Radical Sense
Reader Volume 5

2020

THE GENDER OF SOUND

It is in large part according to the sounds people make that we judge them sane or insane, male or female, good, evil, trustworthy, depressive, marriageable, moribund, likely or unlikely to make war on us, little better than animals, inspired by God. These judgments happen fast and can be brutal. Aristotle tells us that the highpitched voice of the female is one evidence of her evil disposition, for creatures who are brave or just (like lions, bulls, roosters and the human male) have large deep voices.[1] If you hear a man talking in a gentle or highpitched voice you know he is a *kinaidos* ("catamite").[2] The poet Aristophanes puts a comic turn on this cliché in his *Ekklesiazousai*: as the women of Athens are about to infiltrate the Athenian assembly and take over political process, the feminist leader Praxagora reassures her fellow female activists that they have precisely the right kind of voices for this task. Because, as she says, "You know that among the young men the ones who turn out to be terrific talkers are the ones who get fucked a lot."[3]

This joke depends on a collapsing together of two different aspects of sound production, quality of voice and use of voice. We will find the ancients continually at pains to associate these two aspects under a general rubric of gender. High vocal pitch goes together with talkativeness to characterize a person who is deviant from or deficient in the masculine ideal of self-control. Women, catamites, eunuchs and androgynes fall into this category. Their sounds are bad to hear and make men uncomfortable. Just how uncomfortable may be measured by the lengths to which Aristotle is willing to go in accounting for the gender of sound physiognomically; he ends up ascribing the lower pitch of the male voice to the tension placed on a man's vocal chords by his testicles functioning as loom weights.[4] In Hellenistic and Roman times doctors recommended vocal exercises to cure all sorts of physical and psychological ailments in men, on the theory that the practice of declamation would relieve congestion in the head and correct the damage that men habitually do to themselves in daily life by using the voice for highpitched sounds, loud shouting or

aimless conversation. Here again we note a confusion of vocal quality and vocal use. This therapy was not on the whole recommended to women or eunuchs or androgynes, who were believed to have the wrong kind of flesh and the wrong alignment of pores for the production of low vocal pitches, no matter how hard they exercised. But for the masculine physique vocal practice was thought an effective way to restore body and mind by pulling the voice back down to appropriately manly pitches.[5] I have a friend who is a radio journalist and he assures me that these suppositions about voice quality are still with us. He is a man and he is gay. He spent the first several years of his career in radio fending off the attempts of producers to deepen, darken and depress his voice, which they described as "having too much smile in it." Very few women in public life do not worry that their voices are too high or too light or too shrill to command respect. Margaret Thatcher trained for years with a vocal coach to make her voice sound more like those of the other Honourable Members and still earned the nickname *Attila The Hen*.[6] This hen analogy goes back to the publicity surrounding Nancy Astor, first female member of the British House Of Commons in 1919, who was described by her colleague Sir Henry Channon as "a queer combination of warmheartedness, originality and rudeness . . . she rushes about like a decapitated hen . . . intriguing and enjoying the smell of blood . . . the mad witch."[7] Madness and witchery as well as bestiality are conditions commonly associated with the use of the female voice in public, in ancient as well as modern contexts. Consider how many female celebrities of classical mythology, literature and cult make themselves objectionable by the way they use their voice. For example there is the heartchilling groan of the Gorgon, whose name is derived from a Sanskrit word **garg* meaning "a guttural animal howl that issues as a great wind from the back of the throat through a hugely distended mouth."[8] There are the Furies whose highpitched and horrendous voices are compared by Aiskhylos to howling dogs or sounds of people being tortured in hell (*Eumenides*).[9] There is the deadly voice of the Sirens and the dangerous ventriloquism of Helen (*Odyssey*)[10] and the incredible babbling of Kassandra (Aiskhylos, *Agamemnon*)[11] and the fearsome hullabaloo of Artemis as she charges through the woods (*Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite*).[12] There is the seductive discourse of

Aphrodite which is so concrete an aspect of her power that she can wear it on her belt as a physical object or lend it to other women (*Iliad*).[13] There is the old woman of Eleusinian legend Iambe who shrieks obscenities and throws her skirt up over her head to expose her genitalia.[14] There is the haunting garrulity of the nymph Echo (daughter of Iambe in Athenian legend) who is described by Sophokles as "the girl with no door on her mouth" (*Philoktetes*).[15]

Putting a door on the female mouth has been an important project of patriarchal culture from antiquity to the present day. Its chief tactic is an ideological association of female sound with monstrosity, disorder and death. Consider this description by one of her biographers of the sound of Gertrude Stein:

> Gertrude was hearty. She used to roar with laughter, out loud. She had a laugh like a beefsteak. She loved beef.[16]

These sentences, with their artful confusion of factual and metaphorical levels, carry with them as it seems to me a whiff of pure fear. It is a fear that projects Gertrude Stein across the boundary of woman and human and animal kind into monstrosity. The simile "she had a laugh like a beefsteak" which identifies Gertrude Stein with cattle is followed at once by the statement "she loved beef" indicating that Gertrude Stein ate cattle. Creatures who eat their own kind are regularly called cannibals and regarded as abnormal. Gertrude Stein's other abnormal attributes, notably her large physical size and lesbianism, were emphasized persistently by critics, biographers and journalists who did not know what to make of her prose. The marginalization of her personality was a way to deflect her writing from literary centrality. If she is fat, funny-looking and sexually deviant she must be a marginal talent, is the assumption.

One of the literary patriarchs who feared Gertrude Stein most was Ernest Hemingway. And it is interesting to hear him tell the story of how he came to end his friendship with Gertrude Stein because he could not tolerate the sound of her voice. The story takes place in Paris. Hemingway tells it from the point of view of a disenchanted expatriate just realizing that he cannot after all make a life for himself amid the alien culture where he is stranded. One spring day in 1924

Hemingway comes to call on Gertrude Stein and is admitted by the maid:

> The maidservant opened the door before I rang and told me to come in and wait. Miss Stein would be down at any moment. It was before noon but the maidservant poured me a glass of *eau-de-vie,* put it in my hand and winked happily. The colorless liquid felt good on my tongue and it was still in my mouth when I heard someone speaking to Miss Stein as I had never heard one person speak to another; never, anywhere, ever. Then Miss Stein's voice came pleading and begging, saying, "Don't, pussy. Don't. Don't, please don't. Please don't, pussy."
>
> I swallowed the drink and put the glass down on the table and started for the door. The maidservant shook her finger at me and whispered, "Don't go. She'll be right down."
>
> "I have to go," I said and tried not to hear any more as I left but it was still going on and the only way I could not hear it was to be gone. It was bad to hear and the answers were worse. . . .
>
> That was the way it finished for me, stupidly enough. . . . She got to look like a Roman emperor and that was fine if you liked your women to look like Roman emperors. . . . In the end everyone or not quite everyone made friends again in order not to be stuffy or righteous. But I could never make friends again truly, neither in my heart nor in my head. When you cannot make friends any more in your head is the worst. But it was more complicated than that.[17]

Indeed it is more complicated than that. As we shall see if we keep Ernest Hemingway and Gertrude Stein in mind while we consider another vignette about a man confronting the female voice. This one is from the 7th century BC. It is a lyric fragment of the archaic poet Alkaios of Lesbos. Like Ernest Hemingway, Alkaios was an expatriate writer. He had been expelled from his home city of Mytilene for political insurgency and his poem is a lonely and demoralized lament from exile. Like Hemingway, Alkaios eptomizes his feelings of alienation in the image of himself as a man stranded in an anteroom of high culture and subjected to a disturbing din of women's voices from the room next door:

> . . . wretched I
> exist with wilderness as my lot
> longing to hear the sound of the Assembly

being called, O Agesilaidas,
and the Council.
What my father and the father of my father
grew old enjoying—
among these citizens who wrong one another—
from this I am outcast

an exile on the furthest fringes of things, like Onomaklees
here all alone I have set up my house
in the wolfthickets. . . .

. . . I dwell keeping my feet outside of evils

where the Lesbian women in their contests for beauty
come and go with trailing robes
and all around reverberates
an otherworldly echo of women's awful yearly shrieking (*ololygas*). . . .

ἀγνοις . . σβιότοις . . ις ὀ τάλαις ἔγω
ζώω μοῖραν ἔχων ἀγροϊωτίκαν
ἰμέρρων ἀγορας ἄκουσαι
καρυ[ζο]μένας ὤ ('A)γεσιλαΐδα

καὶ β[ό]λλας· τὰ πάτηρ καὶ πάτερος πάτηρ
κα⟨γ⟩γ[ε]γήρασ' ἔχοντες πεδὰ τωνδέων
τὼν [ἀ]λλάλοκάκων πολίταν
ἔγ[ω . ἀ]πὺ τούτων ἀπελήλαμαι

φεύγων ἐσχατίαισ', ὡς δ' 'Ονυμακλέης
ἔνθα[δ'] οἷος ἐοίκησα λυκαιμίαις
. [ ]ον [π]όλεμον· στάσιν γὰρ
πρὸς κρ . [. . . .] . οὐκ † ἄμεινον † ὀννέλην·

.] . [. . .] . [. .] . μακάρων ἐς τέμ[ε]νος θέων
ἐοι[. . . . .] με[λ]αίνας ἐπίβαις χθόνος
χλι . [.] . [.] . [.]ν συνόδοισί μ' αὔταις
οἴκημι κ[ά]κων ἔκτος ἔχων πόδας,

ὄππαι Λ[εσβί]αδες κριννόμεναι φύαν
πώλεντ' ἐλκεσίπεπλοι, περὶ δὲ βρέμει
ἄχω θεσπεσία γυναίκων
ἴρα[ς ὀ]λολύγας ἐνιαυσίας . . . .[18]

This is a poem of radical loneliness, which Alkaios emphasizes with an oxymoron. "All alone (*oios*) I have set up my household (*eoikesa*)" he says (at verse 10), but this wording would make little sense to a 7th-century BC ear. The verb (*eoikesa*) is made from the noun *oikos,* which denotes the whole relational complex of spaces, objects, kinsmen, servants, animals, rituals and emotions that constitute life within a family within a *polis*. A man all alone cannot constitute an *oikos*.

Alkaios' oxymoronic condition is reinforced by the kind of creatures that surround him. Wolves and women have replaced "the fathers of my fathers." The wolf is a conventional symbol of marginality in Greek poetry. The wolf is an outlaw. He lives beyond the boundary of usefully cultivated and inhabited space marked off as the *polis,* in that blank no man's land called *to apeiron* ("the unbounded"). Women, in the ancient view, share this territory spiritually and metaphorically in virtue of a "natural" female affinity for all that is raw, formless and in need of the civilizing hand of man. So for example in the document cited by Aristotle that goes by the name of The Pythagorean Table of Opposites, we find the attributes curving, dark, secret, evil, ever-moving, not self-contained and lacking its own boundaries aligned with Female and set over against straight, light, honest, good, stable, self-contained and firmly bounded on the Male side (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*).[19]

I do not imagine that these polarities or their hierarchization is news to you, now that classical historians and feminists have spent the last ten or fifteen years codifying the various arguments with which ancient Greek thinkers convinced themselves that women belong to a different race than men. But it interests me that the radical otherness of the female is experienced by Alkaios, as also by Ernest Hemingway, in the form of women's voices uttering sounds that men find bad to hear. Why is female sound bad to hear? The sound that Alkaios hears is that of the local Lesbian women who are conducting beauty contests and making the air reverberate with their yelling. These beauty contests of the Lesbian women are known to us from a notice in the Iliadic scholia which indicates they were an annual event performed probably in honour of Hera. Alkaios mentions the beauty contests in order to remark on their prodigious noise level and, by so doing, draws his poem into a ringcomposition. The

poem begins with the urbane and orderly sound of a herald summoning male citizens to their rational civic business in the Assembly and the Council. The poem ends with an otherworldly echo of women shrieking in the wolfthickets. Moreover, the women are uttering a particular kind of shriek, the *ololyga*. This is a ritual shout peculiar to females.[20] It is a highpitched piercing cry uttered at certain climactic moments in ritual practice (e.g., at the moment when a victim's throat is slashed during sacrifice) or at climactic moments in real life (e.g., at the birth of a child) and also a common feature of women's festivals. The *ololyga* with its cognate verb *ololyzo* is one of a family of words, including *eleleu* with its cognate verb *elelizo* and *alala* with its cognate verb *alalazo,* probably of Indo-European origin and obviously of onomatopoeic derivation.[21] These words do not signify anything except their own sound. The sound represents a cry of either intense pleasure or intense pain.[22] To utter such cries is a specialized female function. When Alkaios finds himself surrounded by the sound of the *ololyga* he is telling us that he is completely and genuinely out of bounds. No man would make such sound. No proper civic space would contain it unregulated. The female festivals in which such ritual cries were heard were generally not permitted to be held within the city limits but were relegated to suburban areas like the mountains, the beach or the rooftops of houses where women could disport themselves without contaminating the ears or civic space of men. To be exposed to such sound is for Alkaios a condition of political nakedness as alarming as that of his archetype Odysseus, who awakens with no clothes on in a thicket on the island of Phaiakia in the sixth book of Homer's *Odyssey,* surrounded by the shrieking of women. "What a hullabaloo of females comes around me!" Odysseus exclaims[23] and goes on to wonder what sort of savages or supernatural beings can be making such a racket. The savages of course turn out to be Nausikaa and her girlfriends playing soccer on the riverbank, but what is interesting in this scenario is Odysseus' automatic association of disorderly female sound with wild space, with savagery and the supernatural. Nausikaa and her friends are shortly compared by Homer to the wild girls who roam the mountains in attendance upon Artemis,[24] a goddess herself notorious for the sounds that she makes—if we may judge from her Homeric epithets. Artemis is called *keladeine,* derived from the noun *kelados* which

means a loud roaring noise as of wind or rushing water or the tumult of battle. Artemis is also called *iocheaira* which is usually etymologized to mean "she who pours forth arrows" (from *ios* meaning "arrow") but could just as well come from the exclamatory sound *io* and mean "she who pours forth the cry IO!"[25]

Greek women of the archaic and classical periods were not encouraged to pour forth unregulated cries of any kind within the civic space of the *polis* or within earshot of men. Indeed masculinity in such a culture defines itself by its different use of sound. Verbal continence is an essential feature of the masculine virtue of *sophrosyne* ("prudence, soundness of mind, moderation, temperance, self-control") that organizes most patriarchal thinking on ethical or emotional matters. Woman as a species is frequently said to lack the ordering principle of *sophrosyne*. Freud formulates the double standard succinctly in a remark to a colleague: "A thinking man is his own legislator and confessor, and obtains his own absolution, but the woman . . . does not have the measure of ethics in herself. She can only act if she keeps within the limits of morality, following what society has established as fitting."[26] So too, ancient discussions of the virtue of *sophrosyne demonstrate clearly that, where it is applied to women, this word has a different definition than for men.*[27] *Female sophrosyne* is coextensive with female obedience to male direction and rarely means more than chastity. When it does mean more, the allusion is often to sound. A husband exhorting his wife or concubine to *sophrosyne* is likely to mean "Be quiet!"[28] The Pythagorean heroine Timyche who bit off her tongue rather than say the wrong thing is praised as an exception to the female rule.[29] In general the women of classical literature are a species given to disorderly and uncontrolled outflow of sound—to shrieking, wailing, sobbing, shrill lament, loud laughter, screams of pain or of pleasure and eruptions of raw emotion in general. As Euripides puts it, "For it is woman's inborn pleasure always to have her current emotions coming up to her mouth and out through her tongue" (*Andromache*).[30] When a man lets his current emotions come up to his mouth and out through his tongue he is thereby feminized, as Herakles at the end of the *Trachiniai* agonizes to find himself "sobbing like a girl, whereas before I used to follow my difficult course without a groan but now in pain I am discovered a woman."[31]

It is a fundamental assumption of these gender stereotypes that a man in his proper condition of *sophrosyne* should be able to dissociate himself from his own emotions and so control their sound. It is a corollary assumption that man's proper civic responsibility towards woman is to control her sound for her insofar as she cannot control it herself. We see a summary moment of such masculine benevolence in Homer's *Odyssey* in Book 22 when the old woman Eurykleia enters the dining hall to find Odysseus caked in blood and surrounded by dead suitors. Eurykleia lifts her head and opens her mouth to utter an *ololyga*. Whereupon Odysseus reaches out a hand and closes her mouth saying, *ou themis:* "It is not permitted for you to scream just now. Rejoice inwardly. . . ."[32]

Closing women's mouths was the object of a complex array of legislation and convention in preclassical and classical Greece, of which the best documented examples are Solon's sumptuary laws and the core concept is Sophokles' blanket statement, "Silence is the *kosmos* [good order] of women."[33] The sumptuary laws enacted by Solon in the 6th century BC had as their effect, Plutarch tells us, "to forbid all the disorderly and barbarous excesses of women in their festivals, processions and funeral rites."[34] The main responsibility for funeral lament had belonged to women from earliest Greek times. Already in Homer's *Iliad* we see the female Trojan captives in Achilles' camp compelled to wail over Patroklos.[35] Yet lawgivers of the 6th and 5th centuries like Solon were at pains to restrict these female outpourings to a minimum of sound and emotional display.

The official rhetoric of the lawgivers is instructive. It tends to denounce bad sound as political disease (*nosos*) and speaks of the need to purify civic spaces of such pollution. Sound itself is regarded as the means of purification as well as of pollution. So for example the lawgiver Charondas, who laid down laws for the city of Katana in Sicily, prefaced his legal code with a ceremonial public *katharsis*. This took the form of an incantation meant to cleanse the citizen body of evil ideas or criminal intent and to prepare a civic space for the legal *katharsis* that followed. In his law code Charondas, like Solon, was concerned to regulate female noise and turned attention to the ritual funeral lament. Laws were passed specifying the location, time, duration, personnel, choreography, musical content and verbal content of the women's funeral lament on the grounds that these "harsh and

barbaric sounds" were a stimulus to "disorder and licence" (as Plutarch puts it).[36] Female sound was judged to arise in craziness and to generate craziness.

We detect a certain circularity in the reasoning here. If women's public utterance is perpetually enclosed within cultural institutions like the ritual lament, if women are regularly reassigned to the expression of nonrational sounds like the *ololyga* and raw emotion in general, then the so-called "natural" tendency of the female to shrieking, wailing, weeping, emotional display and oral disorder cannot help but become a self-fulfilling prophecy. But circularity is not the most ingenious thing about this reasoning. We should look a little more closely at the ideology that underlies male abhorrence of female sound. And it becomes important at this point to distinguish sound from language.

For the formal definition of human nature preferred by patriarchal culture is one based on articulation of sound. As Aristotle says, any animal can make noises to register pleasure or pain. But what differentiates man from beast, and civilization from the wilderness, is the use of rationally articulated speech: *logos*.[37] From such a prescription for humanity follow severe rules for what constitutes human *logos*. When the wife of Alexander Graham Bell, a woman who had been deafened in childhood and knew how to lipread but not how to talk very well, asked him to teach her sign language, Alexander replied, "The use of sign language is pernicious. For the only way by which language can be thoroughly mastered is by using it for the communication of thought without translation into any other language."[38] Alexander Graham Bell's wife, whom he had married the day after he patented the telephone, never did learn sign language. Or any other language.

What is it that is pernicious about sign language? To a husband like Alexander Graham Bell, as to a patriarchal social order like that of classical Greece, there is something disturbing or abnormal about the use of signs to transcribe upon the outside of the body a meaning from inside the body which does not pass through the control point of *logos,* a meaning which is not subject to the mechanism of dissociation that the Greeks called *sophrosyne* or self-control. Sigmund Freud applied the name "hysteria" to this process of transcription when it occurred in female patients whose tics and neuralgias and convul-

sions and paralyses and eating disorders and spells of blindness could be read, in his theory, as a direct translation into somatic terms of psychic events within the woman's body.[39] Freud conceived his own therapeutic task as the rechannelling of these hysteric signs into rational discourse.[40] Herodotos tells us of a priestess of Athene in Pedasa who did not use speech to prophesy but would grow a beard whenever she saw misfortune coming upon her community.[41] Herodotos does not register any surprise at the "somatic compliance" (as Freud would call it) of this woman's prophetic body nor call her condition pathological. But Herodotos was a practical person, less concerned to discover pathologies in his historical subjects than to congratulate them for putting "otherness" to cultural use. And the anecdote does give us a strong image of how ancient culture went about constructing the "otherness" of the female. Woman is that creature who puts the inside on the outside. By projections and leakages of all kinds—somatic, vocal, emotional, sexual—females expose or expend what should be kept in. Females blurt out a direct translation of what should be formulated indirectly. There is a story told about the wife of Pythagoras, that she once uncovered her arm while out of doors and someone commented, "Nice arm," to which she responded, "Not public property!" Plutarch's comment on this story is: "The arm of a virtuous woman should not be public property, nor her speech neither, and she should as modestly guard against exposing her voice to outsiders as she would guard against stripping off her clothes. For in her voice as she is blabbering away can be read her emotions, her character and her physical condition."[42] In spite of herself, Plutarch's woman has a voice that acts like a sign language, exposing her inside facts. Ancient physiologists from Aristotle through the early Roman empire tell us that a man can know from the sound of a woman's voice private data like whether or not she is menstruating, whether or not she has had sexual experience.[43] Although these are useful things to know, they may be bad to hear or make men uncomfortable. What is pernicious about sign language is that it permits a direct continuity between inside and outside. Such continuity is abhorrent to the male nature. The masculine virtue of *sophrosyne* or self-control aims to obstruct this continuity, to dissociate the outside surface of a man from what is going on inside him. Man breaks continuity by interposing

logos—whose most important censor is the rational articulation sound.

Every sound we make is a bit of autobiography. It has a totally private interior yet its trajectory is public. A piece of inside projected to the outside. The censorship of such projections is a task of patriarchal culture that (as we have seen) divides humanity into two species: those who can censor themselves and those who cannot.

In order to explore some of the implications of this division let us consider how Plutarch depicts the two species in his essay "On Talkativeness."

To exemplify the female species in its use of sound Plutarch tells the story of a politician's wife who is tested by her husband. The politician makes up a crazy story and tells it to his wife as a secret early one morning. "Now keep your mouth closed about this," he warns her. The wife immediately relates the secret to her maidservant. "Now keep your mouth closed about this," she tells the maidservant, who immediately relates it to the whole town and before midmorning the politician himself receives his own story back again. Plutarch concludes this anecdote by saying, "The husband had taken precautions and protective measures in order to test his wife, as one might test a cracked or leaky vessel by filling it not with oil or wine but with water."[44] Plutarch pairs this anecdote with a story about masculine speech acts. It is a description of a friend of Solon's named Anacharsis:

> Anacharsis who had dined with Solon and was resting after dinner, was seen pressing his left hand on his sexual parts and his right hand on his mouth: for he believed that the tongue requires a more powerful restraint. And he was right. It would not be easy to count as many men lost through incontinence in amorous pleasures as cities and empires ruined through revelation of a secret.[45]

In assessing the implications of the gendering of sound for a society like that of the ancient Greeks, we have to take seriously the connexion Plutarch makes between verbal and sexual continence, between mouth and genitals. Because that connexion turns out to be a very different matter for men than for women. The masculine virtue of self-censorship with which Anacharsis responds to impulses from inside himself is shown to be simply unavailable to the female nature.

Plutarch reminds us a little later in the essay that perfect *sophrosyne* is an attribute of the god Apollo whose epithet Loxias means that he is a god of few words and concise expression, not one who runs off at the mouth.[46] Now when a woman runs off at the mouth there is far more at stake than waste of words: the image of the leaky water jar with which Plutarch concludes his first anecdote is one of the commonest figures in ancient literature for the representation of female sexuality.

The forms and contexts of this representation (the leaky jar of female sexuality) have been studied at length by other scholars including me,[47] so let us pass directly to the heart, or rather the mouth, of the matter. It is an axiom of ancient Greek and Roman medical theory and anatomical discussion that a woman has two mouths.[48] The orifice through which vocal activity takes place and the orifice through which sexual activity takes place are both denoted by the word *stoma* in Greek (*os* in Latin) with the addition of adverbs *ano* or *kato* to differentiate upper mouth from lower mouth. Both the vocal and the genital mouth are connected to the body by a neck (*auchen* in Greek, *cervix* in Latin). Both mouths provide access to a hollow cavity which is guarded by lips that are best kept closed. The ancient medical writers apply not only homologous terms but also parallel medications to upper and lower mouths in certain cases of uterine malfunction. They note with interest, as do many poets and scholiasts, symptoms of physiological responsion between upper and lower mouth, for example that an excess or blockage of blood in the uterus will evidence itself as strangulation or loss of voice,[49] that too much vocal exercise results in loss of menses,[50] that defloration causes a woman's neck to enlarge and her voice to deepen.[51]

"With a high pure voice because she has not yet been acted upon by the bull," is how Aiskhylos describes his Iphigeneia (*Agamemnon*).[52] The changed voice and enlarged throat of the sexually initiated female are an upward projection of irrevocable changes at the lower mouth. Once a woman's sexual life begins, the lips of the uterus are never completely closed again—except on one occasion, as the medical writers explain: in his treatise on gynecology Soranos describes the sensations that a woman experiences during fruitful sexual intercourse. At the moment of conception, the Hellenistic doctor Soranos alleges, the woman has a shivering sensation and the

perception that the mouth of her uterus closes upon the seed.[53] This closed mouth, and the good silence of conception that it protects and signifies, provides the model of decorum for the upper mouth as well. Sophokles' frequently cited dictum "Silence is the *kosmos* of women" has its medical analog in women's amulets from antiquity which picture a uterus equipped with a lock at the mouth.

When it is not locked the mouth may gape open and let out unspeakable things. Greek myth, literature and cult show traces of cultural anxiety about such female ejaculation. For example there is the story of Medusa who, when her head was cut off by Perseus, gave birth to a son and a flying horse through her neck.[54] Or again that restless and loquacious nymph Echo, surely the most mobile female in Greek myth. When Sophokles calls her "the girl with no door on her mouth" we might wonder which mouth he means. Especially since Greek legend marries Echo off in the end to the god Pan whose name implies her conjugal union with every living thing.

We should also give some consideration to that bizarre and variously explained religious practice called *aischrologia*. *Aischrologia* means "saying ugly things." Certain women's festivals included an interval in which women shouted abusive remarks or obscenities or dirty jokes at one another. Historians of religion classify these rituals of bad sound either as some Frazerian species of fertility magic or as a type of coarse but cheering buffoonery in which (as Walter Burkert says) "antagonism between the sexes is played up and finds release."[55] But the fact remains that in general men were not welcome at these rituals and Greek legend contains more than a few cautionary tales of men castrated, dismembered or killed when they blundered into them.[56] These stories suggest a backlog of sexual anger behind the bland face of religious buffoonery. Ancient society was happy to have women drain off such unpleasant tendencies and raw emotion into a leakproof ritual container. The strategy involved here is a kathartic one, based on a sort of psychological division of labour between the sexes, such as [pseudo]Demosthenes mentions in a reference to the Athenian ritual called *Choes*. The ceremony of *Choes* took place on the second day of the Dionysian festival of Anthesteria.[57] It featured a competition between celebrants to drain an oversize jug of wine and concluded with a symbolic (or perhaps not) act of sexual union between the god Dionysos and a representa-

tive woman of the community. It is this person to whom Demosthenes refers, saying "She is the woman who discharges the unspeakable things on behalf of the city."[58]

Let us dwell for a moment on this ancient female task of discharging unspeakable things on behalf of the city, and on the structures that the city sets up to contain such speech.

A ritual structure like the *aischrologia* raises some difficult questions of definition. For it collapses into a single kathartic activity two different aspects of sound production. We have noticed this combinatory tactic already throughout most of the ancient and some of the modern discussions of voice: female sound is bad to hear *both* because the quality of a woman's voice is objectionable *and* because woman uses her voice to say what should not be said. When these two aspects are blurred together, some important questions about the distinction between essential and constructed characteristics of human nature recede into circularity. Nowadays, sex difference in language is a topic of diverse research and unresolved debate. The sounds made by women are said to have different inflectional patterns, different ranges of intonation, different syntactic preferences, different semantic fields, different diction, different narrative textures, different behavioural accoutrements, different contextual pressures than the sounds that men make.[59] Tantalizing vestiges of ancient evidence for such difference may be read from, e.g., passing references in Aristophanes to a "woman's language" that a man can learn or imitate if he wants to (*Thesmophoriazousai*),[60] or from the conspicuously onomatopoeic construction of female cries like *ololuga* and female names like Gorgo, Baubo, Echo, Syrinx, Eileithyia.[61] But in general, no clear account of the ancient facts can be extracted from strategically blurred notions like the homology of female mouth and female genitals, or tactically blurred activities like the ritual of the *aischrologia*. What does emerge is a consistent paradigm of response to otherness of voice. It is a paradigm that forms itself as *katharsis*.

As such, the ancient Greek ritual of *aischrologia* bears some resemblance to the procedure developed by Sigmund Freud and his colleague Josef Breuer for treatment of hysterical women. In *Case Studies on Hysteria* Freud and Breuer use the term "katharsis" and also the term "talking cure" of this revolutionary therapy. In Freud's theory the hysterical patients are women who have bad memories or

ugly emotions trapped inside them like a pollution. Freud and Breuer find themselves able to drain off this pollution by inducing the women under hypnosis to speak unspeakable things. Hypnotized women produce some remarkable sounds. One of the case studies described by Freud can at first only clack like a hen; another insists on speaking English although she was Viennese; another uses what Freud calls "paraphrastic jargon."[62] But all are eventually channelled by the psychoanalyst into connected narrative and rational exegesis of their hysteric symptoms. Whereupon, both Freud and Breuer claim, the symptoms disappear—cleansed by this simple kathartic ritual of draining off the bad sound of unspeakable things.

Here is how Josef Breuer describes his interaction with the patient who goes by the pseudonym Anna O.:

> . . . . I used to visit her in the evening, when I knew I should find her in her hypnosis, and then I relieved her of the whole stock of imaginative products which she had accumulated since my last visit. It was essential that this should be effected completely if good results were to follow. When this was done she became perfectly calm, and next day she would be agreeable, easy to manage, industrious and even cheerful. . . . She aptly described this procedure as a "talking cure," while she referred to it jokingly as "chimney sweeping."[63]

Whether we call it chimney sweeping or *aischrologia* or ritual funeral lament or a hullabaloo of females or having a laugh like a beefsteak, the same paradigm of response is obvious. As if the entire female gender were a kind of collective bad memory of unspeakable things, patriarchal order like a well-intentioned psychoanalyst seems to conceive its therapeutic responsibility as the channelling of this bad sound into politically appropriate containers. Both the upper and the lower female mouth apparently stand in need of such controlling action. Freud mentions shyly in a footnote to *Case Studies on Hysteria* that Josef Breuer had to suspend his analytic relationship with Anna O. because "she suddenly made manifest to Breuer the presence of a strongly unanalyzed positive transference of an unmistakably sexual nature."[64] Not until 1932 did Freud reveal (in a letter to a colleague)[65] what really happened between Breuer and Anna O. It was on the evening of his last interview with her that Breuer entered Anna's apartment to find her on the floor contorted by ab-

dominal pain. When he asked her what was wrong she answered that she was about to give birth to his child. It was this "untoward event" as Freud calls it that caused Breuer to hold back the publication of *Case Studies on Hysteria* from 1881 to 1895 and led him ultimately to abandon collaborating with Freud. Even the talking cure must fall silent when both female mouths try to speak at the same time.

It is confusing and embarrassing to have two mouths. Genuine *kakophony* is the sound produced by them. Let us consider one more example from antiquity of female *kakophony* at its most confusing and embarrassing. There is a group of terracotta statues recovered from Asia Minor and dated to the 4th century BC which depict the female body in an alarmingly shortcircuited form.[66] Each of these statues is a woman who consists of almost nothing but her two mouths. The two mouths are welded together into an inarticulate body mass which excludes other anatomical function. Moreover the position of the two mouths is reversed. The upper mouth for talking is placed at the bottom of the statue's belly. The lower or genital mouth gapes open on top of the head. Iconographers identify this monster with the old woman named Baubo[67] who figures in Greek legend as an allomorph of the old woman Iambe (in the Demeter myth) and is a sort of patron saint of the ritual of the *aischrologia*. Baubo's name has a double significance; according to *LSJ* the noun *baubo* is used as a synonym for *koilia* (which denotes the female uterus) but as a piece of sound it derives from *baubau,* the onomatopoeic Greek word for a dog's bark.[68] The mythic action of Baubo is also significantly double. Like the old woman Iambe, Baubo is credited in legend with the twofold gesture of pulling up her clothes to reveal her genitalia and also shouting out obscene language or jokes. The shouting of Baubo provides one aetiology for the ritual of the *aischrologia;* her action of genital exposure may also have come over into cult as a ritual action called the *anasyrma* (the "pulling up" of clothing).[69] If so, we may understand this action as a kind of visual or gestural noise, projected outward upon circumstances to change or deflect them, in the manner of an apotropaic utterance. So Plutarch describes the use of the *anasyrma* gesture by women in besieged cites: in order to repel the enemy they stand on the city wall and pull up their clothing to expose unspeakable things.[70] Plutarch praises this action of female self-exposure as an instance of virtue in its context. But woman's allegedly

definitive tendency to put the inside on the outside could provoke quite another reaction. The Baubo statues are strong evidence of that reaction. This Baubo presents us with one simple chaotic diagram of an outrageously manipulable female identity. The doubling and interchangeability of mouth engenders a creature in whom sex is cancelled out by sound and sound is cancelled out by sex. This seems a perfect answer to all the questions raised and dangers posed by the confusing and embarrassing continuity of female nature. Baubo's mouths appropriate each other.

Cultural historians disagree on the meaning of these statues. They have no certain information on the gender or intention or state of mind of the people who made them. We can only guess at their purpose as objects or their mood as works of art. Personally I find them as ugly and confusing and almost funny as *Playboy* magazine in its current predilection for placing centrefold photographs of naked women side by side with long intensely empathetic articles about high-profile feminists. This is more than an oxymoron. There is a death of meaning in the collocation of such falsehoods—each of them, the centrefold naked woman and the feminist, a social construct purchased and marketed by *Playboy* magazine to facilitate that fantasy of masculine virtue that the ancient Greeks called *sophrosyne* and Freud renamed repression.

In considering the question, how do our presumptions about gender affect the way we hear sounds? I have cast my net rather wide and have mingled evidence from different periods of time and different forms of cultural expression—in a way that reviewers of my work like to dismiss as ethnographic naïveté. I think there is a place for naïveté in ethnography, at the very least as an irritant. Sometimes when I am reading a Greek text I force myself to look up all the words in the dictionary, even the ones I think I know. It is surprising what you learn that way. Some of the words turn out to sound quite different than you thought. Sometimes the way they sound can make you ask questions you wouldn't otherwise ask. Lately I have begun to question the Greek word *sophrosyne*. I wonder about this concept of self-control and whether it really is, as the Greeks believed, an answer to most questions of human goodness and dilemmas of civility. I wonder if there might not be another idea of human order than repression, another notion of human virtue than self-control, another

kind of human self than one based on dissociation of inside and outside. Or indeed, another human essence than self.

Endnotes

1. *Physiognomics,* 807a.
2. *Physiognomics,* 813a. On *kinaidos* see Aiskhines 1.131 and 2.99; Dover (1975), 17, 75; M. W. Gleason (1990), 401; I am indebted to Maud Gleason also for allowing me to preview a chapter ("The Role of the Voice in the Maintenance of Gender Boundaries") of her book on self-presentation in the Second Sophistic, *Making Men: Sophists and Self-Presentation in Ancient Rome.*
3. Aristophanes, *Ekklesiazousai,* 113–114.
4. Aristotle, *On the Generation of Animals,* 787b–788.
5. Oribasios, 6; Gleason (1994), 12.
6. A. Raphael, *The Observer,* October 7, 1979.
7. S. Rogers in S. Ardener (1981), 59.
8. T. Howe (1954), 209; J.-P. Vernant (1991), 117.
9. *Eumenides,* 117, 131.
10. *Odyssey,* 4.275.
11. Aiskhylos, *Agamemnon,* 1213–1214.
12. *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite,* 18–20.
13. *Iliad,* 14.216.
14. On Iambe see M. Olender (1990), 85–90 and references.
15. *Philoktetes,* 188.
16. M. D. Luhan (1935), 324.
17. E. Hemingway (1964), 118.
18. fr. 130 Lobel.
19. Aristotle, *Metaphysics,* 986a22.
20. S. Eitrem (1919), III, 44–53 assembles the pertinent texts.
21. E. Boisacq (1907), 698.
22. L. Gernet (1983), 248 and n. 8.
23. *Od.* 6. 122.
24. *Od.* 9. 105–6.
25. So Gernet (1983), 249–250 following Ehrlich (1910), 48.
26. Letter to E. Silberstein cited by Grosskurth (1980), 889.
27. H. North (1966), see especially 1, 22, 37, 59, 206.

3
Against Population, Towards Alterlife

Michelle Murphy

A group of individuals and the sum of inhabitants. Population is pervasively used as a neutral term that abstractly describes a multitude. Yet figures of massified life, in the forms of crowds and overpopulation, have been persistently racializing. With intensifying climate change, mass extinctions, and extraction regimes poisoning lands, airs and waters, the problem of overpopulation has been recharged for left and liberal politics as a way to think through environmental crisis. In media venues like *The Guardian*, aerial photos of global slums and crowded shopping malls excite privileged viewers to reattach anxiety to overpopulation.

This essay takes a position against population as a framework for a feminist politics while still elevating the question of reproductive politics in feminist decolonial environmental justice. Even if population as a framework is abandoned, it is also the case that an individualized approach to reproductive justice, in

which the individual and their right to choice only takes precedence, is also an inadequate framework for addressing the mesh of responsibilities and entanglements reproduction has with environmental violence. Following in the footsteps of a multitude of radical reproductive justice visions, might we search for concepts that reframe reproductive justice as fundamentally a concern of environment—that is of land, water, non-human relations, hostile conditions, and life supports in worlds already damaged? This essay opens a critical path against population and moves towards a reparative path, envisioning a distributive reproductive politics that stretches beyond bodies, choice, and babies to extensively include all our relations and responsibilities within damaged worlds.

Achieving distributive reproductive justice requires creating infrastructures that disseminate viable worlds, queer and non-human kinships, harm reduction practices, and also the taking apart of violent systems. What concepts might be given up to make room for other ways of creating a politics of reproductive justice? Population is not the only way to think through a politics of more-than-individual reproduction that is responsible to environmental violence. Hence, I make my case beginning with a refusal of population and then move towards positing the beginning of something else: the concept of alterlife.

Against Population

While we can trace population thinking back to Malthus in the 18th century, the managerial sense of population—as a quantity problem fixed by *adjustable* birth and death rates—is a 20th-century formulation. Population, in the 20th century, became a calculative concept used to govern the stock of people in a nation-state for the sake of economic productivity. In 19th-century Britain, the term designated the working class as an undifferentiated mass, and in mid-20th-century United States, the word named the totality of people in a prison. Population, as an artifact of a particular way of counting, bundles up bodies into a single tally, creating distance and abstraction for a managerial gaze that is then poised to ask, "What should be done about *them*?" It is a formulation that allows the anonymization of lives into deletable data points.

The histories of the uses of "population" are ignored at our peril. I have tried to show this in *The Economization of Life*, building on works by Alison Bashford, Betsy Hartmann, Farida Akhter, and many other chroniclers of eugenics and population control. In the first half of the 20th century, the problem of population was politicized in nations around the world as the eugenic project of racial futures, how to prevent the breeding of some for the sake of the evolutionary future of the whole. The word "prevention" here hides the vast range of violences undertaken in the name of racial evolution: sterilization, segregation, child-theft, residential schools, incarceration, starvation, murder, war. The future of population was often posed as the problem of differential fertility, creating national projects of destructive sorting: the problem of poor people having

more children than the rich, of blacks having more children than whites, of the colonized having more children than the colonizer. From Malthus to American foreign policy, the problem of population has been framed as a way to avert crises, as necessitating unsavory acts in order to thwart a potential apocalypse of starvation, resource depletion, and war.

In the cold war/postcolonial/ongoing-settler colonial period of the second half of the 20th century, when it became less allowable for scientific and political elites to explicitly invoke racial biological difference as a sufficient rationalization for violent policies, the problem of population was transformed within the social sciences into the dilemma of too many people: the problem of the prevention of the birth of surplus others for the sake of future economic prosperity of the nation. In the UN, USAID, and national population departments around the world, population became a concept affectively charged with a fear of future apocalypses caused by the too-many. Population became a kind of simple quantification of mass, containerized by the project of nation-statehood. It joined Gross National Project as a simple kind of measure, one meant for adjustment: population and economy *together* needed to be counted, stimulated, managed. Economy's perpetual growth required population's curbing. In the second half of the 20th century, every nation was required to offer up such numbers as the price of participation in transnational agreements and finance.

But so too was population summoned as a problem modeled as a planetary-scaled phenomenon open to ongoing management, legitimating projects incorporating American interests to cover the globe. Population, as worked through the now globalized practices of population control since the 1960s, has

rested on calculations of surplus life and white supremacy, of foreign life to be kept outside of borders, of lives not worth saving, of killable brown and black others, and of elite lives to be protected. The concept of population has worked its way deep inside conventional policy, economic, ecological, and life science thinking. Trained to inhabit a world composed of objects and forces rendered by these epistemologies, critics of environmental violence, especially biologists, might find it difficult to imagine a future organized without "population" as a concept.

Yet the problem of population is not just conceptual. Population as a problem carries with it thick transnational webs of infrastructures, laws, experimental platforms, clinics, and technologies of population control still in operation today. Population infrastructures continue to weaponize birth control practices, distributing coercive sterilization, inventing new flexible forms of eugenics, propagating extractive experiments, putting up border walls, and fomenting racist violence. Population is bound to the material horror of genocide, apartheids, sexual violence and colonialisms. Each is animated by designations of life as expendable.

After spending over a decade in the thick archive of data produced by histories of the experimental exuberance of globalized family planning in American empire, after reading thousands of studies about averting the births of poor, Indigenous, brown, and black people, studies in which race is rarely mentioned even as it is the very grammar of designations of surplus life, after living with the ongoing violence of settler colonialism in Canada, population has become for me an intolerable concept. I am against population. #AgainstPopulation

Not only is population a way of managing human presence saturated with racism, concentrating fears on the problem of population is also a distraction. It deflects from the crucial fact that it is the structures of industrial accumulation, militarism, and consumption—justified by the goal of improving macroeconomic measures—that have overwhelmingly produced the material violence of climate change, extensive planetary pollution, and death-making terraforming. A 2017 Major Carbons Database report identifies just 90 companies that are responsible for two-thirds of the last 150 years of green house gas emissions. In this moment of intensifying environmental violence, human density is attractive as a managerial policy problem and container for worry because it points the finger at preventing future human life without requiring the reordering of capitalism, colonialism, the nation-state, or heteropatriarchy as world orders. If only there were fewer humans in sites of high-human density, then future others might live more abundantly. Population policies of every flavour imaginable have been tried over the last half century, and they have resoundingly failed to curb the violence of the world.

Instead, nearly a century of governing industry for the sake of growing the national macroeconomy has produced a globalized capitalist infrastructure that, on the one hand, produces the molecular material "waste" of emissions as outside of the calculation of value and, on the other hand, designates poor people as forms of human "waste," better for the world to be without, and hence correspondingly open to abuse, abandonment, and elimination. In other words, population as a concept is enmeshed in the very infrastructures and logics that have produced ubiquitous environmental violence.

The problem of massive, widely distributed, environmental violence has today reinstalled population as an affectively charged problem. Categories like climate change and the Anthropocene offer planetary-scaled renderings that calibrate well with the framework of population. Charts demonstrating the "Great Acceleration" put the dramatic upward slope of human population next to those of extinction, carbon dioxide, and pollution emissions. This earth systems optics of Anthropocene, as Joseph Masco has shown, is caught up in cold war American military histories of planetary-scaled measurement, planning, and nuclear war modelling. It is thus no accident that population thinking (with its own entanglements with cold war military global planning, and not just ecological modelling) fits well within the units of analysis of the Anthropocene. Narratives of the Anthropocene emphasize environmental violence at the totality of the planetary combined with an imminent apocalyptic horizon that, together, encourages responses crafted as massive and urgent, hence assembling the enormous earth system scale of problematizing with the ethically fraught timescape of the emergency as a justification for suspending ethics. For whom do these scalings of the problem make sense? Population is not the only way of thinking through reproductive politics in relation to intensive environmental violence, even if the inheritance of cold war and colonial epistemologies keep offering population as a container. Given the existence of elaborate national and transnational projects to reduce population in the 20th century, is there any surprise that it remains easier to imagine doing something about population than ending capitalism? I do not believe that a radical political imaginary for the concept of population can be mobilized without

amplifying existing infrastructures already deployed towards racist necropolitical ends. To take a stance against population is to prompt the challenge of recognizing and creating other ways of figuring humanity, relations, and density as part of collectivities resisting environmental violence and towards more livable worlds.

So how to talk about intensive human-caused environmental violence and its relation to the questions of human presence, distributions of reproductive possibility, and differential exposures to death? How do reproductive politics and massive environmental violence connect? How to create a politics of reproduction beyond the myopia of the individual body and in recognition of macrological political dimensions of human life, and even all being? This essay is an attempt to think through these questions in, alongside, and in struggle with colleagues and mentors whose work, it is no exaggeration to say, have made my own possible. It is an attempt to think futures and concepts in the spaces between conflicting and yet deeply entangled feminisms. And it is an insistence of opposition to population and human numbering as a feminist framing for land defense while still puzzling through how reproductive politics is integral to environmental justice.

For some, particularly people in privileged vantage points, the abuses of population control are parried with a politics of individual choice and the individual right to choose to have or not have children. However, women of color, Indigenous, queer, and decolonial feminist reproductive justice has long been critical of this privileged version of reproductive politics, which pivots on the well-resourced individualized user and consumer of reproductive health care services

and commodities. Reproductive justice frameworks built by organization such as the Sister Song Women of Color Reproductive Health Collective, Asian Communities for Reproductive Justice, or Native Youth Sexual Health Network emphasize building strategies of *community*, not just individual, survival and flourishing. Radical reproductive justice takes as its starting point the *affirmative making of the conditions that support collective life* in the face of persistent racist, colonial, and heteropatriarchal life-negating structures. Thus, reproductive justice bleeds into environmental justice, which includes water, land, and non-human relations, as well as policing, food, shelter, schools, reserves, carceral systems, war, structural unemployment, and pollution. If you cannot drink the water, there is no reproductive justice. Or, as the Third World Women's political banner at a 1979 Boston protest about murdered Black women declared, "We cannot live without our lives."

So if conditions of environmental hostility require versions of collective reproductive justice, might the same be said of elite and enabled life? What reproductive justice politics can grapple with rich, white, settler colonial, heteronormative reproduction, of baby-making with expensive strollers assembled in supply chain capitalist webs, of fossil-fuel guzzling SUVs fed through pipelines, of oil turned into piles of plastic toys destined for landfills and then microplastic gyres, of white property relations with empty rooms, of grocery stores stocked with the bright goods of multi-national corporations, and all the many forms of white possession and enablement? Reproduction here is not just the baby. Webs of relations and distributions of violence make possible the smooth life of abundant choice. This kind of reproductive accumulation is another kind of

density—a density of relations that enable capitalist life at the expense of all else. Here we can think of density in a different way: not in terms of human numbers, but as densities of relations that create the enablement and entitlement that in turn depend on and propagate often quite distanced distributions of violence.

What responsibilities to webs of injury, land theft, and other worlds does an anti-colonial, anti-racist environmental reproductive justice politics attuned to the environmental violence of capitalism, white supremacy, and settler colonialism demand? What responsibilities to our entanglements in webs of accumulation, entitlement, and hoarding? An extended, anti-racist and decolonial reproductive justice politics stretches beyond babies, birth and bodies and out into struggles of survival that are not just personal survival, but struggles over what more-than-life relations might persist into the future for collectivities. It also asks what relations should be dismantled, refused, shunned? This extensive sense of reproductive relations thus includes policing and military violence, reserves and borders, heterosexuality and family, property and labor, land and water, and questions of redistribution of resources and life chances. It includes Black Lives Matter, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, and Two Spirit People, No One is Illegal, and countless struggles against extractive regimes around the globe.

A distributed reproductive politics is not about birth rates or human numbers. It is about which kinships, supports, structures, and beings get to have a future and which are destroyed. A distributed reproduction is not about babies in particular (neither is it against them); instead its ambit extends into air, water, land, and a mesh of life forms into the multigenerational future. It is not merely about how bodies reproduce, it

is about how life supports are replenished, cared for, and created. It is inseparable from a becoming-with-the-many that includes shelter, technologies, protocols of governance, structures of violence, animals, plants, ancestors, and histories. A distributed sense of reproduction attends to what infrastructures, assemblies, systems, and collectivities are supported through violence—capitalism, colonialism, white supremacy, heteropatriarchy—and what relations must struggle for their continuity or resurgence, and in so doing fight for the destruction of those violent systems, a dismantling that makes room for other forms of life. As Winona LaDuke asserts, not pipelines for oil, but for water. Which structures have to end to make room for livable ways of being together? The list is long. Reproduction (as perpetuation) is not in itself an inherent good.

Aspiring towards decolonizing and queer alter-worlds, reproduction might be better rethought as a politics of redistributing relations, possibilities and futures. #RedistributionsNotReproductions. Making redistributed relations is an extensive, ongoing endeavor, looped with imperfections, messiness, returns and futurities. I am against population and for a politics of differently distributed futures. #DifferentFutures

So to be against population is to reject the zeroing in on human density and wealth as problems of disconnected counting and to instead concentrate political attention on decomposing the density of consumption, property, waste and state sanctioned violence that prop up capitalism, colonialism, and white supremacy, while at the same time creating less violent ways of being with land. It is to struggle over different futurities, not differential fertility. To be against the problem of population, then, calls for concepts and practices of becoming-with-the-many-

differently that resist the impulse of the biopolitical equation: "some must die so that others might live." It is not to be against numbers or science in total, but rather particular ways of doing numbers. To be against population is also to reject the proprietary heterosexual family form that the storm of capitalism, racism, colonialism, and liberalism demands as the container for reproductive choice. To be against population is to foster a multitude of ways of living in kinship differently that already exist all around us, as well as to continue to create speculative otherwises.

Towards Alterlife

At stake in conjuring alter-collectivities and redistributions is the very sense of what constitutes life, land, and its relations. Refusing population as a unit of analysis opens up an invitation to transform the many obsolete and violent epistemic habits sedimented into scientific ways of problematizing life. Within the biological sciences, there is no unified theory of life, even as the units of gene, body, species, and ecosystem have become so commonplace that they seem to exist in the world itself, and not as historically particular materializations of it. Making futurities in the aftermaths of ongoing violence requires alternative decolonial ways of retheorizing life with and against, alongside and athwart, technoscientific framings of life and environment. It is to learn from and propagate politics and concepts in the tensions between violences that have already happened and the need to undo them nonetheless, the condition of being already altered and the struggle to become otherwise in the aftermath.

In this spirit, I share from an experiment in learning with the concept of *alterlife*—the struggle to exist again *but differently* when already in conflicted, damaging, and deadly conditions, a state of already having been altered, of already being in the aftermath, and yet persisting. The concept of alterlife came out of efforts to grapple with the transgenerational injurious effects of industrially produced chemicals now ubiquitous in the atmosphere and water, some of which, like PCBs and DDE (a metabolite of DDT), appear to be in the bodies of every person alive on the planet. I come to alterlife after studying these chemicals as they deliver concentrated injury and premature death to already assaulted communities, and also continue spreading ubiquitously across the earth, transforming the epigenomes, neurobiology and metabolisms of living beings, human, non-human, and more than human.

Since 2001 when the CDC began national biomonitoring studies in the US, other endocrine disrupting chemicals, like phthalate plasticizers, dioxins, furan, lead, and organochlorine pesticides, and organophosphate pesticides have joined PCBs and DDT in the bodies of all people tested. In Canada, lead and mercury are near universally in bodies, even as we know, from both science and communities, that the violence of these chemicals is concentrated in Indigenous territories, such as Grassy Narrows and Aamjiwnaang First Nations. Such pollution is a persistent form of colonial violence, an interruption to Indigenous sovereignty and the relations that make up land and life. Thinking alterlife is an ongoing project, and thus what I can offer here are invitations and openings, rather than summations, towards making a concept in support of a distributed reproductive politics.

Alterlife has become a political concern for me as I live as a guest in Tkaronto/Toronto, on Anishinaabe territories, on the Great Lakes governed by the Dish and One Spoon Wampum Treaty, and in Canada, a settler colonial and petro-extraction state. The question of alterlife is shaped by a sense of responsibilities as a guest of this place, to its water and land, to its knowledge-making, and to my own position as an urban Métis person from Winnipeg with responsibilities to both my complicities in settler colonialism and whiteness as well as activations of decolonial Indigenous relations. To be a white-coded Métis in settler colonial spaces is to be messily pulled between systems intent on Indigenous erasure interconnected with structures of white entitlement.

Alterlife is a concern here in Canada, where entangled relations of life and death take the form of neoliberal managerial governance combined with a capitalist settler colonial extraction regime that together create a potent environmentally violent mix dependent on Indigenous dispossession. Alterlife is a concern for me as someone who lives with bodies of water that hold 21% of the world's fresh surface water, and 84% of North America's. Alterlife is a concern for me as I live as a guest of both ancestors and those yet to come, who also already have relations with this land. Thus, my thinking of alterlife is also about upholding Indigenous sovereignties and continuing Land/Body relations in the ongoing aftermaths of settler colonialism, even while surrounded by skyscrapers and enmeshed in the enjoyments and densities of city life.

My sense of a politics of distributed reproduction for the condition of alterlife is also animated by emergent technoscientific renderings of endocrine

disruption and metabolism that overflow the old singular toxicological focus on acute poisonings that have previously been used to map (and limit) the terrains of environmental violence. Some scientists are now tracking low dose epigenetic, neurobehavioral, developmental, and metabolic effects of industrial chemicals, some of which may be transgenerational. What it means to be a human is to materially develop in the uneven distribution of chemical exuberances of a century of industrial capitalism. *As such, the very premise of the discrete body is unravelling.* Microbiome research, for example, shows how bodies are not singular organisms, but instead always collectivities. These are emerging research trajectories that might be collaborated with towards thickening a sense of alterlife.

Moreover, Hannah Landecker has identified a turn to a "post-industrial metabolism" in which many life scientists now explicitly acknowledge that their object of inquiry has become life forms that are materially transformed at biochemical registers by entanglements with a capitalist-made built environment both inside and outside labs. The nascent field of "exposomics" likewise extends the sense of the beings and doings that make up bodies by attending to the metabolic effects of synthetic chemical exposures as they accumulate and cause metabolic changes in bodies from conception onward. While this field is aimed at creating a personalized medicine that can address the problematics of individual exposure, it nonetheless sparks a potential for new ways of studying exposures as the extensive molecular alteration of life in capitalist fields of relation.

To these emerging fields of research, environmental epigenetic studies are now suggesting that the environments of our ancestors may be present inside us

as *inherited metabolic patterns.* This bundle of research contributes towards a sense of relational living-being that extends not only outward into multi-species and land relations, but out into the very physical infrastructures of capitalism, colonialism, and racism. Or put another way, it offers a sense of how such infrastructures are physically present inside of us, unevenly distributing harms and supports. These are not the life forms of cold war population models. They point to different kinds of densities and relations of becoming. While evocative, these various technoscience materializations of the already-altered body need to be troubled, challenged, collaborated with, and recomposed with critical research from Black studies, Indigenous studies, postcolonial studies, queer studies, and trans studies, fields that have many lessons for how to craft concepts, existences, kinships, and political actions that rise from and resist the aftermaths of structural violence. Alterlife is forged in recognition of the long duration of densified everyday environmental violence. Alterlife does not happen at the scale of molecules, it is extensive, now planet wide, even as it is unevenly concentrated in some places and bodies.

Learning from and making kin with the decolonial projects of Frantz Fanon, Sylvia Wynter, and Indigenous Land/body prophecies, understanding the densities that make up "alterlife" is a project aimed at summoning new forms of humanity, not preserving the human that histories of deep violence have created. Alterlife is not waiting for the apocalypse—apocalypses of many kinds have already happened, even as livable worlds keep being snatched away. First the buffalo, then the land, now the water. Alterlife resides in what Frantz Fanon called "an atmosphere of certain uncertainty." This is a crucial point. The frame of population

crisis and the Anthropocene both put apocalypse on the horizon. It is yet to come. This is telling. For whom has massive violence not already been a daily struggle, and thus who has the luxury to think endangerments to life are in the future? Alterlife, in contrast, insists on a different temporality, recognizing the many long-standing world-destructions, from settler colonialism to plantation slavery. As Kyle Whyte argues, Indigenous people of Turtle Island already know well loss of land—through land theft, displacement, and industrialism—and do not have to wait for climate change to intimately know forms of loss tied to land change. Slavery too brutally robbed people of their worlds, their lands, their knowledges, languages, and relations, creating legacies of dehumanization and death, as well as accumulations of wealth out of unfree labor, the structures of which are still at work today. Theorizing the plantation as an ongoing violence, Kathrine McKittrick asks, "What kind of future can the plantation give us?" In this spirit, the temporality of alterlife is one of the aftermaths, even as they are still happening, and for which there has been continual heterogenous projects of making life otherwise in the ongoing fallout.

Of vital significance here is that life has not just been altered, it is more generally open to ongoing alteration, both desired and imposed, making and destroying, choreographed and unexpected. Alterlife resides in ongoing uncertain aftermaths, continuingly challenged by violent infrastructures, but also holding capacities to alter and be altered—to recompose relations to land and sociality, to love and sex, to survival and persistence, to undo some forms of life and be supported by others, to become alter-wise in the aftermath of hostile conditions, to surprise.

Alterlife is the condition of being already co-constituted by material entanglements with water, chemicals, soil, atmospheres, microbes, and built environments, and also the condition of being open to ongoing becoming. Hence, alterlife is already recomposed, pained, and damaged, but has potentiality nonetheless. If life holds together tensions between violence and possibility, braiding the organic and inorganic, body and land, and resides in the indistinctions between infrastructures and ecologies, recognizing Alterlife attends also to openness, to a potential for recomposition that exceeds the ongoing aftermaths. Refusing narratives of purity, or a sense of life as separate from its conditions, or a politics of reproduction separate from environment, alterlife strives for a politics of survival-as-resistance—what indigenous scholar Gerald Vizenor calls survivance. Alterlife is life damaged, life persistent, and life otherwise; life materialized in other ways and life exceeding our materializations.

The concept of alterlife is offered as a way of approaching the politics of relations in solidarity with the vast labors of anti-racist and decolonial reproductive and environmental justice activism, as well as Indigenous survivance and resurgence. This vision of decolonializing more-than-life collectivities draws inspiration from the work of many scholars, land defenders, activists, and artists, as well as students and friends, who are working hard to activate decolonial potentials now without waiting for a better moment to arrive.

Core to the sense of alterlife is the acknowledgment that bodies are not separable from lands, waters, airs, and other non-human beings. Body defense is land defense, as the Native Youth Sexual Health Project's reproductive/environmental justice work teaches. The violences against the land, water

airs, and the many beings that are co-dependent on one another is also violence on bodies. "What happens to the land, happens to the people." Their recent campaign with Women's Earth Alliance on Land/Body Defense centers the experiences, resistances, and resurgences of Indigenous women, two-spirit, and young people whose lives are already also altered by racist colonial processes including the material environmental violence of extractive industries. There are generations of hard-earned learning to acknowledge and start from.

> Our current work cannot afford to forget that a movement for land/body defense has been growing consistently for many years; there are tools and strategies already tried and true or discarded. The first step, then, had to be talking to and honoring the knowledge of those grandmothers, mothers, aunties, and elders who most intimately know the relationship between body, place, people, and movement.

#LandBodyDefense. It is already here.

Those who benefit from oppressive systems have much work to do in calling forth alterlife, dismantling the work of whiteness in the ways environmental violence is structured with beneficiaries: the people and institution who are often densely supported and enriched by capitalist, colonial, and racist systems of consumption and waste. This teaching points to another way of conceiving of a politics of density. Where are the benefits of violence concentrated? Which density of enablement catches life in structures that demand environmental violence as the price of living? Most people are caught in quotidian and humble complicities that are entangled with the very acts of sheltering, eating, cleaning, and surviving that are in

turn knotted to a cacophony of consumption and harms within supply chain capitalist webs, and tied to discard systems built into objects, tethering ordinary survival to the continual spewing of injury and persistent chemical violence.

Our relations are not just supportive, they can also be injurious and toxic. Vanessa Agard-Jones calls this "chemical kinship." Honoring "water is life" demands fraught practices of caring for bodies of water, geological processes, weather, and organisms, as well as relationships with the chemical and radioactive offspring born of extraction processes, nuclear power, and careful as well as careless discard. These non-innocent webs of relations are densified as white supremacy, multi-national corporations, and settler colonial nations. *They constitute the political problem of density; not human number counts of surplus life.* Métis artist and land defender Erin Marie Konsmo who works with Native Youth Sexual Health persistently reminds that an understanding of water as life includes queer, addicted, homeless, hungry, urban, and sick ways of being, and thus demands a politics of harm-reduction aimed at leaving none of our relations uncared for. No one is discarded because the land and water needs everyone. Attention to alterlife asks, not for a politics of fixing the other but, in the words of Fred Moten, "your recognition that it's fucked up for you, in the same way that we've already recognized that it's fucked up for us. I don't need your help. I just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you too however much more softly." Within the condition of alterlife the potential for political kinship and alter-relations comes out of the recognition of connected, though profoundly uneven and often complicit, imbrications in the systems that distribute violence.

One perversity of population control rhetoric today is that it focuses on places like Africa and Bangladesh, where everyday contributions to planetary environmental violence by humans is minimal. It worries about teenage Indigenous pregnancy in a world of settler colonial exterminations. It targets desperate displaced people passing over border fences looking for slightly better life chances. Population rhetoric points responsibility away from low-fertility, heteronormative, elite, massively consumptive lives that are profoundly supported by the exposure to structural violence of others. It deflects from the infrastructure of our current elite and human-centered support systems. It is this infrastructure that I want to attend to, built by a cosmology that frames the body as distinct and isolatable from conditions of becoming with the many. It is the result of seeing land as a resource, with bodies on it, rather than bodies as manifestation of land, and land as extensions of bodies.

Alterlife gathers at least three affirming gestures for a reconceptualized sense of more-than-life becoming within and against conditions of massive violence.

First, alterlife considers living-being within entanglements of becoming, and unbecoming, with others and infrastructures, as a project of future-making. What might a radically inclusive becoming-in-time together look like? No single being on this planet escapes entanglements with capitalism, colonialism and racism, even as their violent effects are profoundly concentrated in hotspots of hostility. Alterlife makes futures in explicit recognition and resistance to profoundly uneven distributions of life chances. Alterlife seeks to find other ways of persisting in ongoing aftermaths that materially redistribute densities of enablement and misery.

Second, alterlife thinks with and against ways of framing environmental violence in discourses about the Anthropocene (which tend to erase the complex histories that have generated and unevenly distributed environmental violence and benefits), as well as within scientific fields such as ecology, climatology, geology, demography, toxicology, epigenetics, and endocrine disruption that are riven by biopolitical grammars, challenging the ways damaged-based research redeploys portraits of racial and sexual difference and blame. Alterlife seeks to refuse the eugenic residual that calculates lives worth living, lives that are better not to have been born, lives not worth supporting, unproductive lives, and lives ignorable and killable. Such calculations vividly persist in policing, ecology, toxicology, demography, public health, economics and many other science, technical, and policy practices. Alterlife rejects damage-based research and biopolitical frameworks that focus the burden of representing violence (and hence the managerial aim and blame) on people, beings, and communities already confined in hostile worlds. Alterlife insists on a politics of valuing, loving, and supporting violated, endangered, and queer life, while fashioning problemizations and projects that attach responsibility to perpetrators and their infrastructures.

And **third**, alterlife compels speculation about futurity and potentials of being otherwise. Alterlife shares with responses to the Anthropocene 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 relations.

Alterlife is a challenge to invent, revive and sustain decolonializing possibilities and persistances right now as we are, forged in non-innocence, learning from and in collaboration with past and present projects of resistance and resurgence. Thus, "Alterlife in the Ongoing Aftermath" is offered as an unfinished and ongoing call to collaborative action, land defense and reoriented responsibility. It is a calling forth of something else, even if that something is not known, even if small, and recognizing that this work has already been happening.

This version of hopefulness is not a deflection. Our bodies/lands are materialized through synthetic chemicals that bind to multinational corporations, through settler colonial extraction, through juridical systems that diminish the value of life and turn it into a cost benefit calculus for finance. I want to learn with others how to activate non-innocent, harm-reducing support systems that, here in Tkaronto, enact the radically generous potentials of Indigenous sovereignties and are mindfully responsible to our planetary relations. At the same time, I want to propagate responsibility to ongoing violences, the responsibility to not only build alter-relations, but also the responsibility to dismantle and shutdown. #AlterRelations and #ShutItDown.

Even as it dreams expansively, what this essay offers are some humble concepts derived from feminist decolonial STS as practiced on the Great Lakes, building on longer resistive legacies of Indigenous, Black, queer, and other projects of radical justice. Concepts that manifest environmental and reproductive justice together, that express Land/Body persistence in the ongoing aftermath. I can almost imagine a politics of alter-collectivities both more than pessimistic and less than optimistic, that draws from what was and what has

persisted, that affirms, disrupts, dismantles, regenerates, and resists; a way of being oriented to relations and that cares about distributions, that needs new and old kinds of solidarities, interdisciplinarities, and pedagogies, and does not reproduce the same, that has concepts that grapple squarely with encompassing violences and yet propagate the alterwise. Almost. #AlterlifeintheAftermath

A Situation

I wanted to talk about this violent situation I was in. A violence that happened to me. We already talked so much about it, but it was a very important experience. [redacted] it made me think a lot about what is violence and what is winning and what does winning mean. Because I made this Facebook post afterwards, which started like, "I have some good news and some bad news from the never-ending feminist revolution". And then I called or encouraged women and queers to practise self-defence and to train, because you will end up in situations where you will need that. "Do it for your nervous system", but also, "do it for the never-ending feminist revolution". [redacted] "A revolution which is not about winning, it is only about rejecting masculine domination and resisting victimhood." Later, I met a friend who is a writer and activist and she said, "Oh yeah, great post," because it was also quite hopeful, a kind of powerful post about how to deal with sexual assault situations and encourage other people to resist. "I really liked your post, but I didn't like the part about not winning, that the feminist revolution is not about winning." I thought a lot about that afterwards.

What is the difference between fighting and fleeing, basically? The situation I was in, where a random guy assaulted me in a village at night, with very violent intentions, and I had to resist with a physical fight, but I also had to call for help and help arrived. And I luckily got out of the situation after two minutes of fighting, or somehow fighting, but then I realised afterwards that was nothing like fighting, because I had only the idea of escape in my head, so it was really about running. It was the first time in my life that I seriously experienced this fight-or-flight mode.

Everyone talks about "fight, flight or freeze", these three options that you have when violence happens. Although I was kind of resisting, I was in flight mode. And although I am trained in boxing, and now have the ability to hit somebody, I can only do that in the game situation. I have never done it for real. I was in flight mode. So, I was thinking a lot about the difference between fighting and fleeing.

When someone questions you, you keep thinking more about it. I was wondering, "Ah, why did I say that it's not

about winning?" It was more of an intuitive decision to write, "it is not about winning". Although, no, it was not totally intuitive because I had this conversation right afterwards. Because I was, luckily, very well cared for in a feminist ex-monastery when this happened. There were all these women around me, and this talk about feminism was there already right after it happened, and I was in a situation where there was a lot of care. One of the caretakers, she said, "You know, you should be proud of yourself because you won." And I was like, "No, it was not about winning." And that was the intuitive moment. It wasn't while writing the post, but very much before. I had said, after the assault, that, no, it couldn't be about winning because we entered it with different stakes. For him, winning would have been to violate me, to rape me, potentially kill me afterwards, I don't know what his winning would be. And my winning, in that situation, because I just wanted to escape, it was just getting out of the situation. And that is why it is not about winning. I know winning from boxing and that's why I am attached to the word, or what it means. And I realised just how different of a situation it is. I realised so much through this event, that the feminist revolution is not about winning.

Winning is a term that is really wrong in the situation that is feminism because it is such a competitive term. I know it very well and I am very attached to it, but it is the logic of a game that has a very clear strategic field. I feel like a lot of politics also works with this, this game structure or this game logic. War logic is also a game logic: this is what we want, this is our goal, we want to win. A war is won. But you can only win when you know what the playing field is. My situation made me think a lot about this moment of flight, because I was not in a place where I even cared about winning over him. I just needed to get out of there. This idea of fleeing, what it means to flee a conflict situation, and I was thinking about refugees, I don't know. If you say it is about winning, you also condemn those who escape, those people who flee, who just want to have peace.

I am a really competitive person, so I am attached to the idea of winning. Of course, I really enjoy it when I'm in the boxing ring, it's all I want to do. That's why my immediate reaction was like, hey, it's so different, it has nothing to do with it. Not to reject it – I like the idea of myself

being a fighter, and sometimes I can feel this, what it does to your body, to feel, "Yeah, I'm going to win". Society is based on this masculinist notion of winning and fighting and competing with each other and being better than somebody else, and all these kinds of things. Of course, my morals are not in this direction, they are always already stopping that, because I'm from a [redacted] culture in some way. But then, on the other hand, the situation was a totally different experience because, in that moment, I was unable to think in competitive terms. My body wasn't able to because it was in flight mode and I was just seriously attached to this idea of wanting peace and getting out of the situation. When something is so seriously dangerous to you, winning really doesn't matter anymore. When I want to win in a boxing fight it is really for my ego, and this was not for my ego, this was just for my animal body. My ego didn't care about anything, it was just like, "I want to be safe", that's all.

I wasn't even thinking of hitting him or anything like that, I wasn't angry. I was just like, this cannot happen, this should not happen to me, because then something really bad will happen. I might lose something really important to me – a safety, a core safety – and I have to defend it. But defend it, as in, get the fuck out of here and go – get to safety, call my feminist support group and just be safe. I have never felt that way before, what safety is. It was a very important experience.

*

I was struck by this moment of narrative, the kinds of symbolic meanings that are not just narratives but are like landscapes, like geography. As in the end of the tunnel that's light, this ex-monastery had to be there. The dark street, out there, or the forest where he wants to drag me. It immediately became such a story, already in the moment. And that was quite crazy, that in the moment it was already so mythological, and immediately afterwards, because of this whole context being so highly aware of associations and narratives and so on, it was immediately made sense of. Everything about my whole experience was already made sense of. It wasn't only my experience, it was happening on another plane as well, and that was really strange. But then, of course, my memory had also changed it immediately. I remembered it like a long

tunnel, and then when I saw it the next day it was actually quite short, just a few metres.

I remember that. It is still my experience when I bike through the city in [redacted] or when I walk the street, and when I see men behave like men. I see it differently now; it is strange. A certain type of masculinist violence – as it traumatises women and as it is narrated through the trauma of women – that has always been there, but somehow I didn't really connect it so much to the actual everyday behaviour of men. Somehow, I have a more gendered look on things now. I mean, I was always the kind of feminist who wants to abolish gender, and now something has changed – that's a development that I had in the last year, anyway. I see things increasingly from a physical perspective. I see certain types of men in groups, I walked past them before and didn't care, and now I feel like, "OK, if they shout something at me, what am I going to reply? How will I defend myself?" Something like that. I think men seem mainly unaware of this experience of being a potential victim of rape. I was also unaware before, and now I see men and I think, "Oh, they are really unaware that this is even a possibility". But maybe they're not unaware, maybe they are even enjoying this potential power. There are also many people not behaving clearly masculine and then I don't read them as men in the same way. So, I think I am more sensitive to a certain type of really physically present masculinity.

It is all so, so basic. I have been reading about masculinity in numerous texts for years, and now it's a little bit like I'm discovering it. It is very much an entitlement of being in space. Just to be entitled to be in space and to behave violently in traffic, in cars, so it doesn't have to be a physical body, but also your car body. I am now a bit more sensitive to this really competitive, dominant behaviour in public space. I guess I have been read as dominant and masculine myself, so, I don't know. I haven't really changed my ways, but I have changed in ... I guess I'm also afraid at the same time, I am more feminine and more vulnerable now, it is a mix now. But maybe it is also temporary. I don't know. In the past, even with competitive situations on the street, I always felt more like, "OK, I am an equal", because I didn't identify as a woman. Like, "Don't let them turn me into a

woman". So, at thirty-four, I have been turned into a woman, in the rape attempt.

I guess that is also what he wanted to do to me, because I was behaving quite masculine. That's one of the interpretations. As in, it was actually a queerphobic – or, not queer-*phobic*, not phobic, because it was actually so dominant that fear is not the right term. It was more about telling me my place, showing me that this can happen: don't think you can act like a man, behave like a man, and walk the street alone as a woman. This can happen to you and I am the one who is showing you. That might be one story you could tell, whatever his intentions were, I don't know. But, if that was his intention, I also have to refuse it and say no, I still want to engage in this competitive or masculine way in the street, because I cannot let this happen to me. His turning me into a woman, why should it interfere with my gender? On the other hand, I don't know. Also, I enjoy the feminine solidarity or empathy, the new empathy that I feel with other people who have experienced this and who have actually been afraid for much longer. I'm in a very different position in the first place to enter this, the field of gender.

Maybe it told me something about masculinity that is not only about my masculinity but is about somebody else's masculinity. And I think, so far, I was mainly concerned with masculinity as my own masculinity. Others' masculinity was out there but I was more concerned with my own. And maybe I have to deal with my own femininity, as well. And I think that can teach me something. I have to reconcile with my own femininity. In many ways, my journey was leading through masculinity, maybe to just get out there and protect myself. It was a way to be ready for this world, and then there are limits to what I can learn from it, and I want to reconnect with my femininity, whatever that is.

*

After the assault, there were these amazing women taking care of me. We were still outside and later, when we went inside and I just wanted to lie down, there were still a few women around me and they just kept talking to me, because I needed to talk to myself about what I was feeling. Then I also talked about this thing with defence. I said, in boxing I always had the experience that my defence is really bad and maybe I felt

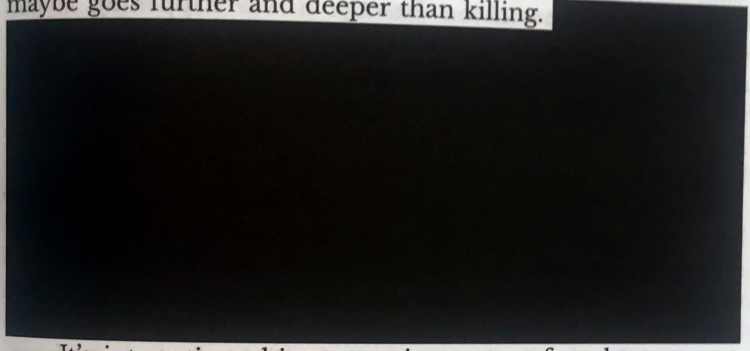
I didn't need it, I just entered these sparring situations with zero necessity to defend myself. And sometimes I got injured and so on. But now I know what I have to defend. There's a core safety I need to defend and I know how important defence is. How could I go boxing and just focus on attack? For a long time, that was my way to deal with it: defence comes later. Of course, I knew it was really important and I always wanted to get better. But intuitively it wasn't part of me. A lot of women, in the beginning, they start to block really hard; they are very afraid of being punched so they block a lot. That was never my intuition. I was probably too open, and it is always a bit annoying when these men tell you, "You are too open", and "Put your hand up to protect yourself!" I don't want to be told that by a man. But I was fearless in that regard because I was lucky to not have been an object of male violence until then.

Calling for help is also a defence. I resisted, I don't know if I defended myself. So, maybe now I'll learn defence, but now I want to learn another sport. I think I am done with boxing. [redacted] Sometimes you just want to punch and it is super intense and the gloves enable you to punch really hard and so on. But I want to learn a defence that goes deeper and I feel this blocking and putting your hand in front of your face is not a kind of defence that comes to me or that I want to be able to engage in. I think there are other martial arts that can teach me another kind of defence, something that comes more from the inside, that has more to do with certain tricks and maybe also a different philosophy. I want to try out different things.

I want to try out a martial art that has more to do with meditation and inner strength. Boxing is very industrial. It's an industrious sport. It is very technical and it is very much about the body as a gladiator or as a robot. The amazing thing about martial arts is that it is always about both defending yourself and hurting or attacking the other, but there are a lot of ancient martial arts that always start with defence. You are preparing for a moment when you have to defend yourself. And boxing is, like, you're in the ring, you both have to kill each other: go! "Kill" is a big word. It is a sport, as well, so it is actually not about killing. But it is a little like a dog fight.

Meeting as equals, that is game logic, that is the logic of the boxing ring and the logic of sports betting. Both start with this equal chance and then luck but also power and knowledge decide who will win. It's the sports-betting logic, but also the war logic. Armies getting enough weapons so they are equal. The Cold War logic. We have to be equal. That is an ideological aspect of war, the ideology of war, even though most wars seem extremely asymmetrical.

It makes a lot of sense, if you consider the fact that rape is also part of war and until recently has been called warfare. Rape as warfare is not just a side-effect of war but rape – soldiers raping the enemy – is one of the main weapons of war. It is about a massive insult but also a trauma that maybe goes further and deeper than killing. [redacted]



It's interesting, this comparison to warfare, because, we also have to understand violence in these two dimensions. Part of violence is this [redacted] kind of man versus man in whatever way; it can also be woman versus woman in a competitive sense. And that would also be army versus army, like it was in the European wars, where you even have ethics of war and, like, "We shouldn't do war crimes, it's man against man". My father used to tell me these sentimental stories: "And then at Easter the soldiers on both sides of the front" – like, in World War I or something – "they just met in the middle with a white flag and celebrated Easter together, and the next day were shooting each other again." These old stories of equality and war, and the war as something that can also be humane, I don't know. It becomes even more absurd you are killing each other if you actually can be nice to each other, you accept each other as equals. There is a race dimension there, it is white men against white men and you're equal in some way.

The other type of war that also happened then and keeps happening is this rape logic, where the other side only wants to escape. There is no winning in this kind of situation because on both sides there are very different stakes: one wants to rape and the other wants to be safe. That is a very different logic to start with, you cannot adapt even the idea of "both sides better stick to the rules", it doesn't apply to these situations at all. I'm thinking that humiliation or sexualised violence was probably part of the European World Wars, you know? It is probably a myth that in the past, or in the European past, war was mainly fraternal, man against man, equal against equal. It is a myth.

I thought maybe you meant colonial war? That was happening at the same … Exactly. It was happening at the same time. And it doesn't have this dimension you're talking about, this patriarchal ethical dimension, conceived within a framework of intra-European whiteness. Colonial war didn't happen in that way at all, because it wasn't conceived of as being between equals.

I could make a classic feminist-theory point that this has some kind of relationship to rape, but I don't know. I've noticed as I've been doing these conversations with people that I have a tendency to abstract, and we're just talking about a particular experience. Can everything really be operating in this way? Maybe that's some weird self-protective resistance to something that's just true?

I don't know what truth is. That is also a very interesting question. The thing I noticed through this – luckily – quite minor trauma, in the end, is that narrativisation immediately becomes really important. And then, of course, through the narrative all these other associations come up. I ask myself questions and then I want to generalise and want to think about violence and want to make sense out of it, also in relation to what is happening later, on the street, with other people, and maybe change my position in society based on it. I can't really say, "This is just my individual experience", like, it might have an effect on my feelings, but otherwise the rest is unaffected. I can't really, that's just not how it works because narrative and trauma are so interlinked. I can imagine if you are raped by someone who is also already narrated as the enemy of war or something – of course, it's politics. I don't know. That didn't happen to me, but there

was almost – yeah, the interesting thing is that the people at the ex-monastery, they wanted to, they attempted to put it, like, "They attacked not only you, they attacked us, too", they attacked this whole feminist project, or art project, that is happening there. And then it became this "us-against-them" logic, which is also war logic.

*

You intuitively feel it would be harder to recover from violence from someone who was already embedded in your life in some way. So much, so much. And I feel, now that I know – I mean, it is different. It is more of a shocking fear that I experienced, like, "How can this happen?" Oh my God, like, I have no, absolutely no interest, no interest in the sexual dimension. But in some way it also wasn't about the sexual, it was purely a violent intention. But yeah, I can just imagine how horrible it is, if it is actually someone you are left in a conflict with; the conflict does not end and the humiliation does not end just because you are out of the situation. I could delete the person, I did not have to be angry or repress my anger or feel ashamed or anything like that in front of him, because he was anonymous and he stayed anonymous and I also don't have any revenge fantasies. In some way, I don't care about him and that makes it easier.

I am not afraid of seeing him again because he is just this rando. He doesn't already have power over me. If you are in a relationship with somebody there is always power at play and there is always already something going on and then it is so much, psychologically, it is so much deeper. I randomly met a friend of mine, one of my oldest friends. She used to – they, or he, used to [redacted] the same [redacted] as me and we were best friends in school, and now they are a trans man. And we have never, we haven't really talked about, um – that was quite recent – they just texted me one day and it was like, I was like wow, and it made sense to me. And now we met randomly on the street and they were just like, "OK, let's grab a beer after all these years". And we just talked and then, yeah, he told me about this relationship that he had back in the town – we were still friends then, but not so close anymore – and how much rape was part of the relationship. How they couldn't really get out of it, and how that was a cause of many years of suffering and, I'm not

trying to explain – they have always been really masculine, it would have been really great if that concept of trans would have been around where we grew up, because maybe that would have solved a lot of problems much earlier. I just felt suddenly so much empathy in a way that I was not really able to feel before. I don't know. Also, the inability to leave this situation, although you say no, you keep saying no, but then you can't really leave it. It is probably one of the most horrible situations that a woman or a man can be in.

The feminist revolution, it will not have a victory. Victory is an imperial and competitive term, and it is a playful term. This revolution is not a game, like, it's not playful enough. Of course, there are often playful aspects to the feminist revolution but victory is always in some way a humiliation of the other, and that is not the goal.

This has come up in a couple of the conversations, the idea of shame as a political tool. And, actually, one of the few political tools people can wield from below. I think maybe humiliation and shame are a bit different because ... I don't know, actually, that is an interesting thing to think about. Are shame and humiliation different? "You should feel ashamed" – that's an ethical call. "You should feel ashamed. If you wanted to be a good person, you would feel ashamed."

You enter the boxing ring as an equal, and then you win or lose. I don't think you feel shame. Shame is, like, a different dimension. You might feel humiliation because you lost the fight, but I think you need certain eyes upon you in order to feel shame, you need to have done something wrong. I like this Sara Ahmed notion. I haven't read so much about shame, but years ago, when I read what Sara Ahmed wrote, it was that shame is a really social feeling. It is always directed at the society you would like to be taken back into. So, you cannot really feel shame alone, you always do it in front of the group you want to be accepted by. I think humiliation is not you and the community, it is more like you and your opponent, or you and your enemy, or you and a violent person.

[redacted] Your rank is decreased. Like, if you think of the animalistic order, someone just downgraded.

The image of a group of mammals that have a rank in their group, and you've been downgraded.

I wonder if "humiliation" has some relationship to "human", something to do with earth or materiality? "Made humble"; "bring low". It's a social ranking. Mid-sixteenth century, from the Latin, from *humilis*. Yeah, *humus* means ground. If I wanted to get even more grand and abstract, then it would be – because h*umus* is like a word for "soil" or "earth" – this idea that misogyny and anti-blackness are somehow related to the question of materiality, to some sort of problematic within a certain – perhaps European, perhaps capitalist, perhaps patriarchal – model of the world, a model where earthiness is a problem. The earth is a problem. And it's projected more intensely onto certain people. If you want to be less of a problem, you have to go higher towards the sky. You have to not be so problematically embodied.

*

This experience of people behaving in threatening ways associated with masculinity has a policing effect. This is a feeling I often have about the behaviour of men in lots of different places, and does seem mainly directed towards communicating to people who aren't cis men that they shouldn't be in public space or that they shouldn't behave confidently in public space. The more feminine or, at least, the more not cis masculine you are perceived to be by others, the more porous your physical boundaries are. More people feel they're able to touch you, to make comments about you or interact in intrusive ways. It does feel like it has some relationship to being, to physicality.

On the other hand, the masculinity that is threatening is also very embodied, although there are two types, of course. There is also this bourgeois violence we were talking about, the violence of refusing any form of responsibility, refusing to be actively violent and just letting you suffer and be by yourself, refusing to have anything to do with it. Refusing to acknowledge even the desire to have nothing to do with your problematic vulnerability. But this is different from the kind of threatening masculine violence that is very embodied, very physical. You see so many men have become buff lately, maybe because of the crisis of masculinity, or the crisis of working-class men, I don't know what. You

have masculinity as a threatening institution also wanting to embody itself and be visible as a body, I feel. But it's an impermeable body. A still body.

A lot of people have written about the phrase "Black Lives Matter" as a relation to materiality as such, that a hostility to matter or a problem with matter itself is part of the structure of anti-blackness. But I think it is also a super conventional feminist, even white feminist, take on the earth mother or Mother Earth, which I guess has its own issues. Maybe it ends up reinstating some problematic things. Maybe what I'm saying is too sweeping, but it is interesting that this word "humiliation" traces back to materiality. In reality, it's just two modes of physicality encountering each other. There is something about impermeability that feels like it's part of the structure of masculinity, but I don't know if that is always the case.

I remember a dream that I had. I've had some weird dreams since then. In one of them, the ex-monastery came up again as a ship I was on with a lot of people and several rooms. People were having sexual encounters with each other. There was this one man I encountered and he had this problem with his dick. I didn't do anything with him, he was just there. The problem with his dick was that it had a big hole in the front and it was growing. The hole in the dick was growing and, the thing was, he was feeling bad, he was feeling sick, that was his disease and it was somehow an infectious disease. The hole was a bit like a mouth in the dick. It was already kind of visible, maybe like a fish mouth or something. But if it were to grow to be the whole size of the dick, then the man would die or, not die, but something would be over. It would be really bad for him if that hole in his dick were to grow bigger. That was the dream. That's what I remembered after. There was other stuff in the dream. I wrote parts of it down but now I don't have it, I don't have it right now in my brain. I was connecting it to this impermeability. The problem is, if the dick also becomes a hole, the dick should not … The problem with the dick, it is endangering the dick if it also becomes a hole.

[redacted]

*

The teenagers that would be the ones to remember who the guy was, or could help find him, they say they don't remember and the police cannot find anything else. I'm not angry. I don't feel any need for justice. I don't know what justice would be because, in some way, I also got out of the situation, and that was a kind of primordial state of justice that was already established by me being safe in the end. Also, it happened somewhere else, where I don't feel it's my society. I don't think we are part of the same society, where I feel like I am related to him and we have to share the same idea of fairness or justice. I have this feeling we're not part of the same community and I only feel the need for justice when it is happening within, somehow, my community. This feeling of fairness or justice, I feel it towards people I want to be part of my community. Or I expect it from friends, like, "You were unfair" and we kind of have to find a truth, like, "What was right and what was wrong?" And, "Who was wrong?" And then the one who's wrong has to either say sorry or be punished. I don't feel like someone should be punished, I've never felt that for anybody. Punished by somebody else, punished by authority. I've never felt like this towards anyone, I think.

Justice, as only conceptually possible within communities or among people who recognise each other in some way. I don't even remember his face, so I somehow cannot feel the need for justice. I guess people see the nation-state or the world as a big kind of authority system or a big kind of community. I felt like it would be good if he felt he cannot do that, someone has to tell him this is wrong, but mainly because of the other people in the region, there. Because it might not happen again to me, but maybe he does this to other people and they should care about it. If they don't care about punishing a member of their community, then that's up to them, in a way. I'm not in an ethical relationship with him. I had no problem with going to the police, they were also very respectful. So, in that sense, my rational self said, "You should go to the police, that's the right thing to do", and it was also not a bad experience. I think it was good for me to say, "Yeah, that's a crime", and I go to the police in order to not feel shame, in order to say, "Well, officially,

this is a crime and I think I should report it". But that was a very rational, "This is what I should do", kind of thing.

There's a structural critique that the police's role is one of suppression or oppression, and because of that they can't really be called upon to mediate interpersonal problems. The idea that the police are able to do that is a kind of ideological myth. And maybe some evidence for that would be the low conviction rates for a lot of interpersonal violence, a lot of interpersonal crimes. Not just sexual violence, but in general those experiences have a complicated relationship to criminal justice systems. And this points to the way the police mainly exist to uphold a repressive social regime. Does that critique still apply in this case, where you were far from home and assaulted by a [redacted] man?

Going to the police didn't feel like a big deal, which was also quite surprising for me. It was not about the experience, it was about the fact that I should let the community know and, in some way, the police, in their provincial slowness, also represent that town. I also went to the doctor, who has been in the village forever, and he felt really shocked that this had happened in this village, like, "This has to be punished", "This is really bad". In some ways, it was about letting the community know. I think I would already feel different if it was a [redacted] police, because then I'd have a different relationship to it. I didn't have big hopes about justice coming out of it. But, if I don't report it, that would mean acknowledging this was not a crime. And I still have this idea of insisting on the fact that this was a crime and pretending as if the police weren't this other oppressive thing – just use the police in the way I would like to use the police. Is the category of crime important to you? I mean, I guess that is also an ideological category. Crime, as in: a violent act. That it was a violent act and that it would traumatise me and that he didn't have the right to do that.

I see what you're saying about this idea that you have to be in some kind of relationship with people to be able to have some kind of justice process. In some situations, people put up flyers or post on the internet about someone being sexually violent, but you can't do that here, because there is not enough potential reciprocity for it to mean anything in a place you don't know anyone. You're not from there.

*

Because I didn't have hopes for it, it doesn't disappoint me. So, it didn't change. I'm not a big pessimist, I think I'm quite optimistic in many of my political beliefs and actions and that's how sometimes I use an oppressive system. Like, let's pretend I can use them in the way I would like them to be. I don't know. Even my fearlessness on the streets is also an effect of optimism that nothing will happen to me. I like to meet people without fear, to believe they don't have any bad intentions towards me. But mainly, that the state does not have only bad intentions towards me. I am in quite a privileged position, in some way, for that. In [redacted] if I were not be [redacted] speaking and white, then I would already have a very different experience. On the other hand, I was also born in an oppressive and authoritarian state, so I wonder sometimes what effect that has had. I was still a kid, but I was born in a state that my parents thought was illegitimate – that the power was illegitimate. In my childhood, the state was a bad state and it was oppressive and then what came later was already democracy.

My father, for example, he didn't want me to have an [redacted] identity. I guess that structure generationally often gets played out in people from lots of different backgrounds, the first generation are much more assimilationist, they're just happy to be there, or whatever. It's like, "Keep your head down". But people want to make sense of themselves so they somehow return to this identity that has been repressed within the family, which brings out these weird authenticity problems or feelings, bad authenticity feelings, sometimes.

I found in my journal this childhood memory that there's this huge authority around me, this threatening authority around me, that I grew up with. And I wonder, could it be the father? Is it the father, or is it the state? Is it the childhood kindergarten? Because my kindergarten was so authoritative and oppressive, and that was my first experience of society, as something like, "There's an authority figure and their main pleasure is to humiliate". But then, I guess that's my optimism, to ignore that. Maybe it changed later, and then there was this weird relief of the loss of authority. Already in primary school, suddenly authority was gone.

Maybe we wanted to express it abstractly, like, to ask if there's any role whatsoever for police and policing in a feminist revolutionary practice? When you talked about trying to ignore a certain kind of patriarchal authority or oppressive authority, I wonder if the danger of ignoring it is that it can become an identification. Because, of course you have to address it, you have to, and then maybe it does become a fight. You have to confront it as an authority, and then you're already in a very different situation. By opposing, you become an opponent.

I wouldn't say I've ignored all authorities, but I had this memory of the anarchy of the early '90s, when the teachers weren't an authority, the parents weren't really an authority either, because they also had no idea of how capitalism worked, no other adults around us had any idea what the rules were, basically, or how society worked. So, the generation I'm from – and I was really happy that, "Oh, there's a name for us", and that's why I don't really identify with Western generations of my time, because it is a very different experience, the loss of any kind of social order – that was the generation of the "un-advised". We were the generation of the "un-advised" or the "non-advised", and I think it explains some of my weird behaviour towards authority, in that I cannot take it seriously. But I can behave like that with a lot of authorities and sometimes it doesn't work, or it doesn't work forever.

With mentors and so on I always had this thing, like, "No-one can be a mentor", "I can't accept my teachers; they cannot teach me anything". That is kind of an ongoing feeling. I was really happy once I found some form of person that I could look up to, a teacher – she was a professor in art school – but then there was a big disappointment connected to that, the one time I had that. She was very authoritative but, in a very convincing and very funny and very slippery way, it would be all up to you. You would attach all that stuff to her and, in some way, she would always get out of the situation. She pretended she didn't want to be this authority, so it is just your fiction. It was also an ideological conviction, it seems to be like she wanted it to be non-authoritarian but, on the other hand, she also wants to lead, so it's a complex – it's a paradoxical leadership. She also didn't want to be addressed as authority, she would always undermine herself

as such. But she still had authority, even so. [redacted]

I was thinking if it is a bit different to have authority through charisma. Authority through competence is again another kind of authority. The authority of "I know what I'm doing" is very different from the authority of "I have this status position and you have to respect it". That's also more convincing. So, in an absurd way, that's always the disappointment of authoritarians in some way: "Oh my God, I only rule because people fear me, but they don't actually respect me".

*

I find it hard to acknowledge the ways in which I'm wielding power. Especially if that power feels uncomfortable for me, it's easy to get caught up in the ways that it is not comfortable for me and I forget the ways in which I still have it, even if I don't like it. It's uncomfortable partly because of some weird ethical reason, like, everyone has their own knowledge, then also because of feeling like I don't know what I'm doing – or both genuinely feeling like I don't know what I'm doing and feeling somehow emotionally attached to the idea that I don't know what I'm doing. I guess I also fear the emotional isolation that might come with being seen as an authority. I fear awe. My relation to awe is negative. It doesn't seem loving to me, it doesn't seem to have a lot of possibilities for love inside it. But that's about my experiences with family.

It was nice when I was doing more reading groups with students and then – especially if it was something I'd read before, because often it's things I really care about – yeah, maybe I end up with some authority, but then it's just something I've thought about for long, so it's, like, organic authority. I was thinking organic authority comes with care. Authority is such a negative word for me, too, although it is like "to author", which is not so negative. But I guess there can be other associations. Other associations can be care, right? There's also the mothering authority, which can be caring, right? Maternal authority is so complicated. With my teaching experiences, with these ways that I felt like I wanted to refuse an authority position, it does often fall into care practices. I often end up having really long conversations with people about their work and, of course, if you're talking

with people about their work, it becomes about everything else, about their life as well, not always, but often, with students. Somehow, it's also draining or strange, or maybe over-promises something.

And then you leave the room having served them and you thought you were their teacher. But teaching is a service position, as well. I think it's not only an authority position but also a service position, and it's a job, so, it has different dimensions. I was really frustrated one time at this thing I was teaching on, when I was trying to make a point about a man being invested with patriarchal power in the way he gave his presentation, and then one of the other teachers, who is a woman, was like, "But we have privilege as teachers". I found it really frustrating in the moment, because I felt it just collapsed a lot of interesting political nuances into, like, this is a hierarchical position. But maybe there is some truth, maybe there is something that I have to accept about that authority position, at a certain point it can become really destructive. Even if it's unconsciously destructive. I think, to have some kind of authority or power and to not allow oneself to become aware of it can cause its own problems. I understand the risk of becoming tyrannical. Even though, obviously it is well-intentioned or whatever, people say they don't have power partly because they genuinely feel they don't have power, but then if you do have some power and continue to say you don't have power, obviously there's a problem.

[redacted]

Not to over-extrapolate, but I do think there is a huge gender dimension around this. There's a subject–position overlap with having problems around authority. I suppose it is something people are trying to encapsulate with ideas like intersectionality – people have multiple positions. Someone can be both in a personally difficult position, for example, being in an institution as a woman of colour or a queer woman, and at the same time the membership in the insti-

tution gives a certain external power and protection. "There are multiple aspects of our identities." But I think the concepts of privilege or power or authority end up being flat concepts and they have to be constantly reworked. I think that's also part of this never-ending revolution, to constantly be like, "We mean this, but we also mean this", and "Sometimes it's this".

I really had to get used to the word "privilege" because I remembered it being used so differently when I was young. My mum always talked about privilege, of course, about the other's privilege. But that was like, "They have privileges". So, it was used for those people who were not opposing the state, [redacted] or were just somehow pretending not to be against the state, they would have privilege. [redacted] and privileges included access to things, but also access to travel documents. [redacted]

I think the difference is that now privilege seems to be about something someone stuck to you, privilege is stuck to you, is part of your identity, you're even born with it. Back then, it was used differently. Privilege was something temporary, because you were getting on well with the state.

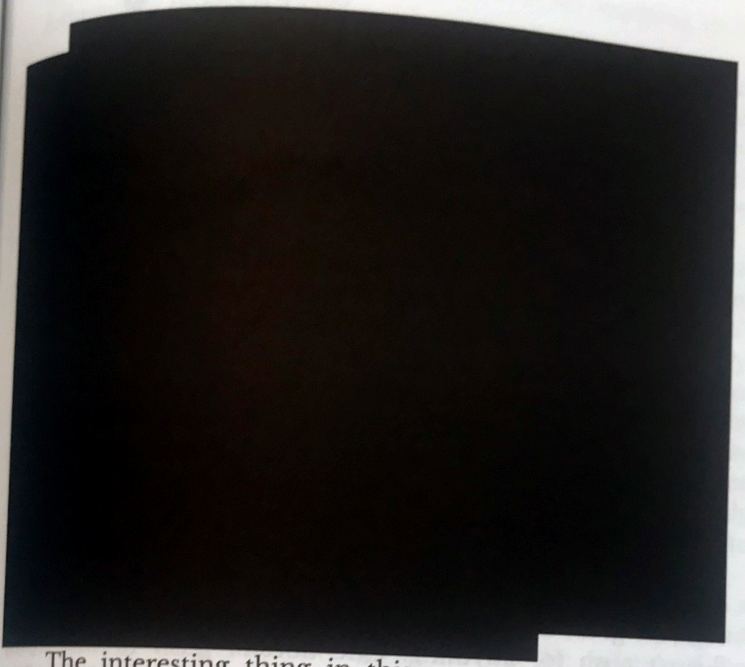
But I think that has a clear relationship to how someone who is perceived as less offensive, someone who visually appears less threatening to a certain self-conception of a white, bourgeois person, has more privileges to act as they please. In a sense, we also live in a really oppressive state, the suspicion is very much attached to people's bodies. It is not just attached to whether they are Christian or not, whether they are a bit rebellious or not, whether they might be fully communists or not, but maybe it is still the authority who attaches suspicion to people's bodies, based on colour, ability and other things.

It is part of this naturalisation of the repressiveness of the capitalist regime. It still behaves so oppressively but because the allocation of privileges isn't through ideology,

supposedly, it is just like, "Well, these people are poor, so obviously they can't have things" or "These people look like terrorists and have to be surveilled". These concepts are more or less violently applied, but are naturalised as if this is how things are. The same concept of privilege still applies, but differently. It is the capitalist, colonial, imperial setting that naturalises access and participation, but also everything that people want, the scarcity as well, the goods that are desirable. But the scarcity is concealed.

I was reading a thing about the failure of the healthcare repeal bill in the United States. A lot of people are happy about it because they have medical conditions and they need healthcare. But some people, who are more from an anti-state, right-wing libertarian position, Trump people, one of the issues they seem to have with how they perceive Obamacare – which is confusing sometimes, because it would be better for them if there were more access to healthcare – is that they feel disturbed by the idea there's going to be this calculated allocation of resources that happens under nationalised healthcare systems. I think within that there's an idea that it is particularly cold and harsh to rationally allocate resources. Someone was expressing this position, like, "It's terrible, they have to calculate who should live and die", and somebody else said, "But that already happens because of cost". Insurance companies are already performing this calculation, but they're doing it in this more distributed, chaotic, market-based way. It's like, "I would rather have the insurance company be the bureaucrats, than live in a bureaucratic state". It's like, "I'd rather pay interest than pay taxes". And this is the whole idea of privatisation: you would rather pay your fees to the bank than to the state. Everyone has to pay fees, but the question is: what are good fees? Good fees are to the bank: "We just have a business, and they told me that I have to pay interest, so I do that". And the state, seemingly, when they claim taxes, they do that with a different authority. One is associated with being illegitimate and the other is associated with legitimacy – the bank and insurance companies – because it seems to be only a business deal and nothing else. It seems to be a business deal and not a structure of authority.

*



The interesting thing in this moment was that I had no language for him. I didn't say anything to him. I could have shouted something at him, against him, "No!" or "Fuck you!" or something, but I didn't say anything. There was no language between us, zero words fell in the space, it was completely silent. I was only speaking with my community, I was shouting for help. I had language for them, this one word, "Help". And that was the only word in the space. I thought about it later. Again, this lack of language, because it was a completely physical situation. There's nothing that I want to say to him now, either, because my body already said everything: I need to get out of here, you cannot do this to me.

A Black Feminist Statement

Combahee River Collective *

We are a collective of Black feminists who have been meeting together since 1974.[1] During that time we have been involved in the process of defining and clarifying our politics, while at the same time doing political work within our own group and in coalition with other progressive organizations and movements. The most general statement of our politics at the present time would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives. As Black women we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face.

We will discuss four major topics in the paper that follows: (1) the genesis of contemporary black feminism; (2) what we believe, i.e., the specific province of our politics; (3) the problems in organizing Black feminists, including a brief herstory of our collective; and (4) Black feminist issues and practice.

1. The Genesis of Contemporary Black Feminism

Before looking at the recent development of Black feminism we would like to affirm that we find our origins in the historical reality of Afro-American women's continuous life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation. Black women's extremely negative relationship to the American political system (a system of white male rule) has always been determined by our membership in two oppressed racial and sexual castes. As Angela Davis points out in "Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves," Black women have always embodied, if only in their physical manifestation, an adversary stance to white male rule and have actively resisted its inroads upon them and their communities in both dramatic and subtle ways. There have always been Black women activists – some known, like Sojourner

*The Combahee River Collective is a Black feminist group in Boston whose name comes from the guerrilla action conceptualized and led by Harriet Tubman on June 2, 1863, in the Port Royal region of South Carolina. This action freed more than 750 slaves and is the only military campaign in American history planned and led by a woman.

Truth, Harriet Tubman, Frances E. W. Harper, Ida B. Wells Barnett, and Mary Church Terrell, and thousands upon thousands unknown – who had a shared awareness of how their sexual identity combined with their racial identity to make their whole life situation and the focus of their political struggles unique. Contemporary Black feminism is the outgrowth of countless generations of personal sacrifice, militancy, and work by our mothers and sisters.

A Black feminist presence has evolved most obviously in connection with the second wave of the American women's movement beginning in the late 1960s. Black, other Third World, and working women have been involved in the feminist movement from its start, but both outside reactionary forces and racism and elitism within the movement itself have served to obscure our participation. In 1973 Black feminists, primarily located in New York, felt the necessity of forming a separate Black feminist group. This became the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO).

Black feminist politics also have an obvious connection to movements for Black liberation, particularly those of the 1960s and 1970s. Many of us were active in those movements (civil rights, Black nationalism, the Black Panthers), and all of our lives were greatly affected and changed by their ideology, their goals, and the tactics used to achieve their goals. It was our experience and disillusionment within these liberation movements, as well as experience on the periphery of the white male left, that led to the need to develop a politics that was antiracist, unlike those of white women, and antisexist, unlike those of Black and white men.

There is also undeniably a personal genesis for Black feminism, that is, the political realization that comes from the seemingly personal experiences of individual Black women's lives. Black feminists and many more Black women who do not define themselves as feminists have all experienced sexual oppression as a constant factor in our day-to-day existence. As children we realized that we were different from boys and that we were treated differently. For example, we were told in the same breath to be quiet both for the sake of being "ladylike" and to make us less objectionable in the eyes of white people. As we grew older we became aware of the threat of physical and sexual abuse by men. However, we had no way of conceptualizing what was so apparent to us, what we *knew* was really happening.

—Black feminists often talk about their feelings of craziness before becoming conscious of the concepts of sexual politics, patriarchal rule, and most importantly, feminism, the political analysis and practice that we women use to struggle against our oppression. The fact that racial politics and indeed racism are pervasive factors in our lives did

not allow us, and still does not allow most Black women, to look more deeply into our own experiences and, from that sharing and growing consciousness, to build a politics that will change our lives and inevitably end our oppression. Our development must also be tied to the contemporary economic and political position of Black people. The post World War II generation of Black youth was the first to be able to minimally partake of certain educational and employment options, previously closed completely to Black people. Although our economic position is still at the very bottom of the American capitalistic economy, a handful of us have been able to gain certain tools as a result of tokenism in education and employment which potentially enable us to more effectively fight our oppression.

A combined antiracist and antisexist position drew us together initially, and as we developed politically we addressed ourselves to hetero-sexism and economic oppression under capitalism.

2. What We Believe

Above all else, our politics initially sprang from the shared belief that Black women are inherently valuable, that our liberation is a necessity not as an adjunct to somebody else's but because of our need as human persons for autonomy. This may seem so obvious as to sound simplistic, but it is apparent that no other ostensibly progressive movement has ever considered our specific oppression as a priority or worked seriously for the ending of that oppression. Merely naming the pejorative stereotypes attributed to Black women (e.g. mammy, matriarch, Sapphire, whore, bulldagger), let alone cataloguing the cruel, often murderous, treatment we receive, indicates how little value has been placed upon our lives during four centuries of bondage in the Western hemisphere. We realize that the only people who care enough about us to work consistently for our liberation is us. Our politics evolve from a healthy love for ourselves, our sisters and our community which allows us to continue our struggle and work.

This focusing upon our own oppression is embodied in the concept of identity politics. We believe that the most profound and potentially the most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else's oppression. In the case of Black women this is a particularly repugnant, dangerous, threatening, and therefore revolutionary concept because it is obvious from looking at all the political movements that have preceded us that anyone is more worthy of liberation than ourselves. We reject pedestals, queenhood, and walking ten paces behind. To be recognized as human, lovely human, is enough.

We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women's lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual, e.g., the history of rape of Black women by white men as a weapon of political repression.

Although we are feminists and lesbians, we feel solidarity with progressive Black men and do not advocate the fractionalization that white women who are separatists demand. Our situation as Black people necessitates that we have solidarity around the fact of race, which white women of course do not need to have with white men, unless it is their negative solidarity as racial oppressors. We struggle together with Black men against racism, while we also struggle with Black men about sexism.

We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy. We are socialists because we believe the work must be organized for the collective benefit of those who do the work and create the products, and not for the profit of the bosses. Material resources must be equally distributed among those who create these resources. We are not convinced, however, that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and antiracist revolution will guarantee our liberation. We have arrived at the necessity for developing an understanding of class relationships that takes into account the specific class position of Black women who are generally marginal in the labor force, while at this particular time some of us are temporarily viewed as doubly desirable tokens at white-collar and professional levels. We need to articulate the real class situation of persons who are not merely raceless, sexless workers, but for whom racial and sexual oppression are significant determinants in their working/economic lives. Although we are in essential agreement with Marx's theory as it applied to the very specific economic relationships he analyzed, we know that his analysis must be extended further in order for us to understand our specific economic situation as Black women.

A political contribution which we feel we have already made is the expansion of the feminist principle that the personal is political. In our consciousness-raising sessions, for example, we have in many ways gone beyond white women's revelations because we are dealing with the implications of race and class as well as sex. Even our Black women's style of talking/testifying in Black language about what we have experienced has a resonance that is both cultural and political. We have spent a great deal of energy delving into the cultural and

experiential nature of our oppression out of necessity because none of these matters has ever been looked at before. No one before has ever examined the multilayered texture of Black women's lives. An example of this kind of revelation/conceptualization occurred at a meeting as we discussed the ways in which our early intellectual interests had been attacked by our peers, particularly Black males. We discovered that all of us, because we were "smart" had also been considered "ugly", *i.e.*, "smart-ugly." "Smart-ugly" crystallized the way in which most of us had been forced to develop our intellects at great cost to our "social" lives. The sanctions in the Black and white communities against Black women thinkers is comparatively much higher than for white women, particularly ones from the educated middle and upper classes.

As we have already stated, we reject the stance of lesbian separatism because it is not a viable political analysis or strategy for us. It leaves out far too much and far too many people, particularly Black men, women, and children. We have a great deal of criticism and loathing for what men have been socialized to be in this society: what they support, how they act, and how they oppress. But we do not have the misguided notion that it is their maleness, per se – i.e., their biological maleness – that makes them what they are. As Black women we find any type of biological determinism a particularly dangerous and reactionary basis upon which to build a politic. We must also question whether lesbian separatism is an adequate and progressive political analysis and strategy, even for those who practice it, since it so completely denies any but the sexual sources of women's oppression, negating the facts of class and race.

3. Problems in Organizing Black Feminists

During our years together as a Black feminist collective we have experienced success and defeat, joy and pain, victory and failure. We have found that it is very difficult to organize around Black feminist issues, difficult even to announce in certain contexts that we *are* Black feminists. We have tried to think about the reasons for our difficulties, particularly since the white women's movement continues to be strong and to grow in many directions. In this section we will discuss some of the general reasons for the organizing problems we face and also talk specifically about the stages in organizing our own collective.

The major source of difficulty in our political work is that we are not just trying to fight oppression on one front or even two, but instead to address a whole range of oppressions. We do not have racial, sexual, heterosexual, or class privilege to rely upon, nor do we have even the minimal access to resources and power that groups who possess any one of these types of privilege have.

The psychological toll of being a Black woman and the difficulties this presents in reaching political consciousness and doing political work can never be underestimated. There is a very low value placed upon Black women's psyches in this society, which is both racist and sexist. As an early group member once said, "We are all damaged people merely by virtue of being Black women." We are dispossessed psychologically and on every other level, and yet we feel the necessity to struggle to change the condition of all Black women. In "A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood," Michele Wallace arrives at this conclusion:

> "We exist as women who are Black who are feminists, each stranded for the moment, working independently because there is not yet an environment in this society remotely congenial to our struggle – because, being on the bottom, we would have to do what no one else has done: we would have to fight the world."[2]

Wallace is pessimistic but realistic in her assessment of Black feminists' position, particularly in her allusion to the nearly classic isolation most of us face. We might use our position at the bottom, however, to make a clear leap into revolutionary action. If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the systems of oppression.

Feminism is, nevertheless, very threatening to the majority of Black people because it calls into question some of the most basic assumptions about our existence, i.e., that sex should be a determinant of power relationships. Here is the way male and female voices were defined in a Black nationalist pamphlet from the early 1970's.

> "We understand that it is and has been traditional that the man is the head of the house. He is the leader of the house/nation because his knowledge of the world is broader, his awareness is greater, his understanding is fuller and his application of this information is wiser . . . After all, it is only reasonable that the man be the head of the house because he is able to defend and protect the development of his home . . . Women cannot do the same things as men – they are made by nature to function differently. Equality of men and women is something that cannot happen even in the abstract world. Men are not equal to other men, i.e. ability, experience or even understanding. The value of men and women can be seen as in the value of gold and silver – they are not equal but both have great value. We must realize that men and women are a complement to each other because there is no house/family without a man and his wife. Both are essential to the development of any life."[3]

The material conditions of most Black women would hardly lead them to upset both economic and sexual arrangements that seem to

represent some stability in their lives. Many Black women have a good understanding of both sexism and racism, but because of the everyday constrictions of their lives cannot risk struggling against them both.

The reaction of Black men to feminism has been notoriously negative. They are, of course, even more threatened than Black women by the possibility that Black feminists might organize around our own needs. They realize that they might not only lose valuable and hard-working allies in their struggles but that they might also be forced to change their habitually sexist ways of interacting with and oppressing Black women. Accusations that Black feminism divides the Black struggle are powerful deterrents to the growth of an autonomous Black women's movement.

Still, hundreds of women have been active at different times during the three-year existence of our group. And every Black woman who came, came out of a strongly-felt need for some level of possibility that did not previously exist in her life.

When we first started meeting early in 1974 after the NBFO first eastern regional conference, we did not have a strategy for organizing, or even a focus. We just wanted to see what we had. After a period of months of not meeting, we began to meet again late in the year and started doing an intense variety of consciousness-raising. The overwhelming feeling that we had is that after years and years we had finally found each other. Although we were not doing political work as a group, individuals continued their involvement in Lesbian politics, sterilization abuse and abortion rights work, Third World Women's International Women's Day activities, and support activity for the trials of Dr. Kenneth Edelin, Joan Little, and Inéz García. During our first summer, when membership had dropped off considerably, those of us remaining devoted serious discussion to the possibility of opening a refuge for battered women in a Black community. (There was no refuge in Boston at that time.) We also decided around that time to become an independent collective since we had serious disagreements with NBFO's bourgeois-feminist stance and their lack of a clear political focus.

We also were contacted at that time by socialist feminists, with whom we had worked on abortion rights activities, who wanted to encourage us to attend the National Socialist Feminist Conference in Yellow Springs. One of our members did attend and despite the narrowness of the ideology that was promoted at that particular conference, we became more aware of the need for us to understand our own economic situation and to make our own economic analysis.

In the fall, when some members returned, we experienced several months of comparative inactivity and internal disagreements which

were first conceptualized as a Lesbian-straight split but which were also the result of class and political differences. During the summer those of us who were still meeting had determined the need to do political work and to move beyond consciousness-raising and serving exclusively as an emotional support group. At the beginning of 1976, when some of the women who had not wanted to do political work and who also had voiced disagreements stopped attending of their own accord, we again looked for a focus. We decided at that time, with the addition of new members, to become a study group. We had always shared our reading with each other, and some of us had written papers on Black feminism for group discussion a few months before this decision was made. We began functioning as a study group and also began discussing the possibility of starting a Black feminist publication. We had a retreat in the late spring which provided a time for both political discussion and working out interpersonal issues. Currently we are planning to gather together a collection of Black feminist writing. We feel that it is absolutely essential to demonstrate the reality of our politics to other Black women and believe that we can do this through writing and distributing our work. The fact that individual Black feminists are living in isolation all over the country, that our own numbers are small, and that we have some skills in writing, printing, and publishing makes us want to carry out these kinds of projects as a means of organizing Black feminists as we continue to do political work in coalition with other groups.

4. Black Feminist Issues and Projects

During our time together we have identified and worked on many issues of particular relevance to Black women. The inclusiveness of our politics makes us concerned with any situation that impinges upon the lives of women, Third World and working people. We are of course particularly committed to working on those struggles in which race, sex and class are simultaneous factors in oppression. We might, for example, become involved in workplace organizing at a factory that employs Third World women or picket a hospital that is cutting back on already inadequate health care to a Third World community, or set up a rape crisis center in a Black neighborhood. Organizing around welfare and daycare concerns might also be a focus. The work to be done and the countless issues that this work represents merely reflect the pervasiveness of our oppression.

Issues and projects that collective members have actually worked on are sterilization abuse, abortion rights, battered women, rape and health care. We have also done many workshops and educationals on

Black feminism on college campuses, at women's conferences, and most recently for high school women.

One issue that is of major concern to us and that we have begun to publicly address is racism in the white women's movement. As Black feminists we are made constantly and painfully aware of how little effort white women have made to understand and combat their racism, which requires among other things that they have a more than superficial comprehension of race, color, and black history and culture. Eliminating racism in the white women's movement is by definition work for white women to do, but we will continue to speak to and demand accountability on this issue.

In the practice of our politics we do not believe that the end always justifies the means. Many reactionary and destructive acts have been done in the name of achieving "correct" political goals. As feminists we do not want to mess over people in the name of politics. We believe in collective process and a nonhierarchical distribution of power within our own group and in our vision of a revolutionary society. We are committed to a continual examination of our politics as they develop through criticism and self-criticism as an essential aspect of our practice. In her introduction to *Sisterhood is Powerful* Robin Morgan writes:

> "I haven't the faintest notion what possible revolutionary role white heterosexual men could fulfill, since they are the very embodiment of reactionary-vested-interest-power."

As Black feminists and Lesbians we know that we have a very definite revolutionary task to perform and we are ready for the lifetime of work and struggle before us.

Endnotes

[1] This statement is dated April 1977.

[2] Michele Wallace, "A Black Feminist's Search for Sisterhood," The Village Voice, 28 July 1975, pp. 6-7.

[3] Mumininas of Committee for Unified Newark, Mwanamke Mwananchi (The Nationalist Woman), Newark, N.J., © 1971, pp. 4-5.

From *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*, ed. by Zillah Eisenstein, New York, Monthly Review Press, © 1978.

False Memories

Trauma and Liberation

"What would happen if one woman told the truth about her life?
The world would split open."

Muriel Rukeyser

~1~

The structures of unequal power are many-layered and complex in the ways they function in the world. But at its root, oppression is really quite simple. It's about looting. The rest is made up of the rules and institutions, rituals and agreements, mythologies, rationales and overt bullying by means of which small groups of people keep a firm grasp on way more than their share of the world's resources.

But just as intense heat makes ripples and waves that distort our view of the road and give us the illusion of water when there is only hot asphalt, oppression of any kind tugs at the culture around it, distorting our view of the naked exercise of power, normalizing it so that it appears natural and tolerable. Making it look like the reason we're thirsty is not that we're being denied water, but our own lack of initiative in the midst of plenty.

Those with privilege cover up the bare bones of what they're up to with all kinds of elaborate theories and justifications, until they persuade themselves that living at the expense of other people is the right thing to do, a luxury they have earned by excellence, the natural way of life, the righteous and inevitable order of things. Some go so far as to convince themselves that exploitation is not only justifiable but a kind and

compassionate expression of their superiority. These lies saturate our culture in ways both subtle and obvious.

The slavers who kidnapped millions of West African people, transported them under conditions that made a third of them die of the journey, gang-raped and tortured them, then sold them into lifelong unpaid labor—and the slave owners who bought them, worked them mercilessly, again raped them at will, routinely tortured them as punishment, sometimes for acts of resistance as small as looking a white man in the eye, sometimes merely to emphasize their power, and who, because of the work of slaves, led lives of leisure—found endless ways to justify their behavior, even to the extent of claiming that slavery was a civilizing influence on the lives of the enslaved. In a massive act of projection, they often described the African people who did every stitch of their work for them as lazy; seriously believed that slaves needed European people to set them tasks and make them useful. They even fantasized that had Europeans not enslaved them, African peoples would have died off from their inability to fend for themselves. After abolition, many ex-slave holders complained of the ingratitude of their former captives.

Or consider the almost hallucinatory fantasies of wealthy members of Congress that teenage African-American welfare mothers, a small minority of the welfare-receiving population, and consuming a minuscule fraction of the public budget, are responsible for bankrupting the economy, growing rich at public expense by having babies in order to pad their AFDC checks. Excluded from decent employment and denied the most basic necessities so as not to slow down the astronomical rise in income of the top 10 percent, these young women are held publicly accountable for the pillaging of our common resources by the greedy.

The mechanism is the same whether we talk about individual or collective atrocities. Feminist psychologist Judith Herman describes the ways in which perpetrators seek to control disclosures of abuse:

> In order to escape accountability for his crimes, the perpetrator does everything in his power to promote forgetting. Secrecy and silence are the perpetrator's first line of defense. If secrecy fails, the perpetrator attacks the credibility of his victim. If he cannot silence her absolutely, he tries to make sure no-one listens. To this end, he marshals an impressive array of arguments, from the most blatant denial to the most sophisticated and elegant rationalization. After every atrocity one can expect to hear the same predictable apologies: it never happened; the victim lies; the victim exaggerates; the victim brought it on herself; and in any case it is time to forget the past and move on. The more powerful the perpetrator, the greater his prerogative to name and define reality, and the more completely his arguments prevail.[1]

Similarly, collective abuses—from the violence of poverty to police brutality, from colonial invasion to slavery to genocide—are denied, dismissed, blamed on the victims and erased from public discussion.

Such lies are part of the apparatus that justifies the massive accumulation by a few people of wealth beyond any human individual's needs. In order for the thing to work, the humanity of almost everyone must somehow be made invisible. Who could bear to hold privilege that meant the suffering and death of others if they had not been trained from early childhood to see these others as not real? Who would tolerate, for even an hour, the inhuman conditions imposed by the privileged, if they had not been trained from early childhood to feel themselves not fully entitled to life?[2]

The culture that inequality creates around itself is saturated with pain, confusion, alienation, a sense of the unreality of our own experience and that of others, an inability to name the abuses we experience, perpetrate and witness on a daily basis. Part of what leaves us numb is the massive scale on which these abuses occur. We are a society of people living in a state of post-traumatic shock: amnesiac, dissociated, continually distracting ourselves from the repetitive injuries of widespread collective violence.

When individual people are abused, the events themselves become a story of our worthlessness, of our deserving no better. We must struggle to re-create the shattered knowledge of our humanity. It is in retelling the stories of victimization, recasting our roles from subhuman scapegoats to beings full of dignity and courage, that this becomes possible. The struggle we engage in is over whose story will triumph, the rapist's story or the raped woman's, the child abuser's or the child's, the stories of bigoted police officers or those of families of color whose children are being murdered. The stories of perpetrators are full of lies and justifications, full of that same projection that holds the abused responsible for her abuse. The stories of the abused are full of dangerous, subversive revelations that undermine the whole fabric of inequality.

~2~

Memory, individual and collective, is clearly a significant site of social struggle. The "false memory" movement that seeks to deny authority over memory to sexual abuse survivors; escalating attacks on multicultural education, particularly in the teaching of history; revisions of Holocaust history that deny it took place, are all examples of current public debates over control of memory. All involve a backlash against powerful popular movements to reclaim authority.

The past is a powerful resource with which to explain and justify the present and create agendas for the future. The frequency with which adult women report that they were sexually abused by their families as children requires a story. That story must either radically redefine how the nature of family is understood in popular culture, or locate responsibility for these reports in the psyches of the women making them. Feminists have sought to do the first, and the false memory movement has sought, by inventing a new category of invalid experience, to do the latter.

Multicultural education—particularly the revision of history and literature curricula to include the presence and voices of women, people of color, poor and working-class people, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people—grew out of broad social movements that erupted in this country during the 1960s, '70s and early '80s and that responded to decolonization processes internationally. Women's Studies, Ethnic Studies, LGBT Studies and the various ways in which working-class culture and thought have been slipped into curricula have presented major challenges to elite control of knowledge, to what story is told about U.S. society.

As the movements that created such academic disciplines have weakened, attacks on multiculturalism have increased. As in the case of the false memory movement, the privileged accuse the disempowered of oppressing them. Multiculturalism violates the "freedom" of privileged white heterosexual men by forcing them to participate in a world in which their interests and perceptions are not the exclusive priority of everyone.

Those who have considered it their private preserve to decide what is and isn't knowledge, art or culture have persuaded themselves that our determination to define these things for ourselves is a threat to their interests. In reality, it's their best chance for survival. The narrow mythologies upon which they have based their lives will not see them through another century. The denial of our interrelatedness is killing this planet and too many of its people.

Holocaust revision, the story that accuses Jews of manufacturing the history of Nazi atrocities and genocide as a bid for power and "special privileges," uses a similar reversal whereby Nazi Germany becomes the victim of those Jews who survived the attempt to exterminate them. The Holocaust is searing evidence of what theories of genetic inferiority, what the dehumanizing of whole populations can bring about. As we experience a rising visibility and popularity of such ideologies once again, both at the level of neo-Nazi organizing and within scientific debates on the

role of genetics in shaping our lives, there is a clear incentive for supporters of these ideologies to erase the well-documented and horrifying realities of the Holocaust and replace them with an account that again places the story in the psyche of the victim, rather than in the world.

For Jews, for incest survivors, for all the people systematically excluded from official histories, the issue is the same. Oppression, whether on the massive social scale of the Holocaust or in the power abuses of incest within one home, is deeply traumatic. Traumatized individuals and communities experience themselves as dehumanized by abuse. The story told by the actions of the perpetrators is that those who are targeted are not human beings. Evidence that such a belief is a central ingredient in oppressor ideology, and essential, in fact, to carrying out their programs, is to be found everywhere, from Nazi propaganda to slave-holder mythology to the persistent belief that women ask for and enjoy rape.

Because I am in multiple ways the target of such dehumanization, I read history books with the skepticism of an incest survivor at a family gathering. I watch everyone's hands. I know the purpose of many of the stories being told is to establish the appropriateness of sacrificing me and my peoples to someone else's interests. Recovery from trauma requires creating and telling another story about the experience of violence and the nature of the participants, a story powerful enough to restore a sense of our own humanity to the abused.

~3~

Our capacity as a society to think about traumatic events and their effect on people has been disrupted by both the silencing imposed on us by perpetrators and the effects of trauma itself. The tendency is for prolonged abuse to become normalized, and even more so when it is perpetrated on a collective scale by those with the greatest power. Judith Herman looks at the checkered past of the psychological study of trauma, describing it as one of "episodic amnesia:"

> Periods of active investigation have alternated with periodic oblivion. Repeatedly in the past century, similar lines of inquiry have been taken up and abruptly abandoned, only to be rediscovered much later... This intermittent amnesia is not the result of the ordinary changes in fashion that affect any intellectual pursuit. The study of psychological trauma does not languish for lack of interest. Rather, the subject provokes such intense controversy that it periodically becomes anathema. The study of psychological trauma has repeatedly led into realms of the unthink-

This is because examining psychological trauma inevitably leads us to the most widespread source of trauma, which is oppression. Therefore, it is only in the context of social movements opposing oppression that psychological trauma can really be examined. Herman argues:

> The systematic study of psychological trauma therefore depends on the support of a political movement. Indeed, whether such a study can be pursued or discussed in public is itself a political question. The study of war trauma becomes legitimate only in a context that challenges the sacrifice of young men in war. The study of trauma in sexual and domestic life becomes legitimate only in the context that challenges the subordination of women and children. Advances in the field occur only when they are supported by a political movement powerful enough to legitimate an alliance between investigators and patient and to counteract the ordinary social processes of silencing and denial. In the absence of strong political movements for human rights, the active process of bearing witness inevitably gives way to the active process of forgetting. Repression, dissociation, and denial are phenomena of social as well as individual consciousness.[4]

Denial and amnesia, repression and the dissociation that keeps our perceptions fragmented so they will not reveal the terrible whole—all of these must be overcome in order for the stories of the traumatized to occupy public space.

~4~

Healing takes place in community, in the telling and the bearing witness, in the naming of trauma and in the grief and rage and defiance that follow. In *Trauma and Recovery* Judith Herman draws from the experiences of women and men traumatized by many different kinds of events, from rape and battering to combat, from kidnaping to incest. She has found that both the effects of trauma and the recovery process from it are largely consistent across all categories of trauma. If abuse is in fact only the local manifestation of oppression, then such stages of individual recovery should also hold true for collective processes of recovery.

The significant difference, however, between a local manifestation of oppression such as incest or battering in a home and societal abuses such as racism, poverty or homophobia is the possibility of leaving the abusive situation. For individuals, recovery generally begins at the point where the abuse has been escaped or stopped. Collectively, we are often attempting to recover from abuses that are ongoing, and the only context in which recovery is possible is one of active opposition. Taking action, saying no to oppression, is an essential first step.

A stance of opposition creates a small liberated territory, a psychological space in which we can act on the belief that we deserve complete freedom and dignity even when achieving such freedom collectively is still out of reach. The refusal to cooperate with our dehumanization even when we may not yet be able to stop it increases our reserves of dignity and hope. In that moment we have begun the process of recovery—of reclaimed humanity—that is both the ultimate outcome and the most essential ingredient of our liberation. And although there is a critical role for allies in bearing witness to and taking a strong moral stance against the abuse, this activism must be by the traumatized on their own behalf.

Writing of the therapeutic relationship for traumatized individuals, Herman states that the client must be "author and arbiter of her own recovery... No intervention that takes power away from the survivor can possibly foster her recovery, no matter how much it appears to be in her immediate best interest."[5] I am reminded of a quote from an unidentified Australian aboriginal woman activist, "If you have come here to help me then you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine then let us work together."

What is clinically referred to as diagnosis, the naming of the problem, is the essential stage of reconnecting symptom and cause, pain and its source. Identifying the cause-and-effect relationships between nightmares and incest, depression and violation of any kind, fear and the experience of violence, releases the traumatized from the business-as-usual denial that these things can reasonably be expected to have an impact. My own relief at the discovery, in therapy, that my inability to sleep, or the persistent intrusive violent images that thrust their way into my mind were a common, known and documented response to severe abuse was identical with what I felt in my first women's consciousness-raising group. As each woman in turn spoke about her life and we recognized how much we had in common, we became able to identify the sources of our anger, frustration and self-doubt in the treatment we had recieved at the hands of men. Our exhilaration came from the realization that our pain was not after all a character flaw but a direct result of systematic injustice and that our reactions made complete sense. Oppressed communities have created many forms—from support groups to written testimony, from "speak bitterness" sessions to autobiographical anthologies—through which the connections between conditions of oppression and their impact on the oppressed can be made explicit and public. While the false memory theoreticians attempt to establish that pain is ahistoric and traumas leave no trace of themselves in our lives,

the traumatized keep finding ways to insist that pain has documentable origins, that when someone is hit, it hurts, and that injuries leave scars.

Without this naming process, the effects of trauma come to seem like personal flaws or cultural defects, inborn in the traumatized, not violently created. Survivors of long-term abuse, unable to identify the external sources of self-hatred, shame, anger and fear, may pose a significant danger to themselves through direct self-harming, passive failures of self-protection, or an intense and pathological dependence on the abuser. Traumatized communities certainly enact these same behaviors. Internalizing the perpetrator's rationalizations, they may come to believe they are the source of their own problems and treat themselves and each other with disrespect and violence. Drug abuse, alcoholism, gang violence, domestic violence and a stunted sense of what is possible can all be seen as a result of the inability to identify the causes of pain and take an active stance to end them. Only when we are able to take in the cumulative impact of slavery, lynching and other forms of organized violence, enforced poverty and segregation and the systematic denial of opportunities to African Americans can we find ways to talk about the violence inflicted by young Black men upon each other as caused, not inherent.

Speaking of individual trauma patients, Herman writes:

> The question of what is wrong with them has often become hopelessly muddled and ridden with moral judgement... A conceptual framework that relates the patient's problems with identity and relationships to the trauma history provides a useful basis for the formation of a therapeutic alliance—this framework both recognizes the harmful nature of the abuse and provides a reasonable explanation for the patient's persistent difficulties.[6]

In order to establish a culture of resistance, a climate in which the oppressed are able to diagnose our own ills as the effects of oppression, we need a body of diagnostic know-how, a tradition of recognizing and understanding in detail the harmful nature of oppression.

~5~

The way we are taught our history is an endless repetition of the perpetrator's story, in which crusaders are shining knights, not massacring mercenaries, wars are glorious, conquerors noble and as far back as we can see, the past unrolls in an infinite time line of thrones, treaties and battles, and the acquisition of exciting new markets and territories. For the subjugated and colonized, the presentation of such a story as one of admirable accomplishments is an added injury. Just as the

individual recovering from abuse must reconstruct the story of her undeserved suffering in a way that gives it new meaning, and herself a rebuilt and invulnerable sense of worth, the victims of collective abuse need ways to reconstruct history in a way that restores a sense of our inherent value as human beings, not simply in our usefulness to the goals of the elites.

When individuals take on such projects of recovery we often find it far more challenging than we may have expected. Herman writes, "Denial makes them feel crazy, but facing the full reality seems beyond what any human can bear."[7] The heart of the challenge is to assimilate the terrible, the unbearable, transforming it into something that can be integrated; something that can nourish us and leave us with a vision of the world, of ourselves, of humanity, that is bigger than the horror.

What is so dreadful is that to transform the traumatic we must re-enter it fully, and allow the full weight of grief to pass through our hearts. It is not possible to digest atrocity without tasting it first, without assessing on our tongues the full bitterness of it. Ours is a society that does not do grief well or easily, and what is required to face trauma is the ability to mourn, fully and deeply, all that has been taken from us. But mourning is painful and we resist giving way to it, distract ourselves with put-on toughness out of pride.

Herman talks about all the ways individuals resist mourning. Out of pride because we will not give them the satisfaction. Through fantasies of revenge rooted in a sense of helplessness, as if perpetrating abusive acts ourselves would restore our power. Through dreams of absolution in which the impact of abuse is erased by an act of love and the abuser is finally repentant. Through fantasies of compensation that allow us to avoid the truth, which is that nothing can ever compensate us.

But only through mourning everything we have lost can we discover that we have in fact survived; that our spirits are indestructible. Only through mourning can we reach a place of clean anger in which we stand with all the abused and hold the abusers accountable. Only through mourning can we reconnect to the love in our lives and lose our fascination with the ones who harmed us. And only if we fully acknowledge and grieve the hurts can we possibly find genuine compassion for the perpetrators. Mourning is the only way to honor what was lost, and only by renouncing all hope of restitution are we free to grieve.

What does grief have to do with history? Everything. In the early 1980s my mother wrote "Concepts of Pollution" about her experience studying anthropology:

> Did you know Levi-Strauss wrote an essay on the pregnant boy myths of the Pawnee Indians, myths about how some boys got supernatural help to become doctors—so called medicine men—without a word about doctoring among the Pawnees in the 1800's, without a word about the desperate hopelessness of it with people dying of all the diseases of starvation, the hungry, cold winters and the attacks of the Sioux? ...And I was there to be a scholar, there to be an anthropologist. Not there to be a person, a woman. Not there to care that I was Puerto Rican, a child of Taino Indians, of Spaniards, of African slaves. Not there to question, to argue. Not there to identify. Not there to cry. Certainly not there to cry. No wonder I drank... I'd write after staying up drinking, talking to myself in the mirror, shouting angrily...Then I would write about Pawnees dying in the thin winter sunlight, coughing up blood, or Polynesians dying on the beach in the Pacific, shot by passing whalers, or caduveo dying of Spanish gunshot. I wrote about Wounded Knee and Canyon de Chelly, places I had names for, and all the beaches and valleys and rocky plains in Africa, in Canada, in Australia, on the Pacific Islands, on the Caribbean islands, in tropical South America, in Arctic North America, places for which I had no names. A soundless litany of death... Drink deadens the pain, and now I don't drink and the pain returns undeadened, unalloyed, clear and punishing. How can I bear it? How do you mourn endless numbers of people in endless numbers of places? Is there a form for it, a requisite time and place for mourning? Is there ever an end to it?[8]

The only way to bear the overwhelming pain of oppression is by telling, in all its detail, in the presence of witnesses and in a context of resistance, how unbearable it is. If we attempt to craft resistance without undertaking this task, we are collectively vulnerable to all the errors of judgment that unresolved trauma generates in individuals. It is part of our task as revolutionary people, people who want deep-rooted, radical change, to be as whole as it is possible for us to be. This can only be done if we face the reality of what oppression really means in our lives, not as abstract systems subject to analysis, but as an avalanche of traumas leaving a wake of devastation in the lives of real people who nevertheless remain human, unquenchable, complex and full of possibility.

Radical history has the potential to do this work. Radical historians, whether academically taught or trained in the storytelling traditions of their communities, have the ability to do for communities of the oppressed what a witness-bearing, morally committed therapist can do for an individual hurt past bearing by abuse. We gather and retell the stories of our side of history, free of the self-serving rationalizations of the looters. In the face of every act or word that would strip us of it, we tell, in all its anguish and beauty, the story of our ineradicable humanity.

Notes

1. Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery.* Basic Books: New York, 1992, p. 8.
2. When I say the oppressed "tolerate" oppression, I am not implying that we are responsible for it. Only that although violence is an essential component of control, the primary way that elites impose their will is through threats, distortions, lies about the nature of our relationships to each other—by creating confusion among the oppressed so that we identify to some degree with the idea that these relations are normal. When large numbers of people in a society reach a point where they no longer find conditions in any way acceptable and are willing to risk whatever is required in order to change them, the threat of physical force stops being an effective control. The overthrow of Somoza happened not because the oppositon had become especially well armed or even suddenly much better organized but because large numbers of young people reached a level of outrage that overrode the habits of resignation that years of dictatorship had instilled.
3. Herman, p. 7.
4. Herman, p. 9.
5. Herman, p. 133.
6. Herman, p. 158.
7. Herman, p. 181.
8. Morales, Rosario. *Getting Home Alive.* Firebrand Books: Ithaca, New York,1986, p. 63.

Rupture, Verge, and Precipice
Precipice, Verge, and Hurt Not

Be not afraid. The isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.

—WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

YOU ARE AFRAID. You are afraid, as usual, that the novel is dying. You think you know what a novel is: it's the kind you write. You fear you are dying.

You wonder where the hero went.

You wonder how things could have gotten so out of hand.

You ask where is one sympathetic, believable character?

You ask where is the plot?

You wonder where on earth is the conflict? The resolution? The *dénouement*?

You imagine yourself to be the holder of some last truth. You imagine yourself to be in some sinking, noble, gilt-covered cradle of civilization.

You romanticize your *fin de siècle*, imbuing it with meaning, overtones, implications.

You are still worried about TV.

You are still worried about the anxiety of influence.

You say there will be no readers in the future, that there are hardly any readers now. You count your measly 15,000—but you have always underestimated everything.

You say language will lose its charms, its ability to charm, its power to mesmerize.

You say the world turns, spins away, or that we turn from it. You're pretty desolate.

You mutter a number of the usual things: You say, "...are rust," "...are void" "...are torn."

You think you know what a book is, what reading is, what constitutes a literary experience. In fact you've been happy all these years to legislate the literary experience. All too happy to write the rules.

You think you know what the writer does, what the reader does. You're pretty smug about it.

You think you know what the reader wants: a good old-fashioned story.

You think you know what a woman wants: a good old-fashioned—

You find me obnoxious, uppity. You try to dismiss me as hysterical or reactionary or out of touch because I won't enter that cozy little pact with you anymore. Happy little subservient typing "my" novel, the one you've been dictating all these years.

You rely on me to be dependent on you for favors, publication, $$$$$$$$, canonization.

You are afraid. Too smug in your middle ground with your middlebrow. Everything threatens you.

You say music was better then: the Rolling Stones, the Who, the Beatles, Fleetwood Mac. You're boring me.

You say hypertext will kill print fiction. You pit one against the other in the most cynical and transparent ways in hopes we'll tear each other to bits

while you watch. You like to watch. Hold us all in your gaze.

Just as you try to pit writing against theory, prose against poetry, film against video, etc., as you try to hold on to your little piece of the disappearing world.

But I, for one, am on to you. Your taste for blood, your love of competition, your need to feel endangered, beleaguered, superior. Your need to reiterate, to reassert your power, your privilege, because it erodes.

Let's face it, you're panicked.

You think an essay should have a hypothesis, a conclusion, should argue points. You really do bore me.

You'd like to put miraculous, glowing glyphs on a screen on one side and modest ink on pretty white paper on the other.

You set up, over and over, false dichotomies. Easy targets. You reduce almost everything, as I reduce you now. Tell me, how does it feel?

You're really worried. You say sex will be virtual. The casting couch, virtual. But you know as well as I do that all the other will continue, you betcha, so why are you so worried?

You fear your favorite positions are endangered. Will become obsolete.

You believe you have more to lose than other people in other times.

You romanticize the good old days—the record skipping those nights long ago while you were making love, while you were having real sex with—

Hey, was that me? The Rolling Stones crooning: "I see a red door and I want it painted black, painted black, painted black..."

Want it painted black.

Or: "Brown Sugar, how come you dance so good, dance so good, dance so good...???"

You want to conserve everything. You worship false prophets. You're sick over your (dwindling) reputation.

You're so cavalier, offering your hand....

Jenny Holzer: "The future is stupid."

I remember the poet-dinosaurs that evening at the dinner table munching on their leafy greens, going extinct even as they

spoke, whispering "language poetry" (that was the evil that night), shuddering.

You fear the electronic ladyland. Want it painted black.

You're afraid of junk food. The real junk food and the metaphoric junk food the media feeds you. Want it painted black...

painted black.

You fear the stylist (as you have defined style) will perish.

You consider certain art forms to be debased and believe that in the future all true artists will disappear. Why do you believe other forms to be inferior to your own?

You consider certain ways of thinking about literature to be debased. You can't decide whether they're too rigorous or too reckless, or both.

Edmund Wilson, Alfred Kazin, Harold Bloom *et fils*—make my day.

You think me unladylike. Hysterical. Maybe crazy. Unreadable. You put me in your unreadable box where I am safe. Where I am quiet. More ladylike.

In your disdainful box labeled "experimental." Labeled "do not open." Labeled "do not review."

You see a red door and you want it painted black.

No more monoliths.

You who said "hegemony" and "domino theory" and "peace with honor."

All the deaths for nothing. All the dark roads you've led us down. No more.

The future: where we're braced always for the next unspeakably monstrous way to die—or to kill.

All the dark deserted roads you've led me down, grabbing at my breasts, tearing at my shirt, my waistband: first date.

Second date: this is how to write a book.

Third date: good girl! Let's publish it!!!

Brown Sugar, how come you dance so good?

Fourth date: will you marry me?

You fear the future, OK. You fear anything new. Anything that disrupts your sense of security and self. Everything threatens you.

Where is the change over the course of the thing in the hero?

Where is the hero?

Where's the conflict? Where the hell is the *dénouement*?

I see your point. But haven't you asked us to write your fiction for just a little too long now? Couldn't we—

Couldn't we, maybe just possibly, coexist?

Why does my existence threaten yours?

It's been too long now that you've asked me to be you. Insisted I be you.

Lighten up. Don't be so afraid. Put up your hand. Say: Bunny, Alfred, Harold, bye-bye.

You fear. You fear the television. You loathe and adore the television.

You feel numbed and buzzed by so much electronics. Numbed and buzzed by so much future.

I'm getting a little tired of this "you" and "I." Still I am learning a few new things about you—and about me.

The future of literature. The death of the novel. You love for some reason, the large, glitzy questions and statements. But the question bores me—and all the usual ways of thinking and speaking and writing anymore.

I'm sorry you are so afraid. You want it to be something like the movie *2001,* the future. You want it to be ludicrous, the future, easily dismissable. Like me. If only I didn't dance so good. You demand to know, How come

you dance so good, dance so good, dance so good...???

You can't see a place for yourself in it and it frightens you. You dig in your heels as a result. Spend all your considerable intelligence and energy conserving, preserving, holding court, posturing, tenaciously holding on, now as you munch your last green leaves, yum.

Where is the resolution of the conflict? Where the fuck is the conflict?

What if a book might also include, might also be, the tentative, the hesitant, the doubt you most fear and despise?

Lyn Hejinian: "Closure is misanthropic."

Fear of growth, fear of change, fear of breaking one's own mold, fear of disturbing the product, fear of ridicule, fear of

indifference, fear of failure, fear of invisibility, fear of, fear of, fear of....

You say that language will cease to be respected, will no longer move us. But we're already becoming numb thanks to what you are afraid to give up. What you flood the market with.

Soyinka: "I am concerned about preserving a special level of communication, a level very different from Oprah Winfrey."

Wish: that all talk-show fiction be put to bed now. Its fake psychologies, its "realisms." Its pathetic 2 plus 2.

Language of course has an enormous capacity to lie, to make false shapes, to be glib, to make common widgets, three parts this and two parts that.

Wish: that all the fiction of lies be put to bed.

That the dishonesty running rampant through much contemporary fiction be recognized as such.

What deal must I strike in order to be published by you? What pose, bargain, stance, is it I must strike with you now?

What mold do you make of me to pour your elixir, your fluid into, and then reward?

The bunny mold? The kitten mold? The flower mold? The damaged flower mold? Pregnant at twelve, illiterate, but with a twist? The gay mold? The white trash mold? The battered child mold? The bad girl mold?

Paint me black. Paint me Latina. Paint me Native American. Paint me Asian and then pour me into your mold. Use me. Co-opt me. Market me.

Debase me and in the future I shall rise anew out of your cynicism and scorn—smiling, lovely, free.

I know a place that burns brighter than a million suns.

Wish list: that the business people who have taken over the publishing houses will focus themselves elsewhere and leave the arts alone again.

Not to own or colonize or dominate. . . .

Despite all efforts to tame it, manage it, control it, outsmart it, language resists your best efforts; language is still a bunch of sturdy, glittering charms in the astonished hand.

A utopia of possibility. A utopia of choice.

And I am huddled around the fire of the alphabet, still.

Even though you say one word next to the other will cease to be cherished.

You say rap music is poison. Hypertext is poison.

Even though you call me sentimental—on the one hand girly-girl, on the other hand loud-mouthed bitch, on the one hand interesting and talented writer, on the other hand utterly out-of-touch idealist, romantic—it is you who wants the nineteenth century back again. When things were dandy for you, swell. You want to believe in the old coordinates, the old shapes. To believe in whatever it was you believed in then. You were one of the guys who dictated the story, sure, I remember. Who made up the story and now go teaching it all over the place. But even then, when you sat around making it up, even then, my friend, it had nothing to do with me. With my world. With what I saw and how I felt.

Wish: that all graduate writing programs with their terminal degrees stop promoting such tiresome recipes for success or go (financially) bankrupt.

Your false crescendos. Climaxes. False for me, at any rate.

The future is all the people who've ever been kept out, singing.

In the future everything will be allowed.

So the future is for you, too. Not to worry. But not only for you.

For you, but not only for you.

Not to discard the canon, but to enlarge it.

No more monoliths. No more Mick Jaggers. No more O. J. Simpsons. No more James Joyces. No more heroes.

Everything threatens you. Hacks, hackers, slacks, slackers, cybergirls with their cybercurls and wiles, poets of every sort. Rock bands with girls.

You believe your (disappearing) time represents some last golden age of enlightenment, to be guarded, protected, reproduced against the approaching mindlessness, depravity, electronic states of America.

But maybe as you become more and more threatened, you'll take a few more risks yourself. Who knows? Anything is possible in the future.

Wish list: that the homogeneity end. That the mainstream come to acknowledge, for starters, the thousand refracted, disparate beauties out there.

That the writers and the readers stop being treated by the mainstream houses like idiot children. That the business people get out and stop imposing their "taste" on everyone.

Wish: that as writers we be aware of our own desire to incorporate, even unconsciously, the demands and anxieties of publishers and reject them, the demands and anxieties of the marketplace.

That the business people go elsewhere.

Market me. Promote me. Sanitize me. Co-opt me. Plagiarize me. Market me harder.

Wish list: that the grade inflation for a certain kind of writing stop, and that the middlebrow writers assume their middle position so that everyone else might finally have a place, too. Be considered seriously, too. Be read, too.

Paint me black. Paint me Latina. Paint me Chinese. Pour me into your mold and sell me harder.

Fuck me (over) harder.

Those of us jockeying for position in the heavens, intent on forever, major reputations, major motion pictures and $$$$ $$$$, life after life after life after death, forget about it.

Wish: that straight white males reconsider the impulse to cover the entire world with their words, fill up every page, every surface, everywhere.

Thousand-page novels, tens and tens of vollmanns—I mean volumes.

Not to own or colonize or dominate anymore.

"Well, we've been kept from ourselves too long, don't you think?" an old woman in Central Park says to a friend.

Two women in the park at dusk.

Turn the beat around:

The pauses and rhythms and allowances of Laurie Anderson. The glow of Jenny Holzer. The ranting and passion of Courtney Love. Brilliance of Susan Howe. Brilliance of Erin Mouré. Theresa Cha. Visionary P. J. Harvey. Suzan-Lori Parks.

The future is feminine, for real, this time.

The future is Emily Dickinson and Emily Brontë and Gertrude Stein still. The future is still Maya Deren and Billie Holiday.

Language is a rose and the future is still a rose, opening.

It is beautiful there in the future. Irreverent, wild.

The future is women, for real this time. I'm sorry, but it's time you got used to it.

Reading on a train by the light the river gives. The woman next to me asleep. Two plastic bags at her feet. Lulling, lovely world. And I am witness to it all—that slumber—and then her awakening—so vulnerable, sensation streaming back, the world returned, the river and the light the river gives, returning language, touch, and smell. The world retrieved. I am privileged to be next to her as she moves gracefully from one state to the next, smiling slightly. I recognize her delight. It is

taken away, and it is given back. The miracle and mystery of this life in one middle-aged black woman on the Metro North next to me. The Hudson River widening.

Let all of this be part of the story, too. A woman dreaming next to water.

The future: all the dreams we've been kept from. All the things yet to dream.

An opening of possibility. A land of a thousand dances.

I want sex and hypersex and cybersex, why not?

The river mysteriously widening, as she opens her eyes.

We can say, if we like, that the future will be plural.

Our voices processed through many systems—or none at all.

A place where a thousand birds are singing.

"The isle is full of noises. . . ."

A place without the usual dichotomies. No phony divisions between mind and body, intelligence and passion, nature and technology, private and public, within and without, male and female.

May we begin a dialogue there in the future. May we learn something from each other. Electronic writing will help us to think about impermanence, facility, fragility, and freedom, spatial intensities, irreverences, experimentation, new worlds, clean slates. Print writing will allow us new respect for the mark on the page, the human hand, the erasure, the hesitation, the mistake.

Electronic writing will give us a deeper understanding of the instability of texts, of worlds.

Print writing will remind us of our love for the physical, for the sensual world. And for the light only a book held in one's hands can give. The book taken to bed or the beach—the words dancing with the heat and the sea—and the mouth now suddenly on my salty neck.

Electronic writing shall inspire magic. Print writing shall inspire magic. Ways to heal.

"Intoxicated with Serbian nationalist propaganda, one charge is that X took part in the murder of a Muslim civilian, F, by forcing another Muslim to bite off F's testicles."

What is a book and how might it be reimagined, opened up, transformed to accommodate all we've seen, all we've been hurt by, all that's been given, all that's been taken away:

"...deliberately infecting subjects with fatal diseases, killing 275,000 of the elderly, the deformed and other 'useless eaters' through the guise of euthanasia, and killing 112 Jews simply to fill out a university skeleton collection."

No more monoliths. No more gods.

"Let us go then, you and I...."

No more sheepish, mindless devotion. No more quiet supplication.

All the dark roads you've led us down no more.

You will call me naive, childlike, irreverent, idealistic, offensive, outrageous, defiant at times, because I do not believe in a

literature of limitation, in a future of limitation. I annoy you with this kind of talk, I know. You've told me many times before. You'd like me to step into my quiet box. You're so cavalier, as you offer your hand.

The future. Possibility will reign. My students poised on some new threshold. We're too diversified, we're too fractured, all too close in proximity suddenly—one world.

One wild world,

free of categories, free of denominations, dance and fiction and performance and installation and video and poetry and painting—one world—every hyper- and cyber-

And in upstate New York, a woman sees fields of flax and iris and cattails, and dreams of making paper. And dreams of creating an Art Farm—a place just for experimenting with unusual indigenous fibers, a real space for bookbinding, an archive, a library, a gallery.

Dream: that this new tolerance might set a tone, give an example. This openness in acceptance of texts, of forms, this freedom, this embrace will serve as models for how to live. Will be the model for a new world order—in my dream. A way to live together better—in my dream.

Godard: "A film like this, it's a bit as if I wanted to write a sociological essay in the form of a novel, and all I had to do it with was notes of music. Is that what cinema is? And am I right to continue doing it?"

But I do believe, and no doubt childishly, unquestioningly, in the supremacy of beauty, in pattern, in language, as a child believes in language, in diversity, in the possibility of justice—

even after everything we have seen—in the impulse to speak—even after everything.

"Peder Davis, a bouncy, tow-headed five-year-old, shook his head and said, 'I would tell him: You shoot down this building? You put it back together.

And I would say, You redo those people.'"

One hundred and sixty-eight dead in Oklahoma bombing.

"Peder said he drew 'a house with eyes that was blue on the sides.' He explained, 'It was the building that exploded, in heaven.'"

Wish: that writing again, through its audacity, generosity, possibility, irreverence, wildness, teach us how to better live.

The world doesn't end.

The smell of the air. The feel of the wind in late April.

You can't have a genuine experience of nature except in nature. You can't have a genuine experience of language except in language. And for those of us for whom language is the central drama, the captivating, imaginative, open, flexible act, there can never be a substitute or a replacement.

Language continually opening new places in me.

A picture of a bird will never be a bird. And a bird will never be a picture of a bird. So relax.

The world doesn't end, my friend. So stop your doomsday song. Or Matthew Arnold: "The end is everywhere: Art still has truth, take refuge there."

All will perish, but not this: language opening like a rose.

And many times I have despaired over the limits of language, the recalcitrance of words that refuse to yield, won't glimmer, won't work anymore. All the outmoded forms. Yet I know it is part of it, I know that now; it's part of the essential mystery of the medium—and that all of us who are in this thing for real have to face this, address this, love this, even.

The struggles with shape, with silence, with complacency. The impossibility of the task.

You say destined to perish, death of the novel, end of fiction, over and over.

But Matthew Arnold, on the cusp of another century, dreams: art.

And I say faced with the eternal mysteries, one, if so inclined, will make fictive shapes.

What it was like to be here. To hold your hand.

An ancient impulse, after all.

As we reach, trying to recapture an original happiness, pleasure, peace—

Reaching—

The needs that language mirrors and engenders and satisfies are not going away. And are not replaceable.

The body with its cellular alphabet. And, in another alphabet, the desire to get that body onto the page.

There will be works of female sexuality, finally.

Feminine shapes.

All sorts of new shapes. Language, a rose, opening.

It's greater than we are, than we'll ever be. That's why I love it. Kneeling at the altar of the impossible. The self put back in its proper place.

The miracle of language. The challenge and magic of language.

Different than the old magic. I remember you liked to saw women in half and put them back together, once. Configure them in ways most pleasing to you.

You tried once to make language conform. Obey. You tried to tame it. You tried to make it sit, heel, jump through hoops.

You like to say I am reckless. You like to say I lack discipline. You say my work lacks structure. I've heard it a hundred times from you. But nothing could be farther from the truth.

In spite of everything, my refusal to hate you, to take you all that seriously, to be condescended to—

Still, too often I have worried about worldly things. Too often have I worried about publishing, about my so-called career, fretted over the so-so-writers who are routinely acclaimed, rewarded, given biscuits and other treats—this too small prison of self where I sometimes dwell.

Too often I have let the creeps upset me.

The danger of the sky.

The danger of April.

If you say language is dying. . . .

Susan Howe: "Poetry is redemption from pessimism."

April in the country. Already so much green. So much life. So much. Even with half the trees still bare. Poking up through the slowly warming earth, the tender shoots of asparagus. Crocus. Bloodroot.

This vulnerable and breakable heart.

As we dare to utter something, to commit ourselves, to make a mark on a page or a field of light.

To incorporate this dangerous and fragile world. All its beauty. All its pain.

You who said "hegemony" and "domino theory" and "peace with honor."

To not only tolerate but welcome work that is other than the kind we do.

To incorporate the ache of Vietnam, the mistake of it, incapable of being erased or changed. To invent forms that might let that wound stand—

If we've learned anything, yet.

Summer 1885

Brother and Sister's Friend—

"Sweet Land of Liberty" is a superfluous Carol till it concerns ourselves—then it outrealms the Birds...

Your Hollyhocks endow the House, making Art's inner Summer, never Treason to Nature's. Nature will

be closing her Picnic when you return to America, but you will ride Home by sunset, which is far better.

I am glad you cherish the Sea. We correspond, though I never met him.

I write in the midst of Sweet-Peas and by the side of Orioles, and could put my hand on a Butterfly, only he withdraws.

Touch Shakespeare for me.

"Be not afraid. The isle is full of noises, Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not."

Fifty years now since World War II. She sits in the corner and weeps.

And hurt not.

Six million dead.

"Well, we've been kept from ourselves long enough, don't you think?"

We dare to speak. Trembling, and on the verge.

Extraordinary things have been written. Extraordinary things will continue to be written.

Nineteen ninety-five: Vinyl makes its small comeback. To the teenage music freak, to the classical music fiend, and to the opera queen, CDs are now being disparaged as producing too cold, too sanitary a sound. Vinyl is being sought out again for its warmer, richer quality.

Wish: that we be open-minded and generous. That we fear not.

That the electronic page understand its powers and its limitations. Nothing replaces the giddiness one feels at the potential of hypertext. Entirely new shapes might be created, different ways of thinking, of perceiving.

Kevin Kelly, executive director of *Wired* magazine: "The first thing discovered by Jaron Lanier [the virtual reality pioneer] is to say what is reality? We get to ask the great questions of all time: what is life? What is human? What is civilization? And you ask it not in the way the old philosophers asked it, sitting in armchairs, but by actually trying it. Let's try and *make* life. Let's try and *make* community."

And now the Extropians, who say they can achieve immortality by downloading the contents of the human brain onto a hard disk. . . .

So turn to the students. Young visionaries. Who click on the Internet, the cyberworld in their sleep. Alvin Lu: citizen of the universe, the whole world at his fingertips. In love with the blinding light out there, the possibility, world without end, his love of all that is the future.

Let the fictions change shape, grow, accommodate. Let the medium change if it must; the artist persists.

You say all is doomed, but I say Julio Cortázar. I say Samuel Beckett. I say Marcel Proust. Virginia Woolf. I say García Lorca and Walt Whitman. I say Mallarmé. I say Ingeborg Bachmann. *The Apu Trilogy* will lie next to *Hamlet. Vivre Sa Vie* will live next to *Texts for Nothing.*

These fragmented prayers.

making love around the fire of the alphabet.

Wish: that we not hurt each other purposely anymore.

A literature of love. A literature of tolerance. A literature of difference.

Saving the best of what was good in the old. Not to discard indiscriminately, but not to hold on too tightly, either. To go forward together, unthreatened for once.
The future is Robert Wilson and JLG. The future is Hou Hsiao-hsien. The future is Martha Graham, still.

The vocabularies of dance, of film, of performance.

The disintegration of categories.

If you say that language is dying, then what do you know of language?

I am getting a little tired of this you-and-I bit. But it tells me one important thing: *that I do not want it to have to be this way.* I do not believe it has to continue this way—you over there alternately blustery and cowering, me over here, defensive, angry.

Wish: a sky that is not divided. A way to look at the screen of the sky with its grandeur, its weather, its color, its patterns of bird flight, its airplanes and accidents and poisons, its mushroom clouds.

Its goldfinches frescoed against an aqua-blue dome.

Wish: that the sky go on forever. That we stop killing each other. That we allow each other to live.

April 1995 in New York City and the long-awaited Satyajit Ray Festival begins. For years he's been kept from us. Who decides, finally, what is seen, what is read, and why? And how much else has been deleted, omitted, neglected, ignored, buried, treated with utter indifference or contempt?

And in conversation with the man, my friend, a famous poet in fact, and the topic moved to someone we both knew who had just been operated on, and he said "masectomy," and I said back, "Yes, a mastectomy, a mastectomy," and he said "masectomy" like "vasectomy," and I said only under my breath, "It's mas*tec*tomy, idiot," ashamed, embarrassed, and a little intimidated, that was the worst part, a little unsure. That it made me question what I of course knew, that was the worst part—because of his easy confidence saying "masectomy," his arrogance, he hadn't even bothered to learn the right word, a *poet,* for God's sake, a man who worked with words, who should have known the right word for the removal of a breast, don't you think?

Mastectomy.

The undeniable danger of the sky.

Adrienne Rich: "Poetry means refusing the choice to kill or die."

Wish: that the straight white male give in just a little more gracefully. Call in its Michael Douglases, its suspect Hollywood, its hurt feelings, its fear—move over some.

After your thousands of years of affirmative action, give someone else a chance—just a chance.

The wish is for gentleness. The wish is for allowances.

"What is the phrase for the moon? And the phrase for love? By what name are we to call death? I do not know. I need a little language such as lovers use. . . ."

Wish: that the typical *New Yorker* story become the artifact it is and assume its proper place in the artifact museum, and not be mistaken for something still alive. Well we've just about had it with all the phony baloney, don't you think?

That the short story and the novel as they evolve and assume new, utterly original shapes might be treated gently. And with optimism. That is the wish.

That hypertext and all electronic writing still in its infancy be treated with something other than your fear and your contempt.

That, poised on the next century, we fear not. Make no grand pronouncements.

You say that language is dying, will die.

And at times I have felt for you, even loved you. But I have never believed you.

The Ebola virus is now. The Hanta virus. HIV. And that old standby, malaria. Live while you can. Tonight, who knows, may be our last. We may not even make the millennium, so don't worry about it so much.

All my friends who have died holding language in their throats, into the end. All my dead friends.

Cybernauts return from time to time wanting to see a smile instead of a colon followed by a closed parenthesis—the online sign for smile. When someone laughs out loud they want to hear real laughter in the real air, not just the letters LOL in front of them. Ah, yes. World while there is world.

A real bird in the real sky and then perhaps a little prose poem or something in the real sky, or the page or the screen or the human heart, pulsing.

> I do not know which to prefer,
> The beauty of inflections
> Or the beauty of innuendoes,
> The blackbird whistling
> Or just after.

One world.

The future of literature is utopic. As surely as my friends Ed and Alan will come this weekend to visit, bearing rose lentils. As long as one can say "rose," can say "lentil."

Gary dying, saying "Kappa maki."

You say, *over.* But I say, *no.*

I say faith and hope and trust and forever right next to wretched and hate and misery and hopeless.

In the future we will finally be allowed to live, just as we are, to imagine, to glow, to pulse.

Let the genres blur if they will. Let the genres redefine themselves.

Language is a woman, a rose constantly in the process of opening.

Vibrant, irresistible, incandescent.

Whosoever has allowed the villanelle to enter them or the sonnet. Whosoever has let in one genuine sentence, one paragraph, has felt that seduction like a golden thread being pulled slowly through one....

Wish: that forms other than those you've invented or sanctioned through your thousands of years of privilege might arise and be celebrated.

"Put another way, it seems to me that we have to rediscover everything about everything. There is only one solution, and that is to turn one's back on American cinema....Up until now we have lived in a closed world. Cinema fed on cinema, imitating itself. I now see that in my first films I did things because I had already seen them in the cinema. If I showed a police inspector drawing a revolver from his pocket, it wasn't because the logic of the situation I wanted to describe demanded it, but because I had seen police inspectors in other films drawing revolvers at this precise moment and in this precise way. The same thing has happened in painting. There have been periods of organization and imitation and periods of rupture. We are now in a period of rupture. We must turn to life again. We must move into modern life with a virgin eye."

—Jean-Luc Godard, 1966

Wish: that Alvin Lu might wander in the astounding classroom of the world through time and space, endlessly inspired, endlessly enthralled by what he finds there. That he be allowed to reinvent freely, revel freely.

My professor once and now great friend, Barbara Page, out there too, ravenous, furious, and without fear, inventing whole new worlds, ways of experiencing the text. New freedoms.

The world doesn't end, says Charles Simic. Engraved on our foreheads in ash, turned into a language of stars or birdsong across a vast sky; it stays. Literature doesn't end—but it may change shapes, be capable of things we cannot even imagine yet.

Woolf: "What is the phrase for the moon? And the phrase for love? By what name are we to call death? I do not know. I need a little language such as lovers use, words of one syllable such as children speak when they come into the room and find their mother sewing and pick up the scrap of bright wool, a feather, or a shred of chintz. I need a howl; a cry."

Charlotte Brontë: "My sister Emily loved the moors. Flowers brighter than the rose bloomed in the blackest of the heath for her; out of a sullen hollow in the livid hillside her mind could make an Eden. She found in the bleak solitude many and dear delights; and not the least and best loved was—liberty."

The future will be gorgeous and reckless, and words, those luminous charms, will set us free again. If only for a moment.

Whosoever has allowed the language of lovers to enter them, the language of wound and pain and solitude and hope. Whosoever has dug in the miracle of the earth. Mesmerizing dirt, earth, word.

Allowed love in. Allowed despair in.

Words are the ginger candies my dying friends have sucked on. Or the salve of water.

Precious words, contoured by silence. Informed by the pressure of the end.

Words are the crow's feet embedded in the skin of the father I love. Words are like that to me, still.

Words are the music of her hair on the pillow.

Words are the lines vibrating in the forest or in the painting. Pressures that enter us— bisect us, order us, disorder us, unite us, free us, help us, hurt us, cause anxiety, pleasure, pain.

Words are the footprints as they turn away in the snow.

There is no substitute for the language I love.

My father, one state away but still too far, asks over the telephone if I might take a photo of this bluebird, the first I have ever seen, because he hears how filled with delight I am by this fleeting sighting. But it's so tiny, it flies so fast, it's so hard to see. So far away. Me, with my small hunk of technology, pointing. With my nostalgia machine. My box that says fleeting, my box that says future.

My pleasure machine. My weeping machine that dreams: keep.

This novel that says desire and fleeting and unfinished.

Unfinished and left that way. Unfinished, not abandoned. Unfinished, not because of death or indifference or loss of faith, or nerve, just unfinished.

Not to draw false conclusions anymore. Not to set up false polarities. Unfinished and left that way, if necessary.

To allow everyone to write, to thrive, to live.

The Baltimore oriole returned from its American tropics at the edge of this frame now. I wait.

On this delicious precipice.

And nothing replaces this hand moving across the page, as it does now, intent on making a small mark and allowing it to stand on this longing surface.

Writing *oriole.* Imagining freedom. All that is possible.

April in the country. My hands in the dark earth, or the body of a woman, or any ordinary, gorgeous sentence.

Whosoever has let the hand linger on a burning thigh, or a shining river of light....

Whosoever has allowed herself to be dazzled by the motion of the alphabet,

or has let music into the body. Or has allowed music to fall onto the page.

Wish: to live and allow others to live. To sing and allow others to sing—while we can.

And hurt not.

Fleeting and longing moment on this earth. We were lucky to be here.

I close my eyes and hear the intricate chamber music of the world. An intimate, complicated, beautiful conversation in every language, in every tense, in every possible medium and form—incandescent.

—for Alvin, Barbara, and Judith
1 June 1995

Like the clarinet with the flute, like the French horn with the oboe, like the violin and the piano—take the melody from me, when it's time.

25 April 1995
Germantown, New York

A walk around the loop and I notice the bloodroot has begun to bloom. A bluebird, two bluebirds! The first I've ever seen, over by the convent. Before my eyes I see an infant clasping a small bird as depicted in Renaissance painting and sculpture. The world begins again. In this vision. In the words *bloodroot* and *bluebird.* And the goldfinches too are suddenly back. Today I saw three enormous turtles sunning themselves at a pond. The bliss of being on leave from teaching is beyond description. I recall Dickinson when someone mused that time must go very slowly for her, saying, "Time! Why time was all I wanted!" And so ditto. Blissful time. Writing, walking every day. I am keeping depression at bay, mania in check. All private sufferings and hurt are somehow more manageable here in solitude. The moment seems all now. The imaginative event, the natural event (two wild turkeys in the woods), the sexual event, and the constantly changing and evolving forms in language for all of this. John sends a note to remind me that my essay is due for the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* on May 1, but that I may have a small extension. I should be finishing up *Defiance,* but all I can think about are my erotic études—again feeling on the threshold of something amazing and out of reach. I'm extremely excited—hard to describe—my brain feels unhinged...

I must make a note as to where to move the daffodils, the iris. The earth in my hands. A wand of forsythia like a light

in my hands. I think of Barbara an hour away, the glowing glyphs coming off the screen in her study. The whole world—luminous, luminous. We were lucky to be here. Even in pain and uncertainty and rage and fear—some fear. In exhaustion.

Too much energy has gone into this Brown/Columbia decision. Where shall I end up? I have only partially succeeded in keeping it all in its proper place. I've had to work too hard to keep my mind at the proper distance. It takes its toll. I've needed the space to think, to dream other things. It hardly matters today though; another étude brews.

The *RCF* essay now in the back of my head. What to say? What can be said? How to use it to learn something, explore something I need to explore. When thinking of literature, the past and the present all too often infuriate me: everyone, everything that's been kept out. The future won't, can't be the same and yet...one worries about it. What I wonder most is if there is a way, whether there might be a way in this whole wide world, to forgive them. Something for the sake of my own work, my own life I need to do—have needed to do a long time. Perhaps in my essay I will make an attempt, the first movement toward some sort of reconciliation, at any rate. If it's possible. To set up the drama that might make it possible.

This breakable heart.

April. How poised everything seems. How wonderfully ready. And I, too, trembling—and on the verge...

Performing Disidentifications

Margo's Bed

There is a certain lure to the spectacle of one queer standing onstage alone, with or without props, bent on the project of opening up a world of queer language, lyricism, perceptions, dreams, visions, aesthetics, and politics. Solo performance speaks to the reality of being queer at this particular moment. More than two decades into a devastating pandemic, with hate crimes and legislation aimed at queers *and* people of color institutionalized as state protocols, *the act* of performing and theatricalizing queerness *in public* takes on ever multiplying significance.

I feel this lure, this draw, when I encounter Marga Gomez's performances. *Marga Gomez Is Pretty, Witty, and Gay*, a 1992 performance by the Cuban and Puerto Rican-American artist, is a meditation on the contemporary reality of being queer in North America. Gomez's show is staged on a set that is meant to look like her bedroom. Much of her monologue is delivered from her bed. The space of a queer bedroom is thus brought into the public purview of dominant culture. Despite the *Bowers v. Hardwick* U.S. Supreme Court decision, which has efficiently dissolved the right to privacy of all gays and lesbians, in essence opening all our bedrooms to the state, Gomez willfully and defiantly performs her pretty, witty, and gay self in public. Her performance permits the spectator, often a queer who has been locked out of the halls of representation or rendered a static caricature there, to imagine a world where queer lives, politics, and possibilities are representable in their complexity. The importance of such public and semipublic enactments of the hybrid self cannot be undervalued in relation to the formation of counterpublics that contest the hegemonic supremacy of the majoritarian public sphere. Spectacles such as those that Gomez presents offer the minoritarian subject a space to situate itself in history and thus seize social agency.

Marga Gomez. Courtesy of Marga Gomez.

I want to briefly consider a powerful moment in her performances that demonstrates disidentification with mainstream representations of lesbians in the media. From the perch of her bed, Gomez reminisces about her first interaction with lesbians in the public sphere at the age of eleven. Marga hears a voice that summons her down to the living room. Marga, who at this age has already developed what she calls "homosexual hearing," catches the voice of David Susskind explaining that he will be interviewing "lady homosexuals" on this episode of his show *Open End*. Gomez recounts her televisual seduction:

> [I] sat next to my mother on the sofa. I made sure to put that homophobic expression on my face. So my mother wouldn't think I was mesmerized by the lady homosexuals and riveted to every word that fell from their lips. They were very depressed, very gloomy. You don't get that blue unless you've broken up with Martina. There were three of them. All disguised in raincoats, dark glasses, wigs. It was the wigs that made me want to be one.

She then channels the lesbian panelists:

> Mr. Susskind, I want to thank you for having the courage to present Cherene and Millie and me on your program. Cherene and Millie and me, those aren't our real names. She's not Cherene, she's not Millie, and I'm not me. Those are just our, you know, synonyms. We must cloak ourselves in a veil of secrecy or risk losing our employment as truck drivers.

Gomez luxuriates in the seemingly homophobic image of the truck-driving closeted diesel dykes. In this parodic rendering of pre-Stonewall stereotypes of lesbians, she performs her disidentificatory desire for this once toxic representation. The phobic object, through a campy over-the-top performance, is reconfigured as sexy and glamorous, and not as the pathetic and abject spectacle that it appears to be in the dominant eyes of heteronormative culture. Gomez's public performance of memory is a powerful disidentification with the history of lesbian stereotyping in the public sphere. The images of these lesbian stereotypes are rendered in all their abjection, yet Gomez rehabilitates these images, calling attention to the mysterious erotic that interpellated her as a lesbian. Gomez's mother was apparently oblivious to this interpellation, as a later moment in the performance text makes patent. Gomez's voice deepens as she goes into bulldagger mode again, mimicking the lesbian who is known as "me and not me":

> Mr. Susskind. When you are in the life, such as we, it's better to live in Greenwich Village or not live at all! At this time we want to say "hello" to a new friend who is watching this at home with her mom on WNEW-TV in Massapequa, Long Island. Marga Gomez? Marga Gomez, welcome to the club, *cara mia*.

Despite the fact that the lesbian flicks her tongue at Marga on the screen, her mother, trapped in the realm of deep denial, does not get it. Of course, it is probably a

good thing that she did not get it. The fact that Marga was able to hear the lesbian's call while her mother tuned out, that she was capable of recognizing the *cara* being discussed as her own face, contributed, in no small part, to her survival as a lesbian. Disidentification is meant to be descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship. In this instance, Marga's disidentification with these damaged stereotypes recycled them as powerful and seductive sites of self-creation. It was, after all, the wigs that made her want to be one.

I possess my own hazy memories of Susskind's show and others like it. I remember being equally mesmerized by other talk-show deviants who would appear long after I was supposed to be asleep in my South Florida home. Those shows were, as Gomez described them, smoky and seedy spectacles. After all, this was during my own childhood in the 1970s, before the flood of freaks that now appear on *Oprah* and her countless clones. I remember, for instance, seeing an amazingly queeny Truman Capote describe the work of fellow writer Jack Kerouac as not writing but, instead, typing. I am certain that my pre-out consciousness was completely terrified by the swishy spectacle of Capote's performance. But I also remember feeling a deep pleasure in hearing Capote make language, in "getting" the fantastic bitchiness of his quip. Like Gomez, I can locate that experience of suburban spectatorship as having a disidentificatory impact on me. Capote's performance was as exhilarating as it was terrifying. This memory was powerfully reactivated for me when I first saw *Marga Gomez Is Pretty, Witty, and Gay.* Her performance, one that elicited disidentificatory spectatorship, transported me to a different place and time. Her performance did the work of prying open memory for me and elucidating one important episode of self-formation.

In writing this Introduction, I went back to check my sources to determine exactly when and on which show Capote first made this statement. I was surprised to discover, while flipping through a Capote biography, that while the writer did indeed make this cutting remark on the *David Susskind Show,* that remark aired during a 1959 episode dedicated to the Beats in which established writers Capote, Norman Mailer, and Dorothy Parker were evaluating the worth of the then younger generation of writers. Capote's quip was in response to Mailer's assertion that Kerouac was the best writer of his generation. The original broadcast, which was the same year as the Cuban Revolution, aired eight years before my own birth and six years before my parents emigrated to Miami. I mention all of this not to set the record straight but to gesture to the revisionary aspects of my own disidentificatory memory of Capote's performance. Perhaps I read about Capote's comment, or I may have seen a rerun of that broadcast twelve or thirteen years later. But I do know this: my memory and subjectivity reformatted that memory, letting it work within my own internal narratives of subject formation. Gomez's performance helped and even instructed this re-

remembering, enabling me to somehow understand the power and shame of queerness. Now, looking through the dark glass of adulthood, I am beginning to understand why I needed that broadcast and memory of that performance, which I may or may not have actually seen, to be part of my self.

The theoretical conceptualizations and figurations that flesh out this book are indebted to the theoretical/practical work of Gomez's performance. For me there would be no theory, no *Disidentifications*, without the cultural work of people such as Gomez. Such performances constitute the political and conceptual center of this study. I want to note that, for me, the making of theory only transpires *after* the artists' performance of counterpublicity is realized for my own disidentificatory eyes.

It is also important to note at the beginning of this book that disidentification is *not always* an adequate strategy of resistance or survival for all minority subjects. At times, resistance needs to be pronounced and direct; on other occasions, queers of color and other minority subjects need to follow a conformist path if they hope to survive a hostile public sphere. But for some, disidentification is a survival strategy that works within and outside the dominant public sphere simultaneously. The remainder of this Introduction will elaborate disidentification through a survey of different theoretical paradigms.

Dissing Identity

The fiction of identity is one that is accessed with relative ease by most majoritarian subjects. Minoritarian subjects need to interface with different subcultural fields to activate their own senses of self. This is not to say that majoritarian subjects have no recourse to disidentification or that their own formation as subjects is not structured through multiple and sometimes conflicting sites of identification. Within late capitalism, all subject citizens are formed by what Néstor García Canclini has called "hybrid transformations generated by the horizontal coexistence of a number of symbolic systems."[1] Yet, the story of identity formation predicated on "hybrid transformations" that this text is interested in telling concerns subjects whose identities are formed in response to the cultural logics of heteronormativity, white supremacy, and misogyny—cultural logics that I will suggest work to undergird state power. The disidentificatory performances that are documented and discussed here circulate in subcultural circuits and strive to envision and activate new social relations. These new social relations would be the blueprint for minoritarian counterpublic spheres.

This study is informed by the belief that the use-value of any narrative of identity that reduces subjectivity to either a social constructivist model or what has been called an essentialist understanding of the self is especially exhausted. Clearly, neither story is complete, but the way in which these understandings of the self have come to be aligned with each other as counternarratives is now a standard protocol of theory-

making processes that are no longer of much use. Political theorist William E. Connolly argues that

> [t]o treat identity as a site at which entrenched dispositions encounter socially constituted definitions is not to insist that any such definition will fit every human being equally well or badly. Some possibilities of social definition are more suitable for certain bodies and certain individuals, particularly after each had branded into it as "second nature" a stratum of dispositions, proclivities, and preliminary self-understandings.[2]

Connolly understands identity as a site of struggle where fixed dispositions clash against socially constituted definitions. This account of identity offers us a reprieve from the now stale essentialism versus antiessentialism debates that surround stories of self-formation.[3] The political theorist's formulations understand identity as produced at the point of contact between essential understandings of self (fixed dispositions) and socially constructed narratives of self. The chapters that make up this study attempt to chart the ways in which identity is enacted by minority subjects who must work with/resist the conditions of (im)possibility that dominant culture generates. The cultural performers I am considering in this book must negotiate between a fixed identity disposition and the socially encoded roles that are available for such subjects. The essentialized understanding of identity (i.e., men are like this, Latinas are like that, queers are that way) by its very nature must reduce identities to lowest-common-denominator terms. There is an essential blackness, for example, in various strains of black nationalist thinking and it is decidedly heterosexual.[4] Socially encoded scripts of identity are often formatted by phobic energies around race, sexuality, gender, and various other identificatory distinctions. Following Connolly's lead, I understand the labor (and it is often, if not always, *work*) of making identity as a process that takes place at the point of collision of perspectives that some critics and theorists have understood as essentialist and constructivist. This collision is precisely the moment of negotiation when hybrid, racially predicated, and deviantly gendered identities arrive at representation. In doing so, a representational contract is broken; the queer and the colored come into perception and the social order receives a jolt that may reverberate loudly and widely, or in less dramatic, yet locally indispensable, ways.

The version of identity politics that this book participates in imagines a reconstructed narrative of identity formation that locates the enacting of self at precisely the point where the discourses of essentialism and constructivism short-circuit. Such identities use *and* are the fruits of a practice of disidentificatory reception and performance. The term *identities-in-difference* is a highly effective term for categorizing the identities that populate these pages. This term is one of the many figurations that I borrow from Third World feminists and radical women of color, especially Chicana theorists, who have greatly contributed to discourses that expand and radicalize identity. Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga, in their individual writings and in their groundbreaking anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of*

Color, have pushed forward the idea of a radical feminist of color identity that shrewdly reconfigures identity for a progressive political agenda. The thread that first emanated from those writers is intensified and made cogent for an academic discourse by Chela Sandoval in her theory of *differential consciousness*. All of these writers' ideas about identity are taken up by Norma Alarcón in her influential articles. In one particular essay, Alarcón synthesizes the work of Anzaldúa, Moraga, and Sandoval, along with the other theories of difference put forward by Andre Lorde and Jacques Derrida (who employs the term *différance*), in an attempt to describe and decipher identity-in-difference:

> By working through the "identity-in-difference" paradox, many radical women theorists have implicitly worked in the interstice/interface of (existentialist) "identity politics" and "postmodernism" without a clear cut modernist agenda. Neither Audre Lorde nor Chela Sandoval's notion of difference/differential consciousness subsumes a Derridean theorization—though resonances cannot be denied and must be explored—so much as represents a process of "determined negation," a nay-saying of the variety of the "not yet, that's not it." The drive behind that "not yet/that's not it" position in Sandoval's work is termed "differential consciousness," in Lorde's work, "difference," and in Derrida's work, *différance*. Yet each invokes dissimilarly located circuits of signification codified by the site of emergence, which nevertheless does not obviate their agreement on the "not yet," which points towards a future.[5]

Alarcón's linking of these convergent yet dissimilar models is made possible by the fact that these different paradigms attempt to catalog "sites of emergence." The disidentificatory identity performances I catalog in these pages are all emergent identities-in-difference. These identities-in-difference emerge from a failed interpellation within the dominant public sphere. Their emergence is predicated on their ability to disidentify with the mass public and instead, through this disidentification, contribute to the function of a counterpublic sphere. Although I use terms such as "minoritarian subjects" or the less jargony "people of color/queers of color" to describe the different culture workers who appear in these pages, I do want to state that all of these formations of identity are "identities-in-difference."

The strict psychoanalytic account of identification is important to rehearse at this point. Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis define "identification" in the following way: "[A] psychological process whereby the subject assimilates an aspect, property or attribute of the other and is transformed, wholly or partially, after the model the other provides. It is by means of a series of identifications that the personality is constituted and specified."[6] Can a self or a personality be crafted without proper identifications? A disidentifying subject is unable to fully identify or to form what Sigmund Freud called that "just-as-if" relationship. In the examples I am engaging, what stops identification from happening is always the ideological restrictions implicit in an identificatory site.

The processes of crafting and performing the self that I examine here are not best explained by recourse to linear accounts of identification. As critics who work on and with identity politics well know, identification is not about simple mimesis, but, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick reminds us in the introduction to *The Epistemology of the Closet*, "always includes multiple processes of identifying with. It also involves identification as against; but even did it not, the relations implicit in identifying with are, as psychoanalysis suggests, in themselves quite sufficiently fraught with intensities of incorporation, diminishment, inflation, threat, loss, reparation, and disavowal."[7] Identification, then, as Sedgwick explains, is never a simple project. Identifying with an object, person, lifestyle, history, political ideology, religious orientation, and so on, means also simultaneously and partially counteridentifying, as well as only partially identifying, with different aspects of the social and psychic world.

Although the various processes of identification are fraught, those subjects who are hailed by more than one minority identity component have an especially arduous time of it. Subjects who are outside the purview of dominant public spheres encounter obstacles in enacting identifications. Minority identifications are often neglectful or antagonistic to other minoritarian positionalities. This is as true of different theoretical paradigms as it is of everyday ideologies. The next section delineates the biases and turf-war thinking that make an identity construct such as "queer of color" difficult to inhabit.

Race Myopics/Queer Blind Spots: Disidentifying with "Theory"

Disidentifications is meant to offer a lens to elucidate minoritarian politics that is not monocausal or monothematic, one that is calibrated to discern a multiplicity of interlocking identity components and the ways in which they affect the social. Cultural studies of race, class, gender, and sexuality are highly segregated. The optic that I wish to fashion is meant to be, to borrow a phrase from critical legal theorist Kimberle William Crenshaw, *intersectional*.[8] Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality is meant to account for convergences of black and feminist critical issues within a paradigm that factors in both of these components and replaces what she has referred to as monocausal paradigms that can only consider blackness at the expense of feminism or vice versa. These monocausal protocols are established through the reproduction of normative accounts of woman that always imply a white feminist subject and equally normativizing accounts of blackness that assume maleness.

These normativizing protocols keep subjects from accessing identities. We see these ideological barriers to multiple identifications in a foundational cultural studies text such as Frantz Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks*, the great twentieth-century treatise on the colonized mind. In a footnote, Fanon wrote what is for any contemporary antihomophobic reader an inflammatory utterance: "Let me observe at once that I had no opportunity to establish the overt presence of homosexuality in Martinique. This must be viewed as the absence of the Oedipus complex in the Antilles. The

schema of homosexuality is well enough known."[9] In his chapter on colonial identity, Fanon dismisses the possibility of a homosexual component in such an identic formation. This move is not uncommon; it is basically understood as an "it's a white thing" dismissal of queerness. Think, for a moment, of the queer revolutionary from the Antilles, perhaps a young woman who has already been burned in Fanon's text by his writing on the colonized woman. What process can keep an identification with Fanon, his politics, his work possible for this woman? In such a case, a disidentification with Fanon might be one of the only ways in which she is capable of reformatting the powerful theorist for her own project, one that might be as queer and feminist as it is anticolonial. Disidentification offers a Fanon, for that queer and lesbian reader, who would not be sanitized; instead, his homophobia and misogyny would be interrogated while his anticolonial discourse was engaged as a *still* valuable yet mediated identification. This maneuver resists an unproductive turn toward good dog/bad dog criticism and instead leads to an identification that is both mediated and immediate, a disidentification that enables politics.

The phenomenon of "the queer is a white thing" fantasy is strangely reflected in reverse by the normativity of whiteness in mainstream North American gay culture. Marlon Riggs made this argument with critical fierceness in his groundbreaking video *Tongues Untied* (1989), where he discussed being lost in a sea of vanilla once he came out and moved to San Francisco. A segment in the video begins a slow close-up on a high-school yearbook image of a blond white boy. The image is accompanied by a voice-over narration that discusses this boy; this first love, as both a blessing and, finally, a curse. The narrative then shifts to scenes of what seems to be a euphoric Castro district in San Francisco where semiclad white bodies flood the streets of the famous gay neighborhood. Riggs's voice-over performance offers a testimony that functions as shrewd analysis of the force of whiteness in queer culture:

> In California I learned the touch and taste of snow. Cruising white boys, I played out adolescent dreams deferred. Patterns of black upon white upon black upon white mesmerized me. I focused hard, concentrated deep. Maybe from time to time a brother glanced my way. I never noticed. I was immersed in vanilla. I savored the single flavor, one deliberately not my own. I avoided the question "Why?" Pretended not to notice the absence of black images in this new gay life, in bookstores, poster shops, film festivals, my own fantasies. I tried not to notice the few images of blacks that were most popular: joke, fetish, cartoon caricature, or disco diva adored from a distance. Something in Oz, in me, was amiss, but I tried not to notice. I was intent on the search for love, affirmation, my reflection in eyes of blue, gray, green. Searching, I found something I didn't expect, something decades of determined assimilation could not blind me to: in this great gay mecca I was an invisible man; still, I had no shadow, no substance. No history, no place. No reflection. I was alien, unseen, and seen, unwanted. Here, as in Hepzibah, I was a nigga, still. I quit—the Castro was no longer my home, my mecca (never was, in fact), and I went in search of something better.

Marlon Riggs in *Tongues Untied*. Courtesy of Frameline.

This anecdotal reading of queer culture's whiteness is a critique that touches various strata of queer culture. *Tongues Untied* has been grossly misread as being a "vilification" of white people and the S/M community in general. Consider John Champagne's apologist defense of the mainstream gay community's racism as a standard maneuver by embattled white gay men when their account of victimization is undercut by reference to racial privilege.[10]

A survey of the vast majority of gay and lesbian studies and queer theory in print shows the same absence of colored images as does the powerful performance in *Tongues Untied*. Most of the cornerstones of queer theory that are taught, cited, and canonized in gay and lesbian studies classrooms, publications, and conferences are decidedly directed toward analyzing white lesbians and gay men. The lack of inclusion is most certainly not the main problem with the treatment of race. A soft multicultural *inclusion* of race and ethnicity does not, on its own, lead to a progressive identity discourse. Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano has made the valuable point that "[t]he lack of attention to race in the work of leading lesbian theorists reaffirms the belief that it is possible to talk about sexuality without talking about race, which in turn reaffirms the belief that it is necessary to talk about race and sexuality only when discussing people of color and their text."[11] When race is discussed by most white queer theorists, it is usually a contained reading of an artist of color that does not factor questions of race into the entirety of their project. Once again taking up my analogy

with Riggs's monologue, I want to argue that if the Castro was Oz for some gay men who joined a great queer western migration, the field of scholarship that is emerging today as gay and lesbian studies is also another realm that is over the rainbow. The field of queer theory, like the Castro that Riggs portrays, is—and I write from experience—a place where a scholar of color can easily be lost in an immersion of vanilla while her or his critical faculties can be frozen by an avalanche of snow. The powerful queer feminist theorist/activists that are most often cited—Lorde, Barbara Smith, Anzaldúa, and Moraga, among others—are barely ever critically engaged and instead are, like the disco divas that Riggs mentions, merely adored from a distance. The fact that the vast majority of publications and conferences that fill out the discipline of queer theory continue to treat race as an addendum, if at all, indicates that there is something amiss in this Oz, too.

The Pêcheuxian Paradigm

The theory of disidentification that I am offering is meant to contribute to an understanding of the ways in which queers of color identify with ethnos or queerness despite the phobic charges in both fields. The French linguist Michel Pêcheux extrapolated a theory of disidentification from Marxist theorist Louis Althusser's influential theory of subject formation and interpellation. Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" was among the first articulations of the role of ideology in theorizing subject formation. For Althusser, ideology is an inescapable realm in which subjects are called into being or "hailed," a process he calls interpellation. Ideology is the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence. The location of ideology is always within an *apparatus* and its practice or practices, such as the state apparatus.[12]

Pecheux built on this theory by describing the three modes in which a subject is constructed by ideological practices. In this schema, the first mode is understood as "identification," where a "Good Subject" chooses the path of identification with discursive and ideological forms. "Bad Subjects" resist and attempt to reject the images and identificatory sites offered by dominant ideology and proceed to rebel, to "counteridentify" and turn against this symbolic system. The danger that Pêcheux sees in such an operation would be the counterdetermination that such a system installs, a structure that validates the dominant ideology by reinforcing its dominance through the controlled symmetry of "counterdetermination." Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology.[13] Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism), this "working on and against" is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact

permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles of resistance.

Judith Butler gestures toward the uses of disidentification when discussing the failure of identification. She parries with Slavoj Žižek, who understands disidentification as a breaking down of political possibility, "a fictionalization to the point of political immobilization."[14] She counters Žižek by asking the following question of his formulations: "What are the possibilities of politicizing disidentification, this experience of misrecognition, this uneasy sense of standing under a sign to which one does and does not belong?" Butler answers: "it may be that the affirmation of that slippage, that the failure of identification, is itself the point of departure for a more democratizing affirmation of internal difference."[15] Both Butler's and Pêcheux's accounts of disidentification put forward an understanding of identification as never being as seamless or unilateral as the Freudian account would suggest.[16] Both theorists construct the subject as *inside* ideology. Their models permit one to examine theories of a subject who is neither the "Good Subject," who has an easy or magical identification with dominant culture, or the "Bad Subject," who imagines herself outside of ideology. Instead, they pave the way to an understanding of a "disidentificatory subject" who tactically and simultaneously works on, with, and against a cultural form.

As a practice, disidentification does not dispel those ideological contradictory elements; rather, like a melancholic subject holding on to a lost object, a disidentifying subject works to hold on to this object and invest it with new life. Sedgwick, in her work on the affect, shame, and its role in queer performativity, has explained:

> The forms taken by shame are not distinct "toxic" parts of a group or individual identity that can be excised; they are instead integral to and residual in the process in which identity is formed. They are available for the work of metamorphosis, reframing, refiguration, *trans*figuration, affective and symbolic loading and deformation; but unavailable for effecting the work of purgation and deontological closure.[17]

To disidentify is to read oneself and one's own life narrative in a moment, object, or subject that is not culturally coded to "connect" with the disidentifying subject. It is not to pick and choose what one takes out of an identification. It is not to willfully evacuate the politically dubious or shameful components within an identificatory locus. Rather, it is the reworking of those energies that do not elide the "harmful" or contradictory components of any identity. It is an acceptance of the necessary interjection that has occurred in such situations.

Disidentifications is, to some degree, an argument with psychoanalytic orthodoxies within cultural studies. It does not represent a wholesale rejection of psychoanalysis. Indeed, one's own relationship with psychoanalysis can be disidentificatory. Rather than reject psychoanalytic accounts of identification, the next section engages

work on identification and desire being done in the psychoanalytic wing of queer theory.

Identification beyond and with Psychoanalysis

The homophobic and racist vicissitudes of psychoanalysis's version of identification have been explored by various critics. Diana Fuss, for instance, has shown the ways in which Freud constructed a false dichotomy between desire and identification. Desire is the way in which "proper" object choices are made and identification is a term used to explicate the pathological investment that people make with bad object choices.[18] Fuss proposes a new theory of identification based on a vampiric understanding of subjectivity formation:

> Vampirism works more like an inverted form of identification—identification pulled inside out—where the subject, in the act of interiorizing the other, simultaneously reproduces externally in the other. Vampirism is both other-incorporating and self-reproducing; it delimits a more ambiguous space where desire and identification appear less opposed than coterminous, where the desire to be the other (identification) draws its very sustenance from the desire to have the other.[19]

The incorporation of the other in this account is in stark opposition to Freud's version, in which identification is distributed along stages, all teleologically calibrated toward (compulsory) heterosexuality. Fuss's revisionary approach to psychoanalysis insists on desire's coterminous relationship with identification.

Fuss's groundbreaking work on identification has been met with great skepticism by Teresa de Lauretis, who discounts this theory on the grounds that it will further blur the lines between specifically lesbian sexuality and subjectivity and feminist takes on female sexuality and subjectivity.[20] De Lauretis's approach, also revisionary, takes the tack of substituting desire for identification in the narrative of psychoanalysis. For de Lauretis, lesbian desire is not predicated by or implicated within any structure of identification (much less cross-identifications). Her approach to desire is to expand it and let it cover and replace what she sees as a far too ambiguous notion of identification. On this point, I side with Fuss and other queer theorists who share the same revisionary impulse as de Lauretis but who are not as concerned with ordering the lines of proper, reciprocal desire against what she views as oblique cross-identifications. A substantial section of chapter 1, "Famous and Dandy like B. 'n' Andy," is concerned with the power of cross-identifications between two artists, Jean-Michel Basquiat and Andy Warhol, who do not match along the lines of race, sexuality, class, or generation. This strategy of reading the two artists together and in reaction to each other is informed by a politics of coalition antithetical to the politics of separatism that I see as a foundational premise of de Lauretis's project. The political agenda suggested here does not uniformly reject separatism either; more nearly, it is wary of separatism because it is not always a feasible option for subjects who are not

empowered by white privilege or class status. People of color, queers of color, white queers, and other minorities occasionally and understandably long for separatist enclaves outside of the dominant culture. Such enclaves, however, are often politically disadvantageous when one stops to consider the ways in which the social script depends on minority factionalism and isolationism to maintain the status of the dominant order.

Disidentification works like the remaking of identification that Fuss advocates. Counteridentification, the attempt at dissolving or abolishing entrenched cultural formations, corresponds to de Lauretis's substitution of desire for identification. In *Identification Papers*, her book on Freud, psychoanalysis, and identification, Fuss succinctly historicizes the long-standing confusion between the terms *desire* and *identification*. She puts pressure on the distinction between wanting the other and wanting to be the other. Fuss marks the distinction between these terms as "precarious" at best.[21]

Valentín, a documentary subject in Augie Robles's groundbreaking short documentary *Cholo Joto* (1993), comes to recognize an early communal identification with Che Guevara as being, on both a subjective and a communal level, about desiring El Che. Robles's video interviews three young Chicano men in their early twenties. The documentary subjects expound on the quotidian dimensions of queer Chicano life in *el barrio* and the white gay ghetto. *Cholo Joto*'s final sequence features a performance by Valentín. Valentín, hair slicked back and lips reddened with a dark lipstick, turns in a captivating performance for the video camera. He sits in a chair throughout his monologue, yet the wit and charm of his performed persona defy the conventions of "talking head"; which is to say that he is not so much the talking head as he is a performer in collaboration with the video artist. After reflecting on the "tiredness" of Chicano nationalism's sexism and homophobia, he tells an early childhood story that disidentifies with the script of Chicano nationalism.

> And I grew up in Logan Heights. We had murals, Chicano park was tremendous. Now that I'm not there I know what it is. But at the time you would walk through and see these huge murals. There was a mural of Che Guevara, that is still there, with the quote "A true rebel is guided by deep feelings of love." I remember reading that as a little kid and thinking, what the fuck does that mean? Then I realized, yeah, that's right. That I'm not going to fight out of anger but because I love myself and I love my community.

For Valentín, this remembering serves as a striking reinvention of Che Guevara. By working through his queer child's curiosity from the positionality of a gay Chicano man, Valentín unearths a powerful yet elusive queer kernel in revolutionary/liberationist identity. Guevara, as both cultural icon and revolutionary thinker, had a significant influence on the early Chicano movement, as he did on all Third World movements. In this video performance, Guevara stands in for all that was promising and utopian about the Chicano movement. He also represents the entrenched misogyny and homophobia of masculinist liberation ideologies. Valentín's

locution, his performance of memory, reads that queer valence that has always subliminally charged such early nationalist thought. His performance does not simply undermine nationalism but instead hopes to rearticulate such discourses within terms that are politically progressive.

Indeed, Valentín knows something that Fuss and other queer and feminist commentators on Freud know: that the story we are often fed, our prescribed "public" scripts of identification and our private and motivating desires, are not exactly indistinguishable but blurred. The point, then, is not to drop either desire or identification from the equation. Rather, it is to understand the sometimes interlocking and coterminous, separate and mutually exclusive nature of both psychic structures.

Ideology for de Lauretis seems to be an afterword to desire. In this book, I will be teasing out the ways in which desire and identification can be tempered and rewritten (not dismissed or banished) through ideology. Queers are not always "properly" interpellated by the dominant public sphere's heterosexist mandates because desire for a bad object offsets that process of reactionary ideological indoctrination. In a somewhat analogous fashion, queer desires, perhaps desires that negate self, desire for a white beauty ideal, are reconstituted by an ideological component that tells us that such modalities of desire and desiring are too self-compromising. We thus disidentify with the white ideal. We desire it but desire it with a difference. The negotiations between desire, identification, and ideology are a part of the important work of disidentification.

Disidentification's Work

My thinking about the power and poignancy of crisscrossed identificatory and desiring circuits is as indebted to the work of writers such as James Baldwin as it is to psychoanalytic theorists such as Fuss or de Lauretis. For instance, Baldwin's *The Devil Finds Work*, a book-length essay, discusses young Baldwin's suffering under a father's physical and verbal abuse and how he found a refuge in a powerful identification with a white starlet at a Saturday afternoon matinee screening. Baldwin writes:

> So here, now, was Bette Davis, on the Saturday afternoon, in close-up, over a champagne glass, pop-eyes popping. I was astounded. I had caught my father not in a lie, but in an infirmity. For here, before me, after all, was a movie star: white: and if she was white and a movie star, she was rich: and she was ugly. . . . Out of bewilderment, out of loyalty to my mother, probably, and also because I sensed something menacing and unhealthy (for me, certainly) in the face on the screen, I gave Davis's skin the dead white greenish cast of something crawling from under a rock, but I was held, just the same, by the tense intelligence of the forehead, the disaster of the lips: and when she moved, she moved just like a nigger.[22]

The cross-identification that Baldwin vividly describes here is echoed in other wistful narratives of childhood described later in this Introduction. What is suggestive about

Valentín in Augie Robles's *Cholo Joto*. Courtesy of Augie Robles.

Baldwin's account is the way in which Davis signifies something both liberatory and horrible. A black and queer belle-lettres queen such as Baldwin finds something useful in the image; a certain survival strategy is made possible via this visual disidentification with Bette Davis and her freakish beauty. Although *The Devil Finds Work* goes on to discuss Baldwin's powerful identifications with Hollywood's small group of black actors, this mediated and vexed identification with Davis is one of the most compelling examples of the process and effects that I discuss here as disidentification.

The example of Baldwin's relationship with Davis is a disidentification insofar as the African-American writer transforms the raw material of identification (the linear match that leads toward interpellation) while simultaneously positioning himself within and outside the image of the movie star. For Baldwin, disidentification is more than simply an interpretative turn or a psychic maneuver; it is, most crucially, a survival strategy.

If the terms *identification* and *counteridentification* are replaced with their rough corollaries *assimilation* and *anti-assimilation*, a position such as disidentification is open to the charge that it is merely an apolitical sidestepping, trying to avoid the trap of assimilating or adhering to different separatist or nationalist ideologies. The debate can be historicized as the early twentieth-century debate in African-American letters: the famous clashes between Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois. Washington, a writer, national race leader, and the founder of the Tuskegee Institute, proposed a program for black selfhood that by today's post–civil-rights standards and polemics would be seen as assimilationist. Washington proposed that blacks must prove their equality by pulling themselves up by their bootstraps and achieving success in the arenas of economic development and education before they were allotted civil rights. Du Bois was the founder of the Niagara Movement, a civil-rights protest organization that arose in response to Washington's conciliatory posture accommodating and justifying white racism. Du Bois's separatist politics advocated voluntary black segregation during the Depression to consolidate black-community power bases, and eventually led to his loss of influence in the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), an organization he helped found in 1910. Washington's and Du Bois's careers came to embody assimilation and anti-assimilation positions. In Chicano letters, Richard Rodriguez's autobiography, *Hunger of Memory* (1982), came to represent an assimilationist position similar to the one proposed in Washington's *Up from Slavery* (1901). Some of the first interventions in contemporary Chicano cultural studies and literary theory were critiques of Rodriguez's antibilingualism tract.[23]

Disidentification is not an apolitical middle ground between the positions espoused by intellectuals such as Washington and Du Bois. Its political agenda is clearly indebted to antiassimilationist thought. It departs from the antiassimilationist rhetoric for reasons that are both strategic and methodological. Michel Foucault ex-

plains the paradox of power's working in relation to discourse in *The History of Sexuality*, volume 1:

> [I]t is in discourse that power and knowledge are joined together. And for this very reason, we must conceive discourse as a series of discontinuous segments whose tactical function is neither uniform nor stable. To be more precise, we must not imagine a world of discourse divided between accepted discourse and excluded discourse, or between the dominant discourse and the dominated one; but as a multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies. . . . Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it, any more than silences are. We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling-block, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy. Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it.[24]

The Foucauldian theory of the polyvalence of discourse informs the theory of disidentification being put forth here inasmuch as disidentification is a strategy that resists a conception of power as being a fixed discourse. Disidentification negotiates strategies of resistance within the flux of discourse and power. It understands that counterdiscourses, like discourse, can always fluctuate for different ideological ends and a politicized agent must have the ability to adapt and shift as quickly as power does within discourse.

Listening to Disidentification

The Devil Finds Work received considerable praise and helped revitalize what was, at the time, Baldwin's somewhat faltering career. It was released right before the author commenced what he called his "second life" as an educator. David Leeming's biography cites an interview with Baldwin in which he discusses what he imagines to be the link between *The Devil Finds Work* and the text that followed it, Baldwin's final and longest novel, *Just Above My Head*:

> He told Mary Bhune that the book "demanded a certain confession of myself," a confession of his loneliness as a celebrity left behind by assassinated comrades, a confession of compassion and hope even as he was being criticized for being passé, a confession of his fascination with the American fantasy, epitomized by Hollywood, even as he condemned it. It was "a rehearsal for something I'll deal with later." That something, *Just Above My Head*, would be the major work of his later years.[25]

For Baldwin, nonfiction, or, more nearly, autobiography, is a rehearsal for fiction. Stepping back from the autobiographer's statement, we might also come to understand the writer's disidentificatory practice to extend to the ideological and structural grids that we come to understand as genre. Baldwin's fiction did not indulge the project of camouflaging an authorial surrogate. Instead, he produced a fiction that

abounded with stand-ins. *Just Above My Head* includes the central character of Arthur, who is representative of a familiar thematic in the author's work, the trope of the bluesboy who is a bluesman in process. Arthur is a black gay man whose intense relationship with his brother David clearly mirrors the author's close tie with his own brother, David Baldwin. But there is also a Jimmy in the novel, who is also a black gay man, and represents a younger version of the author. Jimmy has a sister, Julia, who, like Baldwin, was a renowned child preacher, famous throughout the black church community of Harlem.

With this posited, we begin to glimpse an understanding of fiction as "a technology of the self." This self is a disidentificatory self whose relation to the social is not overdetermined by universalizing rhetorics of selfhood. The "real self" who comes into being through fiction is not the self who produces fiction, but is instead produced by fiction. Binaries finally begin to falter and fiction becomes the real; which is to say that the truth effect of ideological grids is broken down through Baldwin's disidentification with the notion of fiction—and it does not stop here: fiction then becomes a contested field of self-production.

Let me attempt to illustrate this point by substituting the word *fiction* used thus far with the word *song*. Furthermore, I want to draw a connecting line between fiction/song and ideology in a similar fashion. With this notion of the song in place, I want to consider an elegant passage near the end of *Just Above My Head*. Up to this point, the novel has been narrated by Hall, Arthur's brother. The narrative breaks down after Arthur passes away on the floor of a London pub. At this pressured moment, the narrative voice and authority are passed on to Jimmy, Arthur's last lover. The baton is passed from Hall to Jimmy through a moment of performative writing that simultaneously marks Arthur's passing and Hall's reluctance to give up command over the fiction of Arthur, his brother:

> Ah. What is he doing on the floor in a basement of the historical city? That city built on the principle that he would have the grace to live, and, certainly, to die somewhere outside the gates?
>
> Perhaps I must do now what I most feared to do: surrender my brother to Jimmy, give Jimmy's piano the ultimate solo: which must also now, be taken as the bridge.[26]

Jimmy, who is certainly another manifestation of the ghost of Jimmy Baldwin, is given his solo. It is a queer lover's solitary and mournful song. The queer solo is a lament that does not collapse into nostalgia but instead takes flight:

> The song does not belong to the singer. The singer is found by the song. Ain't no singer, anywhere, ever *made up* a song—that is not possible. He *hears* something. I really believe, at the bottom of my balls, baby, that something hears him, something says, come here! and jumps on him just how you jump on a piano or a sax or a violin or a drum and you make it sing the song you hear: and you love it, and you take care of it, better than you take care of yourself, can you

> dig it? but you don't have no mercy on it. You can't. You can't have mercy! That sound you hear, that pound you try to pitch with the utmost precision—and did you hear me? Wow!—is the sound of millions and millions and, who knows, now, listening, where life is, where is death.[27]

The singer is the subject who stands inside—and, in the most important ways, outside—of fiction, ideology, "the real." He is not its author and never has been. He hears a call and we remember not only the "hey, you" of Althusser's ideology cop but also the little white girl in Fanon who cries out "Look, a Negro." But something also *hears* this singer who is not the author of the song. He is heard by something that is a shared impulse, a drive toward justice, retribution, emancipation—which permits him to disidentify with the song. He works on the song with fierce intensity and *the utmost precision*. This utmost precision is needed to rework that song, that story, that fiction, that mastering plot. It is needed to make a self—to disidentify despite the ear-splitting hostility that the song first proposed for the singer. Another vibe is cultivated. Thus, we hear and sing disidentification. The relations between the two are so interlaced and crisscrossed—reception and performance, interpretation and praxis—that it seems foolish to straighten out this knot.

Baldwin believed that *Just Above My Head* was his greatest novel, but he also experienced it as a failure. In a letter to his brother David, he wrote: "I wanted it to be a great song, instead it's just a lyric."[28] It was ultimately a lyric that mattered. It was a necessary fiction, one like the poetry that was not a luxury for Audre Lorde. It was a lyric that dreamed, strove, and agitated to disorder the real and wedge open a space in the social where the necessary fictions of blackness and queerness could ascend to something that was and was not fiction, but was, nonetheless, utterly heard.

Marginal Eyes: The Radical Feminist of Color Underpinnings of Disidentification

When histories of the hermeneutic called queer theory are recounted, one text is left out of most origin narratives. Many would agree that Foucault's discourse analysis or Roland Barthes's stylized semiology are important foundational texts for the queer theory project. Monique Wittig's materialist readings of the straight mind are invoked in some genealogies. Many writers have traced a line to queer theory from both Anglo-American feminism and the French feminism that dominated feminist discourse in the 1980s. But other theory projects have enabled many scholars to imagine queer critique today. This book is influenced, to various degrees, by all of those theoretical forerunners, yet it is important to mark a text and a tradition of feminist scholarship that most influence and organize my thinking. I am thinking of work that, like Foucault's and Barthes's projects, help us unpack the ruses and signs of normativity; I am calling on a body of theory that, like Wittig's critiques, indexes class as well as the materialist dimensions of the straight mind; I am invoking a mode of scholarship that also emerged from the larger body of feminist discourse. Cherríe Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa's 1981 anthology *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings*

by Radical Women of Color is too often ignored or underplayed in genealogies of queer theory.[29] *Bridge* represented a crucial break in gender studies discourse in which any naive positioning of gender as the primary and singular node of difference within feminist theory and politics was irrevocably challenged. Today, feminists who insist on a unified feminist subject not organized around race, class, and sexuality do so at their own risk, or, more succinctly, do so in opposition to work such as *Bridge*. The contributors to that volume set out to disrupt the standardized protocols of gender studies and activism; and, although the advancements of white feminists in integrating multiple sites of difference in their analytic approaches have not, in many cases, been significant, the anthology has proved invaluable to many feminists, lesbians, and gay male writers of color.

This Bridge Called My Back serves as a valuable example of disidentification as a political strategy. Alarcón, a contributor to that volume, suggested in a later article that *This Bridge Called My Back* served as a document that broke with previous feminist strategies of identification and counteridentification.[30] She carefully describes the ways in which the first wave of feminist discourse called for a collective *identification* with the female subject. That female subject was never identified with any racial or class identity and was essentially a desexualized being; thus, by default, she was the middle-class straight white woman. Alarcón described the next stage of evolution for pre-*Bridge* feminist discourse as a moment of *counteridentification*. She turns to Simone de Beauvoir and *The Second Sex* and proposes that de Beauvoir "may even be responsible for the creation of Anglo-American feminist theory's 'episteme': a highly self-conscious ruling-class white Western female subject locked in a struggle to the death with 'Man.'"[31] This endless struggle with "man" is indicative of a stage in feminist discourse in which counteridentification with men is the only way in which one became a woman. Alarcón identifies the weakness of this strategy as its inability to speak to lesbians and women of color who must negotiate multiple antagonisms within the social, including antagonisms posed by white women. Queers of color experience the same problems in that as white normativity is as much a site of antagonism as is heteronormativity. If queer discourse is to supersede the limits of feminism, it must be able to calculate multiple antagonisms that index issues of class, gender, and race, as well as sexuality.

Alarcón argues that *Bridge* has enabled the discourse of gender studies to move beyond politics of identification and counteridentification, helping us arrive at a politics of disidentification. I agree with her on this point, and in this book, begun almost seventeen years after the publication of *This Bridge Called My Back*, I will consider the critical, cultural, and political legacy of *This Bridge Called My Back*.

Although this book tours a cultural legacy that I understand as post-*Bridge*, I want briefly to consider a text that I think of as a beautiful addendum to that project. The video work of Osa Hidalgo has always dared to visualize the politics of disidentification that *This Bridge Called My Back* so bravely outlined. Hidalgo's most recent

tape infuses humor into the fierce political legacy of that classic anthology. Her sensual lens injects the work with a defiant political imagination that moves us from activist manifesto to the expansive space of political humor and satire.

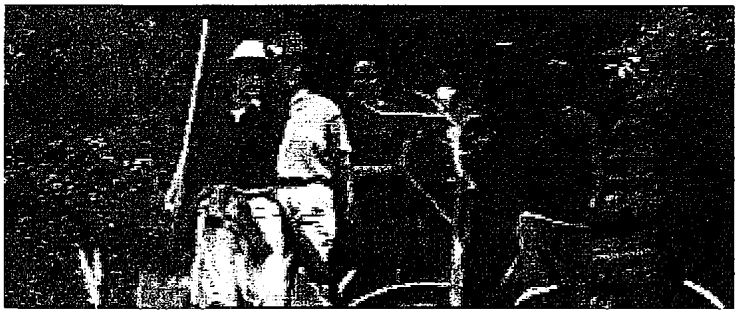
Osa Hidalgo's 1996 video *Marginal Eyes* or *Mujer'a Fantasy I* presents a farcical and utopian fantasy of a remade California in which Chicanas, Native women, and other women of color, like the women who populated the *Bridge*, have ascended to positions of power. The video tells the story of Dr. Hidalgo dela Riva Morena Gonzalez, a fictional Chicana archaeologist who discovers the matrilinial origins to Western culture in the form of small red clay figurines that she unearths during a dig. The discovery serves to boost what is an already remade state of California. In Hidalgo's fantasy play, the Chicana scientist is celebrated by the entire state. The celebration includes a press conference attended by the mayor of Los Angeles, another Latina, and the governor of California, a dark-skinned mestiza named Royal Eagle Bear. (The governor is played by the director.) This emphasis on work has alienated the protagonist's lover—a woman who has felt neglected during her partner's rise to fame and prominence.

The video's first scene is found footage of an early educational film that chronicles the discovery of the Olmec civilization. The film stock is scratchy 8 mm and its appearance reminds the U.S.-based ethnic subject of the national primary education project that force-fed them Eurocentric history and culture. The video shifts from grainy images of the dig to a new archaeological quest led by Dr. Hidalgo dela Riva Morena Gonzalez. Her entire team is composed of Latinas and Latinos. The video cuts back to the educational footage, and one witnesses the discovery of tiny figurines that connote the patriarchal origins of Western culture. This is followed by a sequence in which the Chicana team discovers its own statuettes. These artifacts have breasts and, within the video's camp logic, cast a picture of a utopian matriarchal past.

The video offers a public and a private description of the archaeologist's life. The private world represented is an intimate sphere of Latina love and passion that calls attention to the quotidian pressures that besiege Chicana dykes who must negotiate the task of being public intellectuals and private subjects. The video's final scene concludes with the two lovers finally finding time to make love and reconnect, as they have sex in a candlelit room full of red roses while the educational film plays on the television set. The film represents the "real world" of masculinist archaeology that is being disidentified with. In this instance, disidentification is a remaking and rewriting of a dominant script. The characters can ignore this realm and symbolically recreate it through their sex act. This final scene offers a powerful utopian proposition: it is through the transformative powers of queer sex and sexuality that a queerworld is made.

The public component helps one imagine a remade public sphere in which the minoritarian subject's eyes are no longer marginal. In the fantasy ethnoscape, the world has been rewritten through disidentificatory desire. The new world of Hidalgo's

Marginal Eyes. Courtesy of Osa Hidalgo.



video is a utopian possibility; it is here where we begin to glimpse the importance of utopianism for the project of disidentification. Disidentificatory performances and readings require an active kernel of utopian possibility. Although utopianism has become the bad object of much contemporary political thinking, we nonetheless need to hold on to and even *risk* utopianism if we are to engage in the labor of making a queerworld.

Hidalgo's project also remakes utopianism into something different. Her utopianism is infused with humor and progressive camp sensibilities. In chapter 5, I discuss the way in which Ela Troyano and Carmelita Tropicana disidentify with camp, a predominantly gay white male project, and recast it as a view to a fabulous and funky Latina life-world. Hidalgo offers a camp utopianism that rejects the utopianism of somber prophecies of liberation and instead reimagines a radical future replete with humor and desire.

Her utopianism looks into the past to critique the present and helps imagine the future. The past that is represented in the video is the imagined past of Mesoamerican antiquity; the present that the film critiques is the current climate of immigrant scapegoating that targets Latinas and other women and men of color; and the future that the film imagines is a queer world that is as brown as it is bent. Theodor Adorno once commented that "utopia is essentially in the determined negation of that which merely is, and by concretizing itself as something false, it always points, at the same time, to what should be."[32] Hidalgo's project points to the "should be" with elegance, humor, and political ferocity.

Hidalgo's project and my own owe a tremendous debt to the writing of radical women of color that emerged in the 1970s. It is in those essays, rants, poems, and manifestos that we first glimpsed what a queer world might look like. The bridge to a queer world is, among other things, paved by *This Bridge Called My Back.*

Performing Disidentifications

Throughout this book, I refer to disidentification as a hermeneutic, a process of production, and a mode of performance. Disidentification can be understood as a way of shuffling back and forth between reception and production. For the critic, disidentification is the hermeneutical performance of decoding mass, high, or any other cultural field from the perspective of a minority subject who is disempowered in such a representational hierarchy. Stuart Hall has proposed a theory of encoding/decoding that has been highly influential in media and cultural studies. He postulates an understanding of broadcast television as yielding an encoded meaning that is both denotative and connotative of different ideological messages that reinforce the status quo of the majority culture. These codes are likely to seem natural to a member of a language community who has grown up in such a system. For Hall, there are three different options on the level of decoding. The first position for decoding is the dominant-hegemonic position where a "viewer takes the connoted from, say, a television newscast, full and

straight and decodes its message in terms of the reference code in which it has been encoded, we might say the viewer is operating within the dominant code."[33] The second vantage point from which to decode is the negotiated position that, to some degree, acknowledges the constructed nature of discourse but does not, within its interpretative project, challenge its authorization. As Hall puts it: "Negotiated codes operate through what we might call particular or situated logics: and these logics are sustained by their differential and unequal logics of power."[34] The third and final position that Hall touches on is the oppositional one. This mode of reading resists, demystifies, and deconstructs the universalizing ruse of the dominant culture. Meanings are unpacked in an effort to dismantle dominant codes. As an approach to the dominant culture, disidentification is analogous to the paradigm of oppositional reception that Hall constructs within his essay.

The mode of cultural production that I am calling disidentification is indebted to earlier theories of revisionary identification. These foundational theories emerged from fields of film theory, gay and lesbian studies, and critical race theory. Although these different fields do not often branch into one another's boundaries, they have often attempted to negotiate similar methodological and theoretical concerns. The term "revisionary identification" is a loose construct that is intended to hold various accounts of tactical identification together. "Revisionary" is meant to signal different strategies of viewing, reading, and locating "self" within representational systems and disparate life-worlds that aim to displace or occlude a minority subject. The string that binds such different categories is a precariously thin one and it is important to specify the influence of different critical traditions on my own formulations by surveying some of the contributions they make to this project.

Film theory has used a psychological apparatus to figure identification in the cinematic text. Although the story of disidentification is decidedly *not* aligned with the orthodoxies of psychoanalysis in the same way that different branches of litetary and film theory are, it does share with the psychoanalytic project an impulse to discern the ways in which subjectivity is formed in modern culture. Christian Metz, a French pioneer in psychoanalytic approaches to cinema, elaborated an influential theory of cinematic identification in the early seventies.[35] Drawing heavily from the Lacanian theory of the mirror stage, Metz outlines two different registers of filmic identification. Primary cinematic identification is identification with the "look" of the technical apparatus (camera, projector). The spectator, like the child positioned in front of the mirror constructing an imaginary ideal of a unified body, imagines an illusionary wholeness and mastery. Secondary identification, for Metz, is with a person who might be a star, actor, or character. Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey posed a substantial challenge to Metz's formulation by inquiring as to the gender coordinates of the "bearer-of-the-look" and the object of the look.[36] Mulvey described standardized patterns of fascination in classical narrative cinema structure that placed the female spectator in the masochistic position of identifying with the female subject, who is

either a scopophilic fetish in the narrative or a brutalized character on the screen. The other remaining option for Mulvey's female spectator is a cross-identification with the male protagonist who is, by the gender coding of the cinematic apparatus, placed in the dominant position of control. Implicit in Mulvey's argument is an understanding of any identification across gender as pathologically masochistic. Mulvey's and Metz's theories, when considered together, offer a convincing model of spectatorship and its working. Their models fall short insofar as they unduly valorize some very limited circuits of identification.[37]

Mulvey later refined her argument by once again returning to Freud and further specifying the nature of female desire along the lines pioneered by the founder of psychoanalysis. "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,' Inspired by *Duel in the Sun*" argues that the female spectator undergoes a certain regression that returns her to the transsexed site of her childhood identification that every young girl passes through.[38] The identification here is clearly encoded in the terminology of transvestism, a brand of degayed[39] transvestism that is positioned to disallow the possibility of reading a homosexual spectator. Psychoanalytic theorizations of cross-gender identification such as Mulvey's never challenge the normativity of dominant gender constructions.

Miriam Hansen, in her impressive study of early cinema and emergent practices of spectatorship, calls for a reworking of the Mulveyan paradigm to figure various oscillations in spectatorship between masculine and feminine.[40] In her chapter on Rudolph Valentino and "scenarios" of identification, Hansen writes:

> If we can isolate an instance of "primary" identification at all—which is dubious on theoretical grounds—Valentino's films challenge the assumption of perceptual mastery implied in such a concept both on account of the star system and because of the particular organization of the gaze. The star not only promotes a dissociation of scopic and narrative registers, but also complicates the imaginary self-identity of the viewing subject with an exhibitionist and collective dimension. . . . The Valentino films undermine the notion of unified position of scopic mastery by foregrounding the reciprocity and ambivalence of the gaze as an erotic medium, a gaze that fascinates precisely because it transcends the socially imposed subject-object hierarchy of sexual difference.[41]

Hansen moves away from the monolithic and stable spectator that was first posited by Metz and then gendered as masculine by Mulvey. The gaze itself is the site of identification in Hansen's study, and that gaze is never fixed but instead always vacillating and potentially transformative in its possibilities. Hansen also moves beyond Mulvey's theorizations of the female spectator as having the dismal options of either finding her lost early masculine identification or taking on a masochistic identification. Hansen's work, along with that of other film theorists in the 1980s, took the notion of spectatorial identification in more complicated and nuanced directions where the problem of identification was now figured in terms of instability, mobility,

oscillation, and multiplicity.[42] Disidentification is, at its core, an ambivalent modality that cannot be conceptualized as a restrictive or "masterfully" fixed mode of identification. Disidentification, like Hansen's description of identification, is a survival strategy that is employed by a minority spectator (the female spectator of the early twentieth century in Hansen's study) to resist and confound socially prescriptive patterns of identification.

Scholars of color and gay and lesbian scholars also brought important and transformative urgencies to questions of spectatorship and identification. Manthia Diawara, for example, offered the historically relevant corrective to Mulvey's foundational theory:

> Laura Mulvey argues that the classical Hollywood film is made for the pleasure of the male spectator. However, as a black male spectator I wish to argue, in addition, that the dominant cinema situates Black characters primarily for the pleasure of White spectators (male or female). To illustrate this point, one may note how Black male characters in contemporary Hollywood films are made less threatening to Whites either by White domestication of Black customs and culture—a process of deracination and isolation—or by the stories in which Blacks are depicted playing by the rules of White society and losing.[43]

Contributions such as Diawara's made it clear that difference has many shades and any narrative of identification that does not account for the variables of race, class, and sexuality, as well as gender, is incomplete.[44] Queer film theory has also made crucial challenges to the understanding of identification. Chris Straayer outlines the reciprocity of identification in queer spectatorship, the active play of elaborating new identifications that were not visible on the surface. Straayer's "hypothetical lesbian heroine" is just such a disidentificatory construct: "The lesbian heroine in film must be conceived of as a viewer construction, short-circuiting the very networks that forbid her energy. She is constructed from the contradictions within the text and between text and viewer, who insists on assertive, even transgressive, identification and seeing."[45] The process Straayer narrates, of reading between the dominant text's lines, identifying as the classical text while actively resisting its encoded directives to watch and identify as a heterosexual, can be understood as the survival tactic that queers use when navigating dominant media. Such a process can be understood as disidentificatory in that it is not about assimilation into a heterosexual matrix but instead a partial disavowal of that cultural form that works to restructure it from within. The disidentification, in this instance, is the construction of a lesbian heroine that changes the way in which the object is inhabited by the subject.

My thinking on disidentification has also been strongly informed by the work of critical race theorists, who have asked important questions about the workings of identification for minority subjects within dominant media. Michele Wallace has described the process of identification as one that is "constantly in motion."[46] The flux that characterizes identification for Hansen when considering female spectatorship

and identification is equally true of the African-American spectator in Wallace's article. Wallace offers testimony to her own position as a spectator:

> It was always said among Blackwomen that Joan Crawford was part Black, and as I watch these films again today, looking at Rita Hayworth in *Gilda* or Lana Turner in *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, I keep thinking "she is so beautiful, she looks Black." Such a statement makes no sense in current feminist film criticism. What I am trying to suggest is that there was a way in which these films were *possessed* by Black female viewers. The process may have been about problematizing and expanding one's racial identity *instead of* abandoning it. It seems important here to view spectatorship as not only potentially bisexual but also multiracial and multiethnic. Even as "The Law of the Father" may impose its premature closure on the filmic "gaze" in the coordination of suture and classical narrative, disparate factions in the audience, not equally well indoctrinated in the dominant discourse, may have their way, now and then, with interpretation.[47]

The wistful statement that is central to Wallace's experience of identification, "she is so beautiful, she looks Black," is a poignant example of the transformative power of disidentification. White supremacist aesthetics is rearranged and put in the service of historically maligned black beauty standards. In this rumination, the Eurocentric conceit of whiteness and beauty as being naturally aligned (hence, straight hair is "good hair" in some African-American vernaculars) is turned on its head. Disidentification, like the subjective experience Wallace describes, is about expanding and problematizing identity and identification, not abandoning any socially prescribed identity component. Black female viewers are not merely passive subjects who are possessed by the well-worn paradigms of identification that the classical narrative produces; rather, they are active participant spectators who can mutate and restructure stale patterns within dominant media.

In the same way that Wallace's writing irrevocably changes the ways in which we consume forties films, the work of novelist and literary theorist Toni Morrison offers a much-needed reassessment of the canon of American literature. Morrison has described "a great, ornamental, prescribed absence in American literature,"[48] which is the expurgated African-American presence from the North American imaginary. Morrison proposes and executes strategies to reread the American canon with an aim to resuscitate the African presence that was eclipsed by the machinations of an escapist variant of white supremacist thought that is intent on displacing nonwhite presence. The act of locating African presence in canonical white literature is an example of disidentification employed for a focused political process. The mobile tactic (disidentification) refuses to follow the texts' grain insofar as these contours suggest that a reader play along with the game of African (or, for that matter, Asian, Latino, Arab, Native American) elision. Instead, the disidentificatory optic is turned to shadows and fissures within the text, where racialized presences can be liberated from the protective custody of the white literary imagination.

One of queer theory's major contributions to the critical discourse on identification is the important work that has been done on cross-identification. Sedgwick, for example, has contributed to this understanding of decidedly queer chains of connection by discussing the way in which lesbian writer Willa Cather was able to, on the one hand, disavow Oscar Wilde for his "grotesque" homosexuality while at the same moment uniquely invest in and identify with her gay male fictional creations: "If Cather, in this story, does something to cleanse her own sexual body of the carrion stench of Wilde's victimization, it is thus (unexpectedly) by identifying with what seems to be Paul's sexuality not in spite of but through its saving reabsorption in a gender liminal (and a very specifically classed) artifice that represents at once a particular subcultural and cultural self."[49] This is only one example of many within Sedgwick's oeuvre that narrates the nonlinear and nonnormative modes of identification with which queers predicate their self-fashioning. Judith Butler has amended Sedgwick's reading of Cather's cross-identification by insisting that such a passage across identity markers, a passage that she understands as being a "dangerous crossing," is not about being *beyond* gender and sexuality.[50] Butler sounds a warning that the crossing of identity may signal erasure of the "dangerous" or, to use Sedgwick's word when discussing the retention of the shameful, "toxic." For Butler, the danger exists in abandoning the lesbian or female in Cather when reading the homosexual and the male. The cautionary point that Butler would like to make is meant to ward off reductive fantasies of cross-identification that figure it as fully achieved or finally reached at the expense of the points from which it emanates. Although Sedgwick's theorizations about cross-identification and narrative crossing are never as final as Butler suggests, the issues that Butler outlines should be heeded when the precarious activity of cross-identification is discussed. The tensions that exist between cross-identification as it is theorized in Sedgwick's essay and Butler's response is one of the important spaces in queer theory that has been, in my estimation, insufficiently addressed. The theory of disidentification that I am putting forward responds to the call of that schism. Disidentification, as a mode of understanding the movements and circulations of identificatory force, would always foreground that lost object of identification; it would establish new possibilities while at the same time echoing the materially prescriptive cultural locus of any identification.

Operating within a very subjective register, Wayne Koestenbaum, in his moving study of opera divas and gay male opera culture, discusses the ways in which gay males can cross-identify with the cultural icon of the opera diva. Koestenbaum writes about the identificatory pleasure he enjoys when reading the prose of an opera diva's autobiographies:

> I am affirmed and "divined"—made porous, open, awake, glistening—by a diva's sentences of self-defense and self-creation.
>
> I don't intend to prove any historical facts; instead I want to trace connections between the iconography of "diva" as it emerges in certain publicized lives,

> and a collective gay subcultural imagination—a source of hope, joke, and dish. Gossip, hardly trivial, is as central to gay culture as it is to female cultures. From skeins of hearsay, I weave an inner life, I build queerness from banal and uplifting stories of the conduct of famous and fierywomen.[51]

A diva's strategies of self-creation and self-defense, through the crisscrossed circuitry of cross-identification, do the work of enacting self for the gay male opera queen. The gay male subculture that Koestenbaum represents in his prose is by no means the totality of queer culture, but for this particular variant of a gay male lifeworld, such identifications are the very stuff on which queer identity is founded. Koestenbaum's memoir explains the ways in which opera divas were crucial identificatory loci in the public sphere before the Stonewall rebellion, which marked the advent of the contemporary lesbian and gay rights movement. Koestenbaum suggests that before a homosexual civil-rights movement, opera queens were the sole pedagogical example of truly grand-scale queer behavior. The opera queen's code of conduct was crucial to the closeted gay male before gay liberation. Again, such a practice of *transfiguring* an identificatory site that was not meant to accommodate male identities is to a queer subject an important identity-consolidating hub, an affirmative yet temporary utopia. Koestenbaum's disidentification with the opera diva does not erase the fiery females that fuel his identity-making machinery; rather, it lovingly retains their lost presence through imitation, repetition, and admiration.

Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.

Hybrid Lives/Migrant Souls

The cultural work I engage here is hybridized insofaras it is cultivated from the dominant culture but meant to expose and critique its conventions. It is no coincidence that the cultural workers who produce these texts all identify as subjects whose experience of identity is fractured and split. The type of fragmentation they share is something more than the general sense of postmodern fragmentation and decenteredness.[52] *Hybridity* in this study, like the term *disidentification*, is meant to have an indexical use in that it captures, collects, and brings into play various theories of fragmentation in relation to minority identity practices. Identity markers such as *queer* (from the German *quer* meaning "transverse") or *mestizo* (Spanish for "mixed") are terms that defy notions of uniform identity or origins. *Hybrid* catches the fragmentary subject

formation of people whose identities traverse different race, sexuality, and gender identifications.

Queers of color is a term that begins to describe most of the cultural performers/makers in every chapter of *Disidentifications*. These subjects' different identity components occupy adjacent spaces and are not comfortably situated in any one discourse of minority subjectivity. These hybridized identificatory positions are always in transit, shuttling between different identity vectors. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has suggested that migrant urban public culture, by its very premise, hybridizes identity.[53] A theory of migrancy can potentially help one better understand the negotiation of these fragmentary existences. The negotiations that lead to hybrid identity formation are a traveling back and forth from different identity vectors.

Arturo Islas's second novel, *Migrant Souls*, provides an opportunity to consider the idea of migrancy. The novel tells of two "black sheep" cousins in a large Chicano family. The female cousin's divorce, disrespect for the church, and sexually emancipated attitude alienate her from the family. But it is the male cousin, Miguel Chico, who is of especial interest in this project. Miguel, like the Richard Rodriguez of *Hunger of Memory*, is the scholarship boy who gets out of the barrio because of his academic excellence. Unlike Rodriguez, Miguel is at least partially out about his homosexuality.[54] Miguel's trip home, from his out existence as an academic Chicano to the semicloseted familial space of identity formation, exemplifies the kind of shuttling I describe. Of course, this movement is not only a by-product of Miguel's status as queer son; all of the family, in some way, experience migrancy. The text explains as much when it articulates the family ethos: "They were migrant, not immigrant, souls. They simply and naturally went from one bloody side of the river to the other and into a land that just a few decades earlier had been Mexico. They became border Mexicans with American citizenship."[55] I want to identify a deconstructive kernel in these three sentences by Islas. The idea of a border is scrutinized in this locution. The migrant status can be characterized by its need to move back and forth, to occupy at least two spaces at once. (This is doubly true for the queer Latino son.) The very nature of this migrant drive eventually wears down the coherency of borders. Can we perhaps think of Miguel, a thinly camouflaged authorial surrogate, as a border Mexican with citizenship in a queer nation or a border queer national claiming citizenship in Aztlán?

Margo's Life

After this tour of different high-theory paradigms, I find myself in a position where I need to reassert that part of my aim in this book is to push against reified understanding of theory. The cultural workers whom I focus on can be seen as making theoretical points and contributions to the issues explored in ways that are just as relevant and useful as the phalanx of institutionally sanctioned theorists that I promiscuously invoke throughout these pages. To think of cultural workers such as Carmelita Tropicana, Vaginal Creme Davis, Richard Fung, and the other artists who

are considered here as not only culture makers but also theory producers is not to take an antitheory position. My chapter on Davis's terrorist drag employs Antonio Gramsci's theory of organic intellectuals in an effort to emphasize the theory-making power of performance. It should be understood as an attempt at opening up a term whose meaning has become narrow and rigid. Counterpublic performances let us imagine models of social relations. Such performance practices do not shy away from the theoretical practice of cultural critique.

Consider, once again, the example of Marga Gomez's performance piece *Marga Gomez Is Pretty, Witty, and Gay*. When the lesbian calls out to the young Marga, lasciviously flicking her tongue at the girl, the story of interpellation is reimagined with a comical and critical difference. One possible working definition of queer that we might consider is this: queers are people who have failed to turn around to the "Hey, you there!" interpellating call of heteronormativity. A too literal reading of Althusser's ideology cop fable suggests one primary moment of hailing. Such a reading would also locate one primary source or mechanism that hails the subject. But the simple fact is that we are continuously hailed by various ideological apparatuses that compose the state power apparatus. No one knows this better than queers who are constantly being hailed as "straight" by various institutions—including the mainstream media. The humor and cultural critique that reverberate through this moment in the performance are rooted in Gomez's willful disidentification with this call; she critiques and undermines the call of heteronormativity by fabricating a remade and queered televisual hailing. Through her disidentificatory comedic "shtick," she retells the story of interpellation with a difference.

After Gomez explains how she was "hailed" into lesbianism by the talk-show sapphists, she paces the stage and ruminates on her desire for the life-world these women represented:

> Mr. Susskind and the lady homosexuals chain-smoked through the entire program. I think it was relaxing for them. I don't think they could have done it without the smokes. It was like they were in a gay bar just before last call. And all the smoke curling up made *the life* seem more mysterious.
>
> *The life*—that's what they called it back then when you were one of us. You were in *the life*! It was short for *the hard and painful life*. It sounded so dramatic. I loved drama. I was in the drama club in high school. I wanted to be in *the life*, too. But I was too young. So I did the next best thing. I asked my mother to buy me Life cereal and *Life* magazine. For Christmas I got the game of Life.

Gomez paints a romantic and tragic picture of pre-Stonewall gay reality. She invests this historical moment with allure and sexiness. The performer longs for this queer and poignant model of a lesbian identity. This longing for *the life* should not be read as a nostalgic wish for a lost world, but instead, as the performance goes on to indicate, as a redeployment of the past that is meant to offer a critique of the present. After all the talk of smoking, she pulls out a cigarette and begins to puff on it.

> And as I moved the lonely game pieces around the board, I pretended I was smoking Life cigarettes and living *the life*. By the time I was old enough, no one called it the life anymore. It sounded too isolating and politically incorrect. Now they say *the community*. *The community* is made up of all of us who twenty-five years ago would have been in *the life*. And in the community there is no smoking.

She concludes the narrative by stamping out an imaginary cigarette. The performance, staged in many gay venues and for a crowd who might be called "the converted," does more than celebrate contemporary queer culture. Gomez's longing for a pre-Stonewall version of queer reality is a look toward the past that critiques the present and helps us envision the future. Although it might seem counterintuitive, or perhaps self-hating, to desire this moment before the quest for lesbian and gay civil rights, such an apprehension should be challenged. Marga's look toward the mystery and outlaw sensibility of *the life* is a critique of a sanitized and heteronormativized *community*. In Gomez's comedy, we locate a disidentificatory desire, a desire for a queer life-world that is smoky, mysterious, and ultimately contestatory. More than that, we see a desire to escape the claustrophobic confines of "community," a construct that often deploys rhetorics of normativity and normalization, for a life. *The life*, or at least Gomez's disidentification with this concept, helps us imagine an expansive queer *life*-world, one in which the "pain and hardship" of queer existence within a homophobic public sphere are not elided, one in which the "mysteries" of our sexuality are not reigned in by sanitized understandings of lesbian and gay identity, and finally, one in which we are all allowed to be drama queens and smoke as much as our hearts desire.

Consciousness, Politics, and Magic

Starhawk

All movements seek change. The quests and struggles of our time – the spiritual and the social, the personal and the collective, the magical and the political – all come from a deep recognition of the need for major changes in our society and ourselves, for new visions and the power to make them real. But too often the struggle seems hopeless. Our energy and our creative vision are drained by the constant battle to stop the forces of destruction. The enemies are amorphous, invisible, yet omnipresent – or there are too many enemies, too many burial sites for chemical wastes, too many fingers on the trigger, too many irresponsible corporations, too many weapons already in the stockpiles, too many jobless, too many nuclear reactors, too many rapists at large, too many hopeless, and too many people in power who are unconcerned, who feel they are not part of this world. Our efforts are too easily scattered among the women's groups, the anti-nuke groups, the Third World groups, the gay rights groups, the ecology groups, the anti-corporate

groups, among the whole list which we sense is somehow connected – and yet the connections too often seem unclear.

This essay is an attempt to name the links, to name what we are fighting against, to name what we are working to create. An ancient magical principle tells us that when you can name a thing you can influence it, so this is a work of magic, defined as "the art of causing change in accordance with will." The destructive forces draw their power from the consciousness that supports them. If there is hope for the continuance of life on Earth, it may well lie with magic, which has also been called "the art of changing consciousness at will."

One technique of changing consciousness is to hold two seemingly contradictory thoughts in your mind at the same time, until they are no longer contradictory. For example:

Reality shapes consciousness.
Consciousness shapes reality.

As you read, your consciousness is shaped by the reality of these words on the page. That reality, in turn, was shaped by my consciousness as I wrote, and my consciousness is shaped, at this moment, by all the many realities of my being and my environment.

The broad realities shaping our collective consciousness do not allow much comfort. Those of us born after World War II have never known a world in which the possibility of global annihilation was not a reality. We have never known security. We know that the pesticides on our crops cause cancer, that underground contaminants continue to spread. We have never felt confident that we would leave a hopeful future to our children. As women living in a patriarchy, our consciousness is shaped by many limitations. The threat of rape, to name only one, makes us fear the dark and the streets after nightfall, fear lonely beaches and isolated trails. That fear, in turn, shapes and limits the world we experience. Like sex, race, class, education, and health are all forces that determine the possibilities and the realities of individual lives.

We are taught to look at these realities as separate, taught that rape is a separate issue from nuclear war, that women's struggle for equal pay is not related to a Black teenager's struggle to find a job, or to the struggle to prevent the export of a nuclear reactor to a site on a web of earthquake faults near active volcanoes in the Philippines. But all of these realities are shaped by the underlying consciousness that shapes our society, our economic and social systems, our technology, our sci-

ence, our religions, our views of women and men and of races and cultures that differ from our own, our sexuality, our gods and our wars, and is presently shaping the destruction of the world.

I call this consciousness *estrangement*[1] because its essence is that we do not see ourselves as part of the world — we are strangers to nature, to other human beings, to parts of ourselves. We see the world as being made up of separate, isolated, non-alive parts (not even dead — since death implies life — but inert matter), which have no inherent value.

THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF ESTRANGEMENT

> He says that he is not part of this world,
> that he was set on this world as a stranger.
> — SUSAN GRIFFIN, *Woman and Nature*

Estrangement is the culmination of a long, historical process. Its roots lie in the Bronze Age shift from matrifocal, Earth-centered cultures, whose religions centered around the Goddess and the gods embodied in nature, to patriarchal, urban cultures of conquest, whose gods inspired and supported war.[2] Yahweh of the Old Testament is a prime example, promising his "Chosen People" dominion over plant and animal life and over other peoples whom they were encouraged to attack and conquer. Christianity deepened the split, establishing a duality between spirit and matter that identified flesh with nature and both with woman/sexuality, and all three with the Devil as forces of evil. God was envisioned as male — uncontaminated by the processes of birth, nurturing, growth, menstruation, and the decay of the flesh — removed from this world to a transcendent realm of spirit somewhere else. Goodness and true value were removed from nature and the world as well. As Engels saw it, "Religion is essentially the emptying of man and nature of all content, the transferring of this content to the phantom of a distant God who then in his turn graciously allows something from his abundance to come to human beings and to nature."[3]

The removal of content, of value, served as the basis for the exploitation of nature. According to Lynn White, a historian of science, when the spirits *in* natural objects, which formerly had protected nature from man, evaporated under the influence of Christianity, man's effective monopoly on spirit in this world was confirmed, and the old inhibitions to the exploitation of nature crumbled.[4] No longer were the groves and forests sacred; the very notion of a sacred grove, assuming spirit in na-

ture, was condemned as idolatrous. But when nature is empty of spirit, forest and trees become merely timber,[5] something to be measured in board feet, valued only for its usefulness or profitability.

The removal of content from human beings is, in the same way, the basis for human exploitation. The exploited are seen as less real, less human than the exploiters, a subspecies. On a biological level, it is possible that subspeciation removes inhibitions against harming one's own kind. On a psychological level, removing the human content from a class of human beings prevents identification and empathy: The oppressors see themselves as the embodiment of what value trickles back into the world; the women, the workers, the chicks-kaffirs-spics-geeks-Chinks-niggers are not seen as beings whose own lives contain inherent value, but as empty objects, valued only for their usefulness to those in power, their profitability. The removal of the Divine from nature – from *our* nature – legitimates hierarchy and domination.

Male imagery of God transfers value back to men in patriarchal society and legitimates male rule. The whiteness of God – the identification of all good with light and evil with dark, and the dualism which sees the two as opposed instead of interdependent – legitimates white rule over those with darker skin. The hierarchy is so long-standing that it does not change even when our belief in a white, male, omnipotent God falters.

As we become separate, manipulated objects, we lose our own sense of self-worth, our belief in our own content, and we acquiesce in our own exploitation. When women see men as embodying the *content* of the culture, and ourselves as not possessing inherent value, we submit to the rule of men and voluntarily devote our energies and talents to further men's desires instead of our own. Historically, Christianity has attempted to reconcile workers, slaves, women, and people of color to their position as inferiors by denying value to the conditions of this life and assigning it to some future existence in heaven, where the meek and submissive will be rewarded.

Because we doubt our own content, we doubt the evidences of our senses and the lessons of our own experience. We see our own drives and desires as inherently chaotic and destructive, in need of repression and control, just as we see nature as a wild, chaotic force, in need of order imposed by human beings.

In *The Death of Nature*, Carolyn Merchant documents the processes by which the rise of modern science and the economic needs of preindustrial capitalism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries

shifted the "normative image" of the world from that of a living organism to that of a dead machine, which supported exploitation of nature on a scale previously unknown.[6] The "machine image"—the view of the world as isolated, non-alive parts, blindly moving on their own—grew out of a Christian context in which divinity and spirit had long been removed from matter. Modern, patriarchal science undermined belief in the last repository of spirit, killing off God after He had sucked the life out of the world and leaving nothing but the littered corpses, the hierarchical patterns of our institutions, from the Church to the army to the government to the corporation—all formed in the image of the patriarchal God with His subordinated troops of angels, engaged in perpetual war with the patriarchal Devil and his subordinate troops of demons. No longer do we see ourselves even with the dubious dignity of being flawed images of God; instead, we imagine ourselves in the image of the machine, flawed computers with faulty childhood "programming." Or, to quote my four-year-old friend Bill, we sense, when fatigued, that our "batteries are tired."

We are left in the empty world described *ad nauseum* in contemporary art, literature, and music—from Sartre to punk rock. In the empty world, we trust only what can be measured, counted, acquired. The organizing principle of society becomes what Marcuse termed "the performance principle": the stratification of society according to the economic performance of its members.[7] Content is removed from work itself, which is not organized according to its usefulness or true value, but according to its ability to create profits. Those who actually produce goods or offer services are less well rewarded than those engaged in managing, counting, or stimulating false needs. And in the business section of the newspapers, oil company V.P.s deny that their corporations are in the business of providing Americans with fuel and energy—rather, they are in the business of providing their investors with profits.

Science and technology, based on principles of isolation and domination of nature, grow crops and lumber with pesticides and herbicides that also cause birth defects, nerve damage, and cancer when they infiltrate our food and water supplies. Claiming a high order of rationality, technologists build nuclear reactors, which produce wastes that will be dangerous for a quarter of a million years, and consign the wastes to storage containers that last thirty to fifty years.

Estrangement permeates our educational systems, with its separate and isolated disciplines. It determines our understanding of the human

mind and the capabilities of consciousness, our psychology. Freud viewed human drives and libido as, essentially, a dangerous, chaotic force, at odds with the "reality principle" of the ego. The behaviorists assure us that we are only what can be measured—only behavioral patterns of stimulus and response. Jung replaced a transcendent God with a set of transcendent archetypes, a slight improvement, but one which still leaves us estranged from placing value in our own images and experiences.[8]

Sexuality, under the rule of the Father God, is identified with the opposition—with the forces of nature, woman, life, death, and decay that threaten man's pristine abstraction and so are considered evil.[9] In the empty world of the machine, when religious strictures fall away, sex becomes another arena of performance, another commodity to be bought and sold. The erotic becomes the pornographic: Women are seen as objects empty of value except as they can be used. The sexual experience becomes one of domination, charged with rage, fear, and violence.

And so we live our lives feeling powerless and inauthentic, feeling that the real people are somewhere else, that the characters on the daytime soap operas or the conversations on the late-night talk shows are more real than the people and the conversations in our lives, that the movie stars, the celebrities, the rock stars, the *People* magazine people live out the real truth and drama of our times, while we exist as shadows, as if our unique lives, our losses, our passions—which cannot be counted out or measured, which were not approved or graded or sold to us at a discount and cannot be marketed—are not the true value of this world.

THE CONSCIOUSNESS OF IMMANENCE

Estrangement permeates our society so thoroughly that to us it seems to *be* consciousness itself; even the language for other possibilities has disappeared or been deliberately twisted. Yet, another form of consciousness is possible, indeed, has existed from earliest times. It underlies other cultures and has survived even in the West in hidden streams. This is the consciousness I call *immanence*—the awareness of the world and everything in it as alive, dynamic, interdependent, and interacting, infused with moving energies: a living being, a weaving dance.

The symbol, the "normative image," of immanence is the Goddess:

the Divine embodied in nature, in human beings, in the flesh. The Goddess Herself is not one image but many, a constellation of forms and associations — earth, air, fire, water, moon and star, sun, flower and seed, willow and apple, black, red, white, Maiden, Mother, and Crone. She includes the male in Her aspects: He becomes child and consort, stag and bull, grain and reaper, light and dark. The femaleness of the Goddess is primary because it represents the bringing of life into the world. "The Goddess," as symbol, tells us that the world itself is the content of the world, its true value, its heart and its soul.

Historically, the cultures that were centered around the Goddess and gods embodied in nature underlie all the later patriarchal cultures. Images of the Goddess are the first known images of worship, found in Paleolithic sites. The beginnings of agriculture, weaving, pottery, writing, building, city-dwelling — all the arts and sciences upon which later civilizations developed — began in cultures of the Goddess.

When patriarchy became the ruling force in Western culture, remnants of the religions and culture based on immanence were preserved by "Pagans" (from the Latin word meaning "country dweller"), i.e., by country people, in folk customs, in "occult" tradition, and in covens of Witches.[10] The cultures of Native Americans and other tribal peoples in Africa, Asia, and Polynesia were also based on a worldview of immanence, which saw spirit and transformative power embodied in the natural world.

Ironically, as estranged science and technology advance, they have begun to bring us back to a consciousness of immanence. Modern physics no longer speaks of separate, discrete atoms of dead matter, but of waves of energy, probabilities, patterns that change as they are observed, and recognizes what shamans and Witches have always known: Matter and energy are not separate forces, but different forms of the same thing.

If we could change the prevailing mode of consciousness in our society from estrangement to immanence, the implications would be felt in every area of life. Immanence, expressed in the image of the Goddess, dispels the roots of estrangement. Good, true value, is not found in some heaven, some abstract otherworld, but in female bodies and their offspring, in nature and in the world. Nature is seen as having its own, inherent order, of which human beings are a part. Human nature, needs, drives, and desires are not dangerous impulses in need of repression and control, but are themselves expressions of the order inherent

in being. The evidences of our senses and our experience are evidences of the Divine — the moving energy that unites all being.

Immanence is inherently anti-hierarchical. When each being carries her/his own value, there is no rationale for setting one group to serve another, for aiding one class or one race to dominate another. Joy and satisfaction cannot be postponed for an afterlife in another world; this world, this life is its own justification.

In a technological society, an economic system based on immanence would view the natural and human resources of a society as an energy network, made up of interdependent parts. Our ideas of ownership would have to change; "owning" land or oil fields or mineral rights might become as incomprehensible to us as it was to the Native Americans. If the land and wilderness were seen as having inherent value, as *beings* in their own right, we could not exploit them callously or carelessly. Nor could we exploit ourselves; we would demand that the work we do have value in and of itself and that it serve a real need if it could not offer us pleasure and satisfaction in the doing.

For women, the symbol of the Goddess is profoundly liberating, restoring a sense of authority and power to the female body and all the life processes — birth, growth, lovemaking, aging, and death. In Western culture, the association of women and nature has been used to devalue both. The immanent Goddess does not challenge the association; instead, this consciousness imparts to both women and nature the highest value. At the same time, culture is no longer seen as something removed from and opposed to nature. Culture is an outgrowth of nature — a product of human beings, who are part of the natural world. The Goddess of nature is also the muse, the inspiration of culture, and women are full participants in creating and furthering culture, art, literature, and science. The Goddess as Mother embodies creativity as much as biological motherhood. She represents women's authority over our own life processes, our right to choose consciously how and when and what we will create.

The female image of divinity does not, however, provide a justification for the oppression of men. The female, who gives birth to the male, includes the male in a way that male divinities cannot include the female. The Goddess gives birth to a pantheon that is inclusive rather than exclusive; She is not "a jealous God." She is often seen with a male aspect — Child or Consort — and, in Witchcraft, with the Horned God of animal life, feeling, and vital energy. Manifesting

within human beings and nature, the Goddess and God express the content and value of human nature, drives, desires, and emotions.

When nature is seen as having its own inherent order, that order becomes the model for human organization, replacing the artificial hierarchy of order-imposed-from-without that presently governs human society and our relationship to nature. In the natural order, structures tend to be cellular and decentralized, composed of many small units rather than one large mass. Diversity, instead of uniformity, is valued, both between groups and within groups. There is no monotheistic model of an approved dogma, a "politically correct" line to take. The Goddess Herself is not a belief or a dogma; She is a symbol for a transformative understanding of what is already here, what we know, what we can become. She is a real power, the name we give the binding force that holds together the universe.

THE ART OF CHANGING CONSCIOUSNESS AT WILL

Politically minded people often question the need for the symbol, for dragging the spiritual, the religious, into the political arena. Yet seeing the spiritual and the political as unrelated is itself a mark of estrangement. When "religion" is confined to patriarchal religions that remove the content from the world, then it is true that focus on the "spiritual" can undermine efforts for political and social change. But political movements that try to challenge patriarchal institutions without examining the consciousness that creates those structures often themselves get caught in estranged patterns. Members may give over their sense of value and content to "the Movement" and then "burn out" during those periods when it doesn't seem to be moving. Groups divide over questions of dogma, discipline, or power and dissipate their energy fighting among themselves, attacking their friends instead of enemies. Effective political action is aimed at changing consciousness and, thereby, causing change—or, to put it another way, political action is itself a form of magic, "the art of changing consciousness at will." Ignoring the spiritual aspects of political consciousness simply undermines its sources of power and benefits no one except those presently in the upper echelons of the hierarchies of patriarchal institutions.

"Magic" is a word that causes discomfort; it reeks of superstition, illusion, silliness. I use it deliberately because the words we are comfortable with, the words that sound acceptable, i.e., rational, scientific, intellectual, are comfortable precisely because they are the language of

estrangement. "Magic" shocks our sensibilities. It forces us out of the old patterns.

Simply, magic is the psychology, the understanding of mind and emotion, derived from the principles of immanence rather than estrangement. As a system, its underlying assumption is that human drives and needs contain their own regulatory principles. Rather than repressing and adjusting them to a society in conflict with them, we could better spend our energies creating a society that allows us to fulfill them freely.

Magic is based on patterns of energy and their interconnections, on syntheses more than analyses. In magic we are always making connections, linking ourselves with other forms of being, identifying with what is outside of us rather than separating from it. As "the art of changing consciousness at will," magic has two important aspects: art and will.

Art implies vision, imagery, and fantasy. The practice of magic always begins with an image—not an abstraction, not an ideology, but something visual and/or tangible that speaks to a deeper part of the self than the intellect, to the unconscious as well as the conscious, to the right hemisphere as well as the left.[11] "In the realm of phantasy, the unreasonable images of freedom become rational," states Marcuse.[12] The image, the vision, can shift us out of the limitations imposed by our culture in a way words alone cannot; it can hint at possibilities of fulfillment not offered by the empty world. In Doris Lessing's fiction, the image of the four-gated city appears as an intimation of an order of being based on principles of harmony and equality not found in the cities of ordinary life.[13] The Grail appears to the court of King Arthur in a mythic tale the meaning of which has been given a Christian veneer, but its underlying Pagan structure remains clear: The Grail is the cup of the Goddess, Her breast, Her nurturing milk, spilling through the world, healing its hurts, restoring the Waste Land to fertility and life. The abstract concept of "immanence" alone can never have the emotional and healing power of the image of the Goddess to infuse the world, again, with vitality, meaning, and love, so that the *un*reasonable images of our freedom, our passion, and our creative power are envisioned and attained.

But the image, the vision alone, is not enough. Magic is nothing without *will*—determination, directed energy, and action. Determination means conscious choice, decision made in freedom. To have a will, to acknowledge our own will, means we acknowledge our right and necessity to choose actively, not to drift passively as women have so

often drifted. To people who have pursued spiritual paths over the past few decades when Eastern religions have so strongly influenced the West, *will* may seem a strange, even destructive, concept. But the identification of passivity and inaction with spirituality is another form of estrangement. Transplanted and popularized versions of Eastern philosophies that teach that everything is really unfolding in perfect bliss if we could only see it, that "enlightenment" means getting off the Wheel of birth and death, and that sexuality keeps us bound to the "lower chakras" are simply more exotic forms of estrangement, and no less patriarchal and hierarchical.[14] "Going with the flow" is not necessarily going toward enlightenment; the flow of our culture right now is toward apocalypse. True spirituality, based on a spirit that is not separate from life but manifest in matter and the world, may require us to paddle upstream, and require effort and work and anguish instead of beatific bliss, if we are to have any hope of preserving the balance of life on this planet.

Energy is both intangible and tangible. Magic recognizes currents of subtle energies that flow through our bodies and through the material world, and it teaches techniques for channeling and forming them. But energy is also very prosaic: the energy to leave the house on a cold night and go to a meeting, the energy to join a march or organize a program, the energy to pound away at these typewriter keys. In order to cause change, energy must be directed.

Yet energy moves in cycles; it ebbs and flows. The practice of magic teaches us to be aware of those cycles and use them for differing sorts of work. This writing, for example, is not a steady stream; it comes in bursts, and between them, I make another cup of coffee, take the dogs out, turn the radio up or down, and let the new thoughts form themselves. Energy within groups and movements also ebbs and flows—and when it ebbs we need not feel like failures. We can use the downswing of the cycle for observation, education, and building support for the actions we take when energy is on the upswing.

Will must finally culminate in action. Consciousness shapes reality, not by mystic vibrations or subtle waves alone, but because it leads to action. Action may be direct (working for a political candidate, confronting rapists, resisting the draft, running a women's center) or it may be symbolic (organizing marches, rallies, and protests), depending on the situation. Both are necessary. When we take action, we reclaim our content, our sense of our own authority and value. We reclaim our power—not the ability to dominate another, but the power of con-

sciousness immanent within us—the power to heal, to change, and to create.

We challenge the emptiness of estrangement whenever we make a deep connection with another, whenever we love, whenever we create community. The tools and techniques of magic, especially ritual, let us connect at a deep, nonverbal level. In ritual, we create community by sharing energy—by breathing, chanting, touching, dancing, acting playful, and sharing affection. These actions inspire creativity and restore a living value to poetry, music, and art, which are then no longer estranged commodities but "the acts of song, the acts of power"[15] that can unlock the unreasonable depths of freedom within us.

A demanding task lies ahead of us: transforming the consciousness of our culture from estrangement to immanence. Against the forces of destruction we have only our human will and imagination, our courage, our passion, our willingness to love. Yet we have reason to hope, because we are not, in truth, strangers to this world. I walk outside. I take my dogs to the park. We run through a grove of redwoods that sweat mist; a pink rhododendron, newly open, scents the air; my feet crush laurel leaves; they smell pungent; I feel the blood pound in my neck; behind the fog the sun is a cold blaze; and I am not, we are not, separate from any of it. We are of the world and of each other, and the power that is in us is a great, if not invincible, power. It can be hurt, but it can heal; it can be destroyed, but it can also renew. And it is morning. And there is still time to choose.

Notes

1. A term I borrowed from Marx, although I use it in a broader context. See Karl Marx, "Private Property and Alienated Labor," Howard Selsam and Harry Martel, eds. *Reader in Marxist Philosophy* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), pp. 296–303.
2. This is a one-sentence summary of a vast, complex historical thesis which I do not have space to develop fully here but will explore further in the second chapter of *Dreaming the Dark: Magic, Sex and Politics*, a work in progress.
3. Friedrich Engels, "Humanism Vs. Pantheism: On Thomas Carlyle," *Reader in Marxist Philosophy*, pp. 234–235.
4. Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," David and Eileen Spring, eds., *Ecology and Religion In History*

xtian w

BETWEEN FOREVER & WHEREVER YOU ARE: A NON BINARY TRANS POETICS

I.

Desire, being

the most innate of things. Inside & out of dream, nothing precedes. What could precede desire? Not the heartbeat tremble, nor digi-glitch blue of boxes & pads. Pray down scrape knee for next day, next hour, next blink eye minute & expectations passed, & still, border crosser (exhaustion, no matter) desire run you always to shift.

Between moon clipped light & sun, place gender where? Air & water mix with mud, mold flesh to bone, tho add bit marks & bodies break undone. #Poetics. You know you're a body & that bodies make sense, keep their own time, make measure & make forgetting against the fathomless pull. Here you are, desiring asking, & yet in language nearly absent.

TRANS experience TRANS lives are

forms of embodied devotion to, & desire for, possibility. You spill & spill & keep spilling out beyond polarities that aren't really real. What will catch you? the concrete the fist the bar; tenderness or nest rest, another body or some page? You wonder what TRANS poetics might do like, what NON BINARY TRANS poetics might move like. You shimmy shimmy shake ass cuz the body already knows, & you came here to listen & move, pausing dance for breath & writing here + there. For you, writing makes reflection, makes question

legible, holds body of question for moment in time. TBH though,

do you ever wonder whether or not you exist in the language space crammed down your throat? Would you want to, if you'd the choice, or if your tongue could learn to swivel sound differently? Should you answer no to either, where does this locate your body, your you? #TFW

QUEERNESS is a location

beyond the borders of locations. Cartography sketched in secret ink, sometimes visible atop more *acceptable* worlds. But the body knows. The body knows. The body makes art facts reminding the world what it costs a body to know. Ask.

Writing = somatic practice, something you do with your body. Authorship's a location from which writing movements materialize. TRANS relational. Writing is a direct form of TRANSLATING the body into words onto surfaces. Your eyes tip the page & it spills. Whoops, another surface! Another kind of body, emergent. Constant motion, deep continuity. Gnosis down arm through your fingers out & out...

To write the NON BINARY body, the body between & beyond bodies, is to give oneself permission to undermine agreed upon bodies in order to touch living body. To ask questions about the body a tongue couldn't legibly answer. To ask questions about writing that cannot be written in languages having no language for our bodies.

Having no language for our bodies, (wtaf hetero reality always = violence)

we desire a constant becoming through spaces of WHAT'S NOT THERE. Looked at from outside, TRANS NON BINARY poetics & aesthetics present a constant negation; rejection of locating one's self, community, & work within the borders of heteronormative identity constructing projects, more formally known as dystopias. We fill absence like primordial breath floating above vacant waters. You'll get lost here, turned round, disoriented; you'll look over, recognize family, return to body, feel stranger; you'll drop pen or keyboard to sway hips; fuck get fucked; cum & LOL. Out here, glitter shifts temporalities just like getting Queer bashed: it doesn't always get better, it just gets (#pleasedontdieisanotherwayofsayingiloveyou). TRANS time desires no vanishing points, desires stretching it out, though sometimes forces clamp down on you. Always the world threats to clamp you down.

Constant motion, deep continuity, ghosts, carried. We won't get there together because we aren't moving towards any set destination. When free, uncatchable! Flash a knowing smile. i hope we meet somewhere & kiss in the rain, let our tongues trade words.

Writing the body in TRANSITION is something you do with your whole body.

INTERLUDE:

Queer art by Queer artists for Queer ppl.

Are there specific poetics related to TRANSARTS, or just the way you live your life? Like what comes first, being TRANS or knowing something LOL?!?

II.

How to write a body that's unstable? There's no one answer to this question, & so Non Binary Trans poetics can be any practices—generative, trans-disciplinary, somatic, always subversive—that seek an endless praxis of asking.

In praxis, when i see an identity forming, i know i'm asking a question that doesn't go deep enough, that's somehow inhabiting a heteronormative world i'm wholly disinterested & incapable of living within. This isn't to say one doesn't make decisions during creative process, but that one constantly strives to envision & hold space for pluralities of possibilities. As a work takes shape(s) from accumulated decisions, you might realize the choice you made three potentials ago has boxed. Luckily: NON BINARY TRANS, aka free to fragment & re-enter the process anywhere, at any time you'd fucking like. hahahaha!

One way or another, i want to remain legible in my disregard for legibility (illegibility being one definition of QUEERNESS).

Whatever the medium, my processes remain quite similar, only TRANSLATED. i'm always translating. Non Binary life, as art, is simply a process of transitioning that's not only endless, but, having no destination, seeks no end. So you're always TRANSLATING.

i make art to formulate a question(s) for myself & my community, to say *here's a problem, a danger, a loop, something to be worked with (if not always through)*, & from there, medium explores question. If i've done my work well, if you're doing your work well, than the material that gets dubbed "art" at the "end" of the process (every draft, every note, every run through the score or stupid piece of choreography

thrown away, every text convo, argument, or post rehearsal trip to the diner is the art) should work here, fail there, & bring up more questions from which to continue building, aka asking, aka TRANS-. If there's no debris it didn't happen.

So often, my body my life my practices all feel like a run-on blur of litter & question marks. i wonder, who can love a ? mark, read a ? mark, understand a question interested only in asking other questions. My life builds itself around all this structure of non-structure, gender of no gender, & all over this beguiling map, a creative praxis desires *here i am*. Where are you? WYD?

Queerness is possibility. i experience myself NON BINARY TRANS FEMININE. It's a way of focusing my curiosity, my desires, all the stuff my body knows. As much as labels make un-sense in relation to Non Binary identity, they can provide tether through temporal experience. i'm always Non Binary, i'm always Transition, & those Transformations, in so many ways, find roots, wisdom, direction, & inspiration under the massive cultural somatic & knowing umbrella of the feminine.

Desire, being the most innate of things, we go from here.

NON BINARY is a form of devotion to unfixed possibility.

SOLIDARITY w TRANSITION is FOREVER

III.

Transition is always a poetics between forever & wherever you are.

Anne Carson
The Gender of Sound (1995)

Michelle Murphy
Against Population, Towards Afterlife (2018)

Anna Zett
A Situation (2019)

Combahee River Collective
A Black Feminist Statement (1977)

Aurora Levins Morales
False Memories (1998)

Carole Maso
Rupture, Verge, and Precipice Precipice, Verge, and Hurt Not (1996)

José Esteban Muñoz
Performing Disidentifications (1999)

Starhawk
Consciousness, Politics, and Magic (1982)

xtian w
Between Forever & Wherever You Are: A Non-Binary Trans Poetics (2018)