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Non-Aligned Extinctions: Slavery, Neo- Orientalism, and Queerness

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1.

Recently I found myself at the Clark Art Institute in Massachusetts, standing in front of an orientalist image. Together with a colleague I was looking at *The Slave Market* by Jean-Léon Gérôme, painted in 1866, only one year after the official abolition of slavery in the US. The caption of the painting said the following:

A young woman has been stripped by a slave trader and presented to a group of fully clothed men for examination. A prospective buyer probes her teeth. This disturbing scene is set in a courtyard market intended to suggest the Near East. The vague, distant location allowed nineteenth-century French viewers to censure the practice of slavery, which was outlawed in Europe, while enjoying a look at the female body.

My colleague repeated the words in a whisper: indeed, highly disturbing. I couldn't respond, unsure whether I was really disturbed by the painting or rather by the official institutional rendering of my emotions. I had no courage to stand there longer and dwell on the scenery of the slave market, because the atmosphere created by the museum's visitors seemed to force me away from what was supposed to be disturbing. However, thinking about the image later, I recalled a sexual scenario that repeatedly took place between myself and a lover of mine. She wanted me to examine her teeth. I had to put on white dentist gloves, pull one corner of her mouth aside, and look in. Doing this would arouse her intensely, and it became an easy way to start having sex. Her mother was a dentist and the situation in which she felt most embraced was when someone examined her teeth.

In any other situation, this story might be an accepted and rather boring part of lesbian life, maybe even a welcome sign of neoliberal excess and playfulness. However, I found it difficult to associate this memory with the context of slavery. It felt almost impossible to acknowledge that I could easily identify with the slave trader examining a woman's teeth. Since the museum text did not address the dimension of sexuality at all, there seemed to be no language for the obviously sexual relations in the painting, only a silent repetition of the "disturbing" moment of the scene. In fact, the institution's text suggested a reception of the painting quite similar to its function in 1866: slavery has to be watched with secret and speechless arousal.

In this text I will continue to draw parallels between present-day institutions that are built upon reproductive heteronormativity and that shape our sexual fantasies and practices and



Jean-Léon Gérôme, *The Slave Market*, 1866, Oil on Canvas, 84.6 cm x 63.3 cm.



Mary Cassatt, *In the Loge*, 1978. Oil on canvas, 81cm x 66cm.



Ana Hoffner ex-Prvulovic, *The Bacha Posh Project*, 2018. Photo: WEST. Fotostudio



their legacies, both hidden and explicit, of slavery and neo-orientalism. The fact that I do this on behalf of queerness is a continuation of a practice of queer reading from the 1990s, when the term “queer” became an academic and activist instrument to rewrite political and social relations based on marginalized forms of desire and sexuality.¹ My intention is not only to be queer-affirmative, however, but to test the limits of my own capacity to read queerness as a counter-position to representations of violence, in particular those of sexualized violence as depicted in *The Slave Market*. Orientalist painting had an ideological function for European colonial expansion in the nineteenth century, and its ongoing exhibition cannot be detached from Western domination and power structures.² In order to understand the entanglement of exposure (also as a form of exhibiting), sexuality, and orientalism, one has to include the colonial dimension inscribed in the whole setting of the painting.

In contrast to the above-mentioned museum, queer theory has addressed the function of sexuality in colonial relations extensively. Anne McKlinton argued in her book *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* that the project of imperialism was only possible because it was produced through very specific sexual relations.³ What she called the “cult of domesticity” was a crucial and concealed dimension of male and female identities alike, demonstrating that imperialism was not something that happened elsewhere, but included a high involvement of colonized and colonial subjects in different parts of the world.⁴ McKlinton’s main argument was that domestic space was made possible primarily through “the conquest of the sexual and labor power of colonized women.”⁵ Her analysis of imperialism as the emergence of a new global order pointed out that it was not enough to speak of sexuality as a metaphor. In particular, she explained how Edward Said’s description of colonial relations as dependent upon the sexual subjection of oriental women to Western men had reproduced a highly heteronormative instrumentalization of sexuality.⁶ Said’s image of a feminized orient reserved for Western power and fantasy had in fact contributed to the invisibilization of actual sexual relations. Instead, McKlinton analyzed colonialism through several scenes of sexuality, to be found in the paintings she analyzed, forming a double story of discovery in which white male aggression only appears together with white male paranoia.⁷

Following McKlinton’s interpretation, I would like to draw attention to the background of Jean-Leon Gerome’s painting and to the scene’s

other protagonists. There is a child in the lower right corner of the image, embraced by a completely covered figure, in stark contrast to the nude woman in the foreground. Another covered figure sits next to her, with only minimal indications of her eyes, nose, and fingers behind the heavy white textiles. The covered woman, who is seated more frontally, is holding the nude child in such a way that its genitals remain under her own clothes. The child’s attention seems to be on something outside this embrace, as it is holding and looking at a tiny stick in its hand. The covered figures and the child appear next to the sitting figure of a black woman, who is neither covered completely nor unveiled but depicted with her face and hands visible. The textile wrapped around her body is of a different quality and color, additionally separating her from the other sitting figures.

I would like to assume that this child is a male child, given the fact that girls were raised much more secluded from public view in the nineteenth century in most parts of the world. This is an important assumption, since in this case it could make the male child appear as a counterpart to the masculinity of the slave trader. In trying to escape the physical control of those covered figures, the child might even be understood as the helpless version of a dominant adult male subjectivity. The depiction of the male child being taken care of by women is crucial because it allows the adult male viewer of the painting (Gerome’s intended audience) to handle the fear of being infantilized and losing control. The relations of aggression and fear that are depicted in inverted scenes within the painting belong together. The dominant gesture of ruling over a woman’s body, the central focus of the image, is connected to the loss of this position of power. But this very loss is brought back into the field of vision in a different manner, namely by depicting the child as autonomous within the mother’s physical realm. According to McKlinton, colonialism is bound to “fears of impotence and infantilization and attended by an excess of boundary order and fantasies of unlimited power.”⁸ The painting’s goal is thus to keep things under control, against the invasion of a different (sexual) perspective other than the observer’s, but it is also about eliminating the viewer’s own paranoia, that of being watched or tested by someone else.

The Slave Market is also implicitly a depiction of an exploration of unknown territory – the sphere of sexuality that is explored by the slave trader. The testing of sexual limits turns to an exploration of the geographical space of the colony. McKlinton calls this a “gendering of the imperial unknown,” a highly sexualized and at the same time unstable process of colonization.⁹ In

this image it is the woman's mouth that signifies the unknown space to be conquered. The interior space of the body, which is out of the reach of the gaze, becomes a target for (visual) exploration. But the internal space of the mouth doesn't only signify the unknown (unknown because it is invisible). In the heteronormative setting of *The Slave Market*, the mouth is a typical fetishistic placeholder, a displacement of the woman's genitals that is allowed to be shown to the censoring audience and thus produces the permission to watch. The ambivalent character of the fetish destabilizes the seemingly stable relations of the image and makes the colonial situation open for reappropriation. Upon first glance, *The Slave Market* could be interpreted as depicting the sexuality of a single person who wants to remain undetected, but this seemingly concealed position is inevitably open for everyone who wants to step into the costume of the slave trader and identify with him. The social mask provided by the textiles suggests a masculine identity of the time, and yet it remains vague and unclear. Those fingers could also easily belong to someone whom Gerome did not have in mind as a potential member of his colonial setting. The painting is thus not made by a powerful white male painter, but by an insecure subject who desperately wants to grow up and establish his personal fantasies of control without communication, negotiation, or consensual agreement hiding underneath the covers. What we see in *The Slave Market* is not only a double figure of childish and adult masculinity, but a whole scenario exposing several fears and desires.

The way Gerome depicts different women shows how various aspects of the fantasy of slavery coexist simultaneously. McKlintock claimed that "North African, Middle Eastern and Asian women were, all too often, trampled by the iconography of the veil, while African women were subjected to the civilizing mission of cotton and soap."¹⁰ Slavery depends on the dichotomy of otherness that appears in this picture through the double figure of those who had to be undressed (unveiled) and those who had to be dressed (covered). There is a specific reason for covering the black female body which can be found in other images of blackness, namely, the assumption of a "spectacle of female sexual excess" depicted by a naked black body – Saartjie Baartman perhaps being the most prominent.¹¹ The modest and tranquilized figure of a black woman in Gerome's painting, symbolizing a silenced black woman, stands in apparent oppositional, but in reality complementary, relation to this other depiction of black female sexuality as excess.

All these elements suggest that Gerome did

not depict slavery as that which should be condemned and thus outsourced into the imaginary orient (as the museum's caption suggests). Rather, he contributed to the creation of a structural sexual scenario in which the places of the Middle Eastern slave and the black slave had to be allocated in a way that made them manageable from the point of view of white Western masculinity. Both the Middle Eastern and the black slave are women, indicating that the concept of enslavement is a gendered issue. Both women stay carefully placed next to each other as if no relation whatsoever could exist between them – no sociality, no interaction, but most importantly, no sexual relation. Women's sexuality is out of sight, but so is every sexual encounter beyond the markers of white heteronormativity.

2.

Gerome was a highly conservative proponent of nineteenth-century historicism, and an opponent of impressionism. One of his students was Mary Cassatt, whose work was shown in the exhibition "Women Artists in Paris, 1850–1900" at the same museum and at the same time as *The Slave Market*. Gerome had a great impact on crushing the careers of his own female students, which is how painters like Cassatt were long forgotten to broader audiences. Cassatt's painting *In the Loge* is definitely easier for a feminist to behold, but it is crucially embedded in a similar structure of paranoia as Gerome's painting. Painted in 1878, only twelve years after *The Slave Market*, *In the Loge* is the outcome of a self-empowered female gaze.

Cassatt's painting depicts a theater scene. A woman sitting in a loge, or private theater box, looks through a looking glass, probably towards the stage. We see her profile. Again we are observing an observer, but the woman in the loge is herself being observed by a small figure in men's clothes in the upper left corner of the image. Almost hidden, this body is obviously twisting to look at the woman in the loge (and maybe also at us, as another audience). The figure intervenes subtly in the scene, presenting just a hint of danger for both the woman in the loge and us. It could easily be overlooked. *In the Loge* depicts a similar colonial paranoia as *The Slave Market*, but without the literal figures of colonial subjugation. Colonial relations have vanished from the scene. They are rendered invisible. Here, we are sitting in the public space of a theater; the slave market is somewhere else. In this space only adult subjects are allowed and nothing is present that would indicate childhood or even youth. This is a space outside the relations of domestic functionality, because the emancipated adult woman can appear in the

public realm only in the absence of children, but also without any attributes of her own girlhood. This is even more striking when considering that Cassatt was a painter who depicted many women with children typically in domestic spaces. She made a clear distinction between images of motherhood and public scenes like this one. Despite the fact that there is no direct visual allusion to slavery and/or black people's existence (nobody is enslaved in the public domain, but also there is a clear absence of black bodies), one can read the presence of black people *as* slaves into the painting, precisely because of the knowledge of their political, economic, and social exclusion from such public spaces.

It is not unimportant to mention that the person from whose perspective we see the woman in the painting is Cassatt, the painter. She is the one looking at another woman, who is sitting next to her in the same loge. Cassatt, however, is not part of the scene, and the suggested female point of view is thus hidden somewhere beyond the limitations of the frame. One could ask, what is their relation to each other, or to other women? There are two white women in close proximity to each other, but again, there are no visible relations between white and black women, as if the separation of private and public were reserved for white women only.

Although they do so in different manners, the paintings by Gerome and Cassatt both represent a historical shift: the emancipation of the subject of Empire to become a citizen of a democratic republic and a participant in international capitalist relations. After the abolition of slavery in the US, which was outlawed in Europe already, the early politics of segregation secured selective participation in social structures for black people. The early women's movement brought the right to vote and regulations for women's selective presence in the public domain. Throughout the twentieth century, representation has been a main instrument of emancipation towards global democracy. However, the democratic state has maintained its moments of paranoia – or maybe it was built upon paranoid beliefs and the fear of losing control and power. Without attempting to define the present-day status of democratic representation, I want to focus on this persisting paranoia and look at its contemporary forms.

3.

I'm including an image of a so-called *bacha posh* in this text. The term is used to describe girls who grow up as boys in Afghan society and play the role of sons for their families for a limited amount of time before puberty. *Bacha posh* have

been much discussed and visualized in Western media. In images online, they are mostly shown alone, filling the center of the photograph, but surrounded by other girls in feminine outfits. They are typically wearing boy's clothes, mostly traditional but sometimes jeans and T-shirts, with short hair and indications of a teenage attitude. The landscape is usually the Afghan desert or the destroyed city of Kabul. The visual cues for poverty and the bright sunlight indicate the general geopolitical region; it's the image of Afghanistan that has been carefully fabricated throughout the last forty years, a time of persistent war in the country.

Certainly, *bacha posh* have existed independently of the Western gaze for a long time, but they have made their way into mainstream channels of information distribution only recently. More than anything else, *bacha posh* images have quickly turned into a phenomenon produced by a growing body of reports in newspapers such as the *New York Times* and *The Guardian*, documentaries on TV channels such as Arte, and Google images, but also older magazines like *National Geographic*. The images are usually placed inside a discursive vocabulary of war; a lot is said about oppression and resistance, about the enslavement of women, about the lack of democracy, development, and freedom, and about the effort to survive. Quotes from interviewed family members are usually provided, in which they explain their need for a son in a society that endangers women. But in these reports, there is rarely a contextualization of the global politics of war and the way Afghanistan has been affected by it. Reminiscent of the orientalist inclination to produce knowledge about the East, the proliferation of *bacha posh* imagery online is a very contemporary example of a paranoid fixation: the child is framed as an enslaved woman, according to the assumption that there is potentially an enslaved woman inside the child.

What is new is the appearance of a gender-ambiguous child in the environment of war. It is as if the transformation of little girls into boys is a logical bodily reference to the political problem the West has with a country that was never officially a colony, that was part of the non-aligned movement before the Soviet invasion in 1979, and that has kept its political status ambivalent for decades. Every time Afghanistan has managed not to side with geopolitical powers but sustain its independence, it has been regarded with suspicion from outside. Accordingly, a gender-ambiguous appearance stands for the country's unwillingness to take sides – for or against the US, for or against the Taliban, for or against socialism, for or against

capitalism. The punishment that comes along with this refusal has been forty years of persistent war and poverty. This specific historical time turns into an image beyond history, a timeless zone of war. The images of *bacha posh* seem to facilitate the adherence to gender structures in this warzone, and as such they are also made for an internal identification: to force subjects to understand themselves as outside the historical, as outside the norm of progress and development. The circulating images of *bacha posh* implicitly ask for a reinstatement of essentialist gender as a placeholder for the global order of heteronormative reproductive capitalism (homonormative reproduction is out of sight in this context). In this understanding, a girl dressed as a boy indicates just another perversion in a perverted society unable to find its way out of terrorism. The observers are obsessed with testing the limits of gender and sexuality: Is this a girl or a boy? Is this a gay child? Is this what a gay child looks like in Afghanistan? Or is this a child that will be gay once it grows up?¹²

However, the narratives of *bacha posh* inevitably replace threat with empowerment. What appears first as the danger of losing

femininity is later depicted as an emancipating effect of concealing gender/femininity. In this way *bacha posh* are imaged as gender warriors who can defeat authoritarian regimes by turning their own symbols against them – here, covering up doesn't symbolize oppressed womanhood but a gendered strategy of resistance. Girls dressed as boys appear in the media as solutions for societies that supposedly enslave and lock up women in their homes. But this is only possible because there is an additional process of interpretation included: what was dismissed as a disguise of individuals in segregated societies in the past (women living as men in patriarchal societies) turns visible within a recently established discourse of sexuality. What has rendered *bacha posh* readable for the Western eye are various practices and cultures of drag, but also queer and transgender forms of living. Yet the histories and problems of queer people, such as homophobia and social exclusion, are rarely mentioned explicitly. A selective part of those marginalized communities' knowledge is implemented without any reference to their struggles. Queer theory's concepts about gender and sexuality appear here in many twisted (or covered up?) forms. One has to ask how freedom, democracy, and progress have turned out to be



represented through figures of nonbinary gender, such as *bacha posh*, in the recent past. How has the visible presence of a transgender or queer person turned to a symbol of whiteness, allowing for interpretations of the *bacha posh* as resistant?

The depictions and the discourse emerging around *bacha posh* do not indicate the potential emancipation of a gendered, sexualized, or racialized subject, but are rather indicative of the shifting role of representation in the present. Instead of representing nation-state citizens, the role of representation seems to be to violate and expose those subjects which have gained only selective or no access to the benefits of nation-states and economic privilege. Through the images and interpretations of *bacha posh*, the gaze is once again fixated. It is a paranoid fixation and it is based on the fears of being infantilized or enslaved, fears much older than the present-day representation becoming violence. Development and freedom, as counterparts of infantilization and enslavement, only seemingly shape the view of the contemporary viewer, while in fact the figures of the child and the slave are forced into exposing the representational frame.

4.

In her book *Time Binds: Queer Times, Queer Histories*, Elisabeth Freeman rethinks Judith Butler's understanding of time in her early writing on gender and sexuality in the 1990s. Freeman suggests Butler's thought might have involved a problematic notion of the progressive.¹³ Judith Butler has extensively elaborated on how identities are constructed iteratively through complex citational processes and how identity relies on its constant imitation and repetition.¹⁴ Performativity as a category in gender and queer theory has emerged precisely because of the Butlerian claim that there is no original or primary gender. Queer performativity has been presented as an intervention in historically repetitive and citational patterns regarding the constitution of subjectivity. Crucially, it has enabled appropriations – such as my own in the beginning of this text – and made them readable for a broader public. And most importantly, it has allowed a critique of the linear logic of progress in gender and sexuality development against the continuity of a biographical timeline between childhood and adulthood, defined according to economically productive lifespans. But queer performativity has also provided limited possibilities for understanding gender and sexuality (and therefore those standing behind the imagery of *bacha posh*) without further consideration of the politics of time and history.

Because of Butler's focus on the original and the quest to dismantle it, Freeman claims that "in *Gender Trouble*'s 'repetition with a difference,' the crucial difference seems to be novelty, not anachronism."¹⁵ According to Freeman, Butler favored the spectrum of copying for the creation of a different future that suggests a renewal of the past, or even leaves the past behind.¹⁶ This interpretation of queer performativity has since been taken up by conservative forces to project fantasies of progress and development onto bodies that would otherwise stay unreadable, because they don't emerge within capitalist medical and juridical institutions. As Freeman also states, one has to look at Butler's definition of queer performativity in its own historical context: early queer theory spoke in favor of "futures in ways that are symptomatic of late finance capitalism before the crashes of the early twenty-first century."¹⁷ Freeman does not so much call for dismissing early queer theory as for understanding that the legacy of the notion of queer today is bound to capitalist enthusiasm after 1989, the collapse of socialism, and the US euphoria of having won the Cold War. Without this historical and geographical context, one cannot understand the various meanings and (mis)interpretations of queer performativity today. In fact, queer theory has to admit that it has hardly any instrument for understanding the figure of a girl dressed as a boy in a country like present-day Afghanistan without revisiting its own foundational concepts. This demands going back to historical categories such as slavery and orientalism to understand all components involved in the present-day politics of sexuality. What have slavery and orientalism taught us about paranoid fixations and the progress and development of subjects, long before queer interventions in representation popularized drag and nonbinary gender appearances for conservative forces?

Queer theorist Kathryn Bond Stockton writes in her book *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* that whatever we want to know about the adult subject we search for in childhood. "The child is who we are not and, in fact, never were. It is the act of adults looking back," states Stockton.¹⁸ The child is always watched by an adult eye/I, so it is no wonder that sexist and racist schemata of progress have overly focused on and tried to define the figure of the child. Stockton emphasizes the "supposed gradual growth" and the slow unfolding of personhood that have framed and spatialized children's development as upward – hence the terminology of "growing-up."¹⁹

Children are supposed to follow a

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developmental line towards “full stature, marriage, work, reproduction and the loss of childishness.”²⁰ However, Stockton also remarks that when we speak of childhood, we are speaking about a period of life that can hardly be grasped and that escapes its interpretation all the time. She speaks of a particular “delay” in the developmental mode put upon childhood as a period of time, a suspension of growing up, where access to all that defines adulthood is undermined: autonomy, responsibility, the use and abuse of means of production.²¹ This delay creates a “carefully controlled embodiment of noncomplication.”²² One important part of this mechanism of control is also the surveillance of heterosexuality; the normally developing child is juxtaposed with the homosexual. As a result, we presume every child to be straight. Stockton speaks of a “ghostly gayness” that appears in the figure of the child, which also haunts the adult. Maybe this ghostly gayness is one of the main visual and discursive components for understanding the (Western) adults who watch the *bacha posh*. Their ongoing question (and it is a silently repeated homophobic and paranoid question) seems to be about the growth of these girls: What will happen to them? Will they manage to grow up – or will they “grow

sideways”? Will they find their way back to femininity, or will they become lesbians or something else, something not yet knowable?

The persistent wish for straight children was examined in a 1991 essay by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick entitled “How to Bring Your Kids up Gay.”²³ Sedgwick spoke back then of a “wish that gay people not exist,” a wish that has not yet disappeared but has rather taken a new shape in the form of neo-orientalist fixation.²⁴ In order to fully understand this new shape, one has to look at one more issue: the recent medical and political focus on transgendered children in the West. Stockton reminds us that the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorder has removed homosexuality as a disease, but it has enabled the freedom of the adult homosexual only to embattle the child.²⁵ A new control system targets childhood with a search for a fitting gender. Children are “allowed to become themselves,” as Stockton says ironically. In debates about finding children’s “right” gender and the decisions to pursue hormonal treatment and surgery, there is often a striking absence of sexuality. “There is no mention of nonnormative sexual orientation in childhood or of children’s identifying as ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian.’”²⁶ The ghostly gayness seems to disappear by making



Claude Cahun as Satan in the theatre play *Le Mystère d'Adam* by Pierre Albert-Birot, Théâtre du Plateau, 1929. Photo: Jersey Heritage Trust



Zanele Muholi, *Ayanda Moremi & Abakhaphi II.*, Kwanele Park, Katlehong, November 9, 2013. Courtesy Stevenson, Cape Town and Johannesburg, and Yancey Richardson Gallery, New York.

transgender embodiment a new center of observation. The affirmative images of *bacha posh* are placeholders for this desired dissolution of homosexuality, and also for the dissolution of every unclearly defined sociopolitical position.

5.

In the following part of my text I suggest a way to rework paranoid racist and homophobic structures that stem from colonialism and slavery but operate in different form today. I will do this by examining a core element of such structures: extinction. Extinction is an apocalyptic thought construction. It stands outside of the development and progress of race and humanity as much as it builds the stable ground for it. The fear of being extinct is a crucial part of a paranoid subjectivity. It is a fear that there is no other of one's own kind left, that the continuation of time is not secured, that there is no family left to go back to, or no child to be born in the future. Extinction is a fantasy of ultimate annihilation that goes beyond even one's own death. It stops the wishful thinking of reproductive heterosexuality and racial progress. Extinction is a time model in which time radically stops. For Gerome and his colonial contemporaries, extinction was a danger in the gaze of the other. For Cassatt it was in the failure of white women's emancipation and the enslavement of the patriarchal home. Today, the fear of extinction is to be found in the images of landscapes of ongoing war, the gender warrior being the last of humanity's kind within it.

I will examine the work of one historical and one contemporary artist to consider ways of rearticulating and undermining the fear of extinction. First, I want to go back to the iconic early twentieth-century images of queer performativity by Claude Cahun, not so much because of Cahun's practice itself but because of the history of its reception. Cahun's images have been so overwhelmed with enthusiastic reproductions, interpretations, and displays that it is difficult to enter their world without repeating the already established. Although quite known in Paris surrealist circles in the 1920s and '30s, Cahun was forgotten for decades and rediscovered only in 1992 by French art historian Francois Leperlier, who wrote an extensive biography on the artist.²⁷ Not only did Cahun serve as a model for discussing the absence of women in the reception of surrealism; her practice was also interpreted through feminist and queer readings in emerging queer theory of the early 1990s.

The artistic and social practice of "self-staging" enabled feminist and queer thinkers to formulate questions of emancipation and

liberation of female (and queer) subjects throughout the twentieth century.²⁸ At play in these interpretations, artistic as well as art historical, was the formation of modern and postmodern female subjectivity. Abigail Solomon Godeau has written about the various masks and mirrors Cahun employed as referential systems of a gendered subject.²⁹ Godeau has also crucially written about Cahun's lesbianism, which was enabled by the lesbian subculture in Paris in the 1920s, and emphasized that this aspect was far more than a biographical anecdote.³⁰ However, other important elements in Cahun's work have remained overlooked or only marginally touched upon. To suggest that Cahun's photographic gaze was focused only on herself has contributed to the construction of a self-empowered queer subject, but it dismisses two major factors: the collective and sometimes opaque practice between Claude Cahun and her partner Marcel Moore, and most importantly, the Jewish background of the artist.³¹ Both factors change the way we look at Cahun's work but also how we have learned to understand what queer performativity has become since the 1990s.

Cahun's choice of a Jewish pseudonym (Cahun was the name of the artist's uncle, David Leon Cahun) obviously indicates her interest in being visibly identified as Jewish. Cahun grew up in a cultural environment in which an ambiguous political position was made increasingly impossible. Assimilated or not, at the time Jewish people in all European countries were observed and subjected slowly but increasingly to social interdictions justified by the supposed Jewish ability to change identity. Cahun's work stages precisely these stereotypes and caricatures of the Jew as a chameleon, cannibal, vampire, or devil. In one of Cahun's theater stagings, the 1929 *Le Mystère d'Adam*, she plays Satan. Cahun points here at the descriptions of Jews as "predatory" and "fierce" by posing in a futuristic costume, playing with gestures and looks that indicate cruelty.³² In many other images, Cahun employs the same methods that were used to depict Jewish men around the same time: a clear profile exposing a shaved head and prominently featuring the nose, which has a long history of racist classification. The figure Godeau interpreted as a gender-ambiguous figure ("dandified young man with a shaved head") refers to Jewish masculinity.³³ But it is also about the child being endangered by this masculinity – Cahun's shaved head is that of a boy and that of an intruder threatening the familial space.³⁴

Cahun incorporated what was arrayed against her. She worked against the Jewish fear of extinction in the early 1920s and '30s. Her queer appearance leads us directly to Adorno's

“Elements of Anti-Semitism,” in which he explains the paranoia of the white German race as a fear of being persecuted – which ended up being acted out in the endless persecution of the Jewish people.³⁵ The “fascination” and “shock” Godeau refers to in response to Cahun’s work is much more about her pointing to this fear of extinction than about any female self-centeredness.³⁶ Cahun directly exposed anti-Semitic paranoia about the extinction of the white race, by transforming images of the child-molesting Jew. But the paranoia of white supremacy has persisted in other forms of racial segregation, based on images of the all-white family as a necessary instrument for securing the future.

6.

As an artist of postapartheid South Africa, Zanele Muholi works with the persisting fears of racial extinction on the part of the white family.³⁷ Her wedding images also perhaps give an answer to those fearful questions about queer children from elsewhere: this is how they look when they grow sideways, and this is how they might get married. Several pictures by Muholi show same-sex weddings in South Africa since 2013. Muholi regularly documents weddings, engaging in a popular photographic practice as an artist. Her wedding images follow a very specific visual code. They are staged in the same way that straight wedding photographs are staged: the bride is in the center of the picture, surrounded by family members. Two family members are kneeling to the left and the right of the bride, and six are standing in the background. All of the family members are tomboys or butches, wearing shiny black suits and white shirts with either short hair or long hair tied back. All of them are black. But it would be too simple to dismiss Muholi’s image as a staging of black queer identity. I’m not interested in whether this image is about identity politics or the integration or normalization of black queer couples – the people depicted here could be striving for all the bourgeois benefits of marriage, and maybe they have nothing else in mind but settling down. I’m interested in the way this picture changes the visual racialized schemata of the family.

As with *The Slave Market*, I also had a sexual fantasy when I saw this image. I wanted to get married to eight butches. To me, it’s obvious that the image is about the sexual fulfillment of the bride and everyone who can identify with her. The fantasy is actually similar to that provoked by *The Slave Market*. It is about the unrestricted possession of several other bodies, but with different social consequences than the slave market image. Muholi usually displays the wedding images alongside images of the funerals

of lesbians and gays who were killed through homophobic violence in South Africa. What she calls “visual activism” is the juxtaposition of images of queer weddings and images of queer death.

Maybe the most provocative part of Muholi’s wedding images is not that they show a different kind of nonbiological family, but that they touch upon the history of slavery and emphasize its history as a history without lineages. This staging of black queerness offers no possibility of heterosexual African consolidation, but is rather a reminder of a past of fragmented biographies and relations. Slavery meant being abandoned by the linear temporality of future-oriented reproduction; it meant inhabiting a space in which a fear of extinction was directly acted out upon bodies. Colonial fear of extinction was kept at bay by making others extinct. Today, a concept of family without biology as a concept of belonging without racial integration is derived from the memory of families torn apart, children taken away from their parents, relationships destroyed. And indeed, there is a correlation between slavery and queerness.

Saidiya Hartman writes in her book *Lose Your Mother* about the historical emergence of family structures in African countries in the aftermath of slavery. “The vision of an African continental family or a stable race standing shoulder to shoulder was born by captives, exiles, and orphans,” says Hartman.³⁸ Slaves were those who were historically condemned to be outside of any kinship relations, which is why the unifying perspective of Africa was constructed mainly from outside, by those who were related to former slaves – not by African people who stayed there. Hartman argues further that “the most universal definition of the slave is a stranger. Torn from kin and communities, exiled from one’s country, dishonored and violated, the slave defines the position of the outsider.”³⁹ African slave traders sold strangers, those outside of kin and clan relationships, those who didn’t fit into their internal familial relations. Thus, the slave was both a stranger to those who sold her and a stranger to those who bought her. I wonder if the slave, as a person who is always from elsewhere, has a place of origin, symbolically much more than geographically, in the colonial shifting locus of the East.

Hartman writes about the aftermath of slavery today, in a time when the old West that constituted itself by excluding and stigmatizing the East has almost vanished. The democratic values, politics of representation, and social welfare systems of the West have slowly declined. Its legacy is the paranoid subject of the present, obsessed with its own fear of

eradication and with the global catastrophe that from its point of view has to come. The figure of the slave, the stranger, the sexual outcast, as the one outside of family relations, is thus back (but she was probably never really gone) as a signifier for either being imprisoned, or being fugitive – successfully locked up, or forced outside the prison of white heterosexuality. But this is not the same as being liberated. The fugitive slave is still a slave, even if she is perhaps out of view of panoptical control, escaping the system of surveillance and production before getting caught by it again.

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Non-Aligned Extinctions: Slavery, Neo-Orientalism, and Queerness

- 1 See, for example, Teresa de Lauretis's work on lesbian desire, which profoundly reshapes Freudian psychoanalysis: *The Practice of Love: Lesbian Subjectivity and Perverse Desire* (Indiana University Press 1994).
- 2 Linda Nochlin questioned the unreflected institutional exhibition of orientalist painting in the 1980s in her text "The Imaginary Orient," in *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (Harper: 1989), 33–59.
- 3 Anne McLintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (Routledge, 1995), 4.
- 4 McLintock, *Imperial Leather*, 5.
- 5 McLintock, *Imperial Leather*, 3.
- 6 McLintock, *Imperial Leather*, 3.
- 7 McLintock, *Imperial Leather*, 25.
- 8 McLintock, *Imperial Leather*, 26.
- 9 McLintock, *Imperial Leather*, 24.
- 10 McLintock, *Imperial Leather*, 31.
- 11 McLintock, *Imperial Leather*, 23.
- 12 See, for example, Jenny Nordberg, *The Underground Girls of Kabul: In Search of a Hidden Resistance in Afghanistan* (Penguin Random House, 2014). The website introducing the book also offers a platform for *bacha posh* to share their stories in public – see <http://bachaposh.com/>.
- 13 Elisabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Times, Queer Histories* (Duke University Press, 2010), 62.
- 14 Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, eds. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David Halperin (Routledge, 1993), 307–20.
- 15 Freeman, *Time Binds*, 63.
- 16 Freeman, *Time Binds*, 63.
- 17 Freeman, *Time Binds*, 63.
- 18 Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Duke University Press 2009), 5.
- 19 Stockton, *Queer Child*, 4.
- 20 Stockton, *Queer Child*, 4.
- 21 Stockton, *Queer Child*, 4.
- 22 Stockton, *Queer Child*, 5.
- 23 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "How to Bring Your Kids up Gay: The War on Effeminate Boys," in *Tendencies* (Duke University Press, 1993), 154–64.
- 24 Stockton, *Queer Child*, 13.
- 25 Stockton, *Queer Child*, 14.
- 26 Stockton, *Queer Child*, 9.
- 27 Francois Leperlier, *Claude Cahun: Masks and Metamorphoses*, trans. Liz Heron (Verso, 1997).
- 28 Whitney Chadwick even formulated self-representation as a female position in surrealism. However, the *femme-enfant* was a surrealist figure that secured women's role as lover or muse but excluded them from the art world. See Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (Thames and Hudson 1985).
- 29 Abigail Solomon Godeau, "The Equivocal 'I': Claude Cahun as Lesbian Subject," in *Inverted Odysseys: Claude Cahun, Maya Deren, Cindy Sherman*, eds. Shelley Rice and Lynn Gumpert (MIT Press, 1999), 111–24.
- 30 Godeau, "The Equivocal 'I,'" 116.
- 31 Tirza True Latimer reflects on the impossibility of claiming singular authorship for Claude Cahun in her text "Entre Nous: Between Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12, no. 2 (2006): 197–216. Michelle Gewurtz explores Cahun's Jewish identity in "Equivocally Jewish: Claude Cahun and the Narratives of Modern Art" <https://www.brandeis.edu/hbi/publications/workingpapers/docs/gewurtz.pdf>.
- 32 Godeau, "The Equivocal 'I,'" 117.
- 33 Godeau, "The Equivocal 'I,'" 117.
- 34 These elements are crucial to understanding the modernist usage of oriental textiles, along with poses and gestures that remind one so often of orientalist paintings and their figures that preceded the avant-garde.
- 35 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, "Elements of Anti-Semitism: Limits of Enlightenment," in *Dialectics of Enlightenment* (Stanford University Press 2002).
- 36 Godeau, "The Equivocal 'I,'" 114. According to this historical perspective, the antifascist activities of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore during their time on the British island of Jersey cannot be heroized simply as resistance towards a regime the artist opposed. Rather, Cahun and Moore acted against their own physical and symbolic eradication.
- 37 South Africa was also part of the non-alignment movement but ended its connections to other member nations after the establishment of apartheid.
- 38 Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008), 6.
- 39 Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 5.