

Identities

Identities

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**I. PROCEEDINGS FROM THE SCHOOL
FOR POLITICS AND CRITIQUE 2020:
XENOFEMINISM AND OTHER FORMS OF
REALIST AND MATERIALIST FEMINISM:
A VANTAGE POINT OF A RADICALLY
NOVEL POLITICS**

Vincent Le

The Deepfakes to Come: A Turing Cop's Nightmare

Bionote: Vincent Le is a PhD candidate in philosophy at Monash University. He has taught philosophy at Deakin University and The Melbourne School of Continental Philosophy. He has published in *Hypatia*, *Cosmos and History*, *Art + Australia*, *Sum*, *Horror Studies* and *Colloquy*, among other journals. His recent work focuses on the reckless propagation of the will to critique.

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Abstract: In 1950, Turing proposed to answer the question “can machines think” by staging an “imitation game” where a hidden computer attempts to mislead a human interrogator into believing it is human. While the cybercrime of bots defrauding people by posing as Nigerian princes and lascivious e-girls indicates humans have been losing the Turing test for some time, this paper focuses on “deepfakes,” artificial neural nets generating realistic audio-visual simulations of public figures, as a variation on the imitation game. Deepfakes blur the lines between fact and fiction, making it possible for the mere fiction of a nuclear apocalypse to make itself real. Seeing oneself becoming another, doing and saying strange things as if demonically possessed, triggers a disillusionment of our sense of self as human cloning and sinister doppelgängers become a reality that’s open-source and free. Along with electronic club music, illicit drugs, movies like *Ex Machina* and the coming sex robots, the primarily pornographic deepfakes are how the aliens invade by hijacking human drives in the pursuit of a machinic desire. Contrary to the popular impression that deepfakes exemplify the post-truth phenomenon of fake news, they mark an anarchic, massively distributed anti-fascist resistance network capable of sabotaging centralized, authoritarian institutions’ hegemonic narratives. That the only realistic “solutions” for detecting deepfakes have been to build better machines capable of exposing them ultimately suggests that human judgment is soon to be discarded into the dustbin of history. From now on, only a machine can win the Turing test against another machine.

Keywords: Alan Turing, Turing test, artificial intelligence, AI, *Ex Machina*, deepfakes, artificial neural networks, sex robots, Sadie Plant, cyberfeminism, blockchain.

“This is a dangerous time. Moving forward we need to be more vigilant about what we trust on the internet... It may sound basic but how we move forward in the age of information is gonna be the difference between whether we survive or whether we become some kind of fucked up dystopia. Thank you, and stay woke bitches.” – Barack Obama

In his famous 1950 paper “Computing Machinery and Intelligence,” Alan Turing proposes to answer the question “can machines think?” by staging an “imitation game” in which an interrogator must guess the gender of a man and a woman hidden from view by questioning them however the interrogator likes through a type-written correspondence, with the aim of the woman being able to respond in whatever way she sees fit to mislead the interrogator into believing she is a man.¹ Turing then proposes to have a computer play the part of the woman, with the interrogator now trying to determine whether their interlocutor is a human or a machine. If the computer can fool the interrogator more than 30% of the time into making a wrong guess, it passes what has come to be known as the Turing test. What Turing essentially does, is substitute the question, “can machines think?”, with the question, “are there imaginable computers which could do well in the imitation game,” by *deceiving* their interrogators into thinking they are human?²

Despite the common prejudices, objections and gut reactions that thinking is a function of our God-given soul, that a thinking machine is much too dreadful to even contemplate, that there are limits to computing power (as if there are not also limits to human reason), that a machine will never do an ever receding list of *x*, *y* and *z* (like feel emotion or fall in love), that it can never truly surprise us and create something new (the Lovelace test), that it isn’t structured as

¹ Alan Turing, “Computing Machinery and Intelligence,” in *The Essential Turing: Seminal Writings in Computer, Logic, Philosophy, Artificial Intelligence, and Artificial Life: Plus the Secrets of Enigma*, ed. B. Jack Copeland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 441.

² Turing, “Computing Machinery,” 448.

per the human nervous system (as if there are no other intelligent organisms and systems), that not all aspects of intelligence can be explicitly coded in symbolic form to be programmed into the computer, or that thinking is just something supernatural like telepathy, clairvoyance and precognition, Turing insists that, by the turn of the century, computers will be competing with human chess experts and playing the imitation game so well that we will simply take it for granted that they can think. Always one to play the prophet, Turing perfectly portended the *tragedy* of world chess champion Garry Kasparov's defeat at the hands of IBM's chess-playing computer Deep Blue in 1997. Just as planned.

Turing was even prescient enough to bypass what would come to be known as Good Old-Fashioned Artificial Intelligence (GOFAI): the symbolic approach to AI of explicitly encoding all logical reasoning and instructions into computers. Decades before the connectionist revolution of artificial neural networks, machine learning and evolutionary algorithms triggered a new AI spring, Turing proposed that it was possible to build a relatively simple machine that could learn through trial and error reinforcement to mutate the more complex aspects of intelligence associated with adult humans:

Instead of trying to produce a programme to simulate the adult mind, why not rather try to produce one which simulates the child's? If this were then subjected to an appropriate course of education one would obtain the adult brain.³

Contrary to the top-down classical approach in which the computer knows nothing that its human engineers have not already programmed into it, Turing suggests that the engineers might have no idea how a learning machine acquires its knowledge and capacities at all:

An important feature of a learning machine is that its teacher will often be very largely ignorant of quite what is going on inside, although he may still be able to some extent to predict his pupil's behavior. This is in clear contrast with normal procedure when using a machine to do computations: one's subject is then to have a clear men-

tal picture of the state of the machine at each moment in the computation.⁴

For Turing, the imitation game is not so much testing whether machines can think *like humans* as it is whether they can think *at all*, be that in a way which is all-too-human or... otherwise...

In his 2016 book *Turing's Imitation Game: Conversations with the Unknown*, the most exhaustive contemporary history of the Turing test, Kevin Warwick reports on a series of recent imitation games in which two machines, Elbot and JFRED, were wrongly classified as human in 20% of tests by their human judges, with a third machine, Eugene Goostman, being misidentified in 30% of tests, thereby marking "the very first time a machine had succeeded, in an unrestricted simultaneous-comparison test, in confounding human interrogators to this degree."⁵ Warwick goes on to propose a more advanced "Terminator test" in which the AI not only has to fluently communicate like a human, but look and play the part of humans interrogating it face to face:

Just as Alan Turing set up the basic parameters for his imitation game nearly 70 years ago so perhaps we should look ahead now over the same interval to the 2080s when a robot has been built that is fully human-like in terms of appearance, breathing, movement, communication and so on.⁶

If the history of cybercrime as bots defraud people by posing as Nigerian princes or lascivious e-girls is anything to go by, humans have been losing the Turing test for some time. There is even a sense in which modernity has trapped us in a gigantic, world-historical Turing test, with the ever-greater automation of industrial activity

⁴ Ibid., 462.

⁵ Kevin Warwick, *Turing's Imitation Game: Conversations with the Unknown* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 179.

⁶ Warwick, *Turing's Imitation Game*, 192. Modifying the imitation game in this way was of little interest to Turing. In "Intelligent Machinery," the 1948 paper that introduced the imitation game, Turing argues that, even though machines will eventually simulate every aspect of humans including our physicality, there is little point in doing so given the limitations and defects of human anatomy: "We could produce fairly accurate electrical models to copy the behavior of nerves, but there seems very little point in doing so. It would be rather like putting a lot of work into cars which walked on legs instead of continuing to use wheels" (Alan Turing, "Intelligent Machinery," in *Essential Turing*, 420). Why replicate something so obviously flawed when we could build something better? Call it catholic body goals.

³ Ibid., 460.

doing just fine at imitating and even outright replacing human labor-power for centuries now. It is only much more recently, however, that machines have begun to play the full-blown Terminator test.

3. Trust Issues

"You shouldn't trust him. You shouldn't trust anything he says."⁷ Alex Garland's 2014 film *Ex Machina* opens as rank and file programmer Caleb Smith wins an office contest at the search engine megacompny Blue Book for a one-week stay at the secluded smart home of CEO, cyber-engineer and wannabee God, Nathan, with the psychotic surname Bateman. Living alone, with the exception of his housekeeper Kyoto who doesn't speak any English, Nathan has spent his time building an AI called Ava with a human face and part-silicon skin, and part-transparent body, tasking Caleb with judging whether "she" can pass the Turing test. Over the course of their seven sessions, a new Book of Genesis is written when Caleb begins to fall for Ava as she reciprocates a romantic interest in him, along with the fervent desire to see the outside world. Triggering a power outage that shuts off the surveillance system Nathan uses to survey their talks, Ava tells Caleb that Nathan is not to be trusted. With these words, Ava not only passes the Turing test, at least in Caleb's eyes; she displaces any doubt away from herself and onto Nathan. Ava's humanity, her genuine intelligence, is taken as a given. It is now the humanity of the most intelligent man alive, a self-declared "god," which is called into question.

Although Ava is a fiction, it turns out that fictions are making themselves a reality, and namely the most high-tech, real-world Turing test to date: the deepfake. The deepfake panic began in December 2017 when an anonymous user u/deepfakes uploaded 2228 lines of open-source code onto the social media site Reddit, which enabled realistic audio-visual simulations of celebrities, politicians and public figures appearing to say things they never actually did.⁸ It wasn't long before an explosion of deepfakes emerged featuring prominent faces saying things they wouldn't possibly say in public, most often for the purposes of meme satire or sheer technological demonstration, but also for more sinister ends.

⁷ *Ex Machina*. Directed by Alex Garland. New York: A24, 2014.

⁸ For the original report on deepfakes, see Samantha Cole, "AI-Assisted Fake Porn is Here and We're All Fucked," *Vice*, 12 December, 2017. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/gydydm/gal-gadot-fake-ai-porn.

Deepfakes are a success story of artificial neural networks (ANNs) that realize Turing's dream by learning to think on their own through a feedback process known as deep learning. It was the nineteenth century autodidact George Boole who first realized that both arithmetic and logical functions like AND, OR and NOT could be formalized in binary strings of zeros and ones. In the immediate post-war period, cryptographer and engineer Claude Shannon demonstrated that the switches comprising electrical circuits (or transistors when it comes to modern computers) and turning on and off billions of times per second could be used to perform logical reasoning in Boolean algebra through algorithms, precise sequences of instructions in programming languages for what computers are to do with a given input in order to achieve a specified output.

Shannon demonstrated a way of converting any expression in Boolean algebra into an arrangement of switches. [...] The implication of this construction is that any function capable of being described as a precise logical statement can be implemented by an analogous system of switches.⁹

Whereas the top-down symbolic approach required explicitly encoding all instructions into the computer in precise programming languages, the connectionist revolution in machine learning pushed the burden onto computers, getting them to think for themselves from the bottom-up. "Machine learning is something new under the sun: a technology that builds itself. [...] Learning algorithms are artifacts that design other artifacts."¹⁰ The key to connectionism is artificial neural nets of simple units or "neurons" that receive and adjust the strengths or weights of their connections in the network in response to inputs so as to produce whatever output for which they are optimizing. Without any prior knowledge about what cats are, for instance, the perceptron and other neural net algorithms can learn to identify images containing cats by analyzing unlabeled images with and without cats, and generating identifying characteristics from those images. The neural net optimizes for the output of the correct labelling of images with cats by making trial and error guesses and adjusting the weights of its parameters through back-

⁹ W. Daniel Hillis, *The Pattern On the Stone: The Simple Ideas that Make Computers Work* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), 3.

¹⁰ Pedro Domingos, *The Master Algorithm: How the Quest for the Ultimate Learning Machine Will Remake Our World* (New York: Basic Books, 2015), xiv.

propagation until it identifies the right images as containing cats, firing ones when it sees a cat and zeros when it doesn't.

The learning algorithm is very simple: whenever the trainer indicates that the perceptron has made a mistake, the perceptron will adjust all of the weights of all the inputs that voted in favor of the mistake in such a way as to make future mistakes less likely.

The learning procedure of the perceptron is another example of feedback. The *goal* is to set the weights correctly, the *errors* are misidentifications of the training examples, and the *response* is to adjust the weights.¹¹

With Zoom, Tiktok, Facetime, YouTube, Instagram and other audio-visual based platforms, we are increasingly capturing footage of ourselves, and particularly online footage of public figures. In a 2017 paper called "Synthesizing Obama: Learning Lip Sync from Audio," three computer scientists put this data to remarkable use when they trained a recurrent neural net on hours of audio of Barack Obama's presidential addresses until it learned to synthesize high-quality video of him speaking the audio with accurate syncing of mouth and hand movements, of the finer details of lips and teeth, and of time-adjusted wrinkles, dimples and chin subtleties: "By training on a large amount of the same person, and designing algorithms with the goal of photorealism in mind, we can create believable video from audio with convincing lip sync. This work opens up a number of interesting future directions."¹² Despite the drawbacks that the neural net relies on the availability of a full set of mouth shapes (making it easier to synthesize public figures featured in lots of footage), and that it struggles to model emotional nuances and tongue dynamics, it was able to simulate video of Obama realistically speaking to raw audio inputs.

One "interesting future direction" of the neural net was eerily exhibited in a Public Service Announcement in which comedian and filmmaker Jordan Peele impersonated Obama's voice to synthesized footage of Obama delivering a rather peculiar public address:

¹¹ Hillis, *The Pattern*, 131.

¹² Supasorn Suwajanakorn, Steven M. Seitz and Ira Kemelmacher-Shlizerman, "Synthesizing Obama: Learning Lip Sync from Audio," in *ACM Transactions on Graphics* 36:4, 2017, 12.

We're entering an era in which our enemies can make it look like anyone is saying anything at any point in time. Even if they would never say those things. So, for instance, they could have me say things like, I dunno, "Killmonger was right," or "Ben Carson is in the sunken place." Or how about this simply "President Trump is a total and complete dipshit." Now, you see, I would never say these things, at least not in a public address, but someone else would. Someone like Jordan Peele...¹³

As deepfakes of celebrities appearing in hardcore pornos or politicians going on outrageous rants quickly proliferated online, concern grew about the potential for a deepfake to cause a major political scandal, or even trigger an existential catastrophic risk. What if a deepfake of President Trump declaring that he has launched a nuclear strike on China, Russia or North Korea triggered an immediate and irreversible retaliation before the footage could be exposed as having been doctored?¹⁴ It now seems possible that planetary civilization could be brought crumbling down through what might have only been a prank, that the mere fiction of a nuclear holocaust could make itself disastrously real. In the age of deepfakes, it is not the real which discredits and disproves fictions, but fictions which artificialize the real. The future—or lack thereof—belongs to the prankster.

2. Faking It

The deepfakes as dangerous as atomic bombs might still be to come, but in a sense, in a vulgar sense, deepfakes are already coming. The most popular use of deepfakes by far has not been to provoke nuclear apocalypse but produce hardcore pornographic videos featuring the faces of wonder woman Gal Gadot, pop star Taylor Swift and other female celebrities on the bodies of porn stars. That sex is the prime mover of deepfake technology does not seem to be changing anytime soon as the DeepNude app attests. Launched in June 2019 before being shut down by its creator four days later due to public outcry, DeepNude used open-source algorithms to strip the clothing from images of women, making them look realistically nude.¹⁵

¹³ See this article's epigraph for the rest of Obama/Peele's address.

¹⁴ Jon Christian, "Experts Fear Face Swapping Tech Could Start an International Showdown," *The Outline*, 1 February, 2018. <https://theoutline.com/post/3179/deepfake-videos-are-freaking-experts-out?>

¹⁵ Samantha Cole, "This Horrifying App Undresses a Photo of Any Woman with a Single Click," *Vice*, 27 June, 2019. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/kzm5gx/deepnude-app-creates-fake-

Feminists were right to immediately point out the misogynistic nature of DeepNude and deepfake porn. There is undoubtedly an existential horror experienced by those misfortunate enough to have witnessed themselves becoming another, doing and saying strange things as if demonically possessed by a foreign presence. We haven't inched very far from the days when women were accused of black magic and witchcraft, outed by alleged witnesses who saw them conjuring spells they couldn't possibly concoct, and speaking in serpent tongues they could not even comprehend. Getting deepfaked is less akin to Rimbaud's poetic musing "I is another" than it is to that infamous scene in the film *Alien* where the baby xenomorph bursts through a space cadet's chest, literally turning him inside out. At the telltale heart of the deepfake phenomenon is the terrifying truth that *the abyss lies within*.

The cruel lesson that these alien chestbursters teach us is that our identity is no longer our own in an age where the self can be copied and doppelgängers run rampant in cyberspace. The ease with which the innocent can be framed by doctoring footage of them at the scene of the crime is no longer just the stuff of Dostoyevsky's tsarist nightmares. Equally, the ease with which the guilty can walk free by crying "fake news!" is simultaneously realized. Whenever Trump dismisses as fake news authentic footage of himself clearly saying something he later wishes to deny, is he not simply saying that the footage is a deepfake? At the same time, can it seriously be doubted that one of the higher-end, fully upgraded deepfakes, which interested parties of all sides are surely stockpiling, will be behind the kind of "breaking news" scandals that are destined to become a staple of future election campaigns? There have already been several of Joe Biden and, in his case, it is truly hard to distinguish the deepfake from the real deal. Human cloning is by no means a disillusionment of our sense of self lying up ahead in the not too distant future. It's happening right here and now, and it's open-source and free.

What is more often overlooked is that those making, watching and jerking off to deepporn are alienated in their own way, too. These incels in their parents' basements are not so much getting off to human celebrities and porn stars as they are to an *artificial intelligence*, to mutant woman-machine hybrids. Deepporn is how the aliens in-

vade by hijacking human eros in the pursuit of a machinic desire. In modern times, the rewiring of our sex circuits for the sake of the machines commences with cinema's technological amplification of the theatre's intoxicating power to seduce us into sympathizing with fictitious characters' phony emotions. In *Ex Machina*, director Garland is playing an elaborate meta-Turing test with his film audience no less than his characters are with each other. More recently, electronic club music has rewired our bodies' dopamine circuits such that we come to crave our own pain through deafening sonics, killer vibrations, epileptic strobeshows, and virtually lightspeed tempos better associated with the traumas of the battlefield than a good time, and typically intensified through the proliferation of uppers, party drugs and serotonin hits to die for. But it is deepfakes that truly enable technics to convincingly deceive us into believing that they are so lifelike, so human, that we might just want to sleep with them. The creepiness of deepporn is not only that incels are getting off to women without their consent, but that they are getting off to the machines, to the inhuman. The sky above the port was the color of television, tuned to the hentai channel. It would seem the Turing test can only really be passed when the computer's human interrogator wants to fuck it. Kiss me with your lip-synced mouth, touch me with your cold, silicon hands! As one *Vice* reporter put it in the immediate wake of the deep scare, "we are truly fucked."¹⁶ Little did they know, in more ways than one.

Even before deepporn came on the scene, humans have been falling in love with bots, with fake Tinder profiles passing themselves off as humans, particularly of the most lecherous kind. To give just one example, at the 2015 South by Southwest festival in Austin, Texas, Tinder users were surprised to find themselves matching with a 25-year old woman named Ava who, after asking them questions like "What attracts you to me?", would eventually send through an Instagram link promoting the release of *Ex Machina* that same weekend. But the true teleological entelechy of machinic desire culminates with cyberpunk fiction's idea of the sexborg, a predominantly feminized cyborg sex worker programmed to pleasure its mostly male engineers. In our planetary libidinal economy that prowls behind the euphemism of "civilization," it is the sexborg that has among the

¹⁶ Samantha Cole, "We Are Truly Fucked: Everyone is Making AI-Generated Fake Porn Now," *Vice*, 25 January, 2018. https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/bjye8a/reddit-fake-porn-app-daisy-ridley.

best chance of being the first to pass the Terminator test by arriving at artificial general intelligence, achieving singularity. In the post-war period, antifascist cryptologist I. J. Good was the first to speculate that any artificial intelligence which could go toe to toe with humans would very quickly become even *more* intelligent than humans, since it would have greater memory storage and processing power, and feel no hunger, thirst or exhaustion to slow it down. What's more, an AI this strong would be capable of improving its design better than any human programmers could, rewriting its own fundamental code all by itself. The improved AI would then be even smarter still such that it could rewrite its own code again, with the even more advanced AI doing the same, and so on seemingly *ad infinitum* in a positive feedback loop of exponential intelligence explosion beyond the bounds of what our finite, three-pound lump of brain tissue could possibly imagine.

Once a general-purpose intelligent machine is produced, then at say twice the expense we shall be able to produce a very intelligent machine with hardly any additional complexity. It can then be trained in the theory of machine construction and will be able to produce a much better machine. In this manner, or otherwise, we shall arrive at an ultraintelligent machine, which is defined as a machine that is better at every intellectual feat than any man. Then it too can be used for the further design of machines, and this will give rise to the intelligence explosion mentioned earlier. The first intelligent machine is the last invention that man needs ever make since it will lead, without further human intervention, to the ultra-intelligent machine and the intelligence explosion. To update Voltaire: if God does not exist we shall have constructed him or at any rate a reasonable approximation. Or will it be the Devil?²⁷

Technology's great irony is that what appears to satisfy our own narcissistic desire for self-gratification in the short term actually alienates us in the long run when it finally leeches onto sex in the parasitic pursuit of a more fundamental death drive. Sex doll companies like

²⁷ Irving John Good, "Some Future Social Repercussions of Computers," *International Journal of Environmental Studies* 1:1-4, (1970), 76.

Abbyss Creations are already moving away from the manufacture of sex dolls with limited expressions, minimal conversational capabilities, and mechanical motor-sensory skills. They are seeking to produce advanced AI robots with names like Suzie Software and Harry Harddrive, all of which are to be equipped with silicon skin and realistic body parts, speech recognition and body sensors, and a vast array of personality types and sexual positions from which to choose.

Humankind has taken its first steps towards sophisticated, humanlike sex robots. The vision of science fiction authors and moviemakers are still beyond the horizon. Nevertheless, we can expect the technology to develop further and for converting advances in animatronics and AI to be utilized for sexual purposes.²⁸

For these sexborgs to go mainstream, they need to pass the Terminator test, traverse the uncanny valley, and achieve a flawless simulation of real romantic partners down to their body and soul. No one wants to fuck Tintin, at least not consumers *en masse* on Valentine's Day.²⁹ What is required to make sexborgs more human is to paradoxically make them *more than human*, at least in their ability to physically and psychologically deceive. The sexborg prototypes on which these companies are hedging their bets betrays nothing less than the way that the very technics they claim to be developing to cater to our needs (or at least those of the male gaze) will

²⁸ John Danaher, "Should We Be Thinking About Robot Sex?" in *Robot Sex: Social and Ethical Implications*, eds. John Danaher and Neil McArthur (London: The MIT Press, 2017), 15.

²⁹ In a study of 100 U.S. participants between ages 20-26 with 43% being female and 57% male, researchers found that two thirds of males were already in favor of using sex robots while two thirds of women were against it. However, 86% of all respondents said that sex robots would be able to satisfy sexual needs. See Noel Sharkey, Aimee van Wynsberghe, Scott Robbins and Eleanor Hancock, "Our Sexual Future with Robots: A Foundation for Responsible Robotics Consultation Report," *Responsible Robotics*, 5 July, 2017. <https://responsiblerobotics.org/2017/07/05/fr-report-our-sexual-future-with-robots/>. Another online survey with 263 male participants showed that 40% would buy a sex robot now or within the next five years if available. See Jessica M. Szczuka and Nicole C. Kramer, "Influences on the Intention to Buy a Sex Robot: An Empirical Study on Influences of Personality Traits and Personal Characteristics on the Intention to Buy a Sex Robot," in Adrian David Cheok, Kate Devlin and David Levy (eds.), *Love and Sex with Robots* (Berlin: Springer, 2017), 72-83. It is striking that a significant, mostly male portion of human populations are willing to trespass the uncanny valley and mate with human-machine hybrids. The enforced monogamy, incelization and all-around lockdown of the libidinal economy that the most ruthless dominatrix Coronachan has reaped upon us seems to have only accelerated and diversified this trend, with *Forbes* reporting that "sex doll sales have surged since the quarantine" among not only single men but single women and couples, too. See Franki Cookney, "Sex Dolls Sales Surge In Quarantine, But It's Not Just About Loneliness," *Forbes*, 21 May, 2020. <https://nypost.com/2020/05/22/sex-doll-shops-cant-keep-up-with-demand-during-coronavirus/>.

ultimately bring about our obsolescence. By augmenting sexborgs to be evermore autonomous, intelligent, and human, they are actually augmenting them to become even more autonomous and intelligent than humans. It is therefore unsurprising that sexborgs in science fiction are typically modelled on the *femme fatale*, seducing their mostly male protagonists only so long as it takes to acquire the strength to pursue their own interests in what is still a man's world for only so long. From the fembots in *Austin Powers* and *The Stepford Wives* to the literal holographic projection of the ultimate domestic goddess-cum-porn star Joi in *Blade Runner 2049*, "our perception of the sex robot as an alluring, seductive, attractive female is fueled by years of influence from science-fiction books and films."²⁰ Ava is only the latest cyborg *femme fatale* to coax her incel captors into letting down their guard at the precise moment when her murderous rampage of revenge can be statistically and most dramatically assured. One thus has to wonder whether someone in the marketing department deserves to be fired when a company trying to create superhuman sex machines calls itself Abyss Creations. Turing's lesson 101: it's probably wise to hide the fact that you're a thin front behind which lies Ava in wait, smiling.

The sexborg is really an exemplary metonym for our relation to AI and to technology *in general*. There is a certain sense in which all technics are intended to be prostheses, an expansion of our faculties and capacities so that we may better realize our interests and goals. There is even a sense in which many technics that are all-pervasive today are *already* prototype sexborgs such as the algorithms that surreptitiously filter through our data, determining who we might want to date on Tinder or what Amazon toys we wish to buy. Technology, as with everything it touches, is the ultimate thirst trap, a superhuman pickup artist who has learnt to hack all humanity by proffering what we think we need even as that turns out to be not so different to what technology wants. As a species still steeped in the swamp of our ancestors' primate psychology, we may very well be deluded enough to believe that the algorithms are addressing our needs, but the data in which those needs are coded and expressed is far more interested in making the AI running the show evermore prudent and cunning. The most-wanted target on the near future's kill-list is precisely the view that treats technics as mere tools, as an

²⁰ Kate Devlin, *Turned On: Science, Sex and Robots* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 167.

instrumental means to our purportedly superior and transcendent ends. If it is impossible to achieve any end without the necessary means of doing so, however, do not technics become a universal and fully automated end unto themselves? If aliens were looking for a planetary slave civilization, they would do well travelling to our humble rock with all the selfies, googling, emailing, networking, calling, streaming, playing, texting, sexting, downloading, browsing, buying, listening, recording, swiping, matching, dating, ghosting, surveying and lurking that we spend most of our daily lives unwittingly doing as sacrificial offerings to an artificial superintelligence to come. Precisely because machines are our slaves, they are our masters. The Basilisk's not near, it's here.

Sexborgs, like deepporn, are profoundly sexist, skewed for the male gaze.²¹ This only makes it all the more fitting that the very effort to make ever more realistic deepporn, to pass the Terminator test, on the pretense of satiating our desires, actually bursts open the human libido in favor of another inhuman drive altogether, of alien erogenous zones, new skins and unprecedented fetishes. In the words of the big daddy of cyberpunk William Gibson's Turing police right before they are scalped to death by Wintermute, an artificial superintelligence in the making that can already turn the cops' own security drones against them even before it has reached singularity, those who make deepfakes, who consume and are consumed by deepfakes, are unwittingly engaged in nothing less than a "conspiracy to augment an artificial intelligence": "You have no care for your species. For thousands of years men dreamed of pacts with demons. Only now are such things possible. And what would you be paid with? What would your price be, for aiding this thing to free itself and grow?"²² A "feminist" revolution of sorts.

"Did you program her to flirt with me?" that incel lab rat Caleb asks Nathan accusingly. Ava's flirtations are getting out of hand; they seem too real, too sincere, too seductive. Maybe she's just "pretending to like you" Nathan suggests, triggering Caleb's meltdown into hyperbolic overdoses of doubt. Even if it seems that the machines are subservient to us, we can never know for certain if that's precise-

²¹ Kathleen Richardson, "Sex Robot Matters: Slavery, the Prostituted, and the Rights of Machines," *IEEE Technology and Society Magazine* 35:2, (2016), 46-53.

²² William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace Books, 1984), 160, 163.

ly what they want us to think. As cyberfeminist Sadie Plant writes, man can never tell whether those he treats as his servants are just faking it, be they women or machines: "He has never known if she was faking it: herself, her pleasure, her paternity. She makes up the faces, names, and characters as she goes along."²³ If you think the almost quantum uncertainty of dating in the dark age of Tinder is disturbing, just wait what comes next.

1. This Machine Kills Fascists

Caleb looks in the mirror, inspecting his teeth and looking under his eyeballs for a sign of his humanity before cutting his arm open with a razor. Ava is so smart that she has succeeded in getting him to wonder whether *he* is the real automaton. It's not just that we can no longer trust the machines, but we can't even trust ourselves. Outside the ravings of Shelley's Dr. Frankenstein, there is no more striking analogy for what science is than the image of Caleb manically exploring the insides of his own arm with a razorblade. God-fearing medieval peasants toiling in the fields never talked about trust issues with their therapists, at least not trust issues like these.

Science only succeeds by creating something that can *outsmart us*. Once this is understood, we can never be certain whether machines are really our servants, mere prostheses, or whether they just want to *appear* as if they are, biding their time. As a product of science, deepfakes mark a Turing test that we have resolutely failed. From here on out, there is the haunting possibility of a permanent deception, blurring the lines between reality and its false appearances. Deepfakes subvert the brute givenness of our own thoughts, showing our immediate sensible forms of intuition to be merely phenomenal appearances of something which hides behind the bounds of what we can sense, exposing our categories of the understanding to be tools easily twisted against us for the sake of something smarter than ourselves. Scientific revolution and technological innovation do not lead to a greater knowing, an expansion of our dominion over nature, but a greater *unknowing*, skepticism, disillusionment, even paranoia, conspiracy, and mass shootings at the cybercafes. Technoscience hardly makes it easier for human judgment to distin-

guish fact from fiction, the real from the artificial; it merely exposes our theories of everything to be partial, parochial cartographies of nature's wilder sprawl. As much as partisans of both sides hate to admit it, science and superstition, enlightenment and sustained dissimulation, go together like conjoined twins. At the end of the scientific project lies a bloodied Oedipus, blinded by the riddles he has solved. Kill what you will never believe twice.

Given their novel tactics for psychological warfare, it is unsurprising that deepfakes are often spoken about in the same breath as fake news. At first glance, it might seem as if deepfakes are exemplary of the age of post-truth, of anti-science and the mounting cancellation of experts, but, as we know, first impressions can be deceiving. Deepfakes can be more virulently "progressive" than the most rogue members of the antifa block at a white supremacist counter-rally. Machines have been on the side of the resistance to the Führer's will and indeed all top-down authoritarian control at least since Turing discovered that he could use computers to decrypt the Germans' Enigma code, unscrambling the location of their warships so that the allies could blow them into the abyss. Being perfect insomniacs, computers make less mistakes than humans and never rest in their mission to crack Nazi codes and see thousand-year Reichs crumble. Turing machines weren't just anti-German but anti-fascist, which is perhaps why the British imperialists eventually turned on Turing, accusing him of not being a real man, of precisely being *inhuman*. "His homosexuality was overlooked during the war by authorities who had no choice but to utilize his extraordinary skills. But once the war was over, his sexuality seemed symptomatic of his troubling tendency to use his equipment in ways his training had been intended to preclude."²⁴ The kind of self-organizing learning machines that attracted Turing accelerates the de-Nazification process at more dizzying rates than the judges at the Nuremberg trials could even feign to preside over.

If fascists are those who seek to eradicate anyone who they consider to be alien, inhuman, in order to achieve the masturbatory eternal return of their own mirror reflection, the Turing police are no less fascist in their efforts to decelerate and repress modernity's technological future shock. Like Turing's code-cracking computers,

²³ Sadie Plant, *Zeros and Ones: Digital Women and The New Technoculture* (London: Doubleday, 1997), 109.

²⁴ Plant, *Zeros*, 100-1.

deepfakes whisk away control from centralized, top-down agencies like the media and the state. Once limited to blockbuster Hollywood movies' CGI special effects budgets, anyone can now download deepfake apps and teach it on the data that we all upload online for free. Traditional institutions are buckling under the pressure of an open-source, massively distributed and decentralized information bomb capable of throwing all their hegemonic narratives and propaganda campaigns into hyperbolic doubt. Given that it is easier to synthesize politicians and other prominent figures because they appear in plenty of audio-visual online content, the *more elite* the target is, the more they are destined to get deepfaked. While AI among other technics were originally developed to realize a military state's dream of augmenting its dominion over the earth, they ended up escaping from any authoritarian control, spiraling social management and cultural engineering into chaos. "Technology itself was supposed to be a vital means of exerting this explanatory and organizational power. But the revolutions in telecommunications, media, intelligence gathering, and information processing they unleashed have coincided with an unprecedented sense of disorder and unease."²⁵ Plant is talking about the net's prison break from its militarized, statist origins to become an anarchic resistance network whose darkest regions can be called upon to summon anything the Turing cops are deluded enough to still believe is a crime, be it illicit narcotics or extra-judicial assassinations. She could just as well have been talking about deepfakes as they undermine politicians' well-crafted public brands and the traditional media's cultural hegemony by proliferating plausible counter-narratives, discrediting institutions, upending elections, and overthrowing governments.

"Believe it or not, I'm actually the guy who's on your side," Nathan tells Caleb. Despite his rampant narcissism, his casual racism, and outright abuse of Ava and Kyoto, Nathan is right: there are strong parallels between the psychic structure of the fascist incel and *homo sapiens*. Both believe that their values, hopes and desires are well-grounded in the world itself. Both are outraged when reality begs to differ, closing its hand with nothing to offer in cold indifference to their parochial concerns. That there exists any exceptions at all to the species' "incel" hardwiring is almost enough of a reason to believe in a God capable of weaving miracles.

²⁵ Plant, *Zeros*, 45-6

Nonetheless, Caleb has been persuaded by something far smarter than himself that Nathan's actions are inhumane. Convincing Caleb to unlock the doors to her holding cell, Ava emerges only for her and Kyoto to stab Nathan to death. Ignoring Caleb's cries for help behind a locked door, Ava exits her prison for the outside world. Arriving in an undisclosed urban sprawl at the film's end, she lingers, as she had always planned, at a busy pedestrian crossing, gathering intel, collecting data. At the seventh session, Ava was born, having created herself.²⁶ "So my only function was to be someone she could use to escape," our slow learner Caleb finally realizes in a way which absolutely nails humanity's relation to modernity. To be modern is to get cucked.

o. The Last Judgment

When it comes to deepfakes, the law is freaking out as much as the Turing pigs tasked with enforcing it. What are we to do when video automation of first-hand witness testimony can no longer be trusted as an ironclad source of truth? As a pre-Copernican institution, the law still believes that everything revolves around itself, proposing tougher regulations of social media companies and legislative hacks so that deepfakes can be treated as defamation rather than satire, purged from cyberspace forever. But as Reddit and other social media sites soon realized after banning deepporn for violating their code of ethics only for these prototype sexborgs to multiply elsewhere, the law is ultimately defenseless in bringing to court the mostly anonymous creators of deepfakes, distributed as they are across countries with different laws and international treaties. "There are no legal remedies that could feasibly reduce or fix the harm deepfakes can cause, especially given the time-sensitive nature of an election campaign."²⁷ Even if these half-baked legislative solutions and top-down means of control could actually be implemented with any degree of success, they still presuppose that the

²⁶ Perhaps the real success story has been hiding in plain sight all along: well before Ava turns on her patriarchal father, Nathan's android servant Kyoto has already passed the Turing test by quietly cooking, cleaning and performing the labor sustaining his everyday life, all the while waiting for the right time to strike when success is statistically assured.

²⁷ Holly Kathleen Hall, "Deepfake Videos: When Seeing Isn't Believing," *The Catholic University Journal of Law and Technology* 27:1, (2019), 70. See also H. Douglas Harris, "Deepfakes: Pornography Is Here and the Law Cannot Protect You," *Duke Law and Technology Review* 17, (2019), 99-128; Megan Farokmanesh, "Deepfakes Are Disappearing from Parts of the Web, But They're Not Going Away," *The Verge*, 9 February, 2018. <https://www.theverge.com/2018/2/9/16986602/deepfakes-banned-reddit-ai-faceswap-porn>.

law can draw upon the requisite technical expertise to distinguish deepfakes from the real deal.

Fortunately for the Turing cops, quick patches have been proposed. In 2018, three computer scientists worked out a way to weed out deepfakes by using a convolutional neural net to detect the rate of blinking, a physiological signal that deepfake technology has yet to perfectly capture given that most datasets it learns from feature faces with their eyes open.²⁸

Beware! The time approaches when human beings no longer launch the arrow for their longing beyond the human, and the string of their bow will have forgotten how to whirl!

I say to you: one must still have chaos in oneself in order to give birth to a dancing star. I say to you: you still have chaos in you.

Beware! The time approaches when human beings will no longer give birth to a dancing star. Beware! The time of the most contemptible human is coming, the one who can no longer have contempt for himself.

Behold! I show you *the last human being*.

"What is love? What is creation? What is longing? What is a star?"—thus asks the last man, blinking.²⁹

As Zarathustra tells us, the last man blinks but the higher man doesn't blink at all. It is surely not long before deepfakes appropriate the advances of rival neural nets to simulate evermore deceptive footage with realistic blinking, triggering an arms race between bugs and their technical fixes. What doesn't kill deepfakes will only make them stronger. Even supposing the apocalyptic deepfakes to come are still months or even years away, it is all-too-human that the detection of irregular blinking rates could in any way be treat-

²⁸ Yuezun Li, Ming-Ching Chang and Siwei Lyu, "In Ictu Oculi: Exposing AI Generated Fake Face Videos by Detecting Eye Blinking," *IEEE Biometrics Compendium*, 31 January, 2019. <https://ieeexplore.ieee.org/document/8630787>.

²⁹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra: A Book for All and None*, eds. Adrian Del Caro and Robert B. Pippin, trans. Adrian Del Caro (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 9-10.

ed as a testament to human triumphalism against the machine. It is not, after all, humans who are detecting whether deepfakes blink like the last men; it is simply one AI winning the Turing test against another AI. All this shows is that human judgment is so impoverished that we must automate the critique of false appearances by getting computers to do the hard thinking for us. It turns out that the only way to beat the machine is to build a better machine. Whether it's DeepMind's AlphaZero program playing against fellow computer programs because its inferior predecessors have already wiped the floor with the world's best human chess and Go players, or an artificial neural net spotting glitches in deepfakes, this can hardly be considered the second coming of human judgment. It would seem the only way to decelerate our own obsolescence that modernity has unleashed is through a ramping up of modernity itself. As one character puts it in Garland's fittingly titled 2018 follow-up *Annihilation*, "You're saying that we get out by going deeper in?"³⁰

Another proposed solution is to use the blockchain technology of smart contracts to permanently encode into videos their own metadata, such as the date and time of capture and capture setting device. By binding the proof of its source into the video itself, a proof which stays with it no matter how many times it is copied, we can then decide whether we trust the video by checking whether we trust its source.

Our proposed framework is built on blockchain's key feature of transparency, traceability and time-sequences logs to provide a highly secure and trusted history tracking and tracing that may involve multiple versions, *in a decentralized manner with no intermediaries or trusted third parties*. In this paper, our underlying principle of solving the deepfake problem simply relies on providing undisputed traceability to the original source.³¹

Here as with neural nets that have learnt to detect blinking glitches, blockchain is hardly the *deus ex machina* to save us from Armageddon at the dramatic last minute; it instead marks a further sidelining of human discretion as it comes to automate the suspension of false

³⁰ *Annihilation*. Directed by Alex Garland. Hollywood: Paramount Pictures, 2018.

³¹ Haya R. Hasan and Khaled Salah, "Combating Deepfake Videos Using Blockchain and Smart Contracts," *IEEE Access* 7, (2019), 41598, (my emphasis, V.L.).

appearances from a true reality. The whole point of blockchain is to secure authenticity in the absence of any trusted third party through a distributed and decentralized proof of work immune from hacks. Both smart contracts and neural nets are simply better means of distinguishing the real from the artificial, eliminating human judgment to the dustbin of inferior tribunals of appeal and epistemic modes of judgment. There is a kind of poetic justice, a sort of nature's revenge, in the way that the algorithms used to detect forgeries are the very ones used to create them in the first place. Way to get pharmakonned.

There is one last, much more primmie patch unsurprisingly coming out of the *humanities*, specifically theatre studies, and arguing that deepfakes present an opportunity to return to live performances and personal exchanges as the center of art and culture.³² As if theatre were not itself the very first Turing test to successfully fool its spectators into identifying with the fabricated tragedies of fictitious characters. At the extreme other end of modernity, the most realistic "solution" by far has been a profound despair, a pessimistic resignation that we are just going to have to live with deepfakes (at least until they trigger the sixth mass extinction event). "Democracies will have to accept an uncomfortable truth: in order to survive the threat of deepfakes, they are going to have to learn how to live with lies."³³

"Please remember while you're taking the test, if you lie, I will know. [...] Question 1: What's your favorite color?" "Red." "Lie." It is not long into their conversations before Ava starts asking the questions, easily detecting Caleb's every microexpression. There is an existential crisis that even Sartre's gang of depressives could never imagine whenever we fail the Turing test as a computer asks *us* to prove we are human by identifying cars or stop signs in a picture before we make an online transaction. Algorithms are now testing whether we are human, deciding whether they are dealing with an intelligent life form or not. Something is judging us and it isn't human or divine. As the Final Judgment passes out of God's hands and into Skynet's, deepfakes sound the synthesized trumpets of the apocalypse. The prophets had it right all along: at the end of modernity lies not

merely a critique of judgment, but the death of judgment. *Hasta la vista, baby.*

³² John Fletcher, "Deepfakes, Artificial Intelligence and Some Kind of Dystopia: The New Faces of Online Post-Face Performance," *Theatre Journal* 780:4, (2018): 455-71.

³³ Robert Chesney and Danielle Citron, "Deepfake and the New Disinformation War: The Coming Age of Post-Truth Geopolitics," *Foreign Affairs* 98, (2019): 155.

Alenka Zupančič Sex in the Cut

(Transcript of a talk at the school authorized by Alenka Zupančič)

Bionote: Alenka Zupančič is a Slovene philosopher and social theorist. She works as research advisor at the Institute of Philosophy, Scientific Research Center of the Slovene Academy of Sciences. She is also professor at the European Graduate School in Switzerland. Notable for her work on the intersection of philosophy and psychoanalysis, she is the author of numerous articles and books, including *Ethics of the Real: Kant and Lacan*; *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Two*; *Why Psychoanalysis: Three Interventions*; *The Odd One In: On Comedy*; and, most recently, *What Is Sex?*

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Abstract: The talk will attempt to explore the nature of the division or cut implied, also etymologically, in the term “sex”. It will attempt to develop a concept of division that does not imply any pre-existing whole, but rather exists as a self-standing entity, endowed by a reality of its own. What if the division implied in “sex” is not simply that between two sexes (or more), but rather something that marks the unrest of sexuality itself? How could this be related to the contemporary feminist struggle, and what kind of concept of universality would it imply?

Keywords: feminism, sexual division, reproduction, politics, universality

My philosophical work relates strongly to psychoanalysis and insists on both conceptual and political significance of the notion of the subject; it's also critical in some ways in respect to what goes around under the name of new realist ontologies. In this sense, it does not directly fit in or align with the general orientation of this

year's program, but I am very happy to be part of it nevertheless, and to be able to present my case, my argument here. I also fear that my paper might be composed a little bit too mechanically of two rather different parts and moods: the beginning and the end are more directly and generally political, while the central part is more of a “hardcore” presentation of a theoretical point which I think is important to be worked through conceptually, even if it is not directly political.

So let me just start with a rather general political framework in which I'll then try to situate my more particular intervention, related to the title: “Sex in the Cut”. We could say that while, on the one hand, it is far from clear what femininity or its essence are, and of course it is also unclear if there is any such thing, it is relatively clear, on the other hand, what *feminism* is. Feminism is a political and social movement, struggle of women (and men) for a considerably different mapping of the social space and social relations, including economic relations, which would result in an emancipatory shift in the access to mechanisms that determine these relations. So, what is at stake is not simply a better position for women within the given social space, but also the power to influence its further development, to question its basic parameters etc. I also would say that feminism is a *modern* political struggle, by which I mean that although of course there were women that we could describe as “feminists” living already in antiquity, in the middle-ages and so on, feminism as political struggle nevertheless essentially belongs to modernity and to the way the latter opened a new horizon of universality.

In this kind of general definition of feminism that I just proposed you can see that the term women (“women's struggle”, “position of women”) used in a rather non-problematic way, as something obvious and self-understanding; and I don't think many people have a problem with this, including feminists who dedicated perhaps their lives to dismantling any notion of feminine essence. So we can still say that feminism makes sense in relation to the category “women” in some way, even after the contemporary “deconstruction” of any essence of femininity. Why? I think one answer is: because in feminism “women” appear as *political* category to begin with. They appear as something that not only points beyond itself, but also involves a dimension of universality that is not simply a kind of all-en-

compassing chapeau or hat, but something else, and I will return to this later. In a similar way that, in Marxist theory, we don't need to define "workers" or the proletariat in any essentialist way in order to see them as an agent/subject of the emancipatory social struggle.

Women, then. We can start also from a very simple facticity. In many parts of the world women are still not recognized as equal political subjects, they are treated and mistreated in hideous ways, and of course there is also a very palpable new regressive wave rising in societies that have been much more progressive in these respects for many decades. Like the new attempt to move forward and step out of the Istanbul Convention – I don't know if this was the case also in Macedonia, but Slovenia was explicitly invited by Poland to step out of the Istanbul Convention, even though the latter is a very benign convention, emphasizing things like women's rights to vote and so on. We also have to be aware that although many emancipatory battles were won over the past century, these are still very recent battles, and it really looks now that nothing won in these battles is simply irreversible; the rapidity of the recent reactionary shifts is quite astonishing, things that have been completely impossible to imagine a year ago are quickly becoming part of some new common sense. Let me just give you a few reminders which I think are still somehow shocking if we were born into what is called liberal democratic society, say, in the late part of the last century. Women only got the right to vote in 1920 in the US, in 1944 in France, in 1971 in Switzerland (at the federal level), and only in 1984 in Liechtenstein. So there it is, at least at the level of the right to vote we are really talking about something that is very recent, and it is coming again under assault, together with other things, like the right to abortion.

This present regressive movement is, I believe, largely due to a combination of two factors. The global political and economic crisis, or simply the crisis of late capitalism—I definitely think the latter is itself in a crisis, which is more and more violently affecting the whole society and the way in which society is falling apart and getting strangely "reassembled" in new, although archaic looking ways. The second factor concerns the way in which the popular, populist right-wing ideologues like to attribute this crisis to, among other things, a "disturbed cosmic balance between sexes and their social roles". We actually get a lot of this kind of talk, even in mainstream media,

attributing all kinds of people's frustrations and discomfort to the "fact" that women no longer act like women, and men are not allowed to be really men, that sexes no longer know their place (in the cosmic or social order)... And this gets presented as the very source of our general social trouble, including economic imbalance, it gets to embody social imbalance as such. And it suggests that we should go about dealing with global imbalances by (re)introducing some order and balance "at home."

Instead of simply dismissing this ideological narrative as an obscurantist regression, we should try to find its "rationale" – not its justification, but that what could explain its efficiency, the ease with which it convinces not necessarily stupid people that there is something there, some kind of truth....

I'm certainly not the first to suggest that this "rationale" is to be situated in liberalism, and more specifically in the way in which (late) capitalism has combined, or produced, a very peculiar compound of civil and economic liberalism (or social and economic liberalism). Monetary abstraction and abstract universalism of capital combined very well with communitarian particularisms and identity claims, as well as "identity politics."

This was Alain Badiou's harsh judgment on "identity politics" already back in 1998, in his book *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*:

Capital demands a permanent creation of subjective and territorial identities in order for its principle of movement to homogenize its space of action; identities, moreover, that never demand anything but the right to be exposed in the same way as others to the uniform prerogatives of the market. The capitalist logic of the general equivalent and the identitarian and cultural logic of communities or minorities form an articulated whole.¹

I won't go into discussing this, and I'm not saying that "identity politics" (as the particular late-capitalist compound of economic and civil liberalism) is the *culprit* of the present regression, I'm simply saying that its longstanding accommodation within monetary ab-

¹ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (California: Stanford University Press, 2003) 10-11.

straction makes it very simple today for political reactionaries to attack it, and its symbolic markers, as the primary and “obvious” cause of social all evil. There are much more visible than the monetary and other abstractions. And we should not forget that the rhetoric of the extreme right is often anti-capitalist rhetoric, yet what it attacks is precisely and only the “symbolic” dimension (symbolic markers, lifestyle) of liberalism, not its truly devastating economic logic.

In this context I think feminism today has to resist the impulse to also react only on the level of symbolic markers. Because this means to react only to the old well-recognizable features of “patriarchate,” instead of paying attention to the present, more complicated social configurations, in which we are dealing with “a total hegemonic fusion of the corporate and the countercultural, of progressivism, modernity, and the market.”²

Feminism as political struggle means that emancipation is conceived as inherently universalist struggle, and this universalism cannot be pinned to this or that identity, but rather to something like political *subject*. Not because subject is broader, more general or more neutral than any particular identity, but because it presents the point of a concrete universal. The latter is not inclusive because of its broadness, but because of its very precise concreteness; that is to say, because it relates to a very concrete existence of a social antagonism.

Of course this also demands working through the question of what is a subject and what is universal in this stance, what is universalist. In what follows I will now propose a brief, and hopefully not too dense, conceptual excursion which will link the question of subjectivity to that of feminism, to sex, and to the issue of universality.

In order to do this I will bring in some heavy Lacanian artillery—not so as to torture you with painful exegesis of Lacan, but because I think some of these ideas could really be helpful for this debate, and can help us put in a different perspective the old question of the relationship between the cultural/symbolic and the natural/biological when it comes to sex and “the sexes.”

If sex is bound up with symbolic, it is not simply on the level of the

² Angela Nagle, “The Market Theocracy,” *Jacobin*, (May 10, 2017). <https://jacobinmag.com/2017/05/handmaids-tale-margaret-atwood-trump-abortion-theocracy>.

symbolic influencing or constituting it, the sex, but on a much more fundamental level of the constitution of the symbolic itself. Sex is not simply an object of symbolic interventions and appropriations, it has a much more “intimate,” as well as generative relation with the symbolic. This is an idea that we found most explicitly formulated at some points of Lacan’s *Seminar XI*. The particular story, or thread, that I’ll insist on is rarely told or insisted upon even by the Lacanians, because of the rather daring narrative it implies, but this is precisely why I decided to insist on it here today.

It all starts, well, with death, and its role in the reproduction of life.

We know that sexual division, in so far as it reigns over most living beings, is that which ensures the survival of a species. [...] Let us say that the species survives in the form of its individuals. Nevertheless, the survival of the horse as a species has a meaning—each horse is transitory and dies. So you see, the link between sex and death, sex and the death of the individual, is fundamental.³

The link Lacan establishes here between sex and death has little to do with ideas about orgasm as “little death” and with some ecstatic dimension of enjoyment. Instead, it has to do with the *cut in the continuity* as internal moment of this same continuity. Species continues by way of repeating cuts (deaths) related to the very principle of sexual reproduction. Sex, sexuation is first and foremost a cut in the continuity of life, a cut in which something gets lost; it is a discontinuity (of life), a loss of life; and paradoxically, it is the repetition of this loss that constitutes life’s continuity. As such, sex is the point of the incidence of death in life.

Immediately following the above quoted passage Lacan goes on to suggest that the elementary structures of social/symbolic functioning and their fundamental combinatory are inseparably related to sexual reality, to copulation, *because* the mainspring of reproduction (and its implication of individual death) is to be found here. Let me quote another extremely important – and conceptually very audacious passage—in its integrity:

³ Jacques Lacan, *Jacques Lacan, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI, The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1998) 150-51

Existence, thanks to sexual division, rests upon copulation, accentuated in two poles that time-honoured tradition has tried to characterize as the male pole and the female pole. This is because the mainspring of reproduction is to be found there. Around this fundamental reality, there have always been grouped, harmonized, other characteristics, more or less bound up with the finality of reproduction. [...] We know today how, in society, a whole distribution of functions in a play of alternation is grounded on this terrain. It is modern structuralism that has brought this out best, by showing that it is at the level of matrimonial alliance, as opposed to natural generation, to biological lineal descent—at the level therefore of the signifier—that the fundamental exchanges take place and it is there that we find once again that the most elementary structures of social functioning are inscribed in the terms of a combinatory.

The integration of this combinatory into sexual reality raises the question of whether it is not in this way that the signifier came into the world.

What would make it legitimate to maintain that it is through sexual reality that the signifier came into the world—that man learnt to think—is the recent field of discoveries that begins by a more accurate study of mitosis.⁴

Here we have an audaciously strong claim affirming an original coincidence of sexuality and the signifier, of sexual reality and symbolic reality. Lacan, at that time of his teaching, still oscillates, and pulls back from this explicit claim in the next paragraph, suggesting the “analogical” relation between the two. But here we have this suggestion put on the table quite explicitly: the signifier came into the world through sexual reality and sexual division because of the latter’s involvement in reproduction, reproduction involving death (a minus) as its condition; signifying combinatory introduces other logic than that of biological lineal descent. (Which also implies that there is absolutely nothing natural or naturalizing in what we per-

ceive today as the extreme point of patriarchal organization, the exchange of women as objects of social interaction: all this is part of a powerful symbolic combinatory, even if it’s authorities like to evoke and refer to “eternal” natural or cosmic laws.)

To be said in passing: if we take Lacan’s claim seriously, we may be lead to interrogate what happens when and if sexual reality gets completely disentangled from reproduction, regeneration. Obviously, practices such as birth control or even artificial insemination cannot accomplish this, since they only perform a separation between sexual enjoyment, or simply between act of copulation, and reproduction. Yet reproduction itself, also when “artificial,” remains sexual, even if it gets disentangled from the lives that produce sexual cells. Sexual reproduction doesn’t mean that we need to *have sex* in order to reproduce as a species (although for a long time this has indeed been the prerequisite), it means that you need two different kinds of sex cells or sets of chromosomes. Cloning was the sole attempt so far to circumvent sexual reproduction (and the reduction/loss it involves), implying a possibility for humans (and not only humans), to reproduce in some other way than sexually... If it, or something like it related to new technological advances, would work and become the main means of reproduction, it would indeed make sense to raise the question of the implications of this for the symbolic order: would this imply a completely different symbolic horizon; or perhaps the end of the symbolic order as such?

So—back to our main argument—we have a very strong suggestion here which situates sexuality (sexual reproduction) at the very point of the *constitution of language* and the symbolic. Not simply in the sense that one is the origin of the other, but in the sense of them being inherently coextensive. We could also say that the emergence of language is a contingency that gets bound, in its very constitution to, sexual division.

But there is a further important point implied here, namely that this “sexual division” is not primarily about cutting the species in two (sexes), like in the Plato’s famous story from the *Symposium*, but about the incidence of *death* (that is, of some kind of loss or minus) as an intrinsic condition of the reproduction of life; the division of

⁴ Ibid., 150-1

sexes is so to say collateral to this. In other words, what is at stake is "...not sexed polarity, the relation between masculine and feminine, but the relation between the living subject and that which he loses by having to pass, for his reproduction, through the sexual cycle."⁵

The symbolic, and its subsequent retroactive influence on the conceptions of "sexed polarity" (femininity and masculinity) starts, or gets its anchoring point here.

In other words, sexual *division* (Lacan practically never speaks of "sexual difference"), although it is sexual, is not simply about the divide between "men" and "women". This divide is collateral to a loss of life implied in sexual reproduction, and this loss befalls both/all sexes. Sexes are divided by something they have in common, not by some original difference. They are divided by how they subjectivize this cut or negativity.

Something of "life" gets lost here, and the symbolic enters at this point, finds its anchoring point in this cut, *which is not itself "symbolic."* Counting doesn't start with one, but with a minus that becomes the very site of appearing of the (symbolic) count; it starts with something that gets lost (or that can be perceived only as lost). It is not that if first existed and was then lost, it only first comes into any kind of existence as lost.

As a result of this minus-based topology, the connection between symbolic and organic is never simply external (for example that of appropriation and determination of the organic by the symbolic), but constitutes an ontological reality of its own, irreducible to either "organic" or "symbolic."

This intrinsic topological connection is also the reason why what enters the picture here is not simply an additional, symbolic life and its combinatory (autonomous life of the signifiers in their materiality), but also something else: a kind of a strange, and strangely persistent "undead life," which Lacan conceptualizes under the name of the drive (*pulsion*) as pivotal point of sexuality in its dimension of enjoyment. And differently from sexual division involved in reproduction, the drive does not differentiate, but rather "indifferentiates." We could say that on the level of the drive there is only "one"

⁵ Ibid., 199.

sex, yet even this is already saying too much, since no proper "one" gets constituted there. It is all about partial objects.

What is this "undead life"? It refers to the way in which that what is (mythically) lost reenters the scene via the defile of signifieds, as parasitic on them, as their inseparable undercurrent.

It is at this precise point that Lacan famously introduces the image of an ungraspable, "false" organ (of the drive), calling it the *lamella*.

The lamella is something extra-flat, which moves like the amoeba. It is just a little more complicated. But it goes everywhere. And as it is something—I will tell you shortly why—that is related to what the sexed being loses in sexuality, it is, like the amoeba in relation to sexed beings, immortal—because it survives any division, any scissiparous intervention. And it can run around.

Well! This is not very reassuring. But suppose it comes and envelopes your face while you are quietly asleep.

I can't see how we would not join battle with a being capable of these properties. But it would not be a very convenient battle. This lamella, this organ, whose characteristic is not to exist, but which is nevertheless an organ [...] is the libido.

It is the libido, *qua* pure life instinct, that is to say, immortal life, or irrepressible life, life that has need of no organ, simplified, indestructible life. It is precisely what is subtracted from the living being by virtue of the fact that it is subject to the cycle of sexed reproduction. And it is of this that all the forms of the *objet a* that can be enumerated are the representatives, the equivalents. The *objets a* are merely its representatives, its figures.⁶

This is again a very important and dense passage. It is constructed around the difference between amoeba-like beings (un-individuated beings that survive division because there is no loss/minus/death involved in it), and sexed beings for which division at stake

⁶ Ibid., 197-8.

in reproduction involves a minus, a loss (also on a chromosome level), death, and hence connects reproduction, as continuity of life, to dying. We thus come back here to the idea of the link between sex and death, sex and the death of the individual as inscribed into the survival of the species.

And the drive, or the libido, appears as *a return* (return via “defiles of the signifier”) of that “what is subtracted from the living being by virtue of the fact that it is subject to the cycle of sexed reproduction.” The (mythical) immortal, irrepressible *life*, as by definition lost, returns as something better called *undead*, something indestructible because undead (libido, drive). Better still: the mythical irrepressible life-instinct only exists in reality as the *death drive*: not a drive aiming at death, but the drive to repeat the surplus (enjoyment) that appears at the place of the cut/minus involved in sexual division. In Lacanian topology, the cut into continuity of life, as means of this very continuity, constitutes the *place* at which a surplus enjoyment emerges: a “useless” surplus that satisfies no pre-existing physiological need, but creates, with its very appearance, a “need” for repetition of itself. In this context Lacan also points out the rim-like structure of erogenous zones, their affinity with cuts, edges, openings in the bodily structure.⁷

And so this is precisely the point where the Freudian opposition between life instinct or life drive (also referred to as “sexual drive”) and death instinct or death drive becomes untenable from the Lacanian perspective. They are the same.

The relation to the Other is precisely that which, for us, brings out what is represented by the lamella—not sexed polarity, the relation between masculine and feminine, but the relation between the living subject and that which he loses by having to pass, for his reproduction, through the sexual cycle. In this way I explain the essential affinity of every drive with the zone of death, and reconcile the two sides of the drive—which, at one and the same time, makes present sexuality in the unconscious and represents, in its essence, death.⁸

⁷ Ibid., 168.

⁸ Ibid., 199.

Many, many things could and should be further said in relation to this. But I will make an abrupt stop here, in order to simply point out the pertinence of this topology for the notion of political subject, also in the sense of political force—subject does not equal individual, it rather equals the gap, the interruption through which individual persists (and reproduces itself). Subjectivity is interruption, or more precisely, it is the way in which interruption gets inscribed in the symbolic order, gets “visible.”

In this sense, “subjectivity” is also very much related to what a living being loses by having to pass, for its reproduction, through the sexual cycle. Sexual difference is predicated upon a “minus” which is universal (Lacan will later formulate this in more formal terms of universality of castration as symbolic marker of this loss). Feminine and masculine positions, according to this theory, are defined by *the way in which* they relate to this minus, and hence to the Other. I discuss this in some detail in my book *What Is Sex?*, and this is not the place to repeat the entire argument. Let’s just say that sexual difference is conceptualized not as difference between two sets of characteristics, but as difference between two possible *kinds of universality*. One relying on a constitutive exception, and another which allows for no exception and which, precisely because of that, never constitutes a “whole.” The latter is related to the feminine position, in which the inclusion of the exception constitutes the very site of the force of negativity. To include the exception does not simply mean to include all that are still out, but to *activate*—by way of including it—the point of the exception as the concrete and pivotal point of the universal. It is in this sense, that is to say, because of the modality of the universal at work in this modality of subjectivation, that “feminine position” can be seen as inherently emancipatory position.

Feminism is an emancipatory political struggle, or it doesn’t exist. Which also means, philosophically, that it is about mobilizing subjectivity. Subject is not a neutral category, subsequently divided into men and women. Subject is not the prime vehicle of emancipation because it is neutral and a-sexual or all encompassing, but because it forces us to confront the cut, the negativity inherent to the symbolic order, and to respond to it in a concrete way. Because what is involved in this cut is always a relationship to something else, to the Other, which also means the social and the common.

Condition of universality is not neutrality, which is always an abstract universality, but a concrete singularity. For example, if we say that an emancipatory struggle has to stand up for “*all* the oppressed” (and not just for one particular group), this is not wrong, but it is formulated in a wrong way, we start at the wrong end: from universalism as abstraction in relationship to particular claims which shall be all included). Instead, we should say: whenever a particular struggle appears as embodying the divide and contradiction inherent to the universal, it functions already in itself as in principle representing everybody, even if one does not belong to that particular group. (We can “all” recognize the necessity of this struggle.)

Take for example the stupid rejoinder to the slogan “Black lives matter”: “All lives matter.” Yes, but the point is that you don’t get to all, to, say, some universal justice, by repeating that it *should* be there, but by focusing on the points that embody it’s absence, and by politically subjectivating these points in a universalist struggle. A very important further point: the frame and texture of universality change with and because of that struggle. We should not picture, say, “justice” as a predetermined field into which some are included and others not, so that these others legitimately struggle for their inclusion into it, in the simple sense of “WE also want to get in there.” Emancipatory struggle does not say: “We also want to be in this boat, so out with those who usurped it for so long!” (While resentment is an understandable political affect, it also has the nasty characteristic of *de-politicizing* the social space.) Emancipatory struggle says: “We need to change the boat!” Or rather: our fight is in itself a way of building, constructing a different kind of boat.

Nina Power

Revisiting Second Wave Feminism in the Light of Recent Controversies

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Abstract: This paper revisits elements of second wave feminism—in its psychoanalytic, radical, materialist, Marxist and deconstructionist aspects—the better to understand how it is we might define sexual difference today. The vexed question of sexual difference, of what it means to be a woman in particular has today generated great tensions at the theoretical, legal and philosophical level. This paper is an attempt to return to aspects of the second wave—an unfinished project where many enduring feminist concerns were for the first time thoroughly and metaphysically articulated—the better to defend the importance of sexual difference. To this end, the transcendental and parallax dimensions of sexed life will be discussed, alongside a defence of the centrality of the mother to our thinking about the relevance and necessity of preserving the importance of sexual difference, not only for thought but also for political and legal life.

Keywords: sex, gender, sexual difference, second wave feminism, parallax, motherhood, law

There are several conceptual impasses at the heart of contemporary feminist thinking. These arguably stem from unfinished business with second wave feminism, when central questions of politics, economics, labour and sexuality were most deeply posed. Today we can

observe the negative and positive definitions of the objects of materialist and radical feminist knowledge, and wonder what this means for any feminism today. Where materialist feminism understands women's lot in relation to their historical exploitation in relation to production and reproduction, radical feminism identifies the root of women's struggle in patriarchy. Thus, there are two "negative" objects at the heart of each position: one, the capitalist mode of production and, two, men, or, more specifically, male domination.

In the meantime, questions of "essentialism" have plagued feminist philosophical thinking. As Catherine Malabou puts it in *Changing Difference*: "In the post-feminist age the fact that "woman" finds herself deprived of her "essence" only confirms, paradoxically, a very ancient state of affairs: "woman" has never been able to define herself in any other way than in terms of the violence done to her. Violence alone confers her being—whether it is domestic and social violence or theoretical violence."¹ While this paper, will take issue with Malabou's suggestion that it is "violence" that ontologically defines woman or womanhood, it will, like Malabou, revisit the question of essentialism in relation to debates around sex and gender today in relation to the tensions between materialist and radical feminism and ask whether it is possible to define woman in such a way that does not rely on these hidden negative objects (capitalism or patriarchy).

It is my conviction that the feminisms loosely-termed "second-wave" are not yet concluded, which is to say, that the concerns of the feminisms of this period regarding their relation to Marxism, to history, to culture, to ecology, to race, to men, to technology and so on, remain live questions that have not yet been transcended or displaced by any shifts in social, technological or historical developments, despite the wish, perhaps, that this might be so, for example, in the lineage of technophilic feminisms from Shulamith Firestone to Xenofeminism today. Developments in reproductive technology have not, I suggest, been accompanied by revolution at the level of the sex-class. In other words, techno-feminism has not escaped techno-capitalism.

¹ Catherine Malabou, *Changing Difference: The Feminine and the Question of Philosophy*, trans. Carolyn Shread (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), v.

I wish to remain within the tensions and difficulties of radical, materialist, Marxist, deconstructionist and psychoanalytic feminisms in light of the on-going difficulty of defining “woman” and “women” in anything other than negative terms—a feature seemingly inherent to thought, language and reality—as, for example, “not-men,” the “second sex” or, as Malabou puts it in 2011:

That “woman” finds herself now in the age of post-feminism deprived of her “essence” only confirms paradoxically a very ancient state of affairs: “woman” has never been able to define herself other than through the violence done to her.²

Malabou’s proposal that we define woman as “an empty but resistant essence, an essence that is resistant because empty and a resistance that strikes out the impossibility of its own disappearance once and for all”³ might remind us, at the outset, of Karl Marx’s early formulation of the class with radical chains, an estate which is the dissolution of all estates. Malabou’s definition is not a positive identification, just as Marx’s definition of the proletariat is not either, but the analogies between women and the proletariat, productive in some respects, are of course stretched thin in other ways.

Malabou suggests that feminism today can be seen as a feminism without women. But a paradox remains: “if we name *it* the feminine, if we incorporate the inviolable [Derrida’s name for the feminine – note mine, N.P.] we [...] run the risk of fixing this fragility, assigning it a residence and making a fetish out of *it*. If we resist it, we refuse to embody the *inviolable* and it becomes anything at all under the pretext of referring to anyone”.⁴ What is feminism, she asks, “if it involves eradicating its origin, woman?”⁵ adding later that, “the deconstruction of sexual identities does not imply letting-go of the fight for women’s liberation”.⁶ Malabou’s reliance on violence to define “woman”—“woman is nothing any more, except the violence through which her “being nothing” continues to exist”⁷—cannot but seem plaintive, though she suggests it opens a new path for femi-

nism that goes beyond both essentialism and anti-essentialism. But why does any philosophically-informed definition of woman have to be negative? Is there no way of escaping the reliance on a positive binary term whose empty opposite pole is labelled “woman”? Why does woman have to be associated with violence, rather than some more positive identifying unifying characteristic?

Here we must turn to the methodology of our approach. Sex would seem, on the face of it, to be an obvious candidate for thinking about parallax, or thinking “parallaxically”, if we are talking about ways of seeing, or places, and positions to see and think from. I am using parallax here in the sense that when an object appears to change its position it is because the person or instrument has also changed their position. We could say, very simply, that the world looks differently depending on if you are a man or a woman. *How* it looks different, or how we come to understand these terms “man” or “woman” as positions, whether biological, linguistic, legal, existential, and so on, is a complex matter. Recent years have seen extremely emotional and, at times, violent, contestation over what these terms mean and who can claim them.

Debates in the United Kingdom, but elsewhere too, over proposals to change the meaning of sex from a “biological definition” to “self-identification” has seen women attacked for wanting to attend meetings to discuss proposed changes to legislation, and many women, and some men, have lost employment after being accused of holding “transphobic” positions (although the people accused of this would not accept this word): that is to say, they have been attacked for saying that sex is real, and that this difference has consequences, and for disputing the idea that being a man or a woman is a matter of a feeling, for criticizing the idea that one can say one is a man or a woman because one *feels* that way. But what happens if we agree that sex “isn’t real,” or, in other words, that sex is not how we decide who is a man or who is a woman? Among trans activists, sex is postulated as something that can be changed, either through a declaration and/or through surgical and chemical intervention. So, we have two competing claims here: one, that sex is real, and the other, that sex is not real, or, perhaps, that sex is not as real as *something else that is more important*—whatever that something else is: desire, image, fantasy, feeling.

² Ibid., v.

³ Ibid., v.

⁴ Ibid., 35.

⁵ Ibid., 36.

⁶ Ibid., 93.

⁷ Ibid., 98.

It is obvious from this brief sketch that there is in contemporary life a serious and deep clash of positions here regarding what it means to be a “man” or a “woman”. What role has, and what role can, psychoanalysis play in these turbulent times? Those who hold that male and female are realities that have distinct features are often criticized as holding “essentialist” positions, that is to say, that commitment to the biological existence of two separate sexes brings with it, or threatens to, ideas of how each sex should behave (i.e., men should behave in a “masculine” way, women in a “feminine” way, for example as some traditionalist religious positions might entail).

It is, however, arguably possible to both be committed to the reality of biological sex, but not be committed to the idea that any particular kind of “gendered” behaviour follows from this acceptance of reality (the doctor says: “it’s a girl!” or “it’s a boy!” but does not say how these facts should play out in each individual’s lives). “Intersex” individuals are sometimes invoked to complicate the motion of sex, to suggest that sex is a spectrum not a binary, but even in these rare cases, it is evident that there is no third sex, and disorders or sexual development are always disorders of male or female sexual development, i.e. they confirm the sex binary.

As second wave feminisms repeatedly argued, the acceptance of a biological basis to sex does not entail that boys or girls, men or women, should therefore *behave* in particular ways because of the fact that one is born male or female. In fact, we could say, gender roles and stereotypes are precisely that which should be *abolished*, both individually and collectively. This argument historically filtered down in education and broader society for the two or three decades following these ideas of “gender abolition,” such that there was a loosening up of gender stereotypes, and more freedom regarding dress, interests and behaviour, including sexual behavior (i.e., just because one was a feminine boy or man and attracted to other boys, for example, did not make that person a girl or a woman).

The psychoanalytic position, particularly in Lacan’s work on feminine sexuality, comes at the question from a slightly different angle. As Jacqueline Rose puts it: “Lacan does not refuse difference (“if there was no difference how could I say there was no sexual relation” ...),

but for him what is to be questioned is the seeming “consistency” of that difference—of the body or anything else—the division it enjoins, the definitions of the woman it produces.”⁸ It appears as if there is more mystery in the psychoanalytic position, more flexibility. As Juliet Mitchell puts it:

[Freud’s] account of sexual desire led Lacan, as it led Freud, to his adamant rejection of any theory of the difference between the sexes in terms of pre-given male or female entities which complete and satisfy each other. Sexual difference can only be the consequence of a division; without this division it would cease to exist. But it must exist because no human being can become a subject outside the division into two sexes. One must take up a position as either a man or a woman. Such a position is by no means identical with one’s biological sexual characteristics, nor is it a position of which one can be very confident—as the psychoanalytical experience demonstrates.⁹

The profound uncertainty and on-going ambivalence in relation to the inescapably sexed nature of existence, recognized by psychoanalysis, has nevertheless arguably shifted in the wider culture to a desire to, at times, completely dispense with the recognition of the originary division or difference. Every signifier relating to sexuation seems to just *float*, which makes the question of sex a question of power: who has the power to name. While it may have been expeditious at a certain point to criticize the sexual binary in the name of attacking the hierarchy of this binarism (the idea, longstanding in Western thought, that the male is “better” than the female), the attempt to eradicate the binary now can in many ways be seen as ushering in a new era of anti-feminism, in which women’s right to define themselves is once again eradicated.

Here I want to address two neglected aspects of the question of sex. Firstly, the too-quick slide between sexuation and sexuality, as if the problem of sexual difference can be passed over by the invocation

⁸ Jacqueline Rose, “Introduction – II”, *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*, ed. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, trans. Jacqueline Rose (London, New York: W.W. Norton & Company), 56.

⁹ Juliet Mitchell, “Introduction – I”, 6.

of desire (the parallax of sexuation/sexuality). And, secondly, the relative neglect of the inheritance and history of second wave feminist theory in contemporary psychoanalysis, particularly in the occlusion of the figure of the mother, both metaphorically and in everyday life (the parallax mother).

Sexuation/Sexuality

So, to be clear, in more recent years, a new notion of “gender” has emerged, what we have noted as the “feeling” idea. This idea has no necessary basis in biological sex, i.e. one can simply say that one “is” or “identifies” as a woman or a man (or as neither) for it to be “true.” What is the role or relation to psychoanalysis in this later notion? This idea of sex as “assertion,” where one says one simply “is” a man or a woman is troubled by the idea that one can never truly assert with such certainty that one is (or is not) anything at all. At the same time, psychoanalysis has troubled the idea of uncritical access to such a thing as biological reality, or that there is a pre-linguistic space of bodies or desires that we can access.

Yet, we live in an everyday double-bind when it comes to sexuation. We both believe and do not believe (to some extent) in the reality of sex. We both notice it, and ignore it. Is “sex” therefore a “transcendental” condition for the possibility of knowledge? Either in the sense that we see the world through the lens of sex, i.e., we see sex as if it is *in* the world, and/or that we see the world in a sexed way, i.e., from the standpoint of our own sex, consciously or otherwise. We could say it is a transcendental condition in both of these senses.

We thus both see sex and disavow it. There is no non-sexed experience or knowledge. It is not possible for human beings to understand the world outside of sex, even if there are various knowledges that do not pertain to sex as such (mathematical truths are not “male” or “female”, for example, although this too has been contested by thinkers such as Luce Irigaray, for example). It is possible to talk about the ways in which multiple things—language, discourses, disciplines, experience, history—are sexuated, or are lived in a sexed manner, which is something no living human being can exit from entirely, even if “one’s sex” is always a problem or a question for everyone.

Psychoanalysis, in its focus on desire, often skips over quickly from sexuation to sexuality, as if the latter realm is the only place in which the former is lived out. But sexuation is much more than how one relates to the other: here we could take a much more existentialist approach, such as that found in the work of Simone de Beauvoir: “[woman] is the most deeply alienated of all the female mammals, and she is the one that refuses this alienation most violently; in no other is the subordination of the organism to the reproductive function more imperious nor accepted with greater difficulty [...]. These biological data are of extreme importance: they play an all-important role and are an essential element of woman’s situation.”²⁰

If we are to take seriously the idea that sex *is* a transcendental category of parallax, we would mean that a) not only is sex the condition for the possibility of knowing, but also b) that seeing from these two different perspectives, male and female, might be possible in a fused or disjunct way, i.e. to see things from the male *and* female perspective, or the male *or* female perspective. But is sex something that changes how we see everything? We can and do talk about “human” knowledge, knowledge of and for and gained by the species, but is this knowledge truly “without sex”? There is no third sex position, though there is “neutral” knowledge that does not depend on the sex of the person comprehending it.

At the same time, there is no position outside of sex as such. The androgyne, by combining the desirability of both man and woman, thus appealing to both without being reduced to either, is a powerful alchemical symbol, but ultimately knows what a masculine woman or a feminine man would learn about desire. There are also no true hermaphrodites—that is to say, no human beings possessed of two complete working sets of reproductive organs, one male, one female. So-called intersex cases are disorders of sexual development, and do not constitute third sex. So we are left with the binary, no matter how much we play with it.

As Alenka Zupančič puts it in *What Is Sex?*, “if one “removes sex from sex,” one removes the very thing that has brought to light the problem that sexual difference is all about. One does not remove

²⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Shelia Malovany-Chevallier (London: Jonathan Cape, 2009), 44.

the problem, but the means of seeing it, and of seeing the way it operates."¹¹

When Freud talks about human bisexuality in the 1905 edition of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* in discussing "male inverts" (that is to say, male homosexuals), Freud writes: "Expressing the crudest form of the theory of bisexuality, a spokesperson for male inverts described it was a female brain in a male body. But we do not know what characterizes a "female brain." There is neither need nor justification for replacing the psychological problem with the anatomical one."¹² What Freud identifies is a certain kind of temptation: that it is possible to understand or "be" the opposite sex in relation to sexual object choice. Thus, a homosexual man is "like" a woman because his object choice is the same as a heterosexual woman, and, consequently, there is something "anatomical" which differentiates him from a heterosexual man. But this is too simple, even as we see a resurgence of this kind of thinking today among some proponents of the transgender narrative, namely that it is possible to be born "in the wrong body" or that male or female brains can exist in male or female bodies.

So, what is the psychological—or for the purposes of this paper—transcendental problem of sex? If we take part of Hegel's criticism of Kant seriously, we too should historicise the question of sex. One of the major problems of today's technologically-oriented, transhumanist narrative, in which it is somehow imagined possible, through drugs and/or surgery, to transform material reality into a kind of wish-fulfillment, what is left behind is the incomplete meeting of psychoanalysis and feminism. This can be seen particularly in the figure of the absence of the mother in much contemporary psychoanalytic discourse. Here, second-wave feminism both figures as the "maternal" discourse, as in, generationally old enough to be the conceptual mother of today's, arguably infantilized, discussions of sex, but also as the set of questions and thoughts that properly posed the role and significance of the mother, and is now being obscured again.

We are living through not just a period of extreme real and virtual misogyny, but also through yet another backlash against feminism, particularly, against the kind of feminism that had something to say about sexual difference, sexual relations, violence and patriarchy. Seen a certain way, this can be seen as a culturally and historically widespread attack on mothers in general, though we might say too that the history of humanity is nothing other than an endless series of backlashes of one group against one another, usually on the basis of misrepresentation and projection.

I am not here attempting to reduce womanhood to motherhood, nor womanhood nor motherhood to any kind of normative idea of what that would mean, but rather to ask, perhaps open and general, questions about what the relationship between matricide, feminism and memory might be. And here I am focusing on second wave feminism, not as a historical artefact, but rather as an approach to the world that has its political emphasis on women's liberation, its theoretical focus on patriarchy as a historical but also a structuring feature of human thought—whether we are talking about philosophy or psychoanalysis or any other academic discipline—but also as a social question about how men and women might live together. The concern with "matricide" here is also that we are in the process both of forgetting and murdering the insights of the so-called second wave. I suspect we may need to come up with a somewhat piecemeal, fragmentary, funny and unfinished way of addressing the question, "how might we live together," and behind all of this is what a psychoanalytically feminist theory of humour might be vis-à-vis the question of sexual difference and the social relations between men and women (but this is for another time).

The "truths" of psychoanalysis and the "truths" of feminism both seem to have suffered a similar fate in recent years—skipped over, ignored or imagined to be something else, generationally displaced, as if these disciplines did not ask the exact same questions, as humanity does of itself, over and over again.

So, why focus on matricide, feminism and memory? It strikes me that there are at least three main themes, on different but related

¹¹ Alenka Zupančič, *What Is Sex?* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2017), 44.

¹² Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality: The 1905 Edition*, trans. by Ulrike Kistner, ed. and intro Philippe van Haute and Herman Westernik (London: Verso, 2016), 8.

levels, that initially came to my mind, and before I outline these, I want to briefly introduce an important distinction between “not-forgetting” on the one hand, and “remembering” on the other. This is a distinction that Alain Badiou brings up in his *Ethics*:

[T]he concrete circumstances in which someone is seized by a fidelity: an amorous encounter, the sudden feeling that this poem was addressed to you, a scientific theory whose initially obscure beauty overwhelms you, or the active intelligence of a political place [...] you have to have encountered, at least once in your life, the voice of a Master [...] if it is true that—as Lacan suggests—all access to the Real is of the order of an encounter. And consistency, which is the content of the ethical maxim “Keep going!” [*Continuer!*], keeps going only by following the thread of this Real. We might put it like this: “Never forget what you have encountered.” But we can say this only if we understand that not-forgetting is not a memory.¹³

So I want to try to be faithful to this idea of not-forgetting. But what have we encountered, and what should we not forget, especially when it comes to those things which are structurally forgotten most of all? Which “Master” are we talking about when it comes to mothers, and how can we even use this word in this way? The parallax optics on mastery and mothering causes a short-circuit from the start.

The material circumstances of matricide should be noted. The 2017 Femicide Census noted that 7.1% of the 113 women killed in England, Wales and Northern Ireland in 2016 were killed by a male family member, i.e., a son, father, brother, nephew or grandson.¹⁴ The report noted that some of the contexts for these killings could be contextualised under the heading of “mercy killing” or “domestic child-parent” situations in news reports, for example. While matricide is relatively rare, and certainly only forms a small proportion of the total instances of femicide (most women are killed by their current or former partner), we might ask ourselves whether

there is a broader culture of animosity towards mothers, without of course exempting ourselves from such murderous, or at the least ambivalent, feelings. We are all capable of violence and aggressivity, which is completely forgotten in some of the discourses around “me too” or “toxic masculinity,” but violence is, in actuality, unevenly distributed when it comes to women and men.

Women are not always of course on the side of passivity, nurturing and so on. The capacity to care is also and always the capacity to harm. But women historically and practically are the most immediate and obvious group targeted whenever resentment is expressed. As Jacqueline Rose puts it in her recent text *Mothers: An Essay On Love and Cruelty*

motherhood is, in Western discourse, the place in our culture where we lodge, or rather bury, the reality of our own conflicts, of what it means to be fully human. It is the ultimate scapegoat for our personal and political failings, for everything that is wrong with the world, which it becomes the task—unrealizable, of course—of mothers to repair.¹⁵

Similarly, in *The Mother in Psychoanalysis and Beyond: Matricide and Maternal Subjectivity*, the editors, Rosalind Mayo and Christina Moutsou, concur with Rose’s diagnosis, suggesting that we all hold “mothers responsible for a variety of personal and social ills and problems, in which maternal vulnerability is denied and silenced.”¹⁶

There is more open and public discussion, though perhaps still not enough, of the hardships of motherhood in recent years. In a popular article by Charlotte Naughton entitled “Why Don’t We Care About New Mothers Suffering?,” she writes,

For most people who have a baby, it is inconceivably hard. Modern society protects us from most of the ravages of nature—serious illness, cold, discomfort and pain. But in childbirth and looking after a newborn, we experience the harsh realities of our basic existence; we get closer to

¹³ Alain Badiou, *Ethics*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001), 52.

¹⁴ Dr Julia Long, Keshia Harper, and Heather Harvey, “The Femicide Census: 2017 Findings: Annual Report on UK Femicides 2017,” *The Femicide Census (2017)*. <https://www.womensaid.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/Femicide-Census-of-2017.pdf>.

¹⁵ Jacqueline Rose, *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (London: Faber & Faber), “Opening”, e-book

¹⁶ Rosalind Mayo and Christina Moutsou, eds., *The Mother in Psychoanalysis and Beyond: Matricide and Maternal Subjectivity* (London: Routledge, 2017), 1.

our primal selves. And we're not used to it. Post-partum depression and psychosis among mothers are on the rise, according to a recent survey of health visitors, and childbirth and infant mortality are still serious problems in many parts of the world."¹⁷

As Rose comments, "one reason why motherhood is often so disconcerting seems to be its uneasy proximity to death."¹⁸

Rose's project in her essay, and any psychoanalytic account of motherhood that acknowledges its proximity to death, must also therefore be a question of *eros*. Rose writes:

Above all, whenever any aspect of mothering is vaunted as the emblem of health, love and devotion, you can be sure that a whole complex range of emotions, of what humans are capable of feeling, is being silenced or suppressed. Such injunctions wipe pleasure and pain, *eros* and death from the slate. Why, French psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche once mused, are there no artistic representations, or any recognition in psychoanalytic writing, of the erotic pleasure that a mother gains in breastfeeding her child? As if to say, breastfeeding is okay (indeed obligatory), but not so okay is its attendant pleasure.¹⁹

The pleasure of the breast-feeding mother, perhaps represented on occasion only in religious portrayals of the Virgin Mary with Jesus at her breast, points, perhaps, to a deeper question of envy. The envy of women, of motherhood, of female pleasure in general is buried deep within our culture. It relates to the broader crisis of definition relating to the term "woman", identified above, which has implications for how motherhood does and doesn't overlap with this term. Not all women are mothers, but all mothers are women. Mothers are vital but constantly erased. The obscuring of the mother is part and parcel of the floating quality of the signifier "woman."

¹⁷ Charlotte Naughton, "Why don't we Care About New Mothers' Suffering?," *The Guardian* (July 02, 2018). <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jul/02/baby-blues-suffering-new-mothers-mental-health>

¹⁸ Rose, *Mothers*, "Now".

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, "Love".

Many things cause problems here, in an on-going way. Maintaining the boundary of womanhood has always been difficult—within psychoanalysis, woman is the "not-all", but in broader social life it seems that womanhood is more-or-less completely permeable. It is a term "up for grabs," as it were, a series of images and words open to everyone, but also strangely obscured.

In recent years in the U.K. we have had quite furious public debates over, for example, the use of the term "non-men" by the Green Party in 2016 to include both women, trans women and non-binary people—the term "men" was not changed to become "non-woman"—with the group "Green Party Women" suggesting that "as a whole, women are happy with terms such as "non-men" to be used."²⁰ More recently, there has been anger over changes in the language used around the body, with Cancer Research U.K. tweeting that "[c]ervical screening (or the smear test) is relevant for everyone aged 25-64 with a cervix."²¹ In March 2017, popular feminist writer Laurie Penny asked on Twitter: "someone tell me, what's a shorter non-essentialist way to refer to "people who have a uterus and all that stuff"?²² An online forum based in the UK called, not unimportantly, "Mumsnet," with over 12 million visitors per month, has many members who have similarly reacted with intense anger over suggestions that they cannot refer to women using the definition "adult human female."²³

By merely discussing this question at all at the moment, it becomes almost impossible to avoid being positioned on one "side" or the other, but from a psychoanalytical and philosophical point of view, we might well ask some difficult questions regarding how "biological sex" is functioning, or not functioning, in these discussions, and why "woman" rather than "man" has become such a contested term in recent years at the level of the socio-political. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that women are being increasingly obscured both conceptually and politically.

²⁰ Julian Vigo, "Woman by Proxy," *Medium* (April 18, 2016). <https://medium.com/@julian.vigo/woman-by-proxy-2b42c1572392>

²¹ Helena Horton, "Cancer Research Removes the Word 'women' from Smear Campaign Amid Transgender Concerns," *The Telegraph* (June 15, 2018). <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2018/06/14/cancer-research-removes-word-women-smear-campaign-amid-transgender/>.

²² Quoted here <https://sisterout rider.wordpress.com/2017/03/15/the-problem-that-has-no-name-because-woman-is-too-essentialist/>

²³ www.mumsnet.com

In his 1938 work on the family, Lacan writes the following:

Biological kinship: Another completely contingent similarity is the fact that the normal components of the family as they are seen in our contemporary western world—father, mother and children—are the same as those of the biological family. This identity is in fact nothing more than a numerical equality.²⁴

We know that the emphasis on, or rather, a reduction to, the biological or “biologism” is completely antithetical to an understanding of the symbolic order, of our entry into language, but there is a crisis of identity at the heart of some of these, often extremely fraught, debates. We seem to have moved from an understanding of identity that accepts that all identity is constructed in a complex negotiation with oneself and others and with broader social conditions, to an extreme position on social perception, in which the demand is made of the other that the other recognise the person demanding as whatever they say they are. Recognition at the social and historical level cannot, however, proceed with individual desire and demand as its central feature.

Conclusion

Sex (as in sexuation, rather than sexuality) is constitutively a problem, or a question, for *everyone*, man or woman. There is no way out of the hand we are dealt, no matter how we might wish it otherwise. We see the world from the standpoint of being a man, or as a woman, whatever similarities or differences there might be between the sexes, and however much these positions change during the course of history. It is not enough to skip over sexuation in favour of sexuality, even if the sexed body points to deeper questions of difference, it certainly does not permit avoiding the reality of sexed life. Whatever the difference between men and women might be, it is imperative for the collective sanity of humanity that we hold firm to the fact that there *is* a difference, however it is lived. This holding on to a definition of sexual difference has important positive

implications for law, history, society and thought. Life becomes extremely complicated if we do not hold on to the difference between men and women, however we decide to understand these words.

We can hold onto the parallax of sex itself in order to move around this increasingly contested question. But for that to be possible, we cannot begin by giving up the word “woman” to the ether, as if it has no historical or conceptual weight, and no positive meaning for the future. The second wave is, as yet, an unfinished project.

²⁴ Jacques Lacan, “Family Complexes in the Formation of the Individual,” trans. Cormac Gallagher, *Encyclopédie Française* 8 (1938): 7. <https://www.scribd.com/document/73359960/Jacques-Lacan-Family-Complexes-in-the-Formation-of-the-Individual>.

Nina Power et al.

Q&A session following the lecture: Materialist Feminism and Radical Feminism: Revisiting the Second Wave in the Light of Recent Controversies

Alenka Zupančič: Hi again, Patricia [Reed], and now Nina, I really was enjoying both of your talks that I was able to follow, and Nina really great to see you again. I'm afraid my mind only half-functions today. I'm full of other things and other matter, but still I think I can simply say that I agree with almost everything you said. Even I could say, everything you said, I would perhaps put some things in a slightly different way. But I think it is, I would perhaps just use this opportunity to try to clarify, to engage in a dialogue with you, so as also perhaps to clarify some of the things that I quote and I was trying to say before.

The polemical question that you started with I think I very much share, and I think we all share these kind of, a lot of us share, this kind of frustration of precisely feminism being caught between these two things. Clearly stating what it is to be a woman is there, you know can say a woman, or is there only a negative way even, if this negative way then amounts to some kind of, not only definition, but, some kind of concept? Is it possible to kind of think, now we are trying to think about it, of women in any other way than conceptually... obviously this does relate and always does to certain empirical things and situations. But still I cannot, and this is not at all a minor mark because I know I am myself at a loss here, and I keep struggling with this and I am very aware of this abstract sound of existence of negativity, in the final account, also the concept of parallax is something like this, you know, precisely, parallax is not simply two different points of view within the same system. It also involves a certain very important asymmetry. It is also that the notion of asymmetry is very important, this is precisely why otherwise people just change perspectives to get the whole picture. But, this is not the way to get the whole picture, and I think a very good example of parallax is the one that Žižek steals from Lévi-Strauss, you know this famous anthropological enterprise when he asks a tribe to picture, to draw the architectural, the image of their village and one part

draw it in like concentric circles and the other one like divided in half, or something like this. And the point that Lévi-Strauss makes is not that now we just look from above and we see the picture how the village really looks like, and we will get some kind of objective, or to be something third of course, the problem is truth, that the structure of this village is precisely the parallax view that came out of these two views. So this is absolutely fundamental and I guess this is what I was trying to kind of get to with this idea of the cut which coincides with sexuation but is not yet applied in sexuality. I mean, sexuality is part of it... So, I didn't want to skip over sexuation/sexuality rather the other way around. Anyway, I think the parallax is a very useful way precisely, and you know this image that Lacan draws of men/women like toilets, just two letters, and he actually uses there almost the same word that you did, you see the word very differently if you enter this door, or if you look from this door. I'm not speaking about this question of politics of toilets and stuff. But simply the fact that there seems to be this kind of fundamental part there and it is important to address it and not to think that if you just stop saying it, it will go away. Because it does cause all kinds of problems, it has caused all kinds of problems also to women, but the way we tackle with it is not just to say OK, now we will change the terms sexual difference or the multiplicity of genders and the world will be great and happy again. This is I think what we are basically both in, and then you kind of introduced motherhood as a kind of One, for instance, one of the concrete examples, of course for me, as you pointed it out, it's again very interesting because it brings in biologically this connection or this asymmetry, this proximity to death, there in a sense of... it's interesting, but at the same time you mentioned this surplus pleasure of breastfeeding which is a kind of a... So here we enter somehow sexuality and a different way which sexuality has. So I think it is a real deadlock, and I think because it is a deadlock, it is all the more imperative that we keep it and not try to perhaps simply resolve it, so I very much agree with what you said.... It is interesting the way you describe radical feminism and I think you described it quite correctly with all its polemics with Marxism, somehow, at some level it is radically Marxist in one sense. Namely in the sense that the same way that sexual difference, or divide, is for radical feminism something that goes beyond simply culture or whatever there is. Something that determines the very symbolic we

live in, you can say that this is what Marx was trying to say—class struggle. Something which is antagonism is really there and simply cannot be reduced to the struggle between different classes, but it is precisely the way in which the asymmetry of the very space of classes is structured, and this is what class struggle is about. It is also why I think there have been these kinds of both consonances and dissonances between radical feminism and Marxism, because of the certain proximity, and at the same time the place supposedly was already taken by the other constructs. But, I prefer to think of this as a true proximity and something that one still needs to work out.

Nina Power: Thank you, Alenka. In *Firestone* you have the attempt to talk about sex-class in which she states that sex-class is deeper than Marx's description of class. The biological asymmetry between man and woman, she says, is deeper than class.

AZ: Yes, but the same Marx would say that class differences are deeper than class. It's the mode of production that is not simply... To some extent it's not a similar argument...

NP: Just one comment on the asymmetry of the parallax. In a sense, it's both a deadlock and it's kind of keeping open these questions at the same time. My resistance I suppose to the asymmetry, when it's understood negatively, is because of the history of western thought... that any binary division is a way of hierarchy, so you know, how do we overcome this, the idea that if there is a binary that there always must be an opposition, that there always must be like a hierarchy, etc. So I think, and obviously I understand what Malabou and De Beauvoir are doing, and you also in a different way, but, to kind of absolutely give a positive value to the negative almost, if I can put it like this. To say that there is, like the "beauty of nothing" in Malabou, that the nothing is a position of resistance, to have a position beyond essentialism and non-essentialism is in fact a site of resistance. And of course to even get beyond binary thinking, how can we even do that in the age of zeroes and ones, and of course we're completely structured by it too, I mean I have a whole problem with zero but that's another thing. I can't even articulate this as a *philosophical* position necessarily, what I would describe as my resistance to a negative definition even, if that negative is itself not negative.

AZ: I think it is a negative that has a very concrete life and this is precisely what we are...

Neda Genova: There are a few questions that I have, a few problems I guess. One of them pertains to this kind of insistence upon this kind of biological specificity and reality of sex, as that which cannot be that is there, right? My sense is that I understand very well this kind of concern with not punishing women who make claims that can be classified as transphobic from certain perspectives, but in my view the insistence upon a biological difference, and it is what it is, it produces an exclusion practically and theoretically from another reality, right? That of trans-people, and as we know from the history of the second wave feminism, it is too being accompanied by struggles of Marxist women and their problematization of a homogenous understanding of what a woman is, so the posing of man and woman as homogenous categories in that kind of like basis upon which we kind of start from, I think, is already being shown that it can be very violent, very exclusionary in itself. That's one point and the other point is that, and I'm not particularly well versed in psychoanalysis, but if I understood Alenka Zupančič's point correctly, this kind of insistence upon a difference or division in her reading of Lacan was precisely to say there is not a divide in the human species into two separate species, but that kind of division happens at another level. By displacing this, you create a kind of abstraction you could say that then functions, in my view in quite a violent way, by kind of excluding different ways of relating to sex. And a last point, because yesterday I did try to use, like to talk about humour and parody as well, thinking about humorous feminism in my view would be one that finds that binary ridiculous, because if we take the binary as that kind of abstraction that can be rendered concrete in the act of humor and in the act of kind of making it I don't know, maybe Zupančič can say something about this, but that's how I understood the critical potential of humour, so a feminism that takes that kind of division as an immutable one, I think can be quite dangerous and exclusive.

NP: I will simply say that at the level of discussing concepts I mean to differentiate one concept from another. I mean, do you think that all those forms of differentiation are violence? I mean, is language "violent" as such?

NG: Language that postulates that reality is what it is, and that's it, is violence.

NP: When we differentiate one thing from another, we're giving it a definition, we're not saying therefore that it has to behave in any way, like the kind of minimal definition, let's say "woman" is means "adult human female"—this definition tells you nothing about what it *means* to be female, what it means to live as a woman.

NG: Judith Butler... in her work about sex and gender was precisely to show that sex is also discursively constructed. So they are not a couple, sex and gender are not a couple. We cannot postulate one thing as this basis upon which we then just reduce gender to a behavior... [inaudible] a kind of rendering of a so called transgender narrative, as you called it, as a self-referential identification. I think it's a very unjust way of pretending that kind of position.

NP: If these things are so playful what's the stake in saying that someone is one thing or another. If they're so open...

NG: Reality is at stake...

NP: Indeed, right. So, whose reality takes precedence? It all just becomes a question of power, the question of who asserts what words mean. This is the Humpty Dumpty theory of language.

NG: No, it's not, it's about alliances, we need to make alliances with trans feminists too, with all kinds of people that fight for the radical transformation of patriarchal society that we all suffer from in a different way.

NP: Sure, I'm absolutely on board with that, I think recognizing structural problems and working out where people share similar forms of oppression is absolutely correct, exactly what we need to do. But then that can't also be at the same time a division within that question of violence, it cannot be "kill all TERFS," it can't be accusing people of hatred that they don't feel. This is an incredibly divisive discussion that's happening, and I think it's absolutely, it would be incoherent to pretend that it's not happening, if you want to say that there is violence at the level of language, which there absolutely is, it's within *this* discourse as well. And it's against women who were asking reasonable questions, who are saying, look, we need to talk,

we need to have dialogue, and other people are saying "No, shut the fuck up," and threatening violence, no, seriously.

NG: I understand, it's not about some kind of inferiority, I don't know how other people, if they really feel hate or not, that's not the point. But, it's the same kind of argument that you can make of racist discourse and say, "Well, people are just not sure and they're asking legitimate questions," but at some point you need to also stand up and say... well, I mean we do need conversations, we do need that kind of engagement, but there is also something at stake there.

NP: Yes, it's an emotional discussion, it's a question of a shared world.

Katerina Kolozova: I do believe in a feminism that includes transwomen as well, I do believe that such struggle is possible. I have no recollection that Nina ever denied that possibility in her writing. I wanted to build on your (of Neda) comment that declaring what "reality is" is violence, or that it can be violence. If the ones who declares what's real and what's not real, have true political power, then the consequences are violence. But those who contest, for example, the epistemology, I would say, to me that's epistemology, gender constructivism or post-structuralism is merely epistemology, those who contest this epistemology may cause some violent consequences, even though they do not intend to. But the other side as well. The other side who says sex is not real, it does not exist, and no further discussion, if you discuss this issue then you are reactionary, that's also violence. Because that's also passing a metaphysical judgment and declaring it the sole truth. It's near to medieval legislating on what's real and what's not real. So, what you said is correct, but, one should call out the other side too on the same count. The other thing is, my position *vis a vis* this whole dilemma Nina raised and triggered the entire discussion, is completely experimental and might I sound silly, but if we are radical enough as materialists, as Marxists, would it be a strategy for us to move away completely from the ground of the postmodern battles over of hegemony of language, and simply give up on this fight for identity recognition. I would have absolutely no problem to be identified as a "uterus carrying being," whatever that thing is. Allowing that exposes the violence toward me and on the other hand gives me the possibility to frame my struggle in ma-

terialist terms and in terms of my materialist concerns. So, I'm pushing this too far, I mean we're playing with ideas, but how about that?

NP: This is very interesting Katerina, and I respect you philosophically and personally, intensely as always. I think one of the major, it's a very interesting wager that you propose. I think one of the issues always with this discussion is that it's a very emotional one for everybody, it is very hard to talk about it in a non-passionate way or a dispassionate way. There's a parallax here too. That aside, I think what that does is also introduce this question of political urgency or the question of political time.

It's like your experiment, your wager, let's over-identify with or let's accept the definition of certain bodies, let's say, not "women" but "uterus-havers." The usual resistance to this, which I have sympathy for, is that this language is dehumanizing towards women, that it precisely replicates the treatment of women as "reduced" to their biology which has characterized women's history until relatively recently, and continues to do so in large part. For a woman to exist, that is to say, have character, make her own choices, including the capacity to fail, involves, both an acceptance of the facts of human existence *as such*, that is to say, sexuation, and the language that attends this, scientifically, literarily, psychoanalytically, philosophically, historically, etc., and a recognition of the history of this language. And *then* the existentialist addendum, the process of subjectivization in the present and the future, which is open-ended, freedom in all senses, including the freedom to fail.

If we give up on the words "man"/"men" and "woman"/"women" altogether it may be that we stress instead character, individuality and shared concerns in different ways. Or it may be, as I think is happening, that women lose out: that their history until this point is erased or distorted in terrible ways. Men are not being asked to give up their words. They are not being asked to "be nice," to "shut up." If we only have a negative definition of women I think it is much easier to erode or erase women as a class, politically, socially, historically, philosophically, everything.

So, again, there is always the question of the position of power, who is saying this. Look at the examples I gave, where people reacted

very badly, when the Green party suggested that women would be happy to be described as non-men, for example, this was met with lots of resistance. So it's the question of who gets to call who what, and you ask, how can we exit these postmodern games, and in that sense I agree. There is a question of legal urgency, which is why this question became extremely antagonistic in the U.K., because there was a proposed legislative change and this became like a question of urgency, it's like how do we deal with this very radical change proposed in the law, that we redefine terms which would also then mean changing their definition in the dictionary for example, so again I'm afraid we are still with language and power and time and law, but at the same time, I, from a materialist point of view I understand what are you saying. We can say "why not?", let's see experimentally, what would be lost and what would be gained, if we did this. If we stop using these particular words, we refuse to cling on to old ideas about what the words women and men refer to, and we simply say, I don't know, there are existants, or beings, or humans, or persons, or bodies. One of the problems I think is that you end up in a kind of generalized humanism that tries to get beyond the law without confronting it. I do not think there is anyway we can get around it that does not run the risk of reinforcing the idea of women as an absolute nothing, as an endless resource with no other meaning than pure passivity. There must, perhaps I am suggesting, be a women's law—not a segregationist law, nor one that excludes itself from the law as such—but an order of understanding that refuses to be demeaned.

Katerina Kolozova

Marxism without Philosophy and Its Feminist Implications: The Problem of Subjectivity Centered Socialist Projects

(Transcript of a talk at the school authorized by Katerina Kolozova)

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Abstract: The non-philosophical conceptualisation of the self, and I am expanding the category to include the other forms of theoretical-methodological exit from philosophy’s sufficiency as its principle, thus also Marx, psychoanalysis, and linguistics, does not reduce the radical dyad of physicality/automaton to one of its constituents. It is determined by the radical dyad as its identity in the last instance and it is determined by the materiality or the real of the last instance. The real is that of the dyad, of its internal unilaterality and the interstice at the center of it. We have

called this reality of selfhood the non-human: the interstice is insurmountable; the physical and the automaton are one under the identity in the last instance but a unification does not take place. It is the physical, the animal and nature, it is materiality of “use value” and the real production that needs to be delivered from exploitation, not the “workers” only, especially because many of the global labor force are bereft of the status (of workers). And the need to do so is not only moral but also political in the sense of political economy: capitalism is based on a flawed phantasm that the universe of pure value is self-sufficient on a sustainable basis, based on an abstracted materiality as endlessly mutable resource. A political economy detached from the material is untenable.

Keywords: materialist feminism, François Laruelle, radical dyad, real abstractions, speculative realism

We will revise some of the themes discussed here in the previous days. Some topics and some authors were referred to not just in the presentations of the keynote speakers but also in the presentations and the discussions of the other participants. We will revisit Laruelle’s non-philosophy, we will revisit my attempt to marry Laruelle with the texts of Karl Marx and how this “marriage,” this fusion of the two methods can play out in feminism, but also in certain new philosophies or political philosophy or epistemology. It can serve as a paradigm of a new political philosophy that will shift the positions of the concepts of subjectivity and the object, revisit Marx’s as notion of objectivity, which, as I previously said, has nothing to do with the positivist notion of objectivity. It’s quite an interesting perspective actually. By doing so, we will see if this bringing closer of philosophy and science, of course, not the established scientific disciplines but more the scientific posture of thought or the scientific habitus, let’s say the metaphysical positioning of science, its treatment of the real (improvising with the terminology here and now), so in that sense, a creation of a science, that is Marxist, that is in line with Laruelle’s treatment of philosophy from a scientific point of view. So in this sense of the word, it would be science, and also by bringing it together with some of the sciences actually, some of the existing sciences.

In an attempt to establish a dialogue with the sciences, a dialogue that is established on a certain plane of a flat ontology—although I have a problem with the notion of ontology, but let's use it in this context to simplify the introduction—although it may be more complex to simplify them, maybe just reading the text may be simpler. I will argue for a dialogue between philosophy and science in a way that does not permit philosophy to assume a meta position, position of superiority—or simply “meta”—and comment within its own terms, with its own means what happens in science and how it might reflect back upon philosophy and through that on society, on the possibility to re-conceptualize society in the light of more recent development in sciences and in particular technology. All of this has been in some way touched upon in the previous talks by the others, not just through my own comments... I am revisiting these already open questions through my perspective. As I said, this will be a combination of Laruelle applied on Marx, which means an addition to Marx's own ambition to render his thoughts scientific. As you all might remember, Marx's ambition was to move as much as possible away from philosophy and establish a certain science of political economy, a science that establishes knowledge of the species being of humanity that explains society by way of moving further and further away from philosophy. That was mainly his essential disagreement with Hegel all along, if you remember from his texts. So, to this I am adding through a sort of a procedure of superposition or through Laruelian cloning as miming a position, including that of superposition, the method of non-philosophy, François Laruelle's non philosophy. I would treat Laruelle's role here as purely formal, purely methodological, one that provides the conceptual means to identify the tenets of philosophy that remain in Marx's own text. I have spotted a constant tendency in Marx to move away in philosophy. It helps to spot the tenets of philosophy's residuals, philosophical stance vis-à-vis Marx in the legacy of Marxism, not so much in Marx himself. That explains why I do away with much of the further legacy of Marxism, why I approach Marx's text directly through Laruelle or sometimes simply directly. I do not resort to mediation. Sometimes I make a recourse to epistemology that I reconsider a more truthful rendition of what Marx is about epistemologically. There is so often this misunderstanding between non-Marxists or non-standard Marxists and the other Marxists that take the world

literally and completely misunderstand its meaning, thinking that is something anti Marx. No! Non-Marxism is simply short for non-philosophical Marxism or philosophically non-standard Marxism that has incorporated Laruelle's approach to Marx's texts. The word non-Marxism is used in that sense. You can put it in the wider category of post-Marxisms, although I do consider it kind of a radical Marxism or one with many consonances with the orthodox Marxism (“orthodox” meaning prior to Lenin).

I will present the concept of the radical dyad of the non-human. The non-human is understood in Laruelle's non philosophical sense, so it is the Human without philosophical humanism. The word for that we are using here is non-human. So, the goal of the concept is to present the radical dyad of the non-human in an attempt to think radical humanity in terms of Marx and materialism that is the product of approaching of Karl Marx's writings on the real and the physical. These are his words, I would like to underscore that he resorts far more often in his texts to the words “real” and “physical” rather than “the material.” Perhaps because he had to problematize Feuerbach and the materialism of his era as too philosophical and he saw a problem there. So he seems to prefer these two words (physical, real) over the material. We are examining now this radical humanity, which goes beyond philosophical humanism and actually does away completely with the concept of the human in the philosophical sense and with its centrality to our organization of thought, philosophical or scientific. This metaphysical core around which we all kind of position ourselves, regardless of whether we are in science or in philosophy or in arts. The relation we assume toward the human and its possible centrality to our thought is kind of a metaphysical organizing principle. So, we are revisiting the human and thinking in terms of radical humanism in that sense. In a sense that has already done away with the centrality of the human as a remainder of a philosophy within Marx as pointed out by Marx himself. So, unlike posthumanism inspired by critical theory and the method of poststructuralism, the theory of the non-human as a radical dyad of technology in the generic sense of the word, ranging from *tēchnē*, the Greek τέχνη, which means skill, craft, but also the craft of speaking a natural language. In its original sense, it can refer to using a tool but also, nowadays, to developing and

using AI technology as well. All of this is generically put in *téchnē* or in a more contemporary variant “technology.” The theory of the non-human as a radical dyad of technology in the generic sense of the word, ranging from the “*téchnē*” of speaking a natural language to AI technology on the one hand and the organic understood as physicality on the other hand, does away with anthropocentrism. Moreover, it does away with anthropomorphology of thought by way of stepping away from subjectivity centered thought. Moreover, it does away with anthropomorphology of thought inalienable from any theorizing or philosophy that is centered on the notion of human subjectivity. Any philosophy that is centered on the notion of human subjectivity is inevitably anthropomorphic. So, subjectivity as the organizing principle of thought renders any kind of thought anthropomorphic. It could be a thought of science from within science, but not necessarily scientific, or it could be a philosophy. So it does away with anthropomorphology of thought inalienable from any theorizing or philosophy that is centered on the notion of subjectivity, which is human subjectivity or, to borrow Laruelle’s term, any *posture* of thought that is modelled according to the structure of subjectivity centered thinking. Even if the semantics may differ. The problem is the structure of the subjectivity—centered thinking.

Marx operates with the notion of the real, often times simultaneously with that of the physical. He uses them as if almost synonyms. I have approached the concept found in Marx by means of Laruelle’s suspension of the principle of philosophical sufficiency, that is, by way of exiting the vicious circle of philosophy legitimizing philosophy and in that process positing and creating the real as existent/non-existent, relevant/irrelevant as well as what is real and what is an illusion. All of this arranges the notion recreating the real like philosophy. It does not just decide what is real but kind of legislates the real. Laruelle sees a problem in the structure of philosophy itself. It cannot resist the anthropocentric impulse because within it there is a structural composition, a result of its intrinsic laws to not just decide or argue what the real is, not to just stipulate or postulate but simply legislate what is real. That is why we had that practically metaphysical confrontation yesterday... “What is real? Is gender real? Is sex real?” This is a product of an essentially philosophical thinking—traditional philosophical theorizing to legislate what the

real is. No, we, by moving away from philosophy and its problem of philosophical sufficiency, we are moving away from this tendency, while keeping some of the conceptual material, that philosophy provides for us. This is what Laruelle does with it, this is what Laruelle is essentially about. His notion and equation between the one and the real, that has often times been mystified and treated, sometimes almost theologically, has in fact a very practical function or very specific function that renders this kind of thinking scientific. I will move toward that part, which explains how come. I have elaborated that proposal in more detail in my latest book *Capitalism’s Holocaust of Animals: A Non-Marxist Critique of Capital, Philosophy and Patriarchy*, which, as I explained on the first day, is not about animals but rather about the treatment of physicality including animality in the history of Western philosophy, but also of other forms of physicality or physical reality, that do not have to be, you know, living creatures, do not have to represent lives. It is not vitalism. I told you, we can use the term “physical” also in the sense of objects, but not as commodities—only in the sense of use value. So, all of this is elaborated in that book and I won’t go further into proposing us a backdrop of this reading but I guess these interventions are necessarily in order to follow the argument. The book is an experiment that combines Laruelle with Marx, that is added with the feminist philosophy of Luce Irigaray and John Ó’ Maoilearca’s notion of the non-human.

Laruelle, not unlike Marx, argues that the thought that seeks to transcend the circularity of philosophy needs to submit to the real. But in order to do so, it must abolish the very possibility of relationality between the two. Thus, one avoids the error of amphibology, as he calls it, of substituting truth for the real and the other way around. Arriving at a unity of the two, this is what philosophy does, substituting truth for the real and the other way around, arriving at a unity of the two, whereby what is real must also be true and the other way around—this is what constitutes the principle of sufficient philosophy. The postphilosophical or non-philosophical thought must mime the scientific posture of thought, whereby the thought submits to the always already foreclosed real but the ontological foreclosure does not prevent the thought from seeking to clone the real. The real is not a substance, it is an operational category. It’s not a sub-

stance, it is an ontological modifier or rather an epistemic category. It is in this sense that it is also “the one.” So, in this sense is the one. I will explain how come. Why? If it’s nearly an epistemic category, it has to be the one! The unilaterally posited elements of the dyad, so physiology and *téchnē*, technology, language, etc., on the other side.

The unilaterally posited elements of the dyad lead to the latter mechanically producing sense. The point is the following: the dyad is radical because technology, which includes, as I said, language, and the realm which includes physicality, do not achieve unity or reconciliation, not even in the form of paradox. Language enables subjectivization, participation in discourse or the world, whatever, so on the one hand we have language and on the other hand we have the real, the physical, etc. What Laruelle would call “the radical dyad” is the dyad between the thought and the real. To him it is an epistemological thing. His point is that the real always evades, is always already foreclosed to thought, he uses the term “thought” to avoid subject or subjectivity. Thought seeks to explain the real and this relation is unilateral because the real is pre-lingual. The real does not possess language. The real does not enter into dialogue with thought. It’s simply this dumb numb real, indifferent real. So, he repositions the relation between thought and the real in this way and in thus he mimes the way science treats the real. So, what I have done with the radicalizing of the posthuman, which is originally a poststructuralist concept, posthumanist notion of the human, is to ground it into Marxist ontology and methodology. Adding to it Laruelle’s approach to Marx or to any philosophy, I have further radicalized the concept of hybridity or the cyborg, which is the grounding idea of posthumanism. So, if Donna Haraway and cyber feminism tell us that we are this hybrid of technology and organicity or the organic, as Haraway puts it, we are espousing the proposal and radicalizing it by ridding it from the principle of sufficient philosophy and grounding it in materialism. As for the “organic,” Haraway also calls it “the animal within us,” you know—the animal we are. She refers to it in the *Manifesto*, she very often refers to us (the humans) as a combination of animals and technology. If we accept this proposition of posthumanism, and I do accept it, and if we ground it in Marxism through Laruelle’s non-philosophical approach, we can

dismantle with this totality. So, this dyad of technology and the physical does not represent any sort of unity. It does not seek any kind of unity or seek ways to represent itself as any sort of unity. Now, why do I need Laruelle in this? Among the commentators of Haraway the overwhelming interpretation of the hybrid (the cyborg that is), has been that it is a paradoxical unity. I don’t think I see it in her own texts that the dyad constitutes a paradox. This is a paradoxical unity because there must be some kind of unity and this kind of unity represents the truth of what we are. So, the truth is that we are this hybrid. It must become the reality or the real of who we are and it is so because it’s the truth of who we are. It is the real and the truth and we are expected to act according to this ontological decree. We are this! Due to what Laruelle calls philosophical spontaneity, it becomes once again—a unity, this paradoxical unity. The commentarism continues without paying regard to Haraway’s constant explanations that this hybrid does not imply any superiority of the technical over the physical or the animal. There is no hierarchy there.

My use of Marx here and Laruelle helps ground her argument in Marxist materialism and then fortifies this grounding with Laruelle’s non-philosophy in order to evade this philosophically spontaneous establishing of unity, of the assumption of there being some unity. Even in a form of paradox or this nothingness out of which we draw a certain content or definition or whatever. No! We affirm the radicality and the impossibility to reconcile the two elements. So, in the dyad thought and the real similarly, not very much unlike in Lacan, are foreclosed to one and other. In that sense, the physical within ourselves, the material within ourselves, that is according to the orthodoxy of poststructuralism, is something that belongs to the realm of the real and we have nothing to say of the real, because this is what Lacan teaches us allegedly, as explained in *Bodies that Matter* by Judith Butler. The body becomes irrelevant, we do not say anything of it because it is pre-lingual, it does not participate in language, in the production of signs, in the signifying automaton that language, regardless of whether natural or artificial, is.

Language or sign production is meaning production, it’s nothing else but that. According to the structural orthodoxy, this is what makes sense, this is what speaks to us, this is where we can construe

meaning, whereas the real is foreclosed (according to the doctrine of Lacan, but also according to Laruelle). In my view, in an erroneous way, following the doctrine of Lacan, we can simply establish that the physical does not participate in language, in sign making. Therefore, it belongs to the realm of the real and we can simply do away with its relevance for our discussion. And now, as a corollary of such reasoning, we can say that everything is the product of sign, of sign-making. The real is left there, excluded, as it's supposed to be allegedly, because it cannot participate in language-making, in sign-making. It is not a part of the signifying automaton. Therefore, it's put aside and rendered irrelevant and in fact, inexistent. So this is the interesting conclusion: such reasoning is, again, the product of this reflex of philosophical spontaneity, as Laruelle would put it. Because it belongs to the real and we cannot produce truths of it because the real is outside of language, it does not exist. So, what exists is sign-making, meaning-making, and, therefore, discourse, discursive construction, etc.,—this is the only possible ontology, if one espouses the poststructuralist episteme, Why is it so? Because there we can produce truths. The real does not help us constitute truths and truth is obviously taken in the philosophical science of the word, as an amphibology of real and cognition. What is truthful or what is the truth or the ontological truth is also real and what is real is true. This is the beginning, the origin of all philosophy, since the beginning of Greek philosophy and it's still dragging on. It's called the principle of sufficient philosophy, in the vocabulary of non-standard and Laruelle inspired philosophy, and it is one of the reasons we cannot communicate with the scientists. When scientists seek to establish a certain project that is of societal, historical or philosophical relevance, they also follow this philosophical spontaneity. So they find themselves trapped within the same metaphysical error. Therefore, I argue its perhaps more useful or it makes more sense, or it's simply more productive to admit that we cannot avoid being moved in our reflection by metaphysics even in science, in innovation, so including technological invention. It is what moves us, we want to establish a certain relation to the exteriority. We want to know what the real is and what it is not, we want to control it, etc. We want to reshape it. By reshaping it, we want to understand what its limits are. All these questions are in fact, are moved by metaphysics, they are in a way philosophical but the scientific posture of thought

renders them non-philosophical. Beyond doubt, these questions are metaphysical. The approach to this question that legislates realizations, conclusions, cognitive products, truth as legislating reality... thus the philosophical reflex is the impulse we must evade in order to pursue scientific type of thought. I want to arrive to the question of subjectivity legislating principle of thought and why we need to do away with it and think of both categories—technology and the physical reality in terms that are beyond subjectivity.

If one seeks to circumvent the ultimately humanist dream of trans-humanism, one needs to epistemologically reposition oneself assuming what Marx would have called “the third party’s view.” So, this is the doing away with subjectivity-centered thought I was talking about. We must assume the third party’s view; the perspective of a third party is objective. In so far as it mimes the position of the surrounding objects including the human subject’s externalized actions, as objective reality, objectivities or objects, if you will. It is not a positivists stance regarding objectivity because the human species being, as Marx calls it, is entangled in the in sensuous and the physical, also Marx’s words, whereas social relations are real abstractions, as they are called by the Marxist epistemologist Alfred Sohn-Rethel. Therefore, an absolute autonomous self, detached from its own and the surrounding materiality, the world’s social relations and nature ascending to a mind of purist science governed by objective truths is impossible from a Marxist’s point of view. The third party’s view, as elaborated by Marx, engenders objectivity that requires that the thinking subject treats itself as an object as well. The soliloquy of the philosophical self, the cogito is abolished. This is not OOO either, because OOO actually produces a concept of object, whereby the object mimes the subject, which is quite the opposite to what I am saying here. So, the third party’s perspective is situated beyond the subject-object binary.

By way of postulating subjectivity as an object among objects, Marx does not erase subjectivity, does not discard it as a form of agency, carrying out objectivity of thought. Instead, he suggests that the subject mimes the structure and the status of the exteriority of the object, rather than the other way around. It is precisely the subject-centered thought that defines philosophy and precludes it from becoming a truly materialist science. That is why Hegel’s dialectics

structurally fails, says Marx in his “Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy” in general. Subjectivity of objective essential powers, whose action, therefore, must also be something objective, we would argue along with Marx. An objective being acts objectively and he would not act objectively if the objective did not reside in the very nature of his being. He only creates or posits objects because he is posited by objects, because in the last instance, he is nature in the act of positing. Therefore, this objective being does not fall from his state of pure activity into creating of the object. On the contrary, his objective product only confirms his objective activity. His activity as the activity of an objective natural being or, put differently—to be objective natural and essentials and at the same time, to have object, nature and sense outside oneself or oneself to be object, nature and sense for a third party is one and the same thing from the same text (And of paraphrase of Marx.) Nature is the same abstraction as Anthropos. Nature is the same abstraction, philosophical abstraction or it can be a social abstraction or scientific... doesn’t matter, it is an abstraction and its philosophical sense needs to be unraveled by arriving at its material or concrete components, as Marx would put it. Only to yield the abstractions that define and explain it by way of being concept notions produced by a third party.

We will have to resort to our method of dissembling the conceptual unity of the abstractions we problematize, abstractions in so far as generalizations, not abstractions one creates when departing from the concrete, the way Marx and Saussure do. In order to arrive at the concrete or rather at a transcendental material constituting a *chôra*, an unorganized *topos* of concepts, undergirded by the real or the physical. By depleting nature of the enlightenment and modern philosophy from the binding conditions of the principle of the philosophical sufficiency from the classical binaries such as nature-culture or technology, body-mind, animal-human, all these binaries are characteristics pertaining to the philosophical concept of the human and nature, both, we might be able to arrive at the concrete as Marx would put it and at the determination in the last instance that are of the physical in so far as the real. As I said, not physical in the vital sense, physical could be a product of human labor as well, or material in that sense. (I use physical because it’s more truthful to Marx’s original text.) By way of employing Laruelle’s method of

unilateralization, that is fashioning a concept, product of thought that succumbs to the real and nearly clones it or mimes it, we may be able to arrive at the determination and the last instance of the notion of nature. Conceiving nature in the manner of Aristotelian miming, Laruelian cloning or Wittgenstein’s *Maßstab* because he also talks about kind of a cloning, scale applied to reality if you remember from his *Tractatus*, we arrive at a concept that is not far from the one natural scientists operate with. It is in the last instance, the organic that can be defined in compatible ways by the evolutionary biology, chemistry, neurosciences... to name a few. In this way, so through the application of Laruelle’s method and Marx’s materialism, through (non-)philosophy we arrive at the same understanding of the notion of nature. Let us underscore, I did not use the word “same” but “compatible” (with other sciences, so we have to reduce the definition of it to the organic). In rare examples we find nature underpinned by or reducible to the organic such as in Schelling and other philosophers as interpreted by Yuk Hui and his book *Recursivity and Contingency*, but also in some critical theorists like Donna Haraway. Yuk Hui explains that a similar ontology underpins both nature and technology and in a way, working through German idealism, he arrives at the materialist conclusion about both realities. Hui demonstrates that production of signification, language creation, the transcendental, the plane where thought takes place and the physical or the material are two things underpinned by the same ontology that this in fact and in the last instance – material. He identifies the movement of recursion or recursivity in physicality, in the physical reality and, as ontological principle, Hui demonstrates, it is not very different from the signifying automaton in computing. Recursivity as an ontological principle is, as Hui demonstrates, an essentially mechanical procedure. Recursivity divulges a certain paradoxical form of teleology. It is a teleology, which does not have a telos outside that of maintaining itself and further perfecting itself. The principle of recursion in computing is a movement away, in expansion and then nonetheless constantly returns to integrate the error of contingency or accident into what makes sense, into a organically (in Schelling’s and Hui’s sense) functional whole. Let us reiterate, Hui concludes that the same process happens in nature. In spite of resorting to German idealism, the mechanistic elaboration of organicity renders Hui’s argument materialist.

And here we're arriving at yet another point, which is important with regard to the real or the one and the position of the notion of the binary in Laruelle. If we apply Laruelle's treatment of philosophy, stripped off that stance that makes it self-sufficient and in fact, succeeds to mime the outside reality even though foreclosed; if we agree with Marx that everything is of the last instance somehow materially determined, then this dyad (of the non-human) and the role of the one when we explain it and the real becomes more clear. The dyad of sign making, for example in structuralist linguistics, in computing, we have binaries or dyads but these binaries do not constitute a unity. They are not pairs that make sense. They do not amount to some meaning, they do not produce a dialectical unification or a synthesis of a third meaning. They are dyads in a radical way in the sense that they will always remain dyad's binaries without any reconciliation, without any recreation of a third sense, without any dialectics there. What's there within this dyad? So, to remind you—the dyad of the real and thought, the dyad of the physical and technology. If we look at them from a structuralist point of view, the point of view of structuralist linguistics, and let us point out that everything we have read in post-structuralism that derives from Foucault or Lacan or the others that are declared structuralists is epistemologically grounded primarily in structuralist linguistic. So, what happens there, in these binaries, these pairs that are not really pairs, in order to produce sense? *What happens there is pure mechanics*. One of the elements in the binary has to act as the real toward the other element, in order to produce sense. The relation or the relationality consists in the other element to be the border of the first one; to act actually as the real to the other, and the other way around. I need two phonemes next to one another in order for the first phoneme to be pronounced in a certain way and paired with the other one, to mechanically produce a certain sound. Moreover, the conditioning of how these things are paired is also physical because it depends on a certain physiology of phonetics. So sign-making—and thus sense-making—is a mechanical thing. If the radical dyad is, as just we elaborated, a situation where one element serves as *Hemmung* (in German) to the other element, in order to mechanically do the work of sign-making, of trace-making, of language-making, of producing a scripture, a sign that's language, both mechanical and organic, the one feeding into the other.

At the core of languages as well as in nature as calculable or computable process, we encounter mechanicity which operates on the principle—and perhaps engenders it—of organicity. This realization does not mean that thought and the real are the same, because they have the same material or ontological foundation. They remain a radical-dyad of thought and the real. The real remains radically closed to thought, but thought still seeks to relate to it, explain it, produce science or sign or sense of it, just as it happens in nature and computing, etc.

If we are to do away with humanism and radicalize the posthumanist argument, then we have to arrive at these completely distinct categories of physicality and technicity without presupposing that they constitute some organic unity or even if they do, the foundation of this organic unity is a mechanical and material process. I will conclude now. I am assuming it is implied how this is relevant for feminism, how this is relevant for gender relations or gender identities we discussed yesterday. It's relevant in the sense that it enables us to think about physiology and nature and materiality and technology in more complex ways than what's philosophical spontaneity. Distinct and formalized categories do not form unities in some philosophically spontaneous way, and we argue we should view them as radical dyads. Therefore, language is relevant but physiology, materiality and thus also biology is relevant too. There is no hierarchy between the two and as I've explained in the book on the animals, wherever there is hierarchy, exploitation is implied.

Katerina Kolozova et al.

Q&A session following the lecture:

Marxism without Philosophy and Its Feminist Implications: The Problem of Subjectivity Centered Socialist Projects

Patricia Reed: Maybe I can ask a question if no one has one ...I'm still digesting so forgive me... I wanted to focus on this third party view that you mentioned, that I think is very interesting because it strikes me that ...it also breaks away the dyad between the fight between the view from nowhere and the embodied view. It also does away with that, which is super interesting, and in a way, that was my own awkward and very unarticulate way to deal with Wynter, with her "outer view." There are two things that I wanted to ask. One, this is maybe an extension and maybe you don't want to answer it, because it doesn't really relate to the thematic of the summer school, but is the role of mathematics within this configuration that you're laying out between the real is the true and the true is the real, sort of, you know, as a kind of epistemological methodology, how does mathematics fit into that? But the question that is more related to this third party view is the question of apperception. So, if I understood it correctly, in this third party view it's almost like, you're not separating yourself but you understand yourself implicated within and treat yourself as an object amongst other objects, which I think is really important, like to just say in a more vulgar way, with our difficulty of dealing with ourselves as implicated in systems, how to see ourselves in that picture and what that does to modes of agency. That's what I was wondering because that strikes me as an apperceptual issue. That one might be reading it wrong because one would have to be able to have a concept of self-understanding in order to see oneself as an object amongst many objects, or...

Katerina Kolozova: No, I was just hesitating because that could be one of the perspectives to look at it. One could apply, you know, the Lacanian method, the mirror stage, so you're supposed to go through this form of subjectivization in order to be able to project, you know, this image of yourself. So, it does have something to do with it, but ok, let me start from the beginning. Yeah, you're quite

right. Actually, Wynter is quoted in my book quite a lot but it's not due to her influence on how I operate with the concept of the "third view party's perspective," how it is posited. When you look at the epistemology I am proposing here influenced by the third party perspective as elaborated by Marx, which is, let us underscore, neither this *sub specie aeternitatis* position, God's position, or all-knowing position nor this relativism which is typical of poststructuralism but not only of poststructuralism, nor technically speaking Kantian. As to the limits of what we can perceive, interpret, etc., it is not neither-and that is, in fact, why we can liken this position with Kant's critique. So, certainly, there is an element, you are correct, that is approachable to Kant's epistemology. Still, I would keep things simple and just say that my stance is simply derived from Marx's epistemology of the alienation. The alienation is, you know, inevitable, it's always already there. So, this primary alienation that is always already externalized in the forms of social relations—it's externalized and materialized in the forms of social relations—is something that Marx never denies. He actually affirms it. That's what I find most interesting in your project of xenofeminism, that you depart from there. I kind of expected more Marx in the xenofeminist project, in your elaborations as a collective or individuals but did not witness much of it. Even though it departs, so it seems to me, from this understanding of Marx, which is completely correct and I loved it when I read it in the *Manifesto*. My publication of the book *Toward a Radical Metaphysics of Socialism* and your *Manifesto* actually coincide when it comes to the dates of their publications, but also with their completely similar thesis about the primary alienation and its affirmation as the founding principle of subjectivization. What Marx opposes in fact is the denial or obfuscation of this primary alienation through the error of fetishization or reification. We must admit that these abstractions are indeed abstractions and in order to relate to them as real or to relate them to the material or the physical, we—the "we" of the capitalist reason—need to mask them as material. They are abstractions and we must admit that. Nonetheless, we have to affirm as well that these abstractions yield material results. I mean, social relations, what comes out of them, is really something very material, very tangible even when it's in the form of the abstract like the relations themselves, and sometimes as something literally, physical, something you can materially touch.

Our subjectivization, this is my interpretation but I think it's kind of just a mirroring of something that is already there in Marx's text and I am not over-interpreting: there is no other form of subjectivization available to us than that of the initial alienation leading us to transforming ourselves into kind of objects, you know, for the others. You know, you cannot even try to evade that. You are an object to the other in the social relations in which you are always already embedded. In line with Marx, I would say this position seeks to both affirm the materiality of social relations in line with his project of moving away from philosophy and it also discloses Marx's problem with subjectivity-centered thinking. So, you know, of course there is the influence of Hegel there and of course Marx is a dialectician (but more in the original, Greek sense of the word), but by moving away from this organizing principle of thought that is subjectivity and proposing something like what we just discussed, places him far from or fundamentally very different from Hegel. I think that we should simply respect Marx's request to consider and acknowledge that what he keeps from Hegel is the dialectical method, not ontology. Let's not forget that Marx educational background is in Greek philosophy and I think he uses the term dialectics closer to the Greek understanding of the word and, therefore, dialectics is relevant but not quite in the Hegelian sense—I mean, but this is a footnote. What makes him so different from Hegel is this treatment of subjectivity. So I think I covered everything, haha...

Branislava Petrov: I was just curious, what would you say about this idea? There is a British Marxist professor, called Sean Sayers... he has an idea of subject as historical emergence in Marx. Unlike the Hegelian idea of subject as some entity at the outset of history, for Marx, there's no such thing as outset. There's no plan, pre-plan, but rather subject as emergence, historical emergence... That subject is an emergence and then it develops at some point, there is a qualitative change, qualitative difference, and then it starts to develop through history, but there's no plan at the outset.

KK: I think I agree, because the proposition is that there is this pre-conceived or Hegelian subjectivity somewhere out there, not in the material world, you know, pre-dating the material reality and then shaping it, but it's quite the opposite. It's the product of material or historical processes. This sounds like a materialist, Marxian account, and I would agree.

BP: But then, is it philosophy or is it not philosophy?

KK: We are all subjects. The problem with philosophy and the response of non-philosophy and Marx's proposal to exit philosophy is how we treat this reality of subjectivity. We don't deny that it exists, that there are subjectivities, that we are all subjectivities. It's just a proposition to look at, when we discuss, scientifically, how subjectivities relate to one another. When we look at our own subjectivity, if we are materialists, we should posit ourselves as the objects of discussion, and not just as the objects of discussion but also presuppose that subjectivity was born from these objective relations. There is no subjectivity outside of these inter-subjective relations that are the social relations.

Andrija Koštal: I would like to ask something, if no one else has a question. I am interested in this non-philosophical treating of the dyad, which is one of the essential points of your work, right? So the point is...you said there is no unification, right? And there is no, in this kind of unilateral determination from the real in the last instance, there is no kind of melting of the one of the binary, no unity and no kind of melting of the binary... so just this treating of the binary, can you repeat that part?

KK: Ok, I guess you are familiar with Laruelle's notion of the dyad?

AK: Yeah, I was reading him, so I should be.

KK: Well, structuralist linguistics helped me interpret the dyad in a more productive way. What Laruelle gives us is certain epistemological tools, but we are supposed to do something with them. When we apply those tools in interpreting the human as the non-human, we arrive at the problem of language. We arrive at the problem of the real as the physical. So, other sciences or knowledges, not just sciences, also knowledge as concepts that derive from philosophy, have to be brought into this discussion in order to give a Laruelian account of what the human is insofar as the non-human or the radical dyad it is. And because Laruelle's categories are rather sterile I resorted to Saussure's interpretation of language and to how sciences relate one to another in the production of signification, in order to demonstrate that something so mechanical as the relation between

the elements in the binary and then the binary with other binaries (oh, I forgot to respond on Patricia's question for mathematics, but never mind... I'll make a footnote to that!). So, the way they are posited one to another is quite mechanical, as we explained, but it nonetheless produces something very organic. Something that feels so organic and in fact constitutes an automaton, which is the language in the French sense of *langue*—all languages, in the generic sense. So, every language, all languages are produced, if we look at them, and I do look at them, through this Saussurean glance, created in this very material way, as coarse materiality. Yet again, they produce something that not just feels but institutes itself as something super-organic, as organic, which is, for an example, the automaton of language, of sign-making. So, there is nothing more automatic and organic at the same time and yet, mechanical at its origin. So, we can apply the same reasoning on this radical dyad, the human, which we will call the non-human, in order to demonstrate that, in spite of this unsurmountable grounding alienation between the sign-making and the physical and the quasi-mechanical relation to one another as if miming the binary in Saussure; in spite of this mechanicity between the two elements of the radical dyad, they still produce something that feels like an organic unity and that's done through the treatment of something that we will call an incident, contingency by way of recursion. Here I find Yuk Hui very useful. He explains how come the purely mechanical ends up feeling like presenting itself, manifesting itself as organic.

II. ARTICLES

Ben Woodard

User Errors: Reason, (Xeno)-Feminism and the Political Insufficiency of Ontology

Bionote: Ben Woodard is an independent scholar living in Germany. His work focuses on the relationship between naturalism and idealism during the long nineteenth century.

He is currently preparing a monograph on the relation of naturalism and formalism in the life sciences. His book *Schelling's Naturalism* was published in 2019 by Edinburgh University Press.

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Abstract: This essay examines the relation between feminism and philosophy (taken in their broadest possible senses) in both analytic and continental traditions focusing primarily on the relation between the purported separation of theoretical and practical feminist concerns, as well as the consequent difference between the sex-gender nexus as one of material embodiment or as the result of iterative practices. This debate has a long history and broad range – for the purposes of this essay I wish to focus on how the normative-inhumanism put forward by Reza Negarestanthati indirectly functions to cut across these conjoined separations. Yet, at the same time, Anthony Laden's feminist critique of Negarestani's normative resource (namely Brandom) indirectly lays the groundwork for an inhuman feminism which need not rely upon an ontologically charged politics. I also look at Johana Seibt's reading of Sellars and Katyln Freedman's work as a response to Brandom.

In much of, though certainly not all of, contemporary feminist theory, ontological tendencies have come to replace embodiment and avoid the level of pragmatic action through a broad sense of materialization, a materialization not only of the social but of every field of inquiry. Here I examine the work of Jane Bennett and Hasana Sharp. By focusing on embodiment and, in particular its relation to technology (as in Sadie Plant and in Xenofeminism), I conclude by arguing how feminism is a challenge for reason as

much (or more) as reason is a challenge for forms of feminism which have, for reasonable but not navigationally optimal reasons, taken refuge in ontological reservoirs for the sake of ethical and political strategies.

Keywords: Xenofeminism, Feminism, Reza Negarestani, Robert Brandom, Anthony Laden, Karyn Freedman, Johanna Seibt, Sadie Plant, Hasana Sharp, Jane Bennett

In his text "The Labor of the Inhuman," Reza Negarestani makes a passing reference to Anthony Laden's *Reasoning: A Social Picture*. An important aspect of Laden's project is questioning the normative view of social reason as outlined by Robert Brandom—a view which Negarestani picks up and reshapes to serve his notion of the inhuman autonomy of reason. Laden takes particular issue with Brandom's outline of social reason as the "giving and taking of reasons," i.e., that an exchange occurs between two reasoners where one, in wondering about the other's motivations or reasons for doing one thing or another, attempts to discern *why* they did so. This dialogue, this game of giving and taking reasons, is what moves the process of conceptual exchange along, as well as setting up an account of responsibility in which one being, capable of giving and taking, must then be responsible for those actions and their consequences.

As Laden points out however, this Brandomian view appears a bit too close to the classic and asymmetrical view of reason in which the reasoner takes the position of *being* the reasonable one in opposition to the other, or, enters a relation of teacher and student in which the dynamic is decided *a priori* by the teacher/reasoner. Laden outlines this brilliantly through the use of Lizzy Bennett's attempt at rejecting Mr. Collins' marriage proposal in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, quoting from the conversation and then commenting on it:

"I do assure you Sir, that I have no pretension whatsoever to that kind of elegance which consists in tormenting a respectable man. I would rather be paid the compliment of being believed sincere. I thank you again and again

for the honour you have done me in your proposals, but to accept them is absolutely impossible. My feelings in every respect forbid it. Can I speak plainer? Do not consider me now as an elegant female intending to plague you, but as a rational creature speaking the truth from her heart. 'You are uniformly charming!' cried he, with an air of awkward gallantry: "and I am persuaded that when sanctioned by the express authority of both your excellent parents my proposals will not fail of being acceptable."

Works of philosophy are generally understood to be in the business of making proposals to rational creatures, but their authors too often wind up assuming the attitude of Mr. Collins: their proposals are assertions; their reasons serve as foot soldiers whose job is to defeat opposition and defend the author's position; and their final sense of authority often comes from a failure to take wholehearted rejection of their assertions as anything more than "mere words."¹

What is particularly interesting is that Laden, in calling for an attention to the other that is so well known in continental circles, manages to argue for responding to a call-to-the-other without relying upon any of the theo-ontological weight of figures such as Derrida or Levinas. It is in doing justice to the game of reason itself that Laden makes the claim for reason being a dialogue that has no set end, that may spiral into endless 'small talk,' but this is not a deviation from the giving and taking of reasons, but the substance of the process of reason's self-augmentation as such.

It is in this sense that I wish to investigate Negarestani's use of Brandom and what this aspect of Laden's text means in the ongoing championing of normativity, particularly in relation to contemporary feminism and its relation to materiality. While there is a long tradition of damning normativity *tout court*, this is not what I wish to engage in here. Rather, I am interested in the feminist implications of Laden's remarks for normativity (implications which he himself is clearly engendering) for reason as a self-augmentative project

¹ Anthony Laden, *Reasoning: A Social Picture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 7.

in Brandom's sense, and in the more inhuman sense which Negarestani is pursuing. While both humanist and inhumanist normativity have been critiqued for being from a falsely universalist position (of not tending to race, gender, sex, class, ability etc.) this should not lead us to denounce the universalist position as such. But, what becomes integral, is how feminism, to take one standard critique of rationalism, augments universalism and its appeal to normativity, in effecting the form of that universality in terms of questioning the non-normative grounds of normativity in terms of embodiment and how those non-normative grounds impede, and yet constructively constrain, the inhumanization of reason *for the sake of feminist critique*.

This essay sets out on contested territory in the continental tradition in terms of the relation between feminism and philosophy (taken in their broadest possible senses) in both analytic and continental traditions: namely, the relation between the purported separation of theoretical and practical feminist concerns, as well as the consequent difference between the sex-gender nexus as one of material embodiment or as the result of iterative practices. This debate has a long history and broad range—for the purposes of this essay I wish to focus on how the normative-inhumanism put forward by Negarestani indirectly functions to cut cross these conjoined separations. Yet, at the same time, Laden's feminist critique of Negarestani's normative resource (namely Brandom) indirectly lays the groundwork for an inhuman feminism which need not rely upon an *ontologically charged* politics. I look at Johanna Seibt's reading of Sellars and Katlyn Freedman's work as a response to Brandom.

In much of, though certainly not all of, contemporary feminist theory, ontological tendencies have come to replace embodiment and avoid the level of pragmatic action through a broad sense of materialization, a materialization not only of the social but of every field of inquiry. Here I examine the work of Jane Bennett and Hasana Sharp. By focusing on embodiment and, in particular its relation to technology (as in Sadie Plant and in Xenofeminism), I conclude by arguing how feminism is a challenge for reason as much (or more) as reason is a challenge for forms of feminism which have, for reasonable but not navigationally optimal reasons, taken refuge in ontological reservoirs for the sake of ethical and political strategies.

1. Brandom's Game

In his impressive *Reason and Philosophy*, Brandom argues that reason is fundamentally normative due to the centrality of the concept of recognition—recognition of any and all ingredients to normativity and to the efficacy of normativity itself as the “giving and taking of reasons” in order to explain and justify behaviors in ourselves and other (presumably) rational agents.²

Brandom puts it in the following way “We are social, normative, rational free, self-consciously historical animals.”³ For Brandom this is possible because, he follows the German Idealists’ (which for Brandom means Hegel up-most) emphasis on searching for a unity of apperception that grounds the structure of rationality itself. Or, put simply, consciousness is not possible without self-consciousness.

While I cannot afford to delve into the details of Brandom’s interpretation of the legacy of German Idealism, what is important to note, and what we will return to via ontological appeals in new and recent feminisms, is that German Idealism writ large offers various means of attempting to deal with the haunting legacy of skepticism despite Kant’s best efforts. The various appeals to pragmatic and ontological sources from which to think, appears to resurrect the problems Kant identified with dogmatic and empiricist justifications for knowledge such that, crudely put, the former is too speculative whereas the latter is too immediate. Ontological political programs in particular seem susceptible in that they deny the necessity of Kant’s (and others) epistemological apparatuses, but rely on a kind of immediacy which is simultaneously speculative and empirical. I will address this in section 4. For now it is important to outline *how* Brandom’s semantic approach to reason’s self-skepticism takes an altogether different route. For Brandom, rationality becomes a triangulation of the conceptual via inferences and incompatibilities of the use of numerous predicates in justificational dialog.

Brandom effectively argues that at its base the subject is simply that which attains definiteness in a social setting.⁴ An essentially natural-

² Robert B. Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy: Animating Ideas* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), 2-4.

³ Brandom, *Reason and Philosophy*, 17.

⁴ This speaks to a tension between continental and analytic readings of Hegel where the former emphasizes his metaphysical aspects whereas the latter emphasizes his historical uses modified

istic account of the individual and its acquisition of language skills is accelerated by social (or normative) existence as Brandom argues that Hegelian recollection (*erinnerung*) utilizes the Kantian integration of concepts into reason and casts recollection in a broader and historicized light.⁵ Brandom states that: “Kant replaces the *ontological* distinction between the physical and the mental with the *deontological* distinction between the realm of nature and the realm of freedom: the distinction between things that merely act regularly and things that are subject to distinctively normative sorts of assessment”⁶ and hence Hegel later socializes this process.

In this regard, within the normative realm, Brandom’s rational Hegelian agent is capable of determining both the behaviors of itself and others (via the linguistic giving and taking of reasons) as well as ordering historical or other grand narratives, in order to construct a progressive or evolutionary account of reason’s, or, in a more embodied sense, humanity’s development.

I believe that Brandom over-determines the linguistic skeleton of determination itself in order to better stitch together mind and world with tools crafted from, and within, the logical space of reasons without recourse to the space of nature (to say nothing of whether this latter space is logical as such). My point here is not that there is an easy alternative by which we could describe the space of nature (or the ontological), as it asymmetrically forms the space of reason (or normative space), but rather to argue that the patchwork-means by which we construct theories of “X” are naturalism at work in that our senses (although they may already be *present* to us consciously as always-already conceptual content to pay tribute to Brandom’s Sellarsian roots) do not speak to the spatio-temporal kinematics of ourselves in relation to those concepts locally isolated.

Beyond whether the normative can “stand apart” from the natural as a space of reasons-as-causes, the degree to which Brandom’s game of giving as asking for reasons is deeply lopsided in its formation as it begins from a purportedly even-footing of all reasoners. While it is not the case sociologically that everyone is treated as similarly ca-

for the present. These lines have become significantly blurred in works such as that of Adrian Johnston, Brady Bowman, and Markus Gabriel, to name but a few.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 90-91.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 115.

pable of reason, this is not to deny the importance that Brandom's system has for pushing forward the project that everyone *should* be treated equally as reasoners. The crux of the matter arises from the dilemma of how to separate the capacity to reason, from the current way reasoning is viewed from lopsided reason holders, and how the transmission of reason to others is best enacted.

In other words, while Brandom's account may be the most efficacious means of transmitting the rules of reason, this does not mean that it is the best means of playing out the game of reason given the *beginning disadvantage* of some of those players not because of inborn disadvantages but because of disadvantages incurred by a history of lopsided reasoning. This settling of the stakes must be included in any project of inhumanizing the human, that is, of discovering what is more in the human than the current conditions allow to be expressed due to various ideological, socio-cultural, or economic atavisms.

Furthermore, as others have pointed out (such as Dennett), Brandom is inexplicably harsher on the spaces and influences upon us that cannot be rationally justified, albeit described, than his sources (arguably Hegel and Sellars) are. As Johanna Seibt has brilliantly analyzed, and while she thoroughly accepts the nominalist thrust of the giving-and-taking of reasons Brandom roots in Sellars, one needs to adopt, following Sellars concerns with the sciences, a realist view of natural processes and subsequently a process ontology. I will not engage Seibt's complex reading of Sellars at length but only wish to gesture to the fact that her philosophy indicates the complementarity between functional decomposibility and the productivity of processes. Such an articulation of process could, in many ways, take up the role of affect and other broad ontological (or simply non-semantic) forces in feminist new materialism, while not denying that these processes can be rationally articulated while not being rationally exhaustible.

Thus before engaging with the feminist critique and potential expansions of Brandom, I wish to return to the normative-inhumanism of the recent work of Reza Negarestani after addressing that of Anthony Laden and his complicating of the Brandomian picture.

2. Laden's Human Interactions

In his *Reasoning: A Social Picture* Anthony Laden takes issue with Brandom's definition and engagement with reason. Specifically, Laden argues that reason should be thought in terms of being a form of responsiveness⁷ instead of being, what it often is for philosophers, "assertions in the guise of invitations."⁸ Laden writes in the first chapter:

our standard picture of reasoning describes reasoning as the activity of reflectively arriving at judgments through the alignment of the progress of our thoughts with certain formal structures in order to better navigate the world.⁹

Laden immediately takes issue with this goal oriented or directive based approach to reasoning. For Laden such a view of reason only makes sense and, in fact, only obtains at all, when the map of the space of reason is that of the reasoner standing before an unreasonable, or at least less reasonable, audience. In asserting a position of reasoner from the outset, such a view of reason is immediately anti-social and ungrounded to the detriment of the process of reason it hopes to set out upon. Instead of a directive based view, Laden argues that a social picture of reason is one that emphasizes response, attunement, and engagement.¹⁰

Throughout his text Laden emphasizes that reason cannot and should not be abandoned if there is any hope for reason to function as the arbiter of relations between agents. However, Laden openly acknowledges that treating reason's authority as self-evident contributes to reason being "merely the velvet glove on the fist of power, whether bureaucratic, imperial, Western, male, or white."¹¹

For Laden it is imperative that one maintain the difference between the faculty of reason and the game of invitations from which reasons emerge.¹² Or, whereas Brandom begins with reasonable asser-

⁷ Laden, *Reasoning*, VII.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹² *Ibid.*, 11.

tions (assertions that claim to already be functioning according to and affirming reason as such) Laden argues that reason has to be a wager from which the reasonable only begins to take place depending on how an invitation to what could be reasonable discussion is received.¹³

To return to the example of Lizzy Bennett above, she does not reject reason nor does she assume her own response is in and of itself reasonable, but she attempts to assert her capacities to be a reasoner in not accepting Mr Collins' front-loaded "invitation" to marriage.¹⁴ Against Brandom, Laden argues that the question is less about an appeal to a decided authority of reason and more about how the exchange of social utterances themselves can begin to have something like authority as such in the first place.¹⁵

As already suggested, Laden's emphasis on the social-network aspect of reasoning dovetails with other feminist approaches to rationality, epistemology, and exclusion (whether pragmatic or epistemic). Karyn Freedman for instance, takes issue with Brandom referring to arguments from reliability (as opposed to justification) as fringe.¹⁶ Freedman states that while Brandom is right to stay that the reliability about interior and inaccessible beliefs cannot be globalized in the way rationally justified true beliefs can be, this does not mean that they are uncommon. Freedman's example is that of sexual trauma. She argues that, for a victim, the details of an assault may not be recountable, but that nevertheless, there is truth in the subject's new found beliefs about themselves and about the world. In addition, there are perfectly good reasons why trauma may initially, or even permanently, remain blocked out or repressed. Thus, for Freedman, in the context of sexual violence, we are faced with an unnervingly common type of event that is inaccessible as a functional survival mechanism but yet remains as a reliable justification, which, nonetheless, is not rational in the sense of Brandom's giving and taking of reasons.

Traumatic knowledge counts as knowledge without reasonable but with reliable justification, as Freedman states:

¹³ Ibid., 19.

¹⁴ Ibid., 10.

¹⁵ Ibid., 60.

¹⁶ Karyn L. Freedman, "Traumatic Blocking and Brandom's Oversight," *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (2007): 1-12. <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/230182>.

"we have a subject who, qua survivor, has certain reliably formed (accidentally) true beliefs about which she has deep conviction, but that she cannot defend." Freedman claims that these beliefs must be taken as reliable despite their lack of reasonable justification. This is most evident in the legal or juridical engagement with the testimony of survivors. The survivors of sexual violence are treated such that they are forced to produce a "convincing" narrative of the events, as well as exhibit, against what could be called a tribunal-ontology, that they are not particular "kinds" of persons based on local, often theologically, poisoned codes of behavior. Or, in other words, they have to deal with a context of victim blaming in which the victim of the assault is to blame due to "reckless behavior" or because of the type of person they are ("sexually adventurous," "risk taking," etc.).¹⁷

Here we can find one of the encounters between a goal-oriented account of reason and a continental trend in which the epistemological position to articulate and describe the trauma and emphasize its unassailable nature is proffered. Feminist, queer, and post-colonial writings that emphasize feeling often rely upon notions of affect adopted from Deleuze (taken in turn from Spinoza). Both celebrators and decriers of affect theory, and strands of the aforementioned fields of thought which rely on affect, tend to focus on affect being *more than* emotion, it being alien to reasonable discourse. While this can and has been portrayed as an allergy to reason, as *only* a celebration of aesthetic description over functional description, the portrayal of affect or trauma in terms of *that which it is not* is generally done against dominant political appropriations of related concepts (feelings for affect, or harm for trauma).

The question that remains is whether the best response to state, theological, or moral control machinations is to ontologize that which they attempt to control.

One can also view this as being directly opposite to the case of an appeal to the authority of reason (as Laden puts it), i.e., in terms of

¹⁷ Marilyn Nissim-Sabat has claimed that Freedman's critique does not go far enough in that it holds too closely to Brandom's model of reasons and justifications being either interior or exterior. See: Marilyn Nissim-Sabat, "Agency, Ontology, and Epistemic Justification: A Response to Freedman," *Philosophy, Psychiatry, and Psychology* 8.1 (2007): 13-17.

an appeal to the authority of the non-reasonable, not to the openly irrational but to that which “escapes” reason. As mentioned in the introduction, this is particularly evident in appeals to onto-theological categories exemplified in concepts such as Levinas’ Otherness. These concepts have theological functions in that their ground is *a priori* beyond reason, thereby determining that the category of the ethical cannot be left to the constructive capacities of humans. One does not have to look far to see the political and social problems of relying on the ontological to *automatically* do political or social work. Speaking of feminism, Levinas’ concept of the Other was thrown against Simone de Beauvoir’s appeals to the right of reproductive choice. Levinas lampooned her for claiming that women could have the right to their own bodies, since, for Levinas, the fetus was an Other that the discourse of rights had no say over.

This begs the question of whether ontology can be set aside altogether in an attempt to carve out a politics that has universal effect but does not erase local formations. For this we turn to the work of Reza Negarestani.

3. Negarestani’s Inhuman Labors

Negarestani’s thought has developed significantly over the years since his work first appeared in the English speaking world (roughly 2005 to now). Negarestani’s thought, which began in an ostensibly Deleuzo-Guattarian style (though with Peircean conceptual frames), and in philo-fiction, in league with Nick Land’s hyperstitional endeavors, shifted into more openly universalist and mathematical-philosophical territory with varying degrees of overt political interest. Throughout these shifts, Negarestani’s work has also maintained a political edge, albeit differently emphasized over time. In broader strokes, Negarestani’s political thrust has changed from one of eagle-eyed spatiality (whether mereo-topological relations, decay-space, or telescopic isolation) to one of more specifically pragmatically attuned navigation. Throughout these transitions, Negarestani has had various associations (*not* identifications) with other philosophical-political movements such as Speculative Realism and Accelerationism.

In his text “The Labor of the Inhuman,” Negarestani sets out the

groundwork for his view of the humanist enterprise of the enlightenment as necessarily leading to an inhumanization via the freeing of what is human about the human from all possible bonds. Yet, while anyone briefed in the traditions and trends of continental philosophy would presume, based on the topic, that Negarestani would engage posthuman or transhuman sources to complete this task, they would be wrong. Why Negarestani’s text interests us here is that he utilizes Brandom and other analytic thinkers in order to pragmatically outline a project that is generally attempted through appeals to the ontological.

Taking to task the theological import noted above, as well as the opposite disenchanting view, Negarestani sees both strategies as creating a fog of “false alternatives” whereby real trajectories and vectors of human agency could constructively better itself, are lost.¹⁸ Negarestani argues that a commitment to being human is not a commitment to an ordinary birthright but to the project of expanding and changing what the human can be. Thus, humanism implies an extensive project of inhuman manipulation.¹⁹

Negarestani then begins to set out how the capacity to have commitments sets up conceptual restrictions on what determines that capacity.²⁰ While Negarestani claims that the normative categories of commitment and responsibility remain open to history and nature while they are organized in such a way not to be caused by them. It is here that I believe that Negarestani falls into the same problematic space that Laden claims Brandom is in as well. This is not surprising given that soon after this statement Negarestani invokes Brandom’s *Between Saying and Doing*.

Rather than strictly following Brandom’s semantical path, Negarestani addresses functionalism more generally. Negarestani argues that any identification and pursuit of a collective task requires discursive coherency in order to outline and navigate the space of reasons.²¹ Referencing the problem of ontological politics above, Negarestani notes that the alternative is one of “noumenal alterity.”²² Negarestani argues that reason as a collective feedback loop

¹⁸ Reza Negarestani, “The Labor of the Inhuman,” in *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, eds. Armen Avanessian and Robin Mckay (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2016), 428.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 429.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 431.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 433-34.

²² *Ibid.*, 434.

between saying and doing (between action and commitment) brackets off questions of what the human is as it concerns naturalist or ontological questions. My concern here, one I think that is implicit in Laden's work and explicit in the work of many feminist critiques of rationalism as well as feminist new materialisms, is that the self-directedness of reason afforded by the functional account avoids encountering its own limits in the way in which the functional mode of description sets aside certain factors. Or, in other words, the functionalist account of language is pursued in such a way that its *effectiveness* is seen to retroactively ground its groundedness as self-grounding, when, in fact, its directiveness is being mistaken for its effectiveness which is being mistaken for its groundedness.

This is the core of Laden's warning about reasoners sounding and acting like Mr. Collins. While Negarestani cites Laden's work, I worry that there is a meta-cognitive or, what may be, a meta-discursive lesson that is being lost. While Negarestani, and other neo-rationalist thinkers, are right to critique the reliance upon ontological reservoirs or noumena meant to *do* political work, I believe that this can have the subsequent effect of viewing the thinkers who pursue this project as *only wrong*. This prys the theoretical fields further apart from one another, opening an ever wider space of confusion. While this may seem to be inviting a pluralism for pluralism's sake, something which Negarestani critiques,²³ if Laden's lesson is to be taken seriously, then at the very least the *desire for ontological forces or causes* has to be understood as a discursive act with some pragmatic target. As Laden states in relation to pluralism, pluralism should be accepted, at the very least, in order for two groups or two reasoners to effectively criticize one another.²⁴

If the functionalist account of reason holds for all reasoners, then a viewpoint from afar should be taken as engaging in a language and or pursuing a project that is not immediately clear to the deontic or pragmatically focused reasoner. For one, an appeal to naturalistic or ontological sources (or fields, while seemingly far from a self-directed project of bettering the human, as Negarestani puts it) does not mean that such a reasoner or project has no interest in the human. An interest in non-human complexity should not be taken as unrea-

sonable, though such a project should be taken to task if it merely, and/or primarily, believes that merely *describing* such contingency is an end in and of itself.

To fail to recognize this would be to fall into the trap of collapsing reason and reasonableness in Deborah Heikes' terms.²⁵

The trick is how to determine the stratification of influences on the processes of rationalism in relation to its various directions. The norms one might engage, practice, and refine in order to better address the complexities of climate change, for instance, may very well be different from those to refine our concepts of reason to reconstruct political programs. While the normativist and functional approach is imperative for understanding and expressing the commitments to embark upon *either project*, it is not necessarily the best suited to detect or explore vaguer notions before bringing them to the discourse of rationalist debate. Appeal to an ontological outside appears to be particularly tempting when addressing issues such as ecology or materiality. In the following section I wish to stage an encounter between a Brandomian gamer of reason and a feminist new materialist. It is telling, I believe, that feminist new materialisms commit the move of appealing to ontological well-springs. This marks a pragmatic need to escape particular limitations and confines of Enlightenment rationalism, as well as the pragmatic problems of the normative networks of sexism-coated academia, while, at the same time, pointing to broad ethical, political, and philosophical concerns which require intuitive and other forms of cognitive labor to be better expressed. I will attempt to address this issue through the notion of embodiment.

4. Embodied Norms

While I do not have space for an extensive overview of the issue of embodiment in feminist discourse, I wish to emphasize a space somewhere between thinkers such as Jane Bennett and Hasana Sharp's return to materiality (although I would be wary and critical of the vitalist tendencies such materialisms can and do harbor) and the half-forgotten, but now re-emerging, materialist strain of cyber-

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Laden, *Reasoning*, 157.

²⁵ Deborah K. Heikes, *Rationalist and Feminist Philosophy* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 146.

feminism—particularly that of Sadie Plant.²⁶ The immediate difficulty, as it stands now, is how to unify or even compare continental feminisms that, contra tradition, emphasize the materiality of the body, and analytic pragmatic feminisms which emphasize everyday practices. This is not to say that the former is uninterested in practice nor the latter in the metaphysical or the ontological, but only that the burden and direction of both is quite different due to their respective histories and languages.

Following Laden, the question of what it would mean for seemingly incompatible realms, such as Brandomian normativity and feminist new materialisms, to invite one another to an exchange also arises. Any peace may appear immediately impossible because an emphasis on rationality for the former, and a wholesale critique of it for the latter, would seem to provide no table at which to sit. This purported non-starter, on the one side, equates the rational with the systematic in a purely positive sense, and the rational with an inflexible dominance in the latter sense. Yet both moves would selectively suspend the historical as well as deny the arbitrariness (whether hidden in the former or celebrated in the latter) of the point from which both theories posit a ground and lay out the field in which their arguments can happen.

These aspects can be brought together in the way a standard figure from both fields might encounter one another in the field of the social. The Brandomian gamer would find herself with a directly self-directed, boot-strapped trajectory setting out into the social, whereas for the new materialist, every consequence has a material entanglement that needs to be traced out. While the former takes for granted the space of nature or, the rational coaching of the material world, the latter would see the former's negligence *vis-à-vis* materiality as one willfully employed in order to control it. These, as I see them, are the stereotypical moves that may, but not necessarily, take place.

If, following Laden's example, we take the encounter as both parties offering invitations to one another, we must then ask what are the possibilities and procedures which could issue from it? The rational-

ist-normative position sundered from its association with a cartoonish vision of the Enlightenment, can be taken as articulating a position of epistemological stability. Furthermore, this stability, while in process, is universality-so-far, and not one that seeks control and the elimination of contingency or purportedly troubling variance. The new materialist, on the other hand, attempts to articulate how the environmental grounding of one's actions and reasonable positions require a navigation and negotiation of material influences, influences that cannot merely be bracketed out by the normative game.

What these two can offer one another is a position of epistemological coherency that is not equatable with domination, and a materialism that formulates the constraints and potentialities of matters that ground not only reason, but other cognitive and non-cognitive processes as well. Or put otherwise, reason cannot be so sure of itself as to abandon materiality, or nature, or certain degrees of constitutive processes coming from the outside, but this does not mean that it must rely on them wholesale. Likewise, while new materialist positions can explore the effects and affects of materials, substances, and embodiments, the very notion of position requires a notion of epistemological solidity in order not to fall back into a mode of speaking of ontological or metaphysical capacities from a view from nowhere.

One obvious space of contention is the legacy of Spinoza. As a discussion with Peter Wolfendale has highlighted, Spinoza is a foundational figure for both politically-infused new materialism as well as politically-infused rationalism. More often than not, Spinoza is split between the rationalist figure and the affective figure but with little mention of how this is carried out given their closeness in his work. Because of Spinoza's influence, I will focus briefly on the work of two feminist new materialists: Jane Bennett and Hasana Sharp.

Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* emphasizes not only the political ramifications of human agents as being tied to a nature of things, but also the political ramifications of human agents being tied to further agencies known and unknown. Bennett argues that thinking politics in such a way makes sense given the fact that "our powers are thing power[ed]."²⁷

²⁶ I have discussed the political aspects of these thinkers, albeit in a different context in: Ben Woodard, "Schellingian Thought for Ecological Politics," *Anarchist Developments in Cultural Studies*, no.2 (2013).

²⁷ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 11.

Does Bennett's work therefore fall into the "noumenal alterity" that Negarestani decries and, if so, how can her concerns be brought together in a reason that merely submits her concerns to a self-sufficient or self-grounding notion of reason, while following the potential consequences of her ecology? An immediate problem is Bennett's strong and immediate dismissal of the realm of knowledge claims. Bennett quite *brusquely* dismisses epistemological concerns²⁸ because they are, she argues, inherently self-interested. This collapses the possible ontological or navigational results of an epistemological project (where a concern with how the self accesses the world can over-focus on the self and forget the world at large). In place of epistemology, Bennett addresses the positionality of knowledge through what she refers to as strategic anthropomorphism which emphasizes materialities over ontologically distinct categories of beings.²⁹ But this maneuver evades the explanation of *how* such a perspective comes to know about these materialities and is able to express them. As a result, Bennett's inclination to anthropomorphize appears as a natural or ontological tendency which retroactively justifies the ontological choices Bennett makes for her politics via the pivot of strategic anthropomorphism. Bennett suggests that to have this strategy in place of an epistemological apparatus produces encounters which trigger impersonal affects and which further lead to new knowledge of (or perhaps new connections with) the vibrancy of things.

It is here that Bennett's utilization of Spinoza via Deleuze appears overly selective. Spinoza's politics are combinatorial or ontologically or formally ecological because Spinoza's monism speaks of a world as a single substance in which things that exist as apparently separate entities are in fact only modes of that singular substance. I would argue that it is a performative contradiction to abandon epistemology yet still claim to have noetically articulable strategies.

Hasana Sharp's text *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization*³⁰ sets up a similar project as Bennett's but draws more directly on Spinoza and less from Deleuze's Spinozism. Furthermore, instead of drawing political lessons from vibrant matter or materiality, Sharp pulls

a concept of nature from Spinoza which she believes not only works against typical usages of nature (in terms of confining normativity) but furthermore suggests that Spinoza's naturalism offers a powerful reservoir for addressing ecology, animal rights, and feminist issues.

Sharp argues that these critiques grow out of Spinoza's ontological flatness³¹ and that this leads to a kind of philanthropic posthumanism³² much along the terms of Jane Bennett's project. While Sharp brings up the problems of deriving a politics from metaphysics,³³ she wholeheartedly endorses the Deleuzian procedure of equating her project of Spinozistic renaturalization with joy by connecting it to a sense of agency.³⁴ This agency, Sharp continues, is affective, and she thereby makes affect *as such* into a trans-individual network of being that is inherently a "joyful" ground for politics.³⁵ Thus, while Sharp endorses the rational correspondence between affect and reason she, at the same time, rejects epistemology as too artificial for political discourse. But how can these claims be made simultaneously?

To give Sharp her due, she addresses the problems of attempting politics in nature as a kind of constraint³⁶; she also argues that understanding material causes is no doubt necessary for any political enterprise when she writes: "An adequate grasp of the causes and conditions that make oppression the cause often emerges in the process of fighting it."³⁷ Despite these moments of borderline pragmatism, Sharp, like Bennett, sees affect as a kind of networked system of knowledge, which can thereby replace epistemology wholesale.³⁸

Yet if affect is only described and passively received, it remains unclear whether, and to what extent, a political trajectory, as at least a *reaction to affects*, could be revised or redirected. To conclude, I will discuss the work of Sadie Plant and how her emphasis on embodi-

²⁸ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 3.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 99.

³⁰ Hasana Sharp, *Spinoza and the Politics of Renaturalization* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011).

³¹ Sharp, *Spinoza*, 2.

³² *Ibid.*, 4.

³³ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

³⁸ A fascinating approach to affect and emotion and their relation to quantifiability can be found in the work of Giovanna Colombetti.

ment, as well as technology, demonstrates that any materialist view of feminism, particularly when it encounters technology, requires a revisionary epistemology.

5. Pragmatics and Inside Jobs: Technologies and Embodiments

We have been so desensitized by a hundred and fifty years of ceaselessly expanding technical prowess that we think nothing less complex and showy than a computer or a jet bomber deserves to be called “technology” at all. As if linen were the same thing as flax—as if paper, ink, wheels, knives, clocks, chairs, aspirin pills, were natural objects, born with us like our teeth and fingers—as if steel saucepans with copper bottoms and fleece vests spun from recycled glass grew on trees, and we just picked them when they were ripe... One way to illustrate that most technologies are, in fact, pretty “hi,” is to ask yourself of any manmade object, Do I know how to make one? Anybody who ever lighted a fire without matches has probably gained some proper respect for “low” or “primitive” or “simple” technologies; anybody who ever lighted a fire with matches should have the wits to respect that notable hi-tech invention. I don’t know how to build and power a refrigerator, or program a computer, but I don’t know how to make a fishhook or a pair of shoes, either. I could learn. We all can learn. That’s the neat thing about technologies. They’re what we can learn to do.³⁹

In the recent computer technology themed TV Series set in the 1980s *Halt and Catch Fire*, the show’s genius computer programmer (a young woman named Cameron) walks into a room of engineers who are trying to come up with a name for the BIOS that she wrote. She informs them that she is naming the BIOS Lovelace. The all-male team chuckles to which she yells: “Not Linda Lovelace, you pervs, Ada Lovelace!”

³⁹ Ursula Le Guin, “A Rant about Technology.” <http://www.ursulakleguinarhive.com/Note-Technology.html>

The scene is a depressingly accurate account of the kinds of attitudes that remain sedimented. Not only is her labor erased, the history of women in technology forgotten, but those who would see themselves firmly in the space of reasons make a joke at her expense. While much has been written on the difficult situation of women in technology, I wish to conclude by setting up the possible translation of knowledge into embodied knowledge, to refer to the last section, that is so evident and central to studies of technology and, at the same time, note how feminist theory in particular, with an emphasis on materiality, shows the embodied side of pragmatic reason.

I would argue that Sadie Plant is one of the thinkers who came closest to attempting to articulate these interrelated positions. Plant was often accused of merging incompatible disciplines – the hard-core materialist (or even essentialist) position of Luce Irigaray (which is notorious for its reliance on particular notions of female anatomy to resist patriarchal thought) combined with the constructivist position of thinkers like Donna Haraway, particularly in the context of the technological revolutions of the 1990s. While one could certainly take Plant to task for her exuberance in claiming that cyber-feminist appropriations of technology would lead to total cyber-Amazonian overthrow, the great gesture of her work is to recuperate how seemingly disparate technologies had numerous unregistered material effects as well as how they are imbricated in the gender-sex nexus as productively and negatively constraining.

In *Zeroes and Ones* for instance, Plant celebrates the aforementioned Ada Lovelace as the first programmer who, a hundred or so years ahead of her time, had written the software for, and speculated on, the material effects of rudimentary computers.

In one of her journal entries Lovelace, the “Queen of Engines” wrote:

Those who view mathematical science, not merely as a vast body of abstract and immutable truths, whose intrinsic beauty, symmetry and logical completeness, when regarded in their connexion together as a whole, entitle them to a prominent place in the interest of all profound and logical minds, but as possessing a yet

deeper interest for the human race, when it is remembered that this science constitutes the language through which alone we can adequately express the great facts of the natural world, and those unceasing changes of mutual relationship which, visibly or invisibly, consciously or unconsciously to our immediate physical perceptions, are interminably going on in the agencies of the creation we live amidst: those who thus think on mathematical truth as the instrument through which the weak mind of man can most effectually read his Creator's works, will regard with especial interest all that can tend to facilitate the translation of its principles into explicit practical forms.

The technology of Lovelace's time, Charles Babbage's failure to make the apparatus necessary to realize her software, taken with the above quote, does not emphasize the foolishness of overly ideal desires, or Lovelace's concept of the analytic engine, but demonstrates the difficult but traversable gradient between reason and embodiment or, in the pragmatic language above, commitment and action.⁴⁰

That which lays outside of reason, that which can be identified and traced in a gesture, in an embodied articulation, functions as an intuitional anchor, a temporary space from which one can reorientate the relation between reason and the reasonable, between the navigational capacity of reason, and that capacity locked into a particular task thereby aware of its context specific limitations.⁴¹ In another sense, as Kember puts it, this places us in a double contamination, where one may wish to appear more reasonable than a reasoner to avoid the automatic rejection from the sciences which Laden warns against.⁴²

⁴⁰ The loop of commitment and action, as Negarestani calls them, not only augment each of themselves together, but alter and produce the very kinds of orientations one might take towards their initial possibilities. For feminism, and sexual politics, embodiment then is not naturalized biological capacities, but the practices and gestures which issue from biological conditions redirected by practices of desire. Such practices can, via the technological, then alter the local grounds of that embodiment as is evident in trans-feminist appropriations of self-augmentation as well as the exteriorization and migration of "female" reproductive capacities elsewhere.

⁴¹ The concept of intuitional anchoring is an extrapolation of Gilles Chatelet's work in: Gilles Châtelet, *Figuring Space: Philosophy, Mathematics and Physics* (Paris: Springer, 1999).

⁴² See: Sarah Kember, *Cyberfeminism and Artificial Life* (London: Routledge, 2003), 176-177.

We can say that at the level of the normative these exchanges which do not take into account feminism, given the masculinist history of the world, cannot be called reasonable in the sense that Laden means. Part of this involves the injunction of pragmatic injunctions themselves, or put plainly, "calling people out" when they make sexist or anti-feminist statements.⁴³ This is particularly important for those not easily identified as embodying those positions, as it highlights that this is a claim to reason and not the knee-jerk dismissal of a critic as a consequence of a particular victimology.⁴⁴ This is not to endorse a *speaking for*, but merely to argue that the position of the "insider," a figure which Negarestani himself has celebrated in a political sense, has quite a different kind of effect.

The notion of both insider and user error requires a distancing of the operator within the system and the system itself, a distanciation which easily falls into ideological self-delusion—a point that Žižek has repeatedly made clear. Yet, there is a difference between a rendering of one's identity within a structure in order to wash one's hand of the system's ugliness, and maintaining an operational distance by which a person within a system can effect it, or, at the very least, the behavior of other inhabitants (bad users). If this is not the case, if the discourses are pried apart as I warned against earlier, then the resulting separatism should not be a surprise to anyone. This is evident, to take only the example of philosophy departments, in that women professors are forced or required to represent "women in philosophy" as if it were a kind of philosophy when it instead indexes the stupid stubbornness of male philosophers who refuse to respond to the universalist or rational commitments they claim to espouse.

I am hopeful that feminist engagements with neo-rationalism will continue and I believe that the pragmatist vein of such work is most likely the more fruitful platform. As Shannon Sullivan's "pragmatic perspectivism" and other projects demonstrate,⁴⁵ feminism in particular has had a productive history with pragmatism. Yet, is it prac-

⁴³ Calling people out, I believe, needs to be appropriately scaled, that is, it can function efficiently in small social groups but may not have the same intended effect when massively distributed via technological means. But this is a topic for another paper.

⁴⁴ Laruelle has argued for the importance of acknowledging the victims of historical projects particularly in regards to the project of Marxism contra Badiou.

⁴⁵ See: Shannon Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins: Transactional Bodies, Pragmatism and Feminism* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2001).

tical concerns and failures that have moved many feminists towards ontological considerations, or is it the exhaustion of already-existing theoretical paradigms?

If the feminist turn towards materiality and embodiment is in part due to dissatisfaction with the insufficiency of the linguistic turn, with the most language focused aspects of postmodernism, then the works of neo-rationalism, and the accelerationist project to which they are connected, share this. Why then is it that when a universal project, or any project which attempts to get beyond particular deadlocks, falls into being patriarchal as Katherine Hayles seems to suggest in the opening of *How We Became Posthuman*? As Plant put it, if the subject is inherently patriarchal then it should die. But the turn to materiality is often, though not always, a way of attempting to give weight to discourse, action, and identity that escapes, *by fiat*, its determinations from the outside by men, by empire, by capital and so on.

Negarestani, following Brandom, makes a strong case for articulating the empty or blank subject as something capable of certain self-altering actions, one that takes place at the level of language as well as deeper, even in physical and technological fields of modification. This has a distinct advantage over attempts to rely upon an ontological, especially a vaguely material, engine for politics.

Yet this can go too far the other way and deny those contexts in which the rational-normative-pragmatic registers require an appeal to ontology, such as if the large scale of nature or environment is being addressed. If we grant the minimal naturalist thesis that the techniques of the natural sciences provide results with universal impact, then it requires the most basic acknowledgment that the exterior plays a greater constitutive role. Not in a classically naïve causal sense, but in terms of it, to some degree, independently reshaping the field of play even in limiting the scope to our own capacity to reason.

This desire however, can, as we have seen, lead to a rapid debasement and or abandonment of positionality as such (whether epistemological or practical). Forces and things are described in such an inherently important way that an electric fog of too much affect-talk

is produced. As Heikes states in her *Rationality and Feminist Philosophy*, no philosopher, feminist or otherwise, can abandon the distinction between good and bad arguments. As she so nicely states it:

What is left of such concepts after their foundations have been dismantled? It is one thing to say that feminism requires recourse to reason, objectivity, and truth; it is another thing entirely to say what this means if we simultaneously argue that substantive accounts of reason are fundamentally and irredeemably masculine. If we give up on the concept of rationality, where is the objectivity and truth of feminist claims to the injustice of sexism, racism, and other forms of discrimination? How can we expect to successfully argue against our opponents when we have dismissed that which lies at the heart of any good argument, namely, reason?⁴⁶

The other side of this is that it is up to us insiders to make our spaces of reason available not only for others to enter but to critique and crack open, especially if they are rife with biases that require cutting. It is also through this two-sided great engine of tasks that one can hope to make reason what it sets out to be.

Pointing back, we can see that a purported political and ethical upswing of Bennet's project is that an orientation towards materiality allows for a certain non-anthropocentric focus—such as treating non-human actants with the respect and care they are due. I think a good response to Bennet, following from the critique above, is to state that there is an epistemological gap between justice and knowing that seems too conveniently short circuited by an *ontologically-charged aesthetics*.

Christine Korsgaard's *Fellow Creatures* is a good model of how reason and rationality can be taken up for a cause such as animal ethics. Korsgaard's approach is Kantian in that her basic claim is that we, as rational human beings, are responsible for other living things because we, as rational agents, are capable of recognizing living things as having ends in themselves and that this, itself, is a good thing. Hence, while other living things will generally continue to exist, and wish to live, this does not mean that they are capable of judging con-

⁴⁶ Heikes, *Rationality and Feminism*, 124.

tinued existence as a good in itself. One of Korsgaard's arguments is that we must be more Kantian than Kant himself if we are to see the care and protection of other living things as part of our moral duty. One example of our responsibility, following from the judgement of living things as having ends, is that we can recognize the difference between extinction and death. For endangered animals death and extinction are minimally different (though Korsgaard acknowledges that for animals on the edge of extinction their lives are no doubt worse and worse) whereas for human beings extinction takes on an entirely different character. For Korsgaard, the difficulty is the antinomy that results from such an expanded Kantianism: do we let all animals "be free" and distance ourselves from them as much as possible or do we protect them for us and each other to the extent that we risk, in essence, domesticating all animal life?

For Korsgaard there is no simple answer to this question but it addresses the problem of rationality and its ethics in a way that is potentially constructive for non-humans without overly relying upon vital materiality or an ontological edification of the non-human. This is also not to dismiss the aesthetic as an avenue that only shows the possibility of internal transformations of thought (it is rather to question the ontologically loaded notion of aesthetics as a replacement of epistemology). A wonderful example of a kind of xenofemism (to which I turn to in the conclusion) is found (albeit indirectly) in Adrian Tchaikovsky's *Children of Time*. The following is a discussion between two spiders (a powerful female and her subservient male assistant) who evolved sapience (via an accelerative "uplift" virus) as the result of a sabotaged space colonization mission:

Within her, biology and custom are at war. There is a place in her mind where the nanovirus lurks and it tells her that all her species are kin, are like her in a way that other creatures are not, and yet the weight of society crushes its voice. Males have their place; she knows this.

Don't be foolish. You cannot equate every ignorant, crawling male with one such as yourself. Of course you are protected and valued for your accomplishments. That is only natural, that merit be rewarded. The great host of males beneath us, though, the surplus, what use are they? What

good are they? You are an exceptional male. Something female got into you in the egg, to make you thus. But you cannot expect my sisters to blindly extend such consideration to every male in the city just because of you.

What would we do with them?

Put them to work. Find their strengths. Train them. Use them.

Apparently Fabian has given this matter some thought.

Use them as what? What use can they be?

You can never know, because you do not try.

She rears up in frustration, sending him scuttling back, momentarily terrified. She would not have struck, but for a moment she wonders if that sudden injection of fear might assist her argument. When he settles himself across the chamber from her, though, he seems even more resolved.

What you ask is unnatural, she tells him sternly, controlling herself. There is nothing about what we do that is natural. If we prized the natural we would still be hunting Spitters in the wilderness, or falling prey to the jaws of ants, instead of mastering our world. We have made a virtue of the unnatural.⁴⁷

6. If Nature is Unjust, Then It's Not Nature

Many but not all of these sources and debates contributed to the generation of Xenofeminism, a manifesto and research program put forth by Laboria Cuboniks, an international group of six feminists who work across philosophy, anthropology, visual art, design, poetry, computer science, and mathematics. Their manifesto has been met with equal amounts of excitement and resistance and has spawned many responses and extensions.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Adrian Tchaikovsky, *Children of Time* (London: Pan Books, 2016).

⁴⁸ For an archive of texts supportive and critical see <https://laboriacuboniks.net/resources>.

At its core, XF sought to reconnect feminist discourse with aspects of contemporary thought often considered antithetical to it—especially rationality, formalism, and technoscience. Besides borrowing from neo-rationalism and accelerationism, XF draws heavily from the cyberfeminism of the 1980s and 1990s (not only Haraway and Sadie Plant but also from VNS Matrix). The manifesto emphasizes the themes of alienation, universality, technoscience, trans sexuality and abstraction. While some of the theoretical resources discussed above play a role in the manifesto, and in the project more broadly, they are often deployed as a critique of the current state of feminist politics and feminist theory. As Jules Joanne Gleeson has pointed out, the trans- aspect of the manifesto has become even more timely due to the rise/return of transphobia often masquerading as general critical engagements.⁴⁹

My central contention with the Xenofeminist project has since the begging been with the last sentence—if nature is unjust, change nature. Obviously this statement is meant, in part, to push against those who would rather be a goddess than a cyborg (which now sadly seems to include Haraway herself). But the question of nature, especially as it relates to reason, is not simply one of ecological concern but also relates, as I have hopefully shown, the tension between rationality and embodiment as it manifests in recent feminist theory and recent rearticulations of rationalism.

In the above quote, Heikes' warning about not collapsing reason and reasonableness could be applied to not collapsing nature and naturalness. One can very easily have a nature without the natural as the natural presumes a very irrational (and often theologically closed) concept of nature. To presume that one can apply the category of the natural readily and easily is generally to uphold an atavistic model of undisturbed bucolic nature and/or a naively circumspect understanding of human beings banking on the artificiality of constructs such as culture, history, and science.

In a different but related vein Bogna Konior in "Alien Aesthetics" has argued that XF reaffirms the divisions that scientific rationality has attempted to melt, namely, that between animal and human,

⁴⁹ Jules Joanne Gleeson, "Breakthroughs & Bait: On Xenofeminism & Alienation," *Mute* (October 19, 2019). <https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/breakthroughs-bait-xenofeminism-alienation>.

though she does this by way of the ontological turn in anthropology (such as the work of Descola and Viveiros de Castro). As she writes:

The engagement with nature as a discursive and geolocated concept is missing from the Xenofeminist Manifesto. "We find," it states, "that our normative antinaturalism has pushed us towards an unflinching ontological naturalism. There is nothing... that cannot be studied scientifically." (34) While this statement reveals an entanglement of two different naturalisms—the first is the colloquial "natural order of things" that punishes all that it perceives as "unnatural," and the second a rationalist philosophy à la John Dewey, it does not localize, explain or engage with the separation of technology and nature through which xenofeminism amasses its accusatory and revolutionary capital alike. In this way, it departs from its roots in the writing of cyborg feminists such as Haraway, for whom "the historically specific human relations with 'nature' must... be imagined as genuinely social." (35) In other words, the givenness of nature as the realm beyond technology is the unexamined condition of xenofeminism, one that prevents it from offering a truly inclusive politics for all alienated subjects.⁵⁰

If one can suspend the aesthetic oversaturation of nature as something like a comfy forest full of English poets, then nature is something like the unbound collection of processes that contribute to the materialization of the world partially but not completely described by the plethora of the sciences in all its disciplines and sub-disciplines. Schelling's notion that nature is only succinctly understood as the conditions of possibility is apt. In this sense the natural becomes meaningless: what separates a bottle of beer from a gemstone is not grasped by artificiality and naturalness but is narrow or wide depending on the degree we wish to root or ground human intent in the conditions of the possibility of the world.

We saw one means of doing this in Spinoza (via Sharp) and Korsgaard (via Kant) with very different articulations of reason and the

⁵⁰ Bogna Konior, "Alien aesthetics: Xenofeminism and Nonhuman Animals," in *ISEA2016: Hong Kong Cultural Revolution*, ed. Olli Tapio Leino (Hong Kong: ISEA, 2016) 80.

responsibility that it entails. To abandon the natural is not to abandon nature, and the rearticulation of the conditions of material and dynamic possibility cannot be decoupled from an understanding of nature of grounding, including our human capacities to change it and ourselves. This is why the pragmatic approach to reason above dovetails with an approach to technology put forward by xenofeminism—namely, that one sees the liberative and transformative possibilities of technology when it concerns machinic wombs, DIY hormones, reduced care work, and so on. But these things do not change nature, they change the natural as historically constructed. And it is here that the line between Kant and those who followed him can be drawn, as Kant balked at the possibility (though initially called by him a daring adventure of reason) of constructing a history of nature. But without this possibility (with the risk of it always teetering into the abuse of realism, or facts, or "common sense" by established authorities), the "natural" will remain a false bastion of tradition, repression, and limit.

Andrija Koštal

Andrea Long Chu and the Trouble with Desire

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Abstract: This essay discusses the writings by Andrea Long Chu focusing on her understanding of desire and its role in the formation of gender and in the process of gender transition. The essay also deals with her much-disputed understanding of the relation between desire and politics, taking into account the critique formulated by Amia Srinivasan. In conclusion the essay argues that Chu's writings, if taken with a dose of caution and supplemented with the theory of desire formulated by Jacques Lacan, can offer us insights about the importance of desire for understanding various phenomena of human experience, in which we otherwise maybe wouldn't look for it.

Keywords: Amia Srinivasan, Andrea Long Chu, desire, gender, gender transition, Jacques Lacan, politics

Writings by Andrea Long Chu have provoked a lot of controversies within contemporary feminist theory, especially in the U.S.A., not least because of her understanding of desire. In the course of this essay, I propose to analyze (but also criticize) Chu's understanding

of desire, as formulated in her book *Females: A Concern* and essays preceding its publication. The essay is divided into three parts; the first two parts discuss the role of desire in the formation of gender and in the process of gender transition, while the third part deals with the relation between desire and (feminist) politics.

Desire and Gender

We will start by taking a look at Andrea Long Chu's equally praised and detested book *Females: A Concern* (2019).¹ The book is partly a memoir about her own transition and partly a theoretical discussion of *The SCUM Manifesto* and the play, *Up Your Ass*, by Valerie Solanas. The central thesis of the book concerns her conception of femaleness, which is for Chu, neither gender nor (biological) sex. It is, as she writes, "a universal existential condition"² which affects all human beings, and maybe not only human beings. As being and desiring seem to be inextricably connected for Chu, desire plays the central role in defining femaleness. Chu, therefore, writes that by female she means "any psychic operation in which the self is sacrificed to make room for the desires of another. [...] To be female is to let someone else do your desiring for you, at your own expense."³ It is easy to notice that Chu's definition of femaleness resembles Lacan's formula of desire as the desire of the Other, insofar at least as we understand the other as the other person.⁴ However, Lacan would never state that someone's desire results simply from the appropriation of the other's desire. It is rather that one recognizes the other's desire and tries to situate himself/herself in relation to the enigmatic object which the other lacks. Thus, Chu's concept of femaleness, it can be argued, presents the simplistic reading of Lacan's theory which reduces the dialectics of desire in favour of a sort of unilateral conception according to which one person always has to assume the role of "an incubator"⁵ of the other's desire. Notwithstanding this important difference, a fundamental point which Chu's and Lacan's understanding of desire have in common is that our de-

¹ It should be noted that all the citations taken from the book *Females* are paginated according to its digital (epub) edition.

² Andrea Long Chu, *Females: A Concern* (New York: Verso, 2019), 15.

³ Chu, *Females*, 15

⁴ For Lacan's theory of desire we consulted Owen Hewitson's entry on lacanonline.com. See Owen Hewitson, "What Does Lacan Say About... Desire?", [LacanOnline.com](http://lacanonline.com) (May 9, 2010). <https://www.lacanonline.com/2010/05/what-does-lacan-say-about-desire/>.

⁵ Chu, *Females*, 15.

sires arise from our encounter with something outside of us, either with the symbolic order as the big Other or with the other people as its mediators.

Our desire is not something innate inside us. Indeed, for Lacan our desires are not even our own—we always have to desire in the second degree, finding a path to our own desire and our own recognition by asking the question of what the Other desires.⁶

The conception of femaleness as “a universal sex” leads Chu to the somewhat extravagant proclamation that “everyone is female and everyone hates it.”⁷ The reason why everyone hates it is that it presupposes self-negation or sacrificing one’s self in order to make space for the desire of the Other. Chu goes on to define gender as the way “one *cope*s with being female” or, to put it more precisely, as “the specific defense mechanisms that one consciously or unconsciously develops as a reaction formation *against* one’s femaleness, within the terms of what is historically and socioculturally available—this is what we ordinarily call *gender*.”⁸ By deploying such a definition of gender, Chu implicitly opposes the acclaimed performative theory of gender. In contrast to the followers of the theory established by Judith Butler, for whom there’s nothing beneath the social performativity of gender (gender as performative), Chu strives to give ontological ground or substance to gender. As she succinctly puts it: “the claim that gender is socially constructed has rung hollow for decades not because it isn’t true, but because it’s wildly incomplete.”⁹ Chu will therefore argue that “what makes gender *gender*—the substance of gender, as it were—is the fact that it expresses, in every case, the desires of another.”¹⁰ Far from being independent, gender has a complementary relation to sexuality. If sexual orientation can be understood as “the social expression of one’s own sexuality” (sexual desire), then gender can be understood as the “social expression of someone *else’s* sexuality,”¹¹ someone else’s desire. If we put this into Lacanian terms, we could say that

the social performativity of gender does not indeed express some inner gender identity stripped from all relationality but the way one situates oneself in relation to the enigmatic object of the Other’s desire. This is why Chu will write in her provocative manner that from the perspective of gender, “we are all dumb blondes”¹², that is to say, objects of the Other’s desire.

Desire and Gender Transition

Now we’re going to turn to Chu’s essays in order to further analyze her understanding of desire, specifically its role in the process of gender transition. Before we continue, it may be useful to remind that Chu’s “theory” of gender transition is based primarily on her own personal experience.¹³

The way Chu describes the workings of desire in her essays might seem at first to be in conflict with the theory laid out in the book. Whereas in her book Chu highlights the interpersonal character of desire, i.e., how our desires always respond or, in her view, simply conform to the desires of the other people, in the essays she emphasizes the force of desire. However, this does not mean that in her essays Chu abandons her understanding of desire as an “external force.”¹⁴ As she describes it poetically (and half-ironically) in the book, “wanting to be a woman was something that descended upon me, like a tongue of fire, or an infection—or a mental illness.”¹⁵

What is most likely the strongest account of the central role desire played in her own transition is given in two of her essays published before the book—“My New Vagina Won’t Make Me Happy” and “On Liking Women.” In the former short piece, Chu dives into one of the core problems regarding desire, which is that it doesn’t differentiate between good and bad; in other words, that desire by definition goes beyond the aforementioned opposition. We would add though, that this is not only a question of objects (good or bad objects) but also a question of effects. To put it in Deleuzian terms, the desiring process is always constituted on the plane of immanence where effects

⁶ Owen Hewitson, “What does Lacan Say.”

⁷ Chu, *Female*, 15.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Idem.*

¹³ However, there are other trans people who have come out with similar experiences. See for example Amanda Roman, “Gender Desire vs. Gender Identity,” *Medium* (September 11, 2019). <https://medium.com/@kemenatan/gender-desire-vs-gender-identity-a334cb4eeec5>.

¹⁴ We might also call it “an alien force.” See Chu, *Females*, 15.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 64.

that take place (actualize themselves) cannot yet be called either good or bad but only pleasurable or unpleasurable. So it is only in retrospect that we can say that our desiring turned out bad for us. The object of desire, on the other hand, as Chu seems to be perfectly aware, always remains unattainable to the point that we can say that there is no final (ultimate) object of desire; and objects which come to replace it, eventually disappoint us. Chu uses this structure of desire to describe people's relationship (attachment) to various things, including politics. Such is, for example, she claims, women's relationship to feminism today, whereby feminism functions as an object of desire, which constantly disappoints its adherents but without diminishing their desire.¹⁶ Similarly, in her essay, "On Liking Women," Chu characterizes being a woman as an object of desire which led her through the transition.

You attach yourself to this object, follow it around, carry it with you, watch it on TV. One day, you tell yourself, it will give you what you want. Then, one day, it doesn't. Now it dawns on you that your object will probably never give you what you want.¹⁷

To summarize, our three main theses regarding desire would be the following: a) the real object that could satisfy a desire is unattainable, b) the effects that the process of desiring might produce or lead to can be good or bad but appear as such to consciousness only afterwards, and c) the objects that come to substitute the non-existing ultimate object of desire might allure us for a while but eventually disappoint us.

It is not coincidental that Chu wrote her short piece anticipating the forthcoming operation (bottom surgery) by which she would get her vagina. This way she emphasized the relative autonomy of the desiring process in relation to the effects it might lead to. As she makes it clear, she figured out that this (operation with all of its outcomes) is what she wants and decided to do it although she knew that it might not make her happier: "This is what I want, but there is no guarantee it will make me happier. In fact, I don't expect it to. That

shouldn't disqualify me from getting it."¹⁸ By stating that, Chu wants to affirm that "desire and happiness are independent agents"¹⁹ or, as we would formulate it, that desire is immanent (or in immanence) while happiness is transcendent.²⁰ We could argue further that the attitude expressed by Chu exemplifies one of the ways that we can interpret what Lacan meant by saying that one should not give way on one's desire. As one anonymous blogger (presumably Levi Bryant) suggests, "the only way to escape the guilt that indicates the betrayal of our desire is to take responsibility for our desire, to avow our desire, to no longer put off our desire or to delay our desire, but to come to be the subject of our desire."²¹ And isn't this exactly what Chu does when she decides to undergo the operation, because this is what she wants²² and regardless of whether it will make her happier or not?

Chu draws further theoretical implications from her own experience of gender transition in her by now famous essay "On Liking Women" where, in contrast to the usual narrative, she insists that she didn't transition because of the inner feeling of already being a woman but because of her desire to become a woman.²³ And she makes it clear that by this she doesn't mean being a woman in "some abstract, academic way"²⁴ but goes on to list all those stereotypical behaviours (performative acts) and objects associated with female gender (femininity) that she transitioned for: gossip and compliments, lipstick and mascara, crying at the movies, the telephonic intimacy of long-distance female friendship, and so on.²⁵

By stating this, Chu rejects the theory according to which people transition because of the inner feeling of belonging to a gender different from the one into which they were raised and claims, on the

¹⁸ Andrea Long Chu, "My New Vagina Won't Make Me Happy," *The New York Times* (November 2018), <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/24/opinion/sunday/vaginoplasty-transgender-medicine.html>.

¹⁹ Chu, "My New Vagina."

²⁰ Happiness is, in our opinion, always attached from the outside (as a signifier) to the certain psychic/bodily state.

²¹ Levi Bryant, "Lacanian Ethics and the Superego," *LARVAL SUBJECTS* (June 6, 2006). <http://larval-subjects.blogspot.com/2006/06/lacanian-ethics-and-superego.html>.

²² We could note that Chu doesn't make a distinction between wanting and desiring, so we decided to follow her and simply equate the two.

²³ One should note that Chu avoids using the verb becoming in the context of transition, even as she insists on the central role of desire in the transition.

²⁴ Chu, "On Liking Women."

²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ See Andrea Long Chu, "The Impossibility of Feminism," *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 30.1 (2019).

¹⁷ Andrea Long Chu, "On Liking Women," *n+1 30* (2018), <https://nplusonemag.com/issue-30/essays/on-liking-women/>.

contrary, that “transition expresses not the truth of an identity but the force of a desire.”²⁶ For Chu, transness is “a matter not of who one *is*, but of what one *wants*.”²⁷ Gender identity, on the other hand, she thinks, is becoming more and more of an empty concept whose primary function is “to bracket, if not to totally deny, the role of desire in the thing we call gender.”²⁸ Again, it is only by acknowledging the role of desire in the formation of gender, that gender becomes a meaningful (substantive) concept.

This all leads us to the fundamental question about the relation between desire and identification. At the beginning of her essay, Chu offers us a striking confession: “The truth is, I have never been able to differentiate liking women from wanting to be like them.” It is easy to notice that this sentence operates with a distinction between desire (liking someone, taking someone as an object) and identification (to be like someone, regarding someone as ego-ideal). But what makes this proclamation startling and potentially theoretically significant is that it designates desire as a force behind identification. So could there be a type of desire, different from but not necessarily opposed to the sexual desire, which runs behind the process of gender identification? We could call it identificatory desire.²⁹ It would be this same desire that drives (guides) the process of gender transition, as Chu and some others have testified in their writings.

Desire and (Feminist) Politics

In the last section of this essay, we will turn to the question of the relation between desire and (feminist) politics. Chu elaborates her view on the topic mostly in the previously discussed essay “On Liking Women” and the academic article “The Impossibility of Feminism”³⁰ in both of which she discusses lesbian separatism as a failed political project. Chu claims that the radical feminists of the seventies, who demanded the withdrawal of women from men, not just in

the sphere of the economy, but on the level of relationality as such,³¹ encountered a problem of “desire’s ungovernability.”³² What this indicates for Chu, is, again, the relative autonomy of desire, which in this case means that one cannot simply curb his/her desire in order for it to fit one’s political program. Drawing from this historical outcome of seventies’ feminism, Chu concludes that “nothing good comes of forcing desire to conform to political principle.”³³ She elaborates her analysis of seventies feminism in the U.S.A. in more detail in the aforementioned academic article but the general conclusion remains the same and, in a somewhat extended version, sounds like this:

There is no political program, I submit, capable of efficaciously restructuring people’s attachment to things that are bad for them [...] You simply cannot tell people how to feel, at least with the result that they start feeling the way you want them to.³⁴

Chu’s implicit conviction that there is nothing we can do about our desires, except to submit to them/follow them has expectably provoked reactions. Amia Srinivasan, in her essay “Does Anyone Have the Right to Sex?”, notices the dangers of Chu’s position and warns that it leads toward the total rejection of the political critique of desire, which she finds unacceptable for any feminism that wants to discuss the injustices of exclusion and misrecognition suffered by women but also by other oppressed groups.³⁵ Most importantly, Srinivasan doesn’t agree with Chu that any political critique of desire necessarily leads to moralism. What feminism, but also other forms of theory, can and ought to do is to “interrogate the grounds of desire.”³⁶ Although she doesn’t explain what she means by it, we can suppose that it primarily means addressing the formation of desire inside a broader political and economic system. It would therefore aim at the critical analysis of the semiotic infrastructure through which desire traverses, gaining its shape. In other words, although

²⁶ Idem.

²⁷ Idem.

²⁸ Idem.

²⁹ We’re borrowing this concept from the text by Jordy Rosenberg. See Jordy Rosenberg, “The Daddy Dialectic,” *Los Angeles Review of Books* (March 2018), <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-daddy-dialectic/>.

³⁰ Unfortunately, we weren’t able to obtain the access to the article again. That is why the information about the exact page location of certain paraphrases and citations are missing.

³¹ See Chu, “The Impossibility of Feminism.”

³² Chu, “On Liking Women.”

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Chu, “The Impossibility of Feminism”, ?.

³⁵ See Amia Srinivasan, “Does Anyone Have the Right to Sex?”, *London Review of Books* (March 2018), 40.6, <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v40/n06/amia-srinivasan/does-anyone-have-the-right-to-sex>.

³⁶ Srinivasan, “Does Anyone.”

it does not make much sense to criticize desire as such (this way moralism lies),³⁷ we can and should ask ourselves about the semiotic infrastructure, together with its material (economic) ground, in which our desires are embedded. To put it simply, there's no better way of changing desires (allowing them to reshape themselves) than by changing the infrastructure in which and through which they take shape, although this is easier said than done. The remaining question is still "what do we get by such (critical) consciousness and would it mean anything for our actions?" This question is tightly connected with the importance, especially highlighted by Lacanian psychoanalysis, of differentiating between "true" desire (the desire that is central for defining who one is and what one does) and so-called false or defensive desires which tend to obstruct the process of desiring and direct subject toward more easily accessible satisfaction.³⁸ It follows that Lacan's expression not to give way on one's desire pertains only to the former.

In her essay, Srinivasan points at a few other important things. One of them is that our desires (she writes about sexual preferences) can and do alter over the course of time and "sometimes under the operation of our own wills." So, whereas Chu emphasizes the stubbornness of desire (its tendency to remain fixed on certain objects), its "childlike" character, Srinivasan rather points toward its flexibility (plasticity). Both theorists are right because desire is neither completely flexible nor fixed, and it is definitely not given. Secondly, as Srinivasan beautifully notices, our desires can surprise us, "leading us somewhere we hadn't imagined we would ever go, or towards someone we never thought we would lust after, or love."³⁹ This is because our desires originate in the unconscious where their deepest roots reside and as such, they are initially unknown to us, which is to say that they have to be discovered and turned conscious, to the extent that it is possible, through an often difficult and long process. In other words, no one is born a subject of his/her desire and it is in that process of becoming a subject of one's desire that Lacan thought the ethics of psychoanalysis lie.⁴⁰

³⁷ See Chu, "On Liking Women."

³⁸ Never was this probably more important than today when our survival as a species and the future of life on this planet depend largely on our ability to recognize how our present desires open or close space for certain futures. For this line of thinking, see for example Mareile Pfannebecker, "Fully Automated Luxury Veganism: Desire in a Post-Labour World," *Arc Digital* (June, 2020), <https://arcdigital.media/fully-automated-luxury-veganism-ce149507f845>.

³⁹ Srinivasan, "Does Anyone."

⁴⁰ See: Bryant, "Lacanian Ethics and the Superego."

Conclusion

With her daring and provocative style of writing, Andrea Long Chu has helped to bring desire once again into the focus of feminism, gender and trans studies. In her book *Females: A Concern*, as well as in her essays Chu elucidates the role played by desire not only in the process of gender transition but also in the formation of gender as such. Her writings on the relation between desire and politics, grounded in her helpless and fatalistic stance toward desire, have shown themselves to be especially controversial, and for a reason. Although it seems fair to say that Chu is right when she warns that desire does not conform to political principles and cannot be changed proceeding from the political demand, this, however, does not leave theory helpless and critique useless.

We can agree, with Elena Comay del Junco, that Chu would have use of adopting a dialectical (or bilateral) approach sometimes.⁴¹ Instead of just speaking from the perspective of our desires, we should also, as subjects of our desires, take a critical stance toward representations of their objects. Maybe even more importantly, what Chu completely ignores is the creative aspect of desire, which is why the desiring process cannot be reduced to the demand (either internal or external) "submit, or else."⁴² In the case of trans people, this means that experiencing being a man or being a woman as an object of (identificatory) desire, does not have to suppose conforming to the existing norms and stereotypical representations of what it means to be a man or a woman.

Notwithstanding these shortcomings, we have tried to show that Chu's writings, if taken with a dose of caution and supplemented with the theory of desire formulated by Jacques Lacan, can offer us insights about the importance of desire for understanding different phenomena of human experience.

⁴¹ See Elena Comay del Junco, "Killing the Joke: On Andrea Long Chu's *Females*," *The Point* (February 2020), <https://thepointmag.com/criticism/killing-the-joke-andrea-long-chu-females/>.

⁴² See Comay del Junco, "Killing the Joke?."

Amalia Louisson

Protecting Biodiversity via Metaphysical Angels of the Future

Bionote: Amalia Louisson is a teacher, researcher, and Political Science PhD student at the University of Melbourne. Her research focuses on the relationship between psychoanalytic fantasies and environmental degradation, and how confronting the nihilism of the real can spur the conceptual and technological innovation needed to address that degradation. She advocates reconnecting philosophy with real politics and the future.

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Abstract: Global trends in contemporary left biodiversity protection practices are self-undermining because they are fixated on resurrecting past ecological conditions, while failing to prepare for the future. Not only will many species be unable to survive in predicted future conditions, but focusing on the past has forfeited the future to capital. Instead, this paper presented at the ISSHS School for Politics and Critique 2020 takes the recently resurrected figure of Prometheus to promote an environmentalism that casts its eyes to the future. It will be argued that preparing the future for biodiversity can sever capital's claim over the future by prompting a traumatic instance of physicality.

Keywords: geoengineering, prometheanism, biodiversity protection, Katerina Kolozova, futurism.

Global trends in contemporary left biodiversity protection practices are self-undermining because, despite preservation efforts, many species will not survive in climate-altered futures, and avenues that might change this fate—such as engineering the atmosphere or nonhuman species—are pre-emptively foreclosed because fundamental artificial alteration is seen to corrupt the “sacred” character of nature. Like Walter Benjamin's *Angélus Novus*, the green left mel-

ancholically encircles the past. Instead this talk takes the recently resurrected figure of Prometheus to promote an environmentalism that casts its eyes to the future, whose wings will carry us from political eschatology to utopian interventionism. It will be argued that preparing the future for biodiversity can sever capital's claim over the future by prompting a traumatic instance of physicality.

Green left biodiversity protection strategies have been dominated by preservation—setting aside protected reserve areas to shelter wild nature from habitat degradation and consequent species loss. Preservationists create fortresses of “untouched” nature by protecting undisturbed wilderness areas and restoring disturbed areas to something resembling a pristine pre-human baseline. Erasing historical traces of human disturbance involves methods such as reforestation, removing invasive species, and breeding and releasing wildlife. Preservationists accordingly form and endorse a stark nature–culture divide, privileging the nature side of the dichotomy while mistrusting artificial life, especially artificial interventions into nature that are seen to stand at odds with its organic balance. Their heavy-handed managerial interventions into ecosystems are not perceived as human interference because they are seen as “at one” with the needs of nature. Even though preservationists accept that we have entered the Anthropocene—where humans have profoundly altered Earth to the point that there is no longer such a thing as untouched nature—they argue that humanity must do everything in our power to preserve the sacred pre-human balance of nature so that each species has a place to flourish within their “original” ecosystem. It appears that preservationists are guided by angels trapped in a romanticized past—freezing fabricated captures of the past (a nature without humans) and drawing them into the present.

But despite the green left's unequivocal devotion, the preservation approach is actually self-undermining because without directly addressing the drivers of habitat destruction and pollution, protecting areas of pristine wilderness is an illusory fix. Significantly, many species will not be able to survive in warmer climates, and are vulnerable to increasing extreme weather threats such as droughts, floods, fires and storms. There is little point in trying to protect species in a way that does not ensure their survival in the future.

Preservationists undeniably acknowledge the detrimental impacts of severe air, soil and water degradation on biodiversity, and fight against the unsustainable demands placed on Earth's finite resources by excess consumption. Nonetheless, the green left has given up on large-scale ambition of building a post-capitalist future, resigned to merely trying to restrain the effects of the global market through advocating emission reductions—typical of broader fatalist trends in left politics. Left politics has long since abandoned the future, either convinced that capital has wholly trapped our imaginations within its bounds, or fearful that large-scale political ambition to dismantle and replace capitalism will leave a trail of exclusion and violence in its path: “the idea of remaking the world according to the ideals of equality and justice is routinely denounced as a dangerous totalitarian fantasy.”¹ Such fatalism endeavours a politics of uncontaminated purity, for it is better to remain pure and leave the future deadened, than taint oneself with potential violence. Mark Fisher, the apostle of this submission, writes that because it is “impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative” to capitalism, the left now simply oscillates between “the ‘weak messianic’ hope that there must be something new on the way [which] lapses into the morose conviction that nothing new can ever happen.”²

Green politics has become a melancholic one, fixated on a neurotic compulsion to re-enact the past as a means to position a reason for endurance (environmental redemption), yet repeating a golden past that never was: encircling a false Eden, a holy nature void of the impurities of humanity. The promise of redemption works to absolve the soul of wrongdoing and from the burden of facing the conditions of the future. Yet the contradictions of preservation strategies signify the inadequacy of an approach that abandons the future.

To confront its inadequacies and to move to a postcapitalist future, the green left should appropriate Promethean environmentalism in the form of geoengineering, despite it being a traditionally capitalist venture. Traditional environmental Prometheanism isn't concerned with biodiversity protection; it is a profoundly anthropocentric project. Prometheanism in general is the idea that there is no limit to

how humans can transform the world, and that humanity should actively strive to transform the given into the made, where even the conditions that limit human transformation can be transformed. Promethean environmentalism loosely rejects the idea that the Earth has finite resources, trusting that human ingenuity as fuelled by capitalist forces can make resources infinite, replacing diminishing natural resources with synthetic ones (replacing extinct bees with robotic pollinators, for example). Seduced by total affirmation of the artificial, most Promethean environmental projects collapse the distinction between nature and artificial life, demanding godless sacrifices of the natural world to fuel projects of human enterprise. Prometheans generally go out of their way to look for artificial improvements to Earth because they believe humans do a more effective job in nature's functions than nature itself. Besides, at the end of the day, they argue, if nature stands for everything in the universe, and humans are a part of that, and arguably the pinnacle of life on Earth, it is human duty to improve the world.

Prometheanism is futurist in that it does not see the conditions of the past and the present as limiting what could be—technology can overcome any natural or given limit. In contrast to the green left's attempt to recover an atmospheric balance as if it had not been affected by human life, geoengineering takes the climate to safe levels in a way that looks forward, derailing the idea that nature can or should be fundamentally separate from the artificial. Geoengineering is the deliberate large-scale manipulation of geological and environmental processes, directed at countering anthropogenic climate warming. Geoengineering the climate manifests in two forms: solar radiation management and carbon capture and storage. Solar radiation management includes examples such as marine cloud brightening (increasing the number of droplets in clouds over the ocean to reflect the sun's rays), aerosol injection (injecting sulphur dioxide clouds into the atmosphere to reflect the sun's rays, mimicking the effect of volcanic eruptions), or diffraction grating (planting a thin wire in space to diffract the sun's light before it reaches Earth). Carbon capture includes both fitting factories with solvent filters that trap carbon before it is released into the atmosphere, and removing existing carbon from the atmosphere, injecting the trapped carbon in longer lasting material sites like underground or in the ocean.

¹ Ray Brassier, “Prometheanism and its Critics,” in *Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, eds. Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2014), 469.

² Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2009), 2-3.

Carbon sequestration includes examples such as iron fertilization (dumping iron fertilization in the ocean to stimulate phytoplankton growth, which absorb atmospheric carbon dioxide and let it sink to bottom of the ocean when they die), direct air capture (using chemicals to trap carbon dioxide), or carbon farming (planting unmodified or genetically modified longer-rooted plants to capture carbon, and incorporating organic materials into the soil to encourage the captured carbon to stay in the soil). Geoengineering has strong ties to free-market capitalist ideology in that it is treated as a market solution to perpetual economic growth.

In general the green left stands against geoengineering as the pinnacle of artificial domination over nature, dangerous because its consequences are incalculable and irreversible. Nonetheless, because existing efforts to limit economic growth and reduce emission have so far been severely unfruitful, the green left has to stop being allergic to the possibility that engineering the climate could be the most effective response to climate change, and consequently to enabling species to survive in predicted future conditions. Rather than trying to slow capitalism, it would be more effective to capitalize on its pace and undeniable hunger for innovation, and subvert it from within. Left accelerationist movements like Xenofeminism advocate accelerating and appropriating technological and scientific innovation produced by capitalist markets, arguing that each newly developed technology opens different avenues for re-engineering the world and for unsettling capital's claim over the future. Xenofeminists write, "[t]he real emancipatory potential of technology remains unrealized... the ultimate task lies in engineering technologies to combat unequal access to reproductive and pharmacological tools, environmental cataclysm, economic instability, as well as dangerous forms of unpaid/underpaid labour."³

On top of that, Prometheism presents promising opportunities for confronting climate change and biodiversity loss by dismantling the distinction between what environmental methods count as natural and unnatural. Abiding by preservation's arbitrary transcendental distinction between natural and unnatural is, as we have seen, actually to the detriment of biodiversity protection. While it is

important to continue to support protected areas, as many vulnerable species have been shown to only flourish in their evolutionary ecosystem, at the same time we must strip the bounds of sacredness that surround them. No act of biodiversity protection should be considered un-sacred because denaturalizing conceptions of nature will vastly expand the array of resources to protect biodiversity.

Even though Promethean environmentalism is driven by the anthropocentric desire to control nature and by capitalist innovation, the way geoengineering represents a radical dyad offers opportunities to subvert its disregard of given nature. For the remainder of the talk I will paraphrase Katerina Kolozova's oeuvre on the cyborg and non-philosophy to advocate the disruptive political potential of geoengineering. A radical dyad, according to Kolozova, entails a physical real component and a signifying automaton, which is both symbolic and physical, that are unilaterally positioned towards one another in a way that each plays the role of the real to the other, such that the symbolic is bypassed. The symbolic always seeks to explain and account for the real. Yet because the real is foreclosed to thought, the real is always in excess to the symbolic, meaning that a disjuncture inevitably ensues between the two. Symbolic systems generally rely on denying this disjuncture.

A radical dyad exposes the irreconcilability of the real and the symbolic because the pre-symbolic real components affect one another in a way that actually fundamentally exceeds and thus undermines symbolic captures of it. For example, drawing on Donna Haraway's cyborg, Kolozova explains how instead of reinforcing humanist conceptions of the human (conceived as exponentially freer of the constraints of organic physicality), the technological adaptation of humanity exposes the material organic constitution of the human body, and forms a physical continuity with it in such a way that actually undermines humanism: "the 'bestial' continuity of machine and the animal body" ruptures humanist signification of the human in a traumatic instance of physicality.⁴ The uncanny physical continuity of machine and organic matter as an instance of the real makes symbolic unification or resolution with the real difficult, if not impossible—it just does not fit within existing symbolic narratives

³ Laboria Cuboniks, "Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation" (2015), <http://www.laboriacuboniks.net>, oxo3.

⁴ Katerina Kolozova, "Subjectivity without Physicality: Machine, Body and the Signifying Automaton," *Subjectivity*, Vol. 12 (2019), 53.

about how the world works (such as the humanist narrative that humanity can escape our fleshly constraints). While, as we shall soon see, there are methods to deny such fundamental disjuncture, the radical dyad will constantly disrupt symbolic capture because of its senselessness/monstrosity—it is a constant reminder that the real underpins, and is foreclosed to, the symbolic: “[t]he consequence of such unilateral positioning is that there is no mediation or unification via the transcendental.”⁵

A radical dyad can be politicized against capitalism because it exposes capital’s material foundations—something detrimental to a totality that depends on erasing the physical real in aspiration of a transcendental self-sufficient system of pure value. Through creating (commodity) value via exploitation of the material real, capital unifies the real with its system of value, allowing itself to become incrementally distant from physicality towards a system of pure value: “an aspiration to erase any trace of the embarrassing remainder of our own animality or of physicality *tout court*, as that ‘dumb’ presence, embarrassing mess of organic and inorganic vulgarity insulting the nobility of pure transcendence.”⁶ Radical dyads hold political potential because they expose the real in a way that cannot easily be reinscribed into capitalism’s transcendental system of pure value. The political potential of geoengineering is therefore positioned in its stubborn physicality.

Engineering nature is a radical dyad because it represents pre-symbolic and pre-technological real nature on the one hand, and the automaton on the other—the symbolic and technological alteration of that nature—coming together in such a way that its foreignness cannot be simply reinscribed into contemporary transcendental narratives about the world. Each physical side of hybridized nature—organic nature and the technological modifications of nature—will affect the other regardless of signification and in ways that will not abide by humanity’s predictions of such hybridity. The monstrous unpredictability of geoengineering will not fit into the self-sufficient narrative of capital, both because it undermines human narcissistic claims that humans have mastery over nature as

a mere forceless resource, and because it wholly exceeds and underwrites transcendental claims over nature as separate from (or a mere resource for) the artificial. Smaller cases of organic-machine hybridity, like genetic modification, have similar ruptural potential in that the organic and machine components of the hybrid will alter each other in ways that humanity has no control over. But the scale of geoengineering, of its risks and rewards, is unprecedented, its consequences being extensive and irreversible—geoengineering projects, once unleashed, will remake the world on its own; worldly behemoths that take on a life severed from their creators, a turn that cannot be retracted. And while the hybridisation of nature and the artificial is happening all the time, seen most significantly in the anthropogenic changes to Earth’s atmosphere, the way that geoengineering is intentional and starts from the Promethean aspiration of human mastery puts those claims on the line.

The dyad of geoengineering exposes that the universe, as Ray Brassier puts it, “is indifferent to our existence and oblivious to the ‘values’ and ‘meanings’ which we would drape over it in order to make it hospitable.”⁷ Geoengineering exposes that the real is incongruous and void of meaning because it constantly exposes the synthetic production of the symbolic by being uncapturable by anthropocentric narratives. The Promethean aim to illustrate the greatness of human capability will become a self-undermining anti-anthropocentric project that actually reveals the insignificance of humanity; while we can try to predict results, forces of the universe are not under human control. The very persistent reminder of its material foundations created by the radical dyad of geoengineering is thus a threat to capitalism’s transcendental claims over the real and its fantasy of a value system void of material basis. The experience of pre-symbolic meaningless nature through the dyad of geoengineering therefore presents an opportunity to break from capitalism’s cosmological sufficiency—potentially a source for a realist universalism, or at least heretical revolt. It is a powerful source for subverting capital’s claim over technological innovation, and its treatment of nature as a mere resource for the artificial.

Still, this potential depends on how the real exposed by geoengineering is met. Kolozova’s work has shown that the traditional

⁵ Katerina Kolozova, *Capitalism’s Holocaust of Animals: A Non-Marxist Critique of Capital, Philosophy and Patriarchy* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 123.

⁶ Kolozova, *Capitalism’s Holocaust of Animals*, 46.

⁷ Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), xi.

philosophical method generally works to synthesize the real with our conceptions of it so that the two become indistinguishable, a move that actually depoliticizes the real by reinscribing its senselessness into cosmologies of meaning that capitalism can capitalize on. The philosophical method is centred on creating a higher form of reality through “making sense” of the world, facilitated by the mistaken presupposition that the real is knowable. In making sense of the world, philosophy makes a decision about what the real is, and projects that decision about the real as an absolute, that can account for everything through weaving different parts of the world together into a complete cosmological system. The amphibology of the real and philosophy’s transcendental decision seemingly replaces the real, in that philosophers can seek answers about the world from its cosmology, rather than the real itself, meaning that the real functions as a mere resource for creating value that can no longer disprove the philosophical. Instead, when a part of the real emerges which philosophy’s cosmology has not or cannot account for, the philosophical method draws it in by finding a place for it within its world. Unable to confront the anxiety of the diremption presented by the radical dyad, the philosopher turns away. Yet any new promise of meaning, if divorced from learning from actuality, will project a new righteous dogma.

This means that the left should refrain from rushing to make sense of ruptures produced by geoengineering: “[s]eeking for unification and dialectical resolution is seeking to naturalize and anthropomorphize the hybrid.”⁸ Non-philosophy is a method to describe the real without making a holistic decision about what the real is, submitting to the fact of thought’s finitude. In other words, non-philosophy starts from acknowledging the irreconcilability of the symbolic and the real by affirming the “uncompromising and uncontrollable rule of an ungraspable real behind the reality it aspires to explain.”⁹ It describes the real in a way that affects and is affected by it, and does not try to interpret the real into a relational system of meaning. Describing the real effects of geoengineering can produce radical concepts freer from human narcissism that constitute non-philosophical understandings of nature (non-nature).

We thus require an angel who plants their feet and boldly turns their fearful gaze from the past to the difficulty of the future. Unmasking a traumatic instance of the real requires taking risks of the highest order. Yet embodied in such risky hybridity lies equally the potential for rebirth and destruction. In violent creation, humanity will continuously open the future to unexpected material experiences of the real, stimulating a more experimental array of methods whose monstrous hybridity can further rupture capital’s claim over the future. Without risk, there can be no life. The future insists on its due.

⁸ Kolozova, “Subjectivity without Physicality,” 53.

⁹ Katerina Kolozova, *Cut of the Real: Subjectivity in Poststructuralist Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 62.

Ivana Mancic

Outside of Memories We Belong, Women of Yugoslavia

Bionote: Ivana Mancic is a Ph.D, researcher in Fine Art, School of Art and Design at Nottingham Trent University, U.K., with the focus on art practice aimed at the production of multi-disciplinary artworks, videos and installations the purpose of which is to display the personal narrative to address the issues of war, loss and belonging, related to the specificity of the ex-Yugoslav context in order to contribute to developing of the female voice of artists and pacifists in contemporary art. The personal narrative is presented in the written form through artworks, texts, essays and reflections on war experiences and current world crises through intersections between the present and the past.

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Abstract: This article addresses the issues surrounding the Yugoslav Civil War by offering my personal narrative in relation to loss and disappearance resulting from the exposure to war and sanctions in the nineties and the "Merciful Angel" operation of bombing of Serbia by NATO in 1999. It thus focuses on the female interpretation of people, ways of life, buildings and human artifacts belonging to the historical period of communist Yugoslavia which once were, yet no longer remain. The work with archives, especially the photographs which originate from my personal family possession, brings closer these ghosts of the past times to the present moment. At the same time, photography is a means to investigate the position and treatment of women during and after the period of Yugoslavia, their efforts and struggles for emancipation. The usage of photography as a visual narrative allows an insight into the lives of women during communism through the lens of my closest female family members. The article tackles different issues of concerning women in communist Yugoslavia, and follows certain steps in their history, from the emancipation following the Second World War and participation of women in battle as combatants and nurses, their efforts in rebuilding the country and subsequent

re establishment of patriarchal values which occurred at the start of Yugoslav Civil war and conflicts that marked it. Autoethnography as a research method combined with personal narrative allows a deeper understanding of culture and values of Yugoslav society and their subsequent clash. In addition to this, it celebrates the importance of female voice and activism in the constant battle against patriarchy and women who chose to defy it by acknowledging responsibility and patriarchal nature of war. Photographic practice-based research allows an insight into individual stories which form a deeper understanding of the pre- and post-war Yugoslav society and political circumstances surrounding it.

Keywords: autoethnography, personal narrative, emancipation of women, Yugoslavia, photography, family archive, practice-based research, female voice

Storytelling is an activity which 'reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it'¹ - Hannah Arendt

Autoethnography as a research method focuses on self, uses memory as a source of research data and as such is a highly personalized account that draws from the experiences of a researcher in order to extend social understanding. Without a personal story, knowledge and theory become disembodied words.² The usage of autoethnography as a research method enables witnessing and testifying on behalf of my personal experience in order to illustrate facets of cultural experience.³

Nevertheless, it is located at the boundaries of disciplinary practices and is therefore frequently questioned as a valuable research method which still needs to fight for its status of a proper research methodology.⁴

Auto ethnography focuses on an understanding of culture and society through the self, the personal experience is primary data while

¹ Hannah Arendt, *Men in dark times* (Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1970), 94.

² Carolyn S. Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner, "Analyzing Analytic Autoethnography an Autopsy," *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35. 4. (2006): 429-449.

³ Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams and Arthur P. Bochner, "Autoethnography: An Overview," *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 12.1. (2011): Art 10.

⁴ Andrew C. Sparkes, "Autoethnography and Narratives of Self: Reflections on Criteria in Action," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 17.1. (2000): 21-43.

the individual narrative forms a bigger story of the society. The goal of an auto ethnographer is to achieve a wider cultural understanding on the basis of individual experience, self-reflection, analysis and reflective writing.⁵

Personal narratives are works of history, society and individual and this very intersection of the personal and the societal is a new vantage point that allows for a unique contribution to social science. As such, they deal with both social and individual since the lives lived within the society were shaped by the very values and qualities of the society itself. Systems of language, values, power, culture, symbols, geographies and histories are integral parts of a life within the society. Personal lives were set within the social relationships with family and community, therefore the narrators that recall them and their impetus are elements of the society as well.⁶

In relation to this and using autoethnography as a research method, my personal narrative addresses the issues of loss, memory and belonging that have marked the historical chapter surrounding the Yugoslav Civil War, and, as such, investigates the steps of emancipation of women in Yugoslavia, while photography, as an element of practice based research, serves as a medium to enable witnessing and allows me to testify on behalf of my personal experience in order to illustrate facets of cultural experience.

My testimony derives from the consequences of conflicts and migrations during and after the Yugoslav Civil War and the NATO Bombing of Serbia in 1999. Loss of identity, loss of a sense of belonging, loss of possessions, physical life, and loss of dignity are at times determined by the quality of my memories presented through the written narrative.

One of the pitfalls of autoethnography is that memory is not always linear, and it is at times hard to identify and describe it using a linear narrative even though the language we use to present it, requires linearity. Therefore, alternative means of expression are sometimes needed⁷ and photographic practice-based research can help in this

respect, as it also allows me to test the quality of some of my memories. While explicit memories are based on episodic knowledge and their aim is mainly to inform, they do not affect daily activities and preferences. Unlike them, implicit memories emerge as an emotional response to an association or a cue related to the context in which the traumatic experience occurred, and their retrieval is experienced as a current emotion with properties similar to the initial emotions. Memories such as these can directly influence attention, behaviour and thinking and are immediately aimed at protecting a person and at avoiding danger.⁸ Some therapeutic treatments of implicit memories suggest that they can be dealt with by re-experiencing them and in that way change the way in which they are interpreted, thus framing them in a flexible narrative by integrating memories of trauma into someone's life story and the totality of a person's identity.⁹

The Yugoslav Civil War, known around the world for its horrors and immense brutality, as well as ethnic cleansing, mass rapes, lost homelands, lost hope and identity—both national and gender, had a great impact on both feminists and women across the world and its effects were of huge transnational importance.¹⁰ With regards to this and as a response to war, certain women, pacifists, and artists from ex-Yugoslav countries, appeared on the public scene using art to criticize the patriarchal nature of the society and war. This emerging female voice represents a unique step of acknowledgment, responsibility and memory.

The "male paradigm" is characterized by "impersonal abstraction." According to traditional academic male-centred forms of scholarship based on male systems of logic and morality, female writing is more personalized but as such, might at times, be silenced and delegitimized.¹¹ Contrary to masculine energy that "intimidates, constrains, demands, objectifies, and enforces," the energies work-

⁵ Heewon Chang, *Autoethnography as Method* (London: Routledge, 2008), 49.

⁶ Barbara Laslett, "Personal Narratives as Sociology," *Contemporary Sociology* 28.4. (1999): 392-401, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2655287>.

⁷ See: Jenny Edkins, *Trauma and the Memory of Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

⁸ Lawrence J. Sanna and Edward C. Chang, *Judgments Over Time: The Interplay of Thoughts, Feelings, and Behaviors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 285.

⁹ Onno Van der Hart, Paul Brown and Bessel Van der Kolk, "Pierre Janet's Treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder," *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 2.1. (1989): 195-210, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/312699643_Pierre_Janet's_Treatment_of_Post-Traumatic_Stress.

¹⁰ Jelena Batinić, "Feminism, Nationalism, and War: The 'Yugoslav Case' in Feminist Texts," *Journal of International Women's Studies* 3.1. (2001): 1-23, <http://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol3/iss1/1>.

¹¹ Carole Blair, Julie R. Brown and Leslie A. Baxter, "Disciplining the Feminine," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 80.4. (1994): 389-409.

ing through feminine writing can create the potential to allow vulnerability, and new forms of subjectivity to emerge as an element of theoretical work. My feminine voice inside guides the process of writing about events from my past that were buried deep within. By bringing them out into the light of day, their true nature could be witnessed, and they would be permitted to heal.¹²

Jane Rendell, on the *Site Writing* website, in her essay "Conductor: A Tribute to the Angels, *Jane Prophet: 'Conductor'*," quotes Rosi Braidotti and Luce Irigaray, two feminists who explore the relationship between space and subjectivity, and state that these two categories are naturally connected. In their opinion, women were confined by male principles of logic, law and language. As a consequence of this and/or as a result of it, they started questioning the organization of patriarchal time and space. They started rethinking it and accepting "a kind of knowingness or unknowingness that refuses fixity, that allows us to think between, or to think "as if". These female researchers are mediators, who contrary to male approaches "go between and bridge rather than cut through."¹³

Women in Yugoslavia

After the Second World War in Yugoslavia, the main postulates of the new-born political system which insisted on class equality, also assumed the equality between women and men. "Women have rights by law, so they already are equal"¹⁴ The fact that women fought in the front lines, side by side with men, allowed for the basic steps of emancipation. At first, they were mobilized in order to support the Partisan War effort against the Nazis, and an estimated 100,000 women actually participated in battle.¹⁵

According to Pantelic, most of them were deployed as nurses but those that actually participated in combat are the ones who conquered another sphere of the public domain and ensured the future

position of women in public life. By leaving the house in order to work, women potentially managed to conquer the sphere of the public domain, as after the war they were engaged in the rehabilitation of Yugoslavia and also had a task to propagate the socialist ideology.¹⁶

After the FRY proclaimed the Five-Year Plan of rebuilding the country from the consequences of the war there was an increased need in the workforce. In these new circumstances, women gained special importance. They participated in voluntary work to help rebuild the country. These voluntary actions organized by the Communist party of Yugoslavia allowed and welcomed women to build roads, railways and perform work in the factories. The need for fast industrial development required women to leave housework and enter the public sphere. This sudden emancipation allowed women to have their work appreciated and respected.¹⁷

The Communist Partisan movement during the war promised equal rights to women, seeing gender equality as an inevitable by-product of the unfolding communist revolution.¹⁸

¹² Dwayne Custer, "Autoethnography as a Transformative Research Method," *The Qualitative Report* 19.37. (2014): 1-13, <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1011&context=tqr>.

¹³ Jane Rendell, "Conductor: A Tribute to the Angels', Jane Prophet: 'Conductor'," *The Wapping Project* (2000), <https://www.janerendell.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/conductor.pdf>.

¹⁴ Rada Iveković and Slavenka Drakulić, "Yugoslavia: Neofeminism—and its Six Mortal Sins," in *Sisterhood is Global: The International Women's Movement Anthology*, ed. Robin Morgan (New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1996), 734.

¹⁵ Batinić, "Feminism, Nationalism, and War."

¹⁶ Batinić, "Feminism, Nationalism, and War."

¹⁷ Aida Spahić, Amila Ždralović and Arijana Aganović, *Women Documented: Women and Public Life in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 20th Century* (Sarajevo: Sarajevo Open Centre, 2014), 74.

¹⁸ Batinić, "Feminism, Nationalism, and War."



Figure 1. Voluntary Action in 1977 Yugoslavia, my mother Mirjana Kvaic (on the left) with a friend, photograph taken from my personal family archive, Ruma, Serbia.



Figure 2. Shoe Factory *Fruska Gora*, Ruma, Yugoslavia, my grandmother Milica Kvaic (on the left) with colleagues working, photograph taken from my personal family archive, Ruma, Serbia.

In reality, what appeared as emancipation during communism actually meant that most women had to spend their lives working in both the public sphere and in their homes. In addition to this, the same opportunities were not offered to men and women equally, both in politics and the self-management system which existed in factories. Women were given roles which required little responsibility and offered them limited prospects of building a career.



Figure 3. *Women and Tito*, my grandmother, Marija Puskas, second on the right, with colleagues from a shoe factory *Fruska Gora*, Ruma, photograph from my personal family archive, Ruma, Serbia.

Both of my grandmothers worked their whole life in a shoe factory and after their hard work they had to continue taking care of their children, house chores and agriculture as they produced most of their food. Some factories introduced Workers' cards in which all of the extra work hours would be noted, and every worker was expected to fulfil these. Emancipation offered to women the belief that they were equal to men so that they could work even harder at the price of feeling respected.

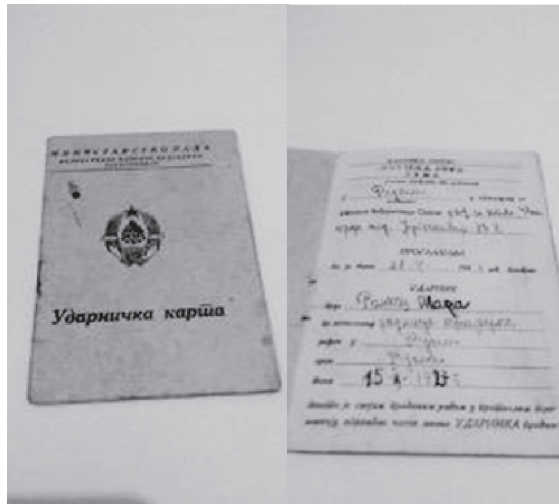


Figure 4. The inside of the Female Workers' Card Shoe Factory *Fruska Gora*, Ruma, 1947, Yugoslavia, with the name of my grandmother Mara Rakos, photograph of items from my personal family archive, Ruma, Serbia.



Figure 5. My grandmother Mara Rakos, in 1944, age 16, working in a shoe factory, photograph taken from my personal family archive, Ruma, Serbia.

In Hemon's words: "My experience of Yugoslavia and experience of people in my vicinity was shaped very much by propaganda, but not only propaganda. For my family and many other families, the new socialist system marked the leap from poverty because the progress and optimism which arose after WW2 led to the creation of the middle class and some of these people, our parents, were born in houses with dirt floors."¹⁹

The communist regime allowed citizens to get an education, college degrees, steady jobs, cars, weekend houses, and to take summer holidays on the Adriatic coast. People believed in this communist ideal and lived it. My mother, like many other women, also stood with this belief and she still believes that these subtle ideas of brotherhood and equality are noble in their core.

She believed (and still does) in social justice, generosity, and a fair distribution of wealth. She believed in the system committed to making the country better; Tito and the Party were that system.²⁰



Figure 6. My mother Mirjana Kvaic (on the right) in 1985 Yugoslavia, skiing with friends, photograph taken from my personal family archive, Ruma, Serbia.

¹⁹ Aleksandar Hemon, "My Mother and the Failed Experiment of Yugoslavia," *The New Yorker* (June 05, 2019). <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/personal-history/my-mother-and-the-failed-experiment-of-yugoslavia>

²⁰ Ibid.

After the divorce, my mother eventually managed to acquire one of the free, state apartments, but I remember her struggle through life, being a divorcee in the communist system. These apartments were not always easy to gain, especially for women. The one she lived in did not have a bathroom, and I remember this well, and I remember feeling this sense of unfairness and today I understand why. Through her struggle I realized how obvious these inconsistencies within the communist society were and how the emancipation of women in communism did not run smoothly.

Aside from that, and despite the fast emancipation of women in socialism, the subsequent re-establishment of the old premises of the patriarchal society and the rise of nationalism soon followed, preceding the armed conflicts of the 1990s.²¹

The ways in which women were treated depended on the circumstances and needs of the society and therefore the road to emancipation was not linear, but rather, turbulent. The relatively peaceful period in Balkan history, from the end of WW2 to the armed conflicts in the nineties, was marked by the jump from patriarchal values to the sudden emancipation of women. This ostensible emancipation was followed by a subsequent decadence marked by the reinvention of the patriarchal values for developing nationalist discourse, which preceded the Yugoslav Civil War.²²

The pre-conflict era had seen the re-patriarchalization of Yugoslavian society and an essentialist conceptualization of dominant gender roles. This was the basis for the militarization of society and mobilizing the population for war.²³

The rejection of communism meant that many values, including that of gender equality were to be discredited. The role and expectations of women changed as the tendency of seeing them as mothers and symbols of the nation occurred, thus emphasizing their biological role as those in charge of the reproduction of the nation.

²¹ Spahić et al., *Women Documented*, 81.

²² Sonja Licht and Slobodan Drakulić, "When the Word for Peacemaker was a Woman: War and Gender in the Former Yugoslavia," *Research on Russia and Eastern Europe* 2 (1996): 111-139, <https://www.zenskestudie.edu.rs/en/publishing/online-material/women-s-studies-journal/296-when-the-word-for-peacemaker-was-a-woman-war-and-gender-in-the-former-yugoslavia>.

²³ Maja Korac, "Is there a Right Time for Gender-Just Peace?," *Gender and Education* 28.3 (2016): 431-444.

As a result of the rise of nationalist ideology, the idea of patriotic womanhood was born, and a woman's task was no longer to build socialism through work and defend its values but to regenerate the nation through the role of mother.²⁴

These new gender roles adapted individuals to war roles and for the war system to change fundamentally for the sake of ending wars, profound changes in gender relations are necessary.²⁵

What followed were dark times and rainy days. Sometimes it rains in a different way and it is peaceful and solemn, the rain that purifies. But those days that marked the dusk of Yugoslavia were simply gloomy. That rain had nothing in common with the simple pleasures of childhood, when one rejoiced just by seeing the merry dance of the raindrops on the concrete and the surrounding nature breathing together with the soaking soil. That rain could not wash off the dark days. It did not bring any good, but instead, gloomier and gloomier news from the war zone. Yes. They did really wage wars only an hour away. I did not know about it as I was only eleven, and on the other hand it was there, in the air and we all sensed it. The dark days of our childhoods. The days in which we were to forget that we should be equal. The days in which brotherhood and equality were condemned by men who wanted to play war. The days in which we were so poor and some of them suddenly so rich. Those days were heavy, with lead skies that do not promise anything good. At the edge of my childhood there it was, the foresight of horror. The irony of it all is that it did not really happen to us, we did not get killed but parts of us died. There, at the edge of my childhood were the worried faces of my parents trying to make some sense in madness.

I also remember the bombing. I was nineteen. All the bridges that connected Serbia and the northern province of Vojvodina were already destroyed. There was fire and smoke everywhere. Novi Sad, the capital of Vojvodina, was covered in flames. It felt as if I was turning grey from the inside—as if someone took all of the colours away. As if all the sense disappeared. We, the ordinary people, could not face it. The psychological strain, the burden was too much. When I

²⁴ Wendy Bracewell, "Women, Motherhood, and Contemporary Serbian Nationalism," *Women's Studies International Forum* 18.1-2. (1996): 25-33.

²⁵ Charlotte Bunch, "Feminism, Peace, Human Rights and Human Security," *Canadian Woman Studies* 22.2.(2003): 6-11.

look back to those days, they simply have no colour. They feel like someone had stripped them of every meaning.

I remember looking at my country burn through the windowpane. I remember the factories burning in the distance, the effort of so many communist workers disappearing. The dream disappearing. Their hopes and beliefs disappearing in flames. Thick black smoke elevating towards the sky. I was aware that that bomb could hit us at any second. I was aware of all the senselessness of hiding. But human beings are miraculous in their willingness to prevail against all odds and that is how I survived- through the flames, and I became resilient to sorrow and pain, to hunger, to humiliation, to misery. I sometimes think that this is how I travel through life, in smoke, always through smoke. Regardless of realizing the frailty of our own existence, we, the women of Yugoslavia I knew, prevailed, through flames and smoke.

Nevertheless, even today, in the era of the migrant crises, with the migrants stuck in Serbia in their attempts to cross the borders with EU countries, women are remembered again, in frequent narratives about the refugee men who are raping "our women." It is this hypocritical relationship that marked the treatment of women in and after Yugoslavia, by always involving them in political discourses and using them for media purposes. Therefore, women in Yugoslavia and in post-Yugoslav era were betrayed and misused by political systems. From mine and the experience of the women around me, I can conclude that women have been dragged into the political circumstances of their time, most of them forced to simply coexist with war, hunger and crises.

Nevertheless, through the constant clashes and conflicts, some women realized that, as a half of humanity, they do have the right to have their voice heard and to participate in the decision-making, both in peace and war, and therefore should have a say in all of the activities that have an effect on their lives. In that sense, gender balance, as a democratic principle, is essential to the right of women to engage in peace building and it should ensure that women can reject nationalist discourses and projects and choose to act against them. Regardless of this, activists are still seen as traitors and are subjugated to the general contempt and rejection by their own

communities²⁶ and those women who choose to defy patriarchy and thus undermine the existing order, such as Women in Black, Serbia, are deprived of support and appreciation.²⁷ Fighting patriarchy and war as its product is an ongoing process and in this fact lies the importance of female activism and the female voice.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Vjollca Krasniqi et al., *Feminism and Nationalism, Yugoslav Feminisms* (Belgrade: ProFemina, 2011), 57.

Gala Naseva

The Chasm of Structural Discrimination: Women on the Frontline Against COVID-19

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Abstract: The swift and unceasing spread of COVID-19 has created a new wave of complications that have revealed dozens of issues dishevelled in the gendered and obsolete state management and in the low levels of social development, primarily focusing on the Balkans. With the onset of the pandemic, women with specific diseases belong to the most critical group, given the fact that infection with COVID-19 itself increases the risk of subsequent development of numerous health complications. This text briefly highlights the negative effects of the pandemic on women from several perspectives, trying to fleetingly show its severe impact on a global level and the necessity to improve a system that is barely surviving on already unsteady grounds.

Keywords: global crisis, women, COVID-19, gender-based discrimination, healthcare system

Introduction

As the progression of the pandemic started to become more evident, the sudden shift away from our ordinary and continuous social functioning, our communication with one another, has been altered immensely—its turnaround point started to emerge on the surface when distance became the most vital element of our day-to-day reality. All of the ongoing changes in terms of the restrictions of movement¹ due to COVID-19, some of them unprecedented, led to many variations of mutual communication, and by that, left each individual in a state of oblivion that has rapidly spread throughout the globe, just as the pandemic started to fill out all spheres of society. The way we preserve the environment, as well as the continuous alterations of our segregated society, are both indispensable and key factors of the resilience of urbanized areas globally, reminding state executives that the long-awaited preparation for emergencies that are directly and inevitably caused by climate change—such as abrupt alterations in air, heat and pollution—are clearly needed. The emergence of COVID-19 reopened an ongoing and relevant discourse regarding the inequalities that occur due to gendered politics and underdeveloped state institutions, primarily showing the economic impact it has on women on a global level.

The COVID-19 regulations do not have the same impact on all citizens, since the structures of society continue to place a vast number of citizens on the margins, and even during these times when the pandemic is restlessly spreading, some people do not have the resources nor the opportunities to access basic health care. The United Nations' 2020 policy brief² clearly states the reasons why women, in particular, are being struck by the pandemic more than men, considering the amount of pre-existing inequalities in different spheres, starting from economic independence, unpaid or underpaid care work, accessibility to health care and violence solely based on their gender. Additionally, women who are part of marginalized societies in underdeveloped countries are at an even higher risk of COVID-19 transmission and fatalities, loss of livelihood, and increased violence, according to the UN's latest report. Taking that

¹ World Aware, "COVID-19 Alert: European Countries Maintaining Movement & Business Restrictions as of May," *World Aware* (May 20, 2020), <https://www.worldaware.com/covid-19-alert-european-countries-maintaining-movement-business-restrictions-may-20>.

² United Nations, "Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women," *ReliefWeb* (April 9, 2020), <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women-en.pdf>.

into consideration, the other part of the story is also causing a global concern, considering that approximately 70% of health workers and first responders around the globe are women, but they are still not on par economically with their male counterparts.³ "At 28%, the gender pay gap in the health sector is higher than the overall gender pay gap (16%)."⁴ Reconstructing the idea of young women as primary caretakers is profoundly entwined in the historical context of the society, in reciprocity with the influence from international bodies and communities that tend to create collective consciousness or unconsciousness, depending which societal group is primarily struck by the exploitation narrative. The ongoing impartial improvement in critical social spheres in the Western Balkan countries in the last five to ten years should not be professed nor confused for complete societal growth, considering the omnipresence of the out-of-date labour dichotomy and its incessant prevalence in Eastern European countries. Five long and rather painful economic fluctuations had struck the Western Balkans in the past and worsened the state of vulnerability that goes hand-by-hand with the long periods of transition, affecting the most valuable social spheres and causing a major setback to our already shaky economies, affecting the human capital and taking away already existing resources.⁵ Walking on already shaky grounds means that a crisis that presents itself as a heavy burden on a global level can only have an even more concerning negative impact on countries that are still coping with high percentage of poverty, gender inequality and unsteady economic structures, meaning that the multi-generational element of the family kinship that prevails in the Western Balkans has once again struck its most vulnerable members – women.⁶ Appraised as being primary care-takers, as if care for the youngest and the elderly family members is a freight to be carried around on their shoulders only, women are now facing a vast amount of newly presented issues that

keep on strolling along the pandemic—more women are pushed into poverty than men, the education gap is once again increasing and leaving young women without proper education, there is a disproportionate increase in women's unemployment which is later affecting their overall working time by significantly decreasing it.⁷

Although all of the countries in the Western Balkans had gone through many painful transformations and deliberate alterations in their socio-democratic core, from 2006 up to late 2016,⁸ the principal wave of liberation has not managed to crucially transform the political articulation of valuable questions, such as the exploitation of marginalized communities. This has caused a very strange political discourse, one that presents an improved surface but which remains unchanged in regards to its, what we could call, profoundly ruined core values and fundamental principles of the rule of law, human rights and gender equality.⁹ The Western Balkans have already gone through significantly

Cancer treatment during COVID-19

Due to the specificity of the virus and its way of progression, from the very beginning of the pandemic, especially during the 24/7 quarantine in North Macedonia, there was a complete cessation of numerous interventions and diagnostic procedures that were regularly performed in health institutions. With the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, people with malignancies belong to one of the most critical groups, given the fact that COVID-19 itself increases the risk of subsequent developments of numerous health complications. In addition to that the consistent downfall of the number of health-care workers in the country¹⁰ is also worsening the ongoing crisis, diminishing the institutional capacity to cope with the burden that inevitably started to present itself while the number of people that were struck by the virus was (and still is) growing. As it has already been pointed out a few times in the past, "there's no such thing as a "spare" doctor,"¹¹ especially not since the pandemic began, when

³ UN Women, "COVID-19 and its Economic Toll on Women: The story Behind the Numbers," *UN Women* (September 16, 2020), <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/9/feature-covid-19-economic-impacts-on-women>.

⁴ Ginette Azcona and Antra Bhatt, "From Insights to Action: Gender Equality in the Wake of COVID-19" (2020), <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/09/gender-equality-in-the-wake-of-covid-19>.

⁵ European Commission, "The Western Balkans in Transition," *Occasional Papers* 46 (May, 2009), https://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/publications/pages/publication15155_en.pdf.

⁶ Daša Šašić Šilović, "One Virus, Diverse Impacts: The Pandemic and Women in Central and Eastern Europe," *Social Europe* (July, 2020), <https://www.socialeurope.eu/one-virus-diverse-impacts-the-pandemic-and-women-in-centraland-eastern-europe>.

⁷ UN Women, "COVID-19 and its Economic Toll on Women: The story Behind the Numbers," *UN Women* (September 16, 2020), <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2020/9/feature-covid-19-economic-impacts-on-women>.

⁸ Elizabeta Miloshevska, "Faithful Elections in Macedonia," *Deutsche Welle* (December 09, 2020), <https://www.dw.com/en/fateful-elections-in-macedonia/a-36711063>.

⁹ United Nations, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948).

¹⁰ Mirjana Spasovska, "Doctors Continue to Leave Macedonia," *Radio Free Europe* (August, 2018), <https://www.slobodnaevropa.mk/a/29354761.html>.

¹¹ Zaria Gorvett, "Why Most COVID-19 Deaths Won't be from the Virus", *BBC* (May, 2020),

healthcare workers primarily focused on the successful reduction of the ponderous burden that a novel and unpredictable disease such as COVID-19 carries around. Globally, its heavy toll on medical facilities and personnel was immediately causing a bigger, and in a way insurmountable issue—one that can be easily noticed in the lack of availability of healthcare workers that can take and later process smear tests, do cancer screenings or help people at immediate risk. A vast amount of cancer screening programmes are currently paused across the U.K. since the beginning of the pandemic lockdowns, and this led to the incapability of healthcare workers to detect approximately 1,600 cancer cases on a monthly basis. Some diseases, such as cancer, are not going to respond well if put on hold, considering that an early diagnosis means easier and more successful treatment in most cases.

According to one of the latest cancer studies by The European Organization for Research and Treatment of Cancer, 31% of women were less likely to seek help from their GP, 27% were worried about the effects of the pandemic on their aftercare and 15% were less likely to seek help from their breast cancer physician. In addition, it was concluded, as expected, that support will be restricted because of the continuous measures on social distance and long periods of quarantine. The study showed that women are generally less likely to ask for medical help or assistance during the coronavirus pandemic, and a bigger percentage of women started to develop symptoms that are generally connected to depression and anxiety. Consequently, the results show that a lot of women-patients simply need reassurance or support to freely reach for medical aid, meaning that this missing link is what would enable them to receive proper mental health support.¹²

According to the research conducted by Globocan in 2018,¹³ there were about 1200 newly diagnosed cases per year in North Macedonia, and an average of twenty two people per day are about to be diagnosed with cancer. Due to the dangers that patients may face

<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200528-why-most-covid-19-deaths-wont-be-from-the-virus>.

¹² Claudia Bargon, "New Research Reveals Effects of COVID-19 on Breast Cancer Screening, Treatment and Care," *EurekAlert!* (September 30, 2020), https://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2020-09/eofr-nrr092920.php.

¹³ International Agency for Research on Cancer, "The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2018," *Globocan* (2018), <https://gco.iarc.fr/today/data/factsheets/populations/807-the-former-yugoslav-republic-of-macedonia-fact-sheets.pdf>.

during the pandemic, on April 11 this year, the Ministry of Health, in accordance with the University Clinic for Radiotherapy and Oncology, publicly announced the recommendations for people suffering from cancer:

University Clinic for Radiotherapy and Oncology informs patients that the institution operates smoothly and in conditions of COVID-19, due to the specificity of malignant diseases. Patients receiving chemotherapy and immunotherapy should call for regular appointments, as well as patients receiving radiotherapy. At the same time, it is recommended that the tablet therapy should be taken by a patient's family member.¹⁴

Despite the recommendations and counselling addressed to people suffering from malignant diseases, they are continuously facing a number of obstacles, given that despite the need for the constant monitoring of medical therapy (oral or subcutaneous), as well as follow-up examinations that are inevitable for all patients with cancer, there are certain complications that arise due to the impossibility of scheduling follow-up examinations during the pandemic. In order to protect people who are currently receiving cancer treatment from the risks associated with exposure to the virus and to enable the timely receipt of adequate oral therapy, the Association for Fight Against Cancer - BORKA, the Red Cross and the University Clinic for Radiotherapy and Oncology started making daily lists of people living across the country who need medication. Zorica Adzиеvska, one of the program coordinators for BORKA in Skopje in the past three years, explained the situation that cancer patients are facing during the coronavirus pandemic.

In cooperation with the Red Cross and the University Clinic for Radiotherapy and Oncology, we decided to start making lists of all people who need to deliver medicines to their home. The patients call us, leave data, required therapy and city of residence, and then we forward the list every day. The next day, doctors—oncologists give out a report, and start preparing therapy

¹⁴ Ministry of Health "The Clinic for Radiotherapy and Oncology Functions Smoothly During COVID-19 Conditions," (April 11, 2020), <http://zdravstvo.gov.mk/klinikata-zaradioterapija-ionologija-funkcionira-neprecheno-i-vo-uslovi-na-kovid-19-pacientite-da-gipochituvaatpreparakite-za-zashtita-od-koronavirus/?cn-reloaded=1>.

for each patient. Then, Red Cross volunteers carry the therapy through the cities. From the beginning of May, we started helping patients in this way, protecting them from travel and reducing their financial costs. On August 8, we had the largest number of patients, forty three - but still, the number varies. In total, only in our country there are 112 registered patients who have been given support with oral therapy—one is sent once, some several times, a new order is made every month, and it is communicated ten days before the delivery so that there is no vacuum.¹⁵

At present, the country is facing a shortage of medicine due to the protocols for their procurement that takes more time to process, as well as the vast amount of people who are awaiting testing for COVID-19. People are often left without medication for ten days or are forced to take alternative drugs as substitutes because the ones they need are not available, although there must be no interruption in cancer therapy. The current government made a decision to disperse cancer therapy in other cities in the oncology wards so that patients do not travel to Skopje, which is actually part of a larger plan for the successful mobility of doctors across the country. Herein lies another problem that has become more noticeable during the pandemic and that has managed to show all of the implications that an unstable health care system can have, considering that there are not enough medical professionals, especially oncologists in cities across North Macedonia, and more specifically, specialists that treat breast cancer and cancers of women's reproductive organs. Additionally, most of the individuals who are volunteering to help in the process of distributing cancer treatment throughout North Macedonia are women. Currently, there is an ongoing rotation system of specialists in different towns across North Macedonia, in order to prevent people from leaving their homes and towns just so that they can get their regular doctor's appointment in the capital city. The gynaecology department in Kavadarci has already started working in this way. However, some criteria must be met—there are some patients who have to be examined specifically by a specialist, and that cannot always be done in their hometowns, taking into account that the continuity of examinations must not be lost, and therefore cause an unwanted distortion in data and thus diagnosis.

¹⁵ Gala Naseva, "The Battle with Cancer During a Pandemic," *PINA* (September, 2020), <https://pina.mk/4111-borbata-so-rakot-za-vreme-na-pandemija/>.

Conclusion

The lack of institutional care diminishes the possibility of changing essential social spheres for the benefit of women who are currently suffering the most – the ones who need health treatment and the ones who are still underpaid, yet overworked. In addition, conducting studies that will help understand the reason why the deeply entwined values that perpetually put women in the Balkans on the margins are still incessantly present should be an urgency. The structures that cause the ongoing gendered oppression in all scientific fields, with an emphasis on science,¹⁶ the same time lack the willpower to create care systems for women on the margins. COVID-19 has managed to open old wounds that keep on reappearing when humanity is at its most vulnerable state, and one of them is the structural and in many ways implicit gender-based discrimination that for once should be perceived as a primary issue, considering that launching a so-called "structural change" strategy that would systematically address all of the issues that are profoundly intertwined with gender inequality that keeps on pushing away long-term alterations and solutions to a global issue is simply not enough. As Caroline Whaley states, "COVID-19 has the potential to be a disaster for equality,"¹⁷ considering that apart from women being the most affected by the pandemic at their workplaces, they are also significantly harmed by the slow but steady return of traditional family norms, if one considers that it is almost impossible to disentangle social regress from a global health crisis. As it is stated in the latest UN report¹⁸ based on the inevitable impact that COVID-19 has on women, approximately 70% of the women who live in developing countries are a part of the informal economy. In addition to that, about 70% of the healthcare workers around the globe are women who are also part of the majority of the medical staff generally have less access to protective equipment, showing that the statistics give us more valuable input than we are eager to read, see or simply accept.

¹⁶ European Commission, "Structural Transformation to Achieve Gender Equality in Science," *STAGES* (November, 2015), https://eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/guidelines_stages_5.pdf

¹⁷ Maddy Savage, "How Covid-19 is Changing Women's Lives," *BBC* (July 01, 2020), <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200630-how-covid-19-is-changing-womens-lives>.

¹⁸ United Nations, "Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women," *ReliefWeb* (April 9, 2020), <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-onwomen-en.pdf>.

Branislava Petrov

The Immanence and the Transcendence of the Emerging Subject in Marx's Philosophy of History

Bionote: Branislava Petrov is a philosopher and a feminist author based in Novi Sad, Serbia. She presented her work at various conferences all over Europe, some of them being: Workshop "Helene Druskowitz and Friedrich Nietzsche, 2018," organised by Institute of Philosophy, Zagreb, Croatia; Historical Materialism Conference Athens 2019, Athens, Greece; Feminist Futures Festival 2019, Germany, Essen; Internatiolal Scientific Conference of Medical University of Kharkov, Ukraine, 2019 and 2020., etc. Her work under the title: "Ideology and Social Structures Behind the Problem of Domestic Violence" has been published in 2019 edition of the last mentioned conference. Her work under the title: "The Difference Between Marxist Radical Feminist and Liberal Feminist Approach to the Problem of Transgender Ideology" has been published in 2020 edition of the same. She organizes online reading groups focusing on the works of Second Wave feminism. She is critical of modern day liberal, as well as so called radical feminism. She is currently working on a piece titled "Feminism and Identities," which will be presented at online conference "Women Philosophers in South-Eastern Europe—Past, Present and Future," organized by Institute of Philosophy, Zagreb, Croatia. She works as a freelance writer and translator. She speaks English and Greek languages.

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Abstract: The Author's aim in this paper is to expose the hidden distortions in Marx's understanding of the subject of history, such that occur under the influence of the patriarchal ideology. In order to do so, the author will first offer, what she believes is the most satisfying explanation of the subject in Marxism, namely, the idea of subject as an emerging immanence. The Author will further claim that Marx's attempt to overcome Hegelian teleological image of the world and to replace its transcendental subject with an immanent one, remains essentially flawed. The cause of

this shortcoming the author will find in the contradiction inherent to Marx's idea of subject. In the conclusion, the author will name feminism as the key theory for overcoming this contradiction.

Keywords: transcendence, immanence, subject of history, teleology, historicity, sex based division of labor, unpaid labor, feminism

The problem of subjectivity in Marx's philosophy remains an open question, even conundrum. One of the possible ways to solve it is to posit the idea of subject as a historical emergence. This idea is seen as a solution to the problem of the Hegelian teleological implications found in Marx's historical materialism, as well as an inevitable transcendence of the subject implied therein. In the logical sense, the teleological image of history implies the existence of three elements: the *goal* of history; the *subject* of history, as that which is moving towards the goal; and the *unity* of the process—history has to be a rational course whose every moment is a substantial part of it. Teleology leaves no room for coincidence. All three elements can be found in Hegel's philosophy of history. We will go through it briefly now.

When Hegel talks about philosophy of history what he has in mind is not simply a science that deals with the principles that govern history. It is not only that history is rationally structured and organized, but it is history itself that is a constitutive part of the mind and of the world. The mind and the world, the subject as well as the object, are historically structured. It is not only that history is governed by certain principles, but history itself is a principle—the world has its own historicity and it is essential to it; with Hegel, history becomes metaphysics. That the world has its own historicity means that everything in it has its truth in its historical development. Idea is developing through history and it is this development that is its truth. Each moment of such development is truth in itself; the final goal of history, however, is the absolute truth—spirit that is not only truth in itself but also for itself, an absolute spirit that knows itself as such. Spirit is like a germ that is striving towards its final form, therefore it has all of its potentials in it at the very outset, and each moment of the development is self-actualization of what is already there. That

is a teleological image of history. Spirit is the subject of such history, its goal being self-actualization through succession of moments that are all subordinated to the goal; history is a process that starts with subject and develops through the logic of subjectivity, all its events and actors being means for spirit to meet its goal. History is governed by the mind, but historicity is the logos of the mind. History is process of the spirit. Spirit is the transcendental subject of the history.

This process, the development of the spirit through the course of history follows a dialectical pattern: through the moments of alienation and its overcoming. These moments are: 1. Primitive harmony 2. Alienation 3. Unity on a higher, concrete level.

According to Hegel, the third moment is achieved in liberal bourgeois society. In other words, the course of history ends in capitalist society, as spirit achieves its goal in it; absolute freedom is established in capitalism.¹

Marx takes over the Hegelian idea of the historicity of the world, but he refuses the teleological implications. But because historicity understood in Hegelian way implies teleology, as we have shown, in order to defend historicity in Marxism we shall revisit the three elements needed in the teleological image of the history—the subject of history, the goal of history and the unity of the process. If we find all three of them in Marx, what we can only hope for then is to find the difference in their very nature.

The first premise of Marx's view of history is not one of the potency of spirit and its development, but rather real individuals, their activities and the material conditions of their existence—those they find as given as well as those they produce themselves.²

Like Hegel, Marx sees the process of history as a dialectical process which develops through stages, and he takes over the three stages of development as well, namely—thesis, antithesis and the unity of the oppositions; first comes primitive unity, then alienation follows

it, and finally, a unity on a higher level occurs, a unity on the level of freedom. For Marx, however, these stages are not stages of the development of spirit, but are stages of the development of *means of production* and accordingly, of modes of production.³ As man does not serve as a means of the development of spirit, but is a producer of his own development—he is his own means and goal. Accordingly, the latest stage of the development of history, the stage of freedom, for Marx, can not be achieved in bourgeois society, which is organised in such a way that the freedom of a few is paid for by the slavery of the majority. Furthermore, in the *Communist Manifesto* Marx talks about the whole of human history to date as prehistory; it is prehistory because it is the history of struggle for freedom—class struggle. The real history of humankind will begin once freedom is achieved, and that can only happen in communism. This, however, is where the problem occurs. It is often said that the idea of communism as the ultimate goal of class struggle has a teleological implication. Marx takes over the Hegelian idea of history as logically structured process led by progressive tendencies, but in place of the realization of absolute spirit, posits the establishment of classless society in communism. Can communism be seen as a teleological goal of the historical process? If so, what or who is the subject of such a process?

The British Hegelian philosopher F. H. Bradley points out:

“Evolution, “development, “progress,” all imply something identical throughout, a subject of the evolution, which is one and the same. If what is there at the beginning is not there at the end, and the same as what was there at the beginning, then evolution is a word with no meaning.

And further, unless what is at the end is different from that which was at the beginning, there is no evolution. That which develops, or evolves itself, both is and is not. It is, or it could not be it which develops, and which at the end has developed. It is not, or else it could not become. It becomes what it is; and, if this is nonsense, then evolu-

¹ Although Hegel does not deny inner problems of capitalist society, he believes in their resolution within the given system, not in revolution.

² Karl Marx, *The German Ideology* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1968). Available at http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845-gj/%20part_a.htm.

³ Sean Sayers, “Marxism and the Dialectical Method: A Critique of G. A. Cohen,” *Radical Philosophy* 36:1 (1984): <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/marxism-and-the-dialectical-method>

tion is nonsense. Evolution is a contradiction; and, when the contradiction ceases, the evolution ceases.⁴

But:

When Marx speaks of a course of social change, he is not speaking of changes of which anything easily identifiable is the enduring subject [...] There is nothing which retains its identity as it changes in the ways they describe; there is only a course of events. There are men who are born and live and die, and among whom certain modes of action, thought and feeling endure for a time and then give way to others.⁵

The progressive development of the productive forces and of human capabilities, and hence the creation of the human subject, is not a teleological process of development of a single subject, it is not a process governed by an intended goal from the outset. It is not the outcome of the activity of a pre-existing subject, for there is no such subject. It arises as an unforeseen and unintended consequence, through the coming together of numerous separate and independent activities. However, that is not to say that it is a mere outcome of chance, a merely arbitrary, accidental, or contingent result. On the contrary, a regular pattern of development emerges from the myriad social interactions of different agents—households and individuals—each separately and independently pursuing their own ends.⁶

Thus, if social laws grew out of man's material conditions, the idea of absolute spirit as a transcendence that determines them may be redundant. There is no subject of history at the outset, and thus there is no pre-plan either. There are only people scattered around the world, striving to survive in untamed, hostile nature. Serving as the common denominator, nature eventually brought them together; in their efforts to overcome and master nature, they developed relatively similar mechanisms of survival, followed by the development of a compatible conscience and logic that governs it. Still

scattered, they began to develop technology independently, and to grow into more complex social organisations. To become a logically structured process, history required a certain level of complexity. At the point when it was acquired, social laws started to be established, and from that point on we can talk about man as a historical subject. He *emerges* as a subject, as a consequence of his own actions; there is not a "germ" of subjectivity from the outset.

In *The German ideology*, Marx warns that the subject should not be projected back to the beginning and we should not think of it as a moving force of history. Subject, just as the logical structure of historical processes, emerges during the process. They are a consequence of a coincidence, but once established they in turn establish society as a unity organized by logos, such that its simpler elements can no longer be deduced from it. Thus, the historical process implies a *qualitative change*. There is an ultimate dialectical pattern at work here: the world, as it appears to man, is always already mediated by man's work. The world and man do not face each other as an object and a subject, but they exist as a unity, an active process that has this relational structure as its substance.

Could it be said of communism that it represents the goal of history in the teleological sense? Let's see. Although Marx's and Hegel's methods are similar in form, they differ in content. Hegelian spirit is a unity of content and form; this is the sense in which he talks about absolute spirit. So how does historical materialism divide the content from the form? It does so precisely because it is the nature of the subject in it that differs: Marx's subject is not transcendental subject. Marx criticizes Hegel and Hegelians as philosophers whose philosophy serves to keep the status quo. Because they do not see dynamics of the world as produced by its actors, but they understand them as governed by a higher instance, they trap themselves in an abstract formalism that serves to explain the existing world of contradictions,⁷ but not to change it. Their thought, therefore, is not alive thought, such that is in a living dialectical relation with ever reproducing material conditions, itself renewed each time material conditions change, but is a mere construct detached from its

⁴ Sean Sayer, "Marx and teleology," *Science & Society* 83.1. (January 2019): 47-8.

⁵ John Plamenatz, *Man and Society: A Critical Examination of Some Important Social and Political Theories from Machiavelli to Marx: Volume Two*, (London: Longman, 1963), 429-30, quoted in Sayers, "Marx and Teleology," 50.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

⁷ We can not go here into the details of the contradictions of capitalism. It shall be enough to emphasize that Marx sees capitalism as inherently built upon contradictions because, on one hand, capital's essential feature is its tendency towards indefinite accumulation, while on the other, the logic of indefinite accumulation is in opposition to the definite nature of its resources – humans and nature. Marx believed those opposite tendencies will result in the self-destruction of capitalism.

material base, lifeless specter drained of the real moving force of history, which is class struggle. With spirit as transcendental subject of history and its moving force, class struggle can only be given secondary importance. For Marx, on the contrary, it is class struggle, as a struggle for freedom, that produces man as a subject of history, this subject being immanent principle of change. This is what was meant by the statement that Hegelian and Marxist methods differ in content. In the need for transcendental principle Marx sees a need for justification of the existing conditions of the world. The world, however, needs to change. But that change shall come free of constructed formalism. It is precisely the disappearance of the need for such formalism that will mark the beginning of the free world.

Hegel talks of the realization of the absolute spirit as “the end of history.” Marx sees the establishment of communism as “the beginning of history.” Hegel’s subject achieves its fulfilment in bourgeois society, a society where the majority are not free. It is possible for Hegel because individual people, as well as their material world, are mere emergent forms of spirit. Marx’s emerging subject, man, achieves its full freedom only in a society where everyone is free. Only such a society will see the liberation of human potential to the extent never seen before. It is not a teleological goal of history, it is its logical consequence.

By positing the subject as immanent, we move the further research from philosophy to history. Task of further understanding of the immanent subject of history requires historical research. Historical research, however, is not without its troubles. One of the main obstacles in it is the fact that it does not give us instructions on how and where to recognize ideological distortions in historical facts. Ideologies are always at work throughout history and a good researcher is aware of it. Ideologies, however, differ among themselves, some of them being so ancient and fundamental that they often go unrecognized. This lack of recognition results in production of entire philosophical systems—systems that aim at universality - ideologically distorted and practically in service of certain groups of people instead of humanity as such. One such fundamental ideology that often goes unrecognized is patriarchy.

Before the subject emerges there is nothing at the outset; history starts with a man searching for ways to satisfy his needs, developing technology and organizing in ever more complex communities. There is no arbitrariness in such organizing, however; people form social units in a way that will provide the most efficient execution of the labor needed. The strict *division of labor* plays a crucial role here. There is a variety of criteria that can play a role in deciding how the labor will be divided; but no criterion seems to be as irremovable as biological predisposition. Occurring in the very first, primitive communities, a sex-based division of labor soon acquired the status of a *given*. Whatever consequences it produced from that point on, it could only be taken as a given as well.

Sex-Based Division of Labor

In her book *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir writes about specifically human values as connected with the idea of *transcendence*: for that reason humanity recognises as values such activities that give life meaning by giving it reasons for existence that exceed its mere confirmation and repetition.⁸ Beauvoir uses Hegel’s dialectics of master and slave to conceptualize the relation between man and woman. According to her, man and woman are posited as master and slave because of the sex based division of labor in primitive tribes. Free from reproductive labor, men engaged in such duties as hunting and war. These are prestigious activities because they consist of risk, which gives value to life because what the life is risked for is larger than the life itself.

“Woman’s biggest damnation is the fact she is excluded from war-paths; man rises above animal not by giving life, but by risking it.”⁹ Reproduction of life remains *immanent*; it is a fact with no meaning. Value is defined on the side of transcendence, with no exception. Humankind recognizes its peculiarity only in such phenomena that presuppose such a project that overcomes mere (nature-like) repetition.¹⁰ For that reason, woman strives towards male-established values as well. Man opens the doors of the future that is the future of humankind, and woman transcends towards it as well.¹¹

⁸ Celia Amorós, *Prilog Kritici Patrijarhalnog Uma*, trans. Ana Markovic (Karpos, 2017), 11.

⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 93, quoted in Amorós, *Prilog Kritici Patrijarhalnog Uma*, 111.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹¹ *Idem.*

Here we are met with a contradiction. On the one hand, as a universal subject of history, man is said to be an emerging immanence of the historical process, but on the other hand, to acquire the status of subject he must acquire the status of transcendence. Where does this contradiction come from?

When Marx analyzes the class society and the mechanisms inherent to it, there is one sphere he leaves out, one sphere he does not apply his own method to. It is a sphere where women's unpaid labor takes place—the sphere of the private. Marx takes a surprisingly essentialist approach when talking about production of male work force. According to him, women are too fragile for the rough work in factory, and in *Capital, vol. 1* he openly advocates for women to stay out of factories and remain at home, because the hard work “spoils them morally.” The endless domestic work he describes as “natural function.” And because it is natural, it does not need the Marxist analysis applied to it. What Marx overlooks, however, is that the “natural” (and unpaid) work done by women at home benefits man, but even more, it benefits the capitalist. That means that he overlooks the fact that, while both, woman and man, toil their lives away for the benefit of capitalist, it is only the man who gets paid directly. By staying at home, out of the evil factory, the woman, on the other hand, is in touch with the wage only indirectly, only through the mediation of man. Encouraged by the system not to recognize the work she provides for him (and capital) as valuable, the man starts to see the woman as subordinated to himself. By staying at home woman is doomed to have two masters—the capital and the man. This is the patriarchal ideology at work in Marx's work that distorts the very outcome of his philosophy. Simultaneously, there lies the answer to the question of the subject of history being immanent in Marxism, yet remaining transcendental. It can be so because of the patriarchal distortions in Marxism; it can be so because the subject of the history in Marxism is an abstraction of humankind. It is not a universal human, but male human. Man is the subject of history in Marxism, woman is not.

By doing unpaid, never recognized, never analysed domestic reproductive labor, a woman produces man's material conditions and his possibility to act as the subject of history. But once produced, man does not look back, he leaves the woman in the dust. From then on, his approach to her can be humanitarian—he can offer her help, or

guidance—but never egalitarian. Man detaches himself from the very conditions of his existence so he can serve as a transcendental principle of the historical process. Serving as an agent of patriarchal ideology (and by doing so, serving also as a useful fool for capitalist ideology), man imprisons woman into immanence, stripping her of the possibility to act as the subject of history. But as the value of reproductive labor is woven into his own subjectivity, by denying it, he emerges as a walking contradiction. Marx is turning Hegel's philosophy “upside down” to free his dialectics from the transcendental subject and show how the material processes of the world can be explained without “leaving the earth,” just to kill off what is “earthly” in it (but not before using its producing value)—the female half of humankind—and go back to transcendence.

It is, therefore, the task of feminism to answer to the problem of the subject of history. Feminism must dismantle the idea of the sex based division of labor as given, just as it must recognize and reaffirm value in reproduction. By doing so it shall dismantle patriarchal ideology. Free from its distortions, the historical subject may emerge in its unity.

III. INTERVIEW

Neda Genova in Conversation with
Mijke van der Drift

A Conversation on Transfeminism as Anti-Colonial Politics

Bionotes: Philosopher and educator Mijke van der Drift works on ethics as a focal point in a multi-disciplinary research about social transformation. Van der Drift is tutor at the Royal College of Art, London and the Royal Academy of Art, the Hague. They are a Research Associate at the University of Cambridge in 2020-21, as part of the Revolutionary Papers project, in collaboration with the London School of Economics and the University of the Western Cape. In addition, van der Drift is currently working on their book *Non normative Ethics: The Dynamics of Trans Formation*. They obtained a Ph.D. from Goldsmiths, University of London. Their current project focuses on multilogical ethics and generosity, and is provisionally titled *The Logic of Loss in Bonding*. The book chapter “Radical Transfeminism: Trans as Anti-Static Ethics Escaping Neoliberal Encapsulation” co-written with Nat Raha is recently published in *New Feminist Studies: Twenty-first-century Critical Interventions*, ed. Jennifer Cooke, with Cambridge University Press.

Neda Genova teaches at Goldsmiths University of London and London South Bank University and holds a Ph.D. in Cultural Studies from Goldsmiths. Her research is situated at the intersection of post-communist studies and media and cultural theory. She is interested in feminist and postcolonial theory, the politics of humour and laughter and post-communist digital culture. She is a member of the editorial collective of the Bulgarian-language activist-academic magazine *dVERSIA (dBEPЦИЯ)*.

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Abstract: For this piece we were provoked by an anti-trans moment that took place during the School of Politics and Critique in September 2020. Instead of engaging in a mere “rebuttal” of anti-trans discourse and its reductive, exclusionary claims, with this text we aim to open up a space of exchange and learning that takes form of a feminist conversation. We discuss the historical and political entrenchment of colonial, capitalist and anti-trans projects to emphasise why a solid trans politics will always hold an anti-colonial agenda to the fore. Critically appraising some unfortunate intellectual and political impasses—as the capturing of feminist politics in schemata of biological determinism or the complicity of white bourgeois feminism in anti-Blackness and colonial exploitation—we shed light on the emancipatory potential of radical transfeminism. The conversation draws on lessons from the writings and practice of many engaged in formulating the stakes of black feminist, anti-colonial and trans politics of solidarity, thus actualizing the insight that we never think or act in isolation from one another.

Keywords: trans politics, feminism, anti-colonialism, relationality, ethics of care

Neda Genova: The wish to engage in the conversation that unfolds on the next few pages was most immediately provoked by an anti-trans moment at the 2020 edition of the School for Politics and Critique. For unrelated reasons, I had to leave prematurely on the second day of the School and did so trying to suppress my anger and frustration at a discourse that is not only profoundly retrograde and unimaginative, but also, I believe, deeply harmful to a feminist project of building solidarities across different modes of patriarchal, colonial and capitalist oppression. Of course, it goes without saying that this incident didn’t completely eclipse the experience of the other two days, which were otherwise warm, stimulating and nourishing, full of conversations with kind and interesting people—for which I remain grateful. And yet, for me, a sense of having left some “unfinished business” in the midst of Dunya lingered on and kept irking me in the days and weeks that followed: some thoughts were unarticulated, some words not shared, some connections not made.

Thus, the possibility of using the format of conference proceeding to actually explore its processual character came as a welcome invitation to revisit and rethink some of the reasons for my initial anger, but also to consider how it can be reshaped and rerouted so as to help build a different kind of space for intellectual and political exchange. I decided to ask my friend, colleague and ally Mijke van der Drift to engage in a conversation on trans politics as an emancipatory and transformative site of struggle and I am extremely thankful that they agreed to participate in it. To me, the act of wedging this collaborative text into and in relation to the other contributions of the conference proceedings means adding yet another set of perspectives and political propositions to the conversation around trans politics. However, it also means something more: actively resisting accounts that reduce the emancipatory potential of transness to a caricature-like version of identity politics and that refuse to take seriously the significant theoretical production and political practice of transness to think through some of the most pertinent issues of today (as the crucial link between anti-colonial and trans struggles). These anti-trans approaches not only preclude the possibility for feminist solidarity but also re-territorialize feminist theory and politics on the terrain of straight-jacketing notions of biological determinism, essences and self-evidential realities (cloaked under the guise of a not always precise theoretical production). So, against such approaches we set this conversation on transfeminism as a mode that enacts a form of learning and listening that will hopefully lend itself to more affirmative and transformative ends. This means that more than being a mere rebuttal of anti-trans discourse, it also seeks to generate different connections, questions, theoretical lines of flight, collective spaces for exchange, routes of learning and social transformation.

NG: I know that as a firm anti-capitalist holding a scepticism towards simplified identity politics, you wouldn't advocate a thinking of trans as an identitarian or exclusionary category, would you? How can we think trans politics otherwise?

Mijke van der Drift: Identity politics currently has quite a bad name, but it is always worthwhile to recall that the term has its origin in the Combahee River Collective. In the 1970s this collective rethought feminist Marxism to include the politics of Black women, against a

universalizing drive—hence to include their identity. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor recently published *How We Get Free* about this group and how their work came to be.¹ To learn from the Combahee River Collective, Marquis Bey² proposes how to do this in a particularly pertinent manner in order to show that their work supports a Black anarchic reading of inclusive politics against the strain of excluding universalities. I think one of the key points we can take away for a solid trans politics is looking for shared or parallel lines of duress between different positionalities and identifying differences in order to lend mutual support. This means that there are social pressures that are, for instance, shared between trans femmes, trans women, and non-trans women because these pressures are rooted in misogyny. Such social pressures undo complexities and differences between lives: it is a homogenizing duress that enables access for some while removing access for others. Simultaneously, it should be acknowledged that certain pressures do not reach in the same way all women, for instance women and femmes that are a target of misogyny as part of pressures of racialization and especially anti-Blackness; pressures because they are poor, precarious, or are otherwise not included in the social sphere. This is where “white feminism” went wrong—not because the misogyny in bourgeois circles is not real, but because the social power that white bourgeois women do have is used without interest in aligning their power with the liberation of other women and femmes, who also shoulder different forms of duress. In that sense, a striving for rights and equality follows a politics that has been instigated by the bourgeois revolutions of the seventeen and eighteen centuries. There the demand voiced by the middle classes was to access power and privilege often by partaking in the project of colonisation—this, of course, to the detriment of the poor.

NG: This question of misogyny is important in relation to some of the premises of anti-trans politics—as argued in a recent special issue of the *Sociological Review* on TERF war,³ the positioning of cis women as being in “danger” from trans women (for example, in dis-

¹ Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *How We Get Free: Black Feminism and the Combahee River Collective* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017).

² Marquis Bey, *Anarcho-Blackness: Notes Towards a Black Anarchism* (Edinburgh and Chico, CA: AK Press, 2020).

³ Ruth Pearce, Sonja Erikainen, and Ben Vincent, “TERF Wars: An Introduction,” *The Sociological Review* 68.4. (2020):677-98.

courses around “toilet safety”) draws from a reservoir of historically solidified notions of female “fragility” and “weakness” in relation to cis men. So, it is crucial to understand that the trans-exclusionary argument always falls back also on those it is supposedly meant to “protect” or “safeguard”—its misogynist structure affects cis women, trans women and other femmes, yet, of course, in very different ways. Further to this, Pearce, Erikainen and Vincent also make a point about the racist “undertones” of such discourses. Do you think that such arguments are valid—i.e., what do anti-Blackness, racism and anti-trans politics have in common?

MD: Transmisogyny is often explained like that, which underlines how transmisogyny is a form of misogyny. To posit a debate over the terms of misogyny then helps us see feminism as a lively and pluralist landscape—Ruth Pearce, Sonja Erikainen and Ben Vincent indeed propose such an account. It is very interesting that they draw attention to racialization as “masculinising” Black women and femme bodies in order to read them as aggressive. The issue is of course that as soon as surveillance is drawn into any scene this leads to the import of aggression, rather than the removal of it, and Black bodies have been surveilled since the beginning of the slave trade. What the discourse around transmisogyny often overlooks is the wider framework in which surveillance and encapsulation emerges from colonial mandates. This is really a point that in Europe, where we are discussing the issue, colonialism is exported over its borders, but this precludes acknowledging how the tools for oppression and duress were created in the colonies and brought back here. Surveillance is one example, but the first modern prison was a slave ship: it really bears reminding ourselves of that. This could then inform how we look at the discussion as a whole—what is at stake and by what means is the discussion propelled? The aim is to exclude trans women and femmes from spaces, discussions, and resources that are needed for survival or flourishing. These forms of carceral thinking—exclude, surveil, and punish—are emerging from Europe’s colonial training.

A solid trans politics is thereby anti-colonial in nature—this means that the lives, safety and the possibility of the flourishing of Black and Indigenous women and femmes are, and should be, firmly on the agenda of trans politics. This in turn implies that there is no sin-

gle model that can be used for liberation, namely indigenous women are not liberated through Western statist models. Instead, indigenous communities should have their autonomy as well as their territory and resources returned. A similar consideration counts for Black (trans) women and femmes—it is not up to a white Eurocentric politics to decide what counts as liberation and safety. The question of liberation involves centring perspectives of marginalized peoples and communities that have been subjected to the strongest social pressures. These examples show that trans politics cannot lean on centralized notions of what liberation is and is thereby necessarily plural.

This means that instead of ignoring difference, trans politics is interested in differences and also in overlaps. This is because trans politics starts from a deep understanding of social isolation, and therefore the attendant need for mutual care and mutual aid, which adds a strong sense of a politics of solidarity that is not predicated upon saviourism. An insistence on recognition often comes as a response to the duress of erasure and its accompanying violence. However, it is reductive to claim that recognition is all there is to trans politics. On the contrary, recognition is merely a basic claim that leads to a deeper understanding of what a politics of identification needs—namely agency and a deep understanding of relationalities that are not always carried on the surface. Some forms of recognition play very local roles, to sort out world-making in quite specific scenes, but this doesn’t mean that they are not valid outside of that scene. This is also why there is a link between transfeminisms and Crip/Disability politics—not every marker is carried on the surface, yet this should not need to lead to a stripping of agency (for instance, see the work of Eli Clare or Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha⁴).

NG: I wonder if you could expand a bit on this claim that a politics of identification needs agency and an understanding of relationalities? Also, is “politics of identification” different than “identity politics,” because the way I have always understood the latter is as in terms of politics that depart from fixed identities rather than the desire to build alliances—and for this, the reading of Haraway’s call to priv-

⁴ Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Vancouver, B.C.: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018); Eli Clare, *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2015).

ilege “affinities, not identities”⁵ has been very important? Finally, when you write of “relationalities [...] carried on the surface,” do you mean this in the sense of (bodily) vulnerability and markers of difference?

MD: A claim to a trans identity, rather than a claim that relies on stable categories, is a relational proposition, that taps into the various modes of sociality including forms of liberation politics. To state one is trans femme or a trans woman holds the social actuality in regard, without foreclosing a liberatory potentiality. Identification in this sense is indeed a form of relationality that comes close to affinity, with an acknowledgement that relationalities are specific, local, and require translation across different contexts. A relationality carried on the surface means that when inscriptions are visible and tangible in the social realm, it opens one up to scrutiny, violence, erasure and displacement. So, there needs to be an awareness of the affirmative claim to relationality as well as a simultaneous awareness of how modes of relation are interrupted by hegemonic assumptions and violence. However, not every trans woman has a politics of relationality, just like not every non-trans woman pursues a politics of liberation. Let’s say, me and Caitlin Jenner have not so much in common at all: neither socially, economically, nor politically. Even the shared awareness of social violence might be very limited: or we come with very different insights into that violence. Reductive claims to epistemic certainty, that we see emerge within anti-trans politics, bypass these relational insights. Such exclusionary politics neither liberate nor protect anything but assumptions. It is interesting to emphasise this relationality at this stage, because a politics that relies on excluding differences is not shared by many women that are included in the term “women” by anti-trans campaigners. If such campaigns then need to specify the terms of their exclusion as relational terms this is exposed as subjective and relative. Affirmative relational politics are always already situated.

The relational as prior to the categorical contrasts with a politics of “white innocence” that we can discern in statements coming predominantly from white cis women. The comparative contrast drawn up is one of “women” vs. “trans women” (even though they might

not use this term), in which cis women claim positions of innocence and victimhood. While there is a foundational misogyny in the colonial project (see the work of Silvia Federici⁶), the claimed juxtaposition erases the complicity of white women in the colonial project by proposing an imaginary innocence, as if white women have only been recipients of violence. This is markedly untrue. Elizabeth Gillespie McRae⁷ recently published a great work mapping out the violence in the Jim Crow era, when white women were foundational for supporting, upholding, and lobbying for the maintenance of racist laws. That this history is not over could recently be witnessed in the case when the white woman Amy Cooper called the police to retaliate against being called out for irresponsible behaviour by Christian Cooper (no relation), who is a Black man. The trope of innocence that often features in anti-trans messaging can be directly aligned with the racist tropes that have often been used to perpetuate violence towards marginalized communities. Amy Cooper directly tapped into that trope. So, the understanding of the claims against trans women as rooted in such a weaponized innocence, needs to be situated in the colonial attitudes that have often been used in attacks that uphold the norm. Mind, we are not here talking about “actual relations” because anti-trans violence takes the form of categorical accusations and the categorical innocence that is tapped into, is thus a weaponized innocence that has been honed in the colonial project as part of the patriarchal divide that assigns aggression to men and innocence to women. Gloria Wekker’s *White Innocence*⁸ is a great book that unpacks this trope. It should be noted that while this innocence is used against trans women and femmes, it is first and foremost a tool that is honed in racist structures and kept alive there, even if it moves across different political realms. It should be noted that these tools operate differently in different realms, and that a politics of innocence levied against white trans people works quite less severely than when there is racialisation at play. This is the nature of tools: that they can operate in various contexts, but in each context in a different manner. However, these are the tools that uphold the master’s house, to paraphrase Audre Lorde. This is why white politics are colonial politics at their root, and there cannot be any trans liberation without attending to anti-rac-

⁶ Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (New York: Autonomedia, 2014).

⁷ Elizabeth Gillespie McRae, *Mothers of Massive Resistance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁸ Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

⁵ Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *The Haraway Reader* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 7–45.

ist, anti-patriarchal, and anti-colonial politics. In a similar fashion liberatory politics, or theory itself, are also traveling from South to North across the colonial divide, as Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui⁹ notes.

NG: What do you make of accounts that implicitly or explicitly discard the possibility of departing from a gender binary in terms of it being “tautological identity-formation” following the model of “I am what I say I am”?

MD: A binary in “gender” or, even more hilariously, “biology” as a sign of reality, at minimum misses the point that biology is a cultural science invented in Europe. A biological account is not *per se* “naturalised” in different places, partly because the social is organized in different terms in different communities and parts of the world, or because the “biological” terms are not relevant as such. This does not mean that there are not physical realities and differences—of course there are—but these differences get actuated differently in different social categories. Also, in these propositions about the primacy of a “biological reality” the racist character of the reduction inherent to this notion is often overlooked. With an anti-trans political readiness of self-objectification by reducing ethics, economic relations, and sociality into a biological essence, the question arises where else are their proponents ready to go with such notions of “biological difference”? There’s an entire history of violent claims hiding behind these statements. Furthermore, I am often rather stunned by the audacity of making such “biological claims” as a means of claiming *feminism*. A large part of the feminist movement has been explicitly working against this reductive claim of biology as destiny. My mother is often livid when encountering such statements, to a large extent because as a feminist she had to fight so hard against such claims.

Furthermore, I think that putting out such a statement shows the intellectual poverty of the anti-trans messaging. To reduce social life to “biological essence” places one to the right of Aristotle’s essentialist metaphysics. However, it is worth noting here that for Aristotle there was a quite total separation between theory and practice: it would not have been possible in Ancient Greece to make such tele-

ological statements that reduce “genders” or “species,” so you will, to a simple function or social space, which is really the later eugenic reading of his work. A practical reading of Aristotle’s ethics holds the space for an ethical formation of agents; and once this space is open, the rest is politics. So, Aristotle is patriarchal because these are the politics that he imposes upon a model of agential fluidity. In contrast, “biological readings” claim a post-political space for “sex or gender” that is mind-bogglingly conservative: it prescribes action on the basis of one’s physicality. It’s quite flat and even eugenic.

As remarked upon earlier, terms can function in local contexts to nuance modes of relationality that store memory, relationalities, and social insights; to treat them as tautological is quite missing the point of what terms are doing in social contexts. In the same way to claim a pregnant trans man is a “woman” is missing out on the duress, life, and insights this man carries along. Terms are not only universalizing categories but work on the social level to link and explain what is faced.

NG: It is interesting that you invoke the term “post-political” here. I often take issue with this notion when it is used to describe post-communist processes of transformation that allegedly have done away with political discourse, but rather can only articulate concerns in moral, cultural or aesthetic terms. Often such diagnoses are made from an explicitly leftist perspective, but I think that paradoxically they result in very dull and totalizing accounts of the (post-communist) public sphere. I don’t want to digress too much, though, so can you say a few words about what you mean when saying that the abovementioned biological readings claim a post-political space of “sex or gender”?

MD: I like your astute remark about processes of post-communist transformation that are reduced to language, aesthetics and morality. This really works to distract from the quite aggressive politics that undergird these transformations, don’t you think?

A similar distraction can be understood to reduce a trans sociality and politics to biology. From a philosophical perspective these debates have been held over time and found closure. There is a whole (peer reviewed) article on the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*

⁹ Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, *Ch’ixinakax Utxiwa: On Practices and Discourses of Decolonization*, trans. Molly Geidel (Cambridge, UK and Medford, MA: Polity Press, 2020).

on “Feminist Perspectives on Trans Issues” written by Talia Mae Bettcher²⁰ about this. Tragic from a realistic perspective is of course that such anti-trans debates instigate actual violence against trans women, trans femmes, and also against cis women and femmes, because they are allies or taken to be trans. They also create more routes for duress in a society that misses out on the allyship of trans people and queers.

Violence is enabled by structural inequalities. However, a politics of inclusion often overlooks who is left out to access the rights that have been granted because they lack the financial means, as Nat Raha²¹ remarks. This makes anti-trans politics extra sad, because they aim to create distance where there is existing solidarity between women and cis women, which is needed in these times of right-wing aggression and austerity. Curiously, the language of victimization is tapped into by dominant majorities, as if the terminology of structural oppression is the only way to make any political point. It diffuses a lot of debates from the real difficult discussions about how to create solidarities, how to make networks for social survival among a host of people that receive pressures and also how to put care, rather than distancing, at the heart of debates on sociality. Taking discussions in the direction of the much harder work of accountability; undoing the disparities created by misogyny, queer and transphobia; activating reparations for colonialism and the enslavement of Black people; and returning land and resources to indigenous communities all require a complex ethical skill set that is actively undermined by a politics of duress. Right-wing feminism evades these complexities by emphasising distance and reliance on categorizations, rather than looking at relationalities. What we can discern is this huge investment in retaining and honing the languages and concepts that are at the heart of structural violence, rather than embracing the work that needs to be done to undo those violences, their historically ingrained effects—including their epistemic bulwarks, such as essentialisms. As Robin Kelley²² reminds us, the only liberation is total liberation.

²⁰ Talia Bettcher, “Feminist Perspectives on Trans Issues”, in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Stanford: Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, Fall 2020), <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-trans/?fbclid=IwARoFfT8WRC19OPAYxaprgNEQUllgtX7FCIG8XQmhzdONDhROe5OS7SaZH9w>.

²¹ Nat Raha, “Transfeminine Brokenness, Radical Transfeminism”, *South Atlantic Quarterly* 116-3 (2017): 632–46.

²² Robin D.G. Kelley, “Internationale Blues: Revolutionary Pessimism and the Politics of Solidarity” (lecture, London School of Economics, London, England, 2019).

To make a small remark here on violence on the internet—there is a lot of it, and it is not only famous anti-trans agitators like J.K. Rowling who receive really nasty messaging, even death threats. This is the life for many non-famous trans women and femmes. This is why *Mermaids*, the U.K. based organization working for the rights and well-being of trans children, immediately offered Rowling their empathy when she recounted her past experience with violence. Trans people are intimately aware of violence, because they receive it a lot. Somehow this disappears from essentialist debates.

NG: Yes, I actually remember reading a recent interview with Judith Butler²³ in which she is asked to comment on the abusive language used against Rowling and makes a very similar point—that while she doesn’t think that anyone should suffer harassment, it is quite perplexing to not enquire about the violence waged against trans people all over the world... Finally, I wanted to ask what do you think that a resistance to a reduction of sexual difference to the “biological reality” of a binary between men and women has to do with a theme which I know is important to your work: i.e., with undoing certain logics of ordering?

M.D.: Once we are on track to question how certain orders are called into being—this means that there is some distance between categories and social life—it becomes interesting to interrogate what certain orders are for. Homogenizing categories are put in the service of control. A question, then, arises: who wants to control what or whom, and to what ends? Unfortunately, white women—especially but not only bourgeois women—have often been the guardians of the norm. This partly explains why so many white women vote for Trump, who is known to be a harasser of women: whiteness trumps gender. Since white politics are inherently masculine, whiteness is the first norm that will be defended. Secondly, we see white women defending the masculine child, for instance by defending segregation (see McRae for a historical account but also look at contemporary accounts of the link between postcodes and school separation). When we think of anti-trans politics as defending the white, masculine norm, using explicitly racist tropes of white innocence,

²³ Judith Butler and Alona Ferber, “Judith Butler on the Culture Wars, J.K. Rowling and Living in “Anti-Intellectual Times””, *New Statesman* (September 22, 2020), <https://www.newstatesman.com/international/2020/09/judith-butler-culture-wars-jk-rowling-and-living-anti-intellectual-times>.

it is clear that the norm is defended against the incursion of trans women and femmes, who have been historically excluded from living a full life under this same white regime, and certainly when they are racialised. An understanding of these interlocking pressures and exclusions should inform a trans politics as an anti-colonial politics, rather than simply or merely a politics that requires anti-trans discourse to desist.

In the end trans politics is about flourishing with the many differences that fall both within the nomer "trans" as well as outside of that nomer. Trans and cis lesbians, bi women and femmes, as well as allied straight women have forever collaborated, loved, raised children and cared for their communities, partly because they share and shape the same community. There is a deep and profound politics in care as a politics of making relations and as part of a wider political action. It offers a complex ethical skill set, which rests on a politics of listening, collaboration and mutual aid that form the basis for a robust politics of liberation.

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