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liesjournal.info
liesjournal@gmail.com

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*EVERYTHING
WE WRITE
WILL BE USED
AGAINST US*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>LIES</i> COLLECTIVE	9
Editorial Note	
<i>NOT-SEX AND SOCIAL RELATIONS</i>	
C.E.	15
Undoing Sex: Against Sexual Optimism	
CLÉMENCE X. CLEMENTINE	45
Against the Couple Form	
M. SANDOVSKY	55
Letters to L: Visions and Paranoia	
SOGUMI	63
salt wedge (excerpts)	
<i>WORKER'S INQUIRY</i>	
JOMO	69
Caring: a labor of stolen time: Pages from a CNA's Notebook	
<i>NOTES ON STRUGGLE</i>	
WENDY TREVINO	103
Santa Rita 128 to 131	
W.&.T.C.H.	111
On the Recent Occupations: A Communique from W.&.T.C.H.	

BARUCHA CALAMITY PELLER 125
Women in Uprising: The Oaxaca Commune, the State,
and Reproductive Labor

JACKIE WANG 145
Against Innocence: Race, Gender, and the Politics of
Safety

Recent Communiques 173

IDENTITY, ABOLITION, COMMUNIZATION

MAGDA LLWHISK 187
Don't try to dig yourself out of the hole. You won't get
out.

P. VALENTINE 191
The Gender Distinction in Communization Theory

SKY PALACE 209
"To Be Liberated From Them (Or Through Them)":
A Call For a New Approach

ARCHIVES

"All the Work We Do As Women": Feminist Manifestos
on Prostitution and the State, 1977 217

SUZAN COOKE 235
"We Referred To It As Coming Out": Recollections on
Trans Identity, State Violence, and 1960s Radicalism

REVIEWS

*Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics,
and the Limits of the Law*, Dean Spade 247

LIES COLLECTIVE

EDITORIAL NOTE

*They called me once, The prophetess of lies,
The wandering hag, the pest of every door-
Attest ye now, She knows in her sooth
The house's curse, the storied infamy.*

— Cassandra, *Agamemnon*

LIES came out of our experience within struggles. The story of the journal is the intersecting narratives of our involvement with the occupations and strikes of recent years and the gendered fault lines that emerged within them. We met in the midst of these activities. We felt the need to organize autonomously as feminists. We started reading groups, held

summer camps, met friends in other cities, and developed forms of mutual aid and solidarity. We did not want to go home, or maybe home suddenly felt like a more hostile place. Things got harder. But the more we read and wrote together, the more we desired a means to devise a theory and politics that is inchoate but at least our own. This journal is that: a way to communicate, to be overcome by the feminist commune, to survive with lesser pain or better pain, to become a more precise and effective force.

This is a journal of materialist feminism, which means that we are interested in (among other things) the conditions that enable us to make and circulate a journal, the way a text in print expresses a set of practices and relations. Materialism cannot be opposed to or purged of ideas. Our writing is not a detour from material relations, but a mode of their refusal; it is a practice of naming what is violent in these relations, of laying it bare and vulnerable to attack. This unnamed violence has an especially forceful momentum within movements whose sense of normalcy is predicated on revolution or some future world-to-come. We are aware of our histories and of the tensions inherent in critique: the limits to what can be thought emerge historically, but the forms we use to conceptualize and critique are not limited in application to the time and context in which they first appear. So we draw on and participate in multiple traditions of thought and struggle: feminism, Marxism, queer theory, communist theory, and anti-racist theory. We find abstraction useful but we aim to keep our ideas grounded, to see how the contours of thought are also social relationships. We are careful that whatever work or politics our ideas imply is desirable, while not forgetting that an idea is never a brick, and in this way our feminist practice is materialist.

We find a materialist approach useful in our search for a location within the set of practices called feminism, in our effort to clear a space from which our position within the social order becomes more intelligible. Our materialism dispenses with concepts of rights, equality, justice, agency, representation, or any that otherwise affirm the same set of relations and political forms that inaugurate and ensure

our oppression. Rather we turn our attention toward the various registers and forms of violence that characterize patriarchy, a structure and set of mechanisms that produces relations of domination and subordination, but within which identity categories are unstable. Our project emphasizes the contradictions, tensions, and ambivalences embedded in the use of the category “woman” as a political point of departure. Indeed, we approach these contradictions as the site of the most productive work we must presently undertake. We identify two fronts to this work.

First, we interrogate the relative usefulness of categories such as “women,” “not-men,” “feminine,” and “queer;” we contend that these name real material processes generative of specific kinds of subjects or social locations, not something essential or salvageable within us. In this sense we break with those feminist traditions that seek to honor, elevate, or unearth a “real” female essence, to define “woman” by physiology, or to ossify manifold experiences into a singular, categorical gender. We also break with traditions that view “woman” as the sole oppressed category under patriarchy. The violent relations produced by the forced binary gendering of bodies and the enforcement of heterosexuality in all spheres of life are as much a part of patriarchy as is the production of male domination over women and, in fact, these processes reinforce one another.

Second, we insist that patriarchy is never pure, never a relationship between two figures, but more an arrangement of violences whose distribution has been most powerfully sorted by categories of race. For this reason, too, we refuse to adopt a foundational category of “women” whose generality remains mute about white cis women’s violence while presenting their experience as constitutive of the female gender. We resist the impetus to order or prioritize forms of oppression as prior to or derivative of one another, and assert instead that any discussion of gender already implies race, and vice versa.

~

Everything we write will be used against us. Every claim on or lament against society that we write will be received in the same way as

accounts of rape — as lies. We don't care anymore. As soon as we stop resisting the charge we can turn around and face the others that have not accused us, those we should have been talking to the whole time. We name this journal after the shame we no longer feel and commemorate all these outcast comrades: the witches, crones, hysterics, spinsters, she-wolves, oracles, and misfits — our fellow-travellers.

See you at the gun club / dance hall / hot springs / savage blockade.

We'll be in touch.

Endless winter,
the LIES editorial collective

This writing is dedicated to those recently fallen, whose memories serve to remind us of the urgency of struggle:

Brandy Martell, Esme Barrera, Paige Clay, Anna Brown, Mark Aguhar, Shelley Hilliard, Marilyn Buck, Shaima Al-Awadi, Amber Lynn Costello, Deoni Jones, Hatice Firat, Josefina Reyes, Marisela Ortiz, Tyra Trent, and far too many more.

And to those who have needed to lie,
and to those who told the truth but weren't believed anyway.

*NOT-SEX
AND SOCIAL
RELATIONS*

C.E.

UNDOING SEX: AGAINST SEXUAL OPTIMISM

I – STARTING

A story we are told:

You are on the brink of sexual freedom; it is here and at your disposal. It is asked only that you find it or make it. If before we were ugly, we may be beautiful now—still, you must make yourself natural, whole, and good. You were traumatized but you may recover, simply possess yourself. This is work to be done but it is a good work. Work on your shame, perhaps even fight those who shame you, and it follows that you will be free. At the end of it you will be whole and you will have

reclaimed your natural pleasure. The right of man is to fuck and to orgasm. Feel free with your body to do these things because they are good. The feminists and the sexual liberationists knew this and this is why their movement is over. *Cosmo* and Oprah know this now and therefore everyone knows it. Sex is good and pleasure is powerful, and it is this proposition that will save us from our pain.

Michel Foucault repeats this tale in its barest bones: “someday, sex will be good again.”¹ Yet for all that such optimism may aspire to, it exists seamlessly with the brutal realities of gendered life. Rape goes on unabated; the lives of so many remain consumed in domestic and reproductive labor. It is not that optimism is simply ineffective, that it has been appropriated and de-fanged by a system of repression and may thus be saved, but rather that it exists alongside shame and silence, each playing their part in a broader production of sex and gender. If it was once radical and marginal to assert an essential, or simply available, goodness to sex, it is now central, institutional. Far from the domain of some radical set, it is at once an ideology of patriarchy and of the majority of its opponents, a disparate, heterogeneous collection of discourses united in common aim. It is the optimism that insistently, cruelly returns us to the work of fucking.

This optimism is what I position myself against. Its history demands explanation, and I long to imagine a politic that emerges after having abandoned attachment to sex entirely. To be positionally “against sex” would be to oversimplify; rather I experience sex as an impasse in the manner of Berlant, “dedramatizing the performance of critical and political judgment so as to slow down the encounter with the objects of knowledge that are really scenes we can barely get our eyes around.”² That is, sex here is not as an enemy to be polemically confronted, but an overwhelming relation demanding examination, where the pain and weight of gender are more immediate. My project: to long for the good and feel its absence, picking apart,

1 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1979).

2 Lauren Berlant, “Starved,” *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 106(3), 433-444.

historicizing, drowning in the weight of phenomena, “tripping on content” as Chris Kraus puts it.³

So then to clarify: I do not set out to reject an entire wave of feminism. Under the banner of “sex positivity,” even sexual optimism, are gestures that would be absurd to reject—the historicizing of sexuality, demystifying sexuality, giving information surrounding STDs and contraception to women and queers, disrupting reactionary forms of shame. What is necessary is far from a sectarian return to “second wave” theorists, but rather tracing the thread that gave rise to our present situation—the ways in which sex has been exalted, its relationship to senses of the Self, and the ideologies of the whole and natural. Sex positivity as a supposedly coherent social movement would be only a paper tiger; rather, the object of this essay is to disrupt the attachment to sex as it has lived in feminism and popular imagination, and it is a relation that lives well beyond the past 30 years of “sex positive feminism.”

Before continuing, a clarification of my use of the phrase “not-man”:

“Not-man” cannot be understood as shorthand for “women & others.” It is, rather than a collection of non-male identities, a way of referring to the product of gender as a relationship of exploitation. “It is nonsensical to describe not-men as *doing* something—anything—or having any unity,” because not-man is a position of silence, an exclusion from subjectivity as it is put to work within gender and patriarchy.⁴ This cannot be confined to any group of bodies or identities, and to conflate it with a unitary womanhood would be an error on the order of conflating “proletarian” with “industrial worker.” None of us *are* not-men by virtue of anatomy or identification, rather not-men is a position we are forced into, to greater or lesser degree as the recipients of gendered violence.

Effectively, the not-man cannot speak, cannot be represented with total accuracy, as it is defined through lack and absence. Still, it is a

³ Chris Kraus, *Aliens and Anorexia* (Boston: MIT Press, 2000).

⁴ P.S. De Beaufort, “Things We’ve Noticed,” *Summer Camp*, 1(1), 2011.

point in a relationship which is constitutive of gendered class, and discussion of it is necessary for any understanding of what it is to be a woman, man, transgender, or queer. Not-man is a means of addressing the problem of patriarchy—the way in which maleness and male subjectivity produces, appropriates, and exploits a condition of silence, death, and lack—while hopefully avoiding the presupposition of a coherent feminist or female subject. Not-maleness is constitutive of gender's class reality—forms of womanhood and manhood exist only in relation to it — but it is irreducible to one or several classes.

II – SEX NEGATIVE FEMINISM DID NOT TAKE PLACE

For all the moral censure, antagonism to what was perceived as “male-identified” or patriarchal sex, and outright rejection of penetrative intercourse—rejection of all sex outright had only a brief moment of acceptance within a very narrow sort of feminism. Two facts confirm this: that the majority of “sex negative” feminists (Dworkin, for example) denied any antagonism to sex itself, and that they continued to affirm and engage in forms of sex which were perceived to be good. Ellen Willis's suspicion that “their revulsion against heterosexuality [served] as the thinnest of covers for disgust with sex itself” is ultimately untrue.⁵ Not that such revulsion didn't contain disgust, but that it was ultimately rerouted and put to work in an attachment to, or affirmation of, sex.

We can trace a certain sense of Self, which developed both before and after the brief heyday of “sex-negativity,” to illustrate just how this affirmation of sex came to be. This is not merely coincidental; rather it is a reflection of an intimate relationship between sexual agency and subjectification, particularly within feminist theory. Sex, “as an especially dense transfer point for relations of power,” develops its forms alongside constructions of agency and subjectivity, but

⁵ Ellen Willis, “Feminism, Moralism, and Pornography” in *Beginning to See the Light: Sex, Hope and Rock and Roll* (Wesleyan University Press, 2nd ed. 1992).

also, and more importantly, is a point at which one's self *comes to be*.⁶ As I will go into later, the work of sex is often the work of subjectification and objectification. As such, the political declaration of what one is, should be, and should be spoken of then carries immediate consequences in the realm of sex, as who one is established by how one acts upon or with others.

To trace the senses of self motivating much of feminist sexual politics, we may begin with Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. In it, she lays many of the theoretical foundations for subsequent feminism, most powerfully in her conception of subjectivity and agency. She writes, "the drama of woman lies in this conflict between the fundamental aspirations of every subject ... and the compulsion of a situation in which she is the inessential."⁷ This existentialist formation, that women's struggle is to regain or newly assert the subject's essential will toward freedom, becomes foundational to much subsequent feminism.

It's unsurprising then, that much of what De Beauvoir problematizes in sexuality is women's enforced passivity, and to combat this she proposes reciprocity. Should the male "both desire and respect" her, "her integrity remains unimpaired while she makes herself object; she remains free in the submission to which she consents."⁸ Thus the sex act is said to be a mutual game of give and take, and the agenda of sexual equality is set. She glowingly describes the narcissism, the subject's urge to possess a feminine body, found in the sexuality of the virginal adolescent.

Radical feminism, from Valerie Solanas' *SCUM Manifesto* and onwards, breaks with De Beauvoir in that it problematizes male subjectivity itself, not mere exclusion from it. Solanas in particular makes this reversion very clear, describing the male as "psychically passive," "empty," "trapped inside himself" and this weakness as his motivation to possess, to fuck, to make war. The male's entire mode

6 Foucault, *History of Sexuality*.

7 Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993).

8 De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.

of being and self definition, as informed by his weakness, rests upon an ability to appropriate or kill. He cannot exist within himself, cannot be contained, and so cannot experience any sort of empathy or intersubjective experience. This, what Solanas bluntly identifies as “the male sex” or maleness itself, is the root of our society. It, in its craven drive to possess, constructs the family, fatherhood, war, the government, capitalism (or “the money system”), and the warped understanding of the nature of women. So, for Solanas, the project of undoing this world means destroying the male sex.⁹

But Solanas presumes that women have the ability to be in a wholly different way. Women have a self to manifest, and while they are conditioned into male defined weakness and passivity, this can be overcome in the process of destroying society. Without their “maleness”, women are cool, collected, capable of genuine empathy, and capable of developing a society based on these attributes. Using a reading inflected by Mary Daly, women are possessors of the divine spark men fail desperately to appropriate, and should they move beyond male myth they can make it manifest politically. The feminist project then proceeds from this essential difference. While a few early radical feminists, Cell 16 as a notable example, pursued the more negative side of Solanas’ thinking, perhaps more influential was this notion of difference as taken up by lesbian separatism.¹⁰

In one of lesbian feminism’s earliest documents, Radicalesbians’ “The Woman-Identified Woman,” a dual picture of lesbianism is presented that is influential and illustrative. In one sense lesbianism is primarily a political trajectory, a means of rejecting patriarchal womanhood and yet “a category of behavior possible only in a sexist

9 Valerie Solanas, *The SCUM Manifesto* (New York: Olympia Press, 1968).

10 In particular, Cell 16 advocated celibacy as an option and their politics, at least in their early years, and centered more on Solanas’ “fucking up” rather than an affirmation of properly feminist nature. Notably, Roxanne Dubar-Ortiz wrote in an early issue of their journal, “All questions pertaining to sexuality are irrelevant under our present structures of thought because we have no idea how people in societies of Whole, Liberated, Individuals will relate to each other.”

society.” Yet in another, it, or rather a woman identification existing beyond merely “lesbian,” is a means of constructing and affirming a true Self. Following a proper commitment to women, the sense of alienation itself is said to recede, revealing “a new consciousness of and with each other.” It is only “with that real self, that consciousness” that revolutionary movement can proceed.¹¹

The eventual ascendancy of the latter tendency made for a tremendous break from earlier radical feminism. Rather than the authentic self being a *product* of successful dismantling of patriarchy, it is a *precondition* for it. In the early years of lesbian separatism, this is less central. Advancement of consciousness and lesbianism were, while prioritized, addressed in terms more tactical than metaphysical. Lesbianism and disengagement from the male left was a means to an end, a form of behavior and identification that offered a challenge to forms of patriarchy. *The Woman-Identified Woman* makes the argument that the “heterosexual structure ... binds us in one-to-one relationships with our oppressors” making it such that feminist “energies and commitments” are divided and undermined. The Furies, in a few early articles, make repeated reference to the capacity of lesbianism to “undermine male dominated society by not fucking, not breeding,” highlighting its necessity by discussing the failures of heterosexual feminism and attachment to men. Their lesbian Self, even where taken as the only useful strategy, had elements of being only a strategy rather than an end in itself. But as the 70s progressed, the trend of declaring lesbianism as “an entirely different reality” (*Spectre*, 1971) and a pursuit “pure as snow, ego free, and non profit” (*Everywoman*, 1971) progressed until it eclipsed previous lesbianisms. To Ti-Grace Atkinson, who before stated that “feminism is the theory, lesbianism is a practice”, it became that “feminism is the theory, lesbianism is *the* practice.”

What Alice Echols describes as cultural feminism started from this foundation, taking as its organizing principle an essential femaleness.

11 Radicalesbians, “The Woman Identified Woman,” *Documents From the Women’s Liberation Movement*, (1970), retrieved from <http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/wlm/womid/>.

Whereas earlier radical feminism advocated a destruction of or overcoming of gender, cultural feminism spoke of reclaiming an ancient matriarchy, and affirming a true womanhood concealed by oppression. Mary Daly is perhaps the most exemplary of the cultural feminists, her work devoted to an endless naming and describing of this essential womanhood, its unique motions, its will toward life, and above all its affirmation. By the late 70s her concern became defending the bodily integrity of the pure life force she ascribed to women – eventually descending into attacks on transsexuality. She described it as a sort of “Frankenstein phenomenon,” “the madness of boundary violation... the mark of necrophiliacs who sense the lack of soul/spirit/life loving principle with themselves and therefore try to invade and kill off all spirit, substituting conglomerates of corpses.”¹²

One particularly Daly-inflected school of cultural feminism set itself to the task of developing lesbian counter-power, establishing communities, events, and businesses reflecting a metaphysically different “presence” from the patriarchal world. Daly herself argued for a female “counterworld”, in which such presence would “radiate outward, attracting others” in a form of action termed gyn/affective – “both discovery and creation of a world other than patriarchy.”¹³ But such a world was never truly constructed. Lesbian counter-power remained produced by the same capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy as the rest of the world, and was constrained to a re-inscription of sexual indifference, albeit on different lines. That is, the lesbian separatist political strategy became, for all its contrary ideology, content with being *more like men*, having a greater access to

12 Mary Daly, *Gyn/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978).

13 See Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1969 – 1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989). Rita Mae Brown in 1973 unwittingly made reference to this strategy of counterpower’s totalizing, controlling potential by positively referring to the Nazi regime, saying they “organized an alternative culture within the German culture and they took over in ten years. It’s shocking. Nazism was an alternative culture built on certain emotional things that already existed. This is a negative event, but the process worked” (Echols, 271-272).

male forms of power and self as natural, as business owners, as free and healthy egos existing in friendship, autonomy, and authenticity.

Aside from the development of counter-power, the shift by which authentic Self became the precondition for feminism informed and impacted politics of representation and consciousness. Within strains of the anti-pornography movement, this became especially pronounced. Hence Robin Morgan's statement that "pornography is the theory, rape is the practice."¹⁴

Pornographic depictions and ideas about women were the cause of rape, while masochism was a sort of false consciousness by which women rationalized continued exploitation. Both presented an aberration from a healthy way of being, one that could be corrected through changing culture and promoting correct consciousness. This attitude toward sex was, while often a negation of almost all hetero sex and much lesbian sex, ultimately a conservatism that aimed to protect and affirm a form of good sex — a defense of a supposedly pure sensuality.

These strains in the anti-pornography movement often exemplified the cultural shift and prioritization of consciousness that carried over into pro-sex and sex positive feminism. Because of the causality supposed, wherein pornographic theory and self image rather than material conditions gave direct rise to the realities of rape and patriarchal exploitation, these politics returned to a liberal strategy of challenging representation. Radicals, both inside and out of the anti-pornography struggle, critiqued such attitudes by emphasizing that porn was either a symptom of patriarchy, or a reality whose life was far greater than representation and ideas. Still, the radical-materialist stance ultimately failed to gain traction, and in recent sex positive movements, there is a familiar emphasis on culture and consciousness — via unlearning body hatred, promoting healthy attitudes toward sexuality, and consciousness raising as an end in itself.

¹⁴ Robin Morgan, "Theory and Practice: Pornography and Rape" in *Going Too Far: The Personal Chronicle of a Feminist* (New York: Random House, 1977).

Perhaps more subtly, this politic relies on a faith in a sort of negative liberty. It espouses a “freedom-from” patriarchy, and in doing so affirms the potential of the subject’s self-definition. In radical and cultural feminist formations, this liberty was the liberation of women as a class, and so the individual decisions of women became accountable to the degree to which they benefit all women. For those excluded from this narrow concept of what free behavior entailed — gay liberationists, lesbian sadomasochists, others who enjoyed forbidden sexual and gender behaviors — such a conception of liberation was rejected, in favor of a far broader affirmation.¹⁵

In her 1984 essay “Thinking Sex,” Gayle Rubin articulated an example of this shift in analysis. What she problematized was primarily “sexual injustice,” as a result of what she called sexual hierarchies. In our Christian, repressive world, sex is subject to a sort of Manichean “good sex/bad sex” distinction — there is straight, vanilla, coupled sex performed for free, and then there is sex which is maligned. Attempting to simply shift what sex is acceptable and what is not is reproducing this logic that is the dominant sexual ideology.

But within this argument is a complete shift in the basis of a sexual politic. Departing from previous feminisms, she writes that “it is essential to separate gender and sexuality analytically to reflect their separate social existence.”¹⁶ Sexual liberation, in such a context, involves the sexual minority being free from undue judgment, rather than the wholesale liberation of a class. Her presumption is that the structural violence of sexuality is, rather than a gendering oppression against women, an oppression directed at those engaged in what dominant culture terms “bad sex.” Homosexuality, promiscuity, kink, and pornography are effectively equalized as being all oppressed by this system of “sexual stratification” and hierarchy, literally grouped

¹⁵ This is alongside other critical developments, such as the critique of essentialized womanhood, historicizing sexuality, and rejecting the possibility that forms of sex can exist outside of patriarchy.

¹⁶ Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for A Theory of The Politics of Sexuality,” in *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1984).

together in a diagram of “the sexual value system.” For Rubin, interrupting and rejecting sex negativity allows for a democratic, “pluralistic sexual ethics.” In spite of her refusal to posit an essential subject seeking liberation, her model of agency supposes a political project that constructs a self predicated on the same democratic, equal, liberal principles as de Beauvoir’s. Rubin’s sex radical is nothing more than a more extreme liberal subject, free to do anything so long as it does not harm the freedom of others, and its political strategy all the more liberal – the affirmation of individual agency and freedom to representation.

This liberal pro-sex attitude has since then persisted, overtaking “anti-sex” feminisms and entering the mainstream. On the explicitly feminist side, the “yes means yes” oriented Slutwalk protests have, in addition to protesting against rape, street harassment, and victim blaming, centralized a fairly blunt narrative of reclaiming and celebrating sex. Using a rhetoric of personal agency, this sexual ethic of reclamation emphasizes the ability of the individual subject to attain a non-alienated state, not even through especially political means. All that is required is a lack of shame about sex and some control over how one wants to be fucked. In a return to the orgasm politics of the 70s, such an attitude posits only the “radical proposition that sex is good,” and pleasure denying attitudes to the contrary be removed. Such concerns are partially mirrored in an ever present, Oprah-friendly sort of sexual liberationism, a right to sexual pleasure, to reclaim a nature as “sexual beings.” We can gain liberation from what is ostensibly “our” enforced frigidity and shame by performing whore instead of virgin, choosing a sexy outfit for our man as an act of revolution.

Even ostensibly radical, queer attitudes toward sexuality find themselves repeating such a relationship with the self. While belief in an essential, self-asserting ego is often abandoned in favor of a social constructionist view, the drama of sexual politics becomes reframed as a tension between “normative/non-normative.” Norms are conceived of in their ability to suppress or the degree to which they are subverted, and so “one gets little sense of the work norms perform

beyond this register of suppression and subversion within the constitution of the subject.”¹⁷ Taken without reference to the other work of norms as is often the case in queer circles, this returns to a liberal stance as the inhabitation and interruption of norms becomes conflated with “resistance.” In practice, this valorizes a particular sort of queer posture, by which the individual subject demonstrates the ability to perform gender “non-normatively,” through exaggeration, irony, or failure. The greater one bucks off norms and demonstrates ones individuality or adherence to a subcultural display of individuality, the greater the supposed resistance.

It is my aim to reject all such valorizations of the subject, as in themselves good and as in themselves our aim. In the history of US feminism, the subjectivities proposed as properly feminist have presented themselves as sometimes useful, but ultimately limits feminist movement must move beyond. Subjectivity and the Self are themselves material effects of patriarchy, as are the means by which subjectivity asserts itself in the realm of sex; they are all sexual reality. To struggle against our conditions is to struggle against what those conditions have made us to be, and in doing so we must question and problematize exactly how our positions came to be. In apprehending this world, and thus gender, as a totality, it follows that our Selves are the very interiority we seek to escape — that none of us have achieved, or can realistically achieve immediately, the stance of the outsider, the new woman of post-feminism.

III – THE METAPHYSICS OF SEX: THE WHOLE AND NATURAL

A common assertion within popular discourse is that sex is natural, that it will always be here and so to condemn it is mere puritanism. Of course we may fight for sexual equality, for new languages and practices of sex that can make it something equitable — but to deny

¹⁷ Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005). Referencing a trend within Judith Butler’s thought.

the necessity of sex, its pleasure and procreation as an essential and good function of our bodies, is toxic, life denying. There remains within sex, as it exists in the present, a core that is ahistorical, produced only by our humanity or our physical structures. Common sense and popular science confirms this; we are animals doing what animals do and have always done, and society merely perverts and represses these drives.

A more radical sex positive analysis permits the belief that this nature is temporarily absent, but that a similar sort of Being, “wholeness” may still be achieved. One may be unable to have good sex due to trauma or internalized misogyny, but the potential for good sex, non-patriarchal sex, lingers inside all of us. Some offer relatively individual approaches to reach this potential – therapy aimed at healing, consciousness raising such that we can unlearn negative body image – while others suggest entire alternative lifestyles and communities. At a far end of this analysis, it is a radical pleasure or pure desire that offers us liberatory potential, and this must be reached by breaking down codes of morality or simply finding the spark of desire within us. While most sex is composed of the ugly history of gender, we can enact an alternate sex composed of something else entirely, or perform sexuality in such a way that it is undone. It’s just a matter of doing it right this time, doing it more, emphasizing the beautiful or the self destructive in what we already do. Throughout all of this thought there remains a common thread: a faith in a good sex, a sex that is “just” sex and outside of exploitation, being already manifest on earth or to be brought about by our actions.

Foucault begins to reply to this in volume one of *The History of Sexuality*:

“By creating the imaginary element that is “sex,” the deployment of sexuality established one of its most essential internal operating principles: the desire for sex-the desire to have it, to have access to it,

to discover it, to liberate it, to articulate it in discourse, to formulate it in truth. It constituted “sex” itself as something desirable.”¹⁸

Sex as a figure within discourse only has existence as the processes that create and constitute it, the process giving it meaning is “the process through which gender inequality becomes socially real.”¹⁹ Sex acts simply don’t exist as things in themselves, as an essence not formed through contact and history. In the search for sex’s ideal forms within us they retreat endlessly, presenting only more elements of discourse. One may psychoanalytically pick apart the innateness of a drive or point to the mechanisms that transform a penis into a “cock” and a vulva into a “pussy,” but this can never be enough. In spite of an unmediated body’s absence, one may respond that we haven’t gone deep enough, that it is just a matter of breaking down our socialization or advancing the feminist project further. In this sense, natural/pure sex is beyond confirmation or denial in the realm of objective facts, and takes on the character of a theology. Yet this theology has immediate material ramifications, as a component of ideology that Foucault rightly says is essential.

Within the process of securing sex as an essence, distinct from historical, ideological, and material movements of sexuality, a simultaneous process works to secure this essence as desirable. “Sex itself” (or otherwise ontologically distinct sex) takes the whole of its value from conflation with similar metaphysically different states of being. This can be seen within the creation of “eroticism” within certain feminisms. The erotic is first separated from male or pornographic sexuality, it in some way pre-exists and is obfuscated by “the pornographic mind” (MacKinnon, paraphrasing Susan Griffin), and thus obfuscated by the gendering, patriarchal material effects of this pornographic mentality. Simultaneously “eroticism” is loaded with value as being of the liberated Self, as a mode of labor and subjectification which does not appropriate. In this process of naming a unique eroticism, it names specific, material acts as erotic, distinct

18 Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*,

19 Catherine MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

from patriarchal sexuality — as the immanent expression of this radically different essence. At an extreme, this essence is taken to be *absolute*²⁰, absolutely different from the being of this world and not formed by its contact with it. Its immanence becomes ascribed to an entire form of life — a feminist community as a sort of communion, a shared essence. Daly denies “a splitting of erotic love from friendship”, and, laying her theological foundation bare, describes such friendship as cherishing “divine sparks ... knowing that their combined combustion is the creation of Female Fire.”²¹

Attachment to a form of sex both immanent and absolute, belief that this immanence is foundational to community (whether already present or as the horizon we must work towards), is totalizing, cruel. The sexual immanent is already the form which must be strived for, politically taking the form of enclosure, defense, and reimposition of an existing erotic. The project of radical presence, defined as a togetherness wholly different from this world, necessitates a perpetual disciplining, a repeated removal of incorrect sex. The absolutely different, cannot simply enclose a territory (and thus remain in contact with other essences, communicating, contaminating), it must enclose the enclosure, be alone with its aloneness.²² It is impossible, and thus the “true community” which has either been lost or not adequately established, closes off, attempts to purify itself and the world.

In the most totalizing cultural feminism, the absolute’s presence is held by an elect few (though, in keeping with its Calvinist tones, it can’t be certain who), and the project of reaching it requires constant, rational optimization of good works. One debates endlessly of what constitutes penetration, what level of gender play is acceptable, how best to behave in a truly lesbian way. On the other end: the sexual

20 “This absolute can appear in the form of the Idea, History, the Individual, the State, Science, the Work of Art, and so on. Its logic will always be the same in as much as it is without relation.” Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

21 Daly, *Gyn/Ecology*.

22 Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*.

liberationist, proposing instead of good works, a perpetual undoing of social mores, aiming to reach or having claimed achievement of a state of nature just below the surface. Taken to its furthest extreme, the Bataillean nihilist-libertine, who realizes the impossibility of his project, and so conceives of it as a pure suicide/pure murder.

But God isn't coming, not through human action. The great wall, the great project of the true community, will be forever incomplete and its builders will have died for nothing. From here, describing the movement of the for-human, or of the community as it actually exists, becomes possible. Separated from the immanent Self or community-as-communion, we are left to search, painfully, for explanation. We are without recourse to a pure nature or pure godliness, any part of the world which we can claim is truly good, to make the world adjust to. The image of Eden contains "nothing to refer to, nothing to look at."²³ In this vacuum, we write, communicate, attempt to make sense of the world, act in ways we hope will make sense, inevitably failing and communicating that failure.

To abandon the Christian communion/community — the one shining future, made manifest now and dictated by the elect — without succumbing to an expedient, apathetic faux-nihilism, imagining all the world as natural, inevitable, doomed. This space, communicative and concerned with movement, internal to this world as it seeks to move beyond it, does not set out to effect a complete new world, nor is it resigned to reform or consciousness raising. A radical approach to sex "is for us not a state of affairs which is to be established, an ideal to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call [it] the real movement which abolishes the present state of things."²⁴

As a part of this (anti)project, I try to talk about sex using the frameworks that speak most accurately to the pain, incommunicable and inconsolable, I endure within gender — marxian and poststructuralist feminism, discourse and history without referent to the predicursive or ahistorical.

²³ De Beaufort, "Things We've Noticed."

²⁴ Marx, *The German Ideology* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1998).

Trying to heal from trauma managed to fuck me up worse because I started to ask “what do I want? What do I really want out of sex?” and diving down in search of my damaged sex drive I couldn’t find anything, really.

Lots of urges to be close and feel safe, wanting to be validated and watched and all that shit, but nothing that feels innate. Without getting drunk all I can manage is Bartleby’s famous line, “I would prefer not to.” Upon the words of catechism, that I am made in G-d’s image, I choke for fear of flying. If there is something of a species-being that remains in me, it seems irretrievably lost.

I am told the orgies I witness are a rupture, that something different is happening, but I don’t see it. At the end they return to work, return to this fucked up world that makes them crazy and wanting and cruel and all I ever saw was a moment where everyone stopped caring about how normal it all was. How boring to expect that at the bottom of everything, if we only push harder, there will be something good. All Sade got was a lot of corpses who never had what he wanted.

Where did the old feminists think difference would emerge from? What in this world could make up the next? I ask this not to mock them but because I keep returning to it, expecting the answer to be different, expecting that I’ll find it by accident some day and then everything can be okay. But it’s not coming, so what now?

IV – SEX AND SUBJECTION

Not unlike “natural” labor, sex, while presumed to be a pre-existing fact of the body, necessitates elaborate social production to bring it into existence. The analogy with labor becomes clear in that “this is a strange commodity for It is not a thing. The ability to labor resides only in a human being whose life is consumed in the process of producing.”²⁵ To characterize labor as natural, and thus ahistorical, would serve as a mask for the reproductive labor that brings it into being; likewise, to characterize sex as natural obscures the social

25 Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1975).

production that brought it into being. Altering the previous quote, we may say: “the ability to be fucked resides only in a human being whose life is consumed in the process of social reproduction.”

This is not to say that humans, as animals prior to any development of culture, did not engage in behaviors now recognized as “sex”, but rather their discursive meaning and all the material practices constituting them are historically produced. In the same manner, humans have always acted and created, but it is only in capitalist development, in the processes that alienated and proletarianized us, that this becomes secured as “labor.” What drives us towards having sex, in the here and now, is something determined by the flows of power and economic structures that produce us as “women,” “men,” “trans,” “straight,” etc. If thousands of years ago there was a pre-gendered mode of pleasure, embodiment, and usage of genitalia, it is irretrievably lost to us. The radical contact that lesbian feminists such as Janice Raymond hoped for is endlessly absent. There is no presence of another’s Self, no opportunity for the truly intersubjective. Only an endless field of touch, affect, craving, survival, and power relations, produced and mediated by our material conditions.

So then, any mention here of “sex” is not referring to any interplay of bodies, as acts alone outside of history, but rather of sex as it is a figure within sexuality and thus within flows of power. I refer not to sex as it could be or as it is in itself, but as it is experienced — here and now, thousands of years deep into patriarchy. There is no nature to sex that makes it essentially evil, and there is no reason to deny that “sex”, as physical acts, could have radically different meanings in the future, just as they have had in the past.

Our understanding of sex must then dispose of all naturalized notions of sex—sex as sacred rite, sex as communion, sex as fundamental aspect of life, and sex as the necessary means by which bodies are discovered and explored. Likewise, idealized visions of sex — as an expression of feminist wholeness, as a radical irruption of pleasure, and as a world-destroying site of jouissance — are counterproductive. “Male dominance here is not an artificial overlay upon an

underlying inalterable substratum of uncorrupted essential sexual being. Sexuality free of male dominance will require change, not reconceptualization, transcendence, or excavation.”²⁶

Sex must be understood through its relation to our economic and political structure, which is to say capitalism, patriarchy, and white supremacy. As such, sex may be understood as work. Not merely the obvious work of making babies (though that is still important and central in certain contexts), but a vast array of functions within the labor of maintaining a body of workers. Non-procreative sex is allowed and fostered not because of society having moved any closer towards freedom, but because the reproductive labor demanded by modern capital is not merely that of population growth, but of the creation of the self, the individual, and consequently the identity.

We can see this within the modern narrative of losing one’s virginity. It’s no longer an archaic sale into the slavery of domestic labor, but a pluralistic coming into one’s self, repeated forever in each act of sex. This is for some a moment in which one takes refuge in the body of the other, one constructed as a warm, giving place onto which some primal impotence may be resolved. Self becomes known in its ability to dissolve safely, to let go and be caught by an other. For others, it is a field by which one can become understood, can articulate themselves in terms alien and ever present: beauty, physicality, availability (called “desire”) for sex. One may even, due to the benevolence of progress or the comforts of non-hetero sexuality, fulfill to some degree both roles, in what is called “empowered” and “mutual.”

Within this vision of coming into one’s sexual self, there is a critical contradiction for at least one of the people fucking — agency is conferred only by finding one’s place within the field that sex acts upon. One does not “fuck” so much as they find their place within “fucking” — constituted through innumerable acts of self production. The coming into being as woman, or as any of the other gendered subjectivities available to not-men, is assured through simultaneously reifying

26 MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*.

the structural position of silence — the class existence as not-man. Modifying a statement of MacKinnon's: once not-men "have" sex, it is lost as theirs.

Radical conceptions of consent then hinge on a structural impossibility — the liberal subject. At its outset, radical consent presumes that we can, theoretically, have sex in such a way that nobody is objectified, nobody hurt. We can all be beautiful, we can all be empowered, we can all have sex in ways that feel right to us, and if rape culture is too totalizing right now, at the least what's important is that we move towards consent and thus cast out non-consent.

Yet the structures ordering sex do not allow for this hopeful vision to be realized, and it is within consent culture that its impossibility becomes bitterly pronounced. For all the cultural changes that have occurred, sex remains a question of subjects and objects, of speaking bodies getting something out of silent ones, even among bodies where speech and silence coexist. The pretensions of equality and consciousness don't erase the world from which sex is produced and made legible.

V – THE VALUE AND CONSUMPTION OF SEX

From here, sex must be understood as something inextricably determined by notions of value. In sex's bluntest formation, some bodies produce value — be it babies, satisfaction, beauty, sense of self, etc. — and other bodies reap the benefit of such value in the exchange of sex. Sex is one moment, among many, that bodies become transformed into a substance to be "enjoyed," that is, consumed.

Liberal feminism's concept of "sexual empowerment" can then be taken as an urge towards self-ownership, to benefit from one's own value production. This is not necessarily useless, and at times presents a powerful challenge to silences necessary to forms of patriarchy, but as an aim in and of itself it is a demand for greater representation in a phallic economy of sex. Radical consent takes this demand even

further until it becomes almost self-parodying: everybody may have access to the subject position, and as such everybody may benefit from their own value production. But phallic economy does not allow for such utopianism. Even if for one encounter it can feel mutual, feel decided upon by free and equal actors, the underlying mechanics of sex have not been challenged. The subject position necessitates the object; any value produced may always be appropriated and will always be expedient to appropriate. The act of rape will in such a context always be available, and when vengeance against the rapist can be circumvented, will always be enacted.

To start again: feminized bodies, “women” or otherwise, are cast as (re)productive forces and as commodities. Offered by most sex positive feminisms are means by which this productivity may occur with a minimum of violence, in which a body cast into the object position has some agency within an already presumed sexual encounter. *Cosmo* offers us a range of interesting new positions with our man, the consent zine offers us ways to semi-formally negotiate sexual encounters; we find ways to feel okay with what we’re doing, what we must do for safety and survival. But this is all within a context where our bodies are presumed to be mere sites, of baby-making, of pleasure, of self discovery, of anything really, and this context goes either unchallenged or challenged with the assertion that everybody has the right to pleasure, self-knowledge, babies, etc. The productivity of the sexual is perhaps acknowledged — and when sex work is addressed this is blatant — but it is assumed to be neutral. When money is involved it is “just a job;”²⁷ when other forms of value, like physical appearance, are involved, all one gets is “of course nobody should be *forced* to be beautiful, but what’s wrong with beauty?”

Sexual production and self ownership is pleasant up until it is confronted with the materiality of consumption. “Consumption gives the product the finishing touch by annihilating it, since the result of production is a product, not as the material embodiment of activity

27 And to be clear, it is just a job, but a gendered, racialized, proletarian one, and this is what makes it detestable.

but only as an object for an active subject.”²⁸ A capitalist economy of sex, in its phallic mode of subject/object, culminates and reproduces itself in acts of consumptive death — in moments of silence, denial, violence, and rape. It is in rape, and in the violent consumption that typifies it, that “not-man” takes on its meaning and is put to work, and it is only within or over this class that all forms of sexual empowerment grant agency.

VI – RAPE AND DEATH

There is then some truth in the phrase, misattributed to Andrea Dworkin, that “all sex is rape.” Rape and sex are far from foreign to each other, but rather are mutually constitutive elements of a broader structure of exploitation. Rape’s violence and transgression is not aberrant but rather a defining aspect of sexuality. It is the original appropriation driving all subsequent consumption or self ownership, a threat or reality that renders sexuality meaningful. Defining the qualities that make sex an event unlike rape becomes difficult; there is no true absence of force, nothing to “consent” to that isn’t on the terms of male power.

The by now traditional feminist approach to ending rape — recognizing rape as a moral outrage, attempting to isolate its unacceptable features, and remove its cancer from the otherwise healthy body of sexuality — fails from its outset to address this reality. In practice, this often adheres to a colonialist pattern, civil society offering its hand in saving or correcting an aberration. Rape, we are told, is violence, not sex. The rapist is an almost metaphysically different creature than the normal man, either a monster or, for liberals, simply very sick. It’s something Other, a quality of the fallen. Yet the concrete realities of rape flagrantly contradict this. The oft-cited statistic that we are much more likely to be raped by someone we know, rather than some stranger lurking in an alley, confirms the suspicion one gains by painful experience. Rape amounts to a horribly normal exercise of power — men over women, white over brown,

²⁸ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse* (London: MacMillan, 1971).

straight over gay, jailer over prisoner, and so on. “A rape is not an isolated event or moral transgression or individual interchange gone wrong but an act of terrorism and torture within a systemic context of group subjection, like lynching.”²⁹

Throughout the whole of sexuality we can find many of the qualities attributed specifically to rape. It’s not a stretch to say that the affective labor of sexuality, the emotional work of another’s subjectification, is exploitative. Likewise the structural constraints on consent, the subtle and not-so-subtle violence that make “no” unheard or unspeakable, can be experienced as coercion, and the abdication of self-definition and submission to another’s will often required to enter into sex can be felt as violation. It is in such experience that the presence of rape, its inextricability from sex becomes clear, yet to flatly characterize all experience of sexuality as rape would be a denial of difference. Sex and rape are not two points on a spectrum of gendered violence and exploitation, one being simply more painful, but rather rape is distinct aspect of patriarchy and sexuality coexisting with and mutually definitive of “normal” sex, which lives a different life socially. Designations of whose rape is tolerable or encouraged and whose is a moral outrage are themselves a concrete relation. As much as rape may give sexuality its (gendered) meaning, it is not meted out equally, and weaponized beyond a narrow, binary scope of gender.

Put bluntly: rape is a function of social death. To be raped is not unlike torture in that the raped is placed beyond the bounds of law, norm, or simple caring. To be raped is to be at a point of absolute objectification, boundaries not just violated but uprooted entirely, made meaningless. No help arrives, no language exists to communicate or reconcile one’s pain because one is at the point where normalcy produces, contains, and makes operative excess, silence, and the incommunicable. Yet this is not the constant experience of a monolithic class of “woman”; for many it is possible to be seen as defileable, to have a purity deemed worth protecting from transgression, and so

29 MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*.

such excess is meted out sparingly and discreetly. It is only sometimes that one's rape even bears the name or meaning of rape, and where it is nameless it is institutionalized — as in prisons where it is made into a joke, or in the many private hells where one is always “asking for it”. Over and over in historical moments of genocide and colonization mass rape emerges as an institutional principle, and in a similar though not coterminous movement rape is prescribed in nearly all modern societies as a means of normalizing deviant bodies. This death haunts the sexuality of civil society. It is the difference that establishes the not-me, not-male, not-subject, not-woman patriarchal desire needs so that it has an object to act upon. Likewise gendered labor and gendered self exist only in relation to this not-ness, to some degree fragilely living with it, in partial and productive silence, and to some degree shifting such violence elsewhere.

Modifying our first statement — rape is implicated in all forms of sex, and to perceive rape rightly as a scandal calls into question the foundation of every form of sexuality. Normative, civil sex is only one part of a system that has rape as its basis, as a central operating principle. The imagined integrity of the perfectly consenting subject amounts to little more than a regulatory principle of rape, a purity to be defended against a threatening Other. Which is not to say that *assertion* of dignity, of the right to not be raped, by those denied it is not a frequently necessary, worthwhile move. Rather, feminism needs to be wary of falling into a cultural conservatism that identifies rape as exogenous to sex and the social, as a disease to be cut away. To challenge rape is to challenge all conceptions of sex and bodies available to us; to undo it would be to uproot thousands of years of society, from what may well be civilization's beginning.

VII — MOVEMENT

The position of the feminine: she is fucked or beaten or ignored until she is crazy and like a crazy person believes in love. To experience contradiction, the body violently torn and disallowed both life and death, develops in us “a secret heliotropism,” a turn toward the

absent good.³⁰ In fantasy stolen between pointless tasks, she imagines a world where her abuses have ended. Her madness is given vent in the tightly controlled mediums available – activism, alcoholism, self-help, religion. In brief moments madness spills over to ecstasy, but for the most part they are unintelligible to this world, and go unnoticed. They grow more and more distant, the ache for them grows, she becomes bitter.

The celibate exists on the far end of this, a reaction to the feminine that takes on a paradoxical character, longs more viscerally to overcome itself. In demanding the good so fervently, the world becomes disgusting. Every dick inspires sickness, every fuck only a reminder of the terrible distance between bodies. Her love, unable to rest and disengage from this world, still grows to reject it and demand perfection. The stories of other Serious Young Women repeat themselves, with the desire to separate, to express love only to what is largest and beyond any approach.

If not put to work in the roles expected of the serious and frigid – slut shaming, management, shallow humanitarianism – this becomes a threat. On a material level, there is the cessation of reproductive labor, a solitude that refuses to validate the male or make his babies, but this often exciting, necessary accumulation of small refusals can't address the breadth of patriarchy alone. Fuck or don't fuck, the world reminds us what we are to it. Dropping out of sex is, at best, an often useful strategy, and at worst a glorified privilege. Perhaps most of the threat of celibacy lies in a broader affect or bearing, asceticism and separatism as a will toward gender strike.

Lacking the means to rest in isolation, to be paranoid, the celibate is instead lonely. Sara Ahmed writes how loneliness, in its sociality, engenders lesbian desire as we extend into new spaces. “Lesbian desires move us sideways”; the deviance of a lesbian bearing or desire, or its perversion, brings us into contact with others who share its slant. Loneliness is not being alone; it communicates, extends beyond

³⁰ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History” in *Illuminations*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World) 254-5.

itself. Loneliness, which is really lack of love, is the pain of being unable to be present, makes us inhabit our bodies differently. At its most radical, loneliness' pain relates to a missing presence beyond any comprehension or memory, as the speech of what feels the unspeakable. Where it does not, or rather cannot, remain trapped in the self-soothing, heterosexual loops intended for it, it may become a question of political engagement. Celibacy then manifests itself as a "lesbian" affect, one that moves us into a closeness with others who experience the pain of not-man. It is intoxicating to see how many others understand when you say "I hate sex and I don't want it anymore," as agoraphobia becomes collective and therefore something else entirely. Echoes of 70s radical feminism; lesbianism as an affective commitment to an absent for-women community and to those who are also in search of it. We withdraw our emotional energy from male desire in hopes that we can move differently.

But the central failure of lesbian separatism was how much it believed it could establish a pure, authentic woman-centered community. As the actions of individuals became indicative of an essential wholeness, a true Self, norms became invested with a deadly seriousness. Every gesture was classed according to its ability to be properly "woman-identified" and a feminist theology not dissimilar to Puritanism emerged. Just as Puritans felt God's grace to be manifest through rigorous, rational adherence to the law, woman identification became a purity that expressed itself through proper speech, proper praxis, and proper sex.³¹ The shame and isolation that engendered lesbian community became disgusting again as it became a tool of asserting the purity of the elect, as it was turned towards a reaffirmation of this world.

We must avoid falling into this trap, and so must always keep in mind that the celibate body is no purer, no more feminist, no less exploited. Just as a refusal to eat meat makes no change to the material basis of industrial agriculture, our refusals to fuck, much as our desires

³¹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism* (New York: Scribner, 1958).

to fuck in different ways, don't crack the material base of patriarchy. They may engender a better quality of life or more agency for individuals or communities, but these liberal models of "resistance" offer nothing in the way of a total break. This is the impasse faced by radical feminism: gestures proliferate but they only ever point towards the abolition of gender, glancing so close but never reaching the moment of Truth.

Our pain cannot be reconciled, at least not by our efforts alone. And yet it is irreducible to sadness, to a simple inability to act, nor to introspection. It "is a call not just for an attentive bearing, but for a different kind of inhabitation. It is a call for action, a demand for collective politics, as a politics based not on the possibility that we might be reconciled, [...] or learning that we live with and beside each other, and yet we are not as one."³²

What I or anyone can offer is not truth, the path to some grand, final moment of overcoming. To move without this cannot be a program though it may be at times strategic, cannot be morally mandated though it will most certainly involve ethics. Prakash Kona writes, "the dispossessed of history are not guided by method but by madness"; what will guide us is not an abstract longing, but the maddening, material, immediate need for something as impossible and otherworldly as liberation. Therein lies the truth of Dworkin's 24 hour truce where there is no rape; not its high minded ideals, but its absolute necessity and absolute impossibility. I am unsure of how to proceed; my hope is that the disclosure of this life, its formation through contact, its movement through books and histories, offers some assistance in the lives and struggles of others.

I don't let anyone touch my cunt or my tits. I stop touching other people's. Mostly I just hit and bite and scratch and get hit and bit and scratched but never ever with men. I cuddle with my friends a lot. I ask before I do most things with other people's bodies and ask that other people do the same with

³² Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

me or ask them to stop or yell at them a lot maybe with death threats. Waged labor is fucking hard to get and I'm pretty and young so I get a job as a sex worker with a feminist boss who pays me pretty alright. I self-destruct in less scary, less uncontrollable ways. I write essays and read books and talk to friends and say what's on my mind as loud as I can and try to avoid people who don't care to listen. Maybe it's working because I know I'm not free and still want to die, still want everything in the world to be something else entirely, but I can turn my misery outward and feel like I have enough power to drag down something important with me. I guess if I didn't have books and a radical scene and shit I'd be drunker and crazier and more anorexic and maybe I'd sink down so forcefully it would make "man" and "woman" and "transsexual" scarier, less stable places to be. I imagine other people will do different things and say different things and justify their lives in different ways and I don't really care. All I want for them is to destroy some things and not get in the way of destroying everything. "Destruction" isn't quite right; patriarchy destroys enough and confusing destruction with communization is deadly. "Decreate," "undo," "make impossible" this shitty world

Queer porn still sucks because it's still porn and it's pieces of our bodies cut off and commodified and it's another lifestyle with another identity being created by us and sold to us. It's a less fucked up feeling hustle and I guess it's fun to watch sometimes but I'm sick of being told greater representation means anything is okay. I don't want to be stigmatized for sex work or having lots of sex but I don't want anyone acting like it's not another job, more exploitation that's always a moment away from horror, more capital, more sadness and boredom and lives wasted on dead time.

I've ended up being a part of this queer, halfway separatist world and something about it feels important. I don't know what. It's not the Truth, not divine, only half-truth only a lie only human. But it's like a community, or something more diffuse and unable to be pinned down. None of us chose to be here but we find ourselves drawn together by this contradiction. To love God, hating all that is not true like him and to engage constant, frantic lying. "Better that I would hear what is not true of you than nothing at all." Lesbian affect or queer ethic or something, a little bit together and equally uncertain about what we could ever do. And while we figure it out we go crazy, start fucking up and quitting our jobs and refusing to fuck or having weirder sorts of sex. Or

anything really. I try to pin it down but all I can ever do is talk around it. This union of agoraphobes, the periphery and the private shaking and groaning as we push against it.

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along with countless blog posts and conversations with friends

CLÉMENCE X. CLEMENTINE
AND ASSOCIATES FROM THE
INFINITE VENOM GIRL GANG

AGAINST THE COUPLE-FORM

“No more mothers, women and girls, let’s destroy the families!” *was an invitation to the gesture of breaking the expected chains of events, to release the compressed potentialities. It was a blow to the fucked up love affairs, to ordinary prostitution. It was a call at overcoming the couple as elementary unit in the management of alienation.*

— Tiqqun, “How to?”

Libidinal flows cut through the social world. Amorous and sexual relations do not exist in some domain safely taped off from the rest of society. Rather they are constituent elements of nearly every aspect of social life. Desire flows and circulates amongst places of employment, intellectual debates, political organizing, artistic circles, playgrounds, and cemeteries. The elderly patient grabs at the breast of a nurse hunched over him. A governmental official strips his newly hired intern down to her leopard print thong during an important briefing in his office. The incarcerated man holds his hand up to the glass of the visiting booth, attempting to touch his wife after twenty years of their bodily separation. These flows of libidinal desire operate within and amongst broader social mechanisms, such that they help animate the dynamics of economic and political life. Often a locus of politics, desire permeates the so-called “public” terrain. Patriarchy incessantly subjects these flows of desire to a system of organization, a logic that subverts the desiring flows against themselves. This channeling and organization of sex and amorous relations I will refer to as the logic of the couple — that which funnels, simplifies, and reduces amorous desire to the needs of patriarchy within the capitalist mode of production. This logic assumes that women have but a single site for the fulfillment of their social and sexual desires, that being a romantic relationship with a man. The couple functions as the threshold, the admission fee, the golden key that allows a woman to participate in the social world. The couple promises that, upon entering its grasp, one will no longer suffer from alienation, from isolation, from boredom, from rootlessness. The couple grants a woman personhood and social visibility. She obtains a title, a temporality, a space through the couple. Marriage enshrines this logic and its perpetuation of the specific form assumed by patriarchy under capitalism.

The action and the discourse within patriarchal social relations emerge from a group of men interested in each other. In intellectual, political, or artistic circles, a cadre of men often monopolize the ability to participate in the production of events or ideas, which is not to say that they do anything particularly interesting. Patriarchy has

systematically excluded women from *the action* and *the discourse*, consigning them as a class to perform the unwaged work of social reproduction. Rather than an essentialist concept, the category of woman stems from a gendered mode of exploitation and relegates certain types of labor to a private, unwaged sphere. While women busily work waged jobs in addition to performing domestic work, men create the sphere of public life in order to insulate themselves from coming to terms with their banality and superfluity.

Men grant women access to *the action* and *the discourse* by developing sexual relations with men from this circle. Un-coupled women, those loose dogs, remain on the periphery, always at a distance from the space where debates, projects, and events are played out. The couple acts as a social form that requires women, in order to participate in whatever practice or domain they desire, to attach themselves to men via the couple mechanism. The couple-form often constitutes the single device that protects a woman from the misogyny of a group of men. *Who's that? Oh, I think it is Zach's girlfriend, Ben's ex.* Women become known for their relationships to men, not for their contributions to intellectual or political life. Women's lives diminish to their roles as the *wife of R* or the *mistress of J*, not poets, theorists, or revolutionaries in their own right.

Women choose different strategies when faced with patriarchal social relations and the logic of the couple. A woman who goes after a man with power in a certain milieu. A woman who always needs a man around and will take whatever she can get. A woman who revels in the confidence of being so-and-so's girlfriend. A woman who cheerfully sits on the "girlfriend couch" during band practice. A woman who is depressed during the stretches in between boyfriends. A woman who views the man she is with as a mirror of her own prowess. A woman who holds out for a man impressive enough to advance her. A woman whose intellectual labor is monopolized by staying up late writing apologetic emails to her boyfriend rather than drafting her own poems, theory, or architectural plans.

The logic of the couple mediates a woman's relationship to herself and her relationships to other women. In the production of herself as a woman, she remains constantly aware of the need to make herself desirable, to make herself worthy of a man's desire, to be fit for a man's love. The *go on, girl! You're worth it!* dimension of contemporary female subjectivation has coded women's individual servitude as their self-realization. Post-1950s waves of feminism have reconfigured women's position in capitalism and in relation to men without necessarily making it any less oppressive. The pseudo-empowerment of women to sleep around, wear lipstick, and buy themselves chocolate if they want to does not amount to any significant change to their structural exploitation. Do the femme fatale, the burlesque dancer, the woman executive have a man, or does a man have her? A woman may completely internalize the demands of the couple, reproducing herself as attractive, desired, and sought after - traits that must be produced - even while railing against the sexually predatory male. The logic of the couple has strengthened the single woman's direct relationship to the commodity, the imperative to produce herself as a commodity. Just as in the sphere of circulation — where allegedly buyers and sellers exchange equivalents — the single woman trades hours of primping, toning, and plucking for the ability to be purchased by a man at the meat market. The couple mediates relations between women to the extent that they interact not to deepen their connection to each other, but to gossip about boys, to process their relationships with men, to trade technologies of femininity whereby they can improve their status with men. In this way, the couple-form haunts women when alone or with other women.

One must not dissociate the desire for a sexual relationship with a man from patriarchy's stacked deck. Who are these boyfriends? What does a woman think having one will get her? In short, everything. The couple stands in for desire itself, after enshrined, funneled, and reduced to a single object by patriarchy. Rather than sprouting yearnings for negation or overcoming, young girls plan their weddings while still in kindergarten. Why does a woman sell out for some wank? She gives herself over to the couple in the hope

of mitigating her alienation and increasing her sense of “security,” in the same way that a citizen gives herself over to a repressive state that she trusts to keep her secure. While perhaps not visible at the outset, the couple will further alienate and isolate her. She will have to answer to her husband in addition to her boss, entering into a relation of hyper-exploitation. Comrade Valerie Solanas heeds the atomizing function of the couple: “Our society is not a community, but merely a collection of isolated family units. Desperately insecure, fearing his woman will leave him if she is exposed to other men or to anything remotely resembling life, the male seeks to isolate her from other men and from what little civilization there is, so he moves her out to the suburbs, a collection of self-absorbed couples and their kids.”¹ How much can a woman forgive? How much does she let slide? How long does she tolerate things being amiss, rotten, fucked up? She avoids breaking up at great costs because disobeying the logic of the couple will stymie her access to the precise mechanisms that supposedly save her from this contemptuous existence. The semblance of care and a promise of future solidarity convince her to stay in unsatisfying, pathetic circumstances.

The couple functions as both the problem and its solution. If not this one, she just needs another boyfriend, one that will treat her better. A woman may feel the nausea of ambivalence, of being caught between obsession with phallic power and revulsion from it. She does not know which is greater, the melancholia of the couple or the melancholia of denouncing it as a social form. Most opt for the sadness of the couple over the alienation of being cut loose from its grasp. Capital lends a shoulder at every turn, suggesting you watch a rom-com with your girlfriends when heartbroken or providing endless ways to personalize your wedding dress. Similar to the framework of electoral politics that limits the scope of critique to the wrong people being in office, the couple-form attributes women’s problems to dating the wrong man rather than to the couple itself. As long as she stays invested in the idea of romantic love as salvation,

¹ Valerie Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto* (New York: Verso Books, 2004) 48.

as the guiding principle against isolation and towards fulfillment, she remains tied to the couple-form.

As another facet of the couple-as-solution, the discourses surrounding austerity measures and neoliberal restructuring frame the couple as a remedy for poverty. One reads tales of young people shifting between poverty and prison as a result of single parenting, especially absent fathers, as if the restitution of the couple could remedy the poverty and structural racism produced by capitalism. State bureaucrats tell women that the couple and the family that it anchors have replaced social assistance programs: you don't need help with childcare or food stamps; you need a man! The surest way out of poverty is to get married! While many women might never have access to employment, those who do work for a wage face a gendered discrepancy in earnings, likely forcing them to rely on male wages to support their children. These economic mechanisms preserve the vehemence of the couple-form as a trap for women within capitalism, which masks unwaged labor as acts of love and care.

The logic of the couple has replaced the logic of god. Turn on the radio and one can hear innumerable accounts of the absolute position of the couple: *you are the only thing that matters, I cannot go on living without you* — or more evocatively — *Every breath you take / And every move you make / I'll be watching you*. Most love songs contain or start with “I” but the “I” is in fact *everyone* kneeling beneath the generalized social form of the couple. The male gaze has replaced the divine gaze. As Artaud has asked us “To Have Done with the Judgment of God” (*Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu*), let us be done with the judgment of men.²

Surveying these dynamics, one might wonder if women can opt out of the couple, perhaps through an exploration of promiscuous affairs. This option may not go far enough. Do not mistake polyamory for a post-couple paradigm. Polyamory is a multiplication of the logic of

² Antonin Artaud, “To Have Done with the Judgment of God (*Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu*)” in *Selected Writings*, ed. Susan Sontag (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

the couple, not its destruction. Casual sex, primary partners, physical and emotional availability, and other such distinctions contain amorous relations within the negotiation of the couple. Polyamory opens up couple-like formations without the formal commitment of the couple, expanding its territoriality and octopus-like tentacles that suck desire into the logic of the couple. Polyamorous or promiscuous relationships function as strategies for women to navigate patriarchal social relations rather than break with or negate them.

The logic of the couple penetrates queer relationships as well as straight ones. Homonormativity and gay assimilation have fashioned queer relationships in the shape of straight coupledness. Rather than a subversion of heterosexual social relations, assimilationist, liberal homosexuals have fought for the right to fit into the logic of the couple — to get married, to wear a wedding dress, to create familial nuclei able to protect property relations. Homosexuals perpetuate heterosexual norms and phallocracy through categorizations and role-play, which further codify desires and constitute sex within the logic of phallic centrality and authority. Same sex couples do not escape either the territoriality imposed on desire or the couple's reinforcement and faithfulness to repressive social relations.

Dismantling the logic of the couple does not indicate distaste for love, but rather a critique of directing love towards a specific object. One must contextualize the couple-form within patriarchy, as so-called "love" arrives to us through the apparatus of gender. Denouncing the couple does not mean shunning giddiness, love letters written in tiny cursive with quill pens, or the feeling of the sidewalk being a trampoline. Rather, critiquing the couple involves an analysis of the way that patriarchy has recuperated women's desire for solidarity, for intimacy, for excitement, for negation, for the event into a consolidation of phallic power and the accumulation of capital.

Who would not arrive at this conclusion: patriarchy and capitalism thwart any possibility to love in a way that liberates oneself from the logic of the couple or from one's own oppression. To liberate love necessarily involves the abolition of patriarchy and capitalism. One

cannot opt in or out of these structural relations, and the struggle against them will be a collective, historical project.

In this pathetic, stillborn world, we do have feelings. Sometimes we look at someone and think we are in love with them. We must crush the illusion that romance is or will be an avenue for liberation. We must divest from romantic relationships as means through which we might access a better world than this one. In realizing that their economies and conventions are part and parcel of the continuing soft disaster of our lives, we will leave behind all hitherto existing couples. New and perhaps unknown forms of feminist organizing present the only possible frontier for love.

For those who have accepted the couple-form as a sham, as unable to allow the circulation of desire, war, and play, we make the following recommendations. Make no mistake: we are not advocating a subcultural, individualist, lifestyle, or voluntarist response to the couple-form, nor do we blame women who must remain in couples for their material survival. We are, however, committed to praxis. These may be some of the forms that the struggle against the couple will assume, coinciding with a broader movement towards the abolition of ourselves as women.

Pour menstrual blood on wedding gowns. Send tigers into engagement parties.

Make love. Anything can be sex. The body is rich and varied in its parts and sensations. So many ecstasies have yet to be felt. Get away from the genital organization of “sexuality.”

Couple-bust, which Solanas describes: “SCUM will couple-bust — barge into mixed (male-female) couples, wherever they are, and bust them up.”³

Wrest yourself from the grasp of the couple’s arms (i.e. love jail). Go out the front door and get caught up in a crowd. Hang out with

³ Solanas, *SCUM*, 72.

plants and animals. Get into space. Replace the dyad, the pair, the two halves that make a whole with third, fourth, *n* not-necessarily-human terms: *The three of them and that pack of wolves and that shrub! The commune! The snow! The tea cups! The knives! The creatures!*

Blast open the contents of the lover: *I didn't want to kiss you per se. I wanted everything that you were an entrance into: the smell of cigars, the doors of the city opening to me, samosas, your aunt's house in the countryside, the sense that I could walk around with my eyes closed and nothing would injure me.*

Go out for anti-seductive strolls, a disinterested cruising that vibes on everything except sex. Or as Guy Hocquenghem writes, "if I leave my house every night to find another queer by cruising the places where other queers hang around, I am nothing but a proletarian of my desire who no longer enjoys the air or the earth and whose masochism is reduced to an assembly line. In my entire life, I have only ever really met what I was not trying to seduce."⁴

Animate other modes of social organization with love and eroticism. Have a seminar, a reading group, a political party, a street gang, a rock garden more satisfying than two people in a bed ever could be. Love in such a way as "to annihilate the outworn, neurotic, and egoistic categories of *subject* and *object*," as Mario Mieli suggests.⁵

Interrogate and challenge the ways that the logic of the couple constructs families. Reconsider the bounds of the family and whom one visits over holidays. Rethink social bonds outside of the couple tie, the blood tie, the legal tie.

Construct autonomous feminist spaces where women produce their own action and discourse. Banish the mediation by men of relationships between women. Prevent a single relationship from alienating oneself from the processes that contribute to liberation and the

⁴ Guy Hocquenghem, *The Screwball Asses* (New York: Semiotext(e), 2010) 51.

⁵ Mario Mieli, *Homosexuality and Liberation: Elements of a Gay Critique* (London: Gay Men's Press, 1980) 56.

abolition of capitalism and patriarchy. Let no single bond stand in the way of friendship, organizing, and advancing the interests of the class.

Make intelligible the movement of history and revolutionary praxis as the only possible love story.

We do not mourn the decomposition of the couple-form. We like to think of it as a blessing, a gift from the future. We consider the abolition of the boyfriend and the husband part of the historical movement superseding capitalism and patriarchy. As comrade Dominique Karamazov has written, the constellation of social relations after capitalism will take on a drastically different character: “As communism generalizes free access to goods, and amongst other things transforms and increases the space available for living in, it destroys the foundations and economic function of the family. Also, as it is the realization of the human community, it destroys the need for a refuge within that community.”⁶ As a historically bounded relation, the internal contradictions of the couple-form will one day arrive at their conclusion, and love will no longer know the territoriality of promises, gender, or subject. In addition to our struggles in the streets and at the printing presses, we open up an additional front against coupledness. Feminist struggle remains the ever-enticing horizon before us.

I strapped my boyfriend with homemade explosives and blew him up. His flesh spread everywhere. So did my affection. I’m sick of love. Let’s fall in politics.

⁶ Dominique Karamazov, “Misère du Féminisme” in *La Guerre Sociale*, No. 2 (Paris, 1978) trans. Jean Weir as *The Poverty of Feminism* (London: Elephant Editions, 1998).

M. SANDOVSKY

LETTERS TO L:
PARANOIA AND
VISIONS

In these words exchanged between women who had up until then remained mute, something had taken shape which would remain part of the feminist tradition: a certain intimate and familiar relationship with the sphere of the perceptible, a coming and going between concreteness and abstraction that cracked the smooth surface of the discourses that legitimate power.

—F.C., *Sonogram of a Potentiality*

Society has made us sick, let us strike a death-blow to society!

—Sozialistisches Patientenkollektiv (SPK)

I.

Dear L,

We share a bed, we read together at the cafe. Under the table you squeeze my hand when M says something about turning the other cheek. I take it as a promise or a pact, a sign that we will have our own secrets. We sit next to each other on the floor at the first meeting and I see how much you like it when people laugh at your jokes. I see your happiness unfolding itself like crumpled paper.

Dear L,

I don't know why you let B treat you that way. I know that he hates women. I know he cheats on his wife, and takes off his ring when he goes to the bars, and I know he tried to sleep with one of his students at my party. I know he wanted to sleep with me that night in the city, when he asked me back to his hotel.

He said your poems were mediocre, and you cried, but I don't know why you respect him at all.

Dear L,

You stay over at my new place when you don't have work the next day. We go out for burritos and midnight movies. Or I cook and you wash the dishes; you say why bother trying to cook when it's just one more thing you'll be bad at.

I know you think of me as someone who is too normal, someone for whom things work out too easily. You have the perfect relationship, you say. But you rarely ask how I am doing, and I rarely bring it up.

Dear L,

I'm learning to hold my tongue when you fight with M because you always reconcile. He calls you five or six times a day sometimes, he needs something from you. He knows something is happening, he can see there are things you talk about with us that you don't tell him. He always wants to hear about the meetings even though he knows better than to ask directly.

Dear L,

I could be imagining it but you seemed aloof at the last meeting. You dyed your hair darker and I complimented you on the style, but you seemed insecure. You said you'd quit smoking.

I don't understand why you slipped out early, with a quick goodbye, instead of staying the night like we'd planned. I got a last-minute ride back home, you said, and I better take it. But I could have driven you tomorrow, I said.

Dear L,

You stopped coming to our meetings. I know, your car broke down and your work schedule changed, and besides, you've always been terrible at planning anything in advance.

I wonder what kind of secrets you keep, because you've always kept secrets, for the sake of appearances, and especially to avoid a fight. I think you are trying to get away from all of us, the people who lay claim to pieces of you. You wish we would just get along, stop coming to you with resentments and demands, stop asking you to take sides.

Dear L,

M is friends with J and J is friends with O and O is friends with B and H. M and J are writing something together, and M just joined J's literary group, which also includes N and R. A is publishing a piece in G's anthology, he's in contact with the famous P, and he's reading at the forum with O and J.

I can see why you chose M, why you need him, what he has that we don't have. They have everything; we have nothing without them. I know why you stopped coming to the meetings.

II.

To be a feminist is to be a paranoid. Everyone tells us that we are reading into things too much, that what we are seeing isn't there. There are certain emotional registers with which we become familiar: skepticism, mistrust, defensiveness.

Our reactions are never proportionate to the actions that preceded them.

On the one hand, the abstract. *Men rape women. Sometimes the configuration is different, sometimes gender violence takes other forms. But the pattern remains: men rape women, over and over and over and over and over.*

On the other hand, the concrete. *He raped me. He was really drunk, and I was really drunk. He left a mark, on my thigh. I know he's messed up, I know something really bad happened to him when he was a kid. He told me he's in therapy.*

Our anger is experienced by others as uninteresting, as formulaic. Sometimes we too become bored with our performance of indignation. *I object*, we say, again and again, and our mouths ache.

Woman: she who is asked to resolve an irresolvable contradiction, or upon whom is placed the burden of hiding its irresolvability, or she who is blamed for her failure to resolve it or to hide it.

Is this the world you want, others ask, a world of judgment, ethical norms, and punishment? Can't you see this solves nothing?

The intensity of emotion that we express – which seems so excessive as to be named hysterical or insincere – is a result of this contradiction.

We know the radiation's source, we know where the leak occurred. We can measure the levels at the site. But the further we get from the site, the more diffuse and dispersed the radiation becomes. We do not know how the force penetrates specific life-forms, how it alters their composition over time, how it contributes to a slow death years later. We know that there is a relationship between the radiation and the particular fates of those exposed – we can detect abnormal rates of illness – but we cannot trace it directly. Death and illness dispersed over time and space appear as purely individual destinies.

This is the way that gender relations appear. Radiating, condensing, making ill.

No, that is not the world we want.

But is not possible for us to avoid certain emotional registers, certain mundane postures. The alternative to anger is despair, it is shades of self-obliteration too bleak to bear.

It is not that we addressed the problem incorrectly but that there is no correct way to address the problem. *It is the social relation that produces us as women with problems, and as men who create problems, that is the problem.*

To live as a woman is to live out the consequences of a contradiction between the private and the social, the concrete and the abstract, the specificity of an individual life and the general pattern that constitutes a group's life.

To embrace the gestures of the feminist is to live as a paranoid, insofar as the social consequences of perceiving as real that which the whole of society denies are the same whether or not those perceptions are true. The contradiction becomes a personal secret, something we must pretend not to perceive when in the presence of others. To others there is no contradiction. Individual reactions are proportionate to the actions that preceded them.

There is no thing, no object called The Radiation, that we can attack. There are only the life-forms that have been exposed to it, whose cells have been altered invisibly, whose bodies have been indelibly marked in ways that unfold mysteriously over time, each distorted in its own way.

There is no thing called Men that we can attack. There are only individual men, there are only individual instances of violence, there are only specific experiences that we accumulate all of our lives, each unique but in some ways alike, like dust on a sill, slowly sedimenting.

Beatings, accountability processes, banishment, forgiveness: these are different ways that milieus attempt to deal with gender violence.

The beatings do not work, the accountability processes do not work, banishment does not work, forgiveness does not work.

The fact that sometimes a woman chooses a violent response suggests that of all the impossible choices given to her, she has opted for the one that expresses the actual degree of hostility at the level of the social group – that is, the hostility of women as a group against the domination of men as a group.

The problem for women is not just uncovering what is political in the personal and personal in the political; it is finding a way to live inside of a contradiction wherein we experience simultaneously the concrete and the abstract nature of gender relations. This way of living is always unsatisfactory, and it is that fact – the fact of our own dissatisfaction, of the impossibility of fitting our lives within the paradigms we are given for them – that forms the material for our resistance.

At some point we begin looking for others suffering from our condition. Others with whom our private hallucinations can be recast as social, and with whom the impossibility of our position forms the foundation for a kind of sharing between the insane.

It is hard to trust each other.

In our terrible communities, when we side with each other we lose access to certain people, to certain men, and to the people to whom those men have access. The more ties we cut the less important we become and the more ties we lose. The lines that run between us, connecting all the men and the not-men together, form a web of allegiances and antagonisms, and we begin to learn that to put each other first has consequences. Brutally, we learn that in extricating

ourselves from certain bonds we will make ourselves undesirable to men, and that this will make us utterly and finally invisible.

We will lose many of our friendships with women.

They will not want to be invisible, or undesirable. They will see how we look through the men's eyes – ugly, hysterical, boring – and they will be repulsed. They will stop coming to our meetings.

They will hate us much more than the men; we must be ready for that.

III.

Dear L,

When I was a girl I dreamt about a landscape I had never seen, and in the dream I moved across it from left to right as it changed from desert cliffs to cracked earth to a black lake with an island in it. The lake was silent and the water was so quiet it seemed solid. I saw this lake inside you and there were times when its silence scared me and kept me back. I was always scared to get close to women because they see too much. They can see the radiation and I was afraid they would see the silence inside me, a black pool of water spilling over a cement lip. Men can be easier, I feel less scrutinized, less scrubbed over like pumice on raw skin. I wanted us to be like two new friends in recovery, tentative, handling each other gently. I wanted to be understood and to be recognized without being named, wild and bright. The emotions careening around inside my body's walls, echoes reverberating like sonar, the bat of my fear senses all without seeing. Wings spread inside me, I wanted you to see me and know me, but it didn't work out that way.

SOGUMI

*SALT WEDGE
(EXCERPTS)*

(UNTITLED)

— and — or — did not get along tonight with —
— taffeta got shredded into — salad which was rich and full
of — or — last remains
— stood there face black with the word
the cliff was white with peril when — — — — stood on it
flashlights which stood for loss shone into — eyes
and all was blind

(UNTITLED)

all the fields asunder
in — experience, the mouth was cold and fur the penis was
triangle and metal the little finger was wet and chewy the
asshole was full of a faint beating and light grit and the
pussy was constructed piece by piece with grain matter and
acrylic glass

(UNTITLED)

hurry said the hunter — bag full of stones
the routines of parking lot shone around —
to crouch was pathetic, to stand even more so
to lie down was to wink, at no one in particular
to zoom was to marry someone quickly, as a reflex
to be still was to put on a dress with fatigue, hands barely on
the zippers
and throw — know is to be filthy

filthy and teeth bright with summer

(UNTITLED)

— did it for revenge — said — would do it again — said that about cutting it up and also grinding it down the way listening to the sound of the air conditioner whining fluttering off tuesday night when it was hot with the news of another — being cut down — would do it again with the shops and the cars lug away the same shit again would throw down the debris of last night's parade again would do it again but bigger would send the sparks running down the boulevard again would cut it off and watch it dangle and fall into a hole would wreck again would fly the tassels and bells again and weep in ecstasy under the gold logo on fire on fire again would lick the ash and pepper from — hips again would toss the brochures into a pile would pile the canisters into an alley would make a line to the sea to scatter the waves again would mix limes with petrol to write notes in the most invisible places would weave the desperation of days with the air of the hour — did it for revenge, will do it again

*WORKER'S
INQUIRY*

JOMO

CARING: A LABOR
OF STOLEN TIME
PAGES FROM A CNA'S NOTEBOOK

*The Machine endangers all we have made.
We allow it to rule instead of obey.
To build a house, cut the stone sharp and fast:
the carver's hand takes too long to feel its way.
The Machine never hesitates, or we might escape
and its factories subside into silence.
It thinks it's alive and does everything better.
With equal resolve it creates and destroys.
But life holds mystery for us yet. In a hundred places
we can still sense the source: a play of pure powers
that — when you feel it — brings you to your knees.
There are yet words that come near the unsayable,
and, from crumbling stones, a new music
to make a sacred dwelling in a place we cannot own.*

— Rilke (Translated by Joanna Macy)

This piece is dedicated to all nursing home workers, residents and their family members. Be patient with me, as I share our silenced stories.

All names have been changed to protect the identities of my co-workers and residents.

I work in a place of death. People come here to die, and my coworkers and I care for them as they make their journeys. Sometimes these transitions take years or months. Other times they take weeks or some short days. I count the time in shifts, in scheduled state visits, in the sham monthly meetings I never attend, in the announcements of the “Employee of the Month,” code word for best ass-kisser of the month, in the yearly pay increment of 20 cents, and in the number of times I get called into the Human Resources office, counting down to the last one that would get me fired.

The nursing home residents also have their own rhythms. Their time is tracked by scheduled hospital visits; by the times when loved ones drop by to share a meal, to announce the arrival of a new grandchild, or to anxiously wait at their bedsides for heart-wrenching moments to pass. Their time is measured by transitions to pureed food, to textures that match their gradual loss of appetite and the decreasing sensitivity of their taste buds. Their transitions are also measured by the changes from underwear to pull-ups and then to diapers. Even more than the loss of mobility, the use of diapers is often the most fearsome adaptation. For many people, lack of control over urinary functions is the definitive mark that their independence has been lost to dementia.

Many of the elderly I have worked with are, at least initially, aware of these transitions and most respond with some combination of shame, anger, depression, anxiety, and fear. Theirs was the generation that survived the Great Depression, armed with fervent missions of world war. Aging, that mundane human process, was anti-climatic

after the purported grandeur and tumultuousness of their early 20th-century youth. Banishment to the nursing home was hardly the ending they had toiled for during their industrious youth.

“I’m afraid to die. I don’t know where I will go, Jennifer,” a resident named Lara once said to me, fear dilating her eyes.

“Lara, you will go to heaven. You will be happy,” I reply, holding the spoonful of pureed spinach to her lips. “Tell me about your son, Tobias.”

And so Lara recounts the story of Tobias, his obedience and intelligence, which I have heard over and over again for the past year. The son whom she loves, whose teenage portrait stands by her bedside. The son who has never visited. The son whom I have never met, but whose name and memory calms Lara down.

Lara is a German immigrant to the US, haunted by memories of Nazi Germany. “Do you like Hitler?” she would ask frequently in her distinctly staccato accent, amid the clutter in the dining room at lunchtime. Her eyes staring intently at us, she would declare, “Hitler is no good. I don’t like Hitler.”

Lara was always on the lookout. She cared especially for Alba and Mary, the two women with severe dementia who sat next to her in the dining room. To find out if Alba was enjoying her meal, she would look to my co-worker, Saskia, and ask, “Is she eating? If she doesn’t want to, don’t force her to eat. She will eat when she is hungry.” Alba, always cheerful, would smile as she chewed her food. Did she understand? Or was she in her usual upbeat mood? “Lara, Alba’s fine. With you watching out for her, of course she’s OK!” We would giggle. These are small warm moments to be cherished. In the nursing home, small warm moments are precious because they are accidental.

We run on stolen time in the nursing home. Alind, another Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA), once said to me, “Some of these residents are dead before they come here.

By “dead,” he was not referring to the degenerative effects of dementia and Alzheimer’s disease that cause Lara, for instance, to occasionally spit her food out at us in anger and spite, or to hit us when we are assisting her. He was not referring to the inevitable loss of our abilities and our susceptibility to pain and disease. By “dead,” Alind was referring to the sense of hopelessness and loneliness that many of the residents feel, not just because of physical pain, not just because of old age, but as a result of the isolation they face, the sorrow of abandonment by loved ones, the anger of being caged within the walls of this institution where their escape attempts are restricted by alarms and wiry smiles.

By death, Alind was also referring to the many times “I’m sorry” is uttered in embarrassment, and the tearful shrieks of shame that sometimes follow when they soil their clothes. Those outbursts are merely expressions of society’s beliefs, as if old age and dependence are aberrations, as if theirs is an undeserved living on borrowed time. The remorse is so deep; it kills faster than the body’s aging cells.

This is the dying that we, nursing home workers, bear witness to everyday; the death that we are expected to, through our tired hearts and underpaid souls, reverse.

So they try, through bowling, through bingo and checkers, through Frank Sinatra sing-a-longs, to resurrect what has been lost to time, migration, and the whimsical trends of capitalism and the capriciousness of life. They substitute hot tea and cookies with strangers for the warmth of genuine relationship bonding with family and friends. Loved ones made distant, occupied by the same patterns of migration, work, ambition, ease their worries and guilt by the pictures captured of their relatives in these settings. We, the CNAs, shuffle in and out of these staged moments, to carry the residents off for toileting. The music playing in the building’s only bright and

airy room is not for us, the immigrants, the lower hands, to plan for or share with the residents. Ours is a labor confined to the bathroom, to the involuntary, lower functions of the body. Rather than people of color in uniformed scrubs, nice white ladies with pretty clothes are paid more to care for the leisurely activities of the old white people. The monotony and stress of our tasks are ours to bear alone.

Yet despite this alienation, residents and workers alike struggle to interact as human beings. Not perfectly, not always correctly, not easily. In the absence of emotional and mental support for both residents and caregivers, under the conditions of institutionalized ableism that count the lives of people with disabilities as worthless, under the abject conditions of overwork, racism, and underpayment, “care-giver stress” sometimes overrides morality and ethics and becomes a tragic reason, or lousy excuse, for mistreatment. These imperfect moments are swept under the rug, the guilty institutions absolved of them through paltry fines and slaps on the wrists. Meanwhile, these trespasses become yet another form of “evidence” for why poor immigrant women who clean bedpans and change diapers cannot be trusted and need heavy managerial control.

The nursing home bosses freeze carefully selected, picture perfect moments in time, brandishing them on the front pages of brochures that advertise facilities where “life is appreciated,” where “we care for the dignity of the human person.” In reality, *they have not tried to make that possible*. Under poor conditions, we have improvised to allow genuine human connection to exist. How we do that is something the bosses have no idea about. They sit, calculating in their cold shiny hallways, far from the cacophony of human interaction that they know only to distantly publicize and profit from.

We CNAs also run on stolen time. It is the only way that the work gets done. When I first started my job, fresh out of the training institute, I was intimidated by the amount of work I had to do. The biggest challenge was the level of detail and thoroughness that each task

required. I held on to my care plans tightly. My residents' specific transfers, their diets, their habits, whether or not they wore hearing aids or glasses, their shower schedules, whether they needed alarm mechanisms when they were in their wheelchairs, whether or not they needed footrests, hand splints, blue boots, catheters, portable oxygen tanks set to level 2, or was it 3? All this was a barrage of information for me to absorb. Harder still, was trying to figure out how to cram the schedules of eight residents with different mobility, toileting needs every two hours or less, unpredictable bodily functions, and one shower per shift, into an eight-hour day. Since two hours were designated for meal times, that meant squeezing all the work into six hours, which was, to say the least, highly intimidating. Being a café barista for years had trained me for highly stressful jobs that consist of multitasking and planning, but apparently not enough.

I received a lot of help and support from the other new hire, Saskia, and the two other CNAs who were in the same unit. Jess and Maimuna were very supportive. "Don't rush. It's OK. If you rush, it gets harder and you forget things," Maimuna used to remind me. Never mind that we were always running down the hallway trying to get the work done. As long as in our minds we kept a grip on our stress levels, as long as we took deep breaths, we would be less anxious and more careful with the residents.

The worst was when there were episodes of *Clostridium difficile* (*C. diff*), a bacterial infection that spreads easily among residents on antibiotics. The clearest symptom of *C. diff* infection is loose bowel movement, or diarrhea. My second week of work, five of the residents I was assigned to had bouts of *C. diff*. No matter how much mental stamina and mindfulness I tried to employ I found myself running around like a chicken with its head cut off. Cleaning, scrubbing, changing soiled diapers, bedpans, machine transfers, dressing the resident, undressing the resident, changing the bed sheets. Repeat, repeat, repeat.

Doing such undesirable work so fast was exhausting and it made me appreciate my co-workers whom I was just getting to know. Saskia

and I bonded over many episodes of diarrhea “accidents,” cracking jokes and giggling with each other and the residents as we cleaned and then aired out the rooms. We shared stories of our new experiences with the bosses and coworkers: which were the nice ones, and which were the ones known to harass CNAs unreasonably? We all knew to be careful of Marilyn, the Filipina treatment nurse who switched between being a darling with her bosses and being a monster to us. Even-toned speech was out of her voice range. She only knew how to scream accusations at us. “You are lazy!” was always the last word out of her mouth to any of us, regardless of circumstance, regardless of identity. In her eyes, all the contradictions could be boiled down to one problem: the poor individual work ethic of the CNA. It was not surprising that many CNAs had gotten fired under her watch.

My friendship with Saskia gave me access to a wealth of knowledge about workplace dynamics. The trust we built and solidarity we offered one another during the hectic times on the job immersed me in relationships with other Ethiopian coworkers who similarly offered advice about the ins and outs of the work. Saskia was a college graduate from Ethiopia, newly arrived in America, and full of excitement to embark on this dream. This nursing home job was meant only to be her first stop and I was one of her first non-Ethiopian friends. There was a lot of excitement in our new friendship. As Saskia translated for me her hard-learned lessons shared over break times in Amharic, I learned to appreciate the importance of “having eyes on my back,” to avoid being targeted unfairly by disgruntled, prejudiced nurses. It was only later that I would learn how to apply Saskia’s advice.

Over time, I would also learn that it was useless to report health hazards, safety violations, and broken equipment to the overworked staff nurses or the arrogant charge nurses. Only when someone got injured, or when the state inspectors conducted their annual visit would there be a flurry of activity. The rest of the time, precautionary actions were thrown to the wind. No one updated the care plans, gave us crucial information about new residents, or bothered to fix faulty wheelchairs in a timely manner.

We had to push hard, nag, ask relentlessly, and document, document, document our attempts. Not because anybody read them, but just so that when some avoidable accident did happen, we would not be so conveniently blamed. Too many times, we literally had to depend on our own eyes and ears to assess the residents' wellbeing, or strain our backs and arms to compensate for what a few tools and expertise could fix. At times, we had to fight and argue to get protective gear even when our residents had bouts of *C. diff*. "You just have to be careful it [the diarrhea] doesn't splash on you. You don't need a protective gown now," or, "Are you sure it's *C. diff* and not just diarrhea? You know you only get the protective gowns when it's *C. diff*." For a cheap, paper-made protective gown, and an even cheaper mask, one had to be ready to have a stand-off with the charge nurse.

Like the time when the machine lift in my unit started breaking down. This was the only automated machine lift that was shared between the two long-term care units. Without it, we would have to support residents who weighed up to 300 pounds with our arms on the manual lift. This made us susceptible to injuries and was scary for the residents we were transferring. When we reported the problem we were asked: "Are you sure you know how to charge the battery?"

For two months this was the response my coworkers and I received from management. Sure, after years of using this machine lift, after years of charging the same battery over and over again, we would suddenly forget how to do it. Of course, it's easier to question our intellect than it is to fix the lift or buy a new battery. In their warped, racist minds, we were always the brainless workers needing their heavy supervision and mindless guidance.

"No, it's really broken. We do know how to change the batteries. It's just that they aren't working. It's unsafe for us to use this because it stops midway and the residents sometimes dangle in mid air. Please, for the tenth time, fix it!"

Instead of fixing the machine, my co-worker Jess and I were called into the Human Resources office for being disrespectful toward

upper management. According to Sabrina, the Human Resources director, we were inappropriately expressing our views in public. “Chain of command,” she reiterated. Our conversation with the mechanic had bypassed our charge nurse. We were supposed to be thankful that it was only a written warning.

Where once I was baffled and shocked by the degrading insinuations of our stupidity and abject lack of concern for the wellbeing of the residents, now I was seething with quiet anger and resentment. Some people call this mental fatigue: when you have to keep fighting for everything, keep resisting people who think you are crazy for actually being pretty reasonable in a crazy environment. Some people call this crazy making. The institution is full of crazy making. Not just toward us, the workers, but also toward the residents.

Caring for eight residents and giving a shower to one of them every shift was not easy, but by multitasking, losing break times, getting help from other coworkers, and unending brisk walking throughout the shift, we could do it. Back then, even as we complained about our lost break times and our exhausted bodies, we begrudgingly gave them up to complete our tasks. We looked forward every day to the time when we could sit down to sign off on our charts and chitchat with one another and the residents, ready to clock out.

In October, things changed.

~

“They don’t understand the work, how can they change it without even asking us?”

It was the nervous buzz of that day that I recall so vividly. It was past 2:30 p.m., after we had all clocked out. We were fourteen CNAs, gathered in the empty dining room, having an impromptu meeting with Lorena, the staffing coordinator. We had all been told earlier that day of the new “shower aide” position.

“This means that we will have only three CNAs on the floor. This means that after lunch I can’t do any of the two-people transfers or machine lifts because the other two people will be tied up. How can I finish by 2:30 p.m.?”

Maimuna was flustered. Her child was in day care and for every minute she was late to pick him up, they charged her extra. She could not afford to clock out late.

Earlier that day, Roseanne, the new Director of Nursing had asked us to gather around in our different units as she made her way through the nursing home. She had an announcement to make. Instead of four CNAs on the floor, we would have three. The fourth CNA would then be designated as the shower aide. This person would give the showers all day. Showers that had once been distributed among the different shifts would now all be completed in the day shift. Three CNAs would be left to care for the residents that four CNAs used to take on.

“It’s not that different from what you have now,” she had said with a smile on her face. “I am new here and want to improve things. It’s more efficient this way. Come to my office if you have any concerns.”

“Is it possible to hire another person to work as a full-time shower aide? We really need four people on the floor,” I blurted out.

She smiled knowingly. “No. If we hire one more person, we will have to cut all your hours. Would you want that? Come talk to me if you have any more questions.”

Her words hung in the silence of the semicircle that shuffled around her nervously. My coworkers and I exchanged looks with one another. If we went into her office one by one, we would be targeted. It was a trap.

Back in the dining room later that day, Remy, the twenty-year veteran CNA said quietly, “They can’t treat us like dogs. I can’t do it. Too old.” Many nods followed.

“Lorena, you tell me, how can I do this? Ten to twelve residents each? I can’t! Too much! These people are crazy! Do they care about the residents? About us?” Asmeret exclaimed. Soon, the room opened up to the different cadences of discontent. We felt a moment of unity. Lorena, our ally, would speak to Roseanne, the DNS, on our behalf.

The next day after work, Saskia, Asmeret, Maimuna and I met up. Crammed in Asmeret’s car in the Safeway parking lot, we discussed our petition. Lorena’s advocacy, we deemed, would be insufficient. We also needed to show them that we were united.

“If the others won’t sign, I won’t. I don’t want to be targeted.”

“If we let them push us now, they won’t stop. This new Director of Nursing, she’s bad. She did this in the other nursing homes, too. Come in and change everything. No questions.”

Back and forth we discussed, we outlined, we debated, and by the end of the week, all twenty-five of the day shift CNAs had signed the petition against the new staffing ratio. Unanimously, we agreed that we had to lay out the time designated for each resident under the new arrangement. We calculated that the new plan would leave us with a mere 25 to 30 min. of care for each resident per eight-hour shift. Under the changes they proposed, some of us would care for nine residents, and others, for eleven or twelve residents per shift. We were determined to make the case that it was safe for neither us nor the residents to be so rushed on the job.

On October 26th, eight of us marched down the shiny bright hallway into the boss's office. The few short steps marked a longer journey for us. For the first time, we were going to speak up collectively. We were all nervous.

We presented the petition letter to Sabrina, the lanky white woman who was our Human Resources director. She, like the Director of Nursing, was new.

Sabrina's first words failed to mask her anxiety. She stammered, "Erm, there's many of you today. What's the occasion? You don't have to all come in at the same time."

Jess said firmly, "We want you to read this and discuss it with the Director of Nursing. Roseanne is not in her office now, so please pass the message along. We want to meet a week from today."

The eight of us walked out of the HR office, Sabrina hot on our heels. We slid a copy under Roseanne's office door, and handed another copy to Elaine, another administrator.

"You can't do that, no! You can't give out literature here in the company!" Sabrina shouted behind us.

By the time she caught up with us, we had left the building.

The very next day, the Director of the nursing home sat us down in a huge meeting.

"If you form unions, we will have no choice but to fire all of you."

The short meeting started with his solemn declaration, and ended with our silence.

Before this, break times were something we begrudgingly sacrificed. We had to get the job done. But the increase in work made us consider our break times in a new light. We realized now that no matter how much we worked, no matter how much we sacrificed to the management to make this place more livable for the residents, to the bosses we were just another lousy, expendable CNA, one they could flippantly fire for speaking up. We were the easily replaceable pillars of the nursing home industry.

As part of the research we had done, we found out that we were protected under Labor and Industry law to have two paid fifteen-minute breaks in addition to our unpaid thirty-minute lunch. Failure to provide those breaks by the employer constituted a violation of labor law.

To the outsider, fifteen minutes might seem short and insignificant. For us, the fifteen minutes meant that we could take a short break from the mind-numbing cleaning, from the tiresome brisk walking, from being at the beck and call of the nurses. There is always more, more, and more for a CNA to do. That's what happens when the job description is loose and flexible. The job never ends unless we leave the floor. Mentally, those short fifteen-minute breaks made a difference between a stressed, flustered attitude and a calm, patient compassion. It was incredibly important. We were determined not to give it up anymore. We were determined not to succumb to that inner voice that said, "No, it's OK, I can go for fifteen more minutes." We tried to hold one another accountable. "Go for break! I'll take over here," we would remind one another. Supporting one another going on break in the midst of the chaotic workload became our symbol of mutual aid. Battling that inner voice and actually taking that break was also a sign of solidarity with other co-workers to collectively set the pace on the job at a reasonable rate, so they too could take their breaks without being targeted as less efficient. Without this kind of self-regulation, the bosses would push us all to work as fast as the fastest CNAs, even if doing so were unsafe.

So we took our mandatory breaks. Too busy? Well, perhaps the charge nurses who sat in their offices all day could take over on the floor for fifteen minutes? We appeared insolent and uncaring, but we had no choice.

Behind the scenes, a lot held us back. Every day after lunch ended, we asked ourselves as we pushed the residents in their wheelchairs out of the dining room, “Can I squeeze in fifteen minutes of break time and be done in time?” Call lights were going off, residents were asking to be toileted, the daily required vital signs log was still incomplete. The one automated machine lift that six CNAs would share just happened to be sitting idly along the hallway. It would say to each of us enticingly, “If you don’t take me now, I might be occupied for the next hour and you won’t be able to transfer your residents in time before the end of the shift.”

Our inner voices argued: “Do you really want the residents to wait that long before getting toileted? What if it gets really busy and the *two* CNAs can’t really cover the floor while you are away? What if your residents transfer themselves to the bathroom without your assistance and fall accidentally? Can you take the responsibility for that?”

“But if I keep not taking my break and giving in to this chaos, then the bosses think this is normal and acceptable for us. Give them an inch, they take a foot. I can’t keep pushing myself. It will kill me. Why should I sacrifice my own bodily well-being for this place? The bosses don’t care anyway. It’s their fault, *not* mine!”

“Do you really want to risk clocking out late, or risk getting the nurse *and* the afternoon shift CNAs pissed with you if you leave without completing the tasks? How many times have you gotten written up already? Are you prepared to stay late?”

The never-ending series of questions spun in our heads, until we decisively declared loudly and clearly, “Yes! I am going for break and risking all that!” or, “No! Being flustered and tired is better than feeling guilty or being chewed out!”

Which consequences were we willing to bear?

Our bodies’ need for a short break, one that rejuvenates us to be more patient, more clear-headed, and less susceptible to careless mistakes was pitted against our residents’ immediate bodily needs. This was our daily moral dilemma. Having to weigh this dilemma every day was mentally exhausting. Either choice we made, we blocked out something deeply human — either our care for our own bodies, or our care for others’. It shouldn’t be so hard, not like this. Not just so our callous bosses can hike their paychecks by saving on staffing, at our expense. Caring should not feel like stealing time.

CNAs are often told that we are the “eyes and ears of the nursing home.” But we are more than that. Our emotions and psychological well-being are also the sacrificial lambs of the nursing home bureaucracy. We are the ones who are destroyed mentally and physically, and overwhelmed with guilt so that our bosses can go home dilemma-free and conscience-free, with their big paychecks, liaising in official meetings with state inspectors exalting the standards of good care in the nursing home. “It’s all part of the job,” one might say. “Having to deal with stressful moments and emotional and mental stress is part of healthcare. It takes a certain personality and caliber.”

I disagree. It is one thing relating to anxious family members who are understandably concerned and worried about the condition of their elderly loved ones. That takes empathy and endurance, but it is a welcome, human challenge. The “menial” tasks of cleaning up soiled diapers and diarrhea “accidents” take patience and experience. It takes compassion to reassure the incontinent elderly that their condition is not a burden, that they do not need to apologize for it, that they deserve good care and that what they are undergoing now is a natural process of aging or illness, one that we all eventually

experience. It is another thing entirely to have to tell anxious family members that we need to go for break, and have them judge, under the given circumstances, that our rest is mutually exclusive with the well-being of their loved ones. We are then labeled over and over again as the “selfish, lazy, immigrant workers” who somehow share different care and hygiene standards from this superior white society. We are reminded of that especially when these family members march off to confirm the latest discovery of this predominantly foreign character flaw to the white bosses.

It is one thing to be doing menial labor that is meaningful even if tiring. Not all important and useful tasks are easy and fun to do, but we strive to do them well nonetheless, out of a sense of justice, love, care, duty, and pride.

It is another thing to be cleaning up crap under the pressures of time, where charge nurses pop by to ask you why you aren't done yet. Their interruptions are pronouncements that ten minutes to thoroughly and gently clean a resident who has soiled her diaper is more than enough. Taking longer would mean you are too slow (and so not suitable for this job, and susceptible to firing); it would suggest that maybe you are slacking and intentionally wasting time to reduce your workload. This ticking time clock washes the dignity out of the work, the worker and the resident. It degrades us all.

I try to hold myself to high standards of care, while maintaining my dignity and self-respect. I try to embrace the challenges of empathetic caring, while rejecting the pressure to work like a machine. Mine is a difficult but rewarding struggle toward an expansion of my humanity. Theirs is an intrusion of capitalist discipline into my psychology, manipulating me into self-policing. What's hard is the murkiness in-between.

Empathy stretches the boundaries that constitute who we are, enabling us to embrace the commonality in all human experience,

including experiences that we may not personally undergo. For a front-line healthcare worker, it is empathy for another's pain — the desire to alleviate suffering — that distinguishes our work from jobs that involve the production of inanimate objects, like manufacturing. Factory workers and CNAs both keep society running; our work is not more important than theirs, but it is different. The factory worker's alienation comes from producing a product in ways she has no control over, producing a product that she will likely never see, which will be distributed to and consumed by people she will never meet; her production is dictated by her bosses' profits, not by human needs. If the boss forces her to speed up and the product ends up becoming unsafe, she may never see what will happen to the consumer who is hurt by it.

For CNAs, our alienation comes from the fact that we interact every second of our workday with the people who our labor affects directly, and we do see what happens to them when our human powers are degraded and destroyed by the discipline of capitalist profit motives, to the point where we can't care for them the way we know we should. In the face of this contradiction, we need to nurture and develop our sensitivity to empathy, so we are continually inspired to offer what we can and so we remain open enough to respond flexibly and justly to a patient's needs.

The nursing home attempts, in its own warped way, to drill into us a superficial empathy. The bosses always end their service training with the motto, "Now, treat the residents like you would your own parents. You wouldn't want them to have to wait for their call lights to be answered!" This sentence may well be the nursing home version of, "Run along, kids!" But rather than be inspired by an intriguing process of human evolution, I, along with many of my coworkers, snigger cynically, with utmost disgust.

There are many layers of emotions that come up when the nursing home managers attempt to guilt trip us into accepting the conditions of speed up and overwork at the workplace. Their motives for drilling empathy into us represent yet another layer of emotional

exploitation. This time, by invoking our distant family members, they threaten to invade yet another space in our psyche with their managerial prowess. As if eight hours and the emotional shrapnel that spill over into our non-work time is insufficient mental colonization. Now, they even try to get family involved. The managerial guilt tripping further negates our own individual initiatives for treating the residents with care and respect. Management remains oblivious to the level of shared human interaction that takes place in spite of its policies. Instead, it claims any such moments as a product of its top-down imposed initiatives, completely robbing us of our free will. For the number of times we received dirty, suspicious looks from nurses or staff for sitting along the hallway with a resident in the few moments of spare time we have, laughing, talking, doing their nails, et cetera, one would think that our bosses thought genuine human interaction was really laziness, a signal for them to say, “get back to real work!” It is this reality, masked by their hypocrisy, which makes us cynical and disgusted. Another level of resentment emerges from the fact that their casual invocation of our families trivializes the obstacles that so many of us workers in the nursing home encounter. Much of my time with coworkers is spent reminiscing about distant family members, discussing the burdens and challenges of trying to bring them over to America to join us, or worrying about supporting them with our meager salaries. We discuss the possibility of organizing ourselves to demand more staffing, so we won’t have to rush, so that we will actually have time to provide our residents with the care that we believe our own families deserve. Yet the managers themselves have made it clear that if we organize we could be fired, which would devastate our ability to care for our own families. The fear of losing our viable income, which we must declare on that damned Form 864I Green Card Application in order to bring our families over, weighs on our spirits. We are torn from family, and yet our shameless bosses try to milk our love for family to serve the speed-up.

We are not the only ones who lament the loss of agency in the nursing home environment. In fact, our infantilization by the bosses is

only a reflection of the way the elderly and people with disabilities are treated. It is as if these bosses, minds steeped in rigid capitalist money-grubbing formulas, are unable to understand what “gentle” means. They act as if the definition of gentle is to treat someone like a child, an inferior, or to exert parental control, be authoritarian and overpower their will. Why does the rhetoric of “safety,” as judged only by others, trump the autonomy and desires of an elderly person? Why are nurses so ready to say that some elderly person who exerts her will and choice is mentally unstable, needing psychiatric medication? With their medical slips, recommending endless doses of sedatives, depressants and tranquilizers, they have twisted the simplicity of “What do you want? What do you need?” into a fearsome, “*This is what you really want, because this is what I need from you.*”

When the bosses speak of gentleness but practice authoritarianism, it is not merely because of their individual moral contradictions. It is because whatever values they claim to stand for are ultimately determined by the profit margin. It doesn’t need to be this way, but capitalism makes it this way. The reason the autonomy of a person with disabilities drowns under the rhetoric of safety is the same reason that the CNA’s need for more time to complete her task is portrayed by management as laziness. Genuine support for the elderly and thoroughness of care that respects their self-determination would require more labor-time, labor for which the bosses are unwilling to pay, and which in many cases the residents’ own families couldn’t afford because their own wages are not high enough. The ticking time clock and the money-saving blueprints don’t allow for human agency or rhythm.

Under capitalism, nursing homes are not places where elderly people have the freedom to reflect on their lives before they pass on. Under capitalism, nursing homes become death farms, where the residents are sedated into resignation before death, because their freedom is too expensive.

How much ownership do we take for the ways in which we too allow our circumstances to distort us?

Our choices shape who we gradually become, even if they are not who we initially set out to be. Sometimes, our gradual transformations happen without our knowledge, and do not match our self-perception, until those who love us tell us how we have changed. Sometimes, these people are our coworkers and friends, or our parents and children. It is they, like familiar landmarks in new territories, who remind us of our course. Ultimately, we make the decisions, for which we must be responsible, about which paths we decide to tread.

As CNAs, we find ourselves at the crossroads: on the one side, an unyielding brutal bureaucracy overworks us, and on the other side, residents genuinely need our assistance. Every decision related to our work is one that is filled with exaggerated moral dilemma focused upon the ways in which refusing the former will negatively affect the latter. To silence the daily moral ambiguity of whether or not to prioritize our own needs or the needs of the residents, many of us erect walls in our hearts and minds. It is a scenario that I am not proud of, but that is important to put out in the open, for the simple reason that it happens. If nothing else, I wish to convey that the moral dilemma that we face as nursing home workers should not be ours alone to bear.

We encircle ourselves with fortress walls, to block out emotions that we cannot handle. I see many people build similar walls in political as well as social circles. These walls serve to make the world a simpler, if at times less honest, place to navigate. For many CNAs, it is a “cost effective” version of moral discernment. Rather than allowing every interaction to potentially destabilize who we are through the moral dilemma it poses, we decide which dilemmas we will consider and which ones we will ignore.

“I don’t care anymore, it’s not my fault. I know someone needs me, but it’s not my fault. I can’t be there for them.”

We blame the bosses. Once, twice, and then too many times. Over time, this rationale kills what is tender and living in us. Over time, this rationale covers more ground than it originally intended to. It gets used to justify actions that are not even consequences of management's policies. It gets used to mask sloppy hastiness by giving it pseudo-political cover. Where some see ignorance as a numbing bliss, others see struggle, the refusal to choose between two bad options, as the only way to remain ethical.

Every person has varying heights and degrees of porosity in these walls we build. Some erect walls so high that even painful screams cannot shake us. "It's not my fault," is sufficient rationale for the mistreatment of residents. Being too tired, too pissed off, erases the daily moral choices of which our job consists. "What do you mean I am rough? There are no bruises. No bruises, no evidence." Their walls are so thick that even the reminders and rebuking of fellow workers cannot penetrate. Fear of punitive action is the only limit that remains.

Others erect low walls and recoil in shock at the pain we cause through rushing; we bring home guilt about the bedsores that develop on the residents' skin as a result of improper care. The cringe on a resident's face reminds us to slow down. The chiding of other co-workers to be gentle reignites our conscience.

How can CNAs, those who have elderly parents themselves, treat the residents they care for in nursing homes in rough and callous ways? Often, it is because of these walls. Walls initially erected out of necessity begin to solidify. They then function as all walls do: to segregate us from those on the other side. Some say that the longer you work at the job, the higher those walls become. I think of people like Alind and Maimuna and they prove that wrong. I know that what has kept them going for so many years has been the combination of individual conscience and the support and recognition of their work from their communities inside and outside the workplace, including religious communities. Their communities continually inspire them

and hold them accountable to good care for the elderly. Not everyone can access this inspiration and accountability.

There is a need for moral accountability that even extra time and labor will not buy. Most of my co-workers share a set of values and principles, a work culture that emphasizes the wellness of our residents. If it is any indication, the workplace rumor mill points out and vilifies those who fail by these unwritten standards. Yet it is about this exact conflict that there is no space to talk openly, because any talk of accountability is monopolized by managerial power and exercised with racism and cold harshness. Left on our own, we could hold each other to our common standards, create sustainable conditions for the work, and not allow each other to harm residents. But for now, whatever methods of accountability we do have remain hidden in whispers, glances, and conversations in Amharic that the bosses won't understand.

My coworkers and I took some small steps to assert the kind of control over the workplace that allows us to provide the care our residents deserve. We had written the petition demanding better staffing ratios, giving the bosses a November 3rd deadline. But November 3rd came and went, without so much as a murmur. In response to our organizing, the management threatened to fire us.

So, in our weekly meetings some of us devised Plan B. We would publicize the abject working conditions in the nursing home. We made a flyer stating that "our working conditions are the elderly's living conditions." We hoped the patients' families would support us. To avoid retaliation, the flyer remained anonymous, and we sought help from friends and contacts to distribute it.

One Sunday our friends and supporters stood outside the doors of the nursing home distributing the flyer to family members and volunteers attending Sunday services with their elderly relatives. They received a wide array of responses. Some people were sympathetic,

others not so. They saw this as a unionizing effort and feared that it would increase their medical fees.

In our units, the management was in a flurry. In response to our anonymous flyer, management printed out their own, restating the “open door policy” of the home, and exalting the cooperation that all staff members of the home provided to the residents and the CNAs. “This is all unfounded,” said the nursing home’s paid pastor, as he shooed our supporters from the front door. “Are you a union trying to destroy this nursing home?” exclaimed another.

A nice white lady in pretty clothes proceeded to tear down the flyers that had been put up on the light poles and signposts that lined the perimeter of the home. The new Director of Nursing and other administrators drove in from their distant suburban homes to attend an emergency Sunday evening meeting. Inside, those of us who planned the action were anxious. We did not know what to expect. We did what we did because we were desperate. Burnt out from the overwork and angered by the arrogance of our bosses, those of us who planned the flyering action were nervous and gripped with suspense. We hoped this action would make the bosses rethink their new policy.

We did not anticipate the psychological pressure that management would exert on us and unfortunately we were not prepared for it. They had clearly sought the advice of union-busting manuals and experts. A few of us were hauled into Sabrina’s office individually. When my turn came, Sabrina, Roseanne and my charge nurse, Doreen, bombarded me with questions. Two good cops, and one bad cop. The carrot or the stick? I could choose.

“People have mentioned your name to us. Who else worked with you on this?”

“We are trying to help you. People have thrown you under the bus by naming you. Why do you want to protect them? They don’t deserve it. You don’t have to sacrifice yourself like this. If you tell us their names, you won’t be the only one taking the blame.”

“If you don’t tell me who the others are, we will fire you.”

“Are you going to let the others off for ratting you out?”

“You and all the other people involved are breaking federal law by doing this. You are exposing the conditions of the private lives of the residents. You are violating HIPA. This is illegal. You can be fired and jailed. You can lose your license.”

“We are trying to help you. Help us help you. Others should be responsible, not you. There is a union involved and we just want to know more.”

They fired their questions at me. My refusals and denials invoked only more pursed lips and fiery glares.

“Sign this.”

They pulled out a sheet stating that I had been in violation of company policy for distribution of unsolicited material.

“I am not involved in any of the distribution.”

“You know who did it but you won’t tell. You were part of writing the petition. We know that. Now, sign this, or you will be fired.”

“You are forcing me to sign a document that I disagree with.”

“You can explain your story in the lines below. But you have to sign it. Otherwise you will be fired.”

“I want a photocopy of this document. You are forcing me to sign against my will.”

I refused to sign. I wrote explaining that I was being forced to sign and threatened with losing my job over a collective job action.

I found out later that the bosses had identified me as a key organizer. Subsequently, they interrogated other coworkers fervently and made it clear to them that any contact with me would blacklist them. Apparently, they had magnified the flyer that had been distributed and put it up on their wall. The least I could hope for was that stewing over it made them work unpaid overtime.

The bosses saw this as a mainstream union's effort from the outside, in part because mainstream unions have monopolized all forms of public labor actions, and in part because they could never believe that we on our own could organize. They thought that they could smother years of resentment from overwork and disrespect with lottery prizes of Snickers and Kit Kat bars in our monthly staff meetings. They thought they could buy us off with the bait of \$50 vouchers so we would trip over each other to become the Employee of the Month. They thought they could win over our hearts the way they win over the public with banners saying "We love our CNAs" hung over the doors of the home. So when we collectively decided to change things on our own, they were not prepared.

What got me through management's attempts to isolate me from my coworkers were the relationships we had built with one another prior to organizing. Our friendships consisted of more than risky political actions. They consisted also of support and solace, advice on how to handle relationships, discussions about how we planned to return to our home countries to visit our families and how we each adapted to America. Other times, we talked about U.S. imperialism in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Tunisian revolt and Egyptian uprising. "We need Tunisia here, in this workplace!" Alind would banter. We laughed at the comparison between the two dictatorships, between the North African country and our workplace, how that brought out the contradictions of "free America," the dream we all had come to pursue. We laughed also because we knew how hard that would be. Our little rebellion already solicited so much retaliation. How much

would it take and how much more would we need to withstand before a Tunisia moment happened?

Those days of running around like a chicken with its head cut off, sharing a culture of solidarity so that each of us could go on our break, each of us taking up extra tasks sometimes so someone else who had a long day could rest their legs, those moments of mutual aid and solidarity paid off. When the struggle is at a low point, militants can only count on their reputation. This is hard because reputations are such subjective things — someone might like you while another might not. In a workplace where gossip is rife, and where stress on the job creates many opportunities for misunderstandings and tension among coworkers, it's hard to have an altogether clean reputation. That said, reputation, credibility, and influence are always rooted in some fundamental issues: How do you behave on the shop floor? Were you able to put aside personal drama to help out another coworker? Are you the type to talk smack? Are you the type that sucks up to the boss, or are you the type that tries to handle things outside, to talk things out with your coworkers? Do you bear grudges? Do you think about other people when you do your work? Do you take out your stress on your coworkers and on the residents? Building relationship bonds that can withstand the attacks by our money-grubbing, unscrupulous managers, means that in our everyday lives we have to strive to be better people, deserving of respect from one another, accountable to one another. This requires daily emotional and mental resilience and discipline.

To me, this is in part what Karl Marx meant when he said that in the process of class struggle, the working class will transform itself. We can only truly succeed if we are also transformed into better human beings who are good to one another. This transformation has stakes in the context of class struggle. You can't fake it because people see through fronts all the time. We have a word for it at my job: "nagarinia" in Amharic. It means empty talk.

The few organizers, including myself, earned the name, "chigri fetari," or troublemaker. I am sure some people said it sarcastically, but

others said it in a respectful and endearing way, a term for those of us who resist. I remember vividly how the workplace became polarized. I had friends, and I also had haters. The bosses cracked down on me by following me on my job, inspecting every thing I did, selectively enforcing every small rule at the workplace, writing me up for taking my break five minutes early or for coming back a few minutes late. I later learned that my nurses and supervisors were heavily pressured by top management to find reasons to fire me. It was an extremely stressful time.

“Why won’t they just fire me?” I asked myself a few times. But I was too proud to quit. Knowing that I was being especially targeted, Jess, Maimuna, Saskia, and others helped me pick up the slack and warned me when the bosses were coming. They would strategize with me about how best to resist and at times acted as my witness during management’s interrogations. They were not in a place to put their job on the line or engage in direct action with me, but they offered what they could through advice and strategizing around the NLRB. I did not take this solidarity for granted. They too were targeted simply for being associated with me, yet they chose to stick around. If it hadn’t been for them, I would have been fired.

In the meantime, Sabrina, the Human Resources director, made a point of showing us how favoritism worked. To Benny, a relatively timid Ethiopian coworker, Sabrina offered help with the immigration process to bring over his entire family. This was unprecedented. She made sure we all knew about it by giving him the paperwork in the dining room where we all gathered.

To Joanna, the Filipina coworker who had snitched and offered our names to management, Sabrina offered a pay increase and flexible hours. The price of organizing was high. In fact, it was exorbitant, both mentally and emotionally. There were changes. We now had mandated break times to which we were assigned. Before, there was an uneven distribution of staffing ratios, where one of us would have nine residents to care for while another would have twelve. Now all

had ten residents each, up from eight. The shower aide, previously required to give 10 showers a shift, now gave seven.

Were these changes victories? It was an ambiguous situation. On my end, I was lucky they had not fired me, or anyone else. But despite the distressing experiences, engaging in this necessary struggle was important. It injected fear into this racist, ugly bureaucracy. It let them know that we could come together, and when we did, they had a lot to lose. It made them a little less arrogant and it gave us some dignity.

“Use labor law as a shield, not a weapon,” is a slogan I have often heard in labor organizing circles. It gets at how labor law in the US is not strong, and should not be relied on by workers trying to organize on the job. No law can substitute for collective action by politically conscious, courageous workers who take their liberation into their own hands. At times, labor law even serves to suppress militant action. That being said, during low periods of struggle, labor law can buy time and space for organizing. NLRB Section 7 gives workers the right to concerted action around working conditions. If one can prove that management retaliates for collective organizing, then the employer will be mandated to post a letter in the workplace informing workers of their legal right to organize.

The posting that the NLRB mandated my bosses put up for three months didn't save me from their covert harassment, but it did save my job. It also became the talk of the workplace.

“It's like they apologized! Unbelievable.”

“We have to know this law. We have to use it.”

“But the law won't protect us unless we already take independent collective action. If we hadn't given the petition all together, we wouldn't be protected in the first place!”

I wasn't fired but our gains were dubious. We were demoralized. We felt some self-respect and gained some experience, none of which was truly tangible or quantitative. But otherwise, the organizing was dead.

That December, for this first time ever, everyone boycotted management's Christmas lunch. No fake smiles and false wishes this time. It drenched their ungodly Christmas cheer and they were pissed.

The lessons from our failed organizing attempt were hard earned. I was inexperienced with organizing on the job. It was a different ball game from the kinds of political work I had previously been involved in outside of the workplace. Looking back, my coworkers and I were too hasty. We were not prepared for the backlash and it was only because of the deep trust and friendship we had built together that we were able to survive it. Nor had we considered carefully the dangers of exposing ourselves so quickly through the flying action.

I personally became too obvious as a leader and target. Of course, management is always going to find someone to vilify. It was as much my own shortcomings as it was management's plan to target one person for the organizing of many. This strategy works in their favor because they give the others an opportunity to back off from the organizing by using the scapegoat as an example. It takes the most principled and most committed people to stay involved after that. Because the organizing had taken place at such a fast pace, in reaction to the speed at which the changes were implemented on the job, it became harder for more people to truly own the risks.

It is important for us to learn from mistakes that we made in this organizing experience. However, in the end, they seem small in the context of the obstacles we faced. Our workplace, where we spent a chunk of our life silencing our own instincts and intelligence to conform to the rules and regulations of a top-down hierarchy, where any individual expression was punished with mental torment and

coercion, and where willingness to subject ourselves to overwork became a criterion for how compassionate we were, was like an abusive relationship. There is emotional exploitation and financial coercion, but you can't leave the relationship because you depend on this other party for your livelihood. If this dynamic occurred between two individuals, it would be considered domestic violence.

However, capitalist society has so many hang-ups about the value of "work," judging people's worth by how much they are willing to subjugate themselves to workplace coercion. Their willingness to be exploited makes them more, or less, deserving of a livelihood. This focus on "productivity" allows most people to accept the authoritarian discipline of the workplace and see the subjugation of creativity and free will as an acceptable norm.

This same framework of judging one's worthiness by one's ability to work at a job is also the backbone of the nursing home industry. The awful conditions in such a form of institutionalized living are deemed unworthy for someone who is mobile, independent, and able to work. However, they are seen as acceptable for the elderly and people with disabilities because they can no longer work. Even the Christian home that I worked in, which tried to present itself as an alternative to the harsh, cruel world the elderly face, could not escape this fundamental philosophy. It is the bedrock of the institution. This philosophy is not just a problem with one nursing home, or with nursing homes in general. It is a problem with our society, and it won't change until we stop measuring the value of human lives based on how much time they put into working.

The support I was able to get from the community of independent, rank and file labor organizers around me was essential. Many had been through similar experiences and shared their expertise and strategizing with me. Knowing I was part of a bigger team gave me the strength to survive yet another day of management's mental warfare. It is this kind of organizing, outside of the control of union bureaucracies, of which we need to build more, together.

None of this is easy, and all the more we need one another for the intangible support and tangible skills we offer.

“*Go home to where you came from, you stupid girl!*” Eleanor yelled at Maimuna and I as we transferred her into bed after her meal. Jeannie mutters in her drowsy blur, “*Where is that colored girl? I want my food.*” Joseph, the army veteran who brandishes his discolored American flag tattoo every so often, bellows, “Speak proper English, I don’t know what you are talking about!” We, the CNAs, are displaced, forced from our home cities, farmlands, and families, into this nursing home, a job that falls short of our American dream. Divided by our languages and backgrounds, Filipino, Ethiopian, Chinese, Eritrean, African American, white American, we seek moments of cohesion and solidarity with each other. The bosses maneuver our alliances by threatening, coercing and scaring us, splitting us into neat separate blocks of yellow, black, brown, white. They stuff us into our allocated slots so our interactions are saturated with tension and stress. In spite of them, we edge closer, out of place. Their reaction is immediate. As soon as we come together, they try to tear us apart.

The mostly white residents are people displaced in a different kind of way. Their old ideologies were shaken by the Civil Rights movement, Black Power and the Vietnamese resistance. In addition, they were thrown off by the de-industrialization that closed down the cities they came from and the workplaces that ground their bodies down to this state. Some of them reminisce about the good old days of the post-war industrial boom, when the racial pecking order gave them first dibs. Theirs was a time when America was on top, an image shattered by the CNN blaring in their dining room.

Their memories of the good old days fade as dementia or Alzheimer’s starts to sink in. Their dignity in their last days cannot be secured by white memories alone; it will only be secure if America’s memories of itself do not fade as fast as theirs; if we actively remember the racism and violence that have brought us to this point, the fire hoses and

attack dogs in the South and the Napalm in Vietnam, the racism and industrial accidents in the plants, and all the other parts of the boom years that seem to escape nostalgia. All of this is what has displaced us, the CNAs, and them, the residents. All of this is what has gotten us to this place, unable to communicate the pain that binds us, so we just blame each other. All of this is part of the capitalist system that rushes immigrant workers who care for the elderly toward the brink of uncaring, to the point where we care only on stolen time.

Their years of laboring in the boom era are measured now in Medicare and other insurance policies that pay for their last years in the nursing home. Some who are still mentally aware try to escape, others make their best out of their circumstances, participating in the home's activities. All know that the moment dementia or Alzheimer's sinks in further, the fate that lies before them is not much different from anyone else's. Their whiteness may have saved them from some of America's miseries, but it has not saved them from this place, and it will not save them from the grave. They have witnessed too, with their own eyes, ears, and bodies, how America runs on stolen time. We cross paths in the nursing home, an environment built for the outcasts. Mass-produced meals, mass-produced standards, mass-produced workers dying on America's scrap heap. In this mess, we all lose some aspects of who we are. Perhaps by uniting on stolen time, we can regain what we involuntarily lost.

The author has since quit their job and enrolled in nursing school. They can be reached at bojin.detroit@gmail.com

*NOTES ON
STRUGGLE*

WENDY TREVINO

*FROM SANTA RITA
128 TO 131*

[A list of things remembered as I remembered them and in no way to be taken as a complete account of what happened there then or what is happening there now]

I was detained approximately 54 hours, 47 of which I spent in jail.

I spent 47 hours under bright fluorescent lights.

I was cold approximately 43 hours.

I was moved 7 times, to 5 different “tanks.”

I spent no more than 15 hours in a tank near a door with a small rectangle of glass through which 21 women and then 27 women could see barbed wire and light then dark outside.

I was fed 6 times—5 “sack lunches” which included 2 slices of stale bread, 2 slices of slimy bologna, 2 crème cookies soaked in bologna juice, 1 packet of “salad dressing” (mayo), 1 packet of mustard, 1 packet of a “calcium mix” and 1 orange; and 1 “hot meal,” which included maybe turkey & definitely beans, a side of cooked carrots, some sauce, a salad, a cube of cornbread and a cube of cake.

I used a toilet no more than 5 times.

I slept no more than 4 hours.

I was denied birth control.

I heard someone with epilepsy was being denied medication.

I met 2 people with serious illnesses who were denied medication.

I watched 2 people go through withdrawal.

I watched 1 woman use 1 toilet at least 10 times in no more than 2 hours.

I spoke to 1 woman who confessed she was having suicidal thoughts.

I gave 1 back rub.

I received 0 back rubs.

I spoke to 3 people on “the outside”:

I spoke to 3 “trustees.”

I spooned 3 women.

I spooned 1 woman I had known previously.

I saw 2 women volunteer to stay inside longer to make sure 2 more women wouldn't be left alone in their respective tanks.

I saw 1 woman refuse release to make sure her friend would have a friend in the tank.

I met 1 woman with an "Abortions Get Babies to Heaven Faster" fanny pack she likes to wear when she visits Texas.

I saw 5 slices of bologna stick to a white wall.

I heard harmonizing coming from a tank 2 times.

I heard 1 person recite 1 poem to 2 pigs.

I heard I had 1 welt on my back.

I saw at least 5 bruises on each wrist.

I heard 1 woman suggest not admitting injury unless it was severe.

I met 2 women who chose not to report feeling ill for fear of being put in solitary confinement.

I met 1 woman who had been released from Santa Rita no more than 2 days before.

I crushed on 1 woman.

I was 1 of at least 5 women crushing on 1 woman.

I met at least 1 woman in a polyamorous relationship.

I met at least 1 woman who had recently had sex in the woods.

I met at least 1 woman who had recently had sex in a dressing room.

I met 1 woman who suggested we start a website to replace the #OO camp.

I met 3 women who were still in high school.

I had at least 5 pigs completely ignore me.

I heard at least 5 pigs lie at least 5 times.

I heard 1 pig compare the impact of the people the pigs had to process on “the system” to 400 marbles going down a drain 3 times.

I heard 1 woman praying.

I saw one appeal to “the Virgin” scratched into the wall of a tank.

I heard 2 women were put in solitary confinement.

I heard 1 woman was put in solitary confinement for scratching a word into the wall of a tank.

I saw “OCCUPY” scratched into the wall of a tank.

I heard 1 woman was placed in solitary confinement for banging on the door of a tank to get a pig’s attention.

I saw at least 2 women kick the door of a tank at least 5 times in a row.

I saw 1 woman be forced into a tank.

I heard 1 pair of cuffs.

I heard 1 pig tell 1 woman if she had a problem with not getting a phone call she should call her lawyer.

I heard 1 pig say, “This isn’t about the constitution ... If I don’t like your face ...”

I heard 1 man banging on the door of his tank.

I heard 1 pig tell 1 trustee not to answer my question.

I met 2 women who requested that NLG contact their employers to let them know they would not be making it to work.

I met 2 women who were worried their arrest would lead to them losing their job.

I met 1 woman who lost her job as a union organizer when she was a “no show” after being arrested at a demonstration.

I met 1 woman who works as a union organizer.

I met 1 woman who works in San Francisco’s Financial District.

I met 1 woman who can “crack” a house.

I met 1 woman with family in Spain.

I met 1 woman who teaches elementary.

I met 1 woman who said the games the pigs were playing with us were the same ones she plays with her kids.

I met 1 woman who teaches yoga.

I met 2 women who worried their car would be towed.

I met 1 woman who worried her boyfriend would forget to pay her parking ticket.

I met 1 woman whose boyfriend runs a comic book store.

I met 1 woman whose mother had bailed out Huey Newton.

I met at least 2 women who were afraid they wouldn’t be able to get into a college class.

I met at least 3 women who were menstruating.

Bridesmaids came up 1 time.

I was 1 of at least 2 women who had seen *Bridesmaids*.

Kreayshawn's "Gucci Gucci" came up 1 time.

I heard 1 woman sing, "One big room / full of bad bitches."

Aquaman came up 1 time.

I saw at least 5 drops of fresh blood on the floor in the hall.

I saw at least 7 spots of dried blood on the wall of a tank.

I heard the riddle "What is brown and sticky?" 2 times.

I saw at least 15 wads of wet toilet paper stick to the air vents of 3 tanks.

I watched 4 women throw wads of wet toilet paper at the air vents of 3 tanks.

I heard 1 woman admit she was waiting to be released to take a "victory poop."

Kali came up at least 5 times.

"The 99%" came up 1 time.

I heard 1 pig call herself part of the 99%.

I heard 1 pig say the system had crashed, that we'd be inside at least 48 more hours, after we'd been detained 52.

I heard 1 pig threaten a mentally ill man.

I heard 1 pig make fun of a woman praying.

Dante's *Inferno* came up 1 time.

"Why am I being detained?" was chanted at least 10 ten times.

“Phone call!” was chanted at least 20 times.

“From Oakland to Greece, no pads no peace!” was chanted at least 10 times.

The Diva Cup came up 2 times.

I heard 1 woman call the inmates who worked at the jail “trustees.”

I saw 13 people I’d previously met inside.

I saw 3 people without shoes.

I saw 2 people in “protective custody.”

I saw 2 bologna faces.

Staying positive was equated with preparing for a class action lawsuit at least 3 times.

W.&.T.C.H.

*ON THE RECENT
#OCCUPATIONS
COMMUNIQUE FROM W.&.T.C.H.
HALLOWEEN 2011
BALTIMORE, AMERIKKKA*

This occupation is inevitable, and yet we need to make it. There is no way for capitalism to continue its reign — this is clear. And yet, capitalism will not behead itself: we know that we need to struggle in some way if we are to overcome it. This statement is not a rejection of the recent occupations — as if occupy could be avoided, as if the present conditions were not so grave, as if we haven't all had enough. But there are things that need to be said. We submit this critique in the deepest solidarity with those people of color, women, queer, and trans* folx that have endured occupy encampments

everywhere, while laboring on making them more livable from the inside.¹

Before anything else, we must frame this movement within a prior occupation: that of white settlers on Nanticoke and Susquehannock land. The genocide, expulsion, and dispossession of native peoples is foundational to the ascent of the US as a center of global capital.² As a settler colony, the US was founded on a logic of agricultural settlement that implies the commodification of land — an always-violent process. The early history of capitalism in North America is a bloody story: to establish a vast supply of arable territory and docile labor, capital coursed through colonial domination and enslavement. On this ground, we cannot reclaim this country, but only acknowledge it as a unit of capitalist destruction.

At the same time, we want to caution against conflating colonialism and its resistance by flattening them into a single tactic — as in the debates within various encampments about whether “decolonization” ought to replace “occupy.” Occupation is, after all, a tactic often wielded by the oppressed. We recognize that in what follows, we fail to address the many contradictions latent in the potential to reclaim occupied land — but we would rather these contradictions be addressed and worked through than blotted out by another term.

“WE ARE THE 99%”

If we want to use this figure to underscore how far polarized the rich and the poor are today, fine. But those of us that don’t homogenize so easily get suspicious when we hear calls for unity. What other percentages hide behind the nearly-whole 99%? What about the

1 We use trans* to encompass gender non-conforming and genderqueer individuals, as well as trans men and women.

2 We define capitalism as a mode of production in which commodity exchange and waged labour are dominant forms. Capital, by contrast, refers to a particular circuit of capitalist accumulation, a process of private profit through investment in production or financial speculation.

16% of Blacks that are “officially” unemployed, double the number of whites? The 1 out of 8 Black men in their twenties that on any given day will be in prison or jail? The quarter of women that will get sexually assaulted in their lifetime? The dozens of queer, trans*, intersex, and gender-variant folks that are murdered each year, 70% of whom are people of color?³ Is a woman of color’s experience of the crisis interchangeable with that of the white man whose wage is twice hers? Are we all Troy Davis?⁴ As austerity grinds us down, who among us will go to prison? Who will be relegated to informal, precarious labor? Whose benefits will be cut, whose food stamps canceled or insufficient? Who will be evicted? Who will be unable to get health care, to get hormones or an abortion?

Don’t get us wrong. We’re not asking for better wages or a lower interest rate. We’re not even asking for the full abolition of capital — *there’s no one to ask*. For now, we are simply critiquing this occupation for assuming we are there, while we have so far been left out. Because we know that whatever is next will be something we make, not something we ask for. For this reason, even if we don’t feel safe there, even if what little analysis and structure that has emerged thus far makes clear we are not a part of this movement, we radical feminist, anti-racist revolutionaries are going to keep bringing our bodies and ideologies to the occupation. And we do so in the same spirit as those women of color who continue to support and attend Slutwalk despite critiquing its white-centered politics: because we see potential here for building resistance and affecting material change.⁵ But for this

3 We use queer to describe any non-heterosexual and heteronormative sexualities, as well as those who do not conform to binary or cis gendered presentations. ‘Queer’ can also (with varying degrees of usefulness and political tractability) denote a separation from mainstream LGBT movements, which characteristically advocate assimilation into heteropatriarchy and bourgeois society.

4 Troy Davis was executed in Butts County, Georgia, on September 21st, 2011, after serving 20 years in prison for the alleged murder of a white police officer. In the wake of his death, a trend to self-identify with Troy Davis emerged on Twitter, and whites would end their tweets with #IAmTroyDavis.

5 Slutwalk began in Toronto in April 2011, in response to police officer Michael Sanguinetti’s comment during a visit to students at a York University

potential to be realized, we have to work together in solidarity with the understanding that unity must be constructed with an analysis of difference, not just plastered blindly over inequalities. Consider this text a chip at the plaster.

ANTI-FINANCE OR ANTI-CAPITAL?

Nothing is more clear in the US debt-scape than the racial character of everyday finance. There is no better indicator that people of color cannot be assimilated to the faceless borrowers of the 99% than the strategic location of payday loan offices, taxpreparation outlets, and banks that specialize in subprime mortgages. But debt is sexed, too. And not only because women, like people of color, were disproportionately solicited for subprime mortgages (across all income levels). A map of foreclosures, of adjustable-rate mortgages, a topography of interest rates: all these overlap neatly on the demographics of racialized and feminized poverty, because race and gender are no longer grounds to deny credit, but indexes of risk. And as long as risk can be commodified, as long as volatility can be hedged against and profited from, our color and gender will be blamed for the inevitable collapse. This is the absurdity of everyday finance. *We* are the risk? *We* are the predators? Finance's favorite game must be the schoolyard refrain: "I know you are but what am I?"

We know that economic crises means less purchasing power for women, and thus more domestic labor — and more domestic labor means more work for women. Dreams of a "mancecession" fade quickly when one realizes male-dominated sectors are simply the first to feel a crisis — and the first to receive bailout funds. In crisis, the patriarchal politics of fertility control and the ugly justification of welfare and social security "reforms" are insults added to

campus Constable that to remain safe, "women should avoid dressing like sluts." Slutwalks rapidly cropped up around the country, prompting debate about the implicit (and ultimately, with a notoriously racist sign at Slutwalk New York, explicit) whiteness of the campaign's rhetoric and pro-sexual liberation assumptions.

the injuries of unemployment and unwaged overwork. Add to this the call to “save America’s families,” the culture war rhetoric that desperately amplifies heteronormativity, patriarchy, in the face of economic meltdown. Crisis translates politically to putting women in their place, while demanding queers and trans people pass or else. And the worse this crisis gets, the more the crisis is excused by a fiction of scarcity, the more the family will be used to promote white supremacy by assaulting women’s autonomy under the guise of population control. The old Malthusian line: it’s not a crisis, there’s just not enough – for them.⁶

Let us be clear: finance is not the problem. Finance is a precondition and a symptom, a necessary and contradictory part of capital. Deregulation, globalization, deindustrialization: none of these words can provide a substantial explanation for the present context. Each is only a surface phenomenon, an effect of capital’s self-defeating tendency to make its own systemic reproduction increasingly difficult. Crisis and the reconcentration of wealth among capitalists are not only regular but necessary; the tendency to financialization has many historical precedents. Genoa in the period 1557-62 looks like the Dutch Republic in 1780-83; Britain in 1919-21 looks like the US today. But even if financial booms and busts are as old as mercantilism, there is a qualitative change to the nature of these crises since the 18th century, when capitalist production was imposed on the British countryside and the credit system emerged as its necessary lubricant. Capitalist production creates an unparalleled need for credit, an unprecedented need to consolidate and centralize capital, a grotesque scale of fungible assets that strives to make everything solid melt into the sophistry of mathematics. Asset-backed securities and credit default swaps didn’t make this crisis, they only allowed it to heat up and billow out of control.

⁶ Thomas Malthus was a 19th-century English demographer who promoted an ideology of economic scarcity against state welfarism. Malthus argued that an inexorable tendency to deplete agricultural resources would lead to economic stagnation, providing a helpful check on population growth.

For those that recall the warm and golden age of US industrialism with dewy-eyed nostalgia: this crisis began with the failure of US industry in the late sixties. Real wages have been stagnant since then. The oil crisis of 1973 was the hinge; we are living in the declension of US global power. There's no going back, no exchanging unproductive finance for good old-fashioned productive exploitation. Or is there? Today, American industry is indeed firing up again, as capital that had long flown from its shores returns to find wages lower than the so-called third world. "Reshoring": a name for the farce that follows the tragedy of the post-war boom.

History insists on the eradication of capital as the only possibility of preventing crisis. Financial reform and "sanctions" are not enough: we will never see "the military industrial complex dismantled, the police disempowered, and the public sector fulfilling its obligations to the people" by redistributing wealth.⁷ Corrupt politicians and greedy financiers are only a superfluous, insulting layer on the thing that is truly condemned: capital, which in our time is inescapable. With this realization, we don't need to occupy Wall Street, or any bank. Why was Tahrir square chosen? Was it even chosen at all? We could occupy any corner, any room, any building, and it would carry the social significance of what needs to be either appropriated or destroyed. The better question to pose when deciding what to occupy is: what do we want to inhabit? On this point, it is worth mentioning that the tactic to occupy has evolved since its recent revival in the 2008 occupation of the Republic Windows and Doors factory in Chicago. What struck students in New York, California, Puerto Rico, London, Athens, etc. about the occupation was that its strategy to reappropriate equipment, space, and organization could take place without recognition from authorities. Demands were auxiliary to the best part: the immediate process of retaking control over the means of production.

⁷ Quote from the "Mortville Declaration of Independence," a manifesto issued by the queer camp at Occupy Baltimore.

Whatever this occupation is, it is not a camping trip from capital – we are still in the patriarchy, still in a white supremacy, still in a transphobic and disability-loathing society. In these places, assuming we are unified will only obscure divisions that need to be confronted before anything else.

ON THE POLITICS OF THE OCCUPATION: LIBERALISM, POLICING, AND THE USES AND ABUSES OF EQUALITY

The “99%” rolls their eyes at anyone that takes offense to signs referring to the current economic climate as “Slavery 2.0” or asserting that, “the free hand of the market touched me in a bad place.” Comparing (white) student debt to hundreds of years of violence and forced subjugation, entrenched as a system of enduring systematic racism, mocking sexual assault for effect — these statements send a clear message to those of us subjected to such oppressive acts. While some are already bristling at the “identity politics” of those that are offended by racist, misogynistic, survivor-hating signage, the placards that have been denounced the most loudly are those that attack *capitalism*. Concerns about “public opinion,” about some centrist mass being able to identify and sympathize with our collective messages abound. These so-called debates actively skew the agenda towards the watered down, apolitical, and (com)modified. GAs play out as if we (the comprehensive “99%”) all endorse these views, but communist, anarchist, and anti-capitalist perspectives are in fact excluded before they are given a chance to be voiced. Meanwhile more privileged niche groups like (hella pro-capitalist) small business owners remain front and center. We who are “taking things too far” get left behind by the “99%.”

As a result of this policing, capitalism’s political ideology of liberal populism (with its values of individuated freedom and abstract equality) has dominated the occupation’s process, statements, and proto-demands. Or better, liberal populism tinged with a healthy dose of hippie New Age individualism (a vaguely countercultural disposition

suits contentless politics perfectly). Capitalist apologists always deploy platitudes of “unity” and “equality,” not to insist that we should act in order to become unified and equal, but to say that we already are – and as such, should “put aside our differences.” Capitalism’s liberal framework cannot articulate how race, sex, and class are maintained as material and systemic social relations. Instead, these categories are reduced to individual attitudes. Any racism, sexism, or act of class war is fashioned into a story about perpetrators and victims; liberalism only registers and disciplines individual oppressors, never structures. In the process, the demands made by the oppressed for changes in their actual material conditions are ignored, or worse – appropriated, co-opted. (Take, for example, so-called “reverse racism”: the idiotic triumph of the liberal individual over history.)

THE POLICE ARE NOT “JUST WORKERS” AND THEY ARE NOT OUR FRIENDS

More than anything, the 99% will be divided by our relationship to the cops. They say: in the interests of “radical inclusivity” we should avoid anti-police messaging; the police, after all, are part of the 99% that have seen wages, benefits and pensions cut along with the rest of the public sector (if only it were true!). They say: we must remember that the police are people too, and not exclude them from our movement before they’ve had a chance to express solidarity with us. We say: just wait. These arguments assume that an individual can be separated from their institutional/social roles, that a police officer can be engaged within a purely personal sphere, completely distinct from their occupation as an arm of state repression. A classic liberal tactic is to humanize the oppressor, thus derailing a structural analysis of oppressive systems, and invalidating the anger of people experiencing institutional violence. Advocating a cooperative, amiable relationship with the police brushes aside the violence of widespread racial profiling, sexual assault with impunity, the murder of innocents, and the war on drugs by universalizing a white, middle-class position that believes the police really serve and protect.

And it's not only about police brutality. How can there be non-violence when there are still police? We need to know that as soon as we present a threat to any element of capital — before this point, even — we will be violently repressed. A peaceful, lawful protest by no means guarantees immunity against arrest and brutality: we only have to look at the women who were penned and maced at Occupy Wall St. to know that. But unless this knowledge is at the forefront of our minds, the first to be arrested will be those who are most vulnerable to police brutality and to breaches of security. (A journalist in the room is a tip-off to immigration officials, not “good press.”) We must strive for solidarity among our comrades, especially the undocumented, those that are experiencing homelessness, the criminalized, and anyone else for whom contact with the police is never friendly or safe. However “nice” a police officer may be to you (FYI: police are often very “nice” to those from the right class and race) does not change the fact that the police are a powerful instrument of violent repression, deployed by a capitalist state to enforce its interests: namely, white supremacy, male domination, ruling class power, and the limitless pursuit of profit.

WHY SAY “99%” WHEN YOU MEAN “ME”?

Perhaps other cities are different, but for all its rhetoric of “unity” and “inclusivity” Occupy Baltimore is really a movement organized by and for the white middle class. There is a reason why the people most besieged by capitalism are not coming down to McKeldin Square. When the organizers act like racism is a secondary issue (“We don’t have time to talk about racism — we need to bring this back to the real issue: finance reform”), it becomes clear whose movement this is. Let’s drop the false rhetoric: what’s wrong with the system is not that it is unfair to the 99%, but that is unfair to a disappearing middle class, an almost vestigial group that reappears in occupy among the concrete environs of its former promised land, the business sector. At McKeldin, in the shadow of corporate high-rises, wedged between convention centers and the bourgeois playground of the inner harbor, Baltimore’s middle class comes to better

envision the jobs and upward mobility they desperately want. Don't get us wrong — there can be a lot of good in indignation, discontent, disillusionment. But we need to exorcise the living ghost of the middle class: the spirit of not giving a fuck who you fuck over. Why say “99%” when you really mean “me”?⁸

And you know how it goes: the neutral “me” is the white dude with all the time in the world (we have to say it: the ideal occupier). At Occupy Baltimore, whiteness and maleness have been duly reinforced as the not-so-secret standard at this occupation, in many ways. One example: an announcement made by a young white man at a GA that “everyone is accountable when they speak to media, because they represent the occupation as a whole” (FYI: there is no literature, no point person, no infrastructure to guide new members; only judgment). The countless snaps and twinkles in support of such a statement demonstrated clear consensus. Those twinkles expressed a range of assumptions that people who are largely comfortable in their own skin tend to make. Being present in a space makes you in charge of its representation; most everyone agrees with you (and should). Those of us that have daily to prepare ourselves for an imminent bash, an imminent fight with hostile, privilege-denying strangers, an imminent insult (intended or not) — we take issue with this coercion into representation. We don't ask you to represent us (please god no). Don't fucking assimilate us into your views, and then make us responsible for them. We won't even mention how much and how loud white dudes have been speaking.

Rather than policing the radical voices taking anti-capitalist, revolutionary, and anti-police positions, we should give these voices space to be heard and listened to seriously. The anarchist in-joke “Make Total Destroy” is true: the real political agenda consists in destroying state power, capitalism, and all its forms of coercive social control.

8 It is true that over the course of the occupation, the demographics of occupy Baltimore shifted to include more people experiencing homelessness; however, the many eruptions of resentment towards homeless people “taking over McKeldin” or “abusing occupy for the food” signal the sharp difference between loudest voices at occupy and the poor.

Why was this phrase deliberately excluded from the agenda cards read out during a GA, while such platitudes as “We are All One” and “Peace on Earth and Good Will to All” were deemed worthy to be shared? The liberal-or-else reformism of Occupy Baltimore is perfectly encapsulated by the *imposition* of goals of peace and love. Fuck peace: we need to formulate a coherent political analysis and a revolutionary agenda to destroy capitalism and dismantle state power. Rejecting outright the eventual need for an armed uprising reflects an unwillingness to pursue the logic of our own (proto)demands to their full extent.

Don't tell us to be “pragmatic,” to focus on piecemeal reforms and wait for our day in the revolt. Because not revolution, but *reformism* is idealistic: reformism believes in democracy under capitalism, in the possibility of redistributing wealth that is systematically dispossessed from its producers. Our revolutionary desire to destroy capitalism is not at all utopian. Nor is it inactive: this aim is embodied in a multitude of actions towards different immediate *and* faraway ends. To us, this means that the revolutionary aim is not pure negation or destruction: we work to confront racism, sexism, and class war in our community as an immediate goal, without forgetting that we ultimately cannot live like this anymore. For Occupy Baltimore, this means the 99% must relinquish its presumed equality and acknowledge division if it is to grasp the real conditions of society, and what must actually be done.

“THE 1% ARE WINNING EVERY TIME WE FIGHT AMONGST OURSELVES.”

When the excluded call out a movement, we are often told to put aside our differences: it's only common sense that to accomplish anything, we need unity. But this equality is only the thinnest commonality — the democracy of consumers — an abstraction that masks society, that papers over the distribution of violence with images of citizenship and rights. Already, in conversations with supposed comrades, our critiques have been met with concern that the

“mainstream” won’t get it, that the precious, delicate momentum will be stopped. Interventions into a whitewashed and patriarchal agenda (which is any agenda that denies the differential impact of capital on people of color and women) are always received as interruptions. At best, they are conceded to with invitations, with “outreach,” and with promises to be more inclusive. We say: inclusivity without an adequate analysis is just unstated exclusivity. *This is not identity politics: this is the anti-identity politics.* For it is capitalism that pushes us to rank facets of our identities, to select one group as the vanguard and press marginalized identities to choose which aspect of their oppression to make a priority. We refuse this choice: we know that our differences are daily produced and reproduced within capitalism’s limits, and therefore cannot be erased within it. Our divisions were not invented by capital, but their integration in it is real (the most real), and thus should drive our analyses and our actions. No unity can be claimed until every social relationship is no longer defined by capital, but by us.

THE TYRANNY OF NON-VIOLENCE

At Occupy Baltimore, a commitment to non-violence is made clear by a list of rules posted around the space, half of which are prohibitions against political violence, illegality, and antagonizing the police. While certain abuses among group members of course hamstring the cooperative functioning of the movement, and while a struggle to overcome misogyny, transphobia, and racism, among other violences, is an everyday, ongoing, and necessary project for all movements, the political platform of non-violence in relation to the state raises serious concerns.

The doctrine of non-violence essentializes and polarizes political struggles into violent and non-violent movements, ignoring the fact that successful struggles use a variety of tactics that cannot be so easily categorized. Advocates of non-violence point to the civil rights movement in the US as a winning example of non-violent protest, refusing to acknowledge the legitimacy of the Black Panthers’ militant

actions. Drawing a moral line between Martin Luther King's dream and Malcolm X's nightmare, pacifists fail to recognize the solidarity between civil rights struggles and black militants. It was in the interests of the white media and politicians to emphasize the conflict between the non-violent and militant factions of the movement, in order to divide and conquer Black resistance. Malcolm X was well aware of this white agenda when he said, "instead of airing our differences in public we have to realize we are all the same family." While these leaders criticized each other's tactics, their understanding of racial oppression shared an analysis, and their political actions collaboratively contributed to the momentum of the whole civil rights struggle. Black activists all over the country used a variety of tactics to advance their political struggle, from the Black Panthers' Free Food program, to armed paramilitaries protecting Black homes and churches from racist attacks. Riots, armed resistance, and revolutionary rhetoric were as much a part of the struggle as the more cherished marches, sit-ins, and boycotts. This real diversity of tactics worked to strengthen communities, raise collective consciousness, develop analyses, and secure helpful (if inadequate) legal reforms. To attribute the power of the civil rights movement to non-violence alone is to manipulate history and occlude the totality of this struggle.

When Occupy Baltimore insists on non-violence without a critical analysis of their own position, they paper over what non-violence even means in this era. Pacifists rely on vague platitudes that fail to account for the ways in which political violence can be purposeful and constructive, as well as the myriad ways in which peaceful action can reproduce and support an injurious status quo. This pacifism (largely a product of white middle class activism) appeals to a particular moral code that asserts itself as universal: violence is never the answer, ever, in any situation, and those who use violence to attain their goals will suffer the karmic consequences. Martin Luther King certainly prescribed non-violence as a strategy for resisting the institutional and social violence inflicted on Black populations daily. But he also considered it necessary to support the armed liberation movements in Palestine and Vietnam. His ideas had root in a specific

history of oppression, rather than being theorized, abstractly, as the morally superior tactic.

A high ground of bourgeois morality is the secret platform of non-violence. Unchecked by an analysis of lived, everyday violence, pacifism turns up its nose at direct confrontation as immature and ignorant, while painting passive resistance as dignified and spiritually pure. Like the liberal insistence on cooperating with the police, this ideology speaks from a position of privilege: not everyone can choose whether or not to engage in violence. Pacifism often presupposes an emotional, physical distance from conflict. Should Palestinians daily besieged by the Israeli military not throw rocks at armed soldiers? Does such violence undermine the legitimacy of their struggle against Israel's political, economic, and cultural hegemony, and its occupation of their land? Shouldn't a woman who survives a rape inflict violence on her attacker? How are youth of color to respond to the police that violently, invasively, and with banal regularity stop and search their shit?

The pacifist claim that we should all be martyrs, that suffering the violence inflicted on us ennobles our cause, is incompatible with feminism. Under patriarchy, women are socialized to endure their sexual, cultural, and social subjugation to men. This subjugation is protected by violence against our bodies and minds. At the same time, people who do not conform to the gender binary are equally threatened with violence and disciplined to assimilate to gender norms. Non-violence leads to the conclusion that people should not form organized resistance against gendered violence, but suffer it nobly in the hopes of winning over the hearts and minds of (powerful) men to our cause. Placing the power to end gendered oppression in the hands of those who benefit from it presumes that patriarchal power can be surrendered by persuasion, which reinforces the thoroughly patriarchal definition of men as arbiters and masters. Listen: we will not wait for men to decide we are human enough not to be brutalized. We realize that we have the power to challenge patriarchy with our organized resistance, and that this resistance must embrace violence as an effective political, defensive tactic.

BARUCHA CALAMITY PELLER

WOMEN IN UPRISING

*THE OAXACA COMMUNE, THE
STATE, AND REPRODUCTIVE LABOR*

In 2006, a popular uprising in Oaxaca, Mexico shook the southern state to its core, demobilizing the capital city for 7 months, and effectively removing state power from the smallest villages to the largest municipalities throughout the region. As arguably the first major insurrection of the 21st century, the uprising gained international attention for its innovative tactics of revolt, and for the mass and popular character of the movement.¹

¹ All quotations and details are from the author's experience and interviews during time spent in Oaxaca during the 2006 uprising.

The uprising was striking not only because of the incredible duration of the revolt and its sudden, violent end, but because the content of the revolt, as well as the proliferation of barricades in the state capitol, was reminiscent of the Paris Commune. And so it was that the walls of Oaxaca city were spray painted with the phrase “Viva la Comuna de Oaxaca.” Yet it was the immediate and mass attempt by the participants to reorganize social relations outside of the logic of capitalist systems and state power during the Oaxaca Commune that makes its tenure one of the most important episodes of social upheaval in recent times: this attempt being exemplified by the central participation of women and their means and discourse of revolt.

Although the central demand of the Oaxaca movement was the removal of the active governor, Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, a broader political motive was articulated in the rejection of Ruiz — a need to do away with the neoliberal policies he embodied. The privatization of land and the public sector, violent repression of dissent, and a racist, neocolonial hegemony prevailed throughout the 70-year reign of the PRI, Ruiz’s political party, and these were among the conditions that the popular movement felt had to be transformed. But even so, the demand of the removal of Ruiz as governor can be said to have been merely a point of unity for the diverse sectors participating in the movement; because many did not ask for a mere replacement or a more just management of capital in the region. The social movement refused to be absorbed into electoral campaigns, and had an unwaveringly antagonistic attitude towards political parties. In the Oaxaca uprising, the majority of the movement sought to overcome capitalist exploitation.

A resistance that had been fermenting for years against state authority was triggered by the violent attempt to evict an annual encampment of thousands of striking teachers from the SNTE Section 22 union by state police on June 14, 2006 in the center of Oaxaca City. The dawn raid on the teachers’ plantón (encampment) by hundreds of armed state police and tear gas launching helicopters was countered not only by the teachers themselves, but thousands of Oaxaca City residents, who poured onto the streets and

fought back the police, ultimately regaining control of the center of the capital and the teachers' encampment. What followed was a diverse movement characterized by strategies of occupying, thus deprivatizing, and regaining popular ownership over public spaces such as plazas and streets, media outlets, and government buildings themselves. State authorities were physically removed from offices across the state, and the political class was rapidly undermined and delegitimized by the resistance. In the shell of the government the movement created an alternative: a large meeting of participants called the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO in its Spanish initials).

APPO both described the resistance space, and the actual organizational body composed of various civil and social organizations with distinct ideologies that organized under the same need for the total removal of state power, and at many times, contradictory desires for deep political transformations. Neighborhoods organized autonomously and set up, at one point, three thousand barricades around the city in acts of self-defense from paramilitary attacks. Oaxaca was said to be in a state of "ungovernability" and the popular assembly and the movement in the streets had control of the state capital and hundreds of other municipalities in the state. For months on end there were no police in the region.

The entrance of the Federal Preventive Police (PFP) on October 27th 2006 into the state capital marked a beginning to the end of the uprising. The shocking violence that ensued on November 25th forced many of the movement's participants into hiding. By December more than twenty people had been assassinated, between 75 to 100 had disappeared, and hundreds were injured and incarcerated.

The Oaxaca resistance brought to the surface the desperate social conditions resulting from a particular phase of capital accumulation; in this case, participants in the resistance, calling themselves anti-capitalists, referred to the effects of restructured capitalism in terms of neoliberal policies and globalization. The specific conditions imposed through neoliberal strategies and their structural adjustment

programs (SAPs) that had long provoked discontent were those such as enclosures (privatization) of the commons, the extraction of resources, both natural and human, for private profits, and the withdrawal of social spending. Although a critique of “neoliberalism” subtended the movement, indeed specifically informing women’s participation, a refusal of capitalism and its logic as a system was a central tenet of the revolt.

WOMEN AS REBEL-SUBJECTS AGAINST CAPITAL: THE MIS-HISTORICIZATION OF UPRISING

Each phase of capitalist development and its accompanying primitive accumulation has as its precondition the exploitation of women. With the global expansion of the labor market in the recent decades the gendered aspect of the wage relation has acquired a new significance — feminized poverty increases alongside new demands on women to produce and reproduce labor power as capital’s most essential commodity. Thus, it is not surprising to find that women emerged as central rebel-subjects of the Oaxaca uprising, and that their revolt was articulated from the contradictions in social relations that they experienced. Through revolt, the women de-mystified the dimensions of their penury, specifically the housewives’ sector of the Oaxaca Commune, who in their own terms defined their rebellion against capitalism and the state as directly correlated with their rebellion against their husbands and families in the domestic sphere.

Generally, the historicizing of the Oaxaca uprising has made women and the meaning of their resistance invisible. Women are simply articulated as asocial subjects who took actions, without exploring how this subjectivity defined and motivated the revolt, or why women’s resistance to patriarchy and capitalism in Oaxaca led them towards the rupture of gender as a specified class relation. In many cases, women’s resistance is a mere side note, and women are listed as “supporters” of the movement, or as coming in after the movement

was spawned, despite the fact that women make up one third of the section 22 teachers union.

The failure in recognizing the centrality of women's actions or the character of their motivations in the Oaxaca uprising is basically reflective of the failure to recognize the gendered aspects of class struggle. Thus, women's experience in the uprising is never contextualized within a class framework, and they are described as joining the uprising under the burden of extreme "personal" sacrifice, identified merely in their relationship to the family or to reproduction, saying that they are "mothers, wives, and daughters." When women's participation in the uprising is discussed, it is often in a way that flattens differences and globalizes women's identity — shielding class conflicts that arose between women, ignoring intersection of gender and ethnic identities, and essentializing the participation of women organizing and taking action together without investigating the political strategy and impetus behind the phenomenon.

Women's militancy in the Oaxaca uprising has been minimized and diminished according to gendered stereotypes, in ways that are at times blatant lies. The majority of accounts about women in the Oaxaca uprising praise women's actions as "peaceful and non-violent," despite the fact that it was commonplace to find a group of women making molotovs around the barricades, or as "democratic," as though the women merely wanted to be better represented in the political economy and movement.

Women's struggles against patriarchal elements of the social movement that were fundamental to the uprising have never been discussed in the many existing accounts, nor the detrimental effects that the patriarchal reality had on the success of the uprising itself. And without noting these dimensions, we cannot ask the crucial question: *What happens when, after a rupture with state and capital, the framework of capitalist social relations, such as the sexual division of labor and the relations between men and women, are reproduced in the very attempt to overcome capitalism?*

The Oaxaca movement was one of the most dynamic examples in recent history of popular resistance rapidly undermining a state- and capital-based framework of social relations, yet this had contradictory meanings for women in the movement, whose initiatives for revolt stemmed from the overwhelmingly gendered aspects of exploitation, but who found that this struggle is continuous within the movement and the formation of alternative structures to capitalism.

GENDERED, NEOLIBERAL CAPITALIST RESTRUCTURING IN OAXACA

The southern state of Oaxaca is one of the poorest states in Mexico and also has one of the highest populations of indigenous people. The effects of neoliberal capitalism and the political economy carved out from its economic restructuring, particularly the 1990s, created a social crisis in the country which was substantially felt in places like Oaxaca that are considered to be rich in “human” and “natural” resources. Both the political and economic dimensions of capital restructuring unequally affect women in Oaxaca, where the state and the market encroach on both the private and public spheres of daily life. The inefficiency of single wage homes with a male primary breadwinner has also led to an increase in women working outside the home and thus a feminization of productive labor. Women’s participation in the global market has expanded, but within both the informal sector and formal sector women are paid lower wages than men and are still expected to perform unpaid domestic work. In the fragmented and segregated labor force, gender stratification has become part of the global economic process.

Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) imposed in Mexico set conditions for repaying loans meant to lift the country out of debt. As a result, in SAPs, women are the first to lose jobs during waves of unemployment, they are more affected by cuts in wages since their wages are already lower than men’s. Also, since men tend to control cash crops, women suffer when subsistence agriculture decreases.

Women's labor in the globalized dynamic is rife with precarity, not only due to the aspects of exploitation within the workforce, but because of violence that has resulted from sociopolitical changes and changes in the market. Increase in domestic violence due to lack of attention given to household labor, and male gender role insecurity stemming from reliance on women's wages, along with general anxiety because of rapid shifts in society (heightened political corruption, gang and narco-trafficking violence) all threaten women. Femicide in Mexico has been directly linked to aspects of globalization.

Such processes of capital accumulation on a globalized scale have resulted in sharp increases in migration, as land becomes privatized and agricultural labor decreases, wages drop, and resources and public services are commodified. The economically motivated mass migration of men from Oaxaca to the United States has resulted in a heightened burden for women left behind, who become solely responsible for their families and communities and must mediate a precarious economic situation where, as the local economy deteriorates around them, they rely on remittances that may or may not be sent back from men who risk not making the journey into the States or unemployment or deportation once there. Precarity thus stretches across both sides of the border.

Migration has changed the gendered structures of local communities, and yet women are not given decision-making power in the men's absence, and old land reforms still prevent women's ownership over properties that they upkeep. Poverty levels have also led to a heightened trend of female migration to the north. SAPs have entailed cuts in funding public services — such as education, healthcare, and basic community infrastructure. These are particularly “feminized” issues, since such services are mystified and socially perceived as “women's work.” The modernization model meant to fast-track development in underdeveloped countries has contradictory implications for women. While the entrance of women into the productive sphere is termed by the espousers of neoliberalism as “empowerment,” it is in truth merely another site of exploitation.

THE WOMEN'S TAKEOVER AND OCCUPATION OF CANAL NUEVE

The breakdown of political legitimacy and the psychological internalization of authority did not only materialize between the people of Oaxaca and the state, but within other relations and the ways that systematic repressive paradigms, such as patriarchy, structured places from work to the home and the popular assemblies. This breakdown began to be articulated in a truly revolutionary setting — during the occupation of Canal Nueve, the Oaxaca state television network and state radio.

The August 1st, 2006, takeover of Canal Nueve has been deemed as significant not only because of the political and logistic power it held for the movement — the possession of a radio and TV networks transmitting far and wide — but also because it was an action carried forth spontaneously by thousands of women who were not acting with the permission or advice of male leaders. The initial takeover occurred during a march of more than 10,000 women in Oaxaca City, where the women decided to go to Canal Nueve and ask for airtime in order to “give a more truthful representation” of the movement. When the station managers refused to give the women fifteen minutes of airtime, 350 women simply took over the station. The march was named March of the Cacerolas, or pots and pans, and subsequently the TV and radio station was named the same. The name subverted gender identity paradigms and ideas of women, particularly housewives, as passive and disempowered.

What has been significantly overlooked in the analysis and reporting of this aspect of the Oaxaca struggle is what the women did during the occupation of Canal Nueve. Besides transmitting, producing daily programming, and holding workshops, long hours were spent during nightly patrols of the transmitter and defensive barricades in which the women of Canal Nueve spoke to each other while huddled around small fires drinking coffee to stay awake. The dialogue and solidarity that emerged between the women was perhaps one of the most potent results of the takeover. What was before “private” and

“personal” became a site for resistance. It was during these conversations that women for the first time experienced a space not dominated by men, in the absence of the market, in which they could organize freely and relate experiences, and talk to other women. This is where the idea of women’s autonomy emerged in Oaxaca, and it was to this formation of women, where there was no exploitation of their labor, no dominance of the market or the family, that the women would refer throughout the struggle.

Having the largest state television and its two radios at their disposal, women were able to transmit their opposition to the state collectively, and the image on the screen showed a break in the social factory where women are disciplined upholders of family and the private sphere, caring for the male waged laborer. Before, the television station had produced endless programs supporting state discourse, in a country where the President, Vicente Fox, had proclaimed on television that women were washing machines with two legs. After the takeover, women from all backgrounds were denouncing state authority and capitalism, and housewives with radical discourses brought the occupied station to its highest viewer rating in history as a state network. The women also critiqued their own movement, publicly challenging male comrades in televised broadcasts to equalize cooking and cleaning at the plantones.

It was within the first experience of a space in which women could speak freely together that they realized the true extent of the exploitation they experienced, and the nature of the political struggle at hand. “We found we had the same story, of being abused by husbands, brothers, raped by bosses”, said Eva, a 56-year-old housewife and member of *Colectiva Nueva Mujer*. “What we had in common was wanting to take down the system in order to change society into one where women are empowered. And we cried together realizing the oppression rooted in the home.”

During the Oaxaca uprising, in which at one point there were nearly 3,000 barricades constructed throughout the city as a means to protect the neighborhoods, and two different plantones occupying

central plazas, women met and talked and organized. The rebellion of the women truly gave the name of “ungovernable” to the conditions in Oaxaca at that time.

Many women of the movement contend that while the popular assemblies were dominated by male voices, the participants of the marches were mostly female, and that the barricades were maintained and defended from paramilitary attacks by mostly women.

There were several barricades in Oaxaca that were all women barricades. The barricades were yet another space where such important dialogues between women continued, and masculinity associated with political militancy was undermined as women defended police and paramilitary attacks with molotov cocktails, stones, and sticks.

Most women had never in their lives experienced space that was not only a place to talk to other women, but also autonomous, not controlled by the market, the state, or their husbands and fathers. Many realized that their life experiences of abuse in the home through economic hardships and structural oppression were echoed in the voices of other women and they found a common understanding of the meaning of gender and identity from the public to the private sphere. Late into the night at the barricades and in the Canal Nueve occupation, women shared stories, many previously untold, of state and interpersonal sexual violence, domestic violence, of subordination from the workplace to the home. Here women realized that they were not alone, that collectively their motivations for participating in the movement did not only stem from their economic struggles and that of their communities, but of the same gender stratification they experienced structurally in capitalist society their entire lives inside their homes, and furthermore, in the present moment within the APPO itself.

This analysis, where the exploitation within the private and public lives of women, within their productive and reproductive labor, intersect in their mutually exploitative categories, provided a new theoretical framework within which these women saw their actions:

not as actions strictly within the context of the popular struggle but actions within the popular struggle of women against their exploitation and oppression. The discourse of the women's movement did not suggest that they saw themselves as a Marxist type "add-on" to the broader movement, or that their task was only to organize around "women's issues." Rather, the collective discourse that emerged from the late conversations in the "liberated" spaces of the barricades, media takeovers, and plantones was that a movement that challenges capitalism and seeks alternatives cannot survive without a transformation of capitalist social relations, wherein gender itself is a class relation. From the home to a public sphere dominated by wage labor, to the male hegemony within the movement, capitalism itself cannot survive without the same tiers of oppression of women. A rupture with capitalist production must be accompanied by a rupture with reproductive labor. The women of Oaxaca found the two spheres irrevocably interlinked, and it was for them the remaining question of reproduction that they faced during the Oaxaca Commune, where the ugly face of capitalist patriarchy was reestablished within the Oaxaca movement. The revanchist force of patriarchal capitalist social relations ultimately had grave strategic consequences for the success of the uprising.

PATRIARCHY IN THE MOVEMENT — THE HOME VS. THE BARRICADES

"Then we were fighting two different fronts — the system, and the men inside our own movement."

—Eva, housewife

The two different fronts in the struggle against patriarchy and capitalism were not mutually exclusive. The reasons why patriarchy persists within the context of popular struggles are similar to and reflective of the perpetuation of gender exploitation in the capitalist world. Patriarchy in this sense cannot be viewed as an isolated phenomenon or a question of individual morality, but a systematic

dynamic upon which capital accumulation and its social relations are dependent, and which are constantly deepened by state policies.

In the same ways that globalization has provided a way for Oaxacan women to participate in labor that does not involve the reproduction of male labor power (albeit to their further exploitation) one could say that in the Oaxaca movement the women also acted autonomously and directly in the movement — organizing occupations, resisting police, building barricades and staging media takeovers — rather than acting as support roles for male participants. “We told them we weren’t here just to cook their food at the plantones and wash the dishes,” said Luz, a 40-year-old housewife. “We demonstrated that we can take actions as part of the movement ourselves.”

The women of the movement did not passively accept the roles that some men attempted to impose on them, but used the transformative moment to challenge traditional gender roles. Many women refused to simply cook or wash dishes at the plantón, but challenged the men to do the same. Women were the most vocal about challenging authoritarian tendencies from some men within the movement, and called out men for acting as the protagonist of the uprising.

Yet sexism and men’s insistence on women’s role in reproduction not only limited women’s participation in the movement, but also strategically undermined the effectiveness of the Oaxaca movement as a whole. Men’s lack of support for women on a practical level — not only their unwillingness to equalize household duties but also the pressure they put on women to return to domestic work — greatly affected women’s ability to participate to their full strategic capacity within the movement, critically weakening the barricades and the occupations.

“The first night [of the Canal Nueve occupation] we were hundreds but little by little the numbers went down because there were women who had children to take care of, husbands, and that limited us,” said Ita, a 55-year-old teacher from *Colectiva Nueva Mujer*. “There were some men who didn’t agree in backing and supporting the station

that had been taken over by women. Women's husbands didn't help in the sense of doing the housework, such as taking care of kids or washing clothes, so that the women could continue being at the station. But for many women it was enough that the men allowed them to go at all."

Paramilitaries took advantage of the low number of women defending the station and on August 21st 2006, shot at the television antenna, rendering it useless. In the case of the Canal Nueve occupation as well as at the barricades, women were limited in maximizing the strategic effects of these tactics because of the pressure to continue to fulfill domestic duties required by their gender roles. Male family members, even those participating in the social movement in the streets, refused to do housework, even under these special circumstances.

Much like daily life in the global labor force, women participating in Oaxaca's popular struggle were challenged by questions of time, and felt they had two jobs. What once was time taken up by waged work became time spent participating in assemblies, occupations, or at barricades, their "second" job being domestic labor. Whereas before they were threatened by economic violence resulting from an insecure and marginalized work sector, they now found themselves threatened by sexual and gendered violence from police and paramilitary. And, during the uprising as before the uprising, women suffer from domestic violence and are punished by an increase in this, whether their housework is neglected because of time spent participating in the waged productive labor, or participating in a movement to end capitalism.

When asked if they suspected if domestic violence increased during the uprising all twelve women from Colectiva Nueva Mujer present nodded their heads.

There were comrades who complained that "since the 1st of August and the Canal Nueve takeover my woman doesn't serve me." There were many women who suffered domestic violence for being at the

plantones, marches, even sometimes attempts to divorce or separate. The husbands didn't take well to the idea of women abandoning the housework to participate politically. "We are worried about this situation because we are fighting against the system and the result is that in the home this same repression occurs. Inside of the APPO it occurs. And it's not just our husbands that question us but our entire families."

One woman continued to defend a barricade with a broken arm — the result of her husband trying to prevent her from going to the streets.

As heterogeneous as the movement was, the assemblies were male dominated and women's voices were systematically silenced. At the APPO statewide congress on November 16th 2006, in which popular assemblies from around the state gathered to solidify the APPO's formation and strategic direction, a directive body, or consejo, was formed composing of representatives from the diverse sectors of the movement. It was to replace the provisional consejo, existing since the birth of the APPO, which was an exclusively male body. When the time came to vote for the percentage of women who would regularly participate as members of the Consejo, it was clear that the APPO had failed to integrate a gender analysis into their previous political debates during the congress or generally during the previous months of uprising. The debate that focused on the "State, National, and International Context" accomplished a coherent current class analysis of Mexico, but never discussed patriarchy and Mexico's long history of oppression of women on a social and political scale as well as the economic exploitation of women's bodies and labor. The congress also consisted mostly of male representatives.

Gender analysis was not taken into consideration in the concept of organizational representation. The vote between whether women should have at least a 33% representation or a 50% representation was debated for over an hour. The congress voted that women should have a 33% representation arguing that it would not be possible to have half of the representatives for each organization, region, or

sector be women, because many had very little or no women participants. “We were angered by the vote at the Congress because we (women) have been most present in the streets, so why can’t we get full participation in the assemblies?” said a 23-year-old member of *Colectiva Nueva Mujer*.

CLASS STRUGGLE WITHIN THE WOMEN’S MOVEMENT

When the antennas of Canal Nueve were destroyed by paramilitary gunfire, the women led other movement participants to take over thirteen other commercial radio stations at dawn the next day. Only two occupations lasted more than a few weeks. On August 31st, APPO’s Coordination of Women of Oaxaca (COMO) was formed, comprised of women from diverse backgrounds, including professionals and housewives. Some participated as individuals or as members of organizations. The COMO organized several marches and actions in the months following and gathered attention as the essential embodiment of the women of the uprising.

In the same way that many participants in the Oaxaca uprising identified with the politics of the rebellion but disagreed with the qualities of the structural organizations of the movement and did not identify with the APPO body, women participants in the Oaxaca uprising identified with the feminized politics of the women’s movement but deviated from the structural entities that pretended to represent the women of the Oaxaca movement: the COMO.

The women who split from the COMO were largely housewives who worked within the informal sector and others who experienced ideological differences with the women of COMO. Many of these differences stemmed from questions of class, and according to some women class privileges in the COMO resulted in internalizations of patriarchy and authoritarianism. The women noted that women who had more education and thus higher paying jobs claimed roles that involved articulation of the women’s issues and pretended to

represent all the women involved, that these roles led to obscuration of poorer women's needs and also put certain women in hierarchal roles.

The splits within the COMO not only reflected splits happening within the movement as a whole, but also reflected how capitalist restructuring has polarized women along class lines. Differences in identity not only adulterated gender relations within the anti-capitalist Oaxaca movement, but also between women fighting capitalism itself and at the same time the gender stratification within society and the movement.

The women who are allotted the least privileges in society, who work at the lowest wages or in unpaid labor, are also marginalized the most within the movement against this exploitation. It is thus that such women who experience the intersections of class, gender, and ethnicity — mainly the Oaxacan housewives and indigenous women — who with the smallest income mediate the effects of patriarchal capitalism and repression at the base level in the community, rejected the COMO. The women who suffered the most from hierarchies outside the movement were highly skeptical of vanguard politics and all types of power relations within society that were recreated within the movement, and they sought a horizontal, anti-authoritarian, non-reformist, and non-representational alternative during times of struggle. They saw that they couldn't unite with all of the other women within the Oaxaca uprising simply on the basis of gender identification because of the ways that intersecting identities, particularly class, shaped the ideological grounds for their rebellion. "We (the housewives) don't want to take power, we don't want to negotiate with the government, we don't want leaders or communists around," Eva said forcefully. "We want autonomy and mutual aid."

Capitalist gender stratification was recreated within the APPO and the social movement, forcing women back to reproductive work, and class stratification was recreated within the women's participation within the APPO. In this way, hierarchies are built and rebuilt.

SEXUAL VIOLENCE AS STATE REPRESSION: WOMEN'S BODIES AS BATTLEGROUND

“Some felt like it was also a security measure to only let women into Canal Nueve, that that way we wouldn't suffer as much violence and repression.”

— Ita

Although women in Canal Nueve were semi-consciously applying a strategy such as that used by Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo in Argentina in 1977 (that is, subverting their gender identity in order to maintain the occupation), they in no way were unaware of the gendered violence often put forth by the state.

The patriarchal nature of the state means that its soldiers and police forces cannot and will never alleviate women of the oppression they experience because they are women. To rely on police and soldiers to “protect” women's bodies is a backwards misconception born out of sexism and a minimization of women's activities. In reality it is exactly the patriarchal profile of the state that heightens violent repression of women rather than diminishing it.

The phenomenon of soldier rape has been widely explored and researched. However, globalization has meant a change in methods of state control of its own people. As international financial institutions such as the IMF and the WTO weaken Mexico's political and economic autonomy, it is forced to lower trade tariffs and to allow multinational corporations to exert hegemony over its markets. The Mexican state has been strengthened in aspects of domestic security with funds from the US in order to protect private investments from local resistance. This has meant an expansion in national security forces and particularly a militarization of police forces. Rather than a full scale military operation, the Mexican government, in order to maintain a democratic aesthetic necessitated by integration into the global market, militarizes its state and federal police forces to mediate crowd control and riot situations, like that of the Oaxaca uprising. The creation of the Federal Preventive Police (PFP) during Vicente Fox's administration is an example of the militarization of the police

forces. The PFP are given more highly sophisticated weapons and do not make regular local patrols but are deployed to outside states to “fight narco-traffickers” or to “maintain the peace”. Like soldiers in a war, 3,000 PFP and armored vehicles and tanks were deployed to Oaxaca on October 27th 2006 in order to temporarily occupy the city, evict the barricades and encampments and “maintain the peace.” Police in Mexico, and the PFP in Oaxaca, have used sexual violence as a tool for repression in both similar and different ways to that of soldiers in wartime. However, gendered violence from police is an under-researched phenomenon that is barely analyzed by social movements.

Sexual violence on the part of a militarized police force is a tactic used not only to terrorize women, but also to make a point among men: by raping “their” women they were also damaging those men’s property, and in the case of Oaxaca, the act of occupying space in the center of the capital, a space previously occupied by the movement, is represented and expressed by occupying women’s bodies through sexual violence. Thus women’s bodies become the political and symbolic battleground.

Further, as traditional gender roles remain static and women’s role remains “in the home,” women who leave their homes to take to the streets in protest are considered to have lost their “respectability” and therefore can be treated as “whores.” When male comrades also discourage women from going into the streets and, instead of supporting women’s participation in the movement, pressure them to fulfill reproduction activities, they play an ideological role in strengthening the tools of state repression and legitimize police sexual violence towards women on the streets.

In most of the cases of mass rapes that have been widely examined, like that of the Bosnian mass rapes, soldiers rape civilians of different ethnicities and nationalities, the supposed motivation being racial cleansing and nationalism. Mass rape has rarely, if ever, been examined outside of a framework in which race and nationalism are considered to be the principal characteristics. This framework ignores

other social or political implications of mass rape, in particular the state's need to protect capital accumulation, and also reinforces biological motivations. Though Oaxaca is 70% indigenous, the PFP does not discriminate. A few months before arriving in Oaxaca, the PFP raped 23 of the 45 women arrested during the siege of Atenco, in the state of Mexico in May of 2006 while putting down the three-day rebellion there.

The total number of women raped during the PFP occupation and during arrests is unknown, but various accounts of sexual assault by the PFP surfaced after their entrance into the state. One 45-year-old woman called into the occupied university radio one night in mid-November to report that PFP officers sexually assaulted her while she was running errands downtown. A silence fell over the barricade as people listened to the live broadcast of the woman's account, and that night women began to organize, seeing a need to show a collective response to the use of sexual violence by the police. The next day, women organized a march to the site of the PFP occupation and protested the assaults, holding mirrors towards the police that read: "I am a rapist."

This occurred in the context of the systematic perpetuation of violence against women and femicide in Mexico, particularly in Oaxaca, where the federal government states an average of 60 women murdered every year. It also occurs in the context where as women work outside the homes in the productive sphere, or leave their domestic work to spend time in occupations or barricades, they suffer a heightened trend in domestic violence.

Though research has been done concerning individual incidents of police sexual violence, and even on how such violence is the result of systemic features of police institutions, mass police use of sexual violence as a method of state repression is barely analyzed by scholars of social movements. Little has been written on how mass police sexual violence is a direct result of the disintegration of economic and social state control and the subsequent militarization of police forces, particularly under globalization. This is augmented by the changing

gender dynamics of capital restructuring — with more women in the “public sphere,” with the exploitation of women’s bodies so essential for extraction of capitalist profit, and with women more active in social movements, police sexual violence will continue to become a more and more common feature of repression.

CONCLUSION

The women of the Oaxaca uprising learned that a popular movement cannot confront the structural, social, and political crisis created by capital and state domination if the violent, gendered expression of capitalism is not simultaneously confronted — if the movement recreates the gendered aspects of the very social relations that an uprising pretends to transform. The strategic obstacles faced in the Oaxaca Commune were an expression of capital’s contradictions concerning women’s work, and it is feasible to say that the uprising may have had a different outcome if the sexual division of labor was openly confronted and did not disable women’s ability to hold the barricades and occupations.

An uprising, along with those who historicize revolt, cannot properly confront its context when “women’s issues” are atomized into a particular, specialized space in the movement, when capitalism as it truly functions and exists is not challenged.

However, the Oaxaca Commune and its barricades and occupations, its street battles and long nights of assemblies, all running on the blood and sweat of women’s resistance, continues to inspire the possibility of insurrection and mass popular revolt. The state of “ungovernability” that the movement claimed gestured toward true freedom, and the rebellious women of the movement refused, for a time with great force, to be governed by state authority, by the domination of capitalism in its everyday manifestations, by husbands, middleclass women, or by the police.

JACKIE WANG

AGAINST
INNOCENCE
RACE, GENDER, AND
THE POLITICS OF SAFETY

Saidiya V. Hartman: I think that gets at one of the fundamental ethical questions/problems/crises for the West: the status of difference and the status of the other. It's as though in order to come to any recognition of common humanity, the other must be assimilated, meaning in this case, utterly displaced and effaced: "Only if I can see myself in that position can I understand the crisis of that position." That is the logic of the moral and political discourses we see every day — the need for the innocent black subject to be victimized by a racist state in order to see the racism of the racist state. You have to be exemplary in your goodness, as opposed to ...

Frank Wilderson: *[laughter] A nigga on the warpath!*

While I was reading the local newspaper I came across a story that caught my attention. The article was about a 17 year-old boy from Baltimore named Isaiah Simmons who died in a juvenile facility in 2007 when five to seven counselors suffocated him while restraining him for hours. After he stopped responding they dumped his body in the snow and did not call for medical assistance for over 40 minutes. In late March 2012, the case was thrown out completely and none of the counselors involved in his murder were charged with anything. The article I found online about the case was titled “Charges Dropped Against 5 In Juvenile Offender’s Death.” By emphasizing that it was a juvenile *offender* who died, the article is quick to flag Isaiah as a criminal, as if to signal to readers that his death is not worthy of sympathy or being taken up by civil rights activists. Every comment left on the article was crude and contemptuous — the general sentiment was that his death was no big loss to society. The news about the case being thrown out barely registered at all. There was no public outcry, no call to action, no discussion of the many issues bound up with the case — youth incarceration, racism, the privatization of prisons and jails (he died at a private facility), medical neglect, state violence, and so forth — though to be fair, there was a critical response when the case initially broke.

For weeks after reading the article I kept contemplating the question: *What is the difference between Trayvon Martin and Isaiah Simmons?* Which cases galvanize activists into action, and which are ignored completely? In the wake of the Jena 6, Troy Davis, Oscar Grant, Trayvon Martin, and other high profile cases,¹ I have taken note of

¹ This article assumes some knowledge of race-related cases that received substantial media attention in the last several years. For those who are unfamiliar with the cases:

The Jena 6 were 6 Black teenagers convicted for beating a white student at Jena High School in Jena, Louisiana, on December 4, 2006, after mounting racial tensions including the hanging of a noose on tree. 5 of the teens were initially charged with attempted murder.

Troy Davis was a Black man who was executed on September 21, 2011 for allegedly murdering police officer Mark MacPhail in Savannah, Georgia, though there was little evidence to support the conviction.

the patterns that structure political appeals, particularly the way *innocence* becomes a necessary precondition for the launching of anti-racist political campaigns. These campaigns often center on prosecuting and harshly punishing the individuals responsible for overt and locatable acts of racist violence, thus positioning the State and the criminal justice system as an *ally and protector of the oppressed*. If the “innocence” of a Black victim is not established, he or she will not become a suitable spokesperson for the cause. If you are Black, have a drug felony, and are attempting to file a complaint with the ACLU regarding habitual police harassment — you are probably not going to be legally represented by them or any other civil rights organization anytime soon.² An empathetic structure of feeling based on appeals to innocence has come to ground contemporary anti-racist politics. Within this framework, empathy can only be established when a person meets the standards of authentic victimhood and moral purity, which requires Black people, in the words of Frank Wilderson, to be shaken free of “niggerization.” Social, political, cultural, and legal *recognition* only happens when a person is thoroughly whitewashed, neutralized, and made non-threatening. The “spokesperson” model of doing activism (isolating specific exemplary cases) also tends to emphasize the individual, rather than the collective nature of the injury. Framing oppression in terms of individual actors is a liberal tactic that dismantles collective responses to oppression and diverts attention from the larger picture.

Oscar Grant was a Black man who was shot and killed by BART police officer Johannes Mehserle in Oakland, California on January 1, 2009.

Trayvon Martin was a 17 year-old Black youth who was murdered by George Zimmerman, a volunteer neighborhood watchman, on February 26, 2012, in Sanford, Florida.

² This was a real situation that I heard described by Michelle Alexander when I saw her speak at Morgan State University. While she was working as a civil rights lawyer at the ACLU, a young Black man brought a stack of papers to her after hearing about their campaign against racial profiling. The papers documented instances of police harassment in detail (including names, dates, badges numbers, descriptions), but the ACLU refused to represent him because he had a drug felony, even though he claimed that the drugs were planted on him. Later, a scandal broke about the Oakland police, particularly an officer he identified, planting drugs on POC.

Using “innocence” as the foundation to address anti-Black violence is an *appeal to the white imaginary*, though these arguments are certainly made by people of color as well. Relying on this framework re-entrenches a logic that criminalizes race and constructs subjects as docile. A liberal politics of recognition can only reproduce a guilt-innocence schematization that fails to grapple with the fact that there is an *a priori* association of Blackness with guilt (criminality). Perhaps *association* is too generous — there is a flat-out conflation of the terms. As Frank Wilderson noted in “Gramsci’s Black Marx,” the cop’s answer to the Black subject’s question — *why did you shoot me?* — follows a tautology: “I shot you because you are Black; you are Black because I shot you.”³ In the words of Fanon, the cause is the consequence.⁴ Not only are Black men assumed guilty until proven innocent, Blackness itself is considered synonymous with guilt. Authentic victimhood, passivity, moral purity, and the adoption of a whitewashed position are necessary for recognition in the eyes of the State. Wilderson, quoting N.W.A, notes that “a nigga on the warpath” cannot be a proper subject of empathy.⁵ The desire for recognition compels us to be allies with, rather than enemies of the State, to sacrifice ourselves in order to meet the standards of victimhood, to throw our bodies into traffic to prove that the car will hit us rather than calling for the execution of all motorists. This is also the logic of rape revenge narratives — only after a woman is thoroughly degraded can we begin to tolerate her rage (but outside of films and books, violent women are not tolerated even when they have the “moral” grounds to fight back, as exemplified by the high rates of women who are imprisoned or sentenced to death for murdering or assaulting abusive partners).

We may fall back on such appeals for strategic reasons — to win a case or to get the public on our side — but there is a problem when

3 Frank Wilderson, “Gramsci’s Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?” *Social Identities* 9.2 (2003): 225-240.

4 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Uniform Title: *Damnés De La Terre* (New York: Grove Press, 1965).

5 Saidiya V. Hartman and Frank B. Wilderson, III, “The Position of the Unthought,” *Qui Parle* 13.2 (2003): 183-201.

our strategies reinforce a framework in which revolutionary and insurgent politics are unimaginable. I also want to argue that a politics founded on appeals to innocence is *anachronistic* because it does not address the transformation and re-organization of racist strategies in the post-civil rights era. A politics of innocence is only capable of acknowledging examples of direct, individualized acts of racist violence while obscuring the racism of a putatively color blind liberalism that operates on a structural level. Posing the issue in terms of personal prejudice feeds the fallacy of racism as an individual intention, feeling or personal prejudice, though there is certainly a psychological and affective dimension of racism that exceeds the individual in that it is shaped by social norms and media representations. The liberal color blind paradigm of racism submerges race beneath the “commonsense” logic of crime and punishment. This effectively conceals racism, because it is not considered racist to be against crime. Cases like the execution of Troy Davis, where the courts come under scrutiny for racial bias, also legitimize state violence by treating such cases as exceptional. The political response to the murder of Troy Davis does not challenge the assumption that communities need to clean up their streets by rounding up criminals, for it relies on the claim that Davis is not one of those feared criminals, but *an innocent Black man*. Innocence, however, is just code for *nontthreatening to white civil society*. Troy Davis is differentiated from other Black men — the *bad* ones — and the legal system is diagnosed as being *infected* with racism, masking the fact that the legal system is the constituent mechanism through which racial violence is carried out (wishful last-minute appeals to the right to a *fair* trial reveal this — as if trials were ever intended to be fair!). The State is imagined to be deviating from its intended role as protector of the people, rather than being the primary perpetrator. H. Rap Brown provides a sobering reminder that, “Justice means ‘just-us-white-folks.’ There is no redress of grievance for Blacks in this country.”⁶

6 H. Rap Brown, Jamil Al-Amin, *Die, Nigger, Die! : A Political Autobiography* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2002).

While there are countless examples of overt racism, Black social (and physical) death is primarily achieved via a coded discourse of “criminality” and a mediated forms of state violence carried out by a impersonal carceral apparatus (the matrix of police, prisons, the legal system, prosecutors, parole boards, prison guards, probation officers, etc). In other words — incidents where a biased individual fucks with or murders a person of color can be identified as racism to “conscientious persons,” but the racism underlying the systematic imprisonment of Black Americans under the pretense of the War on Drugs is more difficult to locate and generally remains invisible because it is spatially confined. When it is visible, it fails to arouse public sympathy, even among the Black leadership. As Loïc Wacquant, scholar of the carceral state, asks, “What is the chance that white Americans will identify with Black convicts when even the Black leadership has turned its back on them?”⁷ The abandonment of Black convicts by civil rights organizations is reflected in the history of these organizations. From 1975-86, the NAACP and the Urban League identified imprisonment as a central issue, and the disproportionate incarceration of Black Americans was understood as a problem that was structural and political. Spokespersons from the civil rights organizations related imprisonment to the general confinement of Black Americans. Imprisoned Black men were, as Wacquant notes, portrayed inclusively as “brothers, uncles, neighbors, friends.”⁸ Between 1986-90 there was a dramatic shift in the rhetoric and official policy of the NAACP and the Urban League that is exemplary of the turn to a politics of innocence. By the early 1990s, the NAACP had dissolved its prison program and stopped publishing articles about rehabilitation and post-imprisonment issues. Meanwhile these organizations began to embrace the rhetoric of individual responsibility and a tough-on-crime stance that encouraged Blacks to collaborate with police to get drugs out of their neighborhoods, even going as far as endorsing harsher sentences for minors and recidivists.

7 Loïc Wacquant, “Social Identity and the Ethics of Punishment,” Center for Ethics in Society, Stanford University, 2007. Conference presentation.

8 Ibid.

Black convicts, initially a part of the “we” articulated by civil rights groups, became *them*. Wacquant writes, “This reticence [to advocate for Black convicts] is further reinforced by the fact, noted long ago by W.E.B. DuBois, that the tenuous position of the black bourgeoisie in the socioracial hierarchy rests critically on its ability to distance itself from its unruly lower-class brethren: to offset the symbolic disability of blackness, middle-class African Americans must forcefully communicate to whites that they have ‘absolutely no sympathy and no known connections with any black man who has committed a crime.’”⁹ When the Black leadership and middle-class Blacks differentiate themselves from poorer Blacks, they feed into a notion of Black exceptionalism that is used to dismantle anti-racist struggles. This class of exceptional Blacks (Barack Obama, Condoleeza Rice, Colin Powell) supports the collective delusion of a post-race society.

The shift in the rhetoric and policy of civil rights organizations is perhaps rooted in a fear of affirming the conflation of Blackness and criminality by advocating for prisoners. However, not only have these organizations abandoned Black prisoners — they shore up and extend the Penal State by individualizing, depoliticizing, and decontextualizing the issue of “crime and punishment” and vilifying those most likely to be subjected to racialized state violence. The dis-identification with poor, urban Black Americans is not limited to Black men, but also Black women who are vilified via the figure of the Welfare Queen: a lazy, sexually irresponsible burden on society (particularly hard-working white Americans). The Welfare State and the Penal State complement one another, as Clinton’s 1998 statements denouncing prisoners and ex-prisoners who receive welfare or social security reveal: he condemns former prisoners receiving welfare assistance for deviously committing “fraud and abuse” against “working families” who “play by the rules.”¹⁰ Furthermore, this complementarity is gendered. Black women are the shock absorbers of

9 Loïc Wacquant, “Deadly Symbiosis: When Ghetto and Prison Meet and Mesh,” *Punishment & Society* 3.1 (2001): 95-134.

10 Ibid.

the social crisis created by the Penal State: the incarceration of Black men profoundly increases the burden put on Black women, who are forced to perform more waged and unwaged (caring) labor, raise children alone, and are punished by the State when their husbands or family members are convicted of crimes (for example, a family cannot receive housing assistance if someone in the household has been convicted of a drug felony). The re-configuration of the Welfare State under the Clinton Administration (which imposed stricter regulations on welfare recipients) further intensified the backlash against poor Black women. On this view, the Welfare State is the apparatus used to regulate poor Black women who are not subjected to regulation, directed chiefly at Black men, by the Penal State — though it is important to note that the feminization of poverty and the punitive turn in non-violent crime policy led to an 400% increase in the female prison population between 1980 and the late 1990s.¹¹ Racialized patterns of incarceration and the assault on the urban poor are not seen as a form of racist state violence because, in the eyes of the public, convicts (along with their families and associates) deserve such treatment. The politics of innocence directly fosters this culture of vilification, even when it is used by civil rights organizations.

WHITE SPACE

[C]rime porn often presents a view of prisons and urban ghettos as “alternate universes” where the social order is drastically different, and the links between social structures and the production of these environments is conveniently ignored. In particular, although they are public institutions, prisons are removed from everyday US experience.¹²

11 Cassandra Shaylor, “‘It’s Like Living in a Black Hole’: Women of Color and Solitary Confinement in the Prison Industrial Complex,” *New England Journal on Criminal and Civil Confinement* 24.2 (1998).

12 Jessi Lee Jackson and Erica R. Meiners, “Fear and Loathing: Public Feelings in Antiprison Work,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 39.1: (2011) 270-290.

The spatial politics of safety organizes the urban landscape. Bodies that arouse feelings of fear, disgust, rage, guilt, or even discomfort must be made disposable and targeted for removal in order to secure a sense of safety for whites. In other words, the space that white people occupy must be *cleansed*. The visibility of poor Black bodies (as well as certain non-Black POC, trans people, homeless people, differently-abled people, and so forth) induces anxiety, so these bodies must be contained, controlled, and removed. Prisons and urban ghettos prevent Black and brown bodies from contaminating white space. Historically, appeals to the safety of women have sanctioned the expansion of the police and prison regimes while conjuring the racist image of the Black male rapist. With the rise of the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s came an increase in public awareness about sexual violence. Self-defense manuals and classes, as well as Take Back the Night marches and rallies, rapidly spread across the country. The 1970s and 1980s saw a surge in public campaigns targeted at women in urban areas warning of the dangers of appearing in public spaces alone. The New York City rape squad declared that "[s]ingle women should avoid being alone in any part of the city, at any time."¹³ In *The Rational Woman's Guide to Self-Defense* (1975), women were told, "a little paranoia is really good for every woman."¹⁴ At the same time that the State was asserting itself as the protector of (white) women, the US saw the massive expansion of prisons and the criminalization of Blackness. It could be argued that the State and the media opportunistically seized on the energy of the feminist movement and appropriated feminist rhetoric to establish the racialized Penal State while simultaneously controlling the movement of women (by promoting the idea that public space was inherently threatening to women). People of this perspective might hold that the media frenzy about the safety of women was a backlash to the gains made by the feminist movement that sought to discipline women and promote the idea that, as Georgina Hickey

13 Georgina Hickey, "From Civility to Self-Defense: Modern Advice to Women on the Privileges and Dangers of Public Space," *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 39.1 (2011): 77-94.

14 Mary Conroy, *The Rational Woman's Guide to Self-Defense* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1975).

wrote, “individual women were ultimately responsible for what happened to them in public space.”¹⁵ However, in *In an Abusive State: How Neoliberalism Appropriated the Feminist Movement Against Sexual Violence*, Kristin Bumiller argues that the feminist movement was actually “a partner in the unforeseen growth of a criminalized society”: by insisting on “aggressive sex crime prosecution and activism,” feminists assisted in the creation of a tough-on-crime model of policing and punishment.¹⁶

Regardless of what perspective we agree with, the alignment of racialized incarceration and the proliferation of campaigns warning women about the dangers of the lurking rapist was *not* a coincidence. If the safety of women was a genuine concern, the campaigns would not have been focused on anonymous rapes in public spaces, since statistically it is more common for a woman to be raped by someone she knows. Instead, women’s safety provided a convenient pretext for the escalation of the Penal State, which was needed to regulate and dispose of certain surplus populations (mostly poor Blacks) before they became a threat to the US social order. For Wacquant, this new regime of racialized social control became necessary after the crisis of the urban ghetto (provoked by the massive loss of jobs and resources attending deindustrialization) and the looming threat of Black radical movements.¹⁷ The torrent of uprisings that took place in Black ghettos between 1963-1968, particularly following the murder of Martin Luther King in 1968, were followed by a wave of prison upheavals (including Attica, Solidad, San Quentin, and facilities across Michigan, Tennessee, Oklahoma, Illinois, West Virginia, and Pennsylvania). Of course, these upheavals were easier to contain and shield from public view because they were cloaked and muffled by the walls of the penitentiary.

15 Hickey, “From Civility to Self-Defense.”

16 Kristin Bumiller, *In an Abusive State: How Neoliberalism Appropriated the Feminist Movement against Sexual Violence* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

17 Wacquant, “Deadly Symbiosis.”

The engineering and management of urban space also demarcates the limits of our political imagination by determining which narratives and experiences are even thinkable. The media construction of urban ghettos and prisons as “alternate universes” marks them as zones of unintelligibility, faraway places that are removed from the everyday white experience. Native American reservations are another example of a “void” zone that white people can only access through the fantasy of media representations. What happens in these zones of abjection and vulnerability does not typically register in the white imaginary. In the instance that an “injustice” does register, it will have to be translated into more comprehensible terms.

When I think of the public responses to Oscar Grant and Trayvon Martin, it seems significant that these murders took place in spaces that the white imaginary has access to, which allows white people to narrativize the incidents in terms that are familiar to them. Trayvon was gunned down while visiting family in a gated neighborhood; Oscar was murdered by a police officer in an Oakland commuter rail station. These spaces are not “alternate universes” or void-zones that lie outside white experience and comprehension. To what extent is the attention these cases have received attributable to the encroachment of violence on spaces that white people occupy? What about cases of racialized violence that occur outside white comfort zones? When describing the spatialization of settler colonies, Frantz Fanon writes about “a zone of non-being, an extraordinary sterile and arid region,” where “Black is not a man.”¹⁸ In the regions where Black is not man, there is no story to be told. Or rather, there are no subjects seen as worthy of having a story of their own.

TRANSLATION

When an instance of racist violence takes place on white turf, as in the cases of Trayvon Martin and Oscar Grant, there is still the problem of *translation*. I contend that the politics of innocence renders such violence comprehensible *only if one is capable of seeing themselves*

¹⁸ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

in that position. This framework often requires that a white narrative (posed as the neutral, universal perspective) be grafted onto the incidents that conflict with this narrative. I was baffled when a call for a protest march for Trayvon Martin made on the Occupy Baltimore website said, “The case of Trayvon Martin – is symbolic of the war on youth in general and the devaluing of young people everywhere.” I doubt George Zimmerman was thinking, *I gotta shoot that boy because he’s young!* No mention of race or anti-Blackness could be found in the statement; race had been translated to *youth*, a condition that white people can imaginatively access. At the march, speakers declared that the case of “Trayvon Martin is not a race issue — it’s a 99% issue!” As Saidiya Hartman has asserted in a conversation with Frank Wilderson, “the other must be assimilated, meaning in this case, utterly displaced and effaced.”¹⁹

In late 2011, riots exploded across London and the UK after Mark Duggan, a Black man, was murdered by the police. Many leftist and liberals were unable to grapple with the unruly expression of rage among largely poor and unemployed people of color, and refused to support the passionate outburst they saw as disorderly and delinquent. Even leftists fell into the trap of framing the State and property owners (including small business owners) as victims while criticizing rioters for being politically incoherent and opportunistic. Slavoj Žižek, for instance, responded by dismissing the riots as a “meaningless outburst” in an article cynically titled “Shoplifters of the World Unite.” Well-meaning leftists who felt obligated to affirm the riots often did so by imposing a narrative of political consciousness and coherence onto the amorphous eruption, sometimes recasting the participants as “the proletariat” (*an unemployed person is just a worker without a job*, I was once told) or dissatisfied consumers whose acts of theft and looting shed light on capitalist ideology.²⁰ These leftists

19 Hartman and Wilderson, “The Position of the Unthought.”

20 Zygmunt Bauman described the rioters as “defective and disqualified consumers.” Žižek wrote that “they were a manifestation of a consumerist desire violently enacted when unable to realize itself in the ‘proper’ way – by shopping. As such, they also contain a moment of genuine protest, in the form of an ironic response to consumerist ideology: ‘You call on us to

were quick to purge and re-articulate the anti-social and delinquent elements of the riots rather than integrate them into their analysis, insisting on figuring the rioter-subject as “a sovereign deliberate consciousness,” to borrow a phrase from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.²¹

Following the 1992 LA riots,²² leftist commentators often opted to define the event as a *rebellion* rather than a *riot* as a way to highlight the political nature of people’s actions. This attempt to reframe the public discourse is borne of “good intentions” (the desire to combat the conservative media’s portrayal of the riots as “pure criminality”), but it also reflects the an impulse to contain, consolidate, appropriate, and accommodate events that do not fit political models grounded in white, Euro-American traditions. When the mainstream media portrays social disruptions as apolitical, criminal, and devoid of meaning, leftists often respond by describing them as *politically reasoned*. Here, the confluence of political and anti-social tendencies in a riot/rebellion are neither recognized nor embraced. Certainly some who participated in the London riots were armed with sharp analyses of structural violence and explicitly political messages — the rioters were obviously not politically or demographically homogenous. However, sympathetic radicals tend to privilege the voices of those who are educated and politically astute, rather than listening to those who know viscerally that they are fucked and act without first seeking moral approval. Some leftists and radicals were reluctant to affirm the purely disruptive perspectives, like those expressed by a woman from Hackney, London who said, “We’re not all gathering together for a cause, we’re running

consume while simultaneously depriving us of the means to do it properly – so here we are doing it the only way we can!’ The riots are a demonstration of the material force of ideology – so much, perhaps, for the ‘post-ideological society’. From a revolutionary point of view, the problem with the riots is not the violence as such, but the fact that the violence is not truly self-assertive.”

21 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Harasym Sarah, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

22 Riots erupted in LA on April 29, 1992 after 3 white and 1 Hispanic LAPD officers were acquitted for beating Rodney King, a Black man, following a high-speed chase.

down Foot Locker.”²³ Or the excitement of two girls stopped by the BBC while drinking looted wine. When asked what they were doing, they spoke of the giddy “madness” of it all, the “good fun” they were having, and said that they were showing the police and the rich that “we can do what we want.”²⁴ Translating riots into morally palatable terms is another manifestation of the appeal to innocence — rioters, looters, criminals, thieves, and disruptors are not proper victims and hence, not legitimate political actors. Morally ennobled victimization has become the necessary precondition for determining which grievances we are willing to acknowledge and authorize.

With that being said, my reluctance to jam Black rage into a white framework is not an assertion of the political viability of a pure politics of refusal. *White anarchists, ultra-leftists, post-Marxists, and insurrectionists who adhere to and fetishize the position of being “for nothing and against everything” are equally eager to appropriate events like the 2011 London riots for their (non)agenda.* They insist on an analysis focused on the crisis of capitalism, which downplays anti-Blackness and ignores forms of gratuitous violence that cannot be attributed solely to economic forces. Like liberals, post-left and anti-social interpretive frameworks generate political narratives structured by white assumptions, which delimits which questions are posed which categories are the most analytically useful. Tiqqun explore the ways in which we are enmeshed in power through our identities, but tend to focus on forms of power that operate by *an investment in life* (sometimes called “biopolitics”) rather than, as Achille Mbembe writes, “the power and the capacity to decide who may live and who must die” (sometimes called “necropolitics”).²⁵ This framework is

23 Zoe Williams, “The UK Riots: The Psychology of Looting,” *The Guardian*, 2011.

24 “London Rioters: ‘Showing the Rich We Do What We Want,’” *BBC News*, 2011 (Video).

25 Biopolitics and necropolitics are not mutually exclusive. While the two forms of power coexist and constitute each other, necropolitics “regulates life through the perspective of death, therefore transforming life in a mere existence bellow every life minimum” (Marina Grzinic). Writing about Mbembe’s conceptualization of necropower, Grzinic notes that

decidedly white, for it asserts that power is *not* enacted by direct relations of force or violence, and that the capitalism reproduces itself by inducing us to produce ourselves, to express our identities through consumer choices, to base our politics on the affirmation of our marginalized identities. This configuration of power as purely generative and dispersed completely eclipses the realities of policing, the militarization of the carceral system, the terrorization of people of color, the institutional violence of the Welfare State and the Penal State, and of Black and Native social death. While prisons certainly “produce” race, a generative configuration of power that minimizes direct relations of force can only be theorized from a white subject position. Among ultra-left tendencies, communization theory notably looks beyond the wage relation in its attempt to grasp the dynamics of late-capitalism. Writing about *Théorie Communiste* (TC), Maya Andrea Gonzalez notes that “TC focus on the *reproduction of the capital-labor relation*, rather than on *the production of value*. This change of focus allows them to bring within their purview the set of relations that actually construct capitalist social life – beyond the walls of the factory or office.”²⁶ However, while this reframing may shed light on relations that constitute *social life* outside the workplace, it does not shed light on social death, for relations defined by social death are not reducible to the capital-labor relation.

Rather than oppose class to race, Frank Wilderson draws our attention to the difference between being exploited under capitalism (the worker) and being marked as disposable or superfluous to capitalism (the slave, the prisoner). He writes, “The absence of Black subjectivity from the crux of radical discourse is symptomatic of [an] inability

necropower requires the “maximum destruction of persons and the creation of deathscapes that are unique forms of social existence in which vast populations are subjected to conditions of life conferring upon them the status of living dead.” Though Mbembe focuses primarily on Africa, other examples of these deathscapes may include prisons, New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Palestine, and so forth.

²⁶ Maya Andrea Gonzalez, “Communization and the Abolition of Gender,” *Communization and Its Discontents: Contestation, Critique, and Contemporary Struggles* (New York: Autonomedia, 2012).

to cope with the possibility that the generative subject of capitalism, the Black body of the 15th and 16th centuries, and the generative subject that resolves late capital's over-accumulation crisis, the Black (incarcerated) body of the 20th and 21st centuries, do not reify the basic categories that structure conflict within civil society: the categories of work and exploitation."²⁷ Historian Orlando Patterson similarly insists on understanding slavery in terms of social death rather than labor or exploitation.²⁸ Forced labor is undoubtedly a part of the slave's experience, but it is not what defines the *slave relation*. Economic exploitation does not explain the phenomena of racialized incarceration; an analysis of capitalism that fails to address anti-Blackness, or only addresses it as a by-product of capitalism, is deficient.

SAFE SPACE

The discursive strategy of appealing to safety and innocence is also enacted on a micro-level when white radicals manipulate "safe space" language to maintain their power in political spaces. They do this by silencing the criticisms of POC under the pretense that it makes them feel "unsafe."²⁹ This use of safe space language conflates discomfort and actual imminent danger — which is not to say that white people are entitled to feel safe anyway. The phrase "I don't feel safe" is easy to manipulate because it frames the situation in terms of the speaker's *personal feelings*, making it difficult to respond critically (even when the person is, say, being racist) because it will injure their personal sense of security. Conversation often ends when people politicize their feelings of discomfort by using safe space language. The most ludicrous example of this that comes to mind was when a woman from Occupy Baltimore manipulated feminist language to

27 Frank B. Wilderson, "The Prison Slave as Hegemony's (Silent) Scandal," *Social Justice: A Journal of Crime, Conflict & World Order* 30.2 (2003): 18-28.

28 Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).

29 This tactic is also used to silence and delegitimize other people, such as femmes who are too loud, or queers who engage in illegal actions.

defend the police after an “occupier” called the cops on a homeless man. When the police arrived to the encampment they were verbally confronted by a group of protesters. During the confrontation the woman made an effort to protect the police by inserting herself between the police and the protesters, telling those who were angry about the cops that it was unjustified to exclude the police. In the Baltimore City Paper she was quoted saying, “they were violating, I thought, the cops’ space.”

The invocation of personal security and safety presses on our affective and emotional registers and can thus be manipulated to justify everything from racial profiling to war.³⁰ When people use safe space language to call out people in activist spaces, the one wielding the language is framed as innocent, and may even amplify or politicize their presumed innocence. After the woman from Occupy Baltimore came out as a survivor of violence and said she was traumatized by being yelled at *while defending the cops*, I noticed that many people became unwilling to take a critical stance on her blatantly pro-cop, classist, and homeless-phobic actions and comments, which included statements like, “There are so many homeless drunks down there — suffering from a nasty disease of addiction — what do I care if they are there or not? I would rather see them in treatment — that is for sure — but where they pass out is irrelevant to me.” *Let it be known that anyone who puts their body between the cops and my comrades to protect the State’s monopoly on violence is a collaborator of the State.* Surviving gendered violence does not mean you are incapable of perpetuating

30 In “Fear and Loathing: Public Feelings in Antiprison Work,” Jessi Lee Jackson and Erica R. Meiners offer the following definition of affect: “Affect is the body’s response to the world — amorphous, outside conscious awareness, non-directional, undefined, full of possibility. In this framing, affect is distinct from emotion, which is understood as the product of affect being marshaled into personal expressions of feeling, as shaped by social conventions.” Affect is useful to think of the way ‘the criminal’ and ‘the terrorist’ become linked to certain racialized bodies, and how people viscerally respond to the presence of those bodies even when they consciously reject racism. Jackson and Meiners, “Fear and Loathing.”

other forms of violence. Likewise, people can also mobilize their experiences with racism, transphobia, or classism to purify themselves. When people identify with their victimization, we need to critically consider whether it is being used as a tactical maneuver to construct themselves as innocent and exert power without being questioned. *That does not mean delegitimizing the claims made by survivors* — but rather, rejecting the framework of innocence, examining each situation closely, and being conscientious of the multiple power struggles at play in different conflicts.

On the flip side of this is a radical queer critique that has recently been leveled against the “safe space” model. In a statement from the Copenhagen Queer Festival titled “No safer spaces this year,” festival organizers wrote regarding their decision to remove the safer-space guidelines of the festival, offering in its place an appeal to “individual reflection and responsibility.” (In other words, ‘The safe space is impossible, therefore, fend for yourself.’) I see this rejection of collective forms of organizing, and unwillingness to think beyond the individual as the foundational political unit, as part of a historical shift from queer liberation to queer performativity that coincides with the advent of neoliberalism and the “Care of the Self”-style “politics” of choice).³¹ By reacting against the failure of safe space with a suspi-

31 Post-leftists, perhaps responding to the way we are fragmented and atomized under late-capitalism, also adamantly reject a collectivist model of political mobilization. In “Communization and the Abolition of Gender,” Maya Andrea Gonzalez advocates “inaugurating relations between individuals defined in their singularity.” In “theses on the terrible community: 3. AFFECTIVITY,” the idea that the human “community” is an aggregate of monad-like singularities is further elaborated: “The terrible community is a human agglomerate, not a group of comrades. The members of the terrible community encounter each other and aggregate together by accident more than by choice. *They do not accompany one another*; they do not know one another.” To what extent does the idea that the singularist (read, individualist) or rhizomatic (non)-strategy is the only option reinforce liberal individualism? In *The One Dimensional Woman*, Nina Power discusses how individual choice, flexibility, and freedom are used to atomize and pit workers against each other. While acknowledging the current dynamics of waged labor, she shows how using the “individual” as the primary political unit is unable to

cion of articulated/explicit politics and collectivism, we flatten the issues and miss an opportunity to ask critical questions about the distribution of power, vulnerability, and violence, questions about how and why certain people co-opt language and infrastructure that is meant to respond to internally oppressive dynamics to perpetuate racial domination. As a Fanonian, I agree that removing all elements of risk and danger reinforces a politics of reformism that just reproduces the existing social order. Militancy is undermined by the politics of safety. It becomes impossible to do anything that involves risk when people habitually block such actions on the grounds that it makes them feel unsafe. People of color who use privilege theory to argue that white people have the privilege to engage in risky actions while POC cannot because they are the most vulnerable (most likely to be targeted by the police, not have the resources to get out of jail, etc) make a correct assessment of power differentials between white and non-white political actors, but ultimately erase POC from the history of militant struggle by falsely associating militancy with whiteness and privilege. When an analysis of privilege is turned into a political program that asserts that the most vulnerable should not take risks, the only politically correct politics becomes a politics of reformism and retreat, a politics that necessarily capitulates to the status quo while erasing the legacy of Black Power groups like the Black Panthers and the Black Liberation Army. For Fanon, it is precisely the element of risk that makes militant action more urgent — liberation can only be won by risking one's life. Militancy is not just tactically necessary — its dual objective is to transform people and “fundamentally alter” their being by emboldening them, removing

grapple with issues like the discrimination of pregnant women in the workplace. She asserts that thinking through the lens of the individual cannot resolve the exploitation of women's caring labor because the individualized nature of this form of labor is a barrier to undoing the burden placed on women, who are the primary bearers of childcare responsibilities. She also discusses how the transition from a feminism of liberation to a feminism of choice makes it so that “any general social responsibility for motherhood, or move towards the equal sharing of childcare responsibilities is immediately blocked off.” Gonzalez, “Communization and the Abolition of Gender.” Nina Power, *One-Dimensional Woman*. (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009).

their passivity and cleansing them of “the core of despair” crystallized in their bodies.³²

Another troublesome manifestation of the politics of safety is an emphasis on personal comfort that supports police behavior in consensus-based groups or spaces. For instance, when people at Occupy Baltimore confronted sexual assaulters, I witnessed a general assembly become so bogged down by consensus procedure that the only decision made about the assaulters in the space was to stage a 10 minute presentation about safer spaces at the next GA. No one in the group wanted to ban the assaulters from Occupy (as Stokely Carmichael said, “The liberal is afraid to alienate anyone, and therefore he is incapable of presenting any clear alternative.”)³³ Prioritizing personal comfort is unproductive, reformist, and can bring the energy and momentum of bodies in motion to a standstill. The politics of innocence and the politics of safety and comfort are related in that both strategies reinforce passivity. Comfort and innocence produce each other when people base their demand for comfort on the innocence of their location or subject-position.

The ethicality of our locations and identities (as people within the US living under global capitalism) is an utter joke when you consider that we live on stolen lands in a country built on slavery and genocide. Even though I am a queer woman of color, my existence as a person living in the US is built on violence. As a non-incarcerated person, my “freedom” is only understood through the captivity of people like my brother, who was sentenced to life behind bars at the age of 17. When considering safety, we fail to ask critical questions about the co-constitutive relationship between safety and violence. We need to consider the extent to which racial violence is the unspoken and necessary underside of security, particularly white security. Safety requires the removal and containment of people deemed to be threats. White civil society has a psychic investment in the erasure and abjection of bodies that they project hostile feelings onto, which allows

³² Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*.

³³ Stokely Carmichael, *Stokely Speaks: Black Power Back to Pan-Africanism* (New York: Random House, 1971).

them peace of mind amidst the state of perpetual violence. The precarious founding of the US required the disappearance of Native American people, which was justified by associating the Native body with filth. Andrea Smith wrote, “This ‘absence’ is effected through the metaphorical transformation of native bodies into pollution of which the colonial body must constantly purify itself.”³⁴ The violent foundation of US freedom and white safety often goes unnoticed because our lives are mediated in such a way that the violence is invisible or is considered legitimate and fails to register as violence (such as the violence carried out by police and prisons). The connections between our lives and the generalized atmosphere of violence is submerged in a complex web of institutions, structures, and economic relations that legalize, normalize, legitimize, and — above all — are constituted by this repetition of violence.

SEXUAL VIOLENCE

When we use innocence to select the proper subjects of empathetic identification on which to base our politics, we simultaneously regulate the ability for people to respond to other forms of violence, such as rape and sexual assault. When a woman is raped, her sexual past is inevitably used against her, and chastity is used to gauge the validity of a woman’s claim. “Promiscuous” women, sex workers, women of color, women experiencing homelessness, and addicts are not seen as legitimate victims of rape — their moral character is always called into question (they are always-already *asking for it*). In southern California during the 1980s and 1990s, police officers would close all reports of rape and violence made by sex workers, gang members, and addicts by placing them in a file stamped “NHI”: *No Human Involved*.³⁵ This police practice draws attention to the way that rap-

34 Andrea Smith, *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2005).

35 See Amy Scholder, Editor, *Critical Condition: Women on the Edge of Violence*, (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1993) and Elizabeth Sisco, “NHI—No Humans Involved,” paper delivered at the symposium “Critical Condition - Women on the edge of violence,” San Francisco Cameraworks, 1993.

ability is also simultaneously unrapability in that *the rape of someone who is not considered human does not register as rape*. Only those considered “human” can be raped. Rape is often conventionally defined³⁶ as “sexual intercourse” without “consent,” and consent requires the participation of subjects in possession of full personhood. *Those considered not-human cannot give consent*. Which is to say, there is no recognized subject-position from which one can state their desires. This is not to say that bodies constructed as rapable cannot express consent or refusal to engage in sexual activity — but that their demands will be unintelligible because they are made from a position outside of proper white femininity.

Women of color are seen as sexually uninhibited by nature and thus are unable to access the sexual *purity* at the core of white femininity. As Smith writes in *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*, Native American women are more likely to be raped than any other group of women, yet the media and courts consistently tend to only pay attention to rapes that involve the rape of a white woman by a person of color.³⁷ Undocumented immigrant women are vulnerable to sexual violence — not only because they cannot leave or report abusive partners because of the risk of deportation, but also because police and border patrol officers routinely manipulate their position of power over undocumented women by raping and assaulting them, using the threat of deportation to get them to submit and remain silent. A Mexican sociologist once told me that women crossing the border often take contraceptives because the rape of women crossing the border is so normalized. Black women are also systematically ignored by the media and criminal justice system. According to Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Black women are less likely to report their rapes, less likely to have their cases come to trial, less likely to have their trials result in convictions, and, most disturb-

36 New Oxford American Dictionary gives a peculiar definition: “the crime, committed by a man, of forcing another person to have sexual intercourse with him without their consent and against their will, esp. by the threat or use of violence against them.” To what extent does this definition normalize male violence by defining rape as inherently male?

37 Smith, *Conquest*.

ingly, less likely to seek counseling and other support services.”³⁸ One reason why Black women may be less likely to report their rapes is because seeking assistance from the police often backfires: poor women of color who call the police during domestic disputes are often sexually assaulted by police, criminalized themselves, or have their children taken away. Given that the infrastructure that exists to support survivors (counseling, shelters, etc) often caters to white women and neglects to reach out to poor communities of color, it’s no surprise that women of color are less likely to utilize survivor resources. But we should be careful when noting the widespread neglect of the most vulnerable populations by police, the legal system, and social institutions — to assume that the primary problem is “neglect” implies that these apparatuses are neutral, that their role is to protect us, and that they are merely doing a bad job. On the contrary, their purpose is to maintain the social order, protect white people, and defend private property. If these intuitions are violent themselves, then expanding their jurisdiction will not help us, especially while racism and patriarchy endures.

Ultimately, our appeals to innocence demarcate who is killable and rapable, even if we are trying to strategically use such appeals to protest violence committed against one of our comrades. When we challenge sexual violence with appeals to innocence, we set a trap for ourselves by feeding into the assumption that white cis women’s bodies are the only ones that cannot be violated because only white femininity is sanctified.³⁹ As Kimberlé Crenshaw writes, “The early emphasis in rape law on the property-like aspect of women’s chastity resulted in less solicitude for rape victims whose chastity had been in some way devalued.”⁴⁰ Once she ‘gives away’ her chastity she no

38 Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review* 43.6 (1991): 1241-99.

39 Because the sexuality of white women derives its value from its ability to differentiate itself from “deviant” sexuality, such as the sexuality of women of color.

40 Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins.”

longer ‘owns’ it and so no one can ‘steal’ it. However, the association of women of color with sexual deviance bars them from possessing this “valued” chastity.⁴¹

AGAINST INNOCENCE

The insistence on innocence results in a refusal to hear those labeled guilty or defined by the State as “criminals.” When we rely on appeals to innocence, we foreclose a form of resistance that is outside the limits of law, and instead ally ourselves with the State. This ignores that the “enemies” in the War on Drugs and the War on Terror are racially defined, that gender and class delimit who is worthy of legal recognition. When the Occupy movement was in full swing in the US, I often read countless articles and encountered participants who were eager to police the politics and tactics of those who did

41 Early rape laws focused on the “property-like” aspects of women’s sexuality that liberal feminists are today attempting to reclaim. Liberal feminists frame debates about women’s health, abortion, and rape around a notion of *female bodies as property*. But using bodily self-ownership to make our claims is counter-productive because certain bodies are more valued than others. Liberal feminists also echo arguments for free markets when they demand that the State not intervene in affairs relating to our private property (our bodies), because as *owners* we should be free to do what we want with the things we own. In order to be owners of our bodies, we first have to turn our bodies into property — into a commodity — which is a conceptualization of our corporeality that makes our bodies subject to conquest and appropriation in the first place. Pro-choice discourse that focuses on the right for women to *do what they want with their property* substitutes a choice-oriented strategy founded on liberal individualism for a collectivist, liberationist one. (Foregrounding the question of choice in politics ignores the forced sterilization of women color and the unequal access to medical resources between middle class women and poor women.) While white men make their claims for recognition as *subjects*, women and people of color are required to make their claims as objects, as *property* (or if they are to make their claims as subjects, they must translate themselves into a masculine white discourse). In the US, juridical recognition was initially only extended to white men and their property. These are the terms of recognition that operate today, which we must vehemently refuse. Liberal feminists try to write themselves in by framing themselves as both the property and the owners.

not fit into a non-violent model of resistance. The tendency was to construct a politics from the position of the disenfranchised white middle-class and to remove, deny, and differentiate the Occupy movement from the “delinquent” or radical elements by condemning property destruction, confrontations with cops, and — in cases like Baltimore — anti-capitalist and anarchist analyses. When Amy Goodman asked Maria Lewis from Occupy Oakland about the “violent” protestors after the over 400 arrests made following an attempt to occupy the vacant Henry J. Kaiser Convention Center in Oakland, I was pleased that Maria affirmed rather than excised people’s anger:

AMY GOODMAN: *Maria Lewis, what about some of the reports that said that the protestors were violent?*

MARIA LEWIS: *Absolutely. There was a lot of anger this weekend, and I think that the anger that the protestors showed in the streets this weekend and the fighting back that did take place was reflective of a larger anger in Oakland that is boiling over at the betrayal of the system. I think that people, day by day, are realizing, as the economy gets worse and worse, as unemployment gets worse and worse, as homelessness gets worse and worse, that the economic system, that capitalism in Oakland, is failing us. And people are really angry about that, and they’re beginning to fight back. And I think that that’s a really inspiring thing.*

While the comment still frames the issue in terms of capitalist crisis, the response skillfully rearticulates the terms of the discussion by a) affirming the actions immediately, b) refusing to purify the movement by integrating rather than excluding the “violent” elements, c) legitimizing the anger and desires of the protestors, d) shifting the attention to the structural nature of the problem rather than getting hung up on making moral judgments about individual actors. In other words, by rejecting a politics of innocence that reproduces the “good,” compliant citizen. Stokely Carmichael put it well when he said, “The way the oppressor tries to stop the oppressed from using violence as a means to attain liberation is to raise ethical or moral questions about violence. I want to state emphatically here that violence in any society is neither moral nor is it ethical. It is

neither right, nor is it wrong. It is just simply a question of who has the power to legalize violence.”⁴²

The practice of isolating morally agreeable cases in order to highlight racist violence requires passively suffered Black death and panders to a framework that strengthens and conceals current paradigms of racism. While it may be factually true to state that Trayvon Martin was unarmed, we should not state this with a righteous sense of satisfaction. What *if* Trayvon Martin were armed? Maybe then he could have defended himself by fighting back. But if the situation had resulted in the death of George Zimmerman rather than of Trayvon Martin, I doubt the public would have been as outraged and galvanized into action to the same extent.

It is ridiculous to say that there will be justice for Trayvon when he is already dead — no amount of prison time for Zimmerman can compensate. When we build politics around standards of legitimate victimhood that requires passive sacrifice, we will build a politics that requires a dead Black boy to make its point. It’s not surprising that the nation or even the Black leadership have failed to rally behind CeCe McDonald, a Black trans woman who was recently convicted of second degree manslaughter after a group of racist, transphobic white people attacked her and her friends, cutting CeCe’s cheek with a glass bottle and provoking an altercation that led to the death of a white man who had a swastika tattoo. Trans women of color who are involved in confrontations that result in the death of their attackers are criminalized for their survival. When Akira Jackson, a Black trans woman, stabbed and killed her boyfriend after he beat her with a baseball bat, she was given a four-year sentence for manslaughter.

Cases that involve an “innocent” (passive), victimized Black person also provide an opportunity for the liberal white conscience to purify and morally ennoble itself by taking a position against racism. We need to challenge the status of certain raced and gendered subjects as instruments of emotional relief for white civil society, or as bodies

42 Carmichael, *Stokely Speaks*.

that can be displaced for the sake of providing analogies to amplify white suffering (“slavery” being the favored analogy). Although we must emphasize that Troy Davis did not kill police officer Mark MacPhail, maybe we also should question why killing a cop is considered morally deplorable when the cops, in the last few months alone, have murdered 29 Black people. Talking about these murders will not undo them. Having the “right line” cannot alter reality if we do not put our bodies where our mouths are. As Spivak says, “it can’t become our goal to keep watching our language.”⁴³ Rejecting the politics of innocence is not about assuming a certain theoretical posture or adopting a certain perspective — it is a lived position.

43 Spivak and Harasym, *The Post-Colonial Critic*.

...

RECENT COMMUNIQUES

TBTN BROOKLYN

In 1976, Claudia Caputi, a 17-year-old woman, was gang-raped in Rome. In a rare move for women in Italy, she reported the rape to Rome's fascist police. A year later on March 31st 1977, when her case went to trial, Claudia was gang-raped again by the same group of men. This time her whole body was slashed with razors in an attempt to keep her silent. Within hours, fifteen thousand women mobilized in Rome's Appio-Tuscolano neighborhood, where Claudia, the rapists, and police all lived. The women dressed like the sex workers common to the district, both to declare solidarity with le puttane and to protect themselves in the crowd's

uniformity. “No more mothers, wives and daughters: let’s destroy the families!” was the cry heard in the street. Carrying torches, the women broke through the police lines and marched to the Fascist Party Headquarters. For the Italian feminists, this was not just a march for Claudia, but for all women who were survivors of violence. This was the first incarnation of Take Back the Night.

Tonight we march again, to refuse the violence that continues to force us to be housewives and fuck-toys, mothers and daddy’s girls, to refuse to understand women’s oppression in the private sphere as a simple cultural or ideological matter. We address capitalism, white supremacy, and patriarchy as one intrinsically interconnected system. We know that women, like people of color in New York City and abroad, are used as natural resources the rich exploit to stay ahead. We realize that atomization and isolation are integral to this plan and that this is why public space is men’s space. Tonight our desires are our own, our anger is our own, our violence is our own. Tonight we refuse to be women.

We all wear skirts and black to symbolize the subversion of both womanhood and of mourning, to destroy that which destroys us.

Brooklyn, 2010

SFPD: DON’T EVEN TRY TO FRONT, WE KNOW YOU DIDN’T KILL HARDING TO “PROTECT WOMEN”

Last Saturday, a man who didn’t pay his MUNI fare ran away from the cops trying to ticket him. The cops took out their guns and shot Kenneth Harding in the back 6 to 10 times in Bayview-Hunters Point. In the aftermath, the police and the media first claimed that he had a gun, then began to expose Harding’s “misogynist past,” downplaying the fact that he was just murdered in cold blood for fare evasion.

The Police and the State consistently justify their systemic racist violence by saying they are protecting women. Patriarchy, the

dominance of men over women and gender nonconforming people, happens everywhere in our society, but the state tries to convince us that Black men are the main perpetrators. This racist lie helps the state justify their violent control over “uncontrollable” communities. The police’s shooting of Harding is one instance of the way the state terrorizes a community that is a threat to the current social order, that has been historically attacked and barred from access to stable employment, etc. It’s no longer politically correct to lynch Black men, but the police can shoot down Black and Brown people in the street and justify it through demonizing them.

Women in poor urban communities are often both breadwinners and housewives. They are the ones left behind in the wake of these murders, beatings, and incarcerations, to hold the funerals, pick up the pieces, and fight the fight against their sons’, husbands’, fathers’ murderers ... all while still being subject to patriarchal violence, sexual assault, and the de-funding of social services, the cutting of the public sector particularly where it employs or supports women of color. The police targeting of young men of color is a phenomenon that ripples outward and affects the gendered structure of poor communities, that affects women as well as men, but in a different form.

Harding didn’t pay his MUNI fare on the Bayview T line, and was shot up to ten times. Two weeks ago an unarmed homeless man was shot and killed by the Police in the Civic Center Bart station. Two years ago Oscar Grant was shot in the back at the Fruitvale Bart station by a cop who is now in comfy retirement. The severe policing of Bay Area transport and the constant increase in fares show us that the state wants poor people to stay in their hood and to remain isolated from the rest of society. Perhaps it shows us that mobility is a potential weapon. In every neighborhood in SF and the East Bay, we want a FREE public transit, FREE of PIGS. Until then, jump turnstiles, back door it! And MUNI and BART workers: look the other way, invite people to take the emergency exit, tell people to use the back door of the bus!

San Francisco, 2011

FROM TEA LIGHTS TO TORCHES: DELINQUENT ALTERNATIVES TO TRANSGENDER DAY OF REMEMBRANCE AND THE TRANS ATTACKS TO COME

As thousands of people in cities all across the world gathered on November 20th to memorialize the 23 transgender women that were murdered in the past year as named by transgenderdor.org, some of us decided to skip the opportunity of silently listening to the politicians of the “trans community” recite the names of our dead over candlelight, romantic as it sounded. Instead we ventured into the mist and fog of a northwest autumn night and put up some graffiti as small gestures of antagonism towards the state, the bashers and the leftists who use the blood of trans women to build campaigns of hate crime legislation and reform. We are against hate crime legislation because we are against prisons, against the infuriating portrayal of police as protectors, against rising for their judges in their detestable courtrooms, against (though not surprised in the least by) the way that such legislation is used to defend those in positions of power and because we are, at heart, hate filled criminal enemies of civilized society.

By the end of the night several walls and surfaces had been subject to the vandalism of the trans symbol, circle As, the largely sprayed proclamation “Too Many Trans Deaths, Not Enough Dead Pigs” and 20 feet of silver letters across a darkly painted business rooftop reading “Vengeance for Shelley Hilliard!!!! (A) Bash Back!”

Shelley Hilliard, also known as Treasure, was a 19-year-old trans woman from Detroit who was identified by a tattoo earlier this month after her burned torso was found on the side of the highway. Krissi Bates was found stabbed to death in her Minneapolis apartment in January in a brutal murder that was described as “over-kill.” Tyra Trent was strangled to death in her Baltimore apartment in February. Nate Eugene Davis was shot and left behind a Houston dumpster in June. Lashai Mclean was shot in the street in Washington, DC in July. Camila Guzmán was stabbed to death by a john in New York City in

August. Gaurav Gopalan died from trauma to the head in September and Chassity Vickers was shot in Hollywood just four days ago, on November 16th.

These are just a few examples of transsexual homicides in the US alone that made headlines this year. Women whose lives and deaths get summed up by reporter after snake-eyed reporter who can barely manage to contain their contempt for the queer and make no effort whatsoever to disguise their disdain for anyone alleged to have been a criminal or whore. Funeral services become the rushed lowering of mangled corpses into the ground, in anticipation of a grave on which to spit. This was exemplified by the pastor of Lashai Mclean's funeral, who repeatedly referred to her by male pronouns and went as far as to incite a mass walk out of the many trans attendants by claiming that "When you live a certain lifestyle this is the consequence you have to pay."

While we remember our dead let us not forgot about those still struggling, especially those who are facing charges and/or living lives in cages.

In June Catherine Carlson was sentenced to 10 years in an Idaho prison after being convicted of first-degree arson, unlawful possession of a bomb, using a hoax destructive device, and indecent exposure. Before her conviction she had locked herself in her trailer for years and left only when necessary, approximately once every ten days when she needed food and could no longer subsist off of coffee alone. Every time she left her home she was taunted by police. Despite having had her name legally changed for over three decades, she couldn't get her given name removed from her license. She was jailed on four occasions for driving without a license in her stubborn and inspiring refusal to acknowledge the state's attempt at controlling her gender. Eventually this torment led to rupture. Catherine constructed what appeared to be four pipe bombs, left them next to a propane tank, set her trailer and her truck on fire, and walked down the highway naked until being stopped and arrested. She is currently being held in the hole of a men's prison despite having had sex reassignment surgery.

On the night of June 5th in Minneapolis, Chrishaun “CeCe” McDonald was harassed outside of a bar for being black and trans and had a glass smashed in her face. A fight broke out and minutes later her attacker, Dean Schmitz, had been fatally stabbed. CeCe was arrested, charged with murder, got bailed out after a month in isolation and is currently awaiting trial.

Three trans women were arrested in connection to a flash mob attack on a New York City Dunkin Donuts that happened on Christopher St. the night of May 16th. Christopher St. is a street with a rich history of queer and trans resistance (including the Stonewall Riots) and an apparent inability to rid itself of the fierce homeless trans youth it is known for despite decades of gentrification and “quality of life” campaigns. During the flash mob, two dozen transgender youth stormed the shop, threw chairs, destroyed expensive coffee machines and looted goods. Those arrested have been charged with assault, criminal mischief, menacing, rioting and criminal possession of a weapon.

In August, off-duty officer Kenneth Fur took it upon himself to remind us that police are the absolute enemy. He became angry when three trans women in DC refused complicity in his entitled assumption that his pig salary could buy any trans body he encountered on the street. So angry, in fact, that he climbed onto the roof of their car and shot the passengers inside. One woman was grazed by a bullet, one was shot in the hand and the brother of one of the women was shot in the chest. The cops were kind enough to show up and escort the injured individuals to the hospital...in handcuffs.

A few days ago Brooke Fantelli was repeatedly tased in El Centro, CA by a Bureau of Land Management ranger. Brooke was stopped for public intoxication while taking pictures in the desert. After being ID’ed the ranger told her, “You used to be a guy,” and then tased her with her hands up. Once she was on the ground he tased her again, this time in the genitals.

Also this month, Andrea Jones was arrested for indecent exposure, or more accurately, for exposing the legal system as the brutally illogical apparatus of control that it is. Andrea went topless in a Tennessee DMV after they refused to change the gender on her ID to female. As a “male,” she said, she had the legal right to take off her shirt. She was jailed for three weeks, lost her job and will most likely have to register as a sex offender. As usual, cops and COs are free to rape us and expose us to sexual violence meanwhile charging those they take hostage as “sex offenders.” Those most vulnerable to this tactic of the state are the gender variant, queer inmates and Black men who are demonized in racist smear campaigns by the media as “rapists” every time a cop gets shot.

Finally, we want to mention Amazon, a transsexual lesbian who has been in prison for the past 30 years and is serving life in California. In a letter that was published in a Black and Pink newsletter earlier this year she says, “I am from Gender Anarchy Collective in the prisons. We are a militant organization fighting for transsexual medicine in the form of female hormones and sex-corrective surgery, and against all forms of hate, genocide and discrimination by cops or prisoners alike, and are also a self defense structure and will fight, have fought, and are fighting for ours on the yards. I am currently in the hole for ‘battery on an inmate with a weapon.’ Two other girls are here with me, one for three counts of assault on staff who jumped on her. We survive by aggressive self defense.” She then proceeds to denounce activism and engagement in politics, describing instead the necessary “post-apocalyptic civil war madness” that the myth of social peace works desperately to keep us from. “Prison is government. No government in the world is going to allow anyone to deconstruct its prisons, come what may. Therefore, to actually abolish prisons, the government must be destroyed, overthrown.”

Here’s to the end of the capitalist system that the police imprison us to protect and to freedom for trans women, and freedom for us all. As our hearts burn with the loss of our loved ones, may their cities burn as well.

Dean Schmitz was not the first and he will not be the last!
VENGEANCE NOT REMEMBRANCE! WE WILL NOT REST
IN PEACE!

Seattle, 2011

FOR SAN QUENTIN, FEB. 20TH

Austerity liquidates social security programs, retirement and education, and therefore the future, while stuffing humans into overcrowded prisons and juvenile detention facilities. There's no jobs, no money, but crime is captured by capital too. The black market is still the market, and beyond that there is an economy of incarceration complete with banks building private prisons and corporations leasing the labor of their captives. Forced into the drug trade and sex work, criminalized, incarcerated, then forced into both sex (rape) and work (slavery) in the penitentiary. This is what we mean when we say "the prison industrial complex." It extends outside the wretched walls of San Quentin and the others into every part of life in a racist and patriarchal commodity society. All prisoners are political prisoners. And as feminists have long pointed out, the personal is political

The spheres of our oppression grow indistinct.

Home is prison, prison is the Third World factory. Boyfriends are bosses, wardens are pimps. Capitalist and patriarchal social relations flow effortlessly across the boundaries between the "inside" and the "outside." Our solidarity and struggle must also flow easily past barbed wire, to destroy capitalism and patriarchy we must destroy all prisons and the police. Free all prisoners! Destroy capital! Smash patriarchy!

oo//***/oo

It is impossible to quantify a unified experience of how trans people, genderqueers, queers, and women live in relation to the prison

industrial complex. However, we found these statistics gravely moving and feel that these facts illuminate the connections between capital's grotesque maintenance of oppression grounded in gender, race and class and the prison industrial complex:

Nearly two-thirds of women in prison are mothers.

In federal women's prisons 70% of guards are male.

Sexual assault within the confines of prison walls is often perpetrated by prison guards.

In many states guards have access to and are encouraged to review the inmates' personal history files. Guards threaten the prisoners' children and rights as a means of silencing them.

Over a five-year period, the incarceration rate of African American women increased by 828%. Black women make up nearly half of the nation's female prison population.

The female prison population grew by 832% from 1977 to 2007. The male prison population grew 416% during the same time period.

Latina women experience nearly four times the rates of incarceration of white women.

Average prostitution arrests include 70% females, 20% percent male prostitutes and 10% customers.

In San Francisco, it has been estimated that 25% of the female prostitutes are transgender.

60% of abuse against street prostitutes is perpetrated by clients, 20% by police and 20% by intimate partners.

A company that operated a maquiladora (assembly plant in Mexico near the border) closed down its operations there and relocated to San Quentin State Prison in California.

Jurors in the US were polled as to what factors would make them most biased against a defendant, and perceived sexual orientation was chosen as the most likely personal characteristic.

*by Some Bad Girls of Occupy Patriarchy
Oakland, 2012*

OCCUPY CPS

Join OOP and OCCUPY CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES
during the MAY 1st GENERAL STRIKE!

Come out on May Day to SHUT DOWN this horribly oppressive institution that doesn't give a fuck about children or parents!

We cannot only block capital in spaces of waged labor, but also in the capitalist, racist, patriarchal reproduction of social life! STRIKE EVERYWHERE!

... *why occupy CPS?*

Despite the good intentions of some workers in the agency, Child Protective Services (CPS) is not what it claims. It does not do us a service, it does not protect our children, it does not create healthy environments for them. CPS is designed to enforce a so-called "normal" model of the family, actively punishing those of us who do not comply with the capitalist, patriarchal, racist, white supremacist ideal of what a family should look like.

CPS is used to scare and punish people who threaten or fight the system.

CPS targets the poor, people of color, single mothers, queer, and non-gender-conforming parents and kids.

CPS is notorious for targeting poor single mothers.

When children are removed from their homes, they are taken into group homes, where underpaid, over worked and under trained “care” providers are responsible for them; in ratios of about 10 to 1. Children who have never before experienced abuse are often abused by other children who have; or by overworked employees and have no way back to their families, or into foster care until a judge decides their fate — often months later. Those who are eventually placed into foster care are often are often physically or sexually exploited by selfish fucks just trying to get some extra money out of the situation.

Also, the mere fact of being a queer, trans* or gender-nonconforming parents can get child services called on a family — if, for example, a homophobic or transphobic school counselor gets wind, CPS can be called.

Children are also more likely to be displaced if they are queer or trans*, and the truth is CPS is NOT likely to place children in foster care with queer or trans* parents! This reinforces the homophobic ciscentric idea of the family, and endangers queer and trans* youth.

Finally, the mere fact of being Black or Brown, poor, and a parent, will result in heightened scrutiny and policing from CPS — CPS is a racist institution and enforces its violent rules primarily on people of color. A middle class white mother, and even a queer white middle class couple, will not be treated the same by CPS as a poor African American single parent, period, and this is how institutional racism is reproduced.

Occupy Patriarchy will fight back

Feminists, queers, and trans* people who have been organizing within the Occupy movement since the beginning started Oakland Occupy Patriarchy to support each other as we organize against racism and patriarchy and gender oppression, both within our movement and within the greater capitalist society. We recognize that capitalism, patriarchy and racism are mutually dependent and we want to end

them all in favor of a better world for all of us. Our action against Child Protective Services on May Day is part of our struggle.

Many of us at Occupy Patriarchy have direct experience of CPS's oppression. We are fed up with CPS and are determined to expose its repressive actions and to continue to build a community to fight it. On May 1st, the day of a new GENERAL STRIKE, we will occupy CPS. We will gather at the CPS office on 4th and Broadway in downtown Oakland at 8:30. We invite and call on all who share our critique, our anger, our oppressions, our experiences, and our revolutionary spirit to join us.

Oakland, 2012

*IDENTITY,
ABOLITION,
COMMUNIZATION*

MAGDA LLWHISK

*DON'T TRY TO DIG
YOURSELF OUT OF
THE HOLE.
YOU WON'T GET OUT.*

1.

there are women who must wake early to cook and do the
washing for their husband and children
then they go to the first of their three jobs
if anyone will abolish time, it will be these women

2.

The Seventeenth International is now officially known as
The Sisterhood, Motherfuckers!

emergent categories of feminist struggle:
expropriation of police vehicles

fortification of the castle
stem cell research
afternoon tea

Her critics label her a Maoist sympathizer. Is she?
“I am a Maoist sympathizer,” she says.

3.
when we think the answer is:
coffee, wine, a good fuck, leafy greens, stretching, quiet,
some cash, sleep, a shrink, a party, a toothbrush, a cry
we really mean filling the bottle and lighting the fuse
get your hermeneutics straight, sisters

4.
the unfolding of communism as the story of a murderess
delivering her crimes with sensuality and nonchalance
a sexiness, slowness, a chill
a quivering at the back of the knees of nearly every prole

5.
“We’re too emotionally detached is the problem,” he said. “We
need to get a little more emotional. We have our wall up. We’ve got
to *connect*.”

6.
The Angel Makers of Nagyrév were a group of women living in a
Hungarian village who between 1914 and 1929 poisoned to death an
estimated 300 husbands, children, and family members.
They quipped that not even their proponents understood the sever-
ity of their argument.

7.
the frisk of the Jealous School Girl
the eye out, the size up

knives or kisses to the throat?
wolves out to bite other wolves

when the war between scum and daddy's girls overtakes the war
against men
the limits of sisterhood

8.

Rather than providing a dose of collective self-reflection and
analysis of mistakes, self-criticism functioned as a mechanism of
inter-party struggle within the CCP leadership.

consciousness raising groups going the way of Maoist self-criticism
proceedings

"You slept with him because you felt validated by him. Admit it!"

"Yes, it's true. I don't believe my own ideas unless he nods at them.
Have mercy on me."

"And I saw you wearing that short pink skirt. Did we not ban pink
and hemlines above the calf?"

"I was trying to attract his attention. I will repent."

9.

When I grow old, I am going to be the sort of witch
that minces children and bakes them into savory pies.

the joy of cooking
the joy of gay sex
the joy of marxist-feminism

10.

I am a woman and I live alone.

P. VALENTINE

*THE GENDER
DISTINCTION IN
COMMUNIZATION
THEORY¹*

Communization theory is primed to do what only a minority of Marxist feminists have attempted to do over the last 50 years of inquiry: rearticulate the capitalist mode of production as being constituted no less by the man/woman relation than by the class relation.² What would ideally emerge from

1 An earlier version of this text was published in MUTE magazine as "The Gender Rift in Communization."

2 Examples include I. M. Young; Silvia Federici; Catharine MacKinnon; Fulvia Carnevale. Others such as Gloria Joseph, Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Maria Mies, and Angela Davis have pressed for a theory that also articulates race as a necessary structural element.

such a project is a “single system” in which the gender relation and the class relation are equally necessary elements within a totality, rather than the subsumption of one to the other, or the erection of a “dual system” of two different and autonomous systems of patriarchy and capitalism. We say communization is “primed” for this project because one of the major interventions of communization theory has been to theorize communism as the abolition not only of capitalists, but also of workers; of work itself and thus of value; of the wage labor relation itself and thus of the distinction between “work” and “life.” This latter distinction has been cast in a variety of terms including the conceptual dyads public/private; social/nonsocial; public/domestic, and is almost unequivocally understood by gender theorists as a grounding element in the production of gender.

Communization’s very starting point is a demand for the abolition of fundamental material elements of the reproduction of gender – the division of social life into two “spheres.” This implies an analysis of the system of gender and class as a unity, and because it focuses on the gender binary as a material relation of exploitation or oppression in which the two sides are produced rather than given, it also articulates the patriarchy in a way which opens avenues toward new and more rigorous theories of gender oppression that are able to link the exploitation and oppression of women with violence and oppression based on heteronormativity and cisnormativity. However, until the work of *Théorie Communiste* (TC) and recently Maya Andrea Gonzalez, conversations around communization had completely ignored gender.³ Today, many merely add gender to the list of things to be abolished through communization, which amounts to little more than buttering the toast of communization with radical cultural gender theory. A more or less idealist critique of the gender binary, of the essentialist identities of “woman” and “man,” which could lead equally to their destruction or proliferation, is attached to a theory of communization without affecting the concept of what constitutes

3 Maya Andrea Gonzalez, “Communization and the Abolition of Gender” in Benjamin Noys (Ed.), *Communization and its Discontents: Contestation, Critique, and Contemporary Struggles* (New York: Minor Compositions/Autonomedia, 2011).

the capitalist totality. The mere shift from women's liberation to gender abolition cast in these basic terms represents little advance in theory over the well-trod "postmodern" shift to de-essentialize identity (an important move, but not particularly new or rare). As TC have written,

If the abolition of the gender distinction is necessary from the point of view of the "success" of communization, it is not in the name of the abolition of all the mediations of society. It is in its concrete and immediate character that the contradiction between men and women imposes itself on the "success" of communization, against what that relation implies in terms of violence, invisibilization, the ascription to a subordinate position.⁴

Only a substantive theory of the production and reproduction of gender in capitalism can give real non-idealist content to the abolition of gender. The important questions are: what is "woman" and "man," what is the gender relation, and what is its relation to class? The nascent forays into gender theory from the communizing tendency have tended towards at least two major elisions: avoiding the problematic of race and its relation to class and gender, and displacing an analysis of sexual violence to the sidelines of the production and reproduction of the gender distinction. Nonetheless some theories of communization, as we have mentioned, are extremely provocative towards a more general and accurate account of capital that takes all these issues rigorously into its purview.

THE COMMUNIZING CURRENT ON GENDER

TC's initial texts on gender claimed: "it's immediately apparent that all societies hinge on a twofold distinction: between genders and between classes" and "the evidence of the abolition of genders will be a revolution in the revolution." The initial texts – "Gender distinction, programmatism and communization" and the two annexes,

4 Théorie Communiste, "Response to the American Comrades on Gender."

“Gender – Class – Dynamic” and “Comrades, but Women,” published in *Théorie Communiste* Issue 23, were still filled with inner conflict and tension around how exactly to describe the material basis of the gender distinction and the way in which it is related to the class relation.⁵ Their stronger, and more provocative analysis (which is not often referenced by other male-dominated theory collectives) addressed women’s role and experience in working class struggle. TC understands that women experience an entirely different realm of oppression and exploitation than men, so that whenever they rise up, this rising up calls into question the differential positions of men and women – namely, that men do the appropriating of women and women are those who are appropriated by men (even and especially the men who are supposed to be their “comrades”). When women call this relation of appropriation into question, men will fight back, fight against the women, in an attempt to put the women “back in their place.”⁶ As Lyon, a member of TC, says in the recently published *SIC* journal: “The defense of the male condition is the defense of male domination. It is the defense of the existence of two separated spheres of activity.”⁷

However, the real material ground of the gender distinction is not fully formed in these early texts. The concept of separate “spheres” or “realms” was concretely raised, but the material genesis and reproduction of the distinction between these spheres, as well as the consistent description of “women” as loosely but not systematically associated with “biological” traits such as childbearing, XX chromosomes, breasts, vaginas and so forth, was not explained. In particular,

5 These two supplements are translated into English and made available at <http://petroleusepress.com>.

6 “When women fight, whether in the private or public sphere, when they attack the very existence of those spheres which is constituted by their separation into public and private, they must confront their male comrades, insofar as they are men *and* insofar as they are their comrades. And they (the women) are the men’s comrades, but women.” *Théorie Communiste*, “Comrades, But Women”, originally published in *Théorie Communiste*, Issue 23, English pamphlet (2011).

7 Bernard Lyon, “The Suspended Step of Communization,” *Sic: International Journal for Communization*, Issue 1, 2012, 163.

they attributed the production of “women” (which they generally equate with the production of the gender distinction) with the fact that the increase in the population is the “primary productive force” in classed societies.

When queried further, TC wrote “Response to the American Comrades on Gender,” a dense and lengthy text that left many important questions unresolved.⁸ They do argue that class societies are defined by surplus being expropriated by some portion of society, and that “up until capital [...] the principal source of surplus labor is the work of increasing the population.”⁹ We might cast this in more concrete terms by saying: the way to increase surplus labor in classed society is to produce more people, and this is made difficult by high infant death rates and/or vulnerability to death from the environment, war and attack. In many places the way to ensure the continued production of surplus at all was to ensure that as many babies as possible are birthed, to avoid a decrease of the population.¹⁰ TC write: “Population can be called the principal productive force only insofar as it becomes the productive force of labor (rather than science or the means of production, etc). It becomes this [...] insofar as a specific social arrangement has population as its object.”¹¹

This begins to answer the question of “what is woman,” and the inchoate answer is woman is she who is appropriated by society for the purpose of increasing the population. The social need to produce more and more babies creates “woman.” It is easy to see also that severe gender distinctions will necessarily arise in places where there

8 TC was asked the following questions by some American Comrades: 1. *Why do all class societies depend on the increase in population as principal productive force?* 2. *What does it mean for the increase in population to be the main productive force?* 3. *TC often write that “labour is a problem for capital.” Does this mean the falling rate of profit? Or does it mean the increasing surplus populations pose a problem of revolt? Or both?* 4. *TC say that women/the family are a problem for capital. Is this merely because labor is a problem for capital, and women/the family reproduces labor?*

9 *Théorie Communiste*, “Comrades, but Women,” op. cit.

10 Gonzalez mentions this also. Maya Gonzalez, op. cit., 226.

11 *Théorie Communiste*, “Response to the American Comrades on Gender,” op. cit.

are intense pressures on population stability, and thus intense con-
scription of women to constant childbearing.

Both Gonzalez and TC correctly articulate the way this ontological-
ly negligible feature (child-bearing) comes to ground a hierarchized
social relation:

The possession of a uterus is an anatomical feature, and not im-
mediately a distinction, but “baby maker” is a social distinction
which makes the anatomical feature a natural distinction. Within
the nature of this social construction, of this system of constraint,
that which is socially constructed – women – are always sent back
to biology.¹²

[...] sexual difference is given a particular social relevance that it
would not otherwise possess. Sexual difference is given this fixed
significance within class societies, when the category woman
comes to be defined by the function that most (but not all) human
females perform, for a period of their lives, in the sexual repro-
duction of the species. Class society thus gives a social purpose to
bodies: because some women “have” babies, all bodies that could
conceivably “produce” babies are subject to social regulation.¹³

But the questions remain: why and how? While countless activi-
ties slip easily between the boundaries dividing the two gendered
“spheres,” why is childbearing not only confined to the female/do-
mestic/private/non-social/non-waged sphere, but constitutive of it?
Why, then, is childbearing so pernicious a domestic activity, if others
(cleaning, laundry, emotional labor) traverse the spheres more eas-
ily? Why haven’t we started making babies in test tubes? Why hasn’t
surrogate motherhood become more popular (though its popularity
is dramatically rising)? Why aren’t women paid to bear children the
way most men are paid to manufacture goods? These questions must
be answered in order to explain why and how baby-making can be

12 *Théorie Communiste*, “Response to the American Comrades on Gender,”
op. cit.

13 Maya Gonzalez, op. cit., 224.

understood as the essential activity that constitutes the female, non-waged sphere.

Further, and more fundamentally, how does this appropriation of women, on whatever basis (childbearing or no) begin? In other words, what is the origin of the gender distinction and how is it reproduced?¹⁴ These questions are outside the scope of this article, but we do believe that the answers both involve gendered physical violence and sexual violence, which we will address cursorily below. These questions are displaced and de-emphasized within communication theory as it currently stands.

GENDER IN CAPITAL

TC and Gonzalez both agree that, once capital comes on the scene, there is a shift in the material basis for the appropriation of women, because “In the capitalist mode of production, the principal ‘productive force’ is the working class itself.”¹⁵ If the production of woman emerges from a situation in which the increase in the population is the principal productive force, this means that the production of woman fundamentally changes in capitalism. They argue that “the determination of a public sphere” is actually the “source” of the sex difference, and we may infer that this is because the public sphere formalizes the appropriation of women in/as the private sphere. Due to capitalism’s absolute distinction of labor as separate from “reproductive activities in the private sphere,” we find that “the cleavage between production and reproduction, of home and workplace, is perfect, structural, definitive of the mode of production.”¹⁶

¹⁴ TC disavow a serious discussion of the origins of the gender distinction, which seems disingenuous considering the important role that the theory of the origin of capitalism (in primitive accumulation) plays for the theory of class exploitation.

¹⁵ *Théorie Communiste*, “Response to the American Comrades on Gender,” op. cit.

¹⁶ *Théorie Communiste*, “Response to the American Comrades on Gender,” op. cit.

TC writes:

The sexed character of all categories of capital signifies a general distinction in society between men and women. This general distinction “acquires as its social content” that which is the synthesis of all the sexuations of the categories: the creation of the division between public and private [...] the capitalist mode of production, because it rests on the sale of the labor power and a social production that does not exist as such on the market, rejects as “non-social” the moments of its own reproduction which escape direct submission to the market or to the immediate process of production: the private. The private is the private of the public, always in a hierarchical relation of definition and submission to the public. As general division and given its content [...] it is naturalized and it actually exists in the framework of this society as natural division: all women, all men. It is not enough to say that all the categories of the capitalist mode of production are intrinsically sexed. It is necessary also that this general sexuation is given a particular form: the distinction between public and private where the categories men and women appear as general, more general even than the differences of class which are produced as “social” and “natural.” The distinction between men and women acquires its own content at its level, specific to the level produced, which is to say, specific to the distinction between public and private: nature (that which the social has produced at the interior of itself as non-social and which actually comes to appear as obvious, natural, because of the anatomical distinction).¹⁷

We agree that the categories of the capitalist totality are sexed; that this sexuation arises from a distinction between the realm of wage labor and that of something else. But is the distinction that grounds the hierarchical gender binary that between “public” and “private,” or between “production” and “reproduction,” or between the “social” and the “non-social”? This ambiguity of the real, material and historical nature of the separate spheres betrays a further ambiguity

¹⁷ Ibid.

concerning the real material construction and reproduction of the gender distinction, before and during capitalism. How are women produced and kept in such a relation of hyper exploitation and appropriation? What are the material mechanisms that enable men to reproduce themselves as men, the appropriators?

Because capital does not consistently face dwindling populations (and in fact, the opposite is often true) both TC and Gonzalez agree that we cannot maintain the same theory of gender when capital comes on the scene. Childbearing can no longer be the functional reason for appropriating women in their totality, because it is no longer the principal productive force. At this juncture, Gonzalez nonetheless continues to posit childbearing, or “sexual reproduction,” as the ground of gender hierarchies in general.¹⁸ This argument relies heavily on the fact that childbearing / sexual reproduction remain for the most part unwaged and unsubsumed (for it is this non-waged quality which makes it particular, in her account), but it doesn’t tell us why these activities *remain* unwaged. The argument removes gender from a logical, structural understanding of the capitalist mode of production, relegating to a biological characteristic that no longer has necessary social meaning. In this account, because increase in population is no longer the primary productive force, it has no reason to continue to ground the gender distinction, and so could theoretically disappear. According to this theory, as Gonzalez says explicitly, the gender distinction could be hypothetically resolved within capitalism through the a-sexual Solanas-throwback method of test-tube babies.¹⁹

TC sometimes leans toward Gonzalez’ argument as well,²⁰ but more often emphasize the ever more materially distinct separation of “spheres” necessitated by the wage-relation as the material ground

18 Gonzalez, op. cit., 228.

19 Gonzalez, op. cit., 233

20 Lyon writes that gendered domination “would always have had the allocation of women to childbirth as its content, that by which women exist as such.” and “The public/private distinction shows that, in the capitalist mode of production, the definition of women is globally constrained to their role

for gender in capital. In so doing, TC attempt to locate the gender distinction on a high level of abstraction within the totality of capitalist social relations, such that capitalism cannot be theorized without gender (even hypothetically). Whether or not this is possible or not remains to be seen, as they have not articulated the specificity and materiality of the logical necessity of gender to capital with much detail – for instance, a central question remains: how is the separation of spheres materially reproduced in capital? What material forces ensure its continued existence, in the way that the proletariat’s lack of ownership over the means of production is both part of its definition, and a central cause of its exploitation?

WHITHER SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Sexual violence and rape are consistently displaced or left out of a schematic account of the gender relation within TC and Gonzalez’s theories. Gonzalez effectively draws the notion of separate “spheres” of activity into more concrete terms, where we are able to talk about the real patterns of employment women experience, and the real concrete ramifications of pregnancy and childrearing on the appropriation of women inside and outside the wage relation, but she ends up treating the relation between actual men and actual women of similar classes in an abstract space where violence does not occur. It is impossible to accurately theorize the feminized “sphere” without referring to sexual violence, and so this represents a serious oversight in the existing theory. Women’s subordination in the home; women’s experience in waged labor; childbearing – all these things are produced directly through sexual violence as a mechanism of control over women’s bodies. Sexual violence is not an unfortunate side effect in the appropriation of women – it is a necessary element of that appropriation. Sexual and domestic violence (“private” violence within intimate family or friend relations) are the types of violence that are constitutive of the gender relation.

as childbearers.” Bernard Lyon, “The Suspended Step of Communization,” 164.

Gonzalez's mention of violence against women in general is confined to two footnotes, and only one mentions sexual violence. The first reads: "[...] violence against women, sometimes carried out by women themselves, has always been necessary to keep them firmly tied to their role in the sexual reproduction of the species."²¹ It is significant that the text to which the footnote refers discusses "violence against women" in terms of women's death through childbirth and the taxing experience of bearing upwards of eight children in a lifetime, not direct violence against women by men. In the footnote itself, the violence Gonzalez mentions has no immediate perpetrator. Gonzalez's use of the passive voice omits the agents of violence from the discussion entirely. The only thing to blame is the system in general. Even though violence against women is almost always at the hands of men, Gonzalez immediately reminds us that it may be carried out even "by women themselves." She distances violence on women's bodies from the structural relation between men and women, effectively sanitizing the relation between men and women by shifting violence to the abstract social totality. Globally, including in the US, women are more likely to be raped by a man than to have high levels of literacy. Women in the military are more likely to be raped by a man than to die in combat. Women are raped at home and at the workplace by men. Rape and sexual assault function, among other things, to keep women confined to their duties which either benefit men of their own class or a higher one (their unpaid work – be it sex, emotional labor, cleaning, etc.), or capitalists who employ them (under threat of rape and assault, women are coerced into working longer, harder and to not complain or organize in the workplace).

Gonzalez's only other reference to violence against women comes in a second footnote, where she states:

Radical feminism followed a curious trajectory in the second half of the 20th century, taking first childbearing, then domestic work, and finally sexual violence (or the male orgasm) as the ground of

²¹ Gonzalez, *op. cit.*, footnote 192.

women's oppression. The problem was that in each case, these feminists sought an ahistorical ground for what had become an historical phenomenon.²²

While her comment here is ambiguous, Gonzalez again seems to be dismissing the centrality of sexual violence in the reproduction of patriarchal gender relations, in addition to rejecting "radical feminist" theories (radical feminism here flattened into homogeneity), suggesting that sexual violence is an "ahistorical ground" for a theory of gender, though she does not make a case for why it should be considered as such.

In the "Response..." TC makes several references to violence and to sexual violence, and even to rape, as mechanisms of the gender relation, but in their formally published texts on gender, in *Théorie Communiste* Issue 24 and *SIC*, TC do not mention rape or sexual violence.²³ They do put a strong emphasis on the direct physical violence that proletarian men inflict upon proletarian women, when those women attempt to struggle in a way that problematizes the separation of the spheres. They draw from accounts of Argentina's piquetero movement:

There are female comrades who declare in the assembly: "I couldn't come to the 'piquete' (road blockade) because my husband beat

22 Gonzalez, op. cit., footnote 203.

23 "Domestic labor, positioned within the division of labor, forms of integration/interpellation in the immediate process of production, 'atypical' forms of the wage system, everyday violence of marriage, family, negation and appropriation of female sexuality, rape and/or the threat of rape, all these are the front lines where the contradiction between men and women plays out, a contradiction whose content is the definition of men and women and the ascription and confinement of individuals to these definitions (none of these elements is accidental). These front lines are the loci of a permanent struggle between two categories of society constructed as natural and deconstructed by women in their struggle. The front lines are never stable. The public-private distinction is constantly redefined: the present "parity" is a redefinition of its boundaries but also a redefinition of what is private." *Théorie Communiste*, "Comrades, but Women," op. cit.

me, because he locked me down.” For that, the women-question helped us quite a bit ... because you’ve seen that it was us, the women, who were the first to go out for food, job positions, and health ... And it brought very difficult situations – even death. There were husbands who did not tolerate their wives attending a meeting, a ‘piquete.’”²⁴

It is meaningful that rape and systematic sexual violence make no appearance in the formally published texts of TC on gender, nor in the entirety of SIC, nor Communization and its Discontents.²⁵ The neglect of rape and sexual violence as structural elements of the gender distinction, and thus of the capitalist totality, leads to an account of gender that cannot make sense of an enormous amount of gendered social relations. Some have argued correctly that some strains of feminist emphasis on rape have served a racist or classist function within struggles and analysis, but it is also true that the neglect of rape and sexual violence is just as easily used in racist or classist attacks.²⁶ If they are not rooted in a systematic structural relation, rape and sexual violence are “bad things” that some “bad people” do, and on these accounts, those bad people blamed by law, media and white supremacist society, are more often than not poor and of an ethnic or racial minority. We observe some beginnings of structural theories of rape and sexual violence in Kathy Miriam’s elaboration of Adrienne Rich’s concept of “sex right,” which she articulates as “the assumption that men have a right of sexual access to women and girls [which] allows for specific acts of coercion and aggression to take place.”²⁷ This theory also grounds Miriam’s expanded theory of compulsory heterosexuality. Although too philosophical and non-material/historical to immediately cohere with a structural commu-

24 *Théorie Communiste*, op. cit.

25 And banal, daily domestic or intimate gendered violence barely appears.

26 For a critique of Susan Brownmiller see Alison Edwards, “Rape, Racism, and the White Woman’s Movement: An Answer to Susan Brownmiller,” 1976.

27 Kathy Miriam, “Towards a Phenomenology of Sex-Right,” *Hypatia*, Vol. 22, Issue 1, February 2007, 225 and Adrienne Rich, “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence,” *Signs*, Vol. 5, No. 4, Summer, 1980.

nist theory of capitalist social relations, Miriam describes processes that must be included in our accounts. To ignore sexual violence and compulsory heterosexuality in an account of structurally gendered capitalist social relations is equivalent to ignoring the way in which the threat of unemployment and the growth of unemployed populations structures the relation between labor and capital.

Understanding sexual violence as a structuring element of gender also helps us to understand how patriarchy reproduces itself upon and through gay and queer men, trans people, gender nonconforming people and bodies, and children of any gender. Gendered divisions of labor within the waged sphere, in conjunction with baby-bearing, do not account for the particular patterns in which, e.g., trans people are economically exploited within capitalist economies, which differs dramatically from cis-women, as well as the endemic murder of trans women of color which amounts to a sort of geographically diffused genocide.²⁸ It cannot account for the widespread rape of children by predominantly male family members. But if we consider sexual violence as an essential material ground in the production of hierarchized gender relations, then we can begin to see how such patterns relate to the production of the categories women and man and the distinction between the spheres of waged/unwaged; social/non-social; public/private.

ABOLITION OF RACE?

Many have argued that the category “woman” is not required for the social functions currently performed by women to “get done” – that is to say, capitalism could rid itself of gender, and still maintain

²⁸ The visibility of this genocide, as with most, is almost totally nil. Its invisibility is only emphasized when social movements recognize some isolated incidents, which makes it only more important to mention, for example, in the United States the recent (somewhat more publicly recognized) murder of Brandy Martell in Oakland, as well as the severe sentencing of CeCe McDonald, who defended herself from a violent transphobic attack. These types of transphobic murders and victim-blaming punishment happen every day worldwide with no notice.

the necessary distinction between “spheres” of social/non-social or waged/unwaged. The emerging communizationist gender theory, on the other hand, often argues that the categories “women” and “men” are nothing other than the distinction between the spheres of activity. Abolishing gender while retaining the waged/unwaged division is like abolishing class while retaining the split between the owners of the means of production and those who are forced to work for a wage in order to survive.

The very same maneuvers are used to make similarly deflationary arguments about what is usually called “race” or “ethnicity.” Even theorists who emphasize the critical importance of race often claim that, at base, race and ethnicity are historical leftovers of past violences that capital has picked up, found useful, and mobilized to its advantage. Some of the theorists most intent on integrating a theory of racial and ethnic oppression into the analysis of capitalism – from autonomists like Harry Cleaver and Selma James to canonical theorists of white supremacist, capitalist society like Stuart Hall – continue to insist that race is in some sense subordinate to or an inflection of (or in Hall’s terms, an articulation of) class.

The race question has yet to be put on the table for communization theory. Theorists who analyze race and racialization as a fundamental social relation that grounds and reproduces capitalist society (from Cedric Robinson, who wrote the epic *Black Marxism*, to the recent “Afro-pessimists” like Frank Wilderson and Jared Sexton) have not been addressed within communization theory. This is a testament to the persistent racist Eurocentrism of current communization theory, even as it is drawn into the American context.²⁹

Frank Wilderson claims that white supremacy: “kills the Black subject that the concept, civil society, may live” and later states:

29 Communists have certainly not dealt with race *well* elsewhere, but European ultra-left and communizationist theory remains somewhat uniquely unconcerned with race – as do its American counterparts. This results in a Eurocentrism that cannot even begin to understand Europe.

We live in this world, but exist outside of civil society. This structurally impossible position is a paradox because the Black subject, the slave, is vital to civil society's political economy: s/he kick-starts capital at its genesis and rescues it from its over-accumulation crisis at its end. Black death is its condition of possibility. Civil society's subaltern, the worker, is coded as waged, and wages are White. But Marxism has no account of this phenomenal birth and life-saving role played by the Black subject.³⁰

Similar to Miriam's phenomenological and hermeneutic account of the sex-right, this language is not yet legible to existing communist or Marxist conversations, in part because it does not consistently use the analytical categories familiar to those conversations, and in part because there is little impetus to investigate the real meaning of racialization for capitalism within white-dominated theoretical and political circles. The absence of rigorous efforts to engage with and integrate analyses of race that do not mesh seamlessly with Marxist categories – and that at times force a rethinking of some of those categories – threatens to undermine the strength of communization theory. The limits of such conversations are threatening to their strength, for these theories of sex-right and black death reveal a truth that, if ignored or dismissed, leaves an account of the totality not only incomplete but a potential tool of capitalist violence.

We believe that capital is a totality that is “classed,” “gendered” and “raced” by virtue of its own internal logic. These are not three contradictions that sit on three thrones in the centre of the capitalist totality, homologous with one another, dictating its logic. We must reveal exactly how race and gender are necessary social relations based on particular material processes within the capitalist mode of production.³¹ Through the recent work of communizationist gender

30 Frank Wilderson, “Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?,” *We Write*, 2 (January 2005), 9, 15.

31 Some formations in the US are beginning to take on this task. See for instance the recent document by CROATOAN, “Who is Oakland?: Anti-Oppression Activism, The Politics of Safety, and State Co-optation,” <http://escalatingidentity.wordpress.com>.

theory, we have come to understand “women” as the category describing those whose activity, unwaged and waged, is appropriated in their totality by society (“men”). This relation inscribes two distinct “spheres” that ground the gender binary. The fact that the boundaries around these spheres are violently policed does not mean they are static – in fact their policing also involves a constant manipulation of the boundaries. We understand “proletariat” as the category describing those who do not own the means of production, and are forced to either sell their labor to those who do (the “capitalists”) or are cast out to waste away. How are we to understand the category of “racialized,” or perhaps of “black,” or perhaps “ethnicized”? It seems possible that these categories are necessarily related to capital’s necessary overproduction of humans within the necessary movement of capitalist development, and its consequent need to kill, obliterate, remove and dispossess such bodies.³² But how do we structure this theory, and how does it relate to waged exploitation and to the two “spheres”? One fruitful direction for communization theory to take might be to bring theories of surplus population (such as those articulated in the recent *Endnotes 2*) into dialogue with theorists of race and ghettos, prisons, and unemployment, in particular the work of Loic Wacquant, Ruth Gilmore, and the above-mentioned Wilderson. Communization theory must also look to, critique, and expand upon the work on race done by autonomist Marxists such as Selma James, Silvia Federici, and Harry Cleaver, all of whom emphasize the key role of race in reproducing stratification within the working class, constructing a hierarchy of labor powers, and providing the ruling class with a mechanism with which to fracture and divide proletarians.

For now, we note the obvious fact that the reproduction of racial and ethnic hierarchies affect, form and constitute every moment and place of capital’s reproduction. A range of feminists, from African-American antiracist feminists like Patricia Hill Collins to eco-feminists like Maria Mies, have noted and argued that gender is produced

³² “Misery and Debt: On the Logic and History of Surplus Populations and Surplus Capital,” *Endnotes 2*, 2011, 20 - 51.

through racialization, and that racialization is produced through gender. Indeed, communization's theory of gender thus far is deeply flawed due to its failure to comprehend how gender itself is fundamentally structured through systems of racialization. The work of Evelyn Nakano Glenn provides strong evidence of the way in which the female sphere of reproductive labor discussed by TC and Gonzalez is itself propped up by severe and violent racial divisions. The historical reliance of white women on the paid reproductive labor of women of color has produced white women as embodying a feminine cultural ideal decoupled from dirtier and more physically demanding domestic tasks, and this former experience of womanhood is the more frequent object of feminist analysis, communization included. The paid labor of women of color has also allowed white women to enter the labor force without forcing the burden of reproductive labor upon men. Glenn shows how this racial division of reproductive labor establishes a particular relationship between white women and women of color, in which racial hierarchy becomes the mechanism by which white women can offload some of the labor forced upon them by their husbands onto other women.³³ Any theory of gender and capital which ignores these facts will remain woefully wrong.

Communization has now been able to say, there is never a proletarian who is not gendered, so we must also be able to say, there is never a proletarian or a "woman" or a "man" who is not raced. We must also be able to articulate the way that the binary categories of "men" and "women" describe a structure of appropriation, but do not describe people (who vary in gender and experience of gendered violence far more than the discussion has indicated thus far). We look forward to communizationists, the ones we know and read, or ones we don't yet know, taking up these issues. If not, communization will become as archaic and as useless as any other communist tendency — or worse, a small but sly tool of the counterrevolution.

33 Evelyn Nakano Glenn, "From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Division of Paid Reproductive Labor," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Fall 1992.

SKY PALACE

*"TO BE LIBERATED
FROM THEM (OR
THROUGH THEM)"
A CALL FOR A NEW APPROACH*

This is a call for a collective conversation about new approaches to theorizing and practically organizing around the complex relationship between identity, liberation, and revolution. Finding the existing framework of intersectionality inadequate, we wish to move beyond stale debates over the priority of either class or identity-based oppression whose form either subsumes political economy into an undifferentiated mass of oppressions or pushes analyses into "pro" or "anti" identity positions. We list some shared starting points that could inform a new mode of inquiry, and pose questions that might lead us to more fruitful ways of thinking about how ascribed identities might be organized autonomously in order to attack the racial, gender, and sexual hierarchies which hold these identities in place.

I. FRAMING WHAT'S AT STAKE

We are looking for a position that is not available in the current theoretical and political landscape. We are trapped in a field of competing political tendencies within which the only intelligible locations are wholly inadequate to our needs. Our choices are limited to a reformist politics of diversity (inclusion of all identities makes the revolution!); a politics of false and violently imposed unity (unite for the class fight!); an ahistorical and idealist insurrectionism (make total destroy!); a class-reductionist communization (the value form is the key!); and so on.

We refuse to set aside the oppression — both brutal and tacit — of queers, women of color, trans* people, women, Black, Brown, Asian-American, Chican@, Muslim, fags, and dykes as something to be dealt with later, *after* the revolution. We refuse to treat these struggles as mere springboards for the more central and fundamental struggle of the proletariat. These oppressions and violences are not derivative, secondary, or epiphenomenal to class. There is no more opportunity to abolish patriarchy or racism *within* capitalism than there is opportunity to abolish class exploitation within capitalism.

Because these oppressions are denied, pushed aside, imagined as incidental; because we experience our conditions as intolerable in the present; because one attacks a structure from one's location within it: because of all of these things there is a real and immediate need to organize around these categories. There is a real need to establish autonomous spaces and groupings according to specific oppressions of capitalism. Autonomy is a means by which we develop shared affinities as a basis for abolishing the relations of domination that make that self-organization necessary. And yet, even as we do this, we want to be freed of the social relations that make us *into* women, queers, women of color, trans*, et cetera. We want to be liberated from these categories themselves, but experience teaches us that the only way out is through.

One model for understanding autonomous organizing as necessary for revolution has been the theory of communization as articulated by a host of groups recently publishing together in the journal *SIC*. The French group *Théorie Communiste* have written “self organization is the first step of the revolution. It then becomes an obstacle that the revolution has to overcome.” Theirs is primarily a critique of communist tendencies that affirm working class identity and view revolution as the ascendance of the working class to power. As an alternative they posit the self-abolition of the working class through the destruction of the labor/capital relation. The term “self-abolition” is key, for it locates the power to abolish relations of exploitation within the collective body of the exploited group. It points to the tension inherent in the revolutionary process: a process in which the material bases for the collective affinities that make struggle possible are themselves violently destroyed through conflict and revolutionary movement, leading to the eventual dissolution of those affinities as relevant descriptors of any kind of shared experience. Autonomy is a step toward abolition, not the end goal.

We are looking for the points where communization theory’s critique of working class identity and its necessary relationship to capital converges with anti-essentialist critiques of raced and gendered identities — gender abolitionist feminism, queer insurrectionism, and Afro-pessimism, to name a few. We move to place these recent anti-essentialist but identity-based movements and theories in conversation with theories of communization, with their critique of working class self-affirmation. As separate modes of inquiry each of these tendencies falls far short of providing us with the necessary tools to attack the totality of capitalist relations. Within the communization cohort, only a few pieces on gender have emerged, and nothing on the questions of race, sexuality, or struggles around trans* and non binary bodies and gender identities. The texts of the communizationist canon [cf. *SIC*; *Communization and its Discontents*; *Endnotes*; *Riff Raff*] are highly Eurocentric and lack historical specificity. Feminist theory has either ignored or capitulated to class analysis, and has been riddled historically with white and cis supremacy.

This is not to mention the consistent presence of a gender essentialism which balks at the notion of abolishing gender altogether. In positioning itself in opposition to a vulgar class-reductionism, anti-racist theory has rejected a serious study of political economy and has frequently flattened the question of gender and sexuality if not outright supported male supremacy and/or hetero/cis normativity. Queer theory's embrace of idealism and postmodernism typically renders it incapable of describing structures rooted in material social relations, and its often implicit or explicit rejection of the concept of patriarchy, at times veering into misogyny, neutralizes many of its potential critiques.

All of this shows that no amount of autonomy and identity-centric analysis can ensure a revolutionary theory or praxis, and this is why we must develop a shared critical vocabulary and understanding of the structural totality of capital. Racial hierarchies, gendered violence, and exploitation are not epiphenomenal; they are immanent relations at the same level of abstraction as class. We strive toward a systemic analysis of gender and race relations, the divisions of labor which base themselves in these relations, and the material sites and institutions which continually reproduce subordinated raced and gendered identities. It is this kind of analysis that we feel has the potential to strengthen our struggles as we face choices about what to attack, what lines to draw, what to fight for, what to fight against, and how to become stronger.

II. SHARED BASIS

Communization. We aim to abolish wage labor, exchange, value, capital, the working class as such, and the state through a process of global insurrectionary upheavals. We view the relation between labor and capital as ever moving and developing, each category constituted by the other and unable to exist without the other; communization is the process of the abolition of the totality.

Totality. Race and gender are not “exotic historical accidents,” incidental to capital’s development. They are immanent to its logic, to its processes of accumulation, and to its expansion. Intersectionality will not suffice.

Autonomy. Those who materially benefit from oppressive and exploitative social relations will never willingly destroy those social relations. Just as we cannot expect capitalists as a group to willingly give up their ownership over the means of production, we cannot expect patriarchy or white supremacy to be destroyed by those who benefit from them. These processes will only be destroyed and abolished by the people who are oppressed and exploited by these relations. Therefore, we believe in the necessity of autonomous organizing on the basis of materially produced categories, such as “trans,” “queer,” “woman,” “POC,” et cetera. The simple affirmation and insistence on working class unity, on the need to unite across our differences for the sake of the class, will not bring communization or an end to identity-based oppressions.

Abolition. Our vision of liberation assumes not equality between genders, sexualities, and races, but the abolition of these identity categories as structural relations that organize human activity and social life. We believe that these identities are the names of real material processes of capitalism — *not of something essential or salvageable within us*. They place us in relationships of domination and subordination with one another. For us communization is also the process by which we ourselves will abolish this identity-relation-process-production. This means that a politics whose ends lie in the radical reassertion of a range of potentially revolutionary historical subjects, from the classical proletariat to contemporary decolonial subjecthood, cannot fundamentally challenge the matrices of power, exploitation, and oppression which materially constitute subjects. We therefore call for a renewed interrogation of the relationship between autonomy and abolition, in which self-organization based on identity categories is understood as a necessary part of the *abolition* of these categories.

III. QUESTIONS

How do we assess existing theories of the totality of capital — the many different theories that attempt to describe the structure of race, gender, and class? How does our understanding of this totality affect our understanding of struggle and of liberation?

How do we conceive of a kind of self-organization where the identity category that forms the basis for organization does not become the basis for a kind of nationalism, essentialism, or a politics of affirmation and authenticity in which occupying a subordinated position is in itself taken as radical or revolutionary? Can we conceive of a dialectic of autonomy and revolt that through its synthesis has the power to destroy the social relation upon which identity categories are built?

What are the points of contradiction where, in the course of struggle, self-organization based on identity categories has a tendency to emerge? How can these points and these forms of self-organization propel the communization process forward? How and when do they become co-opted? Can we look at historical examples to help us understand and speculate about some of the dynamics that might tend to emerge in a revolutionary process?

To what degree can the relation labor/capital, as elaborated by many strains of Marxist theory, be used as a model for understanding gender and race, as in: the relation man/woman, the relation white/non-white, the relations straight/queer and cis/trans? Can theories of the abolition of the labor/capital relation by the self-organization and then self-abolition of the working class be used in some way to theorize the abolition of gender and race? What are the limits to such a comparison? How do we also make sense of the fact that in reality these relations are not separate but interact and mutually constitute one another? How do we imagine the abolition of race and gender as unfolding alongside and within the abolition of the labor/capital relation, not separate from it?

ARCHIVES

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*"ALL THE WORK WE
DO AS WOMEN"
FEMINIST MANIFESTOS ON
PROSTITUTION AND THE STATE,
1977*

In 1977 San Francisco's city government, in the midst of redeveloping its downtown as a center for tourism and a west coast banking capital, initiated a new wave of crackdowns on street prostitution. The SFPD coordinated sweeps of downtown neighborhoods, arresting sex workers en masse. At the same time, the city's Board of Supervisors put forward a proposal to the California legislature to increase the penalties for soliciting to \$1000 or one year in prison. Local sex workers had been organizing against police harassment and violence for over a decade at that point, and when the latest crackdown came some of them reached out to feminist groups around the country and in Europe for solidarity.

The manifestos included here were found recently in a library archive along with other documents about San Francisco sex workers' struggles in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. They are statements written by sex workers and other feminist women in support of their comrades in San Francisco. They were written in response to a call put out by the San Francisco chapter of Wages for Housework, a Marxist-feminist group that was part of an international network of feminists opposing the criminalization of prostitution. The statements were written by women in Brooklyn, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Toronto, and London, all loosely affiliated with the Wages for Housework groups.

The International Wages for Housework Campaign was founded by a small group of Italian and American Marxist feminists in 1972. Among them were Mariarosa Dalla Costa, a participant in the Italian Autonomia movement who became a member of Lotta Femminista, and Selma James, an American former member of the autonomist Marxist group the Johnson Forest Tendency who went on to live and work in Trinidad and England. The Campaign was founded on the idea that women should receive wages from the state for their unpaid labor in the home, thus allowing them financial independence from men and forcing the state to return to the working class some of the money that had been taken from it through capitalist exploitation. Chapters emerged in Italy, England, Germany, Switzerland, and Canada. Lesbian women and Black women organized autonomous groups within the larger Wages for Housework umbrella as Wages Due Lesbians and Black Women for Wages for Housework. In England the Wages for Housework groups worked together with the English Collective of Prostitutes, formed in 1975, which in 1985 occupied a church in London as part of a struggle against police violence.

The political framework of Wages for Housework drew upon the concept of reproductive labor as developed by Italian Marxist feminists, including Dalla Costa and Leopoldina Fortunati. These feminists reread *Capital* from the perspective of working-class women, in so doing elaborating a theory of how unpaid household labor conducted by women contributed to the reproduction of the working

class and the entire capitalist system. They argued that the unwaged character of this labor hid its structural function: to lower the cost of reproducing the working class as a whole and thus allow capitalists to reduce wages and reap extra profits. If women did reproductive labor for free – if they could be compelled to cook, clothe, clean, and provide emotional support for their husbands, children, and parents without receiving any wages in return – the capitalist class would not have to factor the cost of this labor into wages.

The mechanism that compelled women to perform this labor for free, according to their theory, was women's subordination to men, and in particular working-class women's subordination to their husbands. They argued that women's lack of access to wages (or at least to wages that were high enough to support them and their children) forced them into sexual and emotional partnerships with men whether or not they wanted them, merely in order to meet their material needs. Women were thus extremely vulnerable to male domination and abuse, which was heightened by the physical and emotional strain working-class men experienced as exploited wage laborers. Women became the punching bags upon which men could release their pent-up frustration and whose subjugation allowed men to experience some measure of power and control. In this sense women's subordination was also useful for the capitalist class as a pressure valve that displaced men's anger toward their bosses onto their wives and children.

According to their theory, women's dependence upon men prevented them from attaining sexual autonomy and thus made heterosexuality more or less compulsory. Patriarchal divisions of labor, organized through the basic unit of the family, require heterosexual partnerships between men and women and thus queer people, and women in particular, are frequently compelled to enter into relationships that go against their personal sexual and emotional desires. Thus the Marxist feminist analysis of reproductive labor is also a theory of compulsory heterosexuality, as some of the texts below demonstrate.

In elaborating their ideas, Dalla Costa, Fortunati, James, and others hoped to show how male domination was built into capitalism and how both men (including working-class men) and the capitalist class benefited from the unpaid nature of women's reproductive labor. They argued that for women to gain some measure of independence — including the ability to freely choose who and how to love — they needed money of their own, so that they would not have to provide sexual, emotional, and other services to a man in exchange for access to his wages. However, unlike liberal feminists and many Marxist feminists, they did not believe that women should achieve this independence by attempting to gain equal footing with men in the waged workplace (which they viewed as another site of exploitation and misery rather than an opportunity for liberation). Rather, they thought that it would benefit not just women but the entire working class if housework was recognized by the state as productive work and compensated as such. They further argued that if women received wages for housework, they would be able to more freely choose what kind of work they wished to do. All of these developments, they felt, would advance the cause of class struggle by lessening the division between working-class men and women and forcing the capitalist class to return some of its stolen profits.¹

Dalla Costa, Fortunati, and James' analysis of reproductive labor is evident in almost all of the manifestos included here. Their perspective underlies one of the most important rhetorical devices employed by all of the authors: the emphatic insistence that prostitution is not

1 This strategy can be and has been critiqued on a number of fronts. Even assuming victory is possible (a proposition that is certainly up for debate), questions remain about the relationship between reform and revolution posited by the wages for housework campaign. Despite its insistence that women need not enter the waged labor market, the movement still seems to rely upon an assumption that housewives must be made more classically proletarian, i.e. must receive a wage in exchange for their labor power, in order to be proper political subjects capable of fighting against capitalism. From a revolutionary perspective one might ask why housewives should struggle first for reforms that would grant them a higher position within the working class rather than fighting directly and immediately for the abolition of productive and reproductive spheres, i.e. communist revolution.

an isolated, unique form of exploitation but is intimately connected to the general condition of women and the proletariat under heteropatriarchal capitalism. In other words, they placed themselves in opposition to prominent strains of feminism, such as those represented by Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, that favored the criminalization of not just prostitution, but pornography, legal forms of sex work, and all sexualized representations of women's bodies. Rather than isolate sex workers as a special category of victim, anti-criminalization feminists pointed out the connections between sex workers and all women and workers: all women provide men with sexual services in exchange for access to money; all workers sell their bodies and time in exchange for money. They point out that by isolating sex work as the sole exploitative relationship, pro-criminalization ideology implies that women should perform reproductive labor for free within the context of families and romantic partnerships. Without presenting sex work as liberatory or a freely made choice — and in fact insisting on the ultimate goal of abolishing it along with patriarchal capitalism — they explain the reasons why women enter into the field of sex work: unlike housewives, sex workers get money directly for their services, and thus can have more autonomy. Unlike secretaries, waitresses, or maids, many sex workers are relatively highly paid and have more free time.

This line of thinking is carried even further in the piece by Black Women for Wages for Housework, clearly the most complex and nuanced of the manifestos included here. The authors argue that all Black women have an interest in defending prostitutes. In part this is because many Black women are compelled to work as prostitutes due to the material conditions of life in the ghetto. But they point out that even Black women who are not prostitutes are directly impacted by the working and living conditions of prostitutes, for when they are criminalized and violently attacked this constitutes an attack on the ability of all Black women to gain a measure of financial, sexual, and emotional independence from men. They point out that within the category of “woman,” Black women function as symbols of all that is undesirable and degraded, the negative inverse

of an idealized white feminine purity. In this sense, to be a Black woman is to be always already considered a prostitute. This position in the symbolic order expresses itself in the choices black women are forced to make within the confines of racialized poverty. While most women are compelled to exchange sexual services for access to money or material goods, the authors point out that Black women must also often exchange these services for the mere assurance of avoiding racial terror: to avoid being arrested or beaten by police, for instance.

The text also extends the political strategic discussion of fighting for wages for housework to a discussion of the welfare rights movement waged by Black women in the 1960s and 70s. The fight for welfare payments *is* a fight for wages for housework, welfare being the first and only money women in the U.S. have won from the state for their reproductive labor. The decision to go on welfare, they argue, is similar to the decision to become a prostitute in certain ways: a choice, given existing social constraints, that allows women access to money without entering into low-paid service work. An alternative to dependence on men, on the one hand, and wage slavery, on the other.

Clearly the strength of the manifestos lies in their penetrating analysis of the condition of working class women under heteropatriarchal capitalism, and their attention to the ways in which this condition is variable along lines of race and sexuality. Their greatest weakness, however, is their failure to integrate into their analyses the relationship between cis-female sex workers and other kinds of sex workers, namely trans and gay male sex workers, also suffering from police violence, economic precarity, and social marginalization. A more thorough analysis of patriarchy would extend the discussion of compulsory heterosexuality – so eloquently discussed by the Wages Due Lesbians groups and Black Women for Wages for Housework – to include gay men, and show how the enforcement of heterosexuality within families and other institutions often forced queer youth to become economically independent and to seek out prostitution as one of the few well-paying jobs available to them that also allowed for some degree of sexual autonomy.

A stronger analysis would also integrate into its understanding of patriarchy an examination of the virulent police crackdown on trans women, both as sex workers and as “crossdressers” under statutes that made illegal the “impersonation” of a member of the “opposite gender.” At the time of the 1977 crackdown a significant number of trans women and gay men worked on the streets of San Francisco – and had long been publicly resisting violence and harassment, most famously during the Compton’s Cafeteria riot of 1966. (For a discussion of this statute and its enforcement by police in the Bay Area, and of trans and queer resistance to police violence, see the next text in this journal — excerpts from an interview with Suzan Cooke.) Although some of the manifestos leave open the possibility that trans women were included within the category of “women prostitutes,” the absence of any explicit discussion implicitly defines prostitutes as cis women.

Thus these manifestos also point to the shortcomings of Marxist feminist analysis and practice at the time. Their understanding of patriarchy was based on an experience of organizing between and amongst cis women, and of identifying the category “woman” as the sole oppressed category under a patriarchal system. They failed to identify the complexity of patriarchy under capitalism, which produces multiple subordinated categories of human beings, including gay men and trans people. The feminist struggle against criminalization in San Francisco thus excluded many sex workers in its failure to acknowledge these interrelated forms of exploitation and oppression, and took the form of a movement of cis-female prostitutes rather than all prostitutes.

What is important and unusual about these documents is how they shifted the ground of feminist debates about liberation. By focusing on the state as an apparatus designed to regulate divisions of labor and sexuality through its ability to criminalize, imprison, and otherwise punish certain types of women, these manifestos challenge the logic of pro-criminalization feminists. For if criminalization draws a line between legitimate and illegitimate behavior, is not the criminalization of prostitution an attempt to draw a line between

legitimate and illegitimate women — and therefore to regulate the behavior of all women in order to maintain a division of labor beneficial to capital accumulation? The flip side to Catherine MacKinnon's argument that sex work is a violation of women's civil rights is the assumption that the other (paid and unpaid) work that women do is somehow legitimate, acceptable, and free from relations of domination. This logic, like that of the state, draws a dividing line between sex workers and other women. By challenging the logic of criminalization these manifestos erase that line, revealing the material basis for solidarity between housewives, sex workers, lesbians, welfare recipients, women who work for wages, women of color, and all those who inhabit more than one of these categories.

AN ATTACK ON PROSTITUTES IS AN ATTACK ON ALL WOMEN

San Francisco Wages for Housework

Feb 1977

The recent attack on street prostitutes in San Francisco is one more attempt by the government to deny women access to money of our own. The supervisors are raising the flag of morality to justify their "cleaning up the streets." In fact, they are protecting the profits of the Union Square hotels which run their own pimping services. The supervisors' morality is not offended when big business pimps nor when the government takes its share through fines on prostitutes. It is only offended when we refuse to give them a cut. The power of the hotels, like that of all pimps, is threatened by the growing struggle prostitutes are making to abolish the laws against prostitution.

In many parts of the world governments are harassing prostitutes because prostitution exposes our sexuality as work which should be paid for. Recently stated by the English Collective of Prostitutes:

"Sex is supposed to be personal, always a free choice, different from work. But it's not a free choice when we are dependent on men for

money. We women are expected to be sexual service stations, and because of that sex becomes a bargaining point between ourselves and men. When any of us sleeps with men, at least to some degree we are forced to consider what we are going to get in return for ‘giving’ — money, the rent, or better treatment in other ways. Whether we enjoy it or not, we are making a calculation. Those of us who are prostitutes not only calculate, but put a price on our services and make men meet it. The line between paid and unpaid sex is a question of what we get in return.”

Business makes money off our sexuality. Destroyed by the work they are compelled to do, men come to us for the sexual and emotional gratification they need to continue working, making profits for business. When we work outside the home, on top of housework, our bosses use our sexuality to please customers and make sales. The advertising industry is based on linking products with hints that our sexual ‘favors’ go with them. Our lives are consumed so that business can profit.

More and more women are refusing to be exploited — to work in the home for free and to work outside the home for low pay. Wherever we are demanding our wages — from the Welfare Department, in the street, at the job outside the home — we are fighting for money for all our work.

Prostitution is one way of getting our wages. Although the government tries to isolate our struggles, we refuse to be divided. All work is prostitution and we are all prostitutes. We are forced to sell our bodies — for room and board or for cash — in marriage, in the street, in typing pools or in factories. And as we win wages for all the work we do, we develop the power to refuse prostitution — in any of its forms.

*WE DEMAND AN END TO THE HARASSMENT OF
PROSTITUTES. WE DEMAND THE ABOLITION OF ALL THE
LAWS AGAINST PROSTITUTION.*

SUPPORTING STATEMENT BY THE ENGLISH COLLECTIVE OF PROSTITUTES

London 1977

The Los Angeles Wages for Housework Committee in connection with the London Wages for Housework Committee has informed us about the proposals of the San Francisco supervisors to the California legislature to increase penalties for soliciting to \$1000 or one year in prison and we have also heard about the increase of arrests of prostitute women. In England and France, as in other countries, governments are trying to increase fines and jail sentences for soliciting, or already have, making it more difficult for prostitute women to get money. The governments are punishing us because we refuse to be dependent on the little money the boyfriends, husbands, brothers, lovers and families give us in exchange for the housework of looking after them. They are punishing us because when we go into hooking, we are refusing the low standard of living that employers offer us and our children when we do “respectable” work — as secretaries, waitresses, nurses, factory workers, farm workers, teachers, domestic workers and so on. And when they punish us, they are also punishing our children.

All women are, in one way or another, fighting for financial independence and prostitution is the way that prostitute women have found to get the same thing. By attacking prostitute women the governments are telling all women that if we are not good girls, if we do not continue to be the servants of the world, and if we ask for anything for ourselves, we will be punished. But in the past few years an incredible number of women have gone into prostitution and many struggles of prostitute women have exploded and become public.

More and more, they will not be able to confront us in isolation. They will have to deal with us all together — women who work on the street, call girls, women who work in massage parlors, in hotels, in brothels, in nightclubs, in casinos, in holiday resorts, in escort agencies, in bars; women who work in the countryside and small

towns, women who work in big cities, young women, older women, mothers, non-mothers, lesbian women, straight women, part-time prostitutes, full-time prostitutes, married women, single women, immigrant and non-immigrant women, and women of all different races and nationalities.

Like all women, we prostitutes have always fought to get something for ourselves and it has never been easy. But when we look back, we can see that in the end we have always won something. And — we are afraid for the governments — that nothing is going to kill our struggle and nothing will stop us from winning. Power to prostitute women all over the world — power to all women.

E.C.P.

English Collective of Prostitutes

SUPPORTING STATEMENTS BY WAGES DUE LESBIANS

Wages Due Lesbians, London

We fully endorse the statement in support of the San Francisco prostitutes, and urge all other organizations to do the same.

The attack which governments are organizing against prostitute women everywhere in the world is an attack on every woman's right to determine whether, and on what terms, she will have sexual relations with men. As lesbian women we, like prostitute women, refuse to accept that it is women's "nature" to sleep with men and to sleep with them "for love" — i.e. for free. And like prostitute women we face continual harassment by police, employers, schools, individual men, and all those in authority for the crime of shaping our sexual life according to our own needs, of taking something for ourselves.

Many lesbian women have totally refused to do the work of meeting men's sexual demands, and all the other housework that goes along

with sexual relations with men. Others of us have been forced by lack of money to marry or to stay in a marriage, at the expense of the relationships we would like, in order to maintain ourselves or ourselves and our children. Others of us have become hookers in order to get the money we need and are entitled to.

Women, lesbian or “straight,” prostitute or not, are everywhere houseworkers, the servants of the world. We are all entitled to money for this work, and entitled to obtain it in any way open to us as women. Wherever women succeed in winning some of the wages due us, it is a strength to all of us and proof that women’s services cannot be taken for granted.

London, 1977

Wages Due Lesbians, Toronto

Here in Canada, we have recently seen a media campaign against the numbers of women “turning to prostitution” in this time of economic crisis. The push has come from the same quarters as in the U.S. — from the police, politicians, and businessmen, all of whom have something to gain from women working for nothing or only low pay.

Lesbian women are also harassed for the same reason as prostitute women. We are intimidated and isolated from other women for refusing to be sexually available for free to husbands, bosses, and any man on the street. Any woman who steps out of line gets the same treatment. And we’re fighting all the time against this, whether we are married, single prostitute or lesbian.

Many women who work as prostitutes are also lesbians. They are making the same fight against free sex on command when they refuse heterosexuality “off the job.” The only choices women now have

are to “give it” for free for our daily survival, to demand some money for it in exchange, or to try to refuse it altogether — and we pay a high price for all three. We refuse to keep footing the bill.

Whether gay or straight, we all need our own money to determine our lives and what our sexuality will be. We all need Wages for Housework. We urge all lesbian groups and individuals to support the struggle of prostitute women against these crackdowns.

Toronto, Canada, 1977

MONEY FOR PROSTITUTES IS MONEY FOR BLACK WOMEN

The Black Women for Wages for Housework group fully endorses the statement of Wages for Housework – San Francisco and the Los Angeles Wages for Housework Committee that AN ATTACK AGAINST PROSTITUTES IS AN ATTACK ON ALL WOMEN. We make this endorsement because the struggles of prostitute women against police harassment on the streets, against beatings, against fines and jails, against being declared “unfit” mothers in the courts and having our children taken away, against being treated like animals and outcasts, against pimps, racketeers, and businesses that profit from our misery, and, what is key to all these attacks, against not having any money to call our own, are struggles that we as Black women are all forced to make.

Prostitution is not a game — it is WORK — the work of serving men sexually to get the means to live. It is the work of being at the disposal of men’s sexual needs and their fantasies of what a woman is supposed to look like, supposed to do, supposed to be. Prostitution is work that Black women were forced to do on the plantations and that we are forced to do today. It is our work that some men “make their living” on — we don’t play at prostitution. We are forced to sell our sexual services on the streets, in hotels and massage parlours, or in our apartments — to take on the second job of prostitution

— because we are not paid for the first job we all do as women, housework, the job of producing and taking care of everybody so that we all can work and make profits for the Man. Prostitution is one way that Black women are using increasingly to refuse our poverty and dependency on men which is brought about by not getting paid for our first job.

To turn back the rising tide of our refusal to be penniless, the Man makes sure that part of the job of being a prostitute is to be used as a sign to other women of where the bottom is — to be labeled a whore and an unfit mother, a Negress (which they used to call us), a loose woman. So that part of the work of being a prostitute is to be made an example of what it costs us to refuse the poverty the Man forces us to live in, to be a whip against other women to make sure that they strive always to be “respectable” though poor. And this means that part of the work of being a prostitute must also be living with not only the contempt but the envy of other women for having the little bit of money, the little bit of independence, that they don’t have.

Who among us, as Black women, is above prostitution? Racism — our being forced as Black women always to have the least money, the least possibility of getting a job, the least access to school, the worst housing, and the first “opportunity” to be fired, fined, or jailed — already means that all Black women are suspected of being or expected to be prostitutes anyway! In a sweep arrest — when women who are just walking down the street can be arrested as prostitutes — who gets swept up first? It’s always open season on Black women.

The terrorism that is practiced by the Man and by individual men against prostitute women is a terror we all know, a terror in the Black community that always falls first and heaviest on Black women. Whether it is the terror of being beaten in the bedroom or in a parked car, on the street or in the jail, or the terror of not being able to find a decent place to live where the police don’t feel free to break down the door, it is terror rooted in our having to be at everyone’s disposal because we don’t have the money to be able to say NO, to

be able to choose where and how we want to live and whom we want to sleep with.

A ghetto is built around prostitutes like the ghetto in which all Black women, in one way or another, are forced to live. It is a ghetto where we are branded, denied our legal rights, and isolated from other women. If we are on welfare, doing the work of taking care of our men and ourselves that all women do, we are branded as cheats, as we are getting something for nothing. If we are lesbians, refusing to sleep with men as a way to have some independence in our lives, we are branded as freaks. It is a ghetto where if we are not dependent on an individual man to protect us — whether it's a husband, a boyfriend, or a pimp — we are considered fair game. It is a ghetto where even if we don't work the streets as prostitutes, we are often forced to sell our sexual services in exchange for rent, for food, for gas and lights, and in exchange for being "left alone" by the police.

For us the ghetto has always been a place of few choices and no security, the place we are all trying to get the money to get out of. It means being at the mercy of butchers who pass themselves off as doctors and deny us any real health care. So that as black women — especially if we're on welfare — we're likely to be sterilized, as if we are prostitutes somehow "guilty" of polluting the environment with our children and our sex. The ghetto is the place where black teenage women, who have the highest unemployment rate of any group in the USA (as high as 60%), are unable to find any other kind of job but prostitution, and where they are being arrested and booked daily in droves as so-called "juvenile offenders." It is the place where increasingly Black women who are struggling against tuition and cutbacks in the colleges and universities are forced to supplement their income by prostitution in order to stay in school. It is the place where Black women who are no US citizens, who came to this country because they had no money back home and who are increasingly being fired from their low-paying jobs here, are forced to be on the run, to make a living by prostitution, or be deported. The ghetto is the place where we are forced to be anonymous, whether we take names to use "in the game" or not, because being Black women we're

not supposed to have any past, present, or future, any struggle or victory we can call our own.

The ghetto is where Black women are divided against each other according to how we get our money, how much work we can refuse to do and still get by, and according to the money and power the men we're attached to have — just as prostitutes are divided according to whether they work on the street, in the massage parlour, or in a private apartment, whether they service a dozen small customers or only one big one per night. The ghetto means that our “options” as Black women in the labor market run most often from the toilet, to the kitchen, to the sweatshop, to the switchboard, to the typing pool, and that to be a prostitute at this point in time might just seem to be a better deal. And whether we work as prostitutes or not, to get and keep any of these jobs always means always means keeping up appearances of what — as women in this society — we're supposed to be. Above all, the ghetto is wherever Black women are living from hand to mouth in constant crisis — and that is everywhere, whether we work as prostitutes or not.

And it is because all Black women, including prostitutes, are refusing to accept the Man's crisis as the way we are supposed to live that the attack on prostitute women is being stepped up right now. They are looking for ways to turn all of us around, to make us go back, to give up what we've won. Because all of us are using the money, the power that we have already won to refuse to settle for any less and demand more. Just as Black women who get welfare — which is the first wage women have won in this country for the work we do in our homes — are resisting the welfare cuts and demanding more money, everywhere we are refusing to take only what the Man dictates we should have. We are refusing to settle for the sweatshop just because the Man tells us it's a “respectable” job: “respectable” or not, we demand cash money. We are refusing all the cuts, refusing to be pushed out of school, refusing to live only on welfare or unemployment, refusing the closing of daycare centers and hospitals, refusing to force our children to eat less and go without. More and more we are refusing to be at the disposal of men — whether as lesbians by refusing sex

with men altogether, or as straight women by demanding satisfaction for ourselves in our relationships, or as prostitutes by demanding to be paid for our sexual services. More and more we are refusing to be isolated and divided from other women as if there is something wrong with us for refusing to be poor — as demanding money for our work becomes the rule, not the exception.

The welfare struggle organized by Black women in the sixties and continuing today, like all the struggles by Black women against the Man in whatever form He takes — whether it's the telephone company, the gas company, the health care industry, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, the landlord, the transit authority, or the jip-joint businesses — are a tremendous source of power prostitutes, for all women. Prostitutes are organizing a massive struggle around the world to demand their money: in Ethiopia in 1974, prostitutes began organizing a union to demand a basic rate of pay. In Australia, prostitutes demonstrated in front of the Anglican cathedral. And in June of '75, prostitutes went on strike all throughout France, occupying churches, rejecting the moral hypocrisy of the church just as Black women in this country have rejected its racist hypocrisy. By organizing themselves, by being public in their organizations whenever they can, prostitutes, like Black women, are saying by our actions that we have a story to tell, a story about the struggle we are making to be independent. In their statement in Lyons, the French prostitutes said: "We are women like all women."

The struggle of prostitutes is the same struggle Black women are making. It is the struggle to have the money — which is the power to be independent:

To determine all the conditions of our lives;

To determine whom we want to sleep with;

To determine whether we have children or not and to be able to keep our children;

To satisfy our own needs and to build a life for ourselves.

It is the struggle to be paid for all the work we do as women, including sexual work.

The Black Women for Wages for Housework group joins women throughout the world in saying:

NO to the attack on prostitutes in San Francisco.

NO to the attack on prostitutes in New York.

NO to the attack on prostitutes everywhere.

When prostitutes win, all women win. MONEY FOR PROSTITUTES IS MONEY FOR BLACK WOMEN.

Brooklyn, NY

1977

SUZAN COOKE

*"WE REFERRED TO IT
AS COMING OUT"
RECOLLECTIONS ON TRANS
IDENTITY, STATE VIOLENCE, AND
1960S RADICALISM*

Published below are excerpts from an extensive oral history interview with Suzan Cooke, a trans woman who was active in Bay Area radical left, feminist, and gay liberation groups in the 1960s and 70s. The original interview is long and recounts much of Cooke's life, from her early years in small-town New York State to her participation in Warhol's Factory scene in New York City to her eventual migration to the Bay Area in the late 60s. Rather than focus on Cooke's life as a whole we have selected portions of the interview that shed light on the experience of coming out and living as a trans woman in the midst of the turbulent and vibrant radical movements of the 60s, as well as the trauma of dealing with the legal and social

criminalization of her gender identity. The excerpts below cover a range of topics: the repressive legal and penal apparatus set in place to police gender and sexuality in 60s San Francisco; the relationship between trans prostitution and cuts to social services; the complexities of participating as a trans woman in radical feminism and gay liberation movements; and trans- and homophobia in the Weather Underground and SDS. The portion on policing fills in some of the gaps left by the feminist manifestos printed above, describing how trans women experienced the terror of arrest and violence in jail as part of the state's effort to criminalize their nonconformity. Although Cooke does not discuss prostitution very much, she does talk about the fact that street prostitution was the major source of income for most trans women in the Tenderloin neighborhood of San Francisco. Connecting the dots, we can conclude that the experience of police harassment and violence in public space due to gender identity and police targeting of trans women as prostitutes were closely linked, and in fact that in the minds of police patrolling the Tenderloin, being trans could be considered synonymous with being a sex worker.

Note: Portions of this oral history have been published in Susan Stryker's *Gay By the Bay: A History of Queer Culture in the San Francisco Bay Area* and Joanne Meyerowitz's *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in America*.

POLICE TARGETING OF QUEER AND TRANS PEOPLE

[In 1967] I got to San Francisco, went directly to the Haight ... and I got arrested the first night I was there for obstructing the sidewalk. I was playing guitar with a bunch of people, and the Tac squad, the famous Tac squad that I was going to get to know a great deal better over the next year that I spent in San Francisco, they were like "You're new here. You're going in tonight. We're going to print you."¹

1 The Tac (or Tactical) Squad was formed as a SWAT-type squadron within the SFPD after the Hunters Point riot of 1967. A small mobile unit, it

Well this was just sort of standard operating procedure, this checking for runaways. They were picking up and taking in and sending home maybe about 50 runaways a day who were coming into San Francisco, into the Haight ... What they would do at that time, they would have a paddy wagon, and they had like two cars, and a driver and two cops would get out and check everybody's IDs ... mostly [they] patrolled the Haight, parts of the Fillmore, another group of the Tac squad patrolled the Mission and Hunters Point, and then another branch patrolled the Tenderloin and North Beach ... They were like, "Well, we usually don't see your type in the Haight." And later on I sort of figured out what they meant. Because you see I thought I was passing perfectly as this sort of androgynous boy.

There were a lot of people who were dressing all of a sudden very androgynously. And the cops in San Francisco were not very model in those days. They were some of the worst cops in the country. Worse than the cops in New York City. Worse, in my opinion, than the cops in Los Angeles, which has this horrible monster reputation. But San Francisco cops were the worst. Not only were they mean and vicious, but they were corrupt. You got arrested, and you could expect that if you had twenty dollars then only three of it would turn up in property. That kind of thing. They were pretty much — well, they pretty much had their minds blown away by the whole hippie influx. All of a sudden there were girls with jeans that zipped up the front. There were girls wearing black leather jackets. There were guys in beads with long hair and waist-shirts and Victorian-type shirts and bell-bottoms with velvet, and some of those kids who became the Cockettes were already running around doing genderfuck drag — and these cops, well, their minds were just gone at this point, already.

[One night] I was coming back from this place, and I was wearing a black leather jacket, boots, jeans, and a turtleneck t-shirt. Semi-longish hair ... Then the good old Tac squad boys came rolling along. And sometimes they would — well, later they pretty much always

focused on quelling political demonstrations and riots and surveilling and arresting residents of "high crime" areas.

would — park a cop car right outside Maud's.² Or near Maud's, as a form of intimidation ... They had the cameras out. Because there was still at this time a "let's keep track of the queers" mentality. This was, though, when everything was all stewing up and stirring up and getting ready to boil over. Stonewall did not happen as an incident without lots and lots of development. Anyway, I got stopped, the cops get out of the car, and it's "Hey baby," something like that, you know? ... "Let's see some ID." "OK." "What's this, a draft card? Come on, we know you're coming out of Maud's. Do you really think we're so stupid as to think that you're a boy?" I go, "Well, I am a boy." And they say, "All right, that's it. You're coming down to the station." They got me to the station and, under brighter lights, they decided that I probably was a boy. But they still called a matron to search me though I don't think I really got searched much at all. I think maybe they had the matron just do a pat-down ... And again I got hauled in for moperly with intent to gawk, obstructing the sidewalk, failure to produce ID, the trivial stuff that they would always charge you with to hold you until the next morning when the judge would kick it out. But this time they added impersonation. And the judge said, "This is what you were wearing?" "Well, judge," I said, "Yes." And then he says, "Enough is enough. I've seen enough of you hippies. I'm just sick of this, and I'm going to order a court order, a bench order that this has to stop."

Now I didn't really get 650.5 off the books, but it meant that cops were going to have to be a lot more accurate in applying it ... A lot of the use of 650.5 was just when you were a little too butch or a little too femme. Your clothing was such in 1967 or 68 that you could harass the hippies on it. So you see the counterculture probably inadvertently helped to move 650.5 from being actively enforced.³

2 Maud's was a popular lesbian bar located in Haight-Ashbury.

3 Ordinance 650.5 criminalized the wearing of "excessive" amounts of "opposite sex" apparel, and was routinely used by the SFPD to arrest gender non-conforming people, in particular trans street prostitutes, but also customers at gay and lesbian bars and clubs.

They had also been picking up women who wore jeans that zipped up the front because before they zipped up the butt. Up until 1967 women did not wear jeans that zipped up the front. They did not wear pea coats ... You were starting to see a lot of stuff in the Haight where the criteria for clothing wasn't which side the buttons were on but whether it looked cool, fit, and was free.

PROSTITUTION AND THE WELFARE STATE

The major social support for most of the girls in the Tenderloin was prostitution. Or dealing, petty theft, welfare. The programs did help, but as soon as these programs really started helping Nixon was elected in 1968. And one of the first things he did was to start tearing down the war on poverty. He cut out a lot of programs that helped not only trans folks, but a lot of other people at the bottom end of the social spectrum that kept them from, helped them avoid, being criminals. There was just a ripping away of things that had sort of grudgingly been made available not just to trans, but also all sorts of programs ... In those days, if you were a tranny prostitute, you were not a call girl. You were a street-walker.

TRANSITIONING IN THE 60S

While I had been in jail I had made contact with the queens. I got stopped and harassed a few more other times in the process of 1968, and so I had insisted on being thrown into the queen's tank after the rapes, and that's where I started really meeting the queens – who were just transitioning into being trannies, a lot of them, right about this time. I guess the Center for Special Problems had started handing out hormones and the consciousness was there, because in 1966 it had become part of what was going on in America, and wasn't so strange.

Like I said, I had been meeting these queens in the tank, and they were just at that time transitioning from being hair fairies to being

trans in the city jail. And all in response to the 1966 announcements.⁴ Because prior to that people were content to be hair fairies, they were content to be drag queens, even if it wasn't a very good life ... [By 1969] there was just a lot of street life going on and it was confronting the police, they were losing their grip over the harassment of it all, because people were bringing lawsuits and the like.

TRANS WOMEN AND RADICAL FEMINISM

Well, like I said, here I am, this Berkeley chick, this radical feminist who's coming in getting involved with the gay and lesbian movement, and here they are, saying "If you're transsexual, if you're a real transsexual, then what your goal should be is to get the surgery, if you must work you should work at a traditional woman's job, but that your real goal should be to get married and have a husband, and maybe adopt children, and settle down in suburbia, and never ever ever tell anybody about you."⁵

I just did not interact too well with those people who were into the stereotypical feminine roles because I was in Berkeley, and I was part of this communal thing, and I was part of the radical movement ... They were essentially cranking out girls that were learning ten-key, and were learning typing, and learning file clerk, and those sorts of things, and were actually getting their very first jobs through the war on poverty. So I was on welfare, and I didn't really connect with this group ... Here I am in Berkeley, with feminism, being flooded with Feminism 101, 110, and courses in Advanced Feminism, and they're trying to break me into total femininity, total womanhood. The roles,

4 Probably a reference to Dr. Harry Benjamin's publication in 1966 of *The Transsexual Phenomenon* and formation of the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association (HBIGDA), which advocated for the recognition of transsexuality as a mental health issue by the medical and psychiatric professions.

5 Clark is referring to a group of trans women who worked with SFPD community relations officer Elliot Blackstone to improve relations between the police and trans people. Clark is critical of their attitude toward feminism and their embrace of traditional gender roles.

and the very stereotypical ghettoized sorts of employment. I'm surprised they didn't have me going out applying for hair school — which was, by the way, one of the things that got funded for trannies through the EOC.

...

I had sort of gone — there was also this Gay Women's Liberation — and I had gone to a couple of things. I had been told that I really didn't belong there ... On the other hand, while I was told that I didn't belong there by some women who were one part of one group, I was friends with other women who were in the group. So, they said "Here, kid, you're going to need this" — and they handed me *Sexual Politics*, and they handed me *The Second Sex*, and they handed me *Feminine Mystique*, handed me Shulamith Firestone — they handed me all these books and gave me a reading list and said basically read and call us in a year or two.

...

DOB was being inundated with the new lesbians, the lesbian feminists.⁶ If you have read Feinberg's book — at one point Jess goes to a bar, and it's all like these women look all the same, and there's no place for the old time butches, and a femme comes up to her and says "Jess, what's happening? It's all gone."⁷ Well, this is pretty much what was happening. If you were a tranny you got attacked for being too feminine — and if you weren't too feminine you were accused

6 DOB stands for Daughters of Bilitis, often considered the first lesbian rights organization in the United States. Founded in San Francisco in 1955, the group was originally a social club for lesbians. It became more activist-oriented and inflected with feminist politics in the 1960s. Members' views on the inclusion of trans women were divided, and this conflict came to a head when trans member Beth Eliot was ousted in 1969, causing some members to leave the organization.

7 This is a reference to a scene from Leslie Feinberg's influential novel *Stone Butch Blues*, a story about a working class lesbian from Buffalo, New York who becomes involved in the city's lesbian bar culture and later transitions to living as a man.

of playing out the male role in the women's community. So you were damned if you did and damned if you didn't ... That was a line of thinking that you simply couldn't defeat. There was no point in debating it, you just couldn't win.

And you know trans theory came into direct conflict with feminist theory at that point. Because trans theory said that we were identified as being feminine, or just as being women, because of something within us, not something that we learned. When feminism took over and started saying that it was all learned behavior, that we should be giving our little boys dolls and our little girls — well, not guns, but trucks, because nobody was supposed to have guns — and they will learn to be more similar. And that only works up to an extent. And if it works too well I bet you'll be raising a lot of tranny kids! Which I was going to hope for at the time, but which proved to be too much to hope for.

GAY LIBERATION

In the fall of 1969 was when they had this first West Coast Gay Liberation Conference in Berkeley, that I had sort of mentioned earlier. It was a real gathering of the tribe. And I had always in my mind made a connection between the trans community and the gay and lesbian community. Not necessarily the same, of course, but queer oppression has always struck me as queer oppression. A lot of times gay people who look really straight and act really straight don't get any of the oppression. It's the too-butcht woman or the butcht-femme couple, it's the queens and the trannies that suffer the oppression, and they catch shit more for gender than for who they sleep with ... The whole separatism of the gay and lesbian was something that started a little bit later. At first it was all that we were all working together, all queers in the same boat. That was very much a part of the second wave, too.

...

We referred to it as coming out. This was the language of sexual liberation, we didn't use psychspeak — that's what I call it — our language was the language of the queers and queens. One of the first persons to use the newspeak was Virginia Prince.⁸ I mean, she wanted people to ... distinguish the heterosexual transvestite from the queen, so she came up with words like “femophilia” and stuff like “cross-dressing” instead of transvestism ... The language at that point [in 1969] was the language of the queens. A lot of “Hey, Mary! Hey, girlfriend! What's the T? What's the beads?” That sort of thing ... That's part of why I had trouble seeing any vast separation between trans and queens. I mean, to me, queens were just sisters who didn't get whittled on downstairs. God only knows that most of the queens have their own tits and are on hormones so how the hell do you distinguish, really? They didn't play with sharp objects around their genitalia, that's all.

PURGED

I got purged from the radical left when SDS transitioned into Weather. All of us were thinking we were very Red Guard, and were only just realizing what utter hell the Red Guards were actually making of China. I got called to a meeting and told that I was very bourgeois for being involved in the feminist movement, and the gay liberation movement, and that anything I was doing as far as being Suzy was a manifestation of bourgeois values, diverting my energies from the revolution. Plus, I was bringing undue attention to myself due to my medical needs, and because I was becoming increasingly unwilling to participate in riots — well, I was simply no longer welcome. The reason I didn't want to participate in riots was basically that I didn't want to get raped, and I was unsure about how I would be treated in jail as a tranny.

⁸ Prince was a transgender activist and one of the first people to use the term transgender. She started *Transvestia* magazine and founded the Society for the Second Self, an organization for what she termed “heterosexual crossdressers,” in 1976.

I was brought before the cadre ... It was already decided when I was told "Come to the meeting, comrade." It was like that — Come to the meeting. Get in the back of the car. There were people on either side of me. I tell you, I was actually kind of scared. I was scared that I was going to be killed ... The way that this went down was that I just got fucking denounced. And a few months later I had pretty much disappeared.

REVIEWS

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BOOK REVIEW

NORMAL LIFE: ADMINISTRATIVE
VIOLENCE, CRITICAL TRANS
POLITICS, AND THE LIMITS OF THE
LAW BY DEAN SPADE (SOUTH END
PRESS, 2011)

Dean Spade presents *Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of the Law* as an intervention at a critical moment in the articulation of an autonomous trans political practice. In 2012, trans political formations risk repeating the strategies and pitfalls of mainstream gay and lesbian rights organizations that have sought inclusion in a class protected by “hate crimes” legislation and protection from “discrimination” including discrimination constituted by exclusion from state-sanctioned marriage and the military. According to *Normal Life* these are wrong-headed goals first, because they don’t work to provide the protections their proponents claim they provide. Employment

discrimination and hate-bias have been defined in such a way that they are very difficult to prove and hate-crime and anti-discrimination laws have not succeeded in deterring interpersonal violence or employment discrimination. Second, these strategies direct both resources and a veneer of ethical legitimacy toward the expansion of a state punishment apparatus that targets trans and GLQ people disproportionately and the heteropatriarchal and racist-imperialist institutions of marriage and the military.

Given the absolute inefficacy of these strategies and their role in perpetuating racialized and gendered state violence, *Normal Life* explains organizations like the HRC and GLAAD's concentration on these strategies by noting how they fit into a 30-year-old process of the "non-profitization" of activism that covers up the immense rise in racialized and gendered rates of imprisonment, wealth inequity, the dismantling of the social safety net and the demise of labor unionism and radical activism. This process has been enacted by a class of college-educated and disproportionately white non-profit employees who are deferential to their wealthy patrons and prioritize short-term "band-aid" projects that give the illusion that something is being done to address social inequity while not agitating for structural change and indeed casting those who do demand such change as impractical. In resistance to this window dressing non-solution, *Normal Life* proposes a trans politics that decenters legal work, builds leadership from the constituencies of the organizations, de-professionalizes these positions and collectivizes skills. These kinds of political projects will note the structural connections between trans resistance and projects to abolish prisons, end immigration enforcement, and redistribute wealth through taxation and funding social programs. *Normal Life* observes that the interconnectedness of these struggles lies in the way in which race, immigration status, and gender are used as administrative categories to form population groupings of people that ground state policies that support the wellness and wealth of Anglo, male, and cis people and the unemployment, imprisonment, and sickness of communities of color, women, and trans people through the rapid growth in the

production of prisons, the militarization of the U.S.-Mexico border, the dismantling of social programs, and the state's collusion with capitalist interests. Substantial change in the position of racialized populations, women and trans people will require the dismantling of these interlocked systems.

Normal Life provides a succinct and insightful account of the way in which identities that grounded the liberation politics of the late sixties have been de-toothed and whitewashed by the non-profit cooptation of struggle, and a convincing and clear picture of how movements can retake the histories of struggle in the name of alliances and direct actions that center the needs of those made most vulnerable by capitalist white supremacist hetero-patriarchy. I have two points that I would ask Dean Spade to consider. First, the text routinely contrasts the mainstream establishment gay nonprofit-industrial complex with an emergent radical trans and queer politics. This historical framing is inadequate. Both radical and conservative tendencies in gay, lesbian, queer and trans political and social circles have always existed in uneasy relation to one another. Radical politics have not always correlated with trans or queer identities and, likewise, conservative politics have not correlated with lesbian and gay identity. For instance, a group of white trans women called COG (Conversion Our Goal) formed in San Francisco in the 1960s to aid police chief Elliot Blackstone in formulating SFPD community policing policies effectively legitimizing the transphobic, racist, and sexist SFPD in the wake of community resistance. Wealthy gay and trans people have always used the security that money provides in a capitalist society to lessen their exposure to violence. Rather than understanding radical politics in resistance to non-profits, we should understand the centering of marriage equality and other class and race-blind gay rights projects as perfectly logical extensions of the tradition of gay, lesbian, queer and trans efforts to assimilate and access the protections that assimilation provides. Likewise, there have always been lesbian, trans, queer, and gay people involved in resisting capitalism, imperialism, white supremacy and patriarchy. Current radical struggles like those that Spade promotes represent

the extension of these struggles. Sylvia Rivera had solidarity with the Young Lords, and the Black Panther Party was in dialogue with the Gay Liberation Front. These have been and are one struggle and the absolute antagonism between this history of radical resistance and the interests of rich queers is an old and predictable fissure that shouldn't surprise or worry us anymore. GLAAD and HRC are irrelevant. The most pernicious function they can play is to serve as straw men that comfort queers and trans people who can limit their political engagement to critique of these organizations' conservative agendas and feel radical and vindicated. Redraw the lines of dialogue.

This leads to my second point. *Normal Life's* promotion of wealth redistribution seems to negate any revolutionary politic.¹ Here too, the problem is one of historical interpretation. When Spade characterizes "the political upheaval of the 1960's and 1970's, [as] strong social justice movements' [voicing] demands for redistribution and transformation [that] gained visibility and [then] were systematically attacked by COINTELPRO" he forgets that these social justice movements had no faith in the ability of the state to "redistribute" resources (56). Rather, these movements armed themselves for revolution and developed community structures to meet their own needs for food, education and protection from the police. Today, once we're freed of dialogue with conservative groups and the political ties that bind such dialogue: what is to be done? How will we begin to voice an unapologetic and menacing antagonism to the current state of things under capitalism and ready ourselves for the practical struggles that are even now making themselves visible in the streets of the world's cities? This is where the dialogue should be: with critical trans politics as a component of revolutionary political formations that see the abolition of prisons, borders, patriarchy and white supremacy as the real work of ending capitalism.

¹ See the W.&.T.C.H. piece in this issue for a critique of wealth redistribution.

