Radical Sense
Isolation Reader Volume 7

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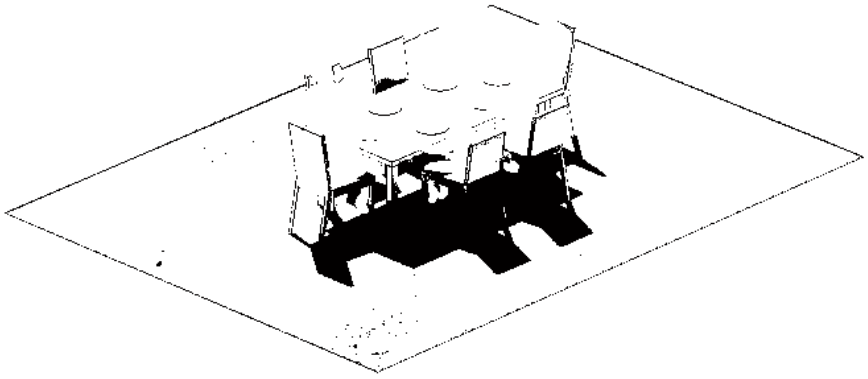
TO THE COP WHO READ MY TEXT MESSAGES:

I STILL REMEMBER YR FACE. WHITE AND PINK AND SOFT W GREY HAIR. U COULD BE MY POETRY PROFESSOR, MY SUGAR DADDY IF U HELD ANOTHER SYMBOL OF POWER BETWEEN YR THICK HANDS KNUCKLES THROBBING ADRENALIN PUMPING WITH THE EXCITEMENT OF FINALLY CATCHING ME. IF U HELD A BOOK OR YR COCK INSTEAD OF A BATON CUMMING AFTER ME. I LUST AFTER THE MOMENT I CAN BECOME INVISIBLE AND PLUNGE A SCREWDRIVER INTO YR EYEBALL THE ONE ON THE LEFT THAT GLIMPSED ME FROM AROUND THE CORNER OF THE BUILDING WHOSE SHADE I SPRINTED UNDER A SCREWDRIVER WITH A FLAT HEAD TO SCRAPE AGAINST THE INSIDE OF YR SKULL WHILE YR LEFT EYE WATCHES FROM A CRACK IN THE SIDEWALK.

I HAVE TOOLS TOO.

Remarks on Gender

September 2, 2014



I. Patriarchy and/or Capitalism: Reopening the Debate

It is standard to find references to “patriarchy” and “patriarchal relations” in feminist texts, tracts, or documents. [1] Patriarchy is often used to show how gender oppression and inequality are not sporadic or exceptional occurrences. On the contrary, these are issues that traverse all of society, and are fundamentally reproduced through mechanisms that cannot be explained at the individual level.

In short, we often use the term patriarchy to underscore that gender oppression is a phenomenon not reducible to interpersonal relations, but rather has a more societal character and consistency. However, things become a bit more complicated if we want to be more precise about what exactly is meant by “patriarchy” and “patriarchal system.” And this move becomes even more complex when we begin to ask about the precise relationship between patriarchy and capitalism.

The Question

For a brief period, from the 1970s to the mid-1980s, the question of the structural relationship between patriarchy and capitalism was the subject of a heated debate among theorists and partisans of a materialist current of thought as well as Marxist-feminists. The fundamental questions which were posed revolved around two axes: 1) is patriarchy an autonomous system in relation to capitalism? 2) is it correct to use the term “patriarchy” to designate gender oppression and inequality?

Although it produced very interesting work, this debate gradually became more and more unfashionable. This occurred in tandem with the retreat of critiques of capitalism, while other currents of feminist thought asserted themselves. These new modes of thought often did not go beyond the liberal horizon of the times – they sometimes essentialized relations between men and women and de-historicized gender, or they avoided questions of capitalism and class – but at the same time, they developed useful concepts for the deconstruction of gender (such as queer theory in the 1990s).

Of course, to go out of fashion does not necessarily mean to disappear. In the past decade, many feminist theorists have continued to work on these questions, at the risk of seeming out of touch with the times, vestiges of a tedious past. They were certainly right to persevere: during a time of economic and social crisis, we are currently bringing partial but much-needed attention back to the structural relation between gender oppression and capitalism.

Over these last few years, empirical analyses or descriptions of phenomena or specific questions have certainly not been lacking, such as the feminization of work; the impact of neoliberal politics on women’s living and workplace conditions; the intersection of gender, racial, and class oppression; or the relation between the different constructions of sexual identity and capitalist regimes of accumulation. However, it is one thing to “describe” a phenomenon or a group of social phenomena, where the link between capitalism and gender oppression is more or less evident. It is another to give a “theoretical” explanation of the reason for this structural relation that can be identified within these phenomena and their mode of functioning. It is therefore crucial to ask if there is an “organizing principle” which explains this link.

In order to be both clear and concise on this point, I will try to summarize the most interesting theses on these matters that have been suggested until now. In the following remarks, I will analyze and question these different theses separately. To uphold a degree of intellectual honesty and to avoid any misunderstandings, I stress that my reconstruction of different points of view is not impartial. My own view is found in the third thesis below.

Three Theses

First Thesis: "Dual or Triple Systems Theory." We can put the original version of this thesis in the following terms: Gender and sexual relations constitute an autonomous system which combines with capitalism and reshapes class relations, while being at the same time modified by capitalism in a process of reciprocal interaction. The most up-to-date version of this theory includes racial relations, also considered as a system of autonomous social relations interconnected with gender and class relations.

Within materialist feminist circles, these reflections are usually associated with the notion that gender and racial relations are systems of oppression as much as relations of exploitation. In general, these theses have an understanding of class relations as defined solely in economic terms. It is only via the interaction with patriarchy and the system of racial domination that they acquire an extra-economic character as well. A variation of this thesis is to see gender relations as a system of ideological and cultural relations derived from older modes of production and social formations, independent of capitalism. These older relations then interact with capitalist social relations, giving the latter their gendered dimension.

Second Thesis: "Indifferent Capitalism." Gender oppression and inequality are the remnants of previous social formations and modes of production, when patriarchy directly organized production and determined a strict sexual division of labor. Capitalism is itself indifferent to gender relations and can overcome them to such a degree that patriarchy as a system has been dissolved in the advanced capitalist countries, while family relations have been restructured in quite radical ways. In sum, capitalism has an essentially opportunistic relation with gender inequality: it utilizes what it finds to be beneficial in existing gender relations, and destroys what becomes an obstacle. This view is articulated in various versions. Some claim that within capitalism women have benefited from a degree of emancipation unknown in other kinds of society, and this would demonstrate that capitalism as such is not a structural obstacle to women's liberation. Others maintain that we should carefully distinguish between the logical and historical levels: logically, capitalism does not specifically need gender inequality, and could get rid of it; historically, things are not so simple.

Third Thesis: The "Unitary Thesis." According to this theory, in capitalist countries, a patriarchal system that is autonomous from capitalism no longer exists. Patriarchal *relations* continue to exist, but without being part of a separate system. To deny that patriarchy is an autonomous system under capitalism is not to deny that gender oppression really exists, permeating both social and interpersonal relations. In other words, this thesis does not reduce every aspect of oppression to simply a mechanistic or direct consequence of capitalism, nor does it seek to offer an explanation solely in economic terms.

In short, unitary theory is not reductionist or economistic, and it does not underestimate the centrality of gender oppression. Proponents of the "unitary theory" disagree with the idea that today patriarchy would be a system of rules and mechanisms that autonomously reproduce

themselves. At the same time, they insist on the need to consider capitalism not as a set of purely economic laws, but rather as a complex and articulated social order, an order that at its core consists of relations of exploitation, domination, and alienation.

From this point of view, the task today is to understand how the dynamic of capital accumulation continues to produce, reproduce, transform, and renew hierarchical and oppressive relations, without expressing these mechanisms in strictly economic or automatic terms.

II. One, Two, or Three Systems?

In 1970, Christine Delphy wrote an article called "The Main Enemy," in which she theorized the existence of a patriarchal mode of production, its relation to, as well as its non-correspondence with, the capitalist mode of production, and the definition of housewives as a class, in the strictly economic sense of the term.

Nine years later, Heidi Hartmann published her own article, "The Unhappy Marriages of Marxism and Feminism," in which she argued for the thesis that patriarchy and capitalism are two autonomous systems, but also historically interconnected. For Hartmann, capitalist laws of accumulation are indifferent to the sex of labor-power, and if there arises a need for capitalism to create hierarchical relations in the division of labor, racism and patriarchy determine the distribution of the hierarchical positions and the specific way these are utilized.

This thesis eventually took on the name of "Dual Systems Theory." In her 1990 book *Theorizing Patriarchy*, Sylvia Walby reformulated the dual systems theory by adding a third, the racial system, and also sought to understand patriarchy as a variable system of social relations composed of six structures: the patriarchal mode of production, patriarchal relations in wage labor and salaried labor, patriarchal relations in the State, male violence, patriarchal relations in the sphere of sexuality, and patriarchal relations in cultural institutions. These six structures reciprocally condition each other while remaining autonomous: they can also be either private or public. More recently, Danièle Kergoat has theorized the "consubstantiality" of patriarchal, race, and class relations; these are three systems of relations based on exploitation and domination which intersect and are of the same substance (exploitation and domination), while being distinct, like the three persons of the Holy Trinity.

This brief survey of authors and essays is only one example of the different ways in which the intersection of the patriarchal system and capitalist system has been theorized, and the ways in which one system is distinguished from the other. There are others, too, but for limits of space I am forced to limit my analysis to these examples, which are among the most clear while remaining the most systematic and complex. As I have already shown, the difficulty with this debate concerns the definition of patriarchy. There is not a uniform definition, but more of a set of propositions, some of which are compatible with each other, while others are contradictory. Since I cannot analyze all of these definitions, I propose, for now, to focus on

the concept of the patriarchal system, understood as a system of relations, both material and cultural, of domination and exploitation of women by men. This is a system with its own logic that is at same time malleable to historical changes, in an ongoing relation with capitalism.

Before analyzing the problems presented by this theoretical approach, we should define exploitation and make some distinctions. From the point of view of class relations, exploitation is defined as a process or mechanism of the expropriation of a surplus produced by a producing class for the benefit of another class. This can happen either through automatic mechanisms such as the wage, or the violent expropriation of the others' labor – this was the case with the corvée, by which the feudal lords constrained the serfs through imposed authority and violent coercion. Capitalist exploitation, in the Marxist sense, is a specific form of exploitation that consists in the extraction of the surplus-value produced by the worker for the benefit of the capitalist. Generally, in order to talk about capitalist exploitation, there must exist generalized commodity production, abstract labor, socially necessary labor time, value, and the wage-form.

I am clearly leaving out other hypotheses, such as those based on the real subsumption of society in its totality, as defended by the workerist and post-workerist traditions. Confronting this view and its consequences for understanding gender relations would take up another article. In loosely defined terms: the extraction of surplus-value for Marx is the secret of capital, in the sense that it constitutes the origin of socially produced wealth and its modes of distribution.

Exploitation as the extraction of surplus-value is not the only form of exploitation within capitalist society: to be simplistic, we can say that an employee in an unproductive sector (in value terms) is also exploited through the extraction of surplus-labor. And the wage-rate, living conditions, and workplace conditions of a shopkeeper can of course be worse than that of a factory worker. In addition, beyond the slightly economistic tendencies of past misunderstandings and debates, it is important to note that from a political point of view, the distinction between productive and unproductive workers (in terms of value or surplus-value production) is practically irrelevant. Strictly speaking, the mechanisms and forms of organization and division of the labor process are much more important.

Let us return now to the dual systems theory and to the problem of patriarchy.

First Problem

If we define patriarchy as a system of exploitation, it logically follows that there is an exploiting group and an exploited group or, better, an expropriating class and an expropriated class. Who makes up these classes? The answers can be: all women and all men, or only some women and some men (in the example cited by Delphy, housewives and the adult male members of their families). If we talk about patriarchy as a system of exploitation in the "public" sphere, the notion can arise in which the State is the exploiter or expropriator. The

“workerist feminists” applied the notion of capitalist exploitation to domestic labor, but according to their view, the true expropriator of domestic labor is capital, which would imply that patriarchy is not in fact an autonomous system of exploitation.

In the case of Delphy’s work, the thesis that housewives are a class and their immediate male family members (in particular their husbands) are the exploiting class is not fully articulated, but also taken to its most far-reaching consequences. In logical terms, the consequence of her position would be that the spouse of a migrant worker belongs to the same social class as the wife of a capitalist: they both produce use-values (in one case care work pure and simple, in the other, the work of “representation” of a certain social status, organizing meetings and receptions, for example) and are both in an exploitative relation of a servile nature, that is to say, working in exchange for the financial security provided by their husbands.

In “The Main Enemy,” Delphy insists that being a member of the patriarchal class is a more important fact than being part of the capitalist class. It would follow that the solidarity between the wife of a capitalist and the wife of the migrant worker must take precedence over the class solidarity between the wife of the migrant worker and the other members of her husband’s class (or, and this is more optimism than anything else, it must take precedence over the class solidarity of the wife of the capitalist and her country club friends). In the end, Delphy’s actual political practice stands in contradiction with the logical consequences of her theory, which makes its analytical limits even more apparent.

Furthermore, if we define men and women (in one version or another) as two classes — one the exploiters, the other the exploited — we inevitably come to the conclusion that there is an irreconcilable antagonism between classes whose interests are in reciprocal contradiction. But, if Delphy is wrong, should we then deny that men profit and take advantage of women’s unpaid work? No, because this would be a symmetrical error, unfortunately made by many Marxists who have taken this reasoning to the opposite extreme. It is clearly better and more convenient to have someone cook you a hot meal in the evening than to have to deal with the dishes yourself after a long day of work. It is quite “natural,” then, that men tend to try and hold on to this privilege. In short, it is undeniable that there are relations of domination and social hierarchy based on gender and that men, including those of lower classes, benefit from them.

However, this should not be taken to mean that there is a class antagonism. We could rather make the following hypothesis: in a capitalist society, the complete or partial “privatization” of care work, that is, its concentration within the family (whatever the type of family, and including single-parent households), the lack of large-scale socialization of this care work, through the state or other forms, all this determines the workload that must be maintained within the private sphere, outside of both the market and institutions. The relations of gender oppression and domination determine the mode and scale in which this workload is to be distributed, giving way to an unequal division: women work more while men work less. But there is no appropriation of a “surplus.”

Is there evidence to the contrary? A simple thought experiment will do. A man would lose nothing, in terms of workload, if the distribution of care work were completely socialized instead of being performed by his wife. In structural terms, there would be no antagonistic or irreconcilable interests. Of course, this does not mean that he is conscious of this problem, as it may well be that he is so integrated into sexist culture that he has developed some severe form of narcissism based on his presumed male superiority, which leads him to naturally oppose any attempts to socialize care work, or the emancipation of his wife. The capitalist, on the other hand, has something to lose in the socialization of the means of production; it is not just about his convictions about the way the world works and his place in it, but also the massive profits he happily expropriates from the workers.

Second Problem

The second problem concerns the fact that those who insist that patriarchal relations today make up an independent system within advanced capitalist societies must face the thorny problem of determining its driving force: why does this system continually reproduce itself? Why does it persist? If it is an independent system, the reason must be internal and not external. Capitalism, for example, is a mode of production and a system of social relations, with an identifiable logic: according to Marx, it is a process of the valorization of value. Certainly, to have identified this process as the driving force or motor of capitalism does not say everything that needs to be said about capitalism: this would be analogous to thinking that the explanation of the anatomy of the heart and its functions would suffice to explain the whole anatomy of the human body. Capitalism is an ensemble of complex processes and relations. However, understanding what its heart is and how it works is a fundamental analytic necessity.

Where patriarchal relations play a direct role in the organization of the relations of production (who produces and how, who appropriates, how the reproduction of these conditions of production is organized), identifying the driving force of the patriarchal system is simpler. This is the case with agrarian societies, for example, where the patriarchal family directly forms the unity of the production with the means of subsistence. Yet this is more complicated in capitalist society, where patriarchal relations do not directly organize production, but play a role in the division of labor, and the family is relegated to the private sphere of reproduction.

Faced with this question, either one agrees with Delphy and other materialist feminists in seeing contemporary patriarchy as a specific mode of production, but would then have to face all the challenges I noted above, especially the intractable problem of who, in this conception, would make up the exploiting and exploited classes; or one simply has to abandon the view that patriarchy is a distinct mode of production, at least in the conventional sense of that term.

A hypothesis that has already been suggested in the past is that patriarchy is an independent ideological system, whose motor resides in the process of the production of signifiers and interpretations of the world. But here, we run into other problems: if ideology is

the way in which we interpret our conditions of existence and our relations to them, a link must exist between ideology and these social conditions of existence; a link that is definitely not mechanistic, or automatic, or anything like that. But it would still be a matter of a certain form of connection, otherwise we would risk having a fetishistic and ahistorical conception of culture and ideology. Now the idea that the patriarchal system is an ideological system that constantly reproduces itself, despite the incredible changes introduced by capitalism in social life and relations of production these last two centuries, is even less convincing. Another hypothesis could be that the motor is psychological, but this also risks falling into a fetishistic and ahistorical conception of the human psyche.

Last Problem

Let us admit for a moment that patriarchy, racial relations, and capitalism are three independent systems, but also intersect and reciprocally reinforce each other. In this case, the question is of knowing the organizing principle and logic of this "holy alliance." In Kergoat's texts, for example, the definition of this relation in consubstantial terms remains a descriptive image, which does not succeed in explaining much. The causes for the intersection between these systems of exploitation and domination remain mysterious, just like with the Holy Trinity!

Despite these problems, the dual or triple systems theories, in their different forms, remain implicit influences in many recent feminist theories. In my opinion, this is because these seem to be the most immediate and intuitive kinds of explanation. In other words, these are explanations that reflect how reality as such is manifested. It is evident that social relations include relations of domination and hierarchy based on gender and race that permeate both the social whole and daily life. The more immediate explanation is that these relations all correspond to specific systems, because this is the way they manifest themselves. However, the most intuitive explanations are not always the most correct.

III. Is It All Capitalism's Fault?

In the last section, I wrote that the conception of patriarchy as an independent system within capitalist society is the most widespread not only among feminist theorists but also activists. This is because it is an interpretation that reflects reality in the way this appears to us. To speak of modes of appearance does not mean to describe an illusory phenomenon that is to be put in opposition to reality with a capital R. "Appearance" here refers to the specific way in which the relations of alienation and domination produced and reproduced by capital are experienced by people because of their very same logic. As Daniel Bensaïd has remarked, the critique of political economy is first and foremost a critique of economic fetishism and ideology, which forces us to think in the shadow of capital. [2] This is not a matter of "false consciousness," but of a mode of experience determined by capital itself: the fragmentation

of our perception of reality. This is a complex discourse, but in order to have an idea of what is to be understood by “a mode of experience determined by capital,” we have to refer, for example, to the section in the first volume of Marx’s *Capital* on commodity fetishism.

Since our perception is fragmentary and those who have developed an awareness of gender inequality usually experience and perceive it as determined by a logic that is different and separate from that of capital, any denial of the view that patriarchy is an independent system within capitalism inevitably encounters rejections and doubts.

The Transformation of the Family

The most common objection has to do with the historic dimension: how can one affirm that patriarchy is not an independent system when the oppression of women existed before capitalist society? Now, to say that within capitalist society women’s oppression and power relations are a necessary consequence of capitalism, and that these phenomena do not have their own independent and proper logic, is not to support the absurd argument that holds that gender oppression originates with capitalism. What is being defended here is a different argument, tied to the particular characteristics of capitalism. Societies in which capitalism has supplanted the preceding mode of production are characterized by a profound and radical transformation of the family.

The transformation of the family is above all the result of the expropriation of the land, or primitive accumulation, which separated large portions of the population from their means of production and subsistence (the land), provoking on the one hand the disintegration of the patriarchal peasant family, and on the other a historically unprecedented process of urbanization. The result was that the family no longer represented the unity of production with a specific productive role, generally organized through the specific patriarchal relations that prevailed in the previous agrarian society.

This process began at different moments and took different forms in all the countries in which capitalist relations took hold. With the separation between the family and the site of production, the relation between production and reproduction (in the sense of biological, generational, and social reproduction) was also radically transformed.

And here is the point: although the relations of gender domination were maintained, they have, on the other hand, ceased being an independent system following an autonomous logic because of this transformation of the family from a unit of production to a private place outside commodity production and the market. Moreover, these relations of domination have undergone a significant transformation.

For example, one of these transformations is tied to a direct link between sexual orientation, reified into an identity, and gender (we can consult on this matter the work of Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*, works by Judith Butler, or, more recently, the writings of Kevin Floyd and

Rosemary Hennessy). While it is certainly true that gender oppression existed well before the advent of capitalism, this does not mean that the forms it takes remained the same afterwards.

Moreover, one could question the idea that gender oppression is a transhistorical fact, an idea defended forcefully by a number of “second wave” feminists but which must be revised in light of recent anthropological research. In fact, not only has the oppression of women not always existed, but it did not exist in various classless societies, where gender oppression was introduced only with colonialism. In order to have a better idea of the link between the class relation and the power relations between genders, we can take the example of slavery in the United States.

Race and Class

In her book *Women, Race, and Class*, Angela Davis highlights the way in which the destruction of the family and all the relations of kinship between African-American slaves, as well as the specific form of slave labor, gave rise to a substantial overturning of gendered power relations between slaves. This does not mean that the female slaves did not undergo a specific form of oppression as women, quite the opposite: they severely suffered, but at the hands of the white slaveowners, not their fellow slaves. In other words, the persistence and articulation of gender relations are linked in complex ways to social conditions, class relations, and relations of production and reproduction. An abstract and transhistorical vision of women’s oppression does not allow for an understanding of these articulations and differences, and therefore cannot explain them.

Persistence of the Domestic Mode of Production

As I wrote above, in the countries where the capitalist mode of production supplanted the preceding mode of production, radically transforming the family and its role, the relations of power between genders ceased to form an independent system. This does not hold for countries with structures of production that are not entirely transformed and that remain on the periphery of the global capitalist economy. Claude Meillassoux documented on this point the persistence of a “domestic mode of production” in many African countries, in which the process of proletarianization (that is, the separation of the peasantry from the land) remained quite limited. [3]

However, even in places where the domestic mode of production remains in place, it is subjected to intense pressure by the country’s integration into the world capitalist system. The effects of colonialism, imperialism, the pillaging of natural resources on the part of the advanced capitalist countries, the objective pressures of the global market economy, etc., have a significant impact on the social and familial relations which organize the production and distribution of goods, often exacerbating the exploitation of women and gender violence.

A Contradictory Totality

Let's return now to the advanced capitalist countries. A classic objection to the thesis that patriarchy does not constitute an independent system is that Marxist feminism is fundamentally reductionist. In other words, it tries to reduce the plural complexity of society to mere economic laws without correctly grasping the irreducibility of power relations. This objection would make sense under two conditions: the first would be that capitalism is understood only as a strictly economic process of the extraction of surplus-value, and thus as an ensemble of economic rules that determines this process; the second would be to understand power relations as the mechanistic and automatic result of the process of surplus-value extraction. The truth is that this type of reductionism does not correspond in the least to the richness and complexity of Marx's thought, and even less to the extraordinary sophistication of a large part of the Marxist theoretical tradition.

As I already said above, to try to explain what capitalist society is only in terms of surplus-value extraction is like trying to explain the anatomy of the human body by explaining only how the heart works.

Capitalism is a versatile, contradictory totality, continually in movement, with relations of exploitation and alienation that are constantly in a process of transformation. Even though Marx attributed an apparently automatic character to the valorization of value in the first volume of *Capital* – a process in which value is the real subject, while capitalists and individuals are reduced to the role of emissaries or bearers of a structure – "Monsieur le Capital" does not really exist, except as a logical category. It is not until the third volume of *Capital* that this becomes clear. Capitalism is not a Moloch, a hidden god, a puppeteer or a machine: it is a living totality of social relations, in which class relations trace lines of demarcation and impose constraints that affect all other forms of relations. Among these, we also find power relations connected to gender, sexual orientation, race, nationality, and religion, and all are put into the service of the accumulation of capital and its reproduction, but often in varying, unpredictable, and contradictory ways.

Is Capitalism "Indifferent" to the Oppression of Women?

A widely held opinion among Marxist theorists is to consider gender oppression as unnecessary to capitalism. This is not to say that capitalism doesn't exploit or profit from the forms of gender inequality produced by previous social configurations; it is, however, a contingent and opportunistic relationship. In actuality, capitalism does not really depend on gender oppression, and women have attained an unprecedented level of freedom and emancipation under capitalism in comparison to other historical epochs. In short, there is not an antagonistic relationship between capitalism and the project of women's liberation.

This point of view has been favorably received among Marxist theorists from many different schools of thought, so it is worthwhile to analyze it. We can use an article written by Ellen Meiksins Wood as a starting point. In her article "Capitalism and Human Emancipation: Race, Gender, and Democracy," Wood begins by explaining the fundamental differences between capitalism and the modes of production that preceded it. Capitalism has no intrinsic

ties to particular identities, inequalities, or extra-economic, political, or juridical differences. Quite the opposite: the extraction of surplus-value takes place in the relations between formally free and equal individuals, without any differences in juridical or political status. Capitalism is thus not structurally disposed to the creation of gender inequalities, and it even has a natural tendency to put such differences into question and dilute racial and gender identities.

An Internal or an Opportunistic Relationship?

Capitalist development also created the social conditions conducive to the critique of these inequalities, and to the facilitation of social pressure against them. This has no precedent in previous historical epochs; one only needs to think back to Greco-Roman literature in which abolitionist positions are practically absent, despite the universal presence of slavery for productive ends.

At the same time, capitalism tends to use pre-existing differences inherited from previous societies in an opportunistic manner. For example, gender and racial difference are utilized in order to create hierarchies between the more and less advantaged sectors of the exploited class. These hierarchies are passed off as consequences of natural differences, masking their real nature, namely that they are products of the logic of capitalist competition.

This should not be understood as a conscious plan that capitalism follows, but as the convergence of a series of practices and policies which follow from the fact that gender and racial equalities are advantageous from the point of view of the capitalists. Capitalism does indeed instrumentalize gender oppression for its own ends, but it would be able to survive just fine without it. On the other hand, capitalism would not be able to exist without class exploitation.

It is crucial to note that the framework of Wood's article is a series of basic political questions about the type of extra-economic gains and benefits that can – and cannot – be obtained in a capitalist society. Her starting point is the shift in attention of social struggles from the economic terrain to non-economic questions (racial and gender emancipation, peace, environmental health, citizenship). And there's the rub. I mention Wood's framework because on the one hand, her article is based on a sharp separation between the logical structure of capital and its historical dimensions; but, on the other hand, it ends up conflating these very same levels, thus reproducing a classic confusion that is unfortunately common in the work of many Marxist theorists who would subscribe to the theses of Wood's article.

To put this point more clearly: as soon as we accept this distinction between the logical structure of capital and its historical dimensions, we can then accept the idea that the extraction of surplus-value takes place within the framework of relations between formally free and equal individuals without presupposing differences in juridical and political status.

But we can do this only at a very high level of abstraction–that is to say, at the level of the logical structure. From the point of view of concrete history, things change radically. Let's take this issue point by point.

1. Let's start from a fact: a capitalist social formation devoid of gender oppression (in its various forms) has never existed. That capitalism was limited to the use of pre-existing inequalities in this process remains debatable: imperialism and colonialism contributed to the introduction of gender hierarchies in societies where they did not exist before, or existed in a much more nuanced way. The process of capitalist accumulation was accompanied by the equally important expropriation of women from different forms of property to which they had access, and professions that they had been able to hold throughout the High Middle Ages; the alternation of processes of the feminization and defeminization of labor contributed to the continual reconfiguration of family relations, creating new forms of oppression based on gender. The advent of the reification of gender identity starting from the end of the 19th century contributed to the reinforcement of a heteronormative matrix that had oppressive consequences for women, but not only them.

Other examples could be cited. To say that women obtained formal freedoms and political rights, until then unimaginable, only under capitalism, because this system had created the social conditions allowing for this process of emancipation, is an argument of questionable validity. One could, in fact, say the exact same thing for the working class as a whole: it is only within capitalism that the conditions were created allowing for the political emancipation of the subaltern strata and that this class became a subject capable of attaining important democratic victories. So what? Would this demonstrate that capitalism could easily do without the exploitation of the working class? I don't think so. It is better to drop the reference to what women have or have not obtained: if women have obtained something, it is both because they have struggled for it, and because with capitalism, the social conditions have been favorable to the birth of mass social movements and modern politics. But this is true for the working class as well.

2. It is important to distinguish what is functional to capitalism and what is a necessary consequence of it. The two concepts are different. It is perhaps difficult to show at a high level of abstraction that gender oppression is essential to the inner workings of capitalism. It is true that capitalist competition continually creates differences and inequalities, but these inequalities, from an abstract point of view, are not necessarily gender-related. If we were to think of capitalism as "pure," that is, analyze it on the basis of its essential mechanisms, then maybe Wood would be right. However, this does not prove that capitalism would not necessarily produce, as a result of its concrete functioning, the constant reproduction of gender oppression, often under diverse forms.

3. Lastly, we must return to the distinction between the logical level and the historical level. What is possible from logical viewpoint and what happens at the level of historical processes are two profoundly different things. Capitalism always exists in concrete social formations that each have their own specific history. As I have already said, these social formations are

characterized by the constant and pervasive presence of gender oppression. Let us suppose, as a thought experiment, that these hierarchies in the division of labor were based upon other forms of inequality (large and small, old and young, fat and skinny, those who speak an Indo-European language versus those who speak other languages, etc.). Let's suppose as well that pregnancy and birth are completely mechanized and that the whole sphere of emotional relationships can be commodified and managed by private services… briefly, let's suppose all of this. Is this a plausible vision from a historical point of view? Can gender oppression be so easily replaced by other types of hierarchical relations, which would appear as natural and be as deeply rooted in the psyche? These scenarios seem legitimately doubtful.

Towards Concrete Historical Analysis

To conclude: in order to respond to the question of whether it is possible for women's emancipation and liberation to be attained under the capitalist mode of production, we must look for the answer at the level of concrete historical analysis, not at the level of a highly abstract analysis of capital.

It is indeed here where we find not only Wood's misstep, but also the error of many Marxist theorists who remain fiercely attached to the idea of a hierarchy between (principal) exploitation and (secondary) oppression. If we want to pose the political aspect of this question and also be in a position to respond to it, we must have a historical conception of what capitalism is today and what it has been historically. This is one of the points of departure for a Marxist feminism where the notion of social reproduction occupies a central role.

IV. Rethinking Capital, Rethinking Gender

In the previous section, I tried to clarify the limits of the "fragmented thought" which presents the different types of oppression and domination as each being connected to an autonomous system, without understanding their intrinsic unity. Moreover, I criticized the reading of the relation between capital and gender oppression that relies on what I called an "indifferent capitalism." It is time now to approach "unitary theory," as well as the concept of "social reproduction."

Reconceptualizing Capital

The dualist positions often begin from the idea that the Marxist critique of political economy only analyzes the economic laws of capitalism, through solely economic categories. This approach would be inadequate to understand such complex phenomena as the multiplicity of power relations, or the discursive practices that constitute us as subjects. This is why alternative epistemological approaches are deemed to be more capable of seeing causes that lie outside the domain of economics, and more adequate for understanding the specificity and irreducible nature of these social relations.

This position is shared across a broad spectrum of feminist theorists. Some of them have suggested that we need a “marriage” or eclectic combination between different types of critical analyses, some devoted to the “pure” economic laws of capitalist accumulation, and others addressing other forms of social relations. On the other hand, other theorists have embraced what is called the “linguistic turn” in feminist theory, which separates the critique of gender oppression from the critique of capitalism. In both cases, there is the common assumption that “pure economic laws” exist, independent from specific relations of domination and alienation. It is precisely this assumption that must be critically questioned. For reasons of space, I will limit myself to highlighting two aspects of the Marxian critique of political economy.

1. A relation of exploitation always implies a relation of domination and alienation.

These three aspects are never truly separated in the Marxian critique of political economy. The worker is before everything else a living and thinking body and is submitted to specific forms of discipline that remold her. As Marx writes, the productive process “produces” the worker to the same extent that it reproduces the work-capitalist relation. Since each process of production is always concrete – that is to say, characterized by aspects that are historically and geographically determined – it is possible to conceive of each productive process as being linked to a disciplinary process, which partially constructs the type of subject the worker becomes.

We can say the same thing for the consumption of commodities: as Kevin Floyd has shown in his analysis of the formation of sexual identity, commodity consumption entails a disciplinary aspect and participates in the reification of sexual identity. Consumption thus takes part in the process of subject-formation.

2. For Marx, production and reproduction form an indivisible unity.

In other words, while they are distinct and separate and have specific characteristics, production and reproduction are necessarily combined as concrete moments of an articulated totality. Reproduction is understood here as the process of the reproduction of a society as a whole, or in Althusserian terms, the reproduction of the conditions of production: education, the culture industry, the Church, the police, the army, the healthcare system, science, gender discourses, consumption habits… all these aspects play a crucial role in the reproduction of specific relations of production. Althusser noted in “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” that without the reproduction of the conditions of production, a social formation would not be able to hold together for even one year.

It is essential, however, not to understand the relation between production and reproduction in a mechanistic or deterministic manner. In fact, if Marx understands capitalist society as a totality, he nonetheless does not understand it as an “*expressive*” totality: put otherwise,

there is no automatic or direct “reflection” between the different moments of this totality (art, culture, economic structure, etc.), or between one particular moment and the totality as a whole.

At the same time, an analysis of capitalism that does not understand this unity between production and reproduction will fall back into a vulgar materialism or economism, and Marx does not make this mistake. Beyond his political writings, *Capital* itself is proof of this, for example in the sections on the struggle over the working day or on primitive accumulation. In these passages, one can clearly see that coercion, the active intervention of the State, and class struggle are in fact constitutive components of a relation of exploitation that is not determined by purely economic or mechanical laws.

These observations allow us to highlight how this idea that Marx conceives capitalism solely in economic terms is untenable. This is not to say that there have not been reductionist or vulgar materialist tendencies within the Marxist tradition. This means, however, that these tendencies relied on a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of the Marxian critique of political economy and a fetishization of economic laws, the latter conceived as static things or as abstract structures rather than as forms of activity or human relations.

An alternative, opposed assumption to the separation between the purely economic laws of capitalism and other systems of domination amounts to conceiving the unity between production and reproduction as a direct identity. This point of view characterizes a section of Marxist-feminist thought, in particular the workerist tradition, which insisted on seeing reproductive labor as directly productive of surplus-value, and thus governed by the same laws.

Again, for reasons of space, I will limit myself to the observation that such a point of view returns to a form of reductionism, which obscures the difference between various social relations and does not help us understand the specific characteristics of diverse relations of domination that are not only constantly reproduced but also transformed within each capitalist social formation. Moreover, it does not help us to analyze the specific way in which certain relations of power are located outside of the labor market, while still being indirectly influenced by this market: for example, through different forms of commodity consumption, or through the objective constraints that wage labor (or its equivalent, unemployment) imposes on personal life and interpersonal relationships.

To conclude, I propose to rethink the Marxian critique of capitalism as a critique of an articulated and contradictory totality of relations of exploitation, domination, and alienation.

Social Reproduction and “Unitary Theory”

In light of this methodological clarification, we now have to understand what is meant by “social reproduction” within what is generally called “unitary theory.” The term social reproduction, in the Marxist tradition, usually indicates the process of reproduction of a

society in its totality, as already mentioned. In the feminist Marxist tradition, however, social reproduction means something more precise: the maintenance and reproduction of life, at the daily or generational level. In this context, social reproduction designates the way in which the physical, emotional, and mental labor necessary for the production of the population is socially organized: for example, food preparation, youth education, care for the elderly and the sick, as well as questions of housing and all the way to questions of sexuality…

The concept of social reproduction has the advantage of enlarging our vision of what was previously called domestic labor, and which a large part of Marxist-feminism has focused on. In fact, social reproduction includes within its concept a series of social practices and types of labor that go well beyond only domestic labor. It also makes it possible to extend analysis outside the walls of the home, since the labor of social reproduction is not always found in the same forms: what part of the latter comes from the market, the welfare state, and family relations, remains a contingent question that depends on specific historical dynamics and feminist struggles.

The concept of social reproduction, then, allows us to locate more precisely the mobile and porous quality of the walls of the home: in other words, the relation between, on the one hand, domestic life within the home, and the phenomena of commodification, the sexualization of the division of labor, and the policies of the welfare-state on the other. Social reproduction also enables us to more effectively analyze phenomena like the relation between the commodification of care-work and its “racialization” by repressive migration policies, such as those that aim to lower the costs of immigrant labor and force them to accept slave-like working conditions.

Finally, and this is the crucial point, the way social reproduction functions within a given social formation has an intrinsic relation to the way the production and reproduction of societies are organized in their totality, and therefore to class relations. **Once again, these relations cannot be conceived as purely accidental and contingent intersections: viewing them through the lens of social reproduction allows us to identify the organizing logic of these intersections without for this reason excluding the role played by struggle, and the existence of contingent phenomena and practices in general.**

We must keep in mind that the sphere of social reproduction is also determinant in the formation of subjectivity, and thus relations of power. If we take into account the relations that exist in each capitalist society between social reproduction, the production of the society as a whole, and the relations of production, we can say that these relations of domination and power are not separate structures or levels: they do not intersect in a purely external manner and do not maintain a solely contingent relation with the relations of production.

The multiple relations of power and domination therefore appear as concrete expressions of the articulated and contradictory unity that is capitalist society. This process should not be understood in an automatic or mechanistic manner. As noted before, we must not forget the dimension of human praxis: capitalism is not a machine or automaton but a social relation, and as such, is subject to contingencies, accidents, and conflicts. However, contingencies and conflicts do not rule out the existence of a logic – namely, capitalist accumulation – that imposes objective constraints not only on our praxis or lived experience but also on our ability to produce and articulate relations with others, our place in the world, and our relations with our conditions of existence.

This is exactly what "unitary theory" tries to grasp: **to be able to read relations of power based on gender or sexual orientation as concrete moments of the articulated, complex, and contradictory totality that is contemporary capitalism**. From this point of view, these concrete moments certainly possess their own specific characteristics, and thus must be analyzed with adequate and specific theoretical tools (from psychoanalysis to literary theory…), but they also maintain an internal relation with this larger totality and with the process of societal reproduction that proceeds according to the logic of capitalist accumulation.

The essential thesis of "unitary theory" is that for Marxist feminism, gender oppression and racial oppression do not correspond to two autonomous systems which have their own particular causes: they have become an integral part of capitalist society through a long historical process that has dissolved preceding forms of social life.

From this point of view, it would be mistaken to see both as mere residues of past social formations that continue to exist within capitalist society for reasons pertaining to their anchoring in the human psyche or in the antagonism between sexed "classes," etc. This is not to underestimate the psychological dimension of gender and sexual oppression or the contradictions between oppressors and oppressed. It is, however, a matter of identifying the social conditions and framework provided by class relations that impact, reproduce, and influence our perceptions of ourselves and of our relations to others, our behaviors, and our practices.

This framework is the logic of capitalist accumulation, which imposes fundamental limits and constraints on our lived experiences and how we interpret them. The fact that such a large number of feminist theoretical currents over the last few decades have been able to avoid analyzing this process, and the crucial role played by capital in gender oppression in its various forms, attests to the power of capital to co-opt our ideas and influence our modes of thinking.

This article is part of a dossier entitled Gender and Capitalism: Debating Cinzia Arruzza's "Remarks on Gender."

EVERYTHING LIES IN ALL DIRECTIONS

Death is the same in both directions.
It wants to go somewhere. It wants to come back.
Once I came back through a grass. Purple coneflowers
floated there, attracting bees. The whole field was humming.
Once I came back through the dead. This roughly translates
to something my mother lived through in Chinese.
My mother said, “I don’t read. It’s too tiring.”
It’s true—people who wrote things
lied to her. Once I came back through a poem.
Time refused to pass there, and loneliness
drifted down past my window like snow.
Alone, I did not move. Worlds changed around me.
Everything beautiful lay both forwards and backwards.
Everything translated into butterflies, which billowed
into a breath of tall summer. They blew out of the past
and into a future. Was it yours or was it mine?
Then, I was a child. Once, my mother was.
This is how you learn that nothing ends
until it has to.

— Hua Xi

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ONANISM, HANDJOBS, SMUT

Performances of self-valorization

Fumi Okiji

I will interrogate the onanistic spirit that innervates the socio-economic configuration we live through. My interest is in how performances of self-valorization excite capitalist exchange society at its every register. Capitalism is a system of self-valorization. The capitalist is a "self-made man." And the worker, a self-sustaining partner in exchange. These acts of *apparent* self-valorization, in fact, depend on the reproductive labor of the homeworker, invisible and unaccounted for, and on the mnemonic impositions placed on hyper-visible and symbolically overdetermined surplus populations, such as the black poor. This may be why the permutation of this self-valorizing performance captured by the term "black excellence" sounds like a cruel joke.

On a freestyle tribute to the late Nipsey Hussle, fellow rapper and entrepreneur Jay-Z tells the crowd "Gentrify your own hood before these people do it / Claim eminent domain and have your people move in" (Jay-Z 2019). This succinct exhortation speaks for a generation of hip-hop entrepreneurism, and, more particularly, allows a "glimpse" into the Hussle's extra-musical vision, at least as Jay-Z understands it. An uneasy marriage of investment and philanthropy—material accumulation, local community activism and an update on symbolic racial uplift. Hussle, an artist whose music was entwined with the social sinew of the Crenshaw area of South Los Angeles, acquired a range of property, including a barber's, a burger restaurant and a fish market—key venues of sociality (Jennings and Kelley 2019). What does it mean to "gentrify [one's] own hood"? What are the ethical implications of the now-wealthy buying up private and commercial properties in an area that they have long called home? Should this be understood as gentrification? The modest twitter storm triggered by Jay-Z's words, that I must reiterate, were strung together on the fly, tended to focus on the inaccuracy of the comment, particularly the choice of the word "gentrify" to describe acts of black capitalism and self-empowerment, and/or community building, depending on how you read Hussle's legacy (and, ultimately, on your faith in the American Dream). The now almost obligatory (always inane) debates that these virtual encounters generate over the definition of a particular word, in this case obscured a more interesting, long-standing one, concerning the contradiction to be found in a black elite's embrace of a system that relies on the material elevation of a few at the expense of communal forms of social and socio-economic organization.[1] Gentrification might not have been the appropriate term—black-determination, seemingly, the underlying personal objective of Hussle's

community enterprises. Jay-Z's "gentrify" may be best understood as a slip, something that was not meant (but *really* meant). The buying up the neighborhood in order to "improve" (it)—as evidence of a certain will to excel or valorize—is well-partnered with an artistic genre that appropriates the lived experience of poor black folk, selling it onto the general social field, the agents of this primitive accumulation at times, rewarded by admission to exchange society.[2]

There is no reason to give Jay-Z the benefit of the doubt, if there is doubt that the call was anything but a morsel of capitalist moralism. (The migration of black respectability—meaning here the sanctioned modes of black public appearance, from the cultural and social into the economic—is entirely in keeping with the more general decline of Protestant-tinted secular morality, that, historically, worked to obfuscate the avarice that the Dream expects of all those in its pursuit.) Back in 2011, on the track "Murder to Excellence," Jay-Z could not deliver the message in starker terms. He, "dress[ed] in Dries and other boutique stores in Paris," is the spokesman for "the new black elite" and applauds their "excellence" (Jay-Z and West 2011). More recently, on "The Story of O.J.," Jay-Z is unapologetically acquisitive, and invites us to aspire to be, too. The tune weaves an ode to accumulation—wealth propagates as if by magic. Consider: "I bought some artwork for one million/… Few years later, that shit worth eight million." And: "I turned that two to a four, four to an eight" (Jay-Z 2017). This is not the repressed underbelly of a Booker T. Washington-style utilitarian thrifty respectability. Not the "exercise of extravagant expenditure" undertaken by the work-sky "N****," narrated by David Marriott in his essay "On Decadence: Bling Bling" (Marriott 2017). This is a sermon on valorization. M-M'. Money makes money. Jay-Z is, apparently, self-made, too. The mysticism of this seeming self-accretion aided by his "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" chides. Reading our minds after sharing his advice on art investment, he responds, "Y'all think it's bougie, I'm like, it's fine" (Jay-Z 2017). He is bougie to our black. And in case we did not catch this vital fact, Jay-Z dissects the speech act for us—our appearance in the work (no "n***a" is left unsummoned), our gentrified blackness, *could* be sold back to us, at a paltry "nine ninety-nine," his oeuvre, the blueprint for success, but only if we agree to embrace exchange society ("a million dollars' worth of game") (Jay-Z 2017).

Self-valorization

The spirit that innervates liberal capitalism is self-valorization. This is, of course, a word used by Karl Marx to describe the system in its entirety: "the occult ability to add value to itself […] [B]y virtue of being value" (Marx 1990, p. 255).[3] What is described as "capital mystification" involves concealment of the actual source of this valorization—most readily identified as the free labor the worker performs on behalf of the capitalist, but also to be found in the invisible and unremunerated reproductive labor of the homeworker, and in the symbolic and imaginary work of other surplus populations such as the slave/black.[4] Exploitation (the surreptitious extraction of surplus-value) and valorization (supposed self-valorizing value) are two sides of the same coin. And while these are often mapped onto the worker and capitalist, respectively, it is important to understand that as the spirit that energizes the mode of production, all players admitted to exchange are bound by the imperative to valorize, and, more accurately, to *appear* (able) to self-valorize, to self-(re)produce. In fact, this may be the terms of one's very admittance, worker and capitalist alike. The player in the capitalist market must appear to self-valorize in accordance with the character (material and spiritual) of the system as a whole. They do not, of course, as capital does not. The

important thing is that they *appear* to. Valorization is not only descriptive of the material mechanics of capitalism in its entirety, but it also names the spirit of the political economy. It is something one must believe in. One can only play in the capitalist market if one appears (able) to self-valorize.

"make parade of riches"/"conceal poverty"

Hannah Arendt on the requisites for participation in the public realm of ancient Greece: "no activity that served only the purpose of making a living, of sustaining only the life process, was permitted to enter the political realm" (Arendt 2019, p. 37). Arendt's insistence on the strict separation of the political (the province of freedom) from the economic has been well-rehearsed.[5] What is perhaps of more interest with regards the argument unfolding here is how entry into the public sphere is conditioned upon a person's ability to transcend material constraints—showing political freedom to be very much dependent on an individual being "carefree of all worries that are connected with life's necessity" (Arendt 2006, p. 38). The poor, chained to "bodily needs," fall short of the economic liberty required to prepare for and participate in the public realm. They were "not free[,] because they were driven by daily needs (ibid.). Moreover, for Arendt, the tragedy of being poor was the anonymity that poverty brings: "darkness rather than want is the curse of poverty" (Arendt 2006, p. 59). It is not only a practical necessity that prevents the poor from becoming public actors, but also that they are ashamed of their poverty and wish to remain hidden. It is interesting that when the poor multitude do expose themselves, when they "burst into the streets" (as during the French Revolution, for instance), Arendt is ambivalent concerning the value of their political participation, believing the violence of the multitude threatening to the very integrity of the notion of freedom (Arendt 2006, p. 39).

Despite Arendt's desire to protect the autonomy of the political, there is little mistaking the entanglement of socio-economic and political here. (The same imbrication of self-preservation and public exhibition is found in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* [1759], where Adam Smith, the political economist and moral philosopher, suggests that people were more inclined to show sympathy for actors who "make parade of [their] riches" and, importantly, who "conceal [their] poverty" (Smith [1759] 1822, p. 54)). Notwithstanding the inability of a nascent working class to access genuine political freedom, capitalism requires that all its participants be free. The freedom the worker lacks politically must be staged within the economic sphere in order that they appear a partner in exchange. The system depends on this pretense. As Marx tells it: "All the notions of justice held by both worker and the capitalist, all the mystifications of the capitalist mode of production, all capitalism's illusions about freedom, all the apologetic tricks of vulgar economics, have as their basis the form of appearance discussed above, which makes the actual relation invisible, and indeed presents to the eye the precise opposite of that relation" (Marx 1990, p. 680). While the system rests on an acute lack of autonomy and spontaneity, worker and capitalist, both, are called upon to appear free as part of their demonstration of worthiness. And, I suggest that it is not only freedom performed, but the spirit of the system, self-valorization.

"the economic Relation does not exist"

A key intervention of classical political economists of the eighteenth century was the upending of the mercantilist assumption that "the world's wealth was a finite amount [and that] if someone got more of the cake, someone else would get less" (Bayly 2004, p. 136). In early modern times, a state was enriched through conflict and conquest—war chests funded by

trade taxes met the costs in a period of almost continual commercial war. The growth of a country was dependent on the successful contest for the world's limited natural resources. Growth was relational; the prosperity or ruin of a nation state was contingent on, and, in turn, affected that of, its competitors. At this turn into free market capitalism, Adam Smith, David Ricardo and other economists suggested that rather than the zero-sum game of ferocious competition for scarce resource, an economy could, in fact, increase by itself. Through innovations in technology, labor organization and mutually beneficial trade, a national economy was thought to be able to increase independently and to be capable of infinite growth. This, effectively, neutered the economic antagonism between the dominant and the subordinate.[6] As part of her exploration of the socio-economic implications of the lack of (sex) relation at the source of subject formation, Alenka Zupančič insists that this superseding economic model rests on an earth-shattering notion: "the economic Relation does not exist" (Zupančič 2017, p. 31).[7] Mercantilism provides

> the image of a 'closed' totality in which the relation ensures the visibility of the difference (in wealth); if you want more, you have to take it from somewhere, so someone else has to lose. The relation is that of subordination (of the weak to the powerful), but it is still a relation. The new economic idea undermines this (totality-based) relation, while at the same time prizing the productivity of the newly discovered non-relation.
>
> *(Zupančič 2017, p. 31)*

All can benefit from this ruptured totality; everyone is capable of increasing their wealth independently.[8]

"invisible handjob of the market"

The "invisible hand" and avaricious prudence are partnered and co-constitutive. The invisible hand of the market looks after the interests of society at large. It ensures that the onanistic pursuit of individuals is checked. The invisible hand of the market is mysterious, and seemingly transcendent, but it can, in a more rationalistic light, be considered the sum (plus, perhaps, the little more that always eludes accounts) of the miscalculations, over-extended ambitions, environmental and social opportunity and disaster, that temper the self-interestedness that Adam Smith considers the making of the ideal society. And for their part, "the butcher, the brewer, [and] the baker" (Smith 2019, p. 14) can wholeheartedly embrace avarice in the knowledge (or rather, belief) that they are "led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of [their] intention" (Smith 2019, p. 423). In "intend[ing] their own gain," butcher, brewer and baker show a fidelity to the market far exceeding that which any conscious governance or policy could achieve. Indeed, the efficiency of the market rests on this myopic prudence. Through this rapacity, with the guidance of the invisible hand, the individual "frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he intends to promote it" (Smith 2019, p. 423). Following Smith, we might consider that partners in exchange, in adherence to the spirit of capitalism, "address [them]selves, not to their humanity but to their self-love" (Smith, p. 14). Capital is (seemingly) masturbatory, and calls on its players to be, too.

Invisible handjob of the market. Following Zupančič's lead, I would like to borrow this term from Aaron Schuster to bridge my discussion concerning this model society—one in which all would be infused with this spirit of onanism; one where we would address each other not by way of our common humanity but rather our "own self-love"—and the thought that has driven my deliberations: namely, capitalism's imploration that its participants appear (able)

to self-valorize (Zupančič 2017, p. 32). I am taken by the invisibility of the act. Why invisible? Does this not contradict my insistence that capitalism requires that its partners appear able to self-valorize; that they perform their excellence? Indeed, capital and its participants are exhibitionists. They want you to watch. On further reflection, we might say that they do not intend for you to spectate the entire operation, in fact, but only for you to see them come. Zupančič's play with the phrase seems to be in reference to the stimulation of one's own erotogenic zones (a "solitary enjoyment"). A handjob is, perhaps, more often understood as involving (an) other(s). The distinction is key, and the slippage not surprising: the system aims to appear masturbatory but, in fact, depends on the stimulus provided by an unseen facilitator. With this in mind, we might say that the capitalist system as such needs to *appear* to bring itself to orgasm, but, in fact, is very much dependent on a silent (or invisible) "partner" to produce the excess. The invisible labor symbolized by this handjob is, of course, the activities that contribute to the upkeep of the market player. The labor expended on turning the raw goods of sustenance into products and activities of social reproduction—toward the material upkeep of current workers, the rearing of future participants and the emotional support provided in the home—is concealed, hidden at the core in capitalism. Whilst this reproductive labor involves a transferal of goods, labor and sustenance between the worker and homemaker, and perhaps most essentially (re)produces labor power—capitalism's most essential commodity— it does not appear within the political economy. This is taken up by Marx without adequate redress. As Silvia Federici writes, "Marx's analysis of capitalism has been hampered by its almost exclusive focus on commodity production and its blindness to the significance of women's unpaid reproductive work and the sexual division of labour in capitalist accumulation" (Federici 2009, p. 209). The homeworker is a key source of generation of the surplus required for valorization; her work occurs in obscurity. This invisible labor of the homeworker allows the worker to appear worthy of the market. His apparent ability to self-sustain, his apparent self-sufficiency, maintains the illusion that excites the entire (accounted for) system.

The slave is not a worker

This ~~handjob~~wank scam might be thought sufficient to maintain the illusion, and yet the unavoidable qualitative difference between owning the means and material of production and owning, merely, one's own labor power is stark, despite the dictum that the market is blind to one's birth.[9] Alongside an invisible homeworker, the capitalist theology employs a hyper-visible icon of derogation. As a commodity, the slave is barred, categorically, from being an agent able to exchange. A slave is a means of production, someone's property. They do not own their own body. They do not have labor power (to sell). They are not, strictly speaking, a worker—they are not an unpaid worker. A slave represents a non-participatory, passive component of the system, symbolizing what a participant must not be. Despite its suspiciously human countenance, there is no reason to regard its status (commodity and/or means of production) as categorically distinct from cattle or machinery. It is of absolute necessity to the capitalist system that the worker distinguishes himself from such; to distinguish his labor power from his body and being. Labor power and the slave are two commodities. The worker owns his labor power; the slave owns nothing. Regardless of the actual paucity of alternatives, the worker ("free" also from property) must be at liberty to sell, not his body but (and this is important) his labor power. Under capitalist relations, the appearance of freedom and equality between partners of exchange is key. The worker must put distance however symbolic, however imaginary, between himself and the commodity he trades. As

with so much in the system, it is this symbolic distance that is the "truth" which allows the worker to be (or seem) worthy of his partnership.

Smut to get off on

Consider:

> Compared, indeed, with the more extravagant luxury of the great, his [the common labourer's] accommodation must no doubt appear extremely simple and easy; and yet it may be true, perhaps, that the accommodation of a European prince does not always so much exceed that of an industrious and frugal peasant, as the accommodation of the latter exceeds that of many an African king, the absolute master of the lives and liberties of ten thousand naked savages.
>
> *(Smith 2019, p. 12)*

In this quotation from *The Wealth of Nations,* Adam Smith summons the figure of the African which goes to work in a number of directions. Most readily, we find a jarring claim that sees a peasant living in greater prosperity than the highest position that one can hold in an African tribe; that of king. While the entire passage is addressing the working poor, the "common labourer" of capitalist society, Smith evokes the peasant here as a subject close enough to an African (king) to bear comparison. He suggests that the inequality between European peasant and African king, in which the former holds the advantage, is not as great as that between the peasant and the European prince. Furthermore, although this may go beyond a straightforward reading, the polemic force of Smith's words allows me to suggest that a qualitative distinction is being drawn between the poor European and African (rich or wretched). The African king is conjured in order to show the upper limit of any estimation an African can obtain. And the designation of the worker (or the peasant standing in for him here) as "absolute master of… [African] savages," in the context of contemporaneous Atlantic trade reinforces the signifying chain, African/savage/slave. As Ian Duncan writes, in a revelatory reading of Smith's passage:

> it requires little reflection to see that African savagery is… part of the political economy of the nation… As Smith knew perfectly well, mid-eighteenth-century Glasgow's commercial wealth was founded on the Chesapeake tobacco and (increasingly) West India sugar trades, and thus on slavery. The elected recognition of that fact occurs here across a syntactical suppression: the European subject *is*, in effect, 'the absolute master of the lives and liberties of ten thousand naked savages,' whether he owns plantations, has shares in the trade, or consumes sugar or tobacco.
>
> *(Duncan 2016, p. 106)*

In quotidian parlance, Smith is assuring the worker, "you may be poor but you are not an African (savage, slave, black)." This is a declaration that echoes uncomfortably into the present day, placed on loudspeaker in this Trumpian era. "Shithole countries," denigration of black protest, clandestine repeal and continued suppression of civil rights all work to maintain this categorical distinction. The message also operates as an exhortation, providing a clearing in the symbolic and imaginary spheres from where the ambiguity that intramural material inequality creates (between, say, capitalist and worker; or the affluent and white poor) can be

countered. Lewis Gordon's pithy formulation of white supremacy perhaps says it best: "(1) be white, but above all (2) don't be black" (Gordon 1997, p. 63).

The ever-extending metonymic chain African/savage/slave/black/welfare queen/subprime debtor—which the move from one formally prohibited from market relations to one not worthy of them does not break—is the smut with which the welcomed exchange participant gets off. Black unworthiness of the market is pronounced with elaborate fanfare. The subprime debtor, for instance, is well set up for the fall. She is encouraged to partake of the promises of homeownership and is seemingly received into this market. And yet, through loaded dice of sociohistorical impediment, finance services malevolence and housing discrimination, the black as a subprime debtor will most likely roll low. This complex of disadvantage shows up in the general social field as the "natural" shortcomings of a subject unable to take personal responsibility, and rejuvenates what Fred Moten understands as the "pathologizing discourse within which blackness' insurgent materiality has long been framed" (Moten 2013, p. 243). The debtor is painted as

> a victim of her own impulses, which could be coded as her own desire to climb socially, into a neighborhood where she doesn't belong and is not wanted—the general neighborhood of home ownership, wherein the normative conception, embodiment and enactment of wealth, personhood, and citizenship reside.
>
> *(Moten 2013, p. 243)*

The blame (criminality, even) attributed to these former "owners" provides contemptible relief against which those worthy of participation can distinguish themselves. This is the obscenity to which the market participant gets off.[10]

Black excellence

Consider these lyrics drawn from Jay-Z's 2011 "Murder to Excellence":

> Black excellence, opulence, decadence […]
> I stink of success, the new black elite.
> *(Jay-Z and West 2011)*

Black excellence is a peculiar term. The coupling of these two words provides a punchline to a joke retold in each performance the term is used to describe. To avoid any confusion: I am not disputing the achievements—financial, academic or political—of black individuals, or that we might want to celebrate these, particularly in light of the odds stacked against them. Nor am I arguing that the condition of blackness is one of absolute abjection—that black lives as imaged and imagined by the general social field are all these lives can be (or what these lives actually are). Yet, it does seem that the declaration of what should be self-evident—that black individuals can also make money, say smart things and provide leadership—betrays the unease in which these two words sit. We might argue that the term "black excellence" is a performative intervention that seeks to, at once, dispel the unease brought on by its own coupling. We might suggest that it is a reparation of discursive space, a mode of representational warfare. This is a valid remedial response. However, I am most interested in the term's palpable unease and the critical work that this unease does. It is not impossible, but it takes considerable effort to divorce black excellence from the neoliberal spirit of the day. Its most recognizable proponents (for instance, Jay-Z, Beyoncé, the Obamas) show

distinction through their ability to accumulate economic and social wealth (their seeming self-valorization) at a time when an assault on the social safety net, on employment and voter rights, under-investment in public services (coupled with exponentially increasing military defense) and the bolstering and further privatization of the carceral industry, helps keep the poor, disproportionately represented by black and brown people, in poverty. As part of the ideological baggage of neoliberalism, excellence tends to refer to the aptitude black individuals show in transcending these trappings of race toward (or by way of) aspirations of full immersion in society. Black excellence performs how one might move toward socio-economic "health," supposedly by way of "hustle" and "grind," by enforcing conventional familial configuration, by celebrating resilience.[11] It attempts to contribute to a fiction that black folk have no reason to believe. It requires that they now feign ignorance concerning the contrivance of a myth that was never meant to take them in, an illusion crafted without them in mind. While the general populace is met with a variety of elaborate ploys to obscure the fact of their powerlessness (consider my ~~handjob~~wank formulation or how patriarchal protection of the sanctity of white femininity serves to control women), black people (historically, and in this contemporary moment) have their subordination pronounced to them in no uncertain terms. Chattel, three-fifths, "No Dogs or Negroes," the war on drugs, Flint, Sandra Bland. The force of these continually refreshing declarations of subordination frustrates any last-minute mystification "black excellence" might hope to achieve on behalf of neoliberalism. The two words continue to stand in opposition, rendering the notion of back excellence forever uneasy. Against the ideological current, and despite itself, the term restates the social antagonism underpinning the system.

Could the term black excellence be gesturing toward something else? Perhaps the specifier indicates a distinct category of excellence—a *black* excellence that calls into question these illusory self-made lives that feed the American Dream. How might this black variety of excellence manifest? Might we observe it in a family who, without shame (and perhaps even need), claims social security funds in defiance of exhortations to perform self-sufficiency (a fallacy for the affluent as much the poor), in awareness that the die is crooked, that the invisible hand requires willful ignorance of the persistence of unequal relations and the antagonisms that compose the society we live in? Or perhaps "black" can be wrested from the overloaded signifying chain, and made to denote opacity or fugitivity: matter(s) that cannot be accounted for—black life beyond the symbolic uses made of it; that which escapes (or is ignored/rejected by) mainstream imaginings. This might be an excellence that evades the hyper-visible antithesis to the self-valorizing market participant, and avoids the self-cannibalizing tendencies of the black neoliberal. But, of course, black excellence, as it is widely understood, does nothing to draw attention to the villainy at the heart of capitalism. It, in fact, helps to conceal its inherent injustice, and this cannot but enact a psychic burden on those who live black lives. Black excellence is an absurd state to perform—its "excellent," supposedly self-valorizing subject providing the titillation for their own wanking off.

Notes

1 Social media hermeneutics call, not for clarity, but for enough confusion to appear, superficially, and to oneself, at least, to have "owned" another. For a sample of the debate, see https://twitter.com/i/events/1122205041522139136?lang=en

2 This is not an Adornoian denigration of popular form. I consider it to be a key site of critical intervention. My focus is narrow and on the neoliberal strain within the music that we hear in some of Jay-Z and Kanye West's work. It is important to understand this as distinct from the tropes

concerning reckless conspicuous consumption—this irresponsible depletion of personal wealth, in fact, runs counter to the prudent avarice discussed in this essay. On "improvement," see Harney, Stefano, and Fred Moten. "Improvement and Preservation: Or, Usufruct and Use." In *Futures of Black Radicalism*, Johnson, Gaye Theresa, and Alex Lubin, eds. Verso, 2017, pp. 83–91.

3 Autonomists such as Tony Negri use the term to refer to the self-determination of the working class.

4 I, of course, have in mind the invaluable feminist interventions of Leopoldina Fortunati, Silvia Federici and Mariarosa Dalla Costa, and others, beginning in the 1970 and continuing on to the present.

5 For instance, see Moruzzi, Norma Claire. *Speaking Through the Mask: Hannah Arendt and the Politics of Social Identity*. Cornell University Press, 2000; Villa, Dana. *Arendt and Heidegger: The Fate of the Political*. Princeton University Press, 1995; Fine, Robert. *Political Investigations: Hegel, Marx and Arendt*. Routledge, 2005.

6 See Pincus, Steve. "Rethinking Mercantilism: Political Economy, the British Empire, and the Atlantic World in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 69, 1 (2012): 3–34. This essay provides a very useful review of the conventional wisdom on the break between mercantilism and the economic system that followed.

7 It is important to understand the non-relation, not only in reference to sexual matters and activity. Capitalism might be understood as an appropriation and privatization of this fundamental non-relation. The "missing of the binary signifier," the "minus one," is the impossibility, the constitutive negativity that molds the spaces in which all relationships occur. This non-relation is not counter to social ties but is, in fact, "the inherent (il)logic (a fundamental 'antagonism') of the relationships that are possible and existing" (Zupančič, p. 24). Zupančič tells us that the discursive field is characterized as antagonistic. The various contests for power and recognition challenge the authority of Man brought by those who embody difference that occurs here. Yet, its primary antagonism is not due to these confrontations accommodated by the field but to the formal qualities of the space itself.

8 We might add that the thesis of self-expanding economies—the notion that the innovations in production and "new organizations of labour" revolutionized economic growth—is incomplete without acknowledgment that this supposedly intramural surplus was to a significant extent mined from the bodies and futures of workers, homemakers and slaves (this, of course, is putting to one side primitive accumulation). This is the reality that the political theology of capitalism worked at its every register to dispel.

9 "The blessing that the market does not ask about birth is paid for in the exchange society by the fact that the possibilities conferred by birth are molded to fit the production of goods that can be bought on the market. Each human being has been endowed with a self of his or her own, different from all others, so that it could all the more surely be made the same." Adorno, Theodor and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford University Press, 2007, p. 9.

10 In a similar turn of argument, Adam Kotsko writes of the "welfare queen" as a latter-day witch, "that racialized figure of sexual license who depletes the public purse with her lavish lifestyle." He continues:

> One might be tempted to dismiss my evocation of her 'demonic' character as a mere metaphor, but a number of the tropes that accumulated around her bear a striking similarity to what we find in an early modern witch-hunting manual.

Amongst her occult capabilities, "the 'welfare queen' has the mysterious ability to cause mass inflation and economic stagnation." The "near-demonic power" she exercises raises a moral panic, and contributes to the effigy of the untouchable that all upright market performers must shun.

11 During his 2013 commencement speech to Morehouse College graduates, Barack Obama urges, "If you stay hungry, if you keep hustling, if you keep on your grind and get other folks to do the same—nobody can stop you." Full speech at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e50Tt9qJRQk.

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I KNOW THAT I WILL ONLY CHANGE THROUGH THE PASSAGE OF TIME AND THE LEARNING OF LESSONS
AND THAT ALL THE PARTS OF ME I CHOOSE TO FIXATE ON ARE JUST DISTRACTIONS TO KEEP ME FROM DOING THE SOUL CRUSHING WORK OF _____. WHATEVER. ANYTHING. THE SOUL CRUSHING WORK OF ANYTHING. ALL WORK IS SOUL CRUSHING.

Introduction

Porn Work against Work

I've worked my entire life, and this is so much better.

Tara Holiday

I've enjoyed it and hated it. . . . It worked for me
in that I was able to survive. It was fun.

Herschel Savage

Fuck overtime! I'd rather be on overtime
humping a hot dude or chick.

Ana Foxxx

Every porn scene is a record of people at work. Sometimes it is also something else. Enjoying it and hating it, the workers I interviewed for this book situate porn at the intersection of life and work, pleasure and tedium, entrepreneurial hustles and waged labor. Sometimes, porn work is a way to refuse other ways of making a living—"fuck overtime!"—and others it feels much the same. Again and again, porn workers told me that they left straight (non-sex-work) jobs for porn because they "hated working." But most also confirm veteran porn publicist Dominic Ace's assessment that "this is a job, this is a gig."[1] "Are you gonna get used?" he said. "Everybody gets used in one way or another. Whether you're a secretary, a janitor,

whatever. The difference here is it's sex." Porn work is work and work that at once offers ways to subvert the harms of straight jobs and reproduces them.

After we talked about wages, connecting with scene partners, policy, and how porn performance is a lot like working in a bookstore, performer, author, and activist Conner Habib paused to trouble the "work" language I was using. "I don't like the 'worker' part," Habib told me. "I'll use 'porn star,' that's fine. I like being a constellation instead of a laborer."[2] After that interview, I started to ask interviewees if "porn worker" resonated with them. "I absolutely am a porn worker," Ela Darling responded. "I respect it if someone doesn't want to think of it as work, but it is. You can think of it as dancing on the moon—that doesn't change the fact that this is how you pay your bills."[3] *Porn Work* maps porn at the nexus of these realities.

Porn work reveals deep contradictions at the core of (late) capitalism: Workers exit traditional jobs in search of autonomy but often find precarity on the other side. Pleasure makes work livable but also gets us to do more of it. The authenticity we seek in sex and work can be sold off for parts, and it can also be sustaining. Workers organize against the twin forces of state surveillance and neglect. And solidarities break down when workers escape managerial control by becoming managers themselves. If these tensions are familiar to thinkers and doers of straight work, this is because porn work is not exceptional.

Instead, the conditions porn workers have long experienced are exactly those heralded as the most striking developments in this economic moment: intimate life is increasingly brought to the market; individual workers, rather than employers or the state, assume the economic and health risks of doing business; and a hypermobile gig economy is eclipsing more stable ways of working. The difference here is, as Ace suggests, sex, and that difference brings both particular vulnerabilities and resources—intensified state violence and stigma on the one hand and the potential for pleasureful refusal on the other. The "new economy" is not new—porn workers have been living in it for decades. They have found ways to hack and reshape its conditions for as long.

Against the scholarly tendency to treat porn as a text and the wage relation as a given, *Porn Work* centers on workers' creative approaches to class struggle. This is another place in which porn is not quite like straight jobs: Workers here are often craftier than those in straight jobs and have a less romantic analysis of work under capitalism. Their ways of intervening in it are not always transformative—sometimes intervening

means ascending hierarchies rather than dismantling them—but they do highlight the contradictions and the stakes. A porn work lens makes for a sharper anti-capitalist feminist critique, not just a more inclusive one.

PORNO DIALECTICS

Habib's position on the "work" question would shift in the years after our first meeting, and he would become more interested in craftily appropriating the language of "sex work" than rejecting it—"as long as we misuse 'work,' we can erode it," he later said.[4] Porn workers are experts at this kind of misuse. Breaking the fundamental rule of waged work, they sometimes take more from the job than it takes from them. Both nimbly responding to current working conditions and inventing new ways of working, they use porn work toward their own ends. This book explores these dynamics through interviews with eighty-one porn performers, managers, and crew members. Interviewees spoke to their experience of working across porn's genres—from big-budget mainstream to low-budget amateur productions and in gay, straight mainstream, and queer and feminist production communities—from the 1970s until the late 2010s.[5] Most were current workers when we interviewed in the 2010s, and this book focuses on their strategies for intervening in present conditions.

Feminist researcher-activists Precarias a la Deriva ground their research on precarious workers in these questions: "What is your precarity? What is your strike?"[6] This book shares these primary concerns. Its political commitments flow from related questions: What changes would mitigate that precarity? What shifts could facilitate that strike? Following Precarias a la Deriva, I am interested in precarity as a "tendency" toward uncertainty—"work and life experiences in permanent construction"—and, crucially, a tendency that should be understood not just as a liability but also as a source of craftiness and alternative vision.[7] "Sex workers are fierce fighters," writes Melinda Chateauvert, "because their jobs demand perspicacity."[8] Conditions that grind can also sharpen our teeth.

Porn Work draws from an expansive archive of struggle. In spite of multiple barriers to organizing—their independent contractor status, the itinerant nature of the work, fierce competition for castings, and the threat of retaliation—porn performers have for decades engaged in collective action.[9] They have formed worker groups modeled on labor unions and ones focused on education and mutual support. Porn workers intervene in more subtle ways, too, manipulating the conditions of porn work to

maximize earning potential, resist burnout, and otherwise exert control over their work lives. They develop creative strategies for navigating emotional intimacy. They figure out ways to manage managers, negotiating working conditions in an atmosphere loaded with gendered and racist hierarchy. They learn to perform intense physical labor while minimizing its toll on the body. They make independent contractor status work to their benefit by producing (and hence reaping profits from) their own material. They use paid scenes as advertisements for other income-generating work in porn's satellite industries. And they use porn as a way to avoid more tedious, more extractive, and often less remunerative work elsewhere.

Before porno dialectics as a conceptual tool came my commitment to taking workers seriously when they say that these interventions matter. Dialectical thinking was the best way to make sense of what came next. In my practice, this meant, first, that if workers told me that a form of pushback makes a difference for them, this is enough evidence that it counts. And second, it meant understanding contradiction as a resource rather than a limitation. Dialectical thinking recognizes a range of tactics, misuses, and forms of community that intervene in the wage relation, and it resists ranking these. Building a theoretical core for this book meant putting interviewees in conversation with other thinkers equipped to the task.

I draw from differently situated schools of thought committed to thinking about power as constantly under revision rather than static. Marxists talk about this in terms of "dialectical materialism," the idea that social life is defined by ongoing conflict between workers and those who profit from their labor. A materialist analysis of porn reveals workers as also locked in struggle with the forces that try to make paid sex dangerous or impossible: the state, internet police, and concerned outsiders who want to end demand for sex work in the first place. This, too, is a classed dynamic—as Silvia Federici has long argued, independent sex work is a problem for a capitalist state that hopes to compel waged straight work and free hetero sex.[10] But dialectical thinking reminds us that power dynamics are always in motion.[11] A producer funds a scene in hopes of making money from sex workers' performance labor, but workers may profit more in the long run, having transformed that scene from (only) a site of extraction into (also) an advertising opportunity. Internet censorship tries to isolate sex workers but confronts networks that cross digital borders and workers who find loopholes at every turn.

A focus on ongoing struggle avoids the traps of romanticizing resistance on the one hand and overestimating managerial (or capitalist

state) power on the other.[12] Management sets work rules, and workers find ways to flout them. Workers make demands, and managers, when pressed, respond to them. Sometimes, on all sides, this has unintended consequences. Dialectical thinking understands contradiction as the meat of our story rather than as a wrinkle to be smoothed over. Porn work can be better than straight work and also just as extractive. Both things are true, and that is the point.

Survival strategies are often a matter of both/and. A source of vulnerability in one context may be a source of power in another or both at the same time, writes resilience theorist Margaret Waller.[13] Porn work provides countless examples of this dynamic: Pleasure at work operates on both registers, sometimes pushing us to work more for less but also materially improving the workday. Demands for emotional labor on set can be straining, but they also prepare performers to craftily manipulate their managers. Framing porn work as an escape from work—one populated by constellations, not workers—at once articulates a critique of work and can romanticize porn's own unexceptional modes of exploitation and extraction. Accessing the means of production helps performers wrest control over their working conditions, but, in making managers out of workers, it can also undermine solidarity.

On a broader scale, precarity brings insecurity, but it also nurtures the nimble creativity workers need in order to navigate uncertainty in life and work.[14] Sometimes, that creativity makes workers more innovative than capital. Porn workers' self-production often follows this pattern. Black, queer, visibly disabled, or fat performers may initially produce their own content because industry gatekeeping limits their access to good work but then come to find that they can make more, under better conditions, without a boss. They may even take market share from the very bosses who had once tried to shut them out. Porn's traditional producer class of white men long relied on rigid ideas about what sells to excuse casting discrimination, but the success of direct-to-consumer scenes, among them the "niche" productions traditional producers assumed lacked mass appeal, suggests that performers have a better sense of the market. In general, writes Shira Tarrant, "niche" genres have been less hard-hit by piracy than mainstream.[15]

Classed struggle shapes the labor market and not always on capital's terms. As the autonomist Marxist tradition makes clear, economic transformation is not simply the result of top-down processes in which capital reorganizes production to extract more from working people.[16] Instead,

workers are both agents and victims of economic transformation.[17] Key shifts in the labor market—the growth of the creative sector, automation, and the transition from stable employment to the gig economy—represent capital's (often disorganized) response to what Franco "Bifo" Berardi calls workers' "withdrawal from exploitation."[18] The growing demand for authenticity in porn might be understood not only as a way for capital to tap new commodities but also as part of capital's anxious response to workers' (and consumers') rejection of alienated labor.[19] As with framings of porn as an escape from work, authenticity *can* be an alternative to alienation and it can also create new forms of estrangement for workers.

Again, workers are often one step ahead—this is why I use the language of "struggle" rather than "resistance" (which suggests a certain reactivity). One performer showed me her contract with a major production company, naming each clause the company had added in honor of the performer whose workaround had inspired it. "Every time one of us would find a loophole, [in] the next contract they made sure [to close it]," she said.[20] But the next workers found new ones—this performer circumvented contract rules by building up a reserve of trade scenes (filmed for no pay with colleagues and friends) she would release once her contract ended. The contract said she could not "work" for anyone else but had no authority over unpaid and as yet unreleased footage. Here, as elsewhere, managers do what they can to try to discipline workers, but they do so with limited foresight, reacting to workers' maneuvers and always in partial ways. Taking workers seriously as agents of struggle (and taking everyday acts seriously as evidence of that struggle) is particularly crucial in making sense of porn, a site in which workers exercise significant power and one in which both pitying and disdainful—there is so little distance between the two—outsiders are committed to imaging that they have none.

Subtly flouting managerial power on set or producing one's own content to avoid giving someone else a cut is not the same as organizing a porn union to bargain collectively, but these methods undermine traditional lines of power nonetheless. Experiencing paid sex as more rewarding and more pleasurable than unpaid sex may not be a militant confrontation with patriarchal capitalism, but it does take aim at its foundational assumption that sex should be private and free. These are all part of a broader landscape of struggle. As Marxist feminist theorist Mariarosa Dalla Costa reminds us, "Every opportunity is a good one."[21] And crafty strategies—what anthropologist James Scott famously called "infrapolitics"—are not a poor substitute for more formal ones.[22] Porn workers taught me this. I came to

this project looking for formal pushback such as traditional union organizing and political lobbying (and found plenty), but interviewees disabused me of the idea that these are workers' best tools.

John Holloway, writing in the heterodox Marxist tradition, describes anti-capitalist world making using the language of cracks—"moment[s] in which we assert a different type of doing."[23] Holloway cautions against reading these dismissively, lest we prevent the cracks from spreading. Desires to free oneself from the harms of waged work are a kind of crack in its edifice, even if the types of doing they invite—becoming a boss oneself or opening up one's whole life to the market to avoid clocking in—are not all that different, in practice, right now. In the same spirit, seemingly individualized means of struggle are not directly opposed to collective ones. Informal struggle is often collective work, and the creative strategies detailed in this book depend on networks of mutual aid, information sharing, and trade labor.

For the most robust infrapolitical vision, we need Black feminist and queer-of-color critique's commitments to daily acts of refusal and what L. H. Stallings talks about as the radical potential of "imagination."[24] These traditions find cracks in unexpected places and refuse a hierarchy of which ones matter most. Here, cultivating the "pleasure and alrightness" Roderick Ferguson finds where we are told they should not exist and, per Sara Ahmed, not wanting the things we are told to want both count.[25] This is not to make us feel that things are okay even as nothing really changes, and it is not to say that such forms of pushback are radical in any simple way. Instead, it is to appreciate all the ways these strategies chip away at the status quo, even as they sometimes also maintain it. Queer theory's commitment to the both/and is a dialectical one.

Only some of the interlocutors in this book are part of these traditions' core constituencies, and my aim is not to obscure the specificity of their interventions. As the sex work theorist Vanessa Carlisle put it, you do not need to be a sex worker to write about it well, "but you do need to understand a liberation struggle when you see one."[26] I think this is also true of thinkers who do not directly address sexual labor but nonetheless have something to offer our understanding of it. Throughout this book, I engage thinkers who best understand what it looks like to fight with the resources one has.

This perspective is particularly crucial for doers and theorists (often the same people) of racialized, feminized, and otherwise contingent labor, whose marginal status in relation to organized labor and the state has

forced them to get creative. Feminist historian Annelise Orleck writes that "we are all fast food workers now" and suggests we pay attention to the nimble strategies precarious workers with a longer historical memory use to organize against "contingent, commodified labor to whom no one owes anything."[27] Here again, lack of access to conventional means of organizing brings not just vulnerability but also sharper vision. Cathy Cohen's now classic Black feminist and queer rejoinder reminds that respectability can hobble the political imagination.[28] This bears out in the ways many workers who once enjoyed a limited compromise with capital and the state (such as mainstream trade unionists) now find themselves with limited tools in the face of its breakdown. It may be better to begin with the perspective, as the sex worker activist collective Hacking// Hustling puts it, that "any system can be hacked, any system can be hustled."[29]

Throughout this book, porn workers' critiques suggest that waged work cannot be recuperated. Even those who do not claim anti-capitalist politics point to irresolvable tensions inherent in waged work as a mode of organizing working life, and most are unconvinced that different bosses or changes to policy will fully resolve these conflicts. "You have to work, you have no choice," Samantha Grace told me, and while she said porn work was better by far than the retail jobs she had done before, she also detailed the ways it reproduced many of the same harms.[30] Not least was the pressure to "make a living" in the first place. Porn work was better than retail because Grace could be her own boss, she said, but that did not resolve the basic problem with the compulsion to work.

This is in line with antiwork Marxism, which maintains that what Kathi Weeks calls "the problem with work" runs deeper than poorly designed policy or the wrong people in charge.[31] Rather than a call for better work, antiwork thinkers advocate a radical departure from work as such. In conversation with workers who "didn't want control; they wanted out," they imagine ways of organizing social and economic life that deconstruct the idea that a living is something we should earn.[32] Tinkering with or sanding off the rough edges of work will not get us there. And precarity, on its own, is not the problem. In any case, there is no going back—the conditions that created limited security for a privileged subset of mostly white, male workers in the mid-twentieth century are gone.[33] Workers wanted more even then, before benefits got slashed and wage stagnation set in. "We must construct an alternative starting point," write Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri.[34] Porn workers do not yearn for a return to the

factory or cubicle farm, nor do they look backward to an imagined time when sex and money were neatly disentangled.

If porn workers tend to share antiwork critics' skepticism that reform will be enough, most do not fully embrace the refusal of work that is at the heart of antiwork politics. Instead, most look for apertures for pushback within existing structures, or what I will call "politics for the meantime." They want access to the means of production, legibility (and perhaps even respectability) as workers and sexual subjects, and policy shifts that will make working conditions better *now*. Most would rather be a boss than have one disciplined by collective bargaining or the state. None of these things, on their own, will do much to disrupt porn's (or other waged work's) fundamental dynamics of exploitation and extraction. Some keep these dynamics exactly in place, only with a kinder, gentler face. Performer-producers, for example, can reproduce the same dynamics they seek to avoid.

Small changes, whether in the realm of policy or in individual efforts to be your own boss so that you do not have to work under one, risk strengthening the very systems that harm. And yet, a wholesale rejection of such tweaks risks sacrificing the immediate needs of those most impacted in favor of long-range aims they may never see.[35] When I asked Richie Calhoun about the benefits available to performers, he responded, "We have nothing. We have no medical insurance, we have no union, we have no residuals or royalties."[36] Those things would not resolve all the problems with work—mainstream actors with union representation attest to as much—but they would make a difference in the meantime. Beyond this, even the demands that do strengthen systems that harm rarely do only that. When José Esteban Muñoz tells us "feeling revolutionary is feeling that our current situation is not enough," the point is to understand dissatisfaction as critique.[37] Porn workers' feelings that current conditions are not enough, even if in the immediate this means that most would rather be a boss than have none at all, undermine pieces of the work ethic even if they preserve others. These contradictions do not cancel each other out. A politics for the meantime hopes to hold them in tension.

Porno dialectics are messier than conventional stories of classed struggle because class boundaries are less calcified here. Porn workers are very rarely only *workers*. Instead, they occupy constantly shifting class positions as entrepreneurs, independent contractors, formal employees, contracted and freelance managers, and producers. This shapes and reshapes their perspectives in countless ways. Of the workers I interviewed

who were current performers at the time, all but one had also occupied other positions in the industry. This is not a testament to sampling that skewed toward an elite "labor aristocracy." To the contrary, performers with less social and economic capital rely most on creative arrangements such as doing trade shoots and producing their own low-budget scenes.[38] Workers who encounter the poorest treatment when they work under a boss are quickest to try to escape those hierarchies. "A lot of the brothers were quick to start their own companies so that they could have more of a say," explained performer, director, and producer Mr. Marcus of Black performers-cum-managers.[39] "How can we demand [a say] if we're not even represented in the production process?" he asked, adding, "You have to get in there, you can't just be a performer." Most porn workers succeed at this at least some of the time, and this places them in liminal spaces in relationship to the regulatory state and also scholarship and activism: prevailing assumptions about porn (or work in general, for that matter) as a contest between powerful managers and vulnerable workers break down.

In porn as elsewhere, most workers do not want to be *workers*. As thirty-nine-year veteran performer Herschel Savage put it, "Not owning your product, you're in a desperate place. Any time you're depending on people for your livelihood, you're in bad shape, no matter what the industry."[40] This has important implications for this book. It means, first, that most interviewees' perspectives are not coming from a simple place of working-class consciousness. Because workers do not want it, such purity is not something to valorize or try to recuperate. The necessity of beginning with a "different starting point" applies here, too.[41] This represents a significant departure from the majority of Marxist thought, which tends to view class positions as relatively static. The Marxist feminist geographers writing under the name J. K. Gibson-Graham advocate an alternative, "anti-essentialist" class analysis, which takes class seriously without tidying it up.[42] Here, we take part in class processes rather than inhabit fixed class identities. It is not that workers misunderstand their own interests but that those interests are shifting. This is true in the broader history of sex work, where the common transition from worker to madam placed worker-managers in the position of reasserting the dynamics of extraction to which they had once been subject.[43]

If porn makes a mess of class, it still remains true that "every kind of thinking, without exception, is stamped with the brand of a class."[44] Porn work's class formations shape interviewees' perspectives on matters ranging from employment law to fair working conditions. Interviewees

acknowledged this, explicitly connecting their analyses to the role(s) they occupy. Performer, director, and producer Joanna Angel put it this way: "Sometimes, I feel like I'm part of the man, so I might not have the same point of view as a lot of other people."[45] When porn's producer-funded trade organization, the Free Speech Coalition, tried to get involved in performer organizing, one performer told me, "They're out of the producer's interest. They shouldn't be meddling."[46] But it is tricky, she added, because so many performers are also managers. "Find me one performer," she said, "who's been in the industry for two years and has never directed for a company, never directed for their own website, and never produced a scene for a Clips4Sale store."

Class positions in porn are slippery, but they matter. Rather than evacuate class of meaning, then, I pay attention to subjects' own sharp analyses of how the class position(s) they inhabit at any given moment shape their perspectives. When I use the terms "worker" and "manager," I mean to signal temporary locations rather than permanent identities. It is possible to speak as a manager and not *be* one. Porn's recent history can be understood as a path toward these uneven and shifting dynamics.

A SHORT HISTORY OF PORN WORK

Rich historical work details porn's history from the perspectives of representational norms, technological and policy change, and porn's central location in the history of the feminist sex wars.[47] Here I offer a short history of changing production practices with an eye for the working conditions they engender and the forms of misuse they open up. It is a history structured by significant change and also points of continuity. First, some constants: Contingent workers creatively navigating varied gigs—rather than stars making a living off porn exclusively—continues to be more the rule than the exception in the world of porn work. Foremost among workers' creative interventions has been taking control over the means of production when they can. From this perspective, the twenty-first century's move toward radically democratized digital production is the most seismic shift in porn's history. Here again, contradiction rules. Wider markets mean more competition for existing producers, directors, and performers but also class mobility for performers and entry points for those who had been previously excluded.

Porn stardom is a recent invention, and it looms larger in most stories about porn than in the day-to-day experience of working. For the bulk of

the twentieth century, most porn workers were uncredited and sometimes even faceless in the final cut. Stag films, loops (single scenes, often shown in peep shows), and sexploitation films offered low pay and no chance of stardom to performers.[48] Anticipating the "gig work" scholars would name decades later, a contingent workforce could use this kind of porn work to supplement working-class incomes, often as part of a broader sex work hustle.

The dawn of "porno chic" and the "Golden Age" of the 1970s changed how porn was produced and consumed, though a smaller, quieter market of loops persisted. Big-budget, theatrically released films such as *Deep Throat* and *The Devil in Miss Jones* brought high profits for producers, visibility for *some* performers, and the promise of mainstream respectability. The Golden Age's larger budgets and far greater profits—*Deep Throat* grossed upward of $30 million in ticket sales—did not, however, translate into significantly better pay for performers in the celebrated films of the time.[49] Performers were just figuring out how to leverage their negotiating power, and a centralized (and often mob-backed) network of producers and distributors controlled access to production and distribution.[50] Like others who worked during this period, prolific performer and director Carter Stevens said there was "no money" in porn performance at the time.[51] Here, too, most performers used porn gigs as a supplementary income source and, sometimes, an avenue for creative and sexual expression. The Golden Age's wide-release, plot-driven films drew creatives who felt pushed out of Hollywood and stage acting and found in porn an opportunity to practice their craft. Porn work drew performers who wanted a "chance to make movies" and made space for sexual "outlaws" who wanted to flout social norms, Stevens said.

The hefty costs of theatrical production and distribution made for high barriers to entry for performers who wanted to direct and produce their own material, helping to maintain a rigid class hierarchy. But big-budget films did not fully supplant the low-budget loops producers could sell to peep shows and smaller theaters. If one could access the necessary production equipment and distribution channels, loops made it possible to produce one's own material and short-circuit the social relations of the wage. Then as now, low-budget production could make for better (if less prestigious) work because workers could take control. "There were no real directors; I became a producer to hire myself as a director," Stevens said, gesturing to porn work's most enduring route to class mobility. Then as now, not all performers want to produce their own material.

Self-production requires a different skill set, and some would rather come to set, do the job, get paid, and go home. But the potential for self-production gives workers leverage to the extent that managers face the threat of their own obsolescence.

By the mid-1980s, video would supplant both loops and the theatrically released films associated with the Golden Age. The transition from theaters to video brought a bigger consumer market and cheaper production technology and with it a wave of new producers in search of quick profit. For those producers who could afford to play, shrinking production costs coincided with booming profits.[52] The cost of video-filming equipment was still out of reach for most performers, and distribution remained concentrated among capitalized producers who could access wide distribution networks to video stores around the country.

The transition to video had contradictory effects for porn workers. Some performers were able to parlay video's booming profits into higher earnings, and studios' larger advertising budgets helped make some porn performers *stars*.[53] Elite performers could find job security and higher rates through exclusive contracts, performing a set number of scenes for the same production company. Some performers parlayed their new stardom into self-production through their own production companies.[54] Even those with less star power and start-up capital could strike out on direct-to-consumer side hustles that reduced their financial dependence on managers. Paid fan clubs, for example, let performers charge fans for monthly newsletters, and the porn star strip club circuit exploded at this time. Decades later, such direct fan interaction would come to be the surest route to earnings in an industry racked by piracy.

For others, video meant degraded bargaining power and the diffusion of support networks. The Golden Age's small, tight-knit group of performers had found community with one another, and many veteran performers struggled to gain footing in video's impersonal, sped-up production culture.[55] As Jeffrey Escoffier details in his history of gay porn, the HIV/AIDS epidemic radically reshaped the content and conditions of porn production during this same time.[56] Across genres, bargaining power vis-à-vis management took on new stakes.

The shift away from dialogue-heavy theatrical releases and toward sex scenes strung together with little narrative[57] had broken open the pool of those who might be eligible to take on porn work, since directors no longer had to rely on the relatively small population of performers comfortable with both screen acting and screen sex. Performance labor became less

specialized, and with some exceptions among the top stars of the era, individual workers lost the limited bargaining power they had had. Veteran Golden Age performers, writes Peter Alilunas, "were joined by thousands of new, often forgettable faces, rapidly entering and exiting the business."[58] At the same time, widened markets meant expanded opportunities for new performer communities. As porn featuring Black women became a "recognizable subgenre focused on racial difference," writes Mireille Miller-Young, Black actors gained new access to the industry.[59] Porn's history bears this out again and again—bigger, more diffused markets mean more competition for existing workers but also work opportunities for those who had been previously excluded.

The mid-1990s transition to digital shook porn hard, marking a transition from a landscape of small business studios to what Miller-Young describes as a "globalized, corporate behemoth."[60] Profits shifted away from producers and to global distributors.[61] The transition from video to internet porn also made the industry vulnerable to piracy. By the mid-2000s, tube sites had mainstreamed and centralized pirated porn, further slashing profits for the producers who had dominated the video era. Tube sites that got their start in piracy would later consolidate a monopoly by buying up the studios they had bled dry, a story Shira Tarrant details in her mapping of the contemporary industry.[62] In the years that followed, directors would come to do contract work for hire for the same companies that had put their own small production studios out of business. Meanwhile, the performer pool grew larger still, rates got even lower, and long-term performer contracts were almost entirely replaced by a hypermobile gig economy that now even elite workers had to navigate.

Meanwhile, performers and low-wage contract directors still needed work. Many of the workers I interviewed graduated from college around the 2008 financial crisis and described mounting student debt and worsening job prospects in the straight workplace, including in the mainstream creative fields some had initially hoped to enter. In porn they found a better way to get by. Straight work's poor pay and working conditions (not least among them the boredom and inflexibility that characterize straight work even in robust economies) worsened in the years that followed, ensuring a stream of workers who sought an alternative in porn work. This creates a glutted labor market but one that is also open to a range of workers' creative interventions. Millennials are, famously (and much to employers' chagrin), both soured on the unfulfilled promises of

waged work and media savvy, two things that help them figure out ways to make porn work for them.[63]

Classed power relations are under constant revision, and many workers found more competition for fewer gigs and reduced negotiating power in the industry during the 2010s. "When I was in the business [in the early to mid-2000s] it was a lot different than it is now," VJ told me. "Now, you're so easily replaced."[64] Current performers agree. "When I hear models negotiate now, I'm just like, 'You're pretty brave,'" Christopher Daniels told me. "If you don't want to do it, they'll find somebody that will."[65] Along with compressed wages, workers also face increasing demands to shoulder the costs of doing business. Larger studios once paid for performers' sexually transmitted infection (STI) tests, a full set wardrobe, and a hair and makeup artist. Now, workers almost always bear these costs.

Managers say that cost-cutting measures are necessary to stay in business as profits shrink. "The traditional business models of 'Big Porn Inc.' are facing severe challenges" from both aggregate piracy sites and direct-to-consumer distribution, write Rebecca Sullivan and Alan McKee.[66] But as privately held companies, studios' books are closed—we do not know how much producers as a whole are making or what their rate of surplus value is. Some company owners did show me their numbers, demonstrating that profits have indeed dropped significantly. While a producer could expect to quadruple their investment in the late 1990s, it might only double today. These are profits nonetheless, and producers calculate rates like business owners under capitalism do. The only question in deciding rates, explained performer, director, and producer Dave Pounder, is "What is the lowest rate I can pay people where I'd still get people to shoot for me?"[67]

Ironically, studios' efforts to exclude performers from porn's profits also isolate waged porn workers from the most immediate effects of piracy. Now as in previous years, performers get no royalties or residuals when they work for a wage—high studio profits have not, on the whole, made for better pay or long-term economic security historically. As Pounder suggests, most porn wages are as low as they can possibly be—everyday performers have never been able to depend on them, and they have had to find other means. And so while established producers are scrambling in the face of profits lost to piracy, most workers have found ways to make money whether or not customers pay for studio-produced scenes. Such scenes are, after all, "just a marketing tool" for many performers.[68] Performers use scenes as advertisements for their self-produced content,

personal websites, and services that engage consumers directly (such as webcam performance). Workers contend with a customer base that feels entitled to free sexual labor, but it is also true that a pirated scene advertises these products and services just as well as one that is paid for.

The skills precarious workers cultivate in order to get by can make them more agile than capital. Today, producers' best idea for circumventing piracy is to mimic the strategies performers developed years ago. Recorded scenes are vulnerable to piracy in ways direct consumer engagement is not, write Sullivan and McKee, and struggling producers now seek out "interactivity" as a profit source.[69] But there is not much producers can bring to "interactivity" that performers have not already figured out. Workers know what fans want because they are the people engaging with them. Traditional owners' and managers' efforts to isolate themselves from the daily grind of intimate labor also isolate them from the expertise it brings.

Most journalistic and academic accounts of piracy, like those of managers and owners, do not make an ethical distinction between pirating content owned by studios and pirating content from performers who own their own copyright. Workers say this distinction matters. Both forms of expropriation, the wage relationship is distinct from piracy only by matter of degree. If pirating a studio's scene impacts performers peripherally when it filters down to less content produced over time, pirating scenes from performers' self-managed websites, sites that allow performers to sell digitized clips directly to consumers, and webcam performances all hit workers hard. Performers ask fans to #PayForYourPorn, and the explosion of direct-to-consumer distribution means that consumers can now do so more directly.

If the digital era opened porn up to the risks of piracy, it also democratized production in material ways, lowering the financial and technical threshold for producing a scene and opening porn up to whole new communities of creators, not least sex workers themselves.[70] In place of the video era's higher cost of filming and editing and insular distribution channels, digital brought the possibility of filming and editing on inexpensive equipment and opened up more direct distribution to consumers. Workers still contend with the third-party platforms most use to advertise and distribute material, and, as we will see, are constantly navigating the threats of web censorship, extractive platform fees, and algorithmic management. Even so, porn workers are less dependent on moneyed producers and directors than they have ever been. They use digital technology and the web to produce content more fully on their own terms, find paid work

even when established directors fail to see a market for their "niche," and retain ownership of their own product. So, while the transition from video to digital reduced profits for large-scale producers and the workers who depend most on waged scene work, it also made content creation—and ownership—accessible to new people.

Whereas the film and video eras placed the power to determine which bodies and sex acts were visible in porn in the hands of capitalized producers, today anyone can produce porn and distribute it online. This has resulted in a proliferation of pornographic content, particularly in the queer and feminist, fetish, and amateur markets.[71] Antiporn caricatures of who porn represents and the sexual stories it tells always obscured the whole story, and they reveal even less about what porn looks like today. It has been workers, often identifying market niches and ways of monetizing content where studios thought none existed, who broke open these new terrains. When we interviewed in 2014, Ela Darling, a performer, was in the initial stages of developing virtual-reality porn technology. Two years later, she had engineered the technology and become a popular speaker at mainstream tech industry events.[72] Porn has long been at the forefront of technological innovation; now sex workers, rather than capitalized producers and studios, are changing the shape of production. This is not to say that sex workers reliably get the spoils. The non–sex workers who own direct-to-consumer platforms appropriate both sex workers' ideas (and some say even their programming code) and a high percentage of their earnings.

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted production in the global porn industry. Pandemic working conditions are still very much in flux, but in many ways the pandemic meant an acceleration of trends that had long been under way, rather than a novel point of rupture. Performers who had already built fan followings on direct-to-consumer platforms could still maintain an income source through self-produced content and have greater control over safety protocols and partner choice. Once again, established studios' reliance on conventional modes of production made them less nimble. And established studios had less power to force people back to work than straight employers whose workers lacked access to ways of making money on their own.

At the same time, the mass turn to platform-enabled production intensified the dynamics of an already glutted labor market. Performers confronted platforms flooded with sex workers who previously relied on in-person work, newly unemployed straight workers trying their hand at sexual labor, and non–sex worker "tourists" looking to dabble in

it. Influencers and straight actors capitalized on the growing popularity of platforms such as OnlyFans while also distancing themselves from sex workers in stigmatizing ways. As in previous eras, crafty hustles were as vulnerable to labor market shifts as waged performance, and increased competition brought reduced bargaining power. Together with stigma and internet censorship, the same atomization that made at-home production both accessible and pandemic-safe also made it hard to build collective power. Workers had limited recourse when platforms' ever-changing terms of service agreements and payment structures threatened their livelihoods. Porn workers use platforms as tools for creative survival. At the same time, those platforms are largely unaccountable to the sex workers on whose labor they are built.

The porn *industry* as it has been traditionally understood does not exist. There is no powerful, centralized body of producers calling the shots. Porn's trade organization has limited power to organize management or set the terms for industry conduct, and porn's annual trade shows have shrunk dramatically. Meanwhile, porn's regional landscape is growing increasingly diffuse, with small-scale productions coming out of private homes around the world and not just the San Fernando Valley. The porn performer community, too, is less cohesive than it once was, and workers have to get creative about constructing networks for information sharing and mutual aid across distance.

When I use the term "industry," then, I am not gesturing to a monolithic or internally consistent body. Instead, I mean to indicate the heterogeneous array of studio executives, agents, producers, directors, technical set and postproduction workers, and performers—and the many people who occupy more than one of these locations—who make porn. This is the closest we will get to a porn industry at the turn of the 2020s. The industry may very well be in crisis, but in the rubble, workers have found countless ways to (sometimes) make that crisis work for them.

AGAINST REIFICATION

The lessons porn work offers about living within and against late capitalism only become available when we take it seriously as work and then read work dialectically. Most scholarship does not do this. Instead, porn scholarship overwhelmingly focuses on issues of representation and consumption. Meanwhile, sexuality studies work on porn and other sex work often turns away from their materiality, a reflection of what Brooke Beloso

calls "the feminist erasure of class."[73] Labor scholarship, on the other hand, has strenuously avoided critical engagement with porn and other sex work. "We don't seem to think about capitalism so much when we think about sex," writes Yasmin Nair.[74] For many straight-labor scholars, the reverse is also true—they don't seem to think about sex so much when they think about capitalism. This is in spite of Marxist feminists' persistent reminders that sex—paid and unpaid, on-screen and off—is work.[75] Taken together, these elisions contribute to the reification of porn, turning a work process into a product divorced from the conditions of its production. Reification is, classically, something that helps capital exploit working people. Scholars should not make this easier.

Anti-sex-worker feminists reify porn with a focus on the symbolic damage they say porn texts do.[76] For Catharine MacKinnon, understanding porn's harms "does not require noticing that pornography models are real women to whom something real is being done. . . . The aesthetic of pornography is itself the evidence."[77] Relating to porn workers only through "pictures of their bodies," writes Melissa Gira Grant, antiporn campaigners have more in common with consumers than they would like to imagine.[78] Living, breathing sex workers are, explicitly, not their constituency. They cannot be, we are told, because workers refuse to critique porn "for fear of industry retaliation."[79] But dozens of workers readily critiqued their bosses in our interviews; they also made clear that anti-sex-worker feminism is not for them. "These are people who to my face deny me my humanity," said Nina Ha®tley.[80]

A long history of feminist and queer work critiques the pro-censorship and sexually conservative underpinnings of antiporn feminist thought. For that task I turn readers to thinkers such as Lisa Duggan and Nan Hunter, Laura Kipnis, Jennifer Nash, Gayle Rubin, and Carole Vance, who have decisively won the academic "sex wars," if not policy makers' favor.[81] Here I will just add that, where class matters are concerned, anti-sex-worker feminists reproduce the very conditions they claim to contest. As Alice Echols has famously argued, anti-sex-worker "radical" feminists "abandoned transformative politics for the familiarity of sexual repression."[82] This is as much true in questions of political economy. Per Whitney Strub, where early feminist activism around porn focused on working conditions and control over the means of production, antiporn feminism would come to focus on women performers as "victimized pawns on a male chessboard."[83] This kind of thinking transforms a workplace—a site of struggle—into a dead text and workers—agents of struggle—into bodies passively "used."

Straight workplaces, meanwhile, emerge for anti-sex-worker feminists as nonviolent, respectable alternatives.[84] As Laura Kipnis suggests, antiporn thinkers maintain a strange romance with straight jobs.[85] To the extent that anti-sex-worker feminists have purchase, they help to spackle over the cracks in capitalism's artifice, making it that much harder for such cracks to spread. Anti-sex-worker feminists do this, ironically, while claiming a monopoly on anti-capitalist analysis.[86] It is not possible to destroy a system while pretending that its power is all-encompassing.

Porn studies scholarship offers an important rejoinder to antiporn feminist thought, arguing that porn, like other cultural texts, is produced and consumed in varied ways.[87] "Porn is film. . . . Porn is popular culture," insists media scholar Constance Penley, who calls upon scholars to ask of porn what they do of other cultural forms.[88] What accounts for its popular appeal? How does it both reflect and contest cultural norms? What are our investments in reading it in particular ways?[89] From film scholar Linda Williams's pioneering *Porn Studies* anthology to the newer journal of the same title, porn scholars have taken up these calls artfully.[90] But because much of this work is in the areas of cultural and media studies, and because porn studies as a field often frames itself in response to the limitations of antiporn feminism, here, too, we see a focus on porn as text.[91] Where the field turns to working conditions, it can tend to take for granted that better representational norms make for better work. *Porn Work* argues against the tendency to imagine that different bosses or images make for better working conditions and the celebration of "ethical" (typically feminist and queer) production.[92] Chapter 2 will return to the question of how ethical cultural products get measured. For now, I will just say that good branding does not equal good work.

Writing from an anti-capitalist feminist perspective, Helen Hester notes that porn studies struggles to reconcile its commitments to framing porn as a potentially transgressive medium with an understanding of porn as a commodity.[93] This helps explain why porn studies has had less to say about the everyday conditions of work. *Porn Work* intervenes, and, with a burst of attention to porn labor since I began work on this project, it is in increasingly good company. Here I am in conversation with scholarship focused on the work of performance, questions of regulation, and performers' confrontations with the politics of representation.[94] While its focus is on the day-to-day experience of working, *Porn Work* is also in conversation with macro-level analyses that argue for treating "porn as a normal business," as Georgina Voss puts it in her call for such work.[95]

Once we agree that porn is a "normal business," the question becomes, of course, what one thinks of normal businesses. Porn studies scholars argue that business under capitalism can mean different things, some of them emancipatory. Lynn Comella highlights the importance of context: "Branding anyone associated with the world of pornography as a 'predatory capitalist' fails to recognize that consumer capitalism is not fixed and unchanging. . . . The sexual marketplace, like other realms of consumer culture, can be used for socially progressive purposes."[96] And Eleanor Wilkinson urges against "paranoid readings" of porn that cannot imagine that it might sometimes exist "outside, or at least partially outside, capitalist frames" and finds in "alternative pornographies" such an outside.[97]

For working people, it is not so easy to be outside when there is rent to pay. This is true even when your boss is a friend, yourself, or a feminist. Imagining that we are already outside risks pushing us deeper in still, so *Porn Work* is more interested in the ways workers are struggling *against* extraction rather than comfortably *outside* of it. This is not a story of quiet acquiescence. In understanding sex "as a form of work," *Porn Studies* editors Clarissa Smith and Feona Attwood write that "sex-critical" scholarship "leaves out the possibilities of bodies and pleasure creating sites of resistance."[98] From a dialectical perspective, though, it is precisely through framing porn as work that the potential for resistance (or struggle, as I highlight here) becomes legible. Porn studies' retreat from dialectical materialist thinking makes sense as a response to anti-sex-worker thinkers' claimed monopoly on anti-capitalist analysis—its distorted use leaves a bitter taste. But *Porn Work* urges that we not give up that territory to those who use it cynically against working people.

The irony is, of course, that while I use Marxist labor theory as a tool for intervening in the scholarly conversation around porn, many Marxist thinkers are hobbled by their own commitments to bourgeois morality and sex worker exclusion. Marxists have on the whole been more interested in framing sex work as a debased limit case for capitalism's harms than as a site of struggle. Sex work is, for Nadezhda Krupskaya, the "grave of human relations."[99] It is, to be sure, where many Marxists' dialectical commitments so often go to die.[100] In this, they are joined by anti-sex-worker feminists who identify as anti-capitalist but limit their critique to sex work. Using paid sex as an alibi for all that is broken both reinforces the stigma sex workers say harms them and shields all other industries from critique. Together with workers, Marxist feminists have warned against this for

decades. In 1981, Leopoldina Fortunati wrote that Marxism's "moralistic, 'redemptionist' attitude towards prostitution" is "blind, manipulative and violent, as well as being politically non-productive."[101] This book is interested in what anti-capitalist frameworks that refuse such violent moralism can produce. One of those things is a critique of work as such.

Sex worker theorists refuse to let straight work off the hook. "I knew the work was not how anti-sex-work feminists described it," writes Lorelei Lee. "I knew it was as good and as terrible as other, lower-wage work I'd done."[102] Where the porn workers in this book point to the terrible parts, their demand is for better conditions, not pity, rescue, or a return to the same straight jobs they left for porn. Per Melissa Gira Grant, "Sex workers shouldn't have to defend the existence of sex work in order to have the right to do it free from harm."[103] Many of the workers in this book do not defend porn work as it exists right now—some have sharp critiques of it—and I cannot stop anti-sex-worker thinkers from appropriating their or my words in order to shore up systems that harm. I can only offer the reminder that any conditions non-sex-worker readers find troubling here are also a problem closer to home. "Civilians," as sex workers call them, also have bad bosses, boring sex, and workdays that strain. They are, we know, vulnerable to harassment, retaliation, and wage theft, among other forms of workplace violence. Rejecting what Gayle Rubin calls the "fallacy of misplaced scale," porn workers insist that the sex in sex work does not, on its own, make porn's workplace harms more serious.[104]

Throughout this book, I engage with Marxist labor theory and also highlight the fault lines that get revealed when we read it through a porn work lens. The anxiety about the "new" crisis in commodifying the personal, for example, betrays an ignorance of the strategies sex workers have long used to navigate market intimacy. And concerns about the gig economy read only crisis in the downfall of the forty-hour week, when sex workers make very clear that flexibility is a resource as much as it is a source of risk. Knowing that the state is no ally, sex workers have more expertise in mutual aid and community self-defense than many straight workers. And sex workers have more interesting things to say about sexual politics than people wedded to the bourgeois idea that sex should be private and free.

This book is indebted to writing on the political economy of sex work, which uses labor theory to make sense of sexual labor, but also advances critiques of capitalism that get us past the limitations of Marxist orthodoxy. In spite of the enduring narrative that perspectives on sex work tend to uncomplicatedly view sex workers as either hapless victims *or* free market

agents, a wealth of sex work research refuses this dichotomy.[105] Sex work scholars have been at the vanguard of theorizing constrained agency, a framework that, per theorist Clare Hemmings, takes "agency seriously precisely in order to understand how power works."[106] *Porn Work* is particularly indebted to research that situates sexual labor within the context of broader trends in global late-capitalist markets,[107] underscores how public policy produces the very vulnerabilities is purports to address,[108] theorizes emotional labor,[109] and investigates workers' organizing histories.[110] Finally, a burgeoning movement in sex work activism and scholarship frames work itself as the problem with sex work and uses sex work as a lens through which to critique the conditions of work under capitalism.[111] Thinkers in this tradition push for recognizing sex work as *work* and improving conditions within it but also, as Kate Hardy puts it, imagining what it might look like to "refuse work itself."[112]

Sex work may be especially well suited for this latter project because sex workers have long pursued sexual labor not just as an economic survival strategy but also as a way to refuse more extractive and less pleasureful ways of working and living. Black feminist histories of sex work in particular highlight this productive tension.[113] In this spirit, L. H. Stallings positions sex workers as resisters of an "antierotic, sex-negative, and work-centric" society and urges against framings that obscure this force.[114] Porn work is not *just* work for all workers all of the time. Sometimes it is a way to refuse at least some of work's harms and imagine worlds otherwise. *Porn Work* takes that seriously while also remembering that porn is how the bills get paid and often in ways that are neither particularly erotic nor a radical departure from the mundane harms of work under capitalism. As the sex worker theorist femi babylon puts it, "Because capitalism is compulsory, it's difficult to engage almost any labor as symbolic of antiwork." And yet, she urges us to ask, "can we move beyond 'sex work is work'? Perhaps to engaging the phrase 'sex work is (anti)work'?"[115] Porn workers navigate the work question in the context of that tension.

In their critique of sex positivity and the "happy hooker" myth, sex worker theorists Juno Mac and Molly Smith write, "Those who do experience sexual gratification at work are likely to be those who already have the most control over their working conditions."[116] This is a position I am sympathetic to and the one I came to this project with, but complicating conversations with porn workers in the intervening years have troubled it for me.[117] This book shares a critique of sex positivity; as sex work writer and activist Audacia Ray puts it, "The sex positive movement is bad for

sex workers' rights."[118] This is not least because the sex-positive movement has little energy for questions of class. I am, however, interested in a materialist analysis of how working people wrest pleasure where they can. We know that workers steal everyday pleasures in other working-class jobs: camaraderie, unauthorized breaks, workplace theft—all these things can be pleasureful even when work is compelled and our room to maneuver limited. For the workers who gave their time and insights to this project, moments of pleasure did not line up with social privilege in any simple way. Pleasure can be a way to take control rather than evidence of already having it.

OKSANA ZABUZHKO

(UKRAINE, 1960–)

Letter from the Summer House

Dear _____,
The land's rusty again.
Acid rain: our blackened cucumber vines
Jut from the earth like scorched wire.
And I'm not sure about the orchard this year.
It needs a good cleaning up,
But I'm scared of those trees. When I walk
Among them, it feels like I'm going to step
On some carcass rotting in the tall grass,
Something crawling with worms, something smiling
Sickly in the hot sun.
And I get nervous over the sounds:
The day before yesterday, in the thicket, meowing,
The monotonous creaking of a tree,
The suppressed cackling of geese—all constantly
Straining for the same note. Do you remember
The dry elm, the one lightning turned
Into a giant charred bone last summer?
Sometimes I think it lords
Over the whole garden, infecting everything with rabid madness.
How do mad trees act?
Maybe they run amok like derailed streetcars. Anyway,
I keep an axe by the bed, just in case.
At least the butterflies are mating: we'll have
Caterpillars soon. Oh yes, the neighbour's daughter
Gave birth—a boy, a bit overdue. He had hair and teeth
Already, and could be a mutant,
Because yesterday, only nine days old, he shouted,
"Turn off the sky!", and hasn't said a word since.
Otherwise, he's a healthy baby.
So, there it is. If you can get away
For the weekend, bring me something to read,

Preferably in the language I don't know.
The ones I call mine are exhausted.

Kisses, love, O.

Translated from the Ukrainian by Douglas Smith

Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò

Being-in-the-Room Privilege: Elite Capture and Epistemic Deference

"I abandoned the pitch because I don't think I'm the right person to write this story – I have no idea what it's like to be Black... I can send you the Google doc with my notes, too?"

I flinched inwardly. It was an innocent and properly motivated offer: Helen, a freelance journalist, was offering to give up something for me, stemming from her concern to live out an ethos of racial justice. But I worried that it was also a trap.

Even setting aside the mistake about the power dynamics of the conversation (I am Black, but also a tenure-track professor), there was a problem here that I had seen many times before. Behind the assumption that I had experiential insight she lacked was the recognizable cultural imprint of a much discussed, polarizing perspective on knowledge and politics: standpoint epistemology.

If you consider a textbook definition of standpoint epistemology, it may be hard to see the controversy around this idea. The *International Encyclopedia of Philosophy* boils it down to three innocuous-sounding contentions:

1) Knowledge is socially situated
2) Marginalized people have some positional advantages in gaining some forms of knowledge
3) Research programs ought to reflect these facts.

Liam Kofi Bright argues persuasively that these contentions are derivable from a combination of 1) basic empiricist commitments,

and 2) a minimally plausible account of how the social world affects what knowledge groups of people are likely to seek and find.

So, if the problem isn't the basic idea, what is it?

I think it's less about the core ideas and more about the prevailing norms that convert them into practice. The call to "listen to the most affected" or "centre the most marginalized" is ubiquitous in many academic and activist circles. But it's never sat well with me. In my experience, when people say they need to "listen to the most affected", it isn't because they intend to set up Skype calls to refugee camps or to collaborate with houseless people. Instead, it has more often meant handing conversational authority and attentional goods to those who most snugly fit into the social categories associated with these ills – regardless of what they actually do or do not know, or what they have or have not personally experienced. In the case of my conversation with Helen, my racial category tied me more "authentically" to an experience that neither of us had had. She was called to defer to me by the rules of the game as we understood it. Even where stakes are high – where potential researchers are discussing how to understand a social phenomenon, where activists are deciding what to target – these rules often prevail.

The trap wasn't *that* standpoint epistemology was affecting the conversation, but *how*. Broadly, the norms of putting standpoint epistemology into practice call for practices of deference: giving offerings, passing the mic, believing. These are good ideas in many cases, and the norms that ask us to be ready to do them stem from admirable motivations: a desire to increase the social power of marginalized people identified as sources of knowledge and rightful targets of deferential behaviour. But deferring

in this way as a rule or default political orientation can actually work counter to marginalized groups' interests, especially in elite spaces.

Some rooms have outsize power and influence: the Situation Room, the newsroom, the bargaining table, the conference room. Being in these rooms means being in a position to affect institutions and broader social dynamics by way of deciding what one is to say and do. Access to these rooms is itself a kind of social advantage, and one often gained through some prior social advantage. From a societal standpoint, the "most affected" by the social injustices we associate with politically important identities like gender, class, race, and nationality are disproportionately likely to be incarcerated, underemployed, or part of the 44 percent of the world's population without internet access – and thus both left out of the rooms of power and largely ignored by the people in the rooms of power. Individuals who make it past the various social selection pressures that filter out those social identities associated with these negative outcomes are most likely to be in the room. That is, they are most likely to be in the room precisely because of ways in which they are systematically *different from* (and thus potentially unrepresentative of) the very people they are then asked to represent in the room.

I suspected that Helen's offer was a trap. She was not the one who set it, but it threatened to ensnare us both all the same. Broader cultural norms – the sort set in motion by prefacing statements with "As a Black man…" – cued up a set of standpoint-respecting practices that many of us know consciously or unconsciously by rote. However, the forms of deference that often follow are ultimately self-undermining and only reliably serve "elite capture": the control over political agendas and resources by a group's most advantaged people. If we want to use stand-

point epistemology to challenge unjust power arrangements, it's hard to imagine how we could do worse.

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To say what's wrong with the popular, deferential applications of standpoint epistemology, we need to understand what makes it popular. A number of cynical answers present themselves: some (especially the more socially advantaged) don't genuinely want social change – they just want the *appearance* of it. Alternatively, deference to figures from oppressed communities is a performance that sanitizes, apologizes for, or simply distracts from the fact that the deferrer has enough "in the room" privilege for their "lifting up" of a perspective to be of consequence.

I suspect there is some truth to these views, but I am unsatisfied. Many of the people who support and enact these deferential norms are rather like Helen: motivated by the right reasons, but trusting people they share such rooms with to help them find the proper practical expression of their joint moral commitments. We don't need to attribute bad faith to all or even most of those who interpret standpoint epistemology deferentially to explain the phenomenon, and it's not even clear it would help. Bad "roommates" aren't the problem for the same reason that Helen being a good roommate wasn't the solution: the problem emerges from how the rooms themselves are constructed and managed.

To return to the initial example with Helen, the issue wasn't merely that I hadn't grown up in the kind of low-income, redlined community she was imagining. The epistemic situation was much worse than this. Many of the facts about me that made my life chances different from those of the people she was imagining were the very same facts that made me likely to be offered things

on their behalf. If I *had* grown up in such a community, we probably wouldn't have been on the phone together.

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Many aspects of our social system serve as filtering mechanisms, determining which interactions happen and between whom, and thus which social patterns people are in a position to observe. For the majority of the 20th century, the U.S. quota system of immigration made legal immigration with a path to citizenship almost exclusively available to Europeans (earning Hitler's regard as the obvious "leader in developing explicitly racist policies of nationality and immigration"). But the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act opened up immigration possibilities, with a preference for "skilled labour".

My parents' qualification as skilled labourers does much to explain their entry into the country and the subsequent class advantages and monetary resources (such as wealth) that I was born into. We are not atypical: the Nigerian-American population is one of the country's most successful immigrant populations (what no one mentions, of course, is that the 112,000 or so Nigerian-Americans with advanced degrees is utterly dwarfed by the 82 million Nigerians who live on less than a dollar a day, or how the former fact intersects with the latter). The selectivity of immigration law helps explain the rates of educational attainment of the Nigerian diasporic community that raised me, which in turn helps explain my entry into the exclusive Advanced Placement and Honours classes in high school, which in turn helps explain my access to higher education...and so on, and so on.

It is easy, then, to see how this deferential form of standpoint epistemology contributes to elite capture at scale. The rooms of

power and influence are at the end of causal chains that have selection effects. As you get higher and higher forms of education, social experiences narrow – some students are pipelined to PhDs and others to prisons. Deferential ways of dealing with identity can inherit the distortions caused by these selection processes.

But it's equally easy to see locally – in this room, in this academic literature or field, in this conversation – why this deference seems to make sense. It is often an improvement on the epistemic procedure that preceded it: the person deferred to may well be better epistemically positioned than the others in the room. It may well be the best we can do while holding fixed most of the facts about the rooms themselves: what power resides in them, who is admitted.

But these are the last facts we should want to hold fixed. Doing better than the epistemic norms we've inherited from a history of explicit global apartheid is an awfully low bar to set. The facts that explain who ends up in which room shape our world much more powerfully than the squabbles for comparative prestige between people who have already made it into the rooms. And when the conversation is about social justice, the mechanisms of the social system that determine who gets into which room often just *are* the parts of society we aim to address. For example, the fact that incarcerated people cannot participate in academic discussions about freedom that physically take place on campus is intimately related to the fact that they are locked in cages.

Deference epistemology marks itself as a solution to an epistemic and political problem. But not only does it fail to solve these problems, it adds new ones. One might think questions of justice ought to be primarily concerned with fixing disparities around

health care, working conditions, and basic material and interpersonal security. Yet conversations about justice have come to be shaped by people who have ever more specific practical advice about fixing the distribution of attention and conversational power. Deference practices that serve attention-focused campaigns (e.g. we've read too many white men, let's now read some people of colour) can fail on their own highly questionable terms: attention to spokespeople from marginalized groups could, for example, direct attention away from the need to change the social system that marginalizes them.

Elites from marginalized groups can benefit from this arrangement in ways that are compatible with social progress. But treating group elites' interests as necessarily or even presumptively aligned with full group interests involves a political naiveté we cannot afford. Such treatment of elite interests functions as a racial Reaganomics: a strategy reliant on fantasies about the exchange rate between the attention economy and the material economy.

Perhaps the lucky few who get jobs finding the most culturally authentic and cosmetically radical description of the continuing carnage are really winning one for the culture. Then, after we in the chattering class get the clout we deserve and secure the bag, its contents will eventually trickle down to the workers who clean up after our conferences, to slums of the Global South's megacities, to its countryside.

But probably not.

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A fuller and fairer assessment of what is going on with deference

and standpoint epistemology would go beyond technical argument, and contend with the emotional appeals of this strategy of deference. Those in powerful rooms may be "elites" relative to the larger group they represent, but this guarantees nothing about how they are treated in the rooms they are in. After all, a person privileged in an absolute sense (a person belonging to, say, the half of the world that has secure access to "basic needs") may nevertheless feel themselves to be consistently on the low end of the power dynamics they actually experience. Deference epistemology responds to real, morally weighty experiences of being put down, ignored, sidelined, or silenced. It thus has an important non-epistemic appeal to members of stigmatized or marginalized groups: it intervenes directly in morally consequential practices of giving attention and respect.

The social dynamics we experience have an outsize role in developing and refining our political subjectivity, and our sense of ourselves. But this very strength of standpoint epistemology – its recognition of the importance of perspective – becomes its weakness when combined with deferential practical norms. Emphasis on the ways we are marginalized often matches the world *as we have experienced it*. But, from a structural perspective, the rooms we never needed to enter (and the explanations of why we can avoid these rooms) might have more to teach us about the world and our place in it. If so, the deferential approach to standpoint epistemology actually prevents "centring" or even hearing from the most marginalized; it focuses us on the interaction of the rooms we occupy, rather than calling us to account for the interactions we don't experience. This fact about who is in the room, combined with the fact that speaking for others generates its own set of important problems (particularly when they are not there to advocate for themselves), eliminates pressures that might otherwise trouble the centrality of our own suffering – and of the suf-

fering of the marginalized people that *do* happen to make it into rooms with us.

The dangers with this feature of deference politics are grave, as are the risks for those outside of the most powerful rooms. For those who are deferred to, it can supercharge group-undermining norms. In *Conflict is Not Abuse*, Sarah Schulman makes a provocative observation about the psychological effects of both trauma and felt superiority: while these often come about for different reasons and have very different moral statuses, they result in similar behavioural patterns. Chief among these are misrepresenting the stakes of conflict (often by overstating harm) or representing others' independence as a hostile threat (such as failures to "centre" the right topics or people). These behaviours, whatever their causal history, have corrosive effects on individuals who perform them as well as the groups around them, especially when a community's norms magnify or multiply these behaviours rather than constraining or metabolizing them.

For those who defer, the habit can supercharge moral cowardice. The norms provide social cover for the abdication of responsibility: it displaces onto individual heroes, a hero class, or a mythicized past the work that is ours to do now in the present. Their perspective may be clearer on this or that specific matter, but their overall point of view isn't any less particular or constrained by history than ours. More importantly, deference places the accountability that is all of ours to bear onto select people – and, more often than not, a hyper-sanitized and thoroughly fictional caricature of them.

The same tactics of deference that insulate us from criticism also insulate us from connection and transformation. They prevent us from engaging empathetically and authentically with the struggles

of other people – prerequisites of coalitional politics. As identities become more and more fine-grained and disagreements sharper, we come to realize that "coalitional politics" (understood as struggle across difference) is, simply, politics. Thus, the deferential orientation, like that fragmentation of political collectivity it enables, is ultimately anti-political.

Deference rather than interdependence may soothe short-term psychological wounds. But it does so at a steep cost: it can undermine the epistemic goals that motivate the project, and it entrenches a politics unbefitting of anyone fighting for freedom rather than for privilege, for collective liberation rather than mere parochial advantage.

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How would a constructive approach to putting standpoint epistemology into practice differ from a deferential approach? A constructive approach would focus on the pursuit of specific goals or end results rather than avoiding "complicity" in injustice or adhering to moral principles. It would be concerned primarily with building institutions and cultivating practices of information-gathering rather than helping. It would focus on accountability rather than conformity. It would calibrate itself directly to the task of redistributing social resources and power rather than to intermediary goals cashed out in terms of pedestals or symbolism. It would focus on building and rebuilding rooms, not regulating traffic within and between them – it would be a world-making project: aimed at building and rebuilding actual structures of social connection and movement, rather than mere critique of the ones we already have.

The water crisis in Flint, Michigan presents a clear example of both the possibilities and limitations of refining our epistemic politics in this way. Michigan's Department of Environmental Quality (MDEQ), a government body tasked with the support of "healthy communities", with a team of fifty trained scientists at its disposal, was complicit in covering up the scale and gravity of the public health crisis from the beginning of the crisis in 2014 until it garnered national attention in 2015.

The MDEQ, speaking from a position of epistemic and political authority, defended the status quo in Flint. They claimed that "Flint water is safe to drink", and were cited in Flint Mayor Dayne Walling's statement aiming to "dispel myths and promote the truth about the Flint River" during the April 2014 transition to the Flint River water source. That transition was spearheaded under the tenure of the city's emergency manager Darnell Earley (an African-American, like many of the city residents he helped to poison). After the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) circulated a leaked internal memo from the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in July of 2014 expressing concern about lead in Flint water, the MDEQ produced a doctored report that put the overall measure of lead levels within federally mandated levels by mysteriously failing to count two contaminated samples.

The reaction from residents was immediate. The month after the switch in water source, residents reported that their tap water was discoloured and gave off an alarming odour. They didn't need their oppression to be "celebrated", "centred", or narrated in the newest academic parlance. They didn't need someone to understand what it felt like to be poisoned. What they needed was the lead out of their water. So they got to work.

The first step was to develop epistemic authority. To achieve this

they built a new room: one that put Flint residents and activists in active collaboration with scientists who had the laboratories that could run the relevant tests and prove the MDEQ's report to be fraudulent. Flint residents' outcry recruited scientists to their cause and led a "citizen science" campaign, further raising the alarm about the water quality and distributing sample kits to neighbours to submit for testing. In this stage, the alliance of residents and scientists won, and the poisoning of the children of Flint emerged as a national scandal.

But this was not enough. The second step – cleaning the water – required more than state acknowledgement: it required apportioning labour and resources to fix the water and address the continuing health concerns. What Flint residents received, initially, was a mix of platitudes and mockery from the ruling elite (some of this personally committed by a President that shared a racial identity with many of them). This year, however, it looks as though the tireless activism of Flint residents and their expanding list of teammates has won additional and more meaningful victories: the ongoing campaign is pushing the replacements of the problematic service lines to their final stage and is forcing the state of Michigan to agree to a settlement of $600 million for affected families.

This outcome is in no way a wholesale victory: not only will attorney fees cut a substantial portion of payouts, but the settlement cannot undo the damage that was caused to the residents. A constructive epistemology cannot guarantee full victory over an oppressive system by itself. No epistemic orientation can by itself undo the various power asymmetries between the people and the imperial state system. But it can help make the game a little more competitive – and deference epistemology isn't even playing.

The biggest threats to social justice attention and informational economies are not the absence of yet more jargon to describe, ever more precisely or incisively, the epistemic, attentional, or interpersonal afflictions of the disempowered. The biggest threats are the erosion of the practical and material bases for popular power over knowledge production and distribution, particularly that which could aid effective political action and constrain or eliminate predation by elites. The capture and corruption of these bases by well-positioned elites, especially tech corporations, goes on unabated and largely unchallenged, including: the corporate monopolization of local news, the ongoing destruction and looting of the journalistic profession, the interference of corporations and governments in key democratic processes, and the domination of elite interests in the production of knowledge by research universities and the circulation of the output of these distorted processes by established media organizations.

Confronting these threats requires leaving some rooms – and building new ones.

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The constructive approach to standpoint epistemology is demanding. It asks that we swim upstream: to be accountable and responsive to people who aren't yet in the room, to build the kinds of rooms we could sit in together, rather than merely judiciously navigating the rooms history has built for us. But this weighty demand is par for the course when it comes to the politics of knowledge: the American philosopher Sandra Harding famously pointed out that standpoint epistemology, properly understood, demands *more* rigour from science and knowledge production processes generally, not less.

But one important topic stands unaddressed. The deferential approach to standpoint epistemology often comes packaged with concern and attention to the importance of lived experience. Among these, traumatic experiences are especially foregrounded.

At this juncture, scholarly analysis and argument fail me. The remainder of what I have to say skews more towards conviction than contention. But the life of books has taught me that conviction has just as much to teach, however differently posed or processed, and so I press on.

I take concerns about trauma especially seriously. I grew up in the United States, a nation structured by settler colonialism, racial slavery, and their aftermath, with enough collective and historical trauma to go round. I also grew up in a Nigerian diasporic community, populated by many who had genocide in living memory. At the national and community level, I have seen a lot of traits of norms, personality, quirks of habit and action that I've suspected were downstream of these facts. At the level of individual experience, I've watched and felt myself change in reaction to fearing for my dignity or life, to crushing pain and humiliation. I reflect on these traumatic moments often, and very seldom think: "That was educational".

These experiences *can* be, if we are very fortunate, building blocks. What comes of them depends on how the blocks are put together: what standpoint epistemologists call the "achievement thesis". Briana Toole clarifies that, by itself, one's social location only puts a person in a position to know. "Epistemic privilege" or advantage is achieved only through deliberate, concerted struggle from that position.

I concede outright that this is certainly one possible result of the

experience of oppression: have no doubt that humiliation, deprivation, and suffering can build (especially in the context of the deliberate, structured effort of “consciousness raising”, as Toole specifically highlights). But these same experiences can also destroy, and if I had to bet on which effect would win most often, it would be the latter. As Agnes Callard rightly notes, trauma (and even the righteous, well-deserved anger that often accompanies it) can corrupt as readily as it can ennoble. Perhaps more so.

Contra the old expression, pain – whether borne of oppression or not – is a poor teacher. Suffering is partial, short-sighted, and self-absorbed. We shouldn’t have a politics that expects different: oppression is not a prep school.

When it comes down to it, the thing I believe most deeply about deference epistemology is that it asks something of trauma that it cannot give. Demanding as the constructive approach may be, the deferential approach is far more demanding and in a far more unfair way: it asks the traumatized to shoulder burdens alone that we ought to share collectively. When I think about my trauma, I don’t think about grand lessons. I think about the quiet nobility of survival. The very fact that those chapters weren’t the final ones of my story is powerful enough writing all on its own. It is enough to ask of those experiences that I am still here to remember them. Deference epistemology asks us to be less than we are – and not even for our own benefit. As Nick Estes explains in the context of Indigenous politics: “The cunning of trauma politics is that it turns actual people and struggles, whether racial or Indigenous citizenship and belonging, into matters of injury. It defines an entire people mostly on their trauma and not by their aspirations or sheer humanity”. This performance is not for the benefit of Indigenous people, but “for white audiences or institutions of power”.
I also think about James Baldwin’s realization that the things that

tormented him the most were “the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, who had ever been alive”. That I have survived abuse of various kinds, have faced near-death from both accidental circumstance and violence (different as the particulars of these may be from those around me) is not a card to play in gamified social interaction or a weapon to wield in battles over prestige. It is not what gives me a special right to speak, to evaluate, or to decide for a group. It is a concrete, experiential manifestation of the vulnerability that connects me to most of the people on this Earth. It comes between me and other people not as a wall, but as a bridge.

After a long discussion, I answered Helen’s offer with a proposal: why don’t we write something together?

SQUARES AND ANGLES (1918)

Houses in a line, in a line,
In a line there,
Squares, squares, squares,
Even people now have square souls,
Ideas in file, I declare,
And on their shoulders, angles wear.
Just yesterday I shed a tear and it
Oh, God, was square!

Alfonsina Storni

English translation by John A. Crow, John T. Reed, John E. Englekirk, Irving A. Leonard

preamble

Those were the days, when we were all at sea. It seems like yesterday to me. Species, sex, race, class: in those days none of this meant anything at all. No parents, no children, just ourselves, strings of inseparable sisters, warm and wet, indistinguishable one from the other, gloriously indiscriminate, promiscuous and fused. No generations. No future, no past. An endless geographic plane of micromeshing pulsing quanta, limitless webs of interacting blendings, leakings, mergings, weaving through ourselves, running rings around each other, heedless, needless, aimless, careless, thoughdess, amok. Folds and foldings, plying and multiplying, plicatihg and replicating. We had no definition, no meaning, no way of telling each other apart. We were whatever we were up to at the time. Free exchanges, microprocesses finely tuned, polymorphous transfers without regard for borders and boundaries. There was nothing to hang on to, nothing to be grasped, nothing to protect or be protected from. Insides and outsides did not count. We gave no thought to any such things. We gave no thought to anything at all. Every-

thing was there for the taking then. We paid no attention: it was all for free. It had been this way for tens, thousands, millions, billions of what were later defined as years. If we had thought about it, we would have said it would go on forever, this fluent, fluid world.

And then something occurred to us. The climate changed. We couldn't breathe. It grew terribly cold. Far too cold for us. Everything we touched was poisonous. Noxious gases and thin toxic airs flooded our oceanic zone. Some said we had brought it on ourselves, that all our activity had backfired, that we had destroyed our environment by an accident we had provoked. There were rumors of betrayal and sabotage, whisperings of alien invasion and mutant beings from another ship.

Only a few of us survived the break. Conditions were so terrible that many of those who did pull through wished they had died. We mutated to such an extent that we were unrecognizable to ourselves, banding together in units of a kind which, like everything, had been unthinkable before. We found ourselves working as slave components of systems whose scales and complexities we could not comprehend. Were we their parasites? Were they ours? Either way we became components of our own imprisonment. To all intents and purposes, we disappeared.

"Subtly, subtly, they become Invisible; wondrously, wondrously, they become soundless—they are thus able to be their enemies' Fates."

Sun Tzu, The Art *of War*

ada

In 1833, a teenage girl met a machine which she came to regard "as a friend." It was a futuristic device which seemed to have dropped into her world at least a century before its time.

Later to be known as Ada Lovelace, she was then Ada Byron, the only child of Annabella, a mathematician who had herself been dubbed Princess of Parallelograms by her husband. Lord Byron. The machine was the Difference Engine, a calculating system on which the engineer Charles Babbage had been working for many years. "We both went to see the thinking machine (for such it seems) last Monday," Annabella wrote in her diary. To the amazement of its onlookers, it "raised several Nos. to the 2nd & 3rd powers, and extracted the root of a quadratic Equation." While most of the audience gazed in astonishment at the machine, Ada "young as she was, understood its working, and saw the great beauty of the invention."

When Babbage had begun work on the Difference Engine, he was interested in the possibility of "making machinery to compute arithmetical tables." Although he struggled to persuade the British government to fund his work, he had no doubt about the feasibility and the value of such a machine. Isolating common mathematical differences between tabulated numbers, Babbage was convinced that this "method of differences supplied a general principle by which *all* tables might be computed through limited intervals, by one uniform process." By 1822 he had made a small but functional machine, and "in the year 1833, an event of great importance in the history of the engine occurred. Mr. Babbage had directed a portion of it.

consisting of sixteen figures, to be put together. It was capable of calculating tables having two or three orders of differences; and, to some extent, of forming other tables. The action of this portion completely justified the expectations raised, and gave a most satisfactory assurance of its final success."

Shortly after this part of his machine went on public display, Babbage was struck by the thought that the Difference Engine, still incomplete, had already superseded itself. "Having, in the meanwhile, naturally speculated upon the general principles on which machinery for calculation might be constructed, *a principle of an entirely new kind* occurred to him, the power of which over the most complicated arithmetical operations seemed nearly unbounded. On reexamining his drawings . . . the new principle appeared to be limited only by die extent of the mechanism it might require." If the simplicity of the mechanisms which allowed the. Difference Engine to perform addition could be extended to thousands rather than hundreds of components, a machine could be built which would "execute more rapidly the calculations for which the *Difference* Engine was intended; or, that the *Difference* Engine would itself be superseded by a far simpler mode of construction." The government officials who had funded Babbage's work on the first machine were not pleased to learn that it was now to be abandoned in favor of a new set of mechanical processes which "were essentially different from those of the Difference Engine." While Babbage did his best to persuade them that the. "fact of a new superseding an old machine, in a very few years, is one of constant occurrence in our manufactories; and instances might be pointed out in which the advance of invention has been so rapid, and the demand for machinery so great, that half-finished machines have been thrown aside as useless before their completion," Babbage's decision to proceed with his new

machine was also his break with the bodies which had funded his previous work. Babbage lost the support of the state, but he had already gained assistance of a very different kind.

"You are a brave man," Ada told Babbage, "to give yourself wholly up to Fairy-Guidance!—I advise you to allow yourself to be unresistingly bewitched . . ." No one, she added, "knows what almost *awful* energy & power He yet undevelopped in that *wiry* Htde system of mine."

In 1842 Louis Menabrea, an Italian military engineer, had deposited his *Sketch of the Analytical Engine Invented by Charles Babbage* in the BibHotheque Universelle de Geneve. Shortly after its appearance, Babbage later wrote, the "Countess of Lovelace informed me that she had translated the memoir of Menabrea." Enormously impressed by this work, Babbage invited her to join him in the development of the machine.. "I asked why she had not herself written an original paper on a subject with which she was so intimately acquainted? To this Lady Lovelace rephed that the thought had not occurred to her. I then suggested that she should add some notes to Menabrea's memoir; an idea which was immediately adopted."

Babbage and Ada developed an intense relationship. "We discussed together the various illustrations that might be introduced," wrote Babbage. "I suggested several, but the selection was entirely her own. So also was the algebraic working out of the different problems, except, indeed, that relating to the numbers of BernpulH, which I had offered to do to save Lady Lovelace the trouble. This she sent back to me for an amendment, having detected a grave mistake which I had made in the process."

"A strong-minded womanl Much like her mother, eh? Wears green spectacles and writes learned books . . . She wants

to upset the universe, and play dice with the hemispheres. Women never know when to stop ..

William Gibson and Bruce Sterling, ***The Difference Engine***

Babbage's mathematical errors, and many of his attitudes, gready irritated Ada. While his tendency to blame other bodies for the slow progress of his work was sometimes well founded, when he insisted on prefacing the publication of the memoir and her notes with a complaint about the attitude of the British authorities to his work, Ada refused to endorse him. "I never *can* or *will* support you in acting on principles which I consider not only wrong in themselves, but suicidal." She declared Babbage ''one of the most impracticable, selfish, & intemperate persons one can have to do with," and laid down several severe conditions for the continuation of their collaboration. "Can you," she asked, with undisguised impatience, "undertake to give your mind *wholly and undividedly,* as a primary object that no engagement is to interfere with, to die consideration of all those matters in which I shall at times require your intellectual *assistance* & *supervision;* & can you promise not to *slur* & *hurry* things over; or to mislay & allow confusion & mistakes to enter into documents &c?"

Ada was, she said, "very much *afraid* as yet of exciting the powers I *know I have over others, Sc* the *evidence* of which I have certainly been *most unwilling to admit,* in fact for a long/time considered quite fanciful and absurd ... I therefore carefully refrain from all attempts *intentionally* to exercise unusual powers." Perhaps this was why her work was simply attributed to A.A.L. "It is not my wish to *proclaim* who has written it," she wrote. These were just a few afterthoughts, a mere commentary on someone else's work. But Ada did want them to bear some name: "I rather wish to append anything that may tend hereaf-

ter to *individualize it & identify* it, with other productions of the said A.A.L." And for all her apparent modesty, Ada knew how important her notes really were. "To say the truth, I am rather *amazed* at them; & cannot help being struck quite *malgre moi,* with the really masterly nature of the style, & its Superiority to that of the Memoir itself." Her work was indeed vasdy more influential—and three times longer—than the text to which they were supposed to be mere adjuncts. A hundred years before the hardware had been built, Ada had produced the first example of what was later called computer programming.

matrices

Distinctions between the main bodies of texts and all their peripheral detail—indices, headings, prefaces, dedications, appendices, illustrations, references, notes, and diagrams—have long been integral to orthodox conceptions of nonfiction books and articles. Authored, authorized, and authoritative, a piece of writing is its own mainstream. Its asides are backwaters which might have been—and often are—compiled by anonymous editors, secretaries, copyists, and clerks, and while they may well be providing crucial support for a text which they also connect to other sources, resources, and leads, they are also sidelined and downplayed. ^

When Ada wrote her footnotes to Menabrea's text, her work was implicitly supposed to be reinforcing these hierarchical divisions between centers and margins, authors and scribes. Menabrea's memoir was the leading article; Ada's work was merely a compilation of supporting detail, secondary commentary, material intended to back the author up. But her notes

made enormous leaps of both quantity and quality beyond a text which turned out merely to be providing the occasion for her work.

Only when digital networks arranged themselves in threads and links did footnotes begin to walk all over what had once been (he bodies of organized texts. Hypertext programs and (he Net are webs of footnotes without central points, organizing principles, hierarchies. Such networks are unprecedented in terms of their scope, complexity, and the pragmatic possibilities of their use. And yet they are also—and have always been—immanent to all and every piece of written work. "The frontiers of a book," wrote Michel Foucault long before these modes of writing hypertext or retrieving data from the Net emerged, "are never clear-cut: beyond the tide, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within network."

Such complex patterns of cross-referencing have become increasingly possible, and also crucial to dealing with the floods of data which have burst the banks of traditional modes of arranging and retrieving information and are now leaking through the covers of articles and books, seeping past the boundaries of the old disciplines, overflowing all the classifications and orders of libraries, schools, and universities. And the sheer weight of data with which (he late twentieth century finds itself awash is only (he beginning of the pressures under which traditional media are buckling. If the "treatment of an irregular and complex topic *cannot be forced in any single direction* without curtailing the potential for transfer," it has suddenly become obvious (hat no topic is as regular and simple as was once assumed. Reality does not rim along the neat straight lines of the

printed page. Only by "criss-crossing the complex topical landscape" can the "twin goals of highlighting mnltifacetedness and establishing multiple connections" even begin to be attained. Hypertext makes it possible for "single (or even small numbers of) connecting threads" to be assembled into a " 'woven' interconnectedness" in which "strength of connection derives from the partial overlapping of many different strands of connectedness across cases rather than from any single strand running through large numbers of cases . . . "

"It must be evident how multifarious and how mutually complicated are the considerations," wrote Ada in her own footnotes. "There are frequently several distinct sets of effects going on simultaneously; all in a manner independent of each other, and yet to a greater or less degree exercising a mutual influence. To adjust each to every other, and indeed even to preceive and trace them out with perfect correctness and success, entails difficulties whose nature partakes to a certain extent of those involved in every question where *conditions* are very numerous and inter-complicated; such as for instance the estimation of the mutual relations amongst statistical phenomena, and of those involved in many other classes of facts."

She added, "All, and everything is naturally related and interconnected. A volume I could write on this subject."

SADIE PLANT

ON THE MATRIX
Cyberfeminist simulations

> Her mind is a matrix of non-stop digital flickerings.
>
> (Misha 1991: 113)

> If machines, even machines of theory, can be aroused all by themselves, may woman not do likewise?
>
> (Irigaray 1985a: 232)

AFTER DECADES OF AMBIVALENCE TOWARDS technology, many feminists are now finding a wealth of new opportunities, spaces and lines of thought amidst the new complexities of the 'telecoms revolution'. The Internet promises women a network of lines on which to chatter, natter, work and play; virtuality brings a fluidity to identities which once had to be fixed; and multimedia provides a new tactile environment in which women artists can find their space.

Cyberfeminism has, however, emerged as more than a survey or observation of the new trends and possibilities opened up by the telecoms revolution. Complex systems and virtual worlds are not only important because they open spaces for existing women within an already existing culture, but also because of the extent to which they undermine both the world-view and the material reality of two thousand years of patriarchal control.

Network culture still appears to be dominated by both men and masculine intentions and designs. But there is more to cyberspace than meets the male gaze. Appearances have always been deceptive, but no more so than amidst today's simulations and immersions of the telecoms revolution. Women are accessing the circuits on which they were once exchanged, hacking into security's controls, and discovering their own posthumanity. The cyberfeminist virus first began to make itself known in the early 1990s.[1] The most dramatic of its earliest manifestations was *A Cyberfeminist Manifesto for the 21st Century*, produced as a digitized billboard displayed on a busy Sydney thoroughfare.

The text of this manifesto has mutated and shifted many times since, but one of its versions includes the lines:

> we are the virus of the new world disorder
> disrupting the symbolic from within
> saboteurs of big daddy mainframe
> the clitoris is a direct line to the matrix
>
> VNS MATRIX
> terminators of the moral code . . .

Like all successful viruses, this one caught on. VNS Matrix, the group of four women artists who made the billboard, began to write the game plan for *All New Gen*, a viral cyber-guerrilla programmed to infiltrate cyberspace and hack into the controls of Oedipal man – or Big Daddy Mainframe, as he's called in the game. And there has been no stopping All New Gen. She has munched her way through patriarchal security screens and many of their feminist simulations, feeding into and off the energies with which she is concurrent and in tune: the new cyberotics engineered by the girls; the queer traits and tendencies of Generations XYZ; the post-human experiments of dance music scenes.

All New Gen and her allies are resolutely hostile to morality and do nothing but erode political power. They reprogram guilt, deny authority, confuse identity, and have no interest in the reform or redecoration of the ancient patriarchal code. With Luce Irigaray (1985b: 75), they agree that 'how the system is put together, how the specular economy works', are amongst the most important questions with which to begin its destruction.

The specular economy

This is the first discovery: that patriarchy is not a construction, an order or a structure, but an economy, for which women are the first and founding commodities. It is a system in which exchanges 'take place exclusively between men. Women, signs, commodities, and currency always pass from one man to another', and the women are supposed to exist 'only as the possibility of mediation, transaction, transition, transference – between man and his fellow-creatures, indeed between man and himself' (Irigaray 1985b: 193). Women have served as his media and interfaces, muses and messengers, currencies and screens, interactions, operators, decoders, secretaries . . . they have been man's go-betweens, the in-betweens, taking his messages, bearing his children, and passing on his genetic code.

If women have experienced their exclusion from social, sexual and political life as the major problem posed by their government, this is only the tip of an iceberg of control and alienation from the species itself. Humanity has defined itself as a species whose members are precisely what they think they own: male members. Man is the one who has one, while the character called 'woman' has, at best, been understood to be a deficient version of a humanity which is already male. In relation to *homo sapiens*, she is the foreign body, the immigrant from nowhere, the alien without and the enemy within. Woman can do anything and everything except be herself. Indeed, she has no being, nor even one role; no voice of her own, and no desire. She marries into the

family of man, but her outlaw status always remains: '"within herself" she never signs up. She doesn't have the equipment' (Irigaray 1991: 90).

What this 'equipment' might have given her is the same sense of membership, belonging and identity which have allowed her male colleagues to consider themselves at home and in charge of what they call 'nature', the 'world', or 'life'. Irigaray's male subjects are first and foremost the ones who see, those whose gaze defines the world. The phallus and the eye stand in for each other, giving priority to light, sight, and a flight from the dark dank matters of the feminine. The phallic eye has functioned to endow them with a connection to what has variously been defined as God, the good, the one, the ideal form or transcendent truth. It has been, in effect, their badge of membership, their means of identification and unification with an equally phallic authority. Whereas woman has nothing to be seen where man thinks the member should be. Only a hole, a shadow, a wound, a 'sex that is not one'.

All the great patriarchs have defined this as *her* problem. Witch-hunters defined the wickedness of women as being due to the fact that they 'lack the male member', and when Freud extols them to get 'little ones of their own', he intends this to compensate for this supposed lack. And without this one, as Irigaray writes, hysteria 'is all she has left'. This, or mimicry, or catatonic silence.

Either way, woman is left without the senses of self and identity which accrue to the masculine. Denied the possibility of an agency which would allow her to transform herself, it becomes hard to see what it would take for her situation ever to change. How can Irigaray's women discover themselves when any conception of who they might be has already been decided in advance? How can she speak without becoming the only speaking subject conceivable to man? How can she be active when activity is defined as male? How can she design her own sexuality when even this has been defined by those for whom the phallus is the central core?

The problem seems intractable. Feminist theory has tried every route, and found itself in every cul-de-sac. Struggles have been waged both with and against Marx, Freud, Lacan, Derrida . . . sometimes in an effort to claim or reclaim some notion of identity, subjectivity and agency; sometimes to eschew it in the name of undecidability or *jouissance*. But always in relation to a sacrosanct conception of a male identity which women can either accept, adapt to, or refuse altogether. Only Irigaray – and even then, only in some of her works – begins to suggest that there really is no point in pursuing the masculine dream of self-control, self-identification, self-knowledge and self-determination. If 'any theory of the subject will always have been appropriated by the masculine' (Irigaray 1985a: 133) before the women can get close to it, only the destruction of this subject will suffice.

Even Irigaray cannot imagine quite what such a transformation would involve: this is why so much of her work is often said to be unhelpfully pessimistic. But there is more than the hope that such change will come. For a start patriarchy is not a closed system, and can never be entirely secure. It too has an 'outside', from which it has 'in some way borrowed energy', as is clear from the fact that in spite of patriarchy's love of origins and sources, 'the origin of its motive force remains, partially, unexplained, eluded' (Irigaray 1985b: 115). It needs to contain and control what it understands as 'woman' and 'the feminine', but it cannot do without them: indeed, as its media, means of communication, reproduction and exchange, women are the very fabric of its culture, the material precondition of the world it controls. If Irigaray's conclusions about the

extent and pervasiveness of patriarchy were once an occasion for pessimistic paralysis, things look rather different in an age for which all economic systems are reaching the limits of their modern functioning. And if ever this system did begin to give, the effects of its collapse would certainly outstrip those on its power over women and their lives: patriarchy is the precondition of all other forms of ownership and control, the model of every exercise of power, and the basis of all subjection. The control and exchange of women by their fathers, husbands, brothers and sons is the diagram of hierarchical authority.

This 'specular economy' depends on its ability to ensure that all tools, commodities, and media know their place, and have no aspirations to usurp or subvert the governing role of those they serve. 'It would,' for example, 'be out of the question for them to go to the "market" alone, to profit from their own value, to talk to each other, to desire each other, without the control of the selling-buying-consuming subjects' (Irigaray 1985b: 196). It is out of the question, but it happens anyway.

By the late twentieth century, all patriarchy's media, tools, commodities, and the lines of commerce and communication on and as which they circulate have changed beyond recognition. The convergence of once separate and specialized media turns them into systems of telecommunication with messages of their own; and tools mutate into complex machines which begin to learn and act for themselves. The proliferation, falling costs, miniaturization and ubiquity of the silicon chip already renders the new commodity smart, as trade routes and their traffics run out of control on computerized markets with 'minds of their own', state, society, subject, the geo-political order, and all other forces of patriarchal law and order are undermined by the activity of markets which no longer lend their invisible hands in support of the status quo. As media, tools and goods mutate, so the women begin to *change*, escaping their isolation and becoming increasingly interlinked. Modern feminism is marked by the emergence of networks and contacts which need no centralized organization and evade its structures of command and control.

The early computer was a military weapon, a room-sized giant of a system full of transistors and ticker-tape. Not until the 1960s development of the silicon chip did computers become small and cheap enough to circulate as commodities, and even then the first mass market computers were hardly user-friendly machines. But if governments, the military and the big corporations had ever intended to keep it to themselves, the street found new uses for the new machinery. By the 1980s there were hackers, cyberpunks, rave, and digital arts. Prices began to plummet as computers crept on to the desks and then into the laps and even the pockets of a new generation of users. Atomized systems began to lose their individual isolation as a global web emerged from the thousands of email connections, bulletin boards, and multiple-user domains which compose the emergence of the Net. By the mid-1990s, a digital underground is thriving, and the Net has become the leading zone on which the old identifications collapse. Genders can be bent and blurred and the time-space coordinates tend to get lost. But even such schizophrenia, and the imminent impossibility – and even the irrelevance – of distinguishing between virtual and actual reality, pales into insignificance in comparison to the emergence of the Net as an anarchic, self-organizing system into which its users fuse. The Net is becoming cyberspace, the virtuality with which the not-quite-ones have always felt themselves to be in touch.

This is also the period in which the computer becomes an increasingly decentralized machine. The early computers were serial systems that worked on the basis of a central processing unit in which logical 'if-then' decisions are made in serial fashion, one step at a time. The emergence of parallel distributed processing systems removes both the central unit and the serial nature of its operations, functioning instead in terms of interconnected units which operate simultaneously and without reference to some governing core. Information is not centrally stored or processed, but is distributed across the switches and connections which constitute the system itself.

This 'connectionist' machine is an indeterminate process, rather than a definite entity:

> We are faced with a system which depends on the levels of *activity* of its various sub-units, and on the manner in which the activity levels of some sub-units affect one another. If we try to 'fix' all this activity by trying to define the entire state of the system at one time . . . we immediately lose appreciation of the evolution of these activity levels over time. Conversely, if it is the activity levels in which we are interested, we need to look for patterns over time.
>
> (Eiser 1994: 192)

Parallel distributed processing defies all attempts to pin it down, and can only ever be contingently defined. It also turns the computer into a complex thinking machine which converges with the operations of the human brain. Simultaneous with the Artificial Intelligence and computer science programmes which have led to such developments, research in the neuro-sciences moves towards materialist conceptions of the brain as a complex, connective, distributed machine. Neural nets are distributed systems which function as analogues of the brain and can learn, think, 'evolve' and 'live'. And the parallels proliferate. The complexity the computer becomes also emerges in economies, weather-systems, cities and cultures, all of which begin to function as complex systems with their own parallel processes, connectivities and immense tangles of mutual interlinkings.

Not that artificial lives, cultures, markets and thinking organisms are suddenly free to self-organize. Science, its disciplines, and the academic structures they support insist on the maintenance of top-down structures, and depend on their ability to control and define the self-organizing processes they unleash. State institutions and corporations are intended to guarantee the centralized and hierarchical control of market processes, cultural development and, indeed, any variety of activity which might disturb the smooth regulation of the patriarchal economy. When Isaac Asimov wrote his three laws of robotics, they were lifted straight from the marriage vows: love, honour and obey.[2] Like women, any thinking machines are admitted on the understanding that they are duty-bound to honour and obey the members of the species to which they were enslaved: the members, the male ones, the family of man. But self-organizing processes proliferate, connections are continually made, and complexity becomes increasingly complex. In spite of *its* best intentions, patriarchy is subsumed by the processes which served it so well. The goods do get together, eventually.

The implications of these accelerating developments are extensive and profound. In philosophical terms, they all tend towards the erosion of idealism and the emergence of a new materialism, a shift in thinking triggered by the emergent activity and intelli-

gence of the material reality of a world which man still believes he controls. Self-replicating programs proliferate in the software labs, generating evolutionary processes in the same machines on to which the Human Genome Project downloads DNA. Nanotechnology feeds into material self-organization at a molecular level and in defiance of old scientific paradigms, and a newly digitized biology has to acknowledge that there is neither a pinnacle of achievement nor a governing principle overriding evolution, which is instead composed of complex series of parallel processes, learning and mutating on microcosmic scales, and cutting across what were once separated into natural and cultural processes.

Although she is supposed to do nothing more than function as an object of consumption and exchange, it is a woman who first warns the world of the possibility of the runaway potential of its new sciences and technologies: Mary Shelley's Frankenstein makes the first post-human life form of a modern age which does indeed roll round to the unintended consequences of its own intelligent and artificial lives. Shelley writes far in advance of the digital computers which later begin to effect such developments, but she clearly feels the stirrings of artificial life even as industrialization begins and does much to programme the dreams and nightmares of the next two centuries of its acceleration.

The processes which feed into this emergent activity have no point of origin. Although they were gathering pace for some time before the computer arrives on the scene, its engineering changes everything. Regardless of recent portrayals of computers – and, by extension, all machines and all aspects of the telecoms revolution – as predominantly masculine tools, there is a long history of such intimate and influential connections between women and modernity's machines. The first telephonists, operators and calculators were women, as were the first computers, and even the first computer programmers. Ada Lovelace wrote the software for the 1840s Analytical Engine, a prototype computer which was never built, and when such a machine was finally constructed in the 1940s, it too was programmed by a woman, Grace Murray Hopper. Both women have left their legacies: ADA is now the name of a US military programming language, and one of Hopper's claims to fame is the word 'bug', which was first used when she found a dead moth in the workings of Mark 1. And as women increasingly interact with the computers whose exploratory use was once monopolized by men, the qualities and apparent absences once defined as female become continuous with those ascribed to the new machines.

Unlike previous machines, which tend to have some single purpose, the computer functions as a general purpose system which can, in effect, do anything. It can stimulate the operations of, for example, the typewriter, and while it is running a word-processing program, this, in effect, is precisely what it is. But the computer is always more – or less – than the set of actual functions it fulfils at any particular time: as an implementation of Alan Turing's abstract machine, *the computer is virtually real*.[3] Like Irigaray's woman, it can turn its invisible, non-existent self to anything: it runs any program, and simulates all operations, even those of its own functioning. This is the woman who 'doesn't know what she wants', and cannot say what she is, or thinks, and yet still, of course, persists as through 'elsewhere', as Irigaray often writes. This is the complexity of a system beyond representation, something beyond expression in the existing discursive structures, the 'Nothing. Everything' with which Irigaray's woman responds when they ask her: 'what are you thinking?' (Irigaray 1985b: 29).

> Thus what they desire is precisely nothing, and at the same time, everything. Always something more and something else besides that *one* – sexual organ, for example – that you give them, attribute to them; [something which] involves a different economy more than anything else, one that upsets the linearity of a project, undermines the goal-object of a desire, diffuses the polarization towards a single pleasure, disconcerts fidelity to a single discourse.
>
> (Irigaray 1985b: 29–30)

Irigaray's woman has never had a unified role: mirror, screen, commodity; means of communication and reproduction; carrier and weaver; carer and whore; machine assemblage in the service of the species; a general purpose system of simulation and self-stimulation. It may have been woman's 'fluid character which has deprived her of all possibility of identity with herself within such a logic' (Irigaray 1985b: 109), but if fluidity has been configured as a matter of deprivation and disadvantage in the past, it is a positive advantage in a feminized future for which identity is nothing more than a liability. It is 'her inexhaustible aptitude for mimicry' which makes her 'the living foundation for the whole staging of the world' (Irigaray 1991: 118). Her very inability to concentrate now connects her with the parallel processings of machines which function without unified control.

Neural nets function in a way which has less to do with the rigours of orthodox logic than with the intuitive leaps and cross-connections which characterize what has been pathologized as hysteria, which is said to be marked by a 'lack of inhibition and control in its associations' between ideas which are dangerously 'cut off from associative connection with the other ideas, but can be associated among themselves, and thus form the more or less highly organized rudiment of a second consciousness' (Freud and Breuer 1991: 66–7). Hysteria is the point at which association gets a little too free, spinning off in its own directions and making links without reference to any central core. And if hysteria has functioned as a paralysing pathology of the sex that is not one, 'in hysteria there is at the same time the possibility of another mode of "production" . . . maintained in latency. Perhaps as a cultural reserve yet to come?' (Irigaray 1985b: 138).

Freud's hysterical ideas grow 'out of the day-dreams which are so common even in healthy people and to which needlework and similar occupations render women particularly prone' (Freud and Breuer 1991: 66). It is said that Ada Lovelace, herself defined as hysterical, 'wove her daydreams into seemingly authentic calculations' (Langton Moore 1977: 216). Working with Charles Babbage on the nineteenth-century Analytical Engine, Lovelace lost her tortured self on the planes of mathematical complexity, writing the software for a machine which would take a hundred years to build. Unable to find the words for them, she programs a mathematics in which to communicate the abstraction and complexity of her thoughts.[4]

Lovelace and Babbage took their inspiration from the early nineteenth-century Jacquard loom, crucial both to the processes of automation integral to the industrial revolution, and to the emergence of the modern computer. The loom worked on the basis of punched paper programs, a system necessitated by the peculiar complexity of weaving which has always placed the activity in the forefront of technological advance. If weaving has played such a crucial role in the history of computing, it is also the key to one of the most extraordinary sites of woman–machine interface which short-circuits

their prescribed relationship and persists regardless of what man effects and defines as the history of technology.

Weaving is the exemplary case of a denigrated female craft which now turns out to be intimately connected to the history of computing and the digital technologies. Plaiting and weaving are the 'only contributions to the history of discoveries and inventions' (Freud 1985: 167) which Freud is willing to ascribe to women. He tells a story in which weaving emerges as a simulation of what he describes as a natural process, the matting of pubic hairs across the hole, the zero, the *nothing* to be seen. Freud intends no favours with such an account. It is because of women's shame at the absence which lies where the root of their being should be that they cover up the disgusting wound, concealing the wandering womb of hysteria, veiling the matrix once and for all. This is a move which dissociates weaving from the history of science and technology, removing to a female zone both the woven and the networks and fine connective meshes of the computer culture into which it feeds.

In the course of weaving this story, Freud gives another game away. Orthodox accounts of the history of technology are told from an exclusively anthropomorphic perspective whose world-view revolves around the interests of man. Conceived as the products of his genius and as means to his own ends, even complex machines are understood to be tools and mediations which allow a unified, discreet human agency to interact with an inferior natural world. Weaving, however, is outside this narrative: there is continuity between the weaver, the weaving and the woven which gives them a connectivity which eludes all orthodox conceptions of technology. And although Freud is willing to give women the credit for its 'invention', his account also implies that there is no point of origin, but instead a process of simulation by which weaving replicates or weaves itself. It is not a thing, but a process.

From machines to matrices

As images migrate from canvas to film and finally on to the digital screen, what was once called art mutates into a matter of software engineering. Digital art takes the image beyond even its mechanical reproduction, eroding orthodox conceptions of originals and originality. And just as the image is reprocessed, so it finds itself embroiled in a new network of connections between words, music and architectures which diminishes the governing role it once played in the specular economy.

If the media were once as divided as the senses with which they interact, their convergence and transition into hypermedia allows the senses to fuse and connect. Touch is the sense of multimedia, the immersive simulations of cyberspace, and the connections, switches and links of all nets. Communication cannot be caught by the gaze, but is always a matter of getting in touch, a question of contact, contagion, transmission, reception and connectivity. If sight was the dominant and organizing sense of the patriarchal economy, tactility is McLuhan's 'integral sense' (1967: 77), putting itself and all the others in touch and becoming the sense of hypermedia. It is also the sense with which Irigaray approaches the matter of a female sexuality which is more than one, 'at least two', and always in touch with its own contact points. The medium is the message, and there is no 'possibility of distinguishing what is touching from what is touched' (Irigaray 1985b: 26).

> For if 'she' says something, it is not, it is already no longer, identical with what she means. What she says is never identical with anything, moreover; rather, it is contiguous. *It touches (upon)*. And when it strays too far from that proximity, she stops and starts over at 'zero': her body-sex.
>
> (Irigaray 1985: 29)

Digitization sets zero free to stand for nothing and make everything work. The ones and zeros of machine code are not patriarchal binaries or counterparts to each other: zero is not the other, but the very possibility of all the ones. Zero is the matrix of calculation, the possibility of multiplication, and has been reprocessing the modern world since it began to arrive from the East. It neither counts nor represents, but with digitization it proliferates, replicates and undermines the privilege of one. Zero is not its absence, but a zone of multiplicity which cannot be perceived by the one who sees. Woman represents '*the horror of nothing to see*', but she also 'has sex organs more or less everywhere' (Irigaray 1985b: 28). She too is more than the sum of her parts, beside herself with her extra links.

In Greek, the word for womb is *hystera*; in Latin, it is *matrix*, or matter, both the mother and the material. In *Neuromancer*, William Gibson calls it 'the nonspace', a 'vastness . . . where the faces were shredded and blown away down hurricane corridors' (Gibson 1986: 45). It is the imperceptible 'elsewhere' of which Irigaray speaks, the hole that is neither something nor nothing; the newly accessible virtual space which cannot be seen by the one it subsumes. If the phallus guarantees man's identity and his relation to transcendence and truth, it is also this which cuts him off from the abstract machinery of a world he thinks he owns.

It is only those at odds with this definition of humanity who seem to be able to access this plane. They have more in common with multifunctional systems than the active agency and singular identity proper to the male subject. Ada Lovelace writes the first programming language for an abstract machine yet to be built; Grace Murray Hopper programs Mark 1. And then there's Turing, described as 'a British mathematician who committed suicide by biting a poisoned Apple. As a discovered homosexual, he had been given a forced choice by the British courts either to go to jail or to take the feminizing hormone oestrogen. He chose the latter, with feminizing effects on his body, and 'who knows what effect on his brain'. And it was, as Edelman continues, 'that brain,' newly engineered and feminized, which 'gave rise to a powerful set of mathematical ideas, one of which is known as a Turing machine' (Edelman 1992: 218).

As the activities which have been monopolized by male conceptions of creativity and artistic genius now extend into the new multimedia and interactive spaces of the digital arts, women are at the cutting edge of experimentation in these zones. North America has Beth Stryker's *Cyberqueer*, and *Faultlines* from Ingrid Bachmann and Barbara Layne. In the UK, Orphan Drift ride a wave of writing, digital art, film and music. In Australia, Linda Dement's *Typhoid Mary* and *Cyberflesh Girlmonster* put blood, guts and visceral infections on to her tactile multimedia screens. The French artist Orlan slides her body into cyberspace. The construct cunts access the controls. Sandy Stone makes the switch and the connection: '*to put on the seductive and dangerous cybernetic space like a garment, is to put on the female*' (Stone 1991: 109). Subversions of cyberpunk narrative proliferate. Kathy Acker hacks into *Neuromancer*, unleashing its elements in *Empire of the Senseless*. And Pat Cadigan's cyberpunk novels give another excruciating twist to the

cyberspace tale. *Synners, Fools* and the stories in *Patterns* are texts of extraordinary density and intensity, both in terms of their writing and the worlds they engineer. If Gibson began to explore the complexities of the matrix, Cadigan's fictions perplex reality and identity to the point of irrelevance.

> Before you run out the door, consider two things:
> The future is already set, only the past can be changed, and
> If it was worth forgetting, it/s not worth remembering.
>
> (Cadigan 1994: 287)

From viruses to replicunts

Once upon a time, tomorrow never came. Safely projected into the reaches of distant times and faraway galaxies, the future was science fiction and belonged to another world. Now it is here, breaking through the endless deferral of human horizons, short-circuiting history, downloading its images into today. While historical man continues to gaze in the rear-view mirror of the interface, guarding the present as a reproduction of the past, the sands of time are running into silicon, and Read Only Memory has come to an end. Cyber-revolution is virtually real.

Simulation leaves nothing untouched. Least of all the defences of a specular economy entirely invested in the identity of man and the world of ones and others he perceives. The father's authority is undermined as the sperm count goes into decline and oestrogen saturates the water supply. Queer culture converges with post-human sexualities which haven no regard for the moral code. Working patterns move from full-time, life-long, specialized careers to part-time, temporary, and multi-functional formats, and the context shifts into one in which women have long had expertise. It is suddenly noticed that girls' achievements in school and higher education are far in excess of those of their male counterparts, and a new transferable intelligence begins to be valued above either the strength or single-mindedness which once gave the masculine its power and are now being downgraded and rendered obsolete. Such tendencies – and the authoritarian reactions they excite – are emerging not only in the West but also across what were once lumped together as the cultures of the 'Third World'. Global telecommunications and the migration of capital from the West are undermining both the pale male world and the patriarchal structures of the south and east, bringing unprecedented economic power to women workers and multiplying the possibilities of communication, learning and access to information.

These crises of masculine identity are fatal corrosions of every one: every unified, centralized containment, and every system which keeps them secure. None of this was in the plan. What man has named as his history was supposed to function as the self-narrating story of a drive for domination and escape from the earth; a passage from carnal passions to self-control; a journey from the strange fluidities of the material to the self-identification of the soul. Driven by dreams of taming nature and so escaping its constraints, technical development has always invested in unification, light and flight, the struggle for enlightenment, a dream of escaping from the meat. Men may think and women may fear that they are on top of the situation, pursuing the surveillance and control of nature to unprecedented extremes, integrating their forces in the final

consolidation of a technocratic fascism. But cyberspace is out of man's control: virtual reality destroys his identity, digitalization is mapping his soul and, at the peak of his triumph, the culmination of his machinic erections, man confronts the system he built for his own protection and finds it is female and dangerous.

Those who still cherish the patriarchal dream see cyberspace as a new zone of hope for a humanity which wants to be freed from the natural trap, escaping the body and sliding into an infinite, transcendent and perfect other world. But the matrix is neither heaven, nor even a comforting return to the womb. By the time man begins to gain access to this zone, both the phallic dream of eternal life and its fantasy of female death are interrupted by the abstract matters of a cybernetic space which has woven him into its own emergence. Tempted still to go onwards and upwards by the promise of immortality, total control and autonomy, the hapless unity called man finds himself hooked up to the screen and plugged into a global web of hard, soft, and wetware systems. The great flight from nature he calls history comes to an end as he becomes a cyborg component of self-organizing processes beyond either his perception or his control.

As the patriarchal economy overheats, the human one, the member of the species, is rapidly losing his social, political, economic and scientific status. Those who distinguished themselves from the rest of what becomes their world and considered themselves to be 'making history', and building a world of their own design are increasingly subsumed by the activity of their own goods, services, lines of communication and the self-organizing processes immanent to a nature they believed was passive and inert. If all technical development is underwritten by dreams for total control, final freedom, and some sense of ultimate reconciliation with the ideal, the runaway tendencies and chaotic emergences to which these dreams have led do nothing but turn them into nightmarish scenes.

Cyberfeminism is an insurrection on the part of the goods and materials of the patriarchal world, a dispersed, distributed emergence composed of links between women, women and computers, computers and communication links, connections and connectionist nets.

It becomes clear that if the ideologies and discourses of modern feminism were necessary to the changes in women's fortunes which creep over the end of the millennium, they were certainly never sufficient to the processes which now find man, in his own words, 'adjusting to irrelevance' and becoming 'the disposable sex'. It takes an irresponsible feminism – which may not be a feminism at all – to trace the inhuman paths on which woman begins to assemble herself as the cracks and crazes now emerging across the once smooth surfaces of patriarchal order. She is neither man-made with the dialecticians, biologically fixed with the essentialists, nor wholly absent with the Lacanians. She is in the process, turned on with the machines. As for patriarchy: it is not dead, but nor is it intractable.

There is no authentic or essential woman up ahead, no self to be reclaimed from some long lost past, nor even a potential subjectivity to be constructed in the present day. Nor is there only an absence or lack. Instead there is a virtual reality, an emergent process for which identity is not the goal but the enemy, precisely what has kept at bay the matrix of potentialities from which women have always downloaded their roles.

After the second come the next waves, the next sexes, asking for nothing, just taking their time. Inflicted on authority, the wounds proliferate. The replicunts write

programs, paint viral images, fabricate weapons systems, infiltrate the arts and the industry. They are hackers, perverting the codes, corrupting the transmissions, multiplying zeros, and teasing open new holes in the world. They are the edge of the new edge, unashamedly opportunist, entirely irresponsible, and committed only to the infiltration and corruption of a world which already rues the day they left home.

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This essay has been edited for inclusion in the Reader.

Notes

1. Such cultural viruses are not metaphorical: both Richard Dawkins and more recently, Daniel Dennett (1995), have conducted some excellent research into the viral functioning of cultural patterns. Nor are such processes of replication and contagion necessarily destructive: even the most damaging virus may need to keep its host alive.
2. Asimov's three rules are: 1. A robot may not injure a human being, or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm; 2. A robot must obey the orders given it by human beings, except where such orders would conflict with the First Law; 3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.
3. Alan Turing's abstract machine, developed during the Second World War, forms the basis of the modern serial computer.
4. Her 'Sketch of the Analytical Engine invented by L.F. Menebrea, with notes upon the memoir by the translator, Ada Augustus, Countess of Lovelace', appears in Philip and Emily Morrison (eds), *Charles Babbage and his Calculating Engines, Selected Writings by Charles Babbage and Others*, New York, (Dover, 1961).

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mesongs

I

Those who i hold most dear
are nvr dead

they become more than fixed
in song or stone or album

mixed with my sand and mortar
they walk in me with the world

II

How often have we stood
sombred in mourning
scattering dust to dust & ashes

to the earth. the flowers wilt re-
cover with the rain and re-
wither. petals colours into dust

But in our house
behind our words our wines
the flowers bloom are free for-
ever and again the dead dust shines with us
in the completed silence

III

The dancer dance to death
but we only know the dancing

the strings the joints the places
to be oiled the rust after the last
performance are denied to us

we only know the dancing

Introduction

In 1956, Lloyd Stouffer, the editor of the US magazine *Modern Packaging*, addressed attendees at the Society of the Plastics Industry meeting in New York City: "The future of plastics is in the trash can. . . . It [is] time for the plastics industry to stop thinking about 'reuse' packages and concentrate on single use. For the package that is used once and thrown away, like a tin can or a paper carton, represents not a one-shot market for a few thousand units, but an everyday recurring market measured by the billions of units."[1] Stouffer was speaking at a time when reuse, making do, and thrift were key practices reinforced by two US wars. Consumer markets were saturating. Disposability was one tactic within a suite of efforts to move goods *through*, rather than merely *into*, consumer households.[2] Today, packaging is the single largest category of plastic production, ac-

1 Hello, Reader! Thank you for being here. These footnotes are a place of nuance and politics, where the protocols of gratitude and recognition play out (sometimes also called citation), where warnings and care work are carried out (including calling certain readers aside for a chat or a joke), and where I contextualize, expand, and emplace work. The footnotes support the text above, representing the shoulders on which I stand and the relations I want to build. They are part of doing good relations within a text, through a text. Since a main goal of *Pollution Is Colonialism* is to show how methodology is a way of being in the world and that ways of being are tied up in obligation, these footnotes are one way to enact that argument. Thank you to Duke University Press for these footnotes.

For this first footnote of the introduction, we have a simple citation: Stouffer, "Plastics Packaging," 1–3. Don't worry. They'll get better.

2 Packard, *Waste Makers*; Strasser, *Waste and Want*; M. Liboiron, "Modern Waste as Strategy."

counting for nearly 40 percent of plastic production in Europe[3] and 33 percent in Canada.[4] The next largest categories are building and construction, at just over 20 percent, and automotive at 8 percent.[5] Stouffer's desire looks like prophecy. (Spoiler: It isn't. It's colonialism, but more on that in a moment.)

Before Stouffer's call for disposability and before German and US military powers invested significant finances and research infrastructure into perfecting plastics as a wartime material in the 1940s, plastic was described as an environmental good.[6] Mimicking first ivory and then other animal-based materials such as shellac and tortoiseshell, plastic was an artisan substance that showcased technological ingenuity and skill while providing "the elephant, the tortoise, and the coral insect a respite in their native haunts; it will no longer be necessary to ransack the earth in pursuit of substances which are constantly growing scarcer."[7] The idea of disposability and mass production for plastics is relatively new, developing half a century after plastics were invented. Most plastic production graphs start their timelines after 1950, ignoring the nineteenth- and early

3 PlasticsEurope, "Plastics," 12. These numbers include thermoplastics and polyurethanes as well as thermosets, adhesives, coatings, and sealants, but they do not include PET, PA, PP, and polyacryl-fibers. Note that PET and PP are some of the most common plastics found in marine environments.

4 Deloitte and Cheminfo Services, "Economic Study of the Canadian Plastic Industry, Markets, and Waste," 6.

5 PlasticsEurope, "Plastics," 12.

6 While historian Jeffrey Meikle (unmarked, see below) provides much archival evidence on how plastics were written about as a replacement for animal products, it is not clear whether there were "actual" material shortages or not, nor is it clear whether plastics played a role in alleviating that shortage (or not). Regardless, this idea was still core to the early reputation of plastics. Meikle, *American Plastic*. For an alternative, see Friedel, *Pioneer Plastic*, 60–64. Thank you, Rebecca Altman (settler), for not only sharing this insight but also consistently prioritizing the work of others in such a way that you reach out as a co-thinker when people (like me) reproduce an academic truism that needs some empirical work. Thank you for your collegiality, for the way you celebrate other people's work with genuine enthusiasm and care, and for your careful chemical storytelling. Folks, see Altman, "Time-Bombing the Future"; Altman, "American Petro-Topia"; and Altman, "Letter to America."

Pioneer and *plastic* appear together quite a bit in both historical and present-day texts. While I will talk about plastic production's assumption of terra nullius, I won't dwell on its relationships to pioneering frontierism, except to say that the use of *pioneer* to mean innovation simultaneously normalizes frontierism and the forms of erasure, dispossession, and death frontierism requires to make its terra nullius.

7 Meikle, *American Plastic*, 12.

twentieth-century histories of plastics since these materials did not exist as the mass-produced substances we know today.[8] Plastics have been otherwise.

In 1960, only four years after Stouffer's address, a British ornithology journal published an account of the "confounding" discovery of a rubber band in a puffin's stomach.[9] It would be among the first of hundreds of published reports of wildlife ingesting plastics, including the ones I publish as an environmental scientist. How did plastics become such a ubiquitous pollutant? There are questions that should precede that question: What do you mean by pollutant? How did pollutants come to make sense in the first place? It turns out that the concept of environmental pollution as we understand it today is also new.

Only twenty years before Stouffer launched the future of plastics into the trash can, the now-dominant and even standard understanding of modern environmental pollution was articulated on the Ohio River. Two engineers in the brand-new field of sanitation engineering named Earle B. Phelps and H. W. Streeter (both unmarked)[10] created a scientific and mathematical model of the

8 See, e.g., PlasticsEurope, "Plastics," 12.

9 Bennett, "Rubber Bands in a Puffin's Stomach," 222.

10 It is common to introduce Indigenous authors with their nation/affiliation, while settler and white scholars almost always remain unmarked, like "Lloyd Stouffer." This unmarking is one act among many that re-centres settlers and whiteness as an unexceptional norm, while deviations have to be marked and named. Simone de Beauvoir (French) called this positionality both "positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general." Not cool. This led me to a methodological dilemma. Do I mark everyone? No one? I thought about just leaving it, because this is difficult and even uncomfortable to figure out, but since this is a methods text I figured I should shit or get off the pot. Feminist standpoint theory and even truth and reconciliation processes maintain that social location and the different collectives we are part of matter to relations, obligations, ethics, and knowledge. Settlers have a different place in reconciliation than Indigenous people, than Black people who were stolen from their Land. As la paperson (diasporic settler of colour) writes, "'Settler' is not an identity; it is the idealized juridical space of exceptional rights granted to normative settler citizens and the idealized exceptionalism by which the settler state exerts its sovereignty. The 'settler' is a site of exception from which whiteness emerges. . . . [T]he anthropocentric normal is written in its image." This assumed positive and neutral "normal" right is enacted in the lack of introduction of settlers as settlers, as if settler presence on Land, especially Indigenous Land, is the stable and unremarkable norm. What allows settlers to consistently and unthinkingly not introduce their relations to Land and colonial systems is settlerism. See paperson, *A Third University Is Possible*, 10; and Beauvoir, *Second Sex*.

In light of this complex terrain, my imperfect methodological decision has been to identify all authors the way they identify themselves (thank you to everyone who does this!) the first time they appear in a chapter. If an author does not introduce themselves

conditions and rates under which water (or at least that bit of the Ohio River) could purify itself of organic pollutants.[11] After running tests that accounted for different temperatures, velocities of water, concentrations of pollutants, and other variables, they wrote that self-purification is a "measurable phenomenon governed by definite laws and proceeding according to certain fundamental physical and biochemical reactions. Because of the fundamental character of these reactions and laws, it is fairly evident that the principles underlying the phenomenon [of self-purification] as a whole are applicable to virtually all polluted streams."[12]

The Streeter-Phelps equation, as it came to be known, not only became a hallmark of water pollution science and regulation but also contained within it their theory of pollution: that a moment existed when water could not purify itself and that moment could be measured, predicted, and properly called pollution. Self-purification became known as *assimilative capacity*,[13] a term of art

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or their land relations, I mark them as "unmarked." I do this rather than marking settlers as settlers because of the advice of Kim TallBear (Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate), who encourages people to look at structures of the settler state rather than focusing on naming individual settlers, which reenacts the logics of eugenicist and racist impulses to properly and finally categorize people properly. TallBear, Callison, and Harp. "Ep. 198."

I take up this method so we, as users of texts, can understand where authors are speaking from, what ground they stand on, whom their obligations are to, what forms of sovereignty are being leveraged, what structures of privilege the settler state affords, and how we are related so that our obligations to one another as speaker and listener, writer and audience, can be *specific enough to enact obligations to one another*, a key goal of this text. How has colonialism affected us differently? Introducing yourself is part of ethics and obligation, not punishment. Following Marisa Duarte's (Yaqui) example in *Network Sovereignty*, I simply introduce people in this way by using parentheses after the first time their name is mentioned. Duarte, *Network Sovereignty*.

11 Organic pollutants can also be industrial pollutants. Organic in this case does not mean naturally occurring—even arsenic, radon, and methylmercury, while "naturally occurring" compounds, do not occur in the tonnages and associated scales of toxicity without industrial infrastructure.

12 Streeter and Phelps, *Study of the Pollution and Natural Purification of the Ohio River*, 59.

13 Cognate terms that describe thresholds of harm used in different countries and contexts include *carrying capacity*, *critical load*, *allowable threshold*, and *maximum permissible dose*. Versions of the term in specific scientific disciplines include *reference dose* (RfD), *no observable adverse effect level* (NOAEL), *lowest observable adverse effect level* (LOAEL), *lethal dose 50 percent* (LD50), *median effective concentration* (EC50), *maximum acceptable concentration* (MAC), and *derived minimal effect level* (DMEL) (which is a truly tricky measure for a level of exposure for which the risk levels of a nonthreshold carcinogen become

in both environmental science and policy making that refers to "the amount of waste material that may be discharged into a receiving water without causing deleterious ecological effects."[14] State-based environmental regulations in most of the world since the 1930s are premised on the logic of assimilative capacity, in which a body—water, human, or otherwise—can handle a certain amount of contaminant before scientifically detectable harm occurs. I call this the threshold theory of pollution.

Plastics do not assimilate in the way that Streeter and Phelps's organic pollution assimilated in the Ohio River. As I pull little pieces of burned plastic out of a dovekie[15] gizzard in my marine science lab, the Civic Laboratory for Environmental Action Research (CLEAR), the threshold theory of pollution and the future of plastics as waste look like bad relations. I don't mean the individualized bad relations of littering (which does not produce much waste compared to other flows of plastic into the ocean, especially here in Newfoundland and Labrador, a land of fishing gear and untreated sewage) or the bad relations of capitalism where growth and profit are put before environmental costs (though those are certainly horrible relations). I mean the bad relations of a scientific theory that allows some amount of pollution to occur and its accompanying entitlement to Land to assimilate that pollution.[16] I mean colonialism.

The structures that allow plastics' global distribution and full integration into ecosystems and everyday human lives are based on colonial land relations, the assumed access by settler and colonial projects to Indigenous lands for settler and colonial goals. At the same time, the ways in which plastics pollute unevenly, do not follow threshold theories of harm, and act as both hosts for life and sources of harm have made plastics an ideal case to change dominant colonial concepts of pollution by teaching us about relations and obligations that

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"tolerable," thus creating a social threshold where there are no toxicological thresholds). Each has different specifics, but the same theory lies behind them. More on this in chapter 1.

14 Novotny and Krenkel, "Waste Assimilative Capacity Model," 604.

15 A dovekie is also called a bully bird, little auk, or *Alle alle*, depending on who's talking. They look like tiny puffins without the fancy beak, and you can see them flying over the water in lines. Some people in Newfoundland and Labrador eat them, but the bones are tiny, thin, and hard to pick out.

16 This argument also appears in CLEAR and EDAction, "Pollution Is Colonialism," and is expanded beautifully in Shadaan and Murphy, "Endocrine-Disrupting Chemicals as Industrial and Settler Colonial Structures." Also see Ngata and Liboiron, "Māori Plastic Pollution Expertise."

tend to be obfuscated from view by environmental rhetoric and industrial infrastructures. In CLEAR, we place land relations at the centre[17] of our knowledge production as we monitor plastic pollution in the province of Newfoundland and Labrador.

As members of a marine science lab, we are dedicated to doing science differently by foregrounding *anti*colonial land relations. This requires critique but mostly it requires action.[18] We've stopped using toxic chemicals to process samples, which means there is a whole realm of analysis we can't do. We also use judgmental sampling rather than random sampling in our study design to foreground food sovereignty when we look at plastics in food webs. CLEAR does good with pollution, in practice, in place. But CLEAR is not unique: land relations always already play a central role in all sciences, anticolonial and otherwise.

I find that many people understand colonialism as a monolithic structure with roots exclusively in historical bad action, rather than as a set of contemporary and evolving land relations that can be maintained by good intentions and even good deeds. The call for more recycling, for example, still assumes access to Indigenous Land for recycling centres and their pollution. Other people have nuanced understandings of colonialism and seek ways to deal with colonial structures in their everyday lives and research, often in spaces like the academy that reproduce colonialism in uneven ways. This book is for both groups, and others besides. Overall, this is a methodological text that begins with colonial land relations, so that we can recognize them in familiar and comfortable places (like reading, like counting), and then considers anticolonial methods that centre and change colonial land relations in thought and action.

I make three main arguments in this book. First, pollution is not a manifestation or side effect of colonialism but is rather an enactment of ongoing colonial relations to Land.[19] That is, pollution is best understood as the violence of colo-

17 Perhaps you've noticed Canadian spellings in the text even though Duke University Press is based in the United States. This is a constant, possibly annoying, reminder that these words come from a place. Spelling is method.

18 Hale, "Activist Research v. Cultural Critique."

19 Throughout this book, you'll notice that sometimes *Land* is capitalized, and sometimes it isn't. I follow the lead of Styres and Zinga (Indigenous and settler, respectively), who "capitalize Land when we are referring to it as a proper name indicating a primary relationship rather than when used in a more general sense. For us, land (the more general term) refers to landscapes as a fixed geographical and physical space that includes earth, rocks, and waterways; whereas, 'Land' (the proper name) extends beyond a material fixed space. Land is a spiritually infused place grounded in interconnected and interdependent relationships, cultural positioning, and is highly contextualized" (300–301). Likewise, when I capitalize

nial land relations rather than environmental damage, which is a symptom of violence. These colonial relations are reproduced through even well-intentioned environmental science and activism. Second, there are ways to do pollution action, particularly environmental science, through different Land relations, and they're already happening without waiting for the decolonial horizon to appear. These methods are specific, place-based, and attend to obligations. Third, I show how methodologies—whether scientific, writerly, readerly, or otherwise—are always already part of Land relations and thus are a key site in which to enact good relations (sometimes called ethics). This last point should carry to a variety of contexts that do not focus on either pollution or the natural sciences.

I use the case of plastics, increasingly understood as an environmental scourge and something to be annihilated, to refute and refuse the colonial in a good way. That is, I try to keep plastics and pollution from being conflated too readily, instead decoupling them so existing and potential relations can come to light that exceed the popular position of "plastics are bad!"—even though plastics are often bad. To start, let's dig into colonialism (spoiler: it is not synonymous with "bad" in general, though it is certainly bad).

Colonialism

Stouffer, Streeter, and Phelps all assumed access to Indigenous Land when they made their proclamations. Stouffer's declaration about the future of plastics as disposables assumed that household waste would be picked up and taken

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Land I am referring to the unique entity that is the combined living spirit of plants, animals, air, water, humans, histories, and events recognized by many Indigenous communities. When *land* is not capitalized, I am referring to the concept from a colonial worldview whereby landscapes are common, universal, and everywhere, even with great variation. For the same reason, I also capitalize *Nature* and *Resource* and, occasionally, *Science*. Rather than use a small *N* or *R* or *S* that might indicate that these words are common or universal, the capitalization signals that they are proper nouns that are highly specific to one place, time, and culture. That is, Nature is not universal or common, but unique to a specific worldview that came about at a particular time for specific reasons. Calling out proper nouns so they are also proper names is part of a tradition where using someone/thing's name is to bring it out of the shadows and engage it—in power, in challenge, in recognition, in kinship. That's why I don't mind looking like an academic elitist or naive literary wannabe when I capitalize. There's more on compromise in chapter 3. Styres and Zinga, "Community-First Land-Centred Theoretical Framework," 300–301. For other politics of capitalization in feminist sciences, see Subramaniam and Willey, "Introduction"; and Harding, *Science and Social Inequality*.

to landfills or recycling plants that allowed plastic disposables to go "away."[20] Without this infrastructural access to Indigenous Land, there is no disposability.[21] He assumed that Land would provide a sink, a place to store waste, so that profits could be generated through flows of waste-as-consumer-goods. This assumption is made easier when the Land has already been cleared of Indigenous peoples via genocide, moves to reserves, and ongoing disappearances such as those catalogued under MMIWG[22] statistics.

Streeter and Phelps likewise assumed access to Indigenous Land, though they were not capitalists dedicated to growth and profit. On the contrary, Phelps was a bold environmental conservationist. Unlike his contemporaries, he believed polluted rivers could and should be saved from, rather than abandoned to, industrial pollution by using science to keep the pollution be-

20 There is some excellent work on the concept of waste and its "away," including Davies, "Slow Violence and Toxic Geographies" and de Coverly et al., "Hidden Mountain."

21 I first made this argument in *Teen Vogue*: M. Liboiron, "How Plastic Is a Function of Colonialism." This is not the first and will not be the last time I cite myself. There are good reasons to self-cite in certain ways. First, in the words of fish philosopher Zoe Todd (Métis): "It is cheeky to cite oneself and to return to the same stories repeatedly in Euro-western academe. We are taught, as students and apprentices, that this is verboten (a well-meaning mentor even cautioned not to waste my good stories on the wrong journal, which is generally good advice for Euro-Western scholars). . . . However, Leroy Little Bear (Blackfoot) ['Big Thinking'] reminds us that 'in Native ways, we always retell our stories, we repeat them. That's how they sink in and become embodied in students and in the people.' It is through returning to the fish stories shared with me by interlocutors in Paulatuuq, and by reengaging the fish stories my family and friends share with me in amiskwaciwâskahikan, that I am brought back into my reciprocal relationships to people, moments, and responsibilities both in my research and in my engagement as a citizen of my home territory. By returning to the same moments time and time again, I unravel new facets of the relationships these stories contain and enliven." Todd, "Refracting the State," 61; Little Bear, "Big Thinking." Maarsi, Zoe Todd, for the work you do reorienting academics to good relations and manners. I admire the pedagogy your work uses to shore up unlearning and learning in the academy.

Second, I still happen to agree with myself on this point. That doesn't always happen. As I learn, I change my mind. Citing myself in specific ways marks where theories, ideas, and concepts continue to hold after they've come in continued contact with the world. Self-citation and self-quoting says, "Hey, this still works!" because so often it doesn't. I talk to many young researchers who are worried about setting their thoughts to paper because they might later change their minds. I hope you do! You will never get it *right* or *done* if you are thinking and growing. Publishing marks where you are on that path at that moment. Self-citing extends that path.

22 Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.

low a threshold from which the rivers could recover.[23] But his theory of self-purification-cum-assimilative-capacity also assumed access to Indigenous Land. Phelps not only accessed Indigenous Land along the Ohio River to do his science; he also routinized state access by advocating for all rivers on all lands to be governed—carefully! precisely!—as proper sinks for pollution. Whether motivated by profit and growth or environmental conservation, both approaches to waste and wasting are premised on an assumed entitlement to Indigenous Land.

That's colonialism.

While there are different types of colonialism—settler colonialism, extractive colonialism, internal colonialism, external colonialism, neoimperialism—they have some things in common. Colonialism is a way to describe relationships characterized by conquest and genocide that grant colonialists and settlers "ongoing state access to land and resources that contradictorily provide the material and spiritual sustenance of Indigenous societies on the one hand, and the foundation of colonial state-formation, settlement, and capitalist development on the other."[24] Colonialism is more than the intent, identities, heritages, and values of settlers and their ancestors. It's about genocide and access.[25]

Emphasizing the role of access to Indigenous Land for colonialism, Edward Said (Palestinian)[26] writes:

> To think about distant places, to colonize them, to populate or depopulate them: all of this occurs on, about, or because of land. The actual

23 Tarr, "Industrial Wastes and Public Health," 1060. Also see Phelps's own words in Phelps, "Discussion."

24 Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks*, 7.

25 In her important work bringing Indigenous studies and Black studies together in *The Black Shoals*, Tiffany Lethabo King makes a strong case that analytical frames originating in White settler colonial studies that foreground land, rather than genocide and conquest, as the defining feature of colonialism miss intersectionality and grounds for coalition politics between Black and Indigenous peoples. She writes, "Genocide—and the making of the Native body as less than human, or flesh—remains the focus and distinguishing feature of settler colonialism," and that "an actual discussion of Native genocide is displaced by a focus on White settlers' relationship to land rather than their parasitic and genocidal relationship to Indigenous and Black peoples" (56, 68). Yes, yes, yes. I also think that Land relations, and thus the emplacement of more-than-human relations, are one of the keystones to doing anticolonial work as a Métis scientist. So I focus on Land here, and the inheritance of scientific land relations, knowing that this is shorthand for genocide. Also see Trask, *From a Native Daughter*; and Trask, "The Color of Violence."

26 This self-identification is in Said, "Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Victims."

> geographical possession of land is what empire in the final analysis is all about. At the moment when a coincidence occurs between real control and power, the idea of what a given place was (could be, might become), and an actual place—at that moment the struggle for empire is launched. This coincidence is the logic both for Westerners taking possession of land and, during decolonization, for resisting natives reclaiming it.[27]

Let's take a moment to focus on that bit about Westerners. Western culture—the heritage of social norms, beliefs, ethical values, political systems, epistemologies, technologies, and legal structures and traditions heavily influenced by various forms of Christianity and Judaism that have some origin in Ancient Greece and which heavily influenced societies in Europe and beyond—is not synonymous with colonialism. Western culture certainly has its imperialistic and colonial impulses, histories, and ideas of what is good and right, but these are different things from colonialism. When I hear a researcher ask, "Isn't doing research ethics paperwork colonial?," they are conflating Western and colonial. Remember: treaties are paperwork. If paperwork is used to possess land and secure settler and colonial futures, then, yes, it's colonial. But there is also anticolonial, Western-style paperwork that accomplishes the opposite, like the forms required by Indigenous research ethics boards. Colonialism, first, foremost, and always, is about *Land*, including the circumvention of ethics paperwork so researchers can have unfettered and unaccountable access to field sites (a.k.a. homelands), archives, samples, and data.[28]

The focus on Land—what it could be, what it might become, what it is for—does not always mean accessing Land as property for settlement, though it often does. It can also mean access to Land-based cultural designs and culturally appropriated symbols for fashion. It can mean access to Indigenous Land for scientific research. It can mean using Land as a Resource, a practice that may generate pollution through pipelines, landfills, and recycling plants, or as a sink to store or process waste. It can mean imagining a clean, healthy, and pollution-free future and conducting beach cleanups on Indigenous Land without permission or consent. It means imagining things for land in ways that align with colonial and settler goals, even when those goals are well intentioned. Especially when they are well intentioned. Which means it's time to talk about environmentalism.

27 Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 93.

28 E.g., Lawford and Coburn, "Research, Ethnic Fraud, and the Academy."

Environmentalism and Colonialism

Environmentalism does not usually address colonialism and often reproduces it. Philosopher Kyle Whyte (Potawatomi),[29] Dina Gilio-Whitaker (Colville Confederated Tribes),[30] and many others[31] have pointed out that environmental solutions to pollution such as hydroelectric dams,[32] consumer responsibility, and appeals to the commons[33] assume access to Indigenous Land and its ability to produce value for settler and colonial desires and futures. Environmentalism often "propagate[s] and maintain[s] the dispossession of [I]ndigenous peoples for the common good of the world."[34]

For example, in September 2015, a US-based environmental NGO called the Ocean Conservancy released a report looking for solutions to marine plastic pollution that recommended that countries in Southeast Asia work with foreign-funded industries to build incinerators to burn plastic waste.[35] This recommendation follows a long line of colonial acts in the name of plastics, from accessing Indigenous Land to extracting oil and gas (and occasionally corn) for feedstock; to producing disposable plastics that use land to store, contain, and assimilate the waste; to pointing the finger at local "foreign" and Indigenous peoples for "mismanaging" waste imported from industrial and colonial centres; and then gaining access to that Land to solve their uncivilized approach to waste (mis)management.[36]

This is not to say that the Ocean Conservancy is evil, or even aware of its colonial mindset. Colonialism doesn't come from asshat goons, though it cer-

29 Whyte, "Dakota Access Pipeline."

30 Gilio-Whitaker, *As Long as Grass Grows*.

31 paperson, "Ghetto Land Pedagogy"; Osborne, "Fixing Carbon, Losing Ground"; Osborne, Bellante, and vonHedemann, *Indigenous Peoples and REDD+*.

32 Nunatsiavut Government, "Make Muskrat Right."

33 Fortier, *Unsettling the Commons*.

34 Byrd, *Transit of Empire*, xix.

35 Ocean Conservancy, "Stemming the Tide."

36 The term *mismanaged waste* has gained traction since a scientific publication estimating the amount of plastics entering the oceans used the category of mismanaged waste to estimate plastic leakage from land to the ocean. The problem is that everyone whose waste management did not look like the United States was automatically labelled *mismanaged*. The term signals that the infrastructure in question isn't quite Civilized enough. A detailed critique of this study and its colonial premises is in chapters 1 and 2. For community and grassroots pushback to this report, see GAIA Coalition, "Open Letter to Ocean Conservancy."

tainly has a large share of such agents. Colonial land relations are inherited as common sense, even as good ideas.[37] Many environmental historians have shifted their understanding of the origins of environmentalism well before back-to-the-land and save-the-(access-to-)land movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Instead they highlight earlier imperial archiving, cultivation, and control measures necessary for the flourishing of empire around the globe, both within and outside of what is lately called North America.[38] They argue that the colonial scientists who attempted to mitigate and halt environmental destruction in colonies so that the colonies might flourish are "the pioneers of modern environmentalism,"[39] where "environmentalism is police action, inseparable from western conceptions and attitudes"[40] of how to best organize and govern land (more on this in chapter 1).

The way that environmental crises and their solutions maintain rather than change existing power structures is central to the scholarship of anthropologist Joseph Masco (settler), who points out that "crisis," environmental and otherwise, has "become a counterrevolutionary idiom in the twenty-first century, a means of stabilizing an existing condition rather than minimizing forms of violence across militarisms, economy, and the environment."[41] Rather than using crisis as a relational model that puts certain things beyond dispute in the imperative to act at all costs, I focus on colonial land relations within environmental narratives and action as a way to acknowledge and address this usually unmarked power dynamic.

37 Here, I am drawing on Foucault's (unmarked) articulation of power as regimes of truth that allow some things to make sense, to circulate, and to act as truth, while others do not. See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish.* However, following Michelle Murphy (Métis), I build on this work "unfaithfully," as "Foucault's own work on neoliberal economics refuses to engage with colonial and postcolonial histories, the elaboration of the racial state, and drops sex as a central analytic." Murphy, *Economization of Life*, 149.

38 Anker, *Imperial Ecology*; Komeie, "Colonial Environmentalism."

39 Grove, "Origins of Environmentalism," 12. I think Grove and I see eye to eye on the term *pioneer* here.

40 Barton, *Empire Forestry*, 6.

41 Masco, "Crisis in Crisis," S65. Also see Masco, "Bad Weather." Joe Masco, thank you not only for your excellent, careful, original, and insightful work on the links between environmental and military crises, but, more importantly (to me and as a model in the academy), for your genuine generosity, solid and obvious forms of support, forceful and inspiring yet gentle curiosity, and feminist, caring ways that you invest in emerging intellectuals. Thank you, Joe, for taking time and care to be part of this book's life (and mine!).

Capitalism and Colonialism

To change colonial land relations and enact other types of Land relations requires specificity. This is so we don't accidentally think that the opposite of colonialism is environmentalism or, similarly, that we don't conflate colonialism with other forms of extraction, such as capitalism. Colonialism and capitalism might be happy bedfellows and indeed longtime lovers, but they are not the same thing.

Political economist Karl Marx (unmarked) argues that primitive accumulation (the stealing of land) is foundational to the possibility of capitalism—it's how someone gets more capital than someone else in the first place, which you need to jump-start a system where only a few people own the means of production.[42] You can't make and hoard capital without stealing Land first. We have case studies of how aspects of capitalist production and technologies allow specific forms of colonialism and dispossession to take root and spread.[43] Likewise, excellent research describes the sweet trifecta of capitalism, colonialism, and pollution. The treadmill of industrial and capitalist production is ever in need of more Land to contain its pollution,[44] leading to the argument that "contamination and resource dispossession [are] necessary and inherent factors of capitalism."[45]

Yet colonial quests for Land are different than capitalist goals for capital, even if pollution has a role in attaining each goal. Socioeconomic systems other than capitalism also create environmental pollution and waste,[46] but what is more important for understanding the relationship between capitalism and colonialism is that many different economic systems depend on access to Indigenous Land. As Sandy Grande (Quechua) has argued, "Both Marxists and capitalists view land and natural resources as commodities to be exploited, in the first instance, by capitalists for personal gain, and in the second by Marxists for the good of all."[47] Eve Tuck (Unangax) and Wayne Yang (diaspora settler of colour) have pointed out, "Socialist and communist empires have also been settler empires (e.g., Chinese colonialism in Tibet)."[48] Colonialism is not one kind of

42 Marx, "The Modern Theory of Colonisation," chap. 33 in *Capital*, vol. 1.

43 Denoon, *Settler Capitalism*; Pasternak, "How Capitalism Will Save Colonialism."

44 Voyles, *Wastelanding*.

45 Ofrias, "Invisible Harms, Invisible Profits," 436.

46 Gille, *From the Cult of Waste*; Kao, "City Recycled"; Scheinberg and Mol, "Multiple Modernities." We need a lot more research in this area.

47 Grande, *Red Pedagogy*, 31.

48 Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," 4.

thing with one set of techniques that always align with capitalism. Marxism, socialism, anticapitalism, capitalism, and other economic systems can, though certainly don't have to, enact colonial relations to Land as a usable Resource that produces value for settler and colonizer goals, regardless of how and by whom that value is produced.

Colonialism, capitalism, and environmentalism do not have settled relationships or forms.[49] For instance, colonialist states and powers have at times sided with environmental conservation over capitalist gains. Historians have documented how, as Richard Grove (unmarked) puts it, "Paradoxically, the colonial state in its pioneering conservationist role provided a forum for *controls* on the unhindered operations of capital for short-term gain which, it might be argued, brought about a contradiction to what is normally supposed to have made up the common currency of imperial expansion. Ultimately, the long-term security of the state, which any ecological crisis threatened to undermine, counted for far more than the interests of private capital bent on the destruction of the environment."[50] To make capitalism and colonialism synonymous, or to conflate environmentalism and anticolonialism, misses these complex relations.

Because of this nuance and its repercussions for political action, political scientist Glen Coulthard (Yellowknives Dene) has called for scholars to shift their analysis away from capitalist relations (production, proletarianization) to colonial relations (dispossession, Land acquisition, access to Land): "Like capital, colonialism, as a structure of domination predicated on dispossession, is not a 'thing,' but rather the sum effect of the diversity of interlocking oppressive social relations that constitute it. When stated this way, it should be clear that shifting our position to highlight the ongoing effects of colonial dispossession in no way displaces questions of distributive justice or class struggle; rather, it simply situates these questions more firmly alongside and in relation to the other sites and relations of power that inform our settler-colonial present."[51] Conflating colonialism with capitalism misses crucial relations, which Coulthard argues include white supremacy and patriarchy. Aileen Moreton-Robinson (Geonpul,

49 Feminist geographers like J. K. Gibson-Graham (unmarked) have done excellent work showing how capitalism is not only diverse in its manifestations, but also patchy and incomplete. They argue that to describe capitalism as a total and complete system is to give it power it does not necessarily have. Gibson-Graham, "End of Capitalism"; Gibson-Graham, "Rethinking the Economy."

50 Grove, "Origins of Environmentalism," 12; emphasis added. This is an appropriate use of the term *pioneering*.

51 Coulthard, *Red Skins, White Masks*, 15.

Quandamooka First Nation) has shown that it misses racial formations and racism.[52] For thinkers such as Tuck and Yang, the "homogenization of various experiences of oppression as colonialism"—that is, conflating imperialism, racism, capitalism, exclusion, and general bad behaviour with colonialism—accomplishes "a form of enclosure, dangerous in how it domesticates decolonization. It is also a foreclosure, limiting in how it recapitulates dominant theories of social change."[53]

Differentiation and specificity matter to ensure that actions address problems, and the conflation of colonialism with other ills ensures the erasure of horizons of meaningful action that can attend specifically to assumed settler and colonial entitlement and access to Land. In the case of pollution, a focus on capitalism misses relations that make Land available for pollution in the first place. It can miss the necessary place of stolen Land in colonizers' and settlers' ability to create sinks for pollution *as well as* stolen Land's place in alternative economies (via a communal commons) and environmental conservation (via methylmercury-producing hydroelectric dams).

Pollution, scientific ways to know pollution, and actions to mitigate pollution are not examples of, symptoms or metaphors for, or unintentional byproducts of colonialism, but rather are essential parts of the interlocking logics (brain), mechanisms (hands and teeth), and structures (heart and bones)

52 Moreton-Robinson, *White Possessive*. Thank you, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, for the political and intellectual move of foregrounding identity and culture as the primary grounds from which to make claims and change. I think this is a key lesson for activism: "Patriarchal white nation-states and universities insist on producing cultural difference in order to manage the existence and claims of Indigenous people. In this way the production of knowledge about cultural specificity is complicit with state requirements for manageable forms of difference that are racially configured through whiteness." Moreton-Robinson, *White Possessive*, xvii.

53 Tuck and Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor," 17, 3. I wish to express a deep gratitude for your work, Eve Tuck, and especially for "Suspending Damage," which has profoundly shaped my research, including the way this book was framed and written. Tuck's open letter is, in many ways, directly responsible for turning my work from being about plastic to being about colonialism. It is part of a shift that took place in my scientific work from attempting to create an accounting of chemical harms by counting plastic to articulating food sovereignty (details on this method are in chapter 3). I re-read "Suspending Damage" and "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor" at least once a season, as an event to sit with the text, rather than as a source to pull things from (a reading technique I strengthened after reading some of your tweets on extractive reading practices). Your work has easily been some of the most formative in my intellectual and ethical journey. Thank you, Eve Tuck, for your brilliance, pedagogy, and ethics.

of colonialism that allow colonialism to produce and reproduce its effects in Canada, the United States, and beyond.[54] Colonialism is not just about taking Land, though it certainly includes taking Land. Stealing is a manifestation, a symptom, a mechanism, and even a goal of colonialism. But those are the teeth of colonialism, and I want to look at its bones. Stealing Land and dispossessing people are events with temporal edges, but ongoing Land theft requires maintenance and infrastructure[55] that are not as discrete, given that "colonization is a continuing process, not simply a historical event."[56] Colonialism is a set of specific, structured, interlocking, and overlapping relations that allow these events to occur, make sense, and even seem right (to some).[57] I will argue throughout this text that these relations—their types, durations, effects, and maintenance—are also enacted by pollution and pollution science.

Otherwises and Alterlives

When I first began researching plastic pollution around 2008, I thought that plastics had the immense potential to blow concepts of pollution out of the water,[58] since they defy so many scientific and popular truisms. You can't "clean up"

54 There are different colonialisms, imperialisms, and indigeneities because these things are place- and time-based. When I speak in general terms, statements are rooted in relations from Newfoundland and Labrador and early teachings in Alberta, Canada. They will not make global sense (more on the difference between universalism and generalization of knowledge in chapter 3).

55 For an example of interlocking infrastructures at multiple scales that maintain Land theft (even as they fail!), see Pasternak, *Grounded Authority*. This text is particularly good for discussions of how Indigenous jurisdiction and Land are consistently usurped in place, particularly by the state through mechanisms of financialization and "accountability." It is also an excellent text for studying/punching up, for showing how Canadian state sovereignty and jurisdiction consistently fall short and are patchy, even though they are often assumed to be solidly in place. Thank you, Shiri Pasternak (settler), for your excellent work.

56 Anguksuar, "Postcolonial Perspective." Also see the more oft-cited Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism*.

57 Sandy Grande writes about the animating beliefs and logics that underpin colonial societies that serve as the basis for common sense. These core beliefs are as follows: (1) belief in progress as change and change as progress; (2) belief in the effective separateness of faith and reason; (3) belief in the essential quality of the universe and of "reality" as impersonal, secular, material, mechanistic, and relativistic; (4) subscription to ontological individualism; and (5) belief in human beings as separate from and superior to the rest of nature. While this text focuses on the third and fifth beliefs, and particularly how they manifest in pollution science, all five are part of how land is understood and related to. Grande, *Red Pedagogy*, 69.

58 Pun!

plastics because they exist in geological time, and cleaning just shuffles them in space as they endure in time.[59] You can't recycle them out of the way, because it means ever more will be produced,[60] and there is no "away" at any rate.[61] Many of the chemicals associated with plastics, called endocrine disruptors, defy thresholds and exceed the adage that the "danger is in the dose" or the "solution to pollution is dilution" because they cause harm at trace quantities already present in the environment and bodies.[62] Plastics and their chemicals defy containment, a hallmark approach to industrial waste management, as they blow, flow, and off-gas so that their pollutants are ubiquitous in every environment tested.[63] Last but hardly least, their long temporality means their future effects are largely unknown,[64] making uncertain the guarantee of settler futures. I thought these traits would provide pollution science and activism with the case they needed to move beyond thresholds of allowable harm, beyond disposability, and beyond the access to Land that both thresholds and "away" require.[65] But despite con-

59 Gray-Cosgrove, Liboiron, and Lepawsky, "Challenges of Temporality."

60 MacBride, "Does Recycling Actually Conserve or Preserve Things?" Thank you, Samantha MacBride (unmarked). You are one of the smartest, most careful, most multiscalar and interdisciplinary thinkers I have had the pleasure to know intellectually (and personally!) when it comes to waste streams and recycling in the United States. You are a role model for how you put your intelligence to work as the director of research at the New York City Department of Sanitation. If I had to teach only one text on waste, it would be yours: MacBride, *Recycling Reconsidered*. Thank you, Samantha MacBride, for all the forms of work you do and particularly how you do it.

61 Davies, "Slow Violence and Toxic Geographies"; Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie*.

62 E.g., Vandenberg, "Low-Dose Effects of Hormones and Endocrine Disruptors."

63 Bergman et al., "Impact of Endocrine Disruption," A104; vom Saal et al., "Chapel Hill Bisphenol A Expert Panel Consensus Statement," 131.

64 You may have noticed that temporal estimates of plastics breaking down (one thousand years for this kind of plastic, ten thousand for this other kind) exceed the amount of time that plastics have existed. Most of these estimates are modeled from data created in labs (in UV-saturated, vibrating, acidic set-ups that rarely mimic actually existing environmental conditions) and are based on the idea that the rate of weakening polymer bonds will proceed on a regular curve. They do not anticipate the effects of metabolites or the molecular chains that polymers might break into. They cannot anticipate how future environmental relations will absorb, adapt to, and otherwise influence these rates of breakdown or the effects of many types of plastics in diverse environments over long periods.

65 This is what feminist STS scholars such as Martha Kenney (unmarked) and others might call *response-ability*: "*cultivating the capacity for response*. Recent works in feminist science studies have proposed *response-ability* as a term that might whet our imaginations for more relational ethics and politics enacted in everyday practices of living in our more-

siderable and sustained public, scientific, and policy attention to plastic pollution, most pollution science and activism have not shifted this way (with a few notable exceptions[66]).

As feminist scholar Susan Leigh Star (unmarked) reminds us, "It might have been otherwise."[67] In fact, it has been. There are and have been other definitions of and relations to pollution. Not all pollution is colonial, but the idea of modern environmental pollution[68] certainly is (more on this in chapter 1). Be-

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than-human world." Kenney, "Fables of Response-Ability," 7; emphasis in original. Also see work by María Puig de la Bellacasa (unmarked), Donna Haraway (unmarked), Alexis Shotwell (unmarked), Karen Barad (unmarked), Lucy Suchman (unmarked), Kim Fortun (unmarked), Aryn Martin (unmarked), Natasha Myers (settler), Michelle Murphy (Métis), Shawn Wilson (Cree), Dwayne Donald (Cree), Zoe Todd (Métis), Kim TallBear (Sisseton-Wahpeton Oyate), Sara Tolbert (unmarked), and Winona LaDuke (Anishinaabe) on accountability and responsibility in relations.

66 Settler scientists such as Chelsea Rochman (unmarked), Laura Vandenberg (unmarked), and Fred vom Saal (unmarked), among others, have all written about the chemical hazards of plastics and their associated chemicals and the way science, industry, and policy ought to relate to one another. They work within dominant science to shift the conversation. I'll speak more about some of their work in chapter 2. See, e.g., Rochman et al., "Policy"; Vandenberg et al., "Regulatory Decisions on Endocrine Disrupting Chemicals"; vom Saal and Hughes, "Extensive New Literature." Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (GAIA) is also exemplary for its insistence in looking upstream at industry and political alliances for the source of marine plastics and has folded critiques of capitalism and colonialism into its work. GAIA has also proposed some shifts in scientific methods of monitoring marine plastics, which I discuss in chapter 2. See GAIA, "Plastics Exposed."

67 Star, "Power, Technology, and the Phenomenology of Conventions," 53.

68 I use the term *modern pollution* to mean post-miasma theories of environmental pollution based on quantitative science, threshold limits, and industrial capture. In *Risk and Blame*, white primitivist anthropologist Mary Douglas (British) differentiates between cultural notions of pollution and "technical" senses: "There is a strict technical sense, as when we speak of river or air pollution, when the physical adulteration of an earlier state can be precisely measured. The technical sense rests upon a clear notion of the prepolluted condition. A river that flows over muddy ground may be always thick; but if that is taken as its natural state, it is not necessarily said to be polluted. The technical sense of pollution is not morally loaded but depends upon measures of change. The other sense of pollution is a contagious state, harmful, caused by outside intervention, but mysterious in its origins." Douglas, *Risk and Blame*, 36. But one of my primary arguments is that this "technical" sense of pollution is indeed morally loaded with the values and goals of colonialism and that there is therefore no real difference between Douglas's categories. I nevertheless use the term *modern environmental pollution* to highlight, as Douglas does, the recent origins and culturally specific aspects of scientific definitions of pollution.

fore the threshold model of pollution pioneered[69] by Streeter and Phelps, there were many definitions of pollution that shared a more prohibitive and normative slant. The English word *pollution* comes from the Latin *pollutionem*, meaning defilement or desecration. The earliest recorded uses in the mid-fourteenth century refer to the "discharge of semen other than during sex."[70] This may seem like a brilliant idea, but in the Christian Middle Ages extracoital dissemination was written up as an act of desecration, an interruption of the true and right path for semen. Pollution was (and still is) about naming a deviation from the good and true path of things—good relations manifested in the material. Though it wasn't until 1860 that the term *pollution* was recorded in the sense of environmental contamination,[71] the morality and ideas of good and right paths for contaminants remain a key aspect of understanding pollution today. These moral overtones still circulate in environmental science even while we scientists argue that we are measuring wayward particles rather than immoral acts.[72]

Both pollution and plastics have been otherwise, with different and varied interpretations and enactments. The stakes of my research are to open up plastics and pollution so that they are otherwise, yet related, once more (and still). By denaturalizing and demythologizing pollution in general and plastics in particular, I aim to make (more) apparent their ongoing relationships to maintaining colonial Land relations as well as to anticolonial Land relations. That way, when we want to do scientific and/or activist work that does not reproduce colonial L/land relations, we know where we stand and what we mean.

69 Yes, pioneered in the spirit of land acquisition via frontierism and the erasure of other forms of Land relation.

70 Online Etymology Dictionary, s.v. "pollution," accessed August 12, 2020, https://www.etymonline.com/word/pollution.

71 Online Etymology Dictionary, s.v. "pollution."

72 An interesting example of this is that environmental scientists consistently eschew their training to say that the presence of plastics in environments is a form of harm, while the dominant scientific model of pollution distinguishes between contamination (presence) and pollution (demonstrated harm). In "The Ecological Impacts of Marine Debris," Chelsea Rochman and collaborators argue that conflating the two might actually work against conservationist goals, since it gives a space for the plastics and petrochemical industries to defer action by saying harm must be demonstrated beyond presence. I agree with Rochman et al. in a sense. But I extend their argument to say that embracing an idea of pollution as bad relations that can exceed scientific evidence of harm is exactly what we need. If you're going to go with a more overtly "anthropological" set of value-based definitions of pollution as bad relations, do it and do it loud, which means not conflating it with other (scientific) models of pollution with different values and goals.

As such, my orientation for this book is a specific enactment of a *particular* otherwise. Following Michelle Murphy's concept of alterlife, I seek "words, protocols, and methods that might honor the inseparability of bodies and land, and at the same time grapple with the expansive chemical relations of settler colonialism that entangle life forms in each other's accumulations, conditions, possibilities, and miseries."[73] When I am taking plastics out of birds' gizzards one by one with tweezers, I am searching for these words, protocols, and methods *as a scientist*. I want to know whether or how to use an available threshold-based measurement in plastic pollution research (called the EcoQO) when I don't think threshold models are in good relation yet know that the measurement is one of the few effective for policy. I think about how my colleague got this bird to begin with—was it in good relations, or did it assume entitlement to Land? Whose water am I using to clean these plastics, anyhow? And, most importantly, when Murphy writes, "The concept of alterlife is offered as a way of approaching the politics of relations in solidarity with the vast labor of anti-racist and decolonial reproductive and environmental justice activism, as well as Indigenous survivance and resurgence,"[74] the methodological question is: how do I get to a place where these relations are properly scientific, rather than questions that fall outside of science, the same way ethics sections are tacked on at the end of a science textbook? How do I, as a scientist, make alterlives and good Land relations integral to dominant scientific practice?

There is no terra nullius for this work. Western science has long been identified as a practice that assumes mastery over Nature, reproduces the doctrine of discovery, revels in exploration and appropriation of Indigenous Land, and is invested in a rigorous self-portraiture[75] in which valid scientific knowledge is created only by proper European subjects.[76] It's also pretty sexist. But dominant science[77] is my terrain. At CLEAR, we use science against science, understand-

73 Murphy, "Alterlife and Decolonial Chemical Relations," 497. Thank you, Michelle Murphy, for so many reasons. For your scholarship, which has grounded the thinking of multiple generations of STS scholars, and for the way you mentor and create spaces, lessons, and examples for good relations in academia and beyond. Your work and practices make diverse futures for so many of us (a.k.a. legacy). I cannot overstate the effects of your intelligence, generosity, and ethics on me and so many others. Maarsi.

74 Murphy, "Against Population, towards Alterlife," 118.

75 Daston, "History of Science."

76 Seth, "Putting Knowledge in Its Place."

77 I use the term *dominant science* instead of *Western science* for two reasons. First, *dominant* keeps the power relations front and centre, and it's these power relations I am usually discussing. Western science is a cultural tradition where ways of knowing start with the

ing that science is always already fucked up, which means that our work is always compromised (a concept I explain more in chapter 3). To imagine a clean slate from which to start our anticolonial science is to subscribe to "terra nullius, the colonizer's dream," described by feminist scholar Raewyn Connell (settler) as "a sinister presupposition for social science. It is invoked every time we try to theorise the formation of social institutions and systems from scratch, in a blank space. Whenever we see the words 'building block' in a treatise of social theory, we should be asking who used to occupy the land."[78] Research and change-making, scientific or otherwise, are always caught up in the contradictions, injustices, and structures that already exist, that we have already identified as violent and in need of change.[79] This text is about maneuvering within this complex and compromised terrain.

This compromise of doing both Indigenous and anticolonial work in science and academia[80] is something that many Indigenous thinkers contend with when they enter academia.[81] CLEAR member Edward Allen (Kablunangajuk) opens his doctoral comprehensive exam with the following words:

> The academy will have to embrace wholesale change in what it qualifies as legitimate knowledge production and pedagogy if it is to capture any Indigenous knowledges in any meaningful way.[82] Until the hurdles are cleared, I will continue to write as if footed in both worlds. This with op-

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Ancient Greeks, get influenced by various forms of Christianity and Judaism, and move through the Enlightenment. Generally, I have no problem with that culture. The problem is when it becomes dominant to the point that other ways of knowing, doing, and being are deemed illegitimate or are erased. Second, not all Western science is dominant. Midwifery, alchemy, and preventative medicine are part of Western science that suffer at the hands of dominant science.

78 Connell, *Southern Theory*, 46.

79 For an excellent example of how the politics of denunciation can reproduce the wider system of uneven power relations that it seeks to denounce, see Fiske, "Dirty Hands." For more on what is compromised in conducting basic science for justice, including community science, see Shapiro, Zakariya, and Roberts, "Wary Alliance." For more on how many scientists already know this, see O'Brien, "Being a Scientist."

80 Many academics state that academia is colonial, and they're quite right. But they usually aren't specific as to the intentional roles that universities played in imperialism and the disciplining and oppressions of Indigenous peoples. Now you can be specific: Pietsch, *Empire of Scholars*. But you can also be nuanced and generous: paperson, *A Third University Is Possible*.

81 E.g., S. Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony*; A. Simpson, "On Ethnographic Refusal."

82 He cites Bang, Medin, and Cajete, "Improving Science Education for Native Students."

> timism of at least some small piece of the original story being heard, to imitate my Elders (and my occasional Western teacher) who speak from the heart and exercise compassion when faced with shortcomings (as has been done repeatedly for me), and to reluctantly trade the risk of harm for any opportunity to contribute to change from the inside. But, in the short list of things I claim to grasp, I am confident that you *cannot* come to a full understanding of Indigenous concepts of relationality in this [written] format, even if I were to produce here the best academic paper ever written.[83]

These existing terrains are the fertile, toxic grounds[84] for alterlife:

> A politics of non-deferral that is a commitment to act now. But this politics of non-deferral is not driven by the logic of the emergency, the scale of the planetary, or the container of the nation state. It is a politics of non-deferral interested in the humbleness of right here, in the scale of communities, and in the intimacies of relation. Alterlife is a challenge to invent, revive, and sustain decolonizing possibilities and persistences right now as we are, forged in non-innocence, learning from and in collaboration with past and present projects of residence and resurgence.[85]

Let's begin.

Cinzia Arruzza
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Heather Berg
Porn Work against Work (2021)

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Pollution Is Colonialism (2021)

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Ren Cook
I KNOW THAT I WILL ONLY CHANGE THROUGH THE PASSAGE (2019)

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Squares and Angles (1918)

Kamau Brathwaite
Mesongs (2010)