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As the novel coronavirus pandemic spreads, we – the people of planet earth – are faced with a dizzying variety of responses: quarantine, containment, vigilant self-quarantine, paranoid self-isolation, and in some cases escape from the above. Suddenly, it is as if circulation itself has turned against us, making healthy freedom of movement in the world a dealer of death. So your flight is cancelled. Your trip is over. We are staying in place for the foreseeable future. Exhibitions, symposia, gatherings of all kinds are postponed. But not sporting events. Those will go on, but without any supporters in the stands. The players will play for empty stadiums and we will watch from home. It's a good time to catch up on reading.

The movement and circulation of images and words is quite literally what we all do. In the current viral climate, now that mobility is rapidly curtailed and as preparations to be contagious and contained indoors shift between potentiality and reality, certain infrastructures are laid bare in their fragility. At the same time, specific mobilities may revert to how they looked at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The loss of free and near-miraculous movement between needed international gatherings of artists isn't quite something to be celebrated either. What would it look like to gather and share ideas, works, publications traveling only by data or by foot?

Nikolay Smirnov makes visible a century of religious-based networks across Russia – old believers, shamans, libertarian groups, and spiritual outliers who have operated against or in spite of centralized state power. Smirnov also relays attempts to repress these believers, beginning with populist movements before the October Revolution and continuing to this day, with shaman Aleksandr Gabyshev's ongoing and much-disrupted march by foot to the Kremlin this year from Yakutia, Siberia, “with a mission to exorcise the ‘powerful demon’ in the Kremlin.” Through examples spanning great distances and time, Smirnov points out that at one point in the mid-nineteenth century at least, such groups could be considered to operate as an “oppositional religious confederate republic” within Russia. Oleksiy Radynski traces the long gas line of twentieth and twenty-first century fossil fuel connections, particularly between the carbon empires of Russia and Germany, in relation to Alexander Bogdanov's proto-cybernetics to ask: How has information travelled directly through the medium of oil – and now gas – networks?

Sam Richardson enters an ongoing investigation

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into images and lived experiences of Polycystic Ovary Syndrome (PCOS) through the figure of Saint Wilgefortis, a Catholic female saint known for her beard. Often appearing on the cross as if she were Jesus Christ, throughout history Wilgefortis's likeness has been removed, considered heretical, and officially purged (1969). But, since her legend arose in the fourteenth century, she has also been venerated as a patron saint by those who are bound as prisoners or held captive by abusive husbands or domestic situations, by survivors of sexual assault, rape, and incest, and as Richardson shows, by people of many genders and identities, including people with PCOS.

Continuing an ongoing essay on narcissistic authoritarian statism, iLiana Fokianaki gives form to the interplay between soft power and hard power by adding additional axes for plotting emergent forms of unaccountable coercion, reminding us of the pressures exerted on cultural workers and institutions when patrons and board members perpetuate the same violence that artists protest against, or when cultural workers respond by retreating into private familism. Serubiri Moses meditates on the cinematic dimension of postcolonial thought, invoking the work of Franz Fanon to ask how violence operates through fantasies and dreams. If colonialism marries legality and structural violence, then Fanon's practice as a psychoanalyst becomes all the more crucial for uncovering the desires and unconscious fantasies that we might also understand as images and projections.

In "Recolonize This Place," Mostafa Heddaya and Rijin Sahakian critically untangle the exhibition "Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991–2011" at MoMA PS1, and identify how its "belated humanization" through empathetic artists and relativistic curatorial framing extends the "hearts and minds" rhetoric of US occupation. With the billionaire owner of the infamous private military contractor Blackwater chairing PS1 affiliate MoMA's board, and many canonical European and American artists contemplating the mediatic abstraction of war as spectacle, the experiences of Iraqi artists in the exhibition appear increasingly significant for revealing surprising overlaps between the operating logic of the art institution and that of the US occupation of Iraq.

In "Reality Cabaret: On Juliana Huxtable," McKenzie Wark writes through and alongside the artist's music, visual, and written artwork in the form of a remix that's "also a theory of its own aesthetic methods." Among other revelations

she arrives to: "Maybe it's about standing in the flow, not where it's a stagnant pool or a cascading blast, but where it eddies and still trickles. Maybe that stillness is actually propulsion if we think again about what moves relative to what. Maybe there are still times and places that, while not free, at least enable certain bodies and signs a little breathing room. Maybe certain bodies need that more than others, and hence find their way."

In 1960, at the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes in Montevideo, Luis Camnitzer wrote: "I don't believe that there is any other aesthetic premise than freedom, as much personal as collective." Continuing into 2020, Camnitzer's pedagogical and artistic work has developed these premises, including a deep investigation into the interrelation of language and image. At the time, Camnitzer wrote to his fellow travellers, art students and graduates: "Undoubtedly, the most common means of expression is the word. It's misused and abused. It determines thought rather than being a consequence of it. Metaphors have become formal sentences that have lost their original image, and that is how we think."

– Editors
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Nikolay Smirnov
**Shaman,
Schismatic,
Necromancer:
Religious
Libertarians in
Russia**

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Shaman, Schismatic, Necromancer: Religious Libertarians in Russia

Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, religious radicalism in Russia became associated with political opposition and a search for political alternatives. The ethical tenets of popular faiths often coincided with the aspirations of revolutionaries. The collapse of the USSR ushered in a wave of religious libertarianism. This essay considers three recent exponents: shaman Aleksandr Gabyshev, necromancer Anatoliy Moskvina, and neo-paganist Albert Razin. The main discussion is preceded by a brief historical overview of the subject.

1. Without a Tsar at the Head

In Russia, mass religious dissent is associated first and foremost with the *Raskol* (Schism). As a result of a series of reforms in the Russian Orthodox Church carried out in the latter half of the seventeenth century, a portion of the population “went into a schism,” i.e., rejected the reforms. A fierce struggle ensued: The schismatics, who saw the ruling power as the kingdom of the Antichrist, fled abroad or to remote regions of the Empire. The regime, in turn, persecuted the dissenters, saddling them with increased taxes, even burning whole villages alive.

After a harsh campaign of suppressing open protests, elites temporarily lost interest in religious dissent. Under the banner of Enlightened Absolutism, Catherine II moved to end all persecution of the schismatics. Furthermore, in 1777, she put out a decree permitting peasants to enroll in the merchant classes. As a result, *Raskol*, or Old Belief, came to play a pivotal role in the formation of Russian capitalism, which bore unmistakable characteristics of socialism.¹ How did this come about?

Old Believers lived in peasant communes. Many aspects of their daily lives, as well as their resources, were collectivized. Communal assets were held in a trust, referred to as *obshchak* (commons). After 1777, when peasants gained the right to enroll in the merchantry, Old Believer communities saw the opportunity to gain economic independence within a hostile state. The *obshchak* was invested in a business enterprise, nominally headed by a manager. The state considered this person to be the proprietor, but this was not the case. In this manner, toward the middle of the nineteenth century *Raskol* became a corporation, injecting into Russian capitalism the ethical principles of a schismatic community.

At about the same time, the state came to suspect a “false bottom” in domestic capitalism, which led to a series of investigative expeditions in the 1840s, led by the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Additionally, the government financed



Terry McLean's illustration for the cover of a book he co-authored with Hugh Greig: *The Hope and the Promise: The Tender, Tragic and Often Brutal Story of the Doukhobors* (Stagecoach Publishing, 1977). The painting is now on display at Doukhobor Discovery Centre, Castlegar. The painting depicts the Doukhobors' burning of the arms protest in the Southern Caucasus of Russia at midnight on June 28–29, 1895.

several foreign expeditions, notably that of Baron Haxthausen. The latter's 1843 journey across Russia virtually discovered the peasant commune. Haxthausen, moreover, was one of the first to turn his attention to popular religion and its varieties, in particular Old Belief. He classified religious sects into three categories: 1) those that were formed prior to the Church reforms and that, in his opinion, traced their origins to the Gnostics; 2) schismatic doctrines, arising in the seventeenth century in direct consequence of the Church reforms; and 3) sects coming into existence during the reign of Peter I under the influence of Western religion (Molokans, Dukhobors).²

The results of these investigations shocked the elites. It turned out that the religious beliefs of the common people differed significantly from official Orthodoxy. It was a matter not merely of a pre-reform Orthodox rite, but of a hybrid faith, a *folk Orthodoxy*, comprising pagan elements as well as collectivist social ideals. The government saw clearly that popular beliefs were perilously close to Western socialist views: universal equality, collective property, and a rejection of state hierarchy. Moreover, it became apparent that official population statistics grossly underestimated the number of Old Believers. In

reality, at least a quarter of the population was to a lesser or greater extent schismatic, i.e., held itself in opposition to the central power. This gave rise to new persecutions.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the findings of such government expeditions were made public, ushering in a fashion for Raskol within Russia's progressive circles. Studies appeared, laying emphasis on the political aspirations of the schismatics. In particular, Afanasiy Shchapov noted that "the shared antagonism of the schismatics toward the Orthodox government and the Orthodox Church united all the schismatics, despite doctrinal differences, into a single brotherhood."³ Shchapov considered Old Believer networks to form a spatially dispersed *oppositional religious confederate republic*.

The leading Russian revolutionaries of that time – Aleksandr Herzen, Nikolai Ogarev, and Mikhail Bakunin – made a play for religious dissent. Between 1862 and 1864, Herzen and Ogarev put out a supplement to their periodical *Kolokol* titled "General Assembly," aimed at the people, and specifically the Old Believers. At Herzen's prompting, his associate Vasilii Kelsiev studied the political potential of the Schism, eventually publishing several volumes of official Russian documents on its history. One of these

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Portrait of Anatoly Moskvín.
Collage by Alexander
Volozhanin as published
in *Nizhegorodskie Novosti*
(News of nizhny novgorod), no.
137, 2011. Photo by the author.

volumes, dealing with the Skoptsy sect, is preserved in the private library of Karl Marx with his personal notes and marginalia.

The 1860s–70s saw the rise of the *Narodnik* (Populist) movement in Russia. The radical intelligentsia set out for the provinces to “rouse the masses” against autocracy. The “pilgrimage to the countryfolk” failed in its principal aim, and in the 1880s a disenchantment with Raskol set in. The Populists were replaced by Marxists at the vanguard of the revolutionary movement. The revolutionaries’ attention shifted from the heterodox peasant to the proletariat. At the same time, Marxist organizations continued to pay attention to Raskol. The Bolsheviks in the early twentieth century were particularly interested in religious sects as the most radical forms of society. Within the party, this subject was assigned to Vladimir Bonch-Bruevich. In the 1900s–10s he published “Materials Toward a History and Study of Russian Sectarianism and Schism.” At the second Russian Social Democratic Labor Party congress in 1903, Bonch-Bruevich delivered a paper titled “Schism and Sectarianism in Russia.” In consequence, the party adopted a resolution calling for a social-democratic campaign among the sects, and published nine issues of the monthly leaflet *Dawn* aimed at the sectarians.

In 1908–10, a faction of the Bolsheviks took an interest in *Bogostroitelstvo*, or “God-building.” Anatoliy Lunacharsky, Alexander Bogdanov, Maxim Gorky, and Vladimir Bazarov sought to formulate a new religion for the proletariat through a synthesis of socialism and folk religion. In 1909 they organized a school for workers on the island of Capri. The school’s activities and the theoretical writings of the God-builders drew a scornful response from Lenin, who criticized their efforts to create a “proletarian culture” and a “proletarian religion.”

The turn of the century saw an upsurge of interest in the occult, esoteric knowledge, and sectarianism across the spectrum of Russia’s intellectual elite.⁴ A spiritual radicalization of society was underway. A public campaign to defend the Dukhobors was a case in point. The more radical elements of this sect rejected the principles of compulsory military service, private property, prisons, courts of law, churches, and any other institutions of state power. In 1895, several Dukhobor groups carried out a mass anti-war action: a public burning of weapons. The authorities responded with harsh reprisals. The campaign to defend the Dukhobors was led by Leo Tolstoy and included other prominent figures, such as the anarchist Peter Kropotkin, theater director Leopold Sulerzhitsky, and the Bolshevik Vladimir Bonch-Bruevich. In the end, some eight thousand Dukhobors left Russia in

1898 and resettled in Canada.

By this time the vast domain of religious dissent was understood in somewhat greater detail. It became clear, for example, that some of the Old Believers were *Popovtsy* (Priested) – harboring oppositional views, but already integrated into the power structure of institutional religion. Besides these, there were various and rather numerous *bezpopovskie soglasia* (priestless denominations). The latter recognized no hierarchy or formal institutions, and considered all authority, including that of the *Popovtsy*, to be the rule of the Antichrist. Priestless denominations were quite diverse and continually transforming. Many of them incorporated elements of paganism, comprising a hybrid popular religion, opposed to official Orthodoxy in religious as well as social aspects. In his *Writer’s Diary*, Fyodor Dostoevsky referred to it as “the people’s Orthodoxy” or the horizontal Church, as opposed to the hierarchical “Orthodoxy of the elites.”

Several of these priestless sects gave rise to radical societies. For example, the Wanderers, also known as the Runaways, rejected all forms of civic duty and permanent residence. The mystical *Skoptsy* (Eunuchs) practiced castration, while at the same time readily integrating various technological innovations into the life of their community. These came about as a result of what Charles Taylor refers to as the “nova effect,” an intensification of the secularizing processes that began with the arrival of what he calls the “Modern Era” (1500s onwards). According to Taylor, the nova effect emerged at the end of the eighteenth century, bringing about a “galloping pluralism on the spiritual plane.”⁵ A nonstop proliferation of different forms of spiritual existence results in a situation in which, at a certain historical point, the center of spiritual fulfillment could be displaced outside of church hierarchy, into individual religious experience. In Russia at the end of nineteenth century, the majority of schismatic and sectarian communities shared apocalyptic views, awaiting the end of the existing world order on Judgment Day.

The Russian masses, however, were incapable of arriving at a revolution independently, despite their widespread oppositionist leanings. According to Orlando Figes, this was because the peasantry operated strictly at the level of the community (*Mir*), rather than that of nation.⁶ Charles Taylor agrees with him: “Their repertory didn’t include collective actions of this type at this national level; what they could understand was large-scale insurrections, like the Pugachovschina, whose goal was not to take over and replace central power, but to force it to be less malignant and

invasive.”⁷

It was up to the Bolsheviks then to consolidate and transform native libertarianism into nationwide revolutionary events. The party’s prevalent role was certainly well documented in subsequent historiography. Far less attention, however, was given to the various aspects of the popular worldview which made possible the revolutionary experience. After the original studies of the late nineteenth century, we might mention here the Soviet historians Kirill Chistov and, especially, Aleksandr Klibanov, whose work dealt with popular social utopias and socioreligious movements.⁸ Soviet historians invariably emphasized the political role of popular freethinking, noting the significance ascribed to it by the classics of Marxist-Leninist thought. They recalled Marx and Lenin’s affinity for the Munster Commune, along with the latter’s statement that “expression of political protest under a religious guise is common to all people at a certain stage in their development.”⁹

In the post-Soviet period the question was taken up by Aleksandr Pyzhikov. He traced the foundations of the Soviet project to the Old Belief ethics of various priestless denominations, i.e., to the messianic radicalism of the popular faith:

Collective psychology with its Old Belief underpinning became a powerful force that pushed out the old order ... The worker and peasant masses literally laid down their bones to prevent the return of the old order of nobility and government bureaucracy (liberal or not), blessed by the Russian Orthodox Church ... The new ideology combined the Bolsheviks’ Marxist theory with the communal-collectivist psychology of the lower classes.¹⁰

Pyzhikov’s conclusions dovetail with those of the dissident Sovietologist Mikhail Avgursky, who argued that the mass participation of Jews in the October Revolution may be attributed to the sectarian varieties of Judaism and the eschatological messianic sentiments widespread in the community.¹¹

The individualization of spiritual experience intensified over the course of the twentieth century. In the 1960s it entered a new phase, a “spiritual super-nova” according to Charles Taylor, marked by “a generalized culture of ‘authenticity,’ in which people are encouraged to find their own way, discover their own fulfillment.”¹² This is the age of *expressive individualism*. Its advent has coincided with the dismantling of the modern disciplinary society. In Russia it took the form of a critique of the Soviet project and of state-imposed atheism. The USSR in the 1970s saw the emergence of numerous

informal intellectual societies engaged in metaphysical, religious, or esoteric pursuits. Even official or semi-official Soviet art of that time bears a noticeable trace of traditionalist metaphysics: one need only recall the films of Tarkovsky, or the neo-traditionalist writers and the “ruralist” painters. Dissident groups assumed a more radical – which often meant more religious – posture. The art of Soviet nonconformists was shot through with a metaphysical strain, which they opposed to the atheist officialdom. The most radical of these groups took up esotericism and occultism, as exemplified by the Yuzhin Group in Moscow in the 1970s.¹³

Birgit Menzel succinctly sums up the late-Soviet plunge into metaphysics as the “occult underground,”¹⁴ while Mikhail Epstein refers to it as the “new sectarianism.” In his work *Cries in the New Wilderness*, Epstein describes several “sects” among the late-Soviet intelligentsia.¹⁵ Although the sects and the writings of their leaders are fictional, the book captured the intellectual climate of those years. As the author states in his introduction, “Any Russian ideology sooner or later turns into a theology ... and any social movement, unless it manages to seize power, transforms into a heresy and becomes a sect ... In Russia, sectarianism is the preordained means of ‘survival’ of an idea under the tremendous pressure of the state.” In presenting the reader with an assortment of totalitarian heterodox ideologies, the author seeks to obviate the very possibility of totalitarianism: “Our approach to pluralism is different from that of the West – i.e., compromise and moderation of diverging viewpoints. Instead, taking each to its extreme we eliminate the supremacy of one.”¹⁶

With the breakdown of the USSR in the 1980s–90s, the country was inundated by a wave of spiritual pluralism. The immediate cause was the abolition of censorship. At the same time, postmodern, critically inclined intellectuals like Mikhail Epstein and the writer Vladimir Sorokin aimed to amplify spiritual pluralism to a radical extreme. For them, this was at once a means of dismantling the repressive Soviet system, a guarantee of pluralism, and a reflection of the peculiarities of Russian culture. Media outlets, freed from the shackles of censorship, were flooded with information about UFOs, extraterrestrials, healers, mediums, Satanists, and all manner of other esoterica. In all, it may well be said that today we are still witnessing an ongoing “occult revival” in post-Soviet Russia.¹⁷

2. Recent Instances of Religious Radicalism: From Exorcism in the Name of Popular Rule to Occult Libertarianism

In recent years Russia has seen a handful of

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Portrait of Alexandr Gabyshev via the sakhaday.ru website. Photographer unknown.

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Alexandr Gabyshev during his march to Moscow, Siberia, early summer 2019, via the sakhaday.ru website. Photographer unknown.

high-profile incidents of religious dissent. They were able to draw public interest because in each case an exotic religious stance was intertwined with political statements and/or radical action. Still, assigning the label of “abnormality” to the agent appears to satisfy both the authorities and the public at large. The latter, it seems, refuses to see these incidents as an exaggerated reflection of their own problems.

Let us consider the case of Anatoliy Moskvin, a linguist and Celtologist from Nizhny Novgorod. In 2011 police discovered twenty-nine life-size dolls in his apartment that were found to contain mummified remains of young girls, aged five to fifteen. Moskvin turned out to be a necromancer, who frequented cemeteries, communing with the spirits of dead girls and digging up their graves. He mummified their remains and turned them into dolls. According to him, with the help of these spirits he was able to access worlds beyond the grave. It was also his intention to resurrect the children in the future, when science discovers the appropriate technology.

An analysis of Moskvin’s beliefs shows that he had synthesized syncretic paganism with gnostic Luciferianism. His communion with the spirits of the dead began in his childhood. Subsequently, through his studies of various pagan traditions – particularly those of the Celts, the Yakuts, and the Mari – he absorbed their views of the afterlife, namely, that contact with the world of the dead may be established through the help of spirits or magic dolls, which these spirits come to inhabit. To be assured of success, one could place something associated with the original host, such as a tuft of hair, inside a doll. Consequently, the items found in his apartment by the police were neither cadavers nor mummies, but magical dolls. Indeed, every shaman possesses a whole stable of magical dolls: they are their principal means of travel between the two worlds.

Besides his paganist views, however, Moskvin was also an adherent of Luciferianism. This worldview is widely encountered in contemporary society. All of its variants extoll three principal values: freedom, knowledge, and power. In the extreme, this means freedom from the shackles of materiality, access to all forbidden knowledge, and power over oneself as the highest form of power. Lucifer (or “light-bearer”) is the Christian analogue of Prometheus: both figures sought to grant man knowledge – i.e., power – and were condemned for this by the gods/God. The type of Luciferianism practiced by Moskvin bore a gnostic, occult character. The knowledge he sought was principally associated with the spirits of the dead. The prospect of resurrection

is specifically tied to Luciferianism. Moskvin repeatedly indicated that he felt sorry for the young girls, cut off so early in life. For him they were alive, not dead, because he could hear their restless souls. Moskvin blamed the relatives of the deceased for abandoning their dead: according to him, he merely picked up what others had discarded, when they tossed their dead like trash into the cemetery. Convinced that science will soon master the means of cloning (which is tantamount to resurrection), the necromancer tried to preserve the bodies of the dead girls as best as he could by mummifying their remains with a view to a future resurrection.

The genealogy of Moskvin’s spiritual quest can be traced to the Soviet era. In his essay “Cross without a Victim” (literally “without a crucified one”), Moskvin recalls the prohibition against any discussion of the swastika symbol, and the interest it invariably generated among the intellectual milieu of the 1970s–90s: “It was the lure of the ‘forbidden fruit’ ... That time is passed, hopefully for good, and no topic of discussion is off limits to us now.”¹⁸ This is an attitude wholly characteristic of the occult underground, where esoteric knowledge is avidly sought out by the “curious.” It is to be dug up in central libraries, and a great deal of time must be sacrificed in its acquisition and subsequent exchange with others “in the know.”

Moskvin is an example of a religious/spiritual libertarian of the right-wing, individualist variety. The individual asserts his right to access any knowledge, regardless of societal or moral taboos. This is libertarianism of the Faustian or Luciferian type. It may also be called “magic libertarianism” or “occult libertarianism”; in any event, it follows a long tradition. Furthermore, Moskvin’s path hews closely to the tradition of metaphysical investigations undertaken by the Soviet intelligentsia, and is a reflection of a burgeoning esoteric culture associated with post-Soviet society. And yet, this same society refuses to comprehend Moskvin’s actions. For the past seven years the necromancer has been subjected to compulsory psychiatric treatment, a form of dehumanization that uses disciplinary methods drawn from the rapidly obsolescing twentieth century, modernist arsenal. Society and the state assert an epistemological rupture on his behalf, thereby showing themselves incapable of self-analysis.

Another example is the act of self-immolation carried out by the Udmurt neo-paganist, scholar, and activist Albert Razin before the Udmurt parliament building in September 2019. Udmurtia is an ethnic republic in the Volga region. The Udmurt people became

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part of the Muscovy tsardom during the reign of Ivan the Terrible, in no small part as a result of the latter's expansionist campaigns. Alongside other pagan tribes, the Udmurt people were subjected to forced Christianization under their new rulers, yet managed to retain their pagan traditions to a great extent.

In late-Soviet and post-Soviet periods, the breakdown of disciplinary Soviet atheism gave rise to an ethnic and neo-pagan renaissance among Russia's various nationalities. The breakup of the USSR functioned in a manner analogous to the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917, i.e., as the destruction of the "prison of the nations."¹⁹ For example: the first three national congresses of the Udmurt (Votyak) people took place in 1918–19, while the fourth did not take place until 1991. The national-cultural organization Udmurt Kenesh was founded at that time, with Albert Razin – a well-known and widely respected resident of the republic – among its leadership. Razin urged his compatriots to return to the roots of their pagan religion, proclaimed himself a shaman of the ancient tradition known as *tuno*, and reconstructed and performed traditional Udmurt pagan rituals.

What was it then that compelled Razin to set himself on fire? It was a law passed in 2018 that removed the obligatory study of national languages across Russia and made it voluntary. The new law prompted a vigorous protest from Razin, who saw in it the return of "Stalin's policy of Russification." On September 10, 2019, his one-man protest before the parliament building culminated in self-immolation. Two placards he held in his hands read "If my language should disappear tomorrow, I am ready to die today!" and "Do I have a Fatherland?"

According to various pagan beliefs existing in the area of the Middle Volga basin where Udmurtia is located, self-immolation is a ritual called *tipshar*. Historically, its practice was fairly widespread among the pagan tribes of this region (Chuvash, Mordva, Udmurt, and Cheremis), as an assertion of one's right, as personal condemnation of a transgressor who refuses to accept responsibility for his wrongdoing, and finally as a means of punishment, since the soul of anyone who dies an untimely, violent death is unable to find peace and continually plagues the living with a variety of ills. Therefore, to commit *tipshar* before the enemy's house is to set upon him one's vengeful spirit. Justice exacts a high price: the one who commits *tipshar* deprives his soul of repose. It is an extreme measure resorted to by the powerless and the humiliated in the face of a powerful enemy.

According to the traditionalist mindset,

modern repressions have filled the world with troubled spirits. This is why the world has come to resemble a horror movie. Case in point: the vivid emergence of the Yakut horror film in the post-perestroika era, coinciding with a broad return to shamanic beliefs – both expressions of an ethnic renaissance. As the film *Setteeh Sir* suggests: this land has been stripped of its tradition, as the NKVD has confiscated the shaman's tambourine. The couple at the center of the film return to their ancestral Yakut village, largely emptied in the years of Sovietization. They face a succession of difficulties, because the place is filled with ancestral spirits enraged at their progeny. Redemption will not come easy: malignant spirits, wrought by human evil and human error, will not simply go away. In a larger sense, horror is people and ideas driven out of society. The ghoulish corpses and dolls are those whom society has destroyed in its civilizing efforts. This is why Chris Dumas is able to speak of a latent necrophilia in late-modernist society.²⁰ Postcolonial ideologies seek to resolve this problem by advocating for a rehabilitation of beliefs suppressed by the modern age. Similarly, those at the forefront of various ethnic renaissances, like Albert Razin, address the same imbalances. They are religious libertarians, operating at the ethnic, national level. They speak in the name of national-ethnic societies, calling for the liberation of their cultures and beliefs.

The third example is the March on the Kremlin undertaken by the shaman Aleksandr Gabyshev. In August of 2019 Gabyshev set out on foot from the capital of Yakutia, in the northeast corner of Siberia, and headed for Moscow with a mission to exorcise the "powerful demon" in the Kremlin. Once this is accomplished, the people's rule may finally be established in Russia. Gabyshev considers himself a warrior-shaman, whose orders come directly from God. His is a "double-faith," or a popular Christianity: i.e., he believes in Jesus Christ, but also in the multitudes of spirits of the traditional animistic religions. This type of religious hybridization is not uncommon in Siberia.

Along the way, Gabyshev's cause has gradually gained popularity. The plan was to reach Moscow in the spring of 2021 with a large following, which would organically grow up around him in the course of his progress. According to Gabyshev, the entire country is "behind him." In the Trans-Baikal capital of Chita he spoke at an opposition rally. By the time he reached the Buryat capital Ulan-Ude, Gabyshev was accompanied by a group of several dozen followers. There, his arrival precipitated a wave of oppositional activity.

It was also in Buryatia that Gabyshev and

his followers ran into trouble: local “official” shamans of the congregation “Tengeri” denounced him as an impostor. The traffic police confiscated a car that had been donated to the group by supporters. Finally, on September 19, at the border between the Buryat and Irkutsk regions, the shaman was arrested and driven to Yakutsk. There he was charged with publicly inciting extremism, and after a psychiatric evaluation pronounced insane. The criminal charge and the label of insanity exert a double pressure: under Russian law, anyone with a diagnosis of insanity may be involuntarily committed to a psychiatric clinic. The next step is punitive psychiatry: a means of suppressing dissent that is familiar to many Soviet dissidents.

Aleksandr Gabyshev does not speak on behalf of the Yakut people. His ultimate goal is a libertarian action at the national level. The reason is that today, religiosity/spirituality is acquiring an increasingly syncretic character, which may be described as post-secular. In Russia this process exhibits some local peculiarities: post-Soviet spirituality inherits from Soviet state-imposed atheism its universalist aspirations, i.e., it is “post-atheistic.” Mikhail Epstein, who coined the term, proposes that whoever finds faith after the desert of atheism is most likely to find faith generally, as the antithesis of unbelief, rather than adhere to a particular confession.²¹

Another feature peculiar to Russia is the neo-pagan renaissance. Paganism is one of the more obvious choices for those seeking post-Soviet religious emancipation, since it is a system of beliefs that has seen extreme oppression, both under the Russian Empire and in the USSR. Latently, however, Russia has always been far more hybridized than it had officially appeared. On the one hand, popular belief has always been hybridized, incorporating elements of paganism. On the other hand, Soviet Marxism exhibited an affinity for pagan animism in its attitude toward the materiality of the world and spiritualization of matter. “A revival of this whole complex of primeval religions was one of the natural consequences of the Communist project.”²² In this sense, universalist neo-pagan beliefs in Russia are post-atheist squared.

The beliefs of Gabyshev, Moskvin, and Razin are principally neo-pagan. At the same time, they are all hybridized and syncretic, having evolved in the age of expressive individualism. Their religiosity/spirituality is the heterogenous result of inner quests, insights, epiphanies, and experiences. Today the character of religiosity continues to shift from a fellowship of like-minded members of a community toward an individual spiritual path. Or, as Taylor puts it:

“Many of these are engaged in assembling their own personal outlook, through a kind of ‘bricolage.’”²³

These instances of religious radicalism are composite constructions, therefore difficult to understand, and are readily written off as “abnormalities.” A significant characteristic of this complex religiosity in all three dissimilar instances is their *libertarianism*, i.e., radical religiosity here serves an emancipatory end. In the case of Aleksandr Gabyshev we are dealing with a libertarian socialism that calls for popular rule and collective action, its ultimate end being the overthrow of state hierarchy. In Razin’s case it is an ethnic emancipation, articulated in nationalistic terms. Moskvin synthesizes a highly individualized version of occult libertarianism. The political and personal aims of these individuals are very different. At the same time, all three have evolved a kind of hybrid and radical religiosity with a powerful libertarian message.

In the age of expressive individualism, religiosity/spirituality takes on a previously unseen syncretism. This, however, should not be taken as a pretext to write off its excesses as abnormal, thereby asserting an epistemological rupture and denying society’s capacity for self-knowledge. On the contrary, all these incidents are excessive manifestations of fundamental processes in the realm of the religious/spiritual today. Moreover, they are part of an important tradition that ties religious dissent to the search for political alternatives. An understanding of these circumstances will serve to displace our perception of the excesses of religious libertarianism from the stigma of pathology toward analytical, hermeneutic, and pragmatic lines of inquiry.

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Translated from the Russian by Sergey Levchin.

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e-flux journal #107 — march 2020 Nikolay Smirnov
Shaman, Schismatic, Necromancer: Religious Libertarians in Russia

Nikolay Smirnov works as an artist, a geographer, a curator, and a researcher regarding theory-fiction on spatial practices and representations of space and place in art, science, museum practices, and everyday life.

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1
This conclusion is largely grounded in the seminal work of historian Aleksandr Pyzhikov. See his *Facets of the Russian Schism: The Secret Role of Old Rite from the Seventeenth Century to 1917* (in Russian) (Kontseptual, 2018).

2
A. Haxthausen, *Studien über die innern Zustände, das Volksleben und insbesondere die ländlichen Einrichtungen Russlands*. Translated into English as *The Russian Empire: Its People, Institutions and Resources* (Chapman & Hall, 1856), 277.

3
A. L. Shchapov, *The Schism of the Russian Old Rite, Considered in Connection with the Internal State of the Russian Church and Civil Society in the Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Century* (1859). Cited in Pyzhukov, *Facets of the Russian Schism*, 31.

4
For more information see Aleksandr Etkind, *Khlyst: Sects, Literature, and Revolution* (in Russian) (NLO 1998).

5
Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Belknap Press, 2007), 300.

6
Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy* (Viking, 1997), 98–101, 518–19.

7
Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 259. The “Pugachovschina” was a peasant uprising, led by Yemelian Pugachev, 1773–75. The insurrection united Cossacks, peasants, and various ethnic populations in Russia against autocracy. Most of the several hundred thousand rebels came from the Raskol.

8
A. I. Klibanov, *History of Religious Sectarianism in 1860s Russia* (in Russian) (Nauka, 1917); Kirill Chistov, *Russian Popular Socio-Utopian Legends, Seventeenth to Eighteenth Century* (in Russian) (1967).

9
V. I. Lenin, *Complete Works*, vol. 4, 228 (in Russian), as cited in Klibanov, *History of Religious Sectarianism*, 4.

10
Aleksandr Pyzhikov, *Roots of Stalinist Bolshevism* (in Russian) (Argumenty Nedeli, 2018), 530–31.

11
Aleksandr Agurskiy, *The Ideology of National-Bolshevism* (in Russian) (YMCA-Press, 1980), 322.

12
Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 299.

13
An informal literary and occultist club, which met at the apartment of writer Yuri

Mamleev on Yuzhinsky Street. After Mamleev's expulsion from the USSR, the group continued its existence into the 1990s. Other prominent members included Evgeniy Golovin, Aleksandr Dugin, Geydar Dzhehal, and Igor Dudinskiy.

14
In *The New Age of Russia: Occult and Esoteric Dimensions*, eds. Birgit Menzel, Michael Hagemester, and Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal (Verlag Otto Sagner, 2012).

15
Translated into English as Mikhail Epstein, *Cries in the New Wilderness: From the Files of the Moscow Institute of Atheism*, trans. Eve Adler (Paul Dry Books, 2002), 236.

16
For Epstein's introduction in the original Russian, see <https://kph.ffon.npu.edu.ua/le-book/clasik/data/epstein/02/ns.predis.html>.

17
Birgit Menzel, “The Occult Revival in Russia Today and Its Impact on Literature,” *The Harriman Review* 16, no. 1 (Spring 2007): 1–14.

18
Anatoliy Moskvín, “Cross without a Victim,” afterward to Thomas Wilson, *The Swastika*, tr. Anatoliy Moskvín (in Russian) (Knigi, 2008), 360, 362.

19
This sense of the word “prison,” initially applied to Russia by Marquis de Custine in the middle of nineteenth century, was later picked up by Russian progressive circles. In 1914 the term was transformed and popularized by Lenin as “the prison of the nations,” aiming to characterize Russian national policy at the time. In the Soviet period it became a kind of cliché referring to tsarist Russia.

20
Chris Dumas, “Horror and Psychoanalysis. An Introductory Primer,” in *A Companion to the Horror Film*, ed. Harry M. Benshoff (Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 21–37.

21
Mikhail Epstein, *Religion after Atheism: New Possibilities of Theology* (in Russian) (ACT-Press, 2013).

22
Epstein, *Religion after Atheism*, 19.

23
Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 515.

iLiana Fokianaki

Narcissistic Authoritarian Statism, Part 2: Slow/Fast Violence

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Narcissistic Authoritarian Statism, Part 2: Slow/Fast Violence

Continued from “Narcissistic Authoritarian Statism, Part 1: The Eso and Exo Axis of Contemporary Forms of Power”

In part one of this essay, I tried to offer a reading of new power formations by rethinking the current pattern of democratically elected authoritarian figures – brought to power with the help of multinationals vis-à-vis the globalized, neoliberal versions of the “state” and “state power.” By examining their structures and behaviors, I tried to situate, understand, and describe counter-hegemonic cultural practices that position themselves against the state. In part one, I also named today’s configuration of power “narcissistic authoritarian statism,” defining it as a neoliberal structure of power that merges old components of the nation-state with contemporary forms of corporate transnationalism defined by narcissism. I examined this corporate-state model of narcissistic authoritarian statism through what I called the “exo/eso axis,” in order to visually understand how two of its basic components – territory and legitimacy – are expressed within and without its literal and metaphorical borders. Using territoriality, I looked into different artistic practices that propose collective action and organization as a counter-hegemony to this corporate-state model.

In the second part of this essay, I will examine the mechanisms of narcissistic authoritarian statism through a second axis, that of slow and fast violence. I will then discuss the ways in which the field of contemporary art is entangled in such forms of violence, and will present examples of artistic practices that lay the groundwork for new directions for cultural work.

Narcissistic Authoritarian Statism and Why It’s New

I previously drew on the work of political theorists Nicos Poulantzas and Bob Jessop, primarily Poulantzas’s theory of the state as a relationship of forces, an active organism that is able to metamorphose and transform through power relations. These relations are what define and differentiate the violent aspects of narcissistic authoritarian statism. I engaged a proposition of Jessop’s, adding a fourth element to his definition of the state as composed of territoriality, legitimacy, and violence: the “idea” of the state. Both theorists assist us in understanding the temporal and spatial aspects of a new understanding of the state, enacted through violence. As mentioned in the first part of this essay, we should think of narcissistic authoritarian statism as a pattern, a behavior, and a structure, which is not only recognizable in state formations and their political leaders, but

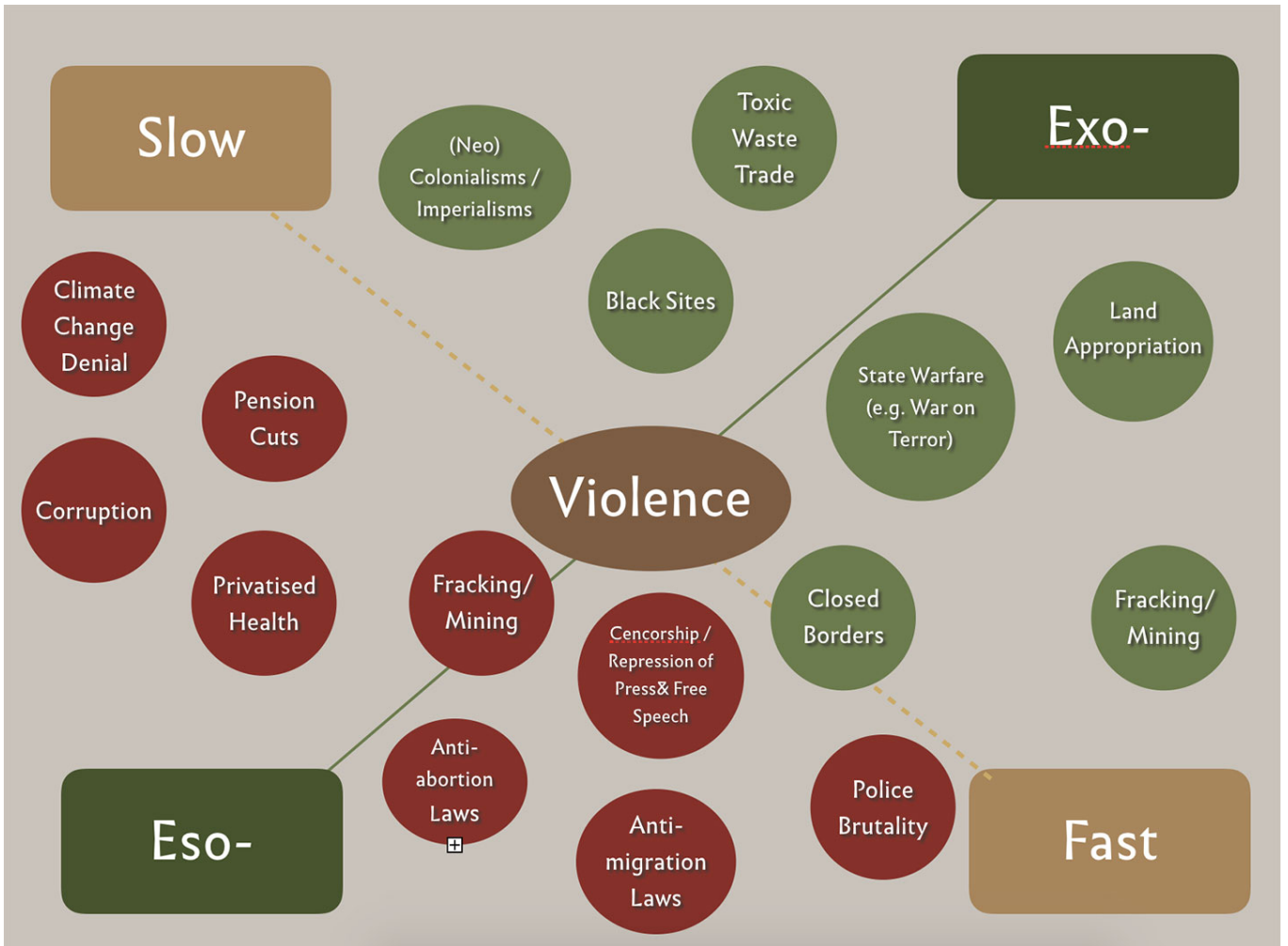


Diagram by the author.

also in institutions and singular actors. Yet this statism is always manifested through violence: a violence that is not simply evinced through direct, momentary acts of aggression but which also has various forms and intensities. Harder to detect and describe are the forms of slow violence perpetrated across vast expanses of time and space. Narcissistic authoritarian statism takes advantage of the slow process of molding identities and realities, redefining violence and its legitimization and cashing in on the effects of neoliberalism.

The difference between narcissistic authoritarian statism and historic instances of autocratic governance is this creation of a new “idea” of what the state considers to be legal and real, constantly performed through a vast spectrum of violent acts. In the words of artist and theorist Jonas Staal, this form of statism is in fact a propaganda machine creating a “new reality.”¹ It succeeds because neoliberal subjects have been brought to the point of apathy and detachment, but also a lack of interest in the disenfranchised, vulnerable, dependent, and precarious, an attitude I discussed in the first part of this essay. Since Poulantzas’s early writings on the state in the 1970s, the merging of state and corporate actors, in combination with the increasing power of these corporate actors, specifically in the fields of surveillance technology and social media, has created a new axis, a slow and fast axis, onto which narcissistic authoritarian statism is formed. Globalization has offered an array of examples of slow and fast violence, marked by the scale of operations of a new corporate state. Various scales of violence are perpetrated by multinationals, such as those producing agrochemicals, like Bayer’s subsidiary Monsanto, or mining giants like Glencore, with its mission under the auspice of the IMF in Mexico and Southeast Asia. They are likewise perpetrated by extra-state interventions such as the War on Terror in the United States. The latter, for instance, marked a new chapter in extrastatecraft – to borrow Keller Easterling’s term – where the fabrication of truth and the denial of culpability, together with the arrogance and narcissism of the violent people in power, were followed by complete impunity.

The Slow and Fast Violence of Narcissistic Authoritarian Statism

My concept of scales of violence is informed by Rob Nixon’s book *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011). In Nixon’s work, “fast violence” refers to violence that is literal, visible, and immediate. In the case of the eso-state (activity conducted within the borders of a state and upon its citizens), one can apply Nixon’s framework to see how the state’s

monopoly on violence is manifested in ways such as crackdowns on demonstrations, police brutality, a strong paramilitary that arrests and imprisons, murdering and disappearing dissidents or oppositional politicians and activists, and so on. Fast violence can also be found in the form of a sudden salary or pension cut, instantly affecting the living conditions of individuals. As an example, the immediate effects of such violence were seen during the first years of the financial crisis in my native Greece, where more than two hundred suicides were reported due to sudden debt and foreclosures. Fast violence in the exo-state may take the form of military operations such as those during the War on Terror, or the recent murder of Iranian military leader Qassem Soleimani, ordered without any consideration of the potentially dire regional repercussions and without a strategy, under the guise of national security concerns. There are many examples of overt operations, sanctions imposed on other states, hard diplomacy, the occupation of land for military bases, state-owned multinationals that occupy and extract from territories – so on and so forth. In both eso- and exo- versions, today’s state violence differs from the aggressive acts of previous forms of statism in that it now has two major tools on its side: technology and turbo-capitalism. Denial (and alternative truth) is a large part of its modus operandi.

Since the first notes of this essay were written only a few months ago, there has been a shocking surge of state violence. To consider South America alone: in Ecuador in October 2019, protests prompted by corporate tax cuts and austerity plans led to violent clashes with police forces. Resistance in Chile followed, and the ensuing police crackdown revealed a hidden deep state echoing the Pinochet dictatorship. In Santiago alone, more than two hundred protesters have been deliberately blinded in one eye by police forces. In Colombia, where demonstrations are a daily phenomenon, a woman was seen on video being forced into an unmarked car, during one of the numerous anti-government demonstrations. The country has been racked by riots, triggered by widespread discontent with the proposed economic reforms of the rightwing president, Iván Duque. In my native Greece, the newly elected far-right government has unleashed an extremely violent crackdown on demonstrations, and has sought to destroy all solidarity structures that host refugees. There have been graphic moments of violence such as police officers stripping protesters naked and sexually harassing them – captured in harrowing videos that have gone viral on social media. Since the end of February, when Turkey opened its border to allow refugees to

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leave the country, Greek police have launched aggressive pushbacks against newly arriving refugees. As I write these lines, two refugees have died after being shot down by border police, while many are endangered in boats that are attacked at sea by the coast guard.² The fast forms of violence these governments employ go hand in hand with slow violence.

Slow violence as defined by Rob Nixon is

a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all. Violence is customarily conceived as an event or action that is immediate in time, explosive and spectacular in space, and as erupting into instant sensational visibility. We need, I believe, to engage a different kind of violence that is neither spectacular nor instantaneous, but rather incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales.³

Nixon's focus is mostly on environmental disasters, but this framework opens up a valuable path to recognize other types of undetected slow violence. For instance, consider the propaganda tactics utilized by companies such as Facebook, which slowly permeate the minds of users through targeted ads, manipulating and cajoling, molding societies that hate minorities. Or take the privatization of healthcare in many countries – a system now driven by cost-effectiveness and competition, which limits access to services for those who are financially precarious and which can cause death.⁴ While perhaps less sensational or visible than physical combat in the street, these forms of slow violence are just as destructive and have longer effects, even creating societies in which more violence of all kinds can proliferate.

Both fast and slow violence are occurring without brows being raised by governmental officials, who claim their legal right (or those of the multinationals they support) to impose violence. These are characteristics of previous authoritarian models, but one new feature of narcissistic authoritarian statism is to make violence difficult to pin on specific perpetrators, through the use of technology and social media to spin new truths and new realities. This, together with the need to generate capital at all costs, has created a new toxic kind of governance infused with classic narcissism: personal disdain and lack of empathy for others, arrogance, and a distorted sense of superiority.

Body and Land versus Religion and Capital

Since 2018 more than forty indigenous leaders have been murdered in the Amazon. Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro's denial of the climate crisis (apparent in his claim that the Amazon is solely "Brazilian business"), and his appointment of evangelical preacher Damares Alves as minister of the Cabinet for Indigenous Protection in Brazil, paved the way for mining companies to accelerate the destruction of the Amazon and isolated Amazonian tribes. Just as religion once operated as a justification for colonial crimes, today it is used to justify the violence of narcissistic authoritarian statism. Interpreted by the likes of Bolsonaro as a measure of civilization and salvation, religion is used to explain the infection and murder brought forth by multimillion-dollar mining and meat corporations. Contemporary missionaries can either enact fast violence through murder, or slow violence through preaching the word of the Lord to uncontacted tribes and spreading Western diseases.⁵ Narcissistic authoritarian statism builds an idea of the state through notions of progress and development, yet these very ideals ironically work against any measures needed to address climate catastrophe – disregarding indigenous communities and creating a new generation of climate refugees. Current states and multinationals narcissistically repackage their operations, claiming they wish to "elevate" indigenous communities from their status as "cavemen," in the words of Bolsonaro. This may be an old tactic, but it is now done in parallel with the construction of a new reality by demolishing the credibility of science, dismissing scientific facts as lies, and proliferating this information through new technological infrastructures, which Bolsonaro and many other world leaders have done.⁶

Language is a crucial tool for the narcissistic construction of the corporate state. Throughout the continent of Africa, companies like Lion's Head Global Partners, with the help of state officials, claim they are "supporting local currency and promoting economic development," while calling the appropriation of cheap land for the purpose of exploitation "asset management."⁷ Sun Biofuels, a Lion's Head subsidiary that collapsed in 2011, left hundreds of Tanzanians landless, jobless, in despair, and feeling that "this is like the return of colonialism, colonialism in the form of investment," as noted by Athumani Mkambala, chairman of the Mhaga village in rural Tanzania.⁸ Sun Biofuels Tanzania declared bankruptcy and never compensated the locals. The company was directed by Christopher Egerton-Warburton, a former Goldman Sachs banker and head of the Lion's Head subsidiary

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From the opening of the exhibition Rojava Film Commune, Forms of Freedom, Galerija Nova, Zagreb, October 2019.

company Thirty Degrees East, which is based in the tax haven of Mauritius. Such hidden locations of capital accumulation, dispersed around the globe, become necropolitical secret depositories, hiding sinister and unlawful conduct – acts of acute slow and fast violence.

Cultural Workers Against Narcissistic Authoritarian Statism

In 2004, artist Abdel Karim Khalil organized an exhibition in a small Baghdad neighborhood. It was a group exhibition of artists from the area who felt the need to position themselves against what was occurring in the city. The exhibition commented on both the eso-/exo- power of the state and the slow/fast violence Iraqi citizens were subject to daily from both the Americans and Iraqi officials. Khalil's sculptural installation *A Man from Abu Ghraib* (2004) is a set of realistic marble figures depicting torture: a visual documentation of a historical moment that disrupted and destroyed a society and a people and initiated a new wave of exiles and refugees. It is one of the rare examples of artistic practice that manages to directly confront eso- and exo-violence, in both its slow and fast forms. The work unearths the violence imposed by the Iraqis and the Americans equally in instantaneous bursts of fast violence during the Gulf Wars, but also throughout the interim periods, during the rise of ISIS and through today. The neo-imperialist arrogance and grandiose illusions of the US military in Iraq and the region contour the narcissism of this type of statism and its violent outbursts.

Another example of art practice that reveals the tropes of narcissistic authoritarian statism is Trevor Paglen's 2006 series of three photographs of US government "black sites," which depicts from afar the hidden locations where detainees are tortured by the US state. Nondescript buildings, doors, cars, and guards are seen from a distance. The *Black Sites* series highlights the beginnings of the War on Terror, when the CIA set up a network of secret prisons in Afghanistan and elsewhere around the world. Undocumented and secret operations, including abductions, torture, and human rights violations against thousands of "ghost prisoners," occurred for decades behind the walls of secret locations, the details of which were some of the Bush Administration's most closely guarded secrets. Paglen's photographs of the buildings are architectural tracings of the violence imposed by the US government, lost in the deep state of classified information. Like Khalil, the work operates as a testimony of forms of fast/slow violence that are not easily traceable. The role of the artist here is to expose, to act as counterintelligence.

In contrast with the Bush era, the narcissism of the US under the leadership of Donald Trump has taken a new turn. In just a few months, through a series of senseless whims, Trump disrupted the already fragile political balance of the Middle East. Equally dumbfounding as, say, the murder of Soleimani in October 2019, was the US withdrawal from Northern Syria and the abandonment of allied Kurdish forces that have been combating ISIS and Daesh for the last five years. On Trump's Twitter feed and in his public statements, one witnesses the disengaged face of narcissism: "I hope they all do great, we are 7,000 miles away"; "The Kurds are no angels."⁹ His actions have sparked outrage from many US citizens, contentment from Vladimir Putin, and approval from another grand narcissist of our time, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan.

Amidst this "*bras de faire*" shines the work of the Rojava Film Commune, a collective founded in 2015 that works in the region of Northern Syria known as Rojava. For the last four years, the group has been documenting the fast and slow violence of living in a war zone, while simultaneously illustrating the enactment of a new social contract drafted by the Rojavan revolution. Their work stands between cinema, documentary, and political audiovisual testimony and offers not only a glimpse of the violence the Assyrian, Arab, and Kurdish populations have endured, but a glimpse of another vision for living and organizing. The dynamic collective of young filmmakers, established filmmakers, and students seeks to contribute to the development of the revolution by narrating both the history of the struggle and the possibilities it has opened up for the present and the future. As Rojava rebuilds itself politically, the Rojava Film Commune contributes to its cultural reconstruction: through the medium of video and film, the members translate their newfound democratic freedom into a new artistic form. For the Commune, speaking about and showing the histories and culture of the people who have been repressed, persecuted, and killed by the Syrian regime is itself revolutionary. Film here operates as an educational form, but also a tool for imagining a different future. In their work, we see the cultural and artistic equivalent of what it means to self-define, to open a space for – as scholar and theorist Dilar Dirik has said – "living without approval" beyond the patriarchal capitalist state, which Rojavans have rejected. The Rojava Film Commune exposes the real desire behind producing art: to affirm the "living" of life.

Together with the Rojava Film Commune, film collectives such as the Syrian Abounadarra and the Egyptian Mosireen produce a type of

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“emergency cinema,” in the words of the Abounadarra. Emergency cinema is a type of film work that documents the life of populations forced to endure violence of different speeds and along different spatial axes, for instance during revolution or civil war. Through film these groups aim to construct a counter-narrative to combat this enforced new reality by safeguarding real facts and the silenced realities of millions of people. The time-based and widely distributable medium of film may be a particularly appropriate medium for attempting to describe and tackle violence operating on multiple time scales, often too quick to apprehend or too slow to capture.

For her 2018 work *Fool Footprints*, commissioned for the Antwerp exhibition “Extra States,” the Dutch artist Femke Herregraven chose the island of Mauritius as a site to investigate the slow and fast violence inflicted on both land and peoples.¹⁰ The installation, which consists of films, wallpaper collage imagery, and three vitrines of objects collected by the artist, reflects on the case of the island of Diego Garcia. Diego Garcia is under the jurisdiction of Mauritius, a country recently in the spotlight for its role in the “Paradise Papers” – over thirteen million documents detailing offshore investment schemes that were made

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public in 2017. Mauritius is not only a popular location for money laundering, but also a locus of exile. In 1965, just before granting Mauritius its independence, the British government reclaimed one of its island constellations (the Chagos Islands) by renaming it and inventing a new colony. This was orchestrated for the purposes of granting the land to the US in exchange for cheap weapons. The Chagos constellation’s largest island, Diego Garcia, operates today as the US’s largest military base outside US soil. It also happens to be the location from where the War on Terror was launched. The Chagossians are still living as refugees in inhumane conditions in Mauritius, and have taken the UK to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in the Hague, but the British Parliament claims that the Chagossians cannot live on Diego Garcia because it is uninhabitable due to a lack of water.

But in Herregraven’s work, a collection of US military memorabilia in vitrines and on walls – photographs of soldiers who served there, pamphlets from gyms on the island – proves otherwise. A few months after the work was presented, on February, 25 2019, the ICJ ordered the UK return the islands to the indigenous inhabitants. In May 2019, a UN vote affirmed the verdict of the ICJ, ordering the UK to withdraw its



Femke Herregraven, *Fool Footprints*, 2018. Installation view. Photo by the author.

colonial administration and urging the UK “to cooperate with Mauritius in facilitating the resettlement” of the Chagossians. The UK, with its narcissistic authoritarian statism, claims the court never had jurisdiction to hear the case. The violence of the UK continues in the eso-state too: Chagossians who fled to the UK in the sixties and who are British passport holders are today intimidated and urged to leave the country by migration officials – another facet of the Windrush scandal.¹¹

Cartographies of Slow and Fast Violence: Art as Tool of Justice

Possibly the most complete position and proposition within cultural practice that not only reveals the violence of narcissistic authoritarian statism, but activates the full potential of culture to counteract this type of power, is that of Forensic Architecture. Since 2010, the research agency has been documenting what they call “cartographies of violence,” employing the latest technology to investigate and visualize corrupt judicial systems, failed and authoritarian states, and corporations that bend the law. The group undertakes advanced architectural and media research on behalf of international prosecutors, human rights organizations, and political and environmental justice groups, as well as individual citizens. They have paved the way for a new direction in architecture studies, with the forensics of architecture becoming a new field in academia, now taught at Goldsmiths University in London. The subject matter of Forensic Architecture’s work directly opposes narcissistic authoritarian statism, and so does its effect: drafting a counter-hegemonic power structure that has a tangible impact.

Some of the group’s investigations concern eso-state fast violence, such as the horrific abduction and murder of forty-three students in Ayotzinapa, Mexico by state troopers and paramilitaries on September 26, 2014. Forensic Architecture was commissioned by members of the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights to provide an account of the events through testimonies, interviews, videos, 3D modeling, data mining, and graphs. They revealed the state as an accomplice to the organized crime groups responsible for the killing, and found that the students’ bodies had been burned in a garbage dump. They exposed the government’s fabrication of facts and discrediting of independent investigative commissions, as well as the blatant disregard and arrogance of local politicians who falsified facts, hid evidence, and produced fake scientific reports – classic traits of the eso-violence of narcissistic authoritarian statism.

In Greece, Forensic Architecture undertook

two investigations into the murders of civilians. Here the fast eso-violence of individual actors was accompanied by the slow violence of the eso-state. The first investigation was into the death of Pavlos Fyssas, the anti-fascist rapper murdered on September 18, 2013 in Athens. Fyssas was killed by Giorgos Roupakias, who had been armed by the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn, of which he was a member.¹² The increase in popularity of Golden Dawn since the beginning of the financial crisis was facilitated by the Greek police, since many in its ranks have been aligned for decades with its neo-nationalist and neofascist ideology. The investigation revealed that police officers not only delayed responding to the crime, but that they were passive bystanders. The evidence gathered was presented in court, turning cultural practice into a powerful civil-society tool in the fight against a corrupt judicial system.

Unfortunately, narcissistic authoritarian statism has brought new traces of eso- and exo-violence to the cultural field through the ever-growing relationships between its key protagonists and art institutions. This is evident in cases such as that of Warren Kanders, mentioned in the first part of this essay, as well as the Sackler family, longtime art benefactors whose company, Purdue Pharma, is known for manufacturing opioids. In their narcissism, such agents of power apparently feel untouchable and irreplaceable. The initial responses to these cases from institutions revealed the latter’s inability or reluctance to position themselves clearly against funders with dubious backgrounds. It took months of letters, petitions, and collective action for institutions to sever ties. In other words, arts institutions perpetuate a form of violence too.

Fifty years after Greek sculptor Takis removed his sculpture from the Museum of Modern Art and ignited the Art Workers’ Coalition, we still seem to be fighting the same battle. The question that Takis, Hans Haacke, and others asked in 1969 – what is the political and social responsibility of the art community? – today seems harder to pose. From my experience, posing such questions in conferences makes colleagues roll their eyes. We are used to praising the “neutral” position of art and the policy of “no politics in the museum.” At the same time, the global art market has grown so much that museums depend on it. And in terms of power structures, museums increasingly model their structures and legislative frameworks on those of corporations.

It is not simply the well-documented effects of neoliberalism’s financial uncertainty, precarity, and joblessness that have silenced culture workers. Worse is the lack of interest in

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speaking out, due to what Lynne Layton has named “amoral familism, a retreat into an individualistic private sphere and a tendency to extend care only to those in one’s family and immediate intimate circle.”¹³ We ourselves have been performing narcissistic authoritarian statism on the individual level. The star curators of the 1990s, who have been accused of abuses of power behind closed doors for decades, are examples of this.

What is to be done? In the words of Audre Lorde, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”¹⁴ The problem is not only the master, but the house itself. Contemporary art’s house, built on neoliberal individualism, reproduces narcissistic authoritarian statism. “Nuanced” and meek positions vis-à-vis ultranationalism, the alt-right, and neofascism and its aesthetic signifiers promote a theoretical position that seems to deny the very existence of ideology. We thus fail to understand that while the art world desires and imagines itself to be a neutral space, neutrality itself is an ideology – a luxurious fantasy that can only be enjoyed by those who do not feel vulnerable.

Although a renewed focus on identity politics has forced open many conversations, narcissism in the cultural field continues to increase. Afraid to be left off the train of contemporaneity, institutions are addressing diversity, but in entirely superficial ways, reluctant to relinquish any actual power. Thus diversity initiatives are crudely done, tokenizing and creating frictions among individuals with similar struggles, forcing identity politics into dead ends that undermine intersectionality. It is a tactic reminiscent of classic colonialism: divide and conquer.

From the time of the Art Workers’ Coalition to today, we are indeed estranged from the modern promise of an art tied to revolutionary transformation. What we must admit is that this has become, in retrospect, a collective loss. Can we move forward with this modern promise into a future that is less grim? The examples of cultural practices presented in this two-part essay make it possible, I hope, to understand the forms of counter-hegemony that can be found in the realm of art, against the plague of narcissistic authoritarian statism. Cultural practice can still be an act not of only whistleblowing and resistance, but also of reimagining and producing a future form of power, one that remains within our grasp. If we see the role of the cultural worker not simply as an agent provocateur but as an author of counter-narratives, as a creator of new agitprop counter-hegemonies, we can develop a more tangible vision of a new and more just power structure. It is crucial that we as cultural workers become

radically aware of our roles and functions within and outside (eso- and exo-) the institution, so that we understand exactly what we can do from this position. Refusing to address the dire issues of our time, out of some fear of being singled out or shunned, will lead to more detachment, apathy, and indifference. This is not an adequate response to what might be not only the end of democracy as we know it, but the end of art. We cannot continue to mind our own business and remain silent in the face of violence, in order to maintain our membership in the flock. For under the pretense of neutrality, we hide our complicity.¹⁵ The only way out of this poly-axial conundrum of the slow/fast, eso-/exo-violence of narcissistic authoritarian statism is to expose its multifaceted modus operandi, while we propose, imagine, and produce forms of counterpower.

I am finishing this essay in between attending the biggest trial Europe has seen since Nuremberg. It is the trial of the ultranationalist neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn. This trial has been almost forgotten by the international media, and the Greek media, now in line with the new right-wing government, barely mentions it. During these cold days in the Athens Court of Appeals, six lawyers representing the victims of Golden Dawn are aiming to convict the group of an array of crimes – not just as a neo-Nazi party but as a criminal organization. Golden Dawn is being charged with several racist attacks, including the murder of Pavlos Fyssas. As I write, the lawyers are giving their closing statements. One of them, Thanasis Kabayiannis, represents a family of Egyptian fishermen who were attacked on June 12, 2013 in their home by a Golden Dawn squad that broke down their door and smashed their windows, threw teargas in their home, and stabbed them, leaving them for dead. In his closing statement the lawyer said: “Hannah Arendt – whose book on the banality of evil was inspired by the trial of the Nazi Adolf Eichmann – would have much to say about how easily everyday people can let themselves be instrumentalized as cogs in a machine such as this, either by active participation or silence.”

Postscript: During the editing of this essay, the situation on the border between Greece and Turkey escalated into a humanitarian emergency. While the Erdoğan regime is pushing refugees towards the borders, weaponizing humans in order to force a new refugee deal on Europe, the Greek state has suspended all asylum applications for one month and has established, with the assistance of Frontex, a heavy militarized zone along the border, blocking refugees from entering the country and violently pushing them back. Reports have surfaced that, as of this writing, two refugees have died after

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being shot with rubber bullets. While the Greek state denies these reports as “fake news and Turkish propaganda,” on March 4 Forensic Architecture released a report demonstrating how Mohammad al-Arab, a Syrian refugee, was indeed fatally wounded by a rubber bullet at the Greek border on March 2. Since then, more reports of violence against refugees have surfaced, while testimonies and videos show paramilitary “patrols” of Greek neo-Nazis and nationalists attacking and “arresting” refugees. German and Swedish neo-Nazis have also traveled to the area and have been seen attacking aid workers, journalists, and refugees. In the last ten days, there have been reports of other attacks on migrants and NGO workers, and arson at refugee aid facilities.

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The author would like to thank Laura Raicovich for the discussion about her forthcoming book on cultural institutions and the myth of neutrality; the artist Jonas Staal for his book *Propaganda Art in the 21st Century*, which informed the propaganda aspect of narcissistic authoritarian statism; and all the comrades in courtrooms and streets, and on screens and pages.

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1
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2
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3
Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2011), 2.

4
For an analysis of the effects of the privatization of healthcare in the EU, and the marketization of the industry, I suggest one of many excellent articles by Corporate Europe Observatory (CEO), a research and campaign group working to expose and challenge the privileged access and influence enjoyed by corporations and their lobbying groups across the EU. See Rachel Tansey, “The Creeping Privatisation of Healthcare,” CEO, June 2, 2017 <https://corporateeurope.org/en/power-lobbies/2017/06/creeping-privatisation-healthcare>.

5
See “Brazil Accuses US Missionary of Putting Isolated Tribe’s Lives at Risk,” *The Guardian*, January 23, 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/23/brazil-us-missionary-isolated-tribe-lives-at-risk-steve-campbell>; and “Amazon Gold Miners Invade Indigenous Village in Brazil after its Leader Is Killed,” *The Guardian*, July 28, 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/28/amazon-gold-miners-invade-indigenous-village-brazil-leader-killed>. In 2018, an American evangelist preacher named John Chau visited North Sentinel Island in the Bay of Bengal, home to the uncontacted indigenous Sentinelese tribe, endangering their lives by exposing them to disease and infection. “My name is John, and I love you and Jesus loves you,” he was reported to have said to them. Chau was not seen again and is presumed to be killed by the tribesmen. See Michael Safi, “American Killed by Isolated Tribe on North Sentinel Island in Andamans,” *The Guardian*, November 22, 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/nov/21/american-killed-isolated-indian-tribe-north-sentinel-island>.

6

Dom Phillips, “Bolsonaro Declares ‘The Amazon Is Ours’ and Calls Deforestation Data ‘Lies,’” *The Guardian*, July 19, 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/19/jair-bolsonaro-brazil-amazon-rainforests-deforestation>.

7
From the Lion’s Head website <https://lhgp.com/>.

8
Damian Carrington, “UK Firm’s Failed Biofuel Dream Wrecks Lives of Tanzania Villagers,” *The Guardian*, October 30, 2011 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2011/oct/30/africa-poor-west-biofuel-betrayal>.

9
From Donald Trump’s tweets, October 14, 2019, and a meeting with the Italian President, streamed live on PBS NewsHour, October 16, 2019.

10
Femke Herregraven, *Foul Footprints – No1: Engineering the Island*, 2018, commissioned for “Extra States: Nations in Liquidation,” a group exhibition at Kunsthall Extra City, Antwerp, September 2018.

11
Katie McQue, Mark Townsend, and Katie Armour, “Windrush Scandal Continues as Chagos Islanders Are Pressed to ‘Go Back,’” *The Guardian*, July 28, 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/28/windrush-scandal-continues-in-crawley-as-chagos-islanders-told-go-back>.

12
Last year Roupakias grotesquely claimed that “it was just a simple homicide, he literally stepped on my knife, the whole thing is blown out of proportion.” See “Roupakias Describes Fyssas’ Murder as a ‘Simple Homicide,’” *Ekathimerini*, July 18, 2019 <http://www.ekathimerini.com/242738/article/ekathimerini/news/roupakias-describes-fyssas-murder-as-simple-homicide>.

13
Lynne Layton, *Toward a Social Psychoanalysis: Culture, Character, and Normative Unconscious Processes* (Routledge, 2020), 180.

14
Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” (1984), in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, 2007), 110–14.

15
For an excellent analysis on neutrality as complicity, I refer you to a 2017 text by Teddy Cruz and Fonna Forman on Trump, the border wall, and architecture <https://research.gsd.harvard.edu/mci/neutrality-is-complicity>.

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Sam Richardson

A Saintly Curse: On Gender, Sainthood, and Polycystic Ovary Syndrome

e-flux journal #107 — march 2020 Sam Richardson
A Saintly Curse: On Gender, Sainthood, and Polycystic Ovary Syndrome

01/21

History is not the past. It is the stories we tell about the past. How we tell these stories – triumphantly or self-critically, metaphysically or dialectically – has a lot to do with whether we cut short or advance our evolution as human beings.
– Grace Lee Boggs¹

Part 1: Her Second Coming

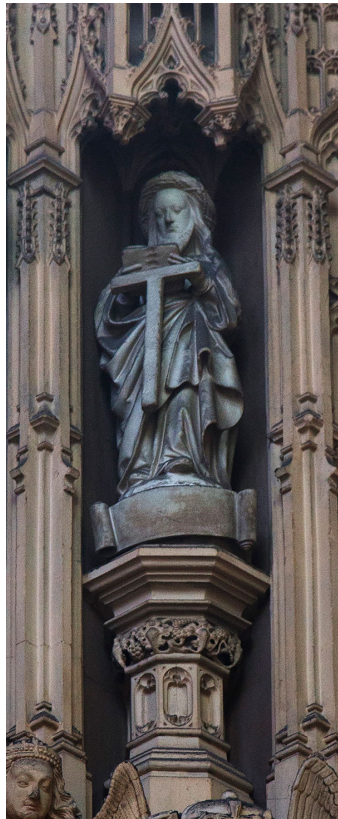
The Nailing of the Cross of St. Kummernis depicts the fourteenth-century crucifixion of St. Wilgefortis, a medieval bearded female saint. The early nineteenth-century painting by Leopold Pellaucher replaced another depiction of the saint at St. Veits Chapel in Austria, which had been destroyed by an overzealous Franciscan clerk. Rather than the typical image of Wilgefortis already nailed to the cross, Pellaucher opted to depict the scene leading up to her crucifixion, showing a distressed St. Wilgefortis, an angry father who has ordered his daughter's execution, and weeping female witnesses to the martyrdom.² In choosing this moment, the painting also equates Wilgefortis's crucifixion with the rebirth or renewal associated with generic Christian interpretations of Christ. Christ's crucifixion is symbolic of a second coming, his resurrection; Wilgefortis's "second coming" is perhaps representative of a necessary escape to a separate life in order to begin anew.

Originally either a pagan noblewoman or the princess of Portugal (her origins are disputed), St. Wilgefortis was promised to a suitor by her father.³ The suitor's identity is also disputed. Some accounts identify him as a non-Christian and say that Wilgefortis wished to keep her Christian body pure.⁴ Either way, she did not wish to wed this man, and the night before her wedding she prayed to God to make her repulsive to the suitor. When she awoke she found that she had grown a beard. The suitor called off the wedding and her father, enraged, had Wilgefortis crucified.

St. Wilgefortis came to be the patron saint of relief from tribulations. Historically, she has been venerated by those who wish to be disencumbered, in particular by women who wish to be liberated from abusive husbands or domestic situations, as well as by survivors of sexual assault, rape, and incest. She has also been historically worshipped by those who are bound or restricted, and thus by prisoners and others in captivity. In various regions and time periods she has been known by other names, such as St. Kummernis (Germany), St. Uncumber (England), and St. Liberata (Italy). I will refer to her here as St. Wilgefortis.



Leopold Puellacher, *The Nailing of the Cross of St. Kummernis*, ca.1820/30, oil on canvas, 65 x 78 cm. St Veits Chapel, Telfs, Austria.



St. Wilgefortis in Westminster Abbey, Henry VII Lady's Chapel, London, England.

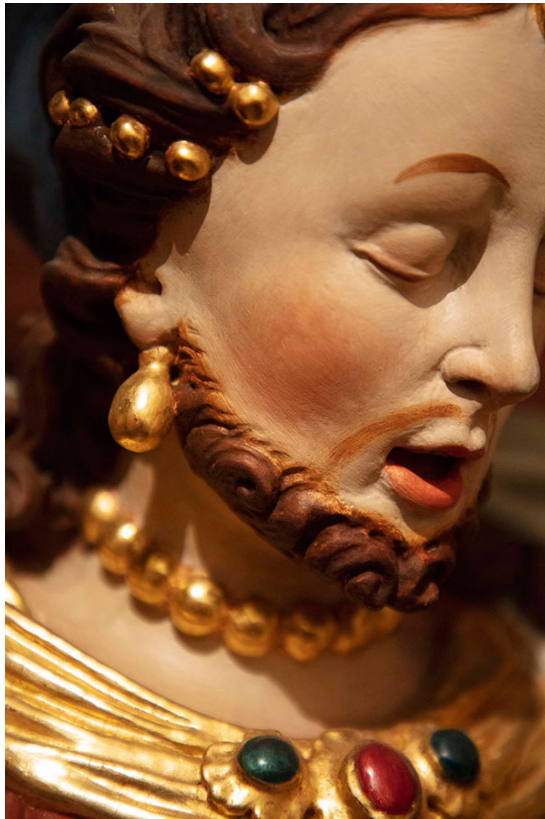
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Myself below Kummerniskreuz statue from the 12th century. Church of Rankweil, Austria, 2019.



St. Wilgefortis sculpture from the 1730s in the Chapel of Our Lady of Sorrows at Loreto Sacntuary, Prague, Czech Republic, 2019.



St. Kummernus sculpture from the 18th century. Previously this sculpture was housed in the Chapel St. Michael and Kummernus at the Church of Axams, Austria. It has since been put in offsite storage – I discovered when I went to visit in the summer of 2019.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, most of the shrines and likenesses of St. Wilgefortis were destroyed or left to deteriorate after the suppression of her sainthood during the Catholic liturgical purge of 1969.⁵ Art historian Ilse E. Friesen, who has done extensive research on the visual representations of Wilgefortis, states that the presence and worship of this saint became identified with anti-Christian, anti-Catholic, and deviant behavior. Her gender presentation was seen as grotesque and a denigration of Christ. Her suppression led to the loss of a saint that offered visibility to survivors of abuse and assault. We must also recognize this loss as a part of the continual erasure of violence against women, trans, and nonbinary people. In contemporary times she has also been interpreted by some as the patron saint of intersex people, asexual people, transgender people, and a powerful lesbian virgin.

There have been instances, in particular at sites in the Tyrolean region of western Austria, where carvings or renditions of Christ have been remade or altered to be Wilgefortis. This act is a queering of the body of Christ. Subtly, this radical gesture creates a visual history of the queer body. The most notable and surviving example of this is in Brixen, at the northern tip of Italy. Friesen writes of this statue:

On certain religious holidays, this venerated statue was decorated with costly garments, lace accessories, pieces of jewelry and precious shoes ... These items, once placed on the statue, made it appear more feminine and ornate. Ironically it does not seem to have been the intention of these believers to transform the gender of the statue through these sartorial additions.

Nevertheless, the dramatic contrast between the adorned and the unadorned statue left visitors with two radically differing impressions – one of the unadorned statue itself (generally recognizable as being male, in spite of the long robe that constituted part of the carving), the other, its lavishly dressed and more apparently feminine counterpart. With the passage of time and the increasingly creative copying of the time in distant locations, it was often left up to individual believers to determine for themselves the extent to which the statue could be regarded as either male or female – or even both at once.⁶

I went to Westminster to find St. Wilgefortis. Supposedly, there was a remaining sculpture of her in Henry VII's massive and ornate Lady

Chapel. I wandered in and started asking docents where to find her. A younger woman and an older man responded, somewhat excitedly, "Ayy, the one with the beard?" Together, we located her in the upper level of the Lady Chapel. The entire space is lined, up to its high ceilings, with statues of various saints selected by Henry VII. Wilgefortis lives on the left end of a row of five saints, sporting a long beard and reading a book placed upon a pedestal. I had not really thought I would find her. But, there she was, quiet, regal, and beautiful. After we located her, the two guides recommended that I go to the library, and directed me down a few stone corridors – cloisters – to a large wooden door. I rang its doorbell, and a voice came through a small intercom.

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What remains of a sculpture of St. Wilgefortis modified to resemble Jesus Christ. Brixen, Italy. Photo by the author.

"Hello?"

"Hi, umm, I was wondering if I could talk to someone about a saint?"

"Come in, close the door behind you!"

BUZZ.

Once inside the door, I walked up a creaky staircase to an attic-like space. Ladders leaned against shelves bearing old volumes. It was a small but bountiful library. An endearingly



St. Kummernus sculpture, Chapel St. Michael and Kummernus at the Church of Axams, Austria.



S. Wilgefortis Sive Liberata is a Romanesque sculpture inside a Baroque altar dating from 1661, Church of Neufahrn, Bavaria. This was the only church I visited that was locked, and the only church known to be explicitly dedicated to St. Wilgefortis.

disheveled middle-aged man came to the mezzanine and asked how he could help. He left and came back a few minutes later with a stack of articles and books. I sat at a small desk in a side room to go through them, making notes. An elderly woman sat across the room from me, seemingly charged with making sure that I did not take photos or write on the materials. I did manage to take one selfie. It felt only right to record an important moment I was experiencing all alone.

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specimen of abnormality; and the witches from *Macbeth*, who are not of our world and sexless in their ability to control reality.

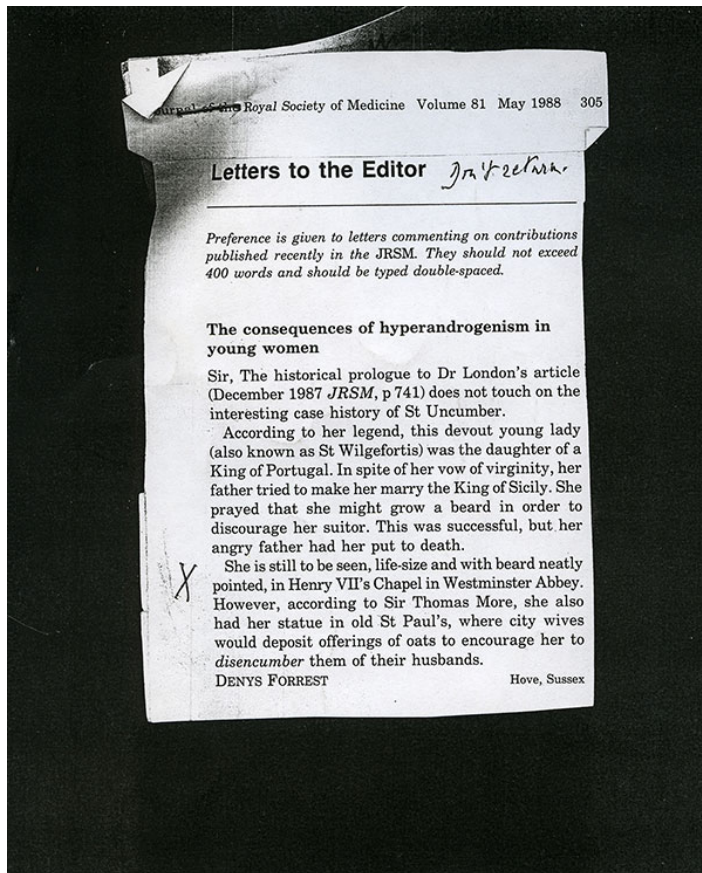
Not mentioned in the article was Wilgefortis, whose sainted likeness was carved into the hallowed building in which I sat. Wilgefortis is a body doubly suppressed: in life for her gender presentation; and in the afterlife when the Church repressed imagery of her, along with the cult of her martyrdom, due to shifting conceptions of gender. This repression continues, as evidenced by her absence from the academic article on hyperandrogenism. For centuries, then, violence perpetrated against the female/femme, nonbinary, and queer body has been erased.

When does history end and the present begin for the patriarchal gender binary? Queerness and non-cis bodies have always existed, but value and care for their well-being and survival have changed over time. Figures like Wilgefortis show how certain markers of “gender,” as we understand it now, were seen as symbolically and religiously significant in the Middle Ages. As historian Caroline Walker Bynum writes:

Because preachers, confessors, and spiritual directors assumed the person to be a psychosomatic unity, they not only read unusual bodily events as expressions of the soul, but also expected body itself to offer a means of access to the divine. Because they worshiped a God who became incarnate and died for the sins of others, they viewed all bodily events – the hideous wounds of martyrs or stigmatics as well as the rosy-faced beauty of virgins – as possible manifestations of grace. Because they associated the female with the fleshy, they expected somatic expressions to characterize women’s spirituality.⁷

Take, for instance, beards. Their association with power, regardless of assigned sex, led certain medieval non-male, bearded bodies to gain recognition and respect. Within this history, a “woman” with a beard was something to be marveled at and revered. In fact, beards sometimes protected or freed the women who had them from the particular ridicule and expectations of traditional womanhood.

From Lady Magdalena Ventura of Abruzzi, to Madame Clofullia, to the bearded lady of the circus, there exists a strong, if shifting, foundation in Western history of bearded women finding safety and power beyond gender expectations. This is not to say that bearded women in the medieval era were necessarily beloved, or thought of as beautiful, but they did



Letter to the Editor, responding to Queen Elizabeth Hospital and Department of Medicine at University of Birmingham, “The Consequences of Hyperandrogenism in Young Women” in *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, vol. 80 (December 1987).

In the archives, I found the above attached to a medical article about hyperandrogenism in women, published by the Royal Society of Medicine in 1987. Hyperandrogenism is a condition among people Assigned Female at Birth (AFAB) that is associated with high levels of androgens, or “male” hormones, such as testosterone. The article discussed the biological anatomy of hormones in a very dry and clinical tone. Despite being otherwise uninterested in addressing the sociological effects of said condition, the article began with a brief historical introduction that covered a few recorded instances: Magdalena Ventura, a noblewoman with a full beard who nursed a child and who was idolized as a physical wonder, a fascinating

threaten the established hierarchy of masculinity and power. Mark Albert Johnston, who has researched the politics of the beard in early modern England, writes specifically about St. Wilgefortis:

At stake for early modern English culture in the image of bearded Uncumber [St. Wilgefortis] was not simply male mastery; the more profound threat posed by bearded women and the female autonomy they represented lay in their refusal to submit to the reproductive imperative – an insubordination that threatens the perpetuation of patriarchy itself ... Despite the destruction of iconography venerating Uncumber, the threat her bearded specter presented to systems of power in post-Reformation England haunted the early modern cultural imagination, not only informing the values attributed to female beardedness generally but also coloring attitudes toward all independent, unmarried, un(re)productive women.⁸

08/21

Part 2: Good Gender

Danielle:

I went to see a doctor. I was probably fifteen? She walked in and the first thing she said to me was, “Ohhh, you’re a pretty PCOS [Polycystic Ovary Syndrome] patient.” And I’ll never forget it because that was before I knew much about PCOS, but that implied that people with PCOS are ugly. And I guess I was flattered, which was sad. I remember trying to deal with PCOS well because they prescribed me Metformin, which is the same drug my grandfather was on for diabetes. Basically, when someone tells you that you can be “cured” of your PCOS symptoms, that implies that you’re gonna be beautiful and skinny. So I made myself take Metformin three times a day and it made me extremely nauseous. There was a summer in high school where I went home every night in extreme nausea, but I just kept taking it cuz I figured I’d be beautiful and all my problems would be solved if I could just handle Metformin three times a day. But eventually I gave that up. It was a bunch of bullshit, it made no change.



Danielle photographed by the author.

	Infertility and Trying to Conceive Are you trying to have a baby? Share your frustrations, share your joys...	Threads: 8,055 Posts: 100,465	NTTC and WTT... by MrsBlueSky 10-29-2019, 03:04 PM
	Metformin aka Glucophage	Threads: 12,558 Posts: 89,028	Metformin and... by DianeSer 08-22-2019, 07:40 AM
	Alternative Remedies Herbals, yoga, acupuncture...share your experiences, and ask your questions!	Threads: 7,988 Posts: 60,590	FREE PDF: TCM in... by mom613 10-02-2019, 03:14 PM
	Diet & Exercise What works for you? Share your advice and ask your questions. Start your own Weight Loss Journal (for FREE), click here! Sub-Forums: Weight Loss Surgery & PCOS , Diet/Exercise Buddies... , Food Reviews & Recipes	Threads: 21,764 Posts: 213,148	A very yummy... by Elmy 10-30-2019, 11:51 AM
	Hair Loss/Hair Growth What do YOU use to get rid of the excess hair, and how do you keep it from falling out?	Threads: 6,239 Posts: 54,477	Rogaine - Hair... by Elmy 10-30-2019, 11:57 AM
	BCP's Demulen, Ortho, Diane-35, etc.	Threads: 3,458 Posts: 17,307	Lo Loestrin Fe Side... by PerseveringSteps 07-30-2019, 06:48 PM
	Depression, Anxiety, Bipolar PCOS and Depression? Yes it's real... NEW! NEW!----> PCOSStories	Threads: 3,493 Posts: 28,579	Mood shifts out of... by Leahbear 02-06-2019, 03:54 AM
	Misc. Medications Clomid, Actos, Provera...and whatever else the doctor ordered!	Threads: 4,652 Posts: 26,158	Clomid Stats For... by shjpherson 08-14-2019, 12:18 PM
	Skin Problems Explore treatments for Acne, Acanthosis Nigracans, Hidradenitis Suppurativa...as if PCOS wasn't enough?	Threads: 2,028 Posts: 16,468	Skin care routine... by Elmy 10-30-2019, 11:52 AM
	Diabetes (Type II) Have you been diagnosed with Type II Diabetes?	Threads: 1,182 Posts: 5,972	Low Ferritin (Iron... by Elmy 10-30-2019, 11:55 AM
	Hypothyroid PCOS May Increase Likelihood of Having Hypothyroidism!	Threads: 1,525 Posts: 8,747	Hypothyroid and... by Elmy 10-30-2019, 11:59 AM
	Endometriosis	Threads: 293 Posts: 5,220	Laparoscopy surgery by _Castle20 08-20-2018, 02:35 PM
	Faith & Healing Studies show that Prayer and Religious Activities have a profound effect on health. ALL FAITHS WELCOME!	Threads: 1,663 Posts: 30,980	Ramadan 2014 by mahjab 09-29-2019, 02:49 PM
The Mother 'Hood'		Threads / Posts	Last Post
	Pregnant Cysters	Threads: 3,972 Posts: 62,991	Polyhydramnios by Neena 09-20-2019, 10:51 PM
	The Mommy Board! Talk about being a mom and coping with PCOS! Ask how these cysters were successful at carrying to full-term!	Threads: 1,804 Posts: 25,387	Anyone lose weight... by Sydneycd 01-24-2019, 07:11 AM
	The Adoption Option...	Threads: 1,939 Posts: 18,904	husband won't allow... by majlado 04-22-2018, 01:05 PM
	Coping with Pregnancy Loss	Threads: 3,512 Posts: 49,559	***Progesterone... by strugglingsister 12-09-2018, 05:29 PM

Screenshot of a message board on a PCOS page detailing different conversations and concerns of the community, 2019.

From what I understand, it's a problem of insulin resistance. You can address this yourself by eating the right food, and by exercising and taking care of yourself. My concern is my reproductive system and eggs – if all of that works properly due to PCOS. No one really knows. The problem with the syndrome is that there are a lot of question marks. Right now I don't treat it, I just live my life and try to be healthy and take care of myself. I'd rather not be on random pharmaceuticals if I don't have to be.

When you Google "Polycystic Ovary Syndrome," a hormonal disorder common among women of reproductive age, you might stumble upon St. Wilgefortis. Her new, unofficial, post-liturgical-purge identity is the patron saint of PCOS.

I was diagnosed with PCOS at age twenty-two after a number of years of very irregular periods, combined with an inability to lose weight. From a young age I also experienced "abnormal" hair growth (hirsutism) and high levels of testosterone. My doctors handed me some literature on the syndrome, its symptoms, treatments, and possible severe long-term effects, such as uterine cancer and diabetes. The

literature mentioned that in the medical field, PCOS's nickname is "The Thief of Womanhood."

Hearing this term marked the first time I began to think more critically, rather than physically, about what this syndrome represented, and why I felt a deep sense of shame. It was the first time that the physical symptoms – facial hair, lack of ovulation – seemed to be theorized outside of my body, and thus a self-reflexive moment was possible. PCOS reveals how the medical-industrial complex is closely linked to capitalist gain, and how both of these are tightly bound to controlling the gender binary and reproducing it for profit. The symptoms themselves are described in terms of deviations from the heteronormative "female" body (such as the ability to reproduce) and from the expected feminine presentation (hairless face, slim body, clear skin).⁹ As described in the pamphlet my doctor handed me, the syndrome makes you less womanly, less desirable, and less productive in a hetero-capitalist society. Just "less than."

There are myriad PCOS groups on Facebook, along with numerous online forums, message boards, and meetups. These online spaces are often filled with cis women from around the United States who are genuinely heartbroken by

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Clara photographed by the author.



Jusepe de Ribera, *Magdalena Ventura with Her Husband and Son* or *The Bearded Lady*, 1631, Spain. Oil on canvas.
Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain

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Self-Portrait of the Thief of Womanhood, Brooklyn, New York, 2018.

their inability to conceive a child. What stands out on these platforms is not just PCOS-related experiences of infertility, but a wider and deeper feeling of inadequacy. These women report feeling “less than” because they cannot perform as AFAB people and meet the expectations of reproduction, since people with PCOS often cannot conceive.

The only reason PCOS exists as a “syndrome” and not just as individual symptoms is because the medical industry is committed to perpetuating and depending on a binary that has only furthered its scope since hormones were sexed “male” and “female.” Information about PCOS that is disseminated in the doctor’s office reinforces this binary. Nonbinary, gender-nonconforming, and trans people are excluded from this dominant discourse about PCOS. Each body that experiences PCOS has a different reality of it and its affects. Many spaces and situations, whether the doctor’s office, church, or a first date, continue to enforce silence and cruelty around gender difference, expression, and experience.

Around the time that I was diagnosed, I was also starting to identify my own queerness, which has no doubt informed and influenced the way I have come to internalize gender and its presentation, as well as unpack it. I wonder, at times, if my queerness – a marker of difference and even of potential danger – is exactly what protects me from feeling truly “afflicted” by PCOS. I feel no *responsibility* to bear children, either physically or politically. *Responsibility* does not always equate with *desire*, of course.

Sociologist Celia Kitzinger observes that historically,

medical research has linked PCOS with “abnormal” sexuality: for example, Meyer and Zerksen (1960) identify a “deep-rooted insecurity” concerning the sexual role of patients with hirsutism, especially those with PCOS, but report that “complete masculine identification and overt homosexuality seem to be rare”; Money and Clopper (1974) note that dating and romantic interests are frequently disrupted, though “bisexuality and lesbianism are not, in general, a problem”; and Gorzynski and Katz (1977) report an apparent increase in sexual drive in women with PCOS, and suggest that “a sense of uncontrollable sexual urge may be distressing (or at least puzzling) to the young woman with polycystic ovaries.” Two studies have reported an apparent link between PCOS and female-to-male transsexualism (Bosinski et. al., 1997; Futterweit, Weiss, & Fagerstrom, 1986). A

comparatively recent case study of a woman with PCOS (Michael, Zolse, & Dinan, 1996) speculates that her “abnormal” sexual desires were influenced by physical unattractiveness. The recurrent assumption is that failure to conform with feminine appearance leads to deviant sexuality.¹⁰

This research seems to suggest that sexuality in “women” is correlated with their level of masculinity: less masculine women have a more refined and lower sex drive and deviancy rate. Of course, deviancy is historically linked to the pathologizing of queerness and homosexuality, and to “promiscuous” behavior of any kind. Each of these assumptions is false. They fail to account for the varying ways in which women, femmes, nonbinary, and trans people express their sexuality and desire. It seems disturbing to associate a physical syndrome with identity and sex drive, yet it is one of the easiest ways to denigrate a body and consider it outside the realm of “normal.” Although rooted in a progressive “feminist perspective” on PCOS, this research falls flat because it identifies queerness and homosexuality as “symptoms.”

Kitzinger highlights the recurrence of the word “freak” in many women’s own accounts of their PCOS, especially in indicating their feeling of standing outside of “normal ‘femininity.’” In her studies, she notes, “nearly a third of women used the term ‘freak’ (or ‘freaky,’ ‘freakish’) specifically to describe how they felt about themselves, or the condition, and virtually everyone talked about feeling ‘abnormal,’ ‘unwomanly,’ ‘weird,’ ‘different’ in some way.”¹¹

Despite her analysis around sexual deviancy and its correlation to queerness, Kitzinger is one of the only researchers who has considered AFAB people from a sociological and perhaps “feminist” lens. She must also be credited with giving voices to those with PCOS outside of the realm of judgment; instead, Kitzinger shared the psychological effects that such a syndrome and its stigma manifest.

With all this in mind, I have recorded experiences shared with me by others who have PCOS. These voices shed light on the varied experiences of PCOS. They also reveal how the queerness of the syndrome connects to the queer legacy of Wilgefortis. It has become clear that people with different gender identities/presentations, within different social and cultural contexts, have very different experiences of the syndrome and its effects.¹²

Clara:

I definitely don't present that feminine. But that is hard to connect with a medical condition because I've been like this since I can remember ... It preceded me having my period, being sexual. I just knew I wanted to wear boys' clothes ... I'm not attached to the word "gender" at all. When people are like, "Oh, you have a really cool gender," "Your gender is great!" I don't even know what that means. What is ascribed to gender there? It's just not something I'm very connected with ... like how gender presentation is this thing that can be recognized beyond the fields of being "female" or "male." I mean, I understand that there is more nuance, but I don't understand the word "gender" attached to that conjunction of sexuality, sociability, aesthetic, appearance, you know what I mean? That is kind of what is supposed to manifest in gender, but I just don't understand how "good gender" as a word addresses that kind of matrix of markers.

... I want to be capable of doing things that bring this separation between female and

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male closer and debunk [the separation] in a way. That was a big task for myself. Like fuck this, that's bullshit. I can do anything that I want, not because I am this kind [of person]. I [know] I am going to be told that I can't, but I just try and I just do it. It's not that difficult ... So my understanding of myself is connected to, willingly, being kind of what I am not supposed to be.

I do not see gender as a fixed identity, or one that has specific roles or presentations associated with "man" or "woman." However, I do still feel pressure to present myself to the world in a certain way, a "feminine" way. My queerness and politics do not protect me from this pressure, from seeking security and power through an expected gender presentation. And although I would like to think that the people I am attracted to would still want to fuck me if I let my beard grow, in truth I'm not so sure; I don't yet feel safe in making this assumption.¹³

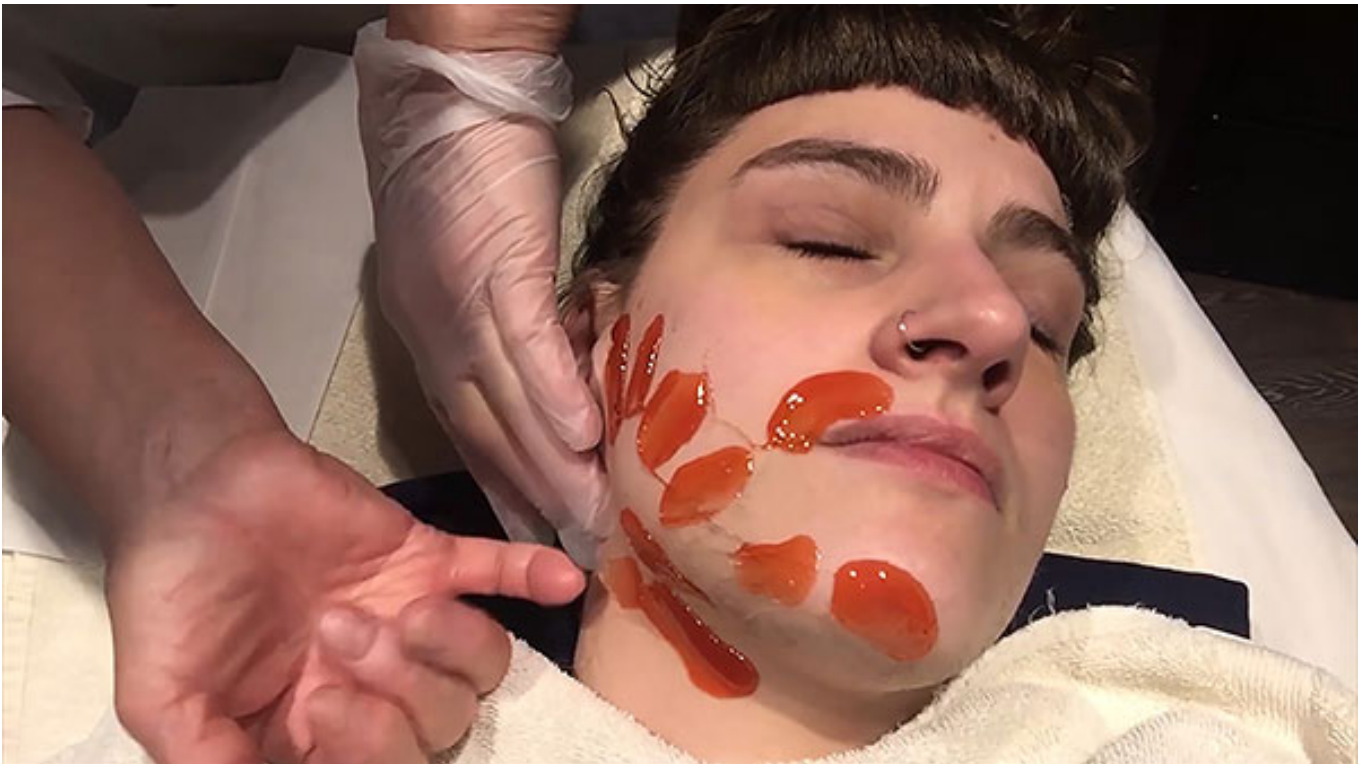
It was precisely this feeling that led me to research historical figures whose bodily presentation (like having a beard) stood in opposition to their assigned-at-birth genders, at least by traditional gender standards. Maybe I was looking for friends (and strangely close to



Aaron photographed by the author.



Various hair removal products. In order to contend, you must spend. Here are some of the things that a person with PCOS might spend money on, such as: Jolen bleach: \$6.40



Waxing treatment, whole face except eyebrows: \$45.00 + \$9.00 tip x 15 = \$810 per year. A full-face wax costs about \$50.00. This is the price affixed to performing and maintaining what I desire to be seen as. When does violence become self-inflicted and to what ends? How can we be liberated from ideas of gender and queer the world if we consistently are in the process of undoing our own notions of constriction?

home, given my own Catholic heritage).

By no means are the depictions of womanhood found in the story of St. Wilgefortis universal. Hers is first and foremost a story of a white woman in Europe with a beard, an aberration worthy, apparently, of sainthood *at one time*. Had she been of a different class, or a woman of color, the account might have ended there – or at least differently. Since some sources racialize Wilgefortis's suitor, it is perhaps her whiteness that protects her from further violence, even elevating her to holiness.

Part 3: The Binary Collapses

Aaron:

It just seems to me that doctors – or maybe no one has explained it to me, but I would have hoped that someone would have ... But sometimes I just don't think that doctors understand what hormones do in the body, so there is this sort of black-and-white thinking about it. Which you see a lot right now, in the way testosterone is spoken about in terms of athletics, and the inclusion of trans and intersex people in athletics. And the way that testosterone is talked about as the male hormone, which of course is false, because everyone – well not everyone, but most people's bodies regardless of gender – produce testosterone in varying amounts.

That binary collapses under closer scrutiny. I sometimes wonder, do people fully understand how hormones regulate certain aspects of the body?

For me there wasn't so much I needed to necessarily treat. From the perspective of affirming my own gender, I don't need to be adding estrogen to my body ... Even though birth control was suggested to me a bunch of times, even before I was diagnosed, I feel like I never understood it that well. It just wasn't really ever explained well to me. Instead, it was just "this is what you have, and here is one way to treat it." Most other things I have learned about it come from talking to people or looking on the internet.

Magdalena Ventura is probably one of the most recognizable historical women with a beard. Painted in Spain by Jusepe de Ribera in 1631, Ventura is pictured breastfeeding her child and standing in front of her husband. The depiction here can be taken in many ways. For one, being pictured with the child affirms Ventura's

"femaleness." For another, her healthy and conspicuous beard and position in comparison to her husband affirms her power and place. This may also be connected to her class status. Perhaps she has gained an unquestionable middle ground of power and visibility by being neither easily feminized nor relegated to freakdom – as would come to mark later experiences of PCOS.

For women with beards in the nineteenth century, the ambivalent power afforded to them by their facial hair unfolded differently. Annie Jones, who was sold to P. T. Barnum's traveling show as an infant, and Julia Pastrana, an indigenous Mexican woman, experienced very mixed forms of acceptance. Jones was part of Barnum's "Freak Show" and died at a young age while campaigning to abolish the term "freak" from sideshow acts. Pastrana was nicknamed "ape woman" for her facial features and long hair that covered her whole body. She was also subjected to further display in death. Her body was stuffed and preserved and toured posthumously, robbing her of any agency she had over her own representation. I thought of Pastrana when I encountered artist and photographer Zoe Leonard's bearded woman photograph series from the early 1990s, which shows the stuffed head of a bearded woman that was preserved as a museum specimen. Leonard photographed the head from three angles in black and white. Although Leonard's photographs might be motivated in part by her own outrage at the treatment of this woman, they may nonetheless inflict further violence against her, insofar as they offer her to be yet again stared at without any further information or attention to her identity or worth.

Other nineteenth-century women capitalized monetarily off their bearded status – some more successfully than others. Madame Clofullia traveled with Barnum's "American Museum" for many years, and historical accounts of her life seem to indicate a degree of praise and respect from mainstream audiences. In some cases, feminine performance can compensate for non-feminine appearance. Whiteness and upper-class status also help.¹⁴

Today, there remain both psychic and monetary costs of maintaining a "feminine" presentation. Some bodies must work harder – and spend more money – to be seen as they would like to be seen, and be treated as they would like to be treated. Personally speaking, as a hostess in my early twenties at an upscale New York City restaurant, I could never show up to work with any hint of "unnecessary" facial hair, let alone a beard. But as an artist's assistant in my late twenties, the expectations and boundaries of self-presentation were more



Gillette Venus Extra Smooth women's razor blade: \$7.99



Nair facial hair remover cream with sweet almond oil, 2 oz: \$4.69.

blurred. I needed both jobs equally in order to support myself, but by gaining social and artistic capital, I was able to access workspaces where I could afford to not perform a “feminine” appearance so deliberately.

As a queer body in the twenty-first century – not personally attached to defining my gender in a specific and/or fixed form for the most part – I am committed to dismantling and tearing apart the notion of a binary. But my body is also filled with the privilege of whiteness and cis-ness (or at least the predominant presentation of cis-ness). Thus the impact of my identity on my daily experience is relatively minor.¹⁵

So why continue to fight my natural presentation? I have a beard, but I do not love my beard. I am not proud of it. And sadly, I certainly do not find power in it. Not consistently at least. In fleeting moments, perhaps. Theoretically, I know this is bullshit; I know I should find extreme confidence in my beard. The gender binary and its violent history are written onto me; they shape how I perceive my own (queer) body. Other bodies that I desire, the lovers I take, fantastically challenge this conventional gender presentation. I fall deeply in lust for that which cannot be labeled and owned by a violent gendered history. Yet I persist in paying \$50.00

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every month to control my appearance.¹⁶

When my facial hair first started to appear in eighth grade as a mustache, a close friend (a cis man) pointed it out and laughed. I started using any available method to hide it. First, it was bleach, then Nair, and eventually self-waxing. When my beard started to come in, at around age eighteen, I added electrolysis treatments. But nothing has worked permanently. I continue to go to professional waxers, but also let my beard be somewhat visible at times. I attribute this mainly to my queerness, and my own slow churn towards undoing and unlearning rigid binary ideas of gender and representation. Another factor is, honestly, fatigue: maintenance can be tiring and expensive. I also exist primarily in communities and spaces where my face as-is, for better or worse, is not unacceptable and does not make me vulnerable to violence or danger. It helps to have become somewhat liberated from internalized gender binaries and dependence on economic situations where I could not openly be who I am.

The gender binary can only persist within structures that also inflict violence more broadly – policing, prisons, capitalism, the state, to name a few. Such structures perpetuate a



Rachel as photographed by the author.

system in which there is no room for the “in between” or the undefinable. It is precisely the precarity of queerness that renders it beautiful and tragic all at once. To live and fuck in the way one desires, outside of the belief system of capitalist patriarchal productivity, is to live in a constant state of pleasure mixed with terror. But this mixture also leads to a kind of freeing euphoria.

Part 4: Gay Anatomy

Rachel:

I definitely get a knot in my stomach, very nervous, thinking about it, talking about it, but in a way that feels productive and destigmatizing for myself. I have internalized a lot of shame around it ... Even when I think about you doing a project, that means you are talking to multiple people, who are all thinking about this. That is deeply comforting to me. I'm sure I could google it and there are groups online, I'm sure ... But I haven't, I haven't looked into this on my own.

I think it's about gender. It's also, for me, tied to sexuality. Leaning a little more into having PCOS is concurrent for me with leaning more into thinking intentionally about my queerness, and about my femmeness. They are happening together.

The more I'm able to accept and think about my PCOS in an open and self-conscious way, in a way that actually feels good, the more I'm able to talk about my queerness, and about the fact that I'm not the most femme. Some days I'm more femme than others. For me they are all part of one conversation.

What my body can do, how I present my body, and how my body is sexual – they are all part of the same thing.

St. Wilgefortis's story of martyrdom is multiply queer. Her female body, made unruly by her miraculous beard, queers Christ's body. Or, as art historian Ulrike Woerner told me in an interview this summer about her research on St. Wilgefortis: “She was developed in a certain social situation of religiousness in the 15th century where you had the first women's movement in religion and Christianity, in the Catholic Church. At this time you have only the Catholic church, and in this spirituality this

figure was developed as a figure of salvation and power mostly for women, but not only. And it's not only to help against violence, that's her second function, but she is first a figure for women to have a female salvation figure, not only a male salvation figure.”¹⁷

There has always been queer representation within historical record. St. Wilgefortis is particular to the Catholic faith, but she has also served as one of the only visible icons that exists for people outside of the gender binary. Additionally, she has been adopted and brought into the PCOS community as a patron saint to the symptoms, and perhaps a signifier that a PCOS experience is only “abnormal” within a technoscientific paradigm, that our experience is not lacking or incomplete or less than, and that there is power in that.

Historian Lewis Wallace argues that Wilgefortis's “so-called disfigurement” was in fact deeply ennobling:

Wilgefortis's beard is meant to rob her of beauty, but as we have seen, it is precisely this so-called disfigurement that brings her closer to Christ and ultimately leads to her sainthood. Wilgefortis's loss of feminine beauty is her miracle; what is presented as her ugliness makes her identical to Christ. This particular paradox does not appear with such precision in any other virgin-martyr narrative. In the case of Wilgefortis, we see not merely female eliding into male but also deformity eliding into perfection.¹⁸

I do not think it is my PCOS that has made me queer, but I do see PCOS as a strangely beautiful and accidental queering of the body, or of my body at least. In conversation with Rachel, I responded to her statement above by saying:

Most of the people I've talked to about this are queer, you know. Some people are in certain types of relationships, and some aren't. It's funny because I think about it as a queering of the body, if we are going to think of bodies as binary, biologically. Then this is a pushback, which I find to be so cool. This is like “Gay Anatomy.”

Through obsessive thought and research on PCOS, I have come to realize that I feel farther from womanhood than ever before. It feels disingenuous for me to claim my womanhood when I no longer believe in a gender binary. At the same time, it also feels wrong to not recognize that people's experiences are culturally shaped along gender lines.

In essence, I have come to undo and unlearn

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much of what I have internalized about gender over time. A friend recently told me that when we first met, he had no doubt that I was “genderqueer, or just very androgynous.” In that moment I felt held and warm. I have clung to womanhood and femininity for so long because it has brought me comfort and community. Those are not things I wish to lose. I still do, and always will, love women and womanhood – I just don’t think they mean the same things to me as they once did. Today I find myself wanting to shake off the entire complex of gender identity. I wish to float in ambiguity, but not sink. I know I am not alone in this.

Last week I was walking with my lover, my person, from the library to her house, when she shared thoughts she had the first time we met. Her roommate had told her that a friend named Sam was coming over, who she assumed was a (cis) man. When I arrived, she was immediately intrigued, she said – tall, deep voice, and obviously not a (cis) man. She just didn’t really know what my gender was, and that’s what initially attracted her, she said. Earlier that day I had told her that no one has ever made me feel so at ease and so desired in my body. We held hands, walking along Echo Park Lake in Los Angeles. My beard was just visibly growing back in.

x

Thank you to everyone who worked with me, talked to me and leant their stories, knowledge and thought to this ongoing exploration. I am forever grateful for your time and generosity: Aaron Kelley, Clara López Menéndez, Danielle Schwab, Rachel Smith, Ulrike Woerner, Sara Frier, Virgil Benjamin Taylor, Johanna Bampi, Robert Mills.

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1
Grace Lee Boggs, *The Next American Revolution: Sustainable Activism for the Twenty-First Century* (University of California Press, 2011), 79.

2
Ilse E. Friesen, *The Female Crucifix: Images of St. Wilgefortis Since the Middle Ages* (Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2001), 107.

3
Another purported origin of Wilgefortis's cult is that she was confused with the Volto Santo, a Roman Catholic crucifix of Jesus Christ dressed in regalia, including a dress-like gown.

4
It should be noted that some of these accounts specifically identify the suitor as Muslim. Wilgefortis's refusal and commitment to Christian purity has thus also been subject to Islamophobic and potentially racist interpretation.

5
"By the directives of Sacrosanctum Concilium of Vatican II (1963), in which one can find the statement that 'incongruous' practices may 'foster devotion of doubtful orthodoxy.' Zealous efforts, both before and following these new directives, resulted in numerous churches being stripped of any traces of the former veneration of the crucified female saint – often to the pride of certain clerics, but to the regret of numerous parishioners and visitors." Ilse E. Friesen, *The Female Crucifix: Images of St. Wilgefortis Since the Middle Ages* (Wilfred Laurier University Press, 2001).

6
Friesen, *The Female Crucifix*, 94.

7
Caroline Walker Bynum, "The Female Body and Religious Practice in the Later Middle Ages," in *Fragments for a History of the Body: Part I*, ed. Michel Feher (Zone Books, 1989).

8
Mark Albert Johnston, *Beard Fetish in Early Modern England: Sex, Gender, and Registers of Value* (Routledge, 2016), 181.

9
All of this is rooted in historical and contemporary white, Eurocentric, classist, and ableist beauty standards.

10
Celia Kitzinger, "'The Thief of Womanhood': Women's Experience of Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome," *Social Sciences and Medicine*, no. 54 (2002).

11
Kitzinger, "'The Thief of Womanhood.'"

12
Experiences of hirsutism vary regionally and culturally. My

experience as a white woman living in the United States is particular. I cannot speak to the experiences of women of color and or those in different regions where culturally and religiously specific notions of beauty and femininity, along with the effects of colonialism and white supremacy, are felt on a bodily level. In an ideal future version of this text, such voices would also be included.

13
That said, I have been pleasantly and genuinely surprised by select lovers who have accepted and even been attracted to this aspect of my presentation. For that I am forever grateful. Those moments have yielded true intimacy and growth.

14
"Why did Clofullia's Victorian American audiences respond so favorably? Partly it's because she 'acted' like a nineteenth-century woman. In a society with deeply entrenched gender norms, Clofullia fit the part: She was demure, nurturing, and demonstrated excellence in needlework and other 'feminine' arts. In the face of all this, what was a beard?" Sean Trainor, "Lesson of the Bearded Lady," *The Atlantic*, December 5, 2015 <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2015/12/lessons-of-the-bearded-lady/418038/>.

15
PCOS affects a variety of different AFAB people regardless of race or ethnicity, and experiences may also differ based on different cultural or regional understandings of beauty standards.

16
Lewis Wallace, "Bearded Woman, Female Christ: Gendered Transformations in the Legends and Cult of Saint Wilgefortis," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 54.

17
Ulrike Woerner, in conversation with the author, August 2019.

18
Lewis Wallace, "Bearded Woman, Female Christ: Gendered Transformations in the Legends and Cult of Saint Wilgefortis," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 30, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 54.

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Serubiri Moses
**Violent
Dreaming**

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e-flux journal #107 — march 2020 Serubiri Moses
Violent Dreaming

1. Violence

If postcolonial thought can be said to have a cinematic dimension, we might begin by asking how violence operates as a fantasy.¹ But first, it is important to define what we understand violence to be. In law, violence is “the unlawful exercise of physical force or intimidation by the exhibition of such force.”² There are distinctions between lawful and unlawful violence, where criminal violence is carried out illegally – against the state, for instance – and lawful violence is most often carried out by the state, which is also responsible for laws and their enforcement. Herbert Spencer has written: “Not only does magisterial power exist because of evil, but it exists by evil. Violence is employed to maintain it; and all violence involves criminality.”³

In the legal use of violence in various forms of law enforcement, one often encounters an interchangeability of right with violence. Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right* connected the discourse of right to self-consciousness, absolute free will, and moral rightness, where right is “freedom as idea” and “something holy, because it is the embodiment of self-conscious freedom.”⁴ Karl Marx referred to right in relation to property and ownership, or what Hegel had previously called “the absolute right of appropriation which man has over all things.”⁵ Marx’s statement on the function of commodities and wealth in chattel slavery reflects the Hegelian notion of right: “The sale and purchase of slaves is formally also a sale and purchase of commodities. But money cannot perform this function without the existence of slavery. If slavery exists, then money can be invested in the purchase of slaves.”⁶

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, however, suggested that “the words right and slave contradict each other.”⁷ Insofar as slaves were considered property and commodities, any violence carried out against them was considered as *right*, and thus lawful. Similarly, violence was deemed lawful when carried out against natives of an occupied territory (as in the colonization of San Domingo by Spain, and later France). In the postcolony and in postcolonial analysis, the question of violence is premised on events occurring in the colonies or within occupied territories, where the notion of right, or lawful violence, has a subject, which is the colonizing subject. How, then, do we interrogate the idea of free will and freedom in occupied lands and colonies? When nature, land, and enslaved persons are most often considered as the exclusive property of white colonizers, lawful violence becomes the right and abstract free will of white colonizers.

Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) touched on the theme of whiteness, which he explored in greater detail in his earlier *Black*

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A classic of anti-colonialism in which 'the Third World finds *itself* and speaks to *itself* through his voice' – Jean-Paul Sartre



Frantz Fanon

**THE
WRETCHED
OF THE
EARTH**

Cover of the Penguin edition of Frantz Fanon's book *The Wretched of the Earth*.

Skin, White Masks (1952). Consider Fanon's statements concerning property, race, wealth, and colonial occupation: "There is no native who doesn't dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler's place," and "You are rich because you are white."⁸ Clearly, Fanon considered the right to wealth – and the abstract relation of right to wealth – to be one of the foundational myths of European colonialism. The theorist further described the colonial enterprise as if it were a business, writing of French colonial Algeria that "the colonies have become a market."⁹

2. Fantasy

There are tensions between Fanon's two books from 1952 and 1961. The question of desire does not transpose very well from one text to the other. The racial pathology that Fanon observed in Martinique – "this desire to be suddenly *white*" – is not the pathology he witnessed in French Algeria among the Algerian soldiers who were his patients.¹⁰ Racial pathology – the deeply internalized racism causing blacks and people of color, perhaps unconsciously, to desire whiteness – contrasts with the horrific fantasies of his Algerian patients haunted by guilt from their military service during the Algerian War, which led them to have terrifying visions of those they had killed. Could it be described as a

pathology inherent to postcolonial nationalism (a topic he devotes an entire chapter to in *Wretched of the Earth*)?

In *Black Skin, White Masks* Fanon describes how mulatto women in Martinique were deemed superior to blacks (both men and women) in the territory because white male French colonists found them desirable – a desire that approximated mulatto women's freedom: "From one day to the next the mulatto went from the class of slaves to that of masters."¹¹ The pathology of blacks in Martinique had to do with this slippage in their social status. Martinican poet and philosopher Édouard Glissant observed something similar in the US, where an obsession with family ancestry was haunted by "the intrusion of Negro blood."¹² The Algerian soldiers, on the other hand, fighting a war of independence that Fanon himself later joined, were embroiled in a national struggle in which the use of violence was undeniable, yet they remained haunted by the guilt of killing innocent Algerians.

An expert psychoanalyst, Fanon made seamless connections between racial and colonial pathologies for which questions of desire are inescapable. Regarding Algeria, his analysis is embedded in a study of postcolonial nationalism, and for Martinique, in a study of whiteness. To reference Fanon's remark once

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Film still from Göran Hugo Olsson's documentary *Concerning Violence* (2014).

more: “There is no native who doesn’t dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler’s place.”¹³ By uttering this fantasy of the colonized, Fanon awakens and brings this fantasy into language.

It is hard not to think of cinema when philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva writes that “the role of language is essential for the formation of fantasies.”¹⁴ She also remarks: “Analytical work consists of making the fantasy conscious – formulating the phantasmatic narrative and interpreting it – in order to dissolve the symptom.”¹⁵ Could we use this same formulation to suggest that, for Fanon, analytical work consisted of revealing these unconscious fantasies in the realm of his patient’s experiences of racism and colonial war? The use of violence, which Spencer called evil, to protect wealth and property caused the pathologies Fanon theorized. Fanon considered violence to be the basis of life in the colony; it was part of the quotidian experience of colonial subjects. Could we thus argue that Fanon built narratives of violence in order to diagnose these pathologies in his patients?

Fanon’s narratives of his patients’ fantasies articulate desires for the settler’s house, desires to own what the white man owns, for the right to be free. We see such desires portrayed in Göran Hugo Olsson’s 2014 film *Concerning Violence*:

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Nine Scenes from the Anti-Imperialist Self-Defense, when a white settler in Rhodesia says that a black servant told his female master as he washed her car that he would one day be driving it.¹⁶ To this conscious spoken fantasy, the white settler being interviewed in the film retorted, “Before getting out we would turn the lights off,” suggesting something more violent – that they would burn the car before giving it to the natives. Or as Fanon might have said, the unspoken fear of the settler is: “They want to take our place.”

As a cinematic work, *Concerning Violence* predominantly draws from European television footage of different anti-colonial uprisings in Africa: Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Angola, and Guinea-Conakry. What desires can be identified in these images and what unconscious fantasies are implied by those same desires? In an earlier criticism of this film, I argued that the Non-Aligned Movement – the organization of independent Asian and African nation-states – constituted a form of anti-colonial self-defense.¹⁷ Why was the Bandung Conference, concurrent with the Mau Mau (aka Kenya Land and Freedom Army) Uprising, not considered an instance of anti-imperialist self-defense by Fanon (and therefore by Olsson)? The omission of this significant project in the film is surprising. I have seen footage of Fanon attending a Pan-African conference in Zaire, where he met Patrice



Film still from Göran Hugo Olsson’s documentary *Concerning Violence* (2014).

Lumumba. Why was this special encounter not part of the film's singular depiction of the anti-colonial movement in Africa?

3. Alienation

In postcolonial historian C. L. R. James's analysis of eighteenth-century events in Haiti leading up to the Haitian Revolution, the idea of "return" offered a kind of freedom where death and cultural retention coincided: "Life was hard and death, they believed, meant not only release but a return to Africa."¹⁸ For James, freedom is also the insurrectionary memory that caused black revolt. In a complimentary sense, for Fanon, forms of freedom manifest in desire and revelations of desire in racial and colonial pathologies. For Fanon, freedom is premised on the native's violent confrontations with whiteness, and her ultimate anthropophagia of whiteness. James's analysis considers Haitians' cultural memory of Africa and uses both ethnography and Marxist analysis to give evidence of African consciousness and its revolutionary potential.

Unlike Isaac Julien's 1995 documentary feature film *Frantz Fanon: Black Skin, White Mask*, which depicted Fanon as a psychiatrist, Olsson's film remains didactic in its approach to Fanon's text. However, the film reflects another pragmatic philosophy. When we see women fighters in Mozambique at a typing and copying station they have set up for printing and publishing at a forest camp, it becomes evident that for Olsson, knowledge production is key. One of the characters in this scene conveys to the camera something that had previously been unspoken – that a strategy of colonialism was to disempower the native by denying them education. But, if the right to education is a right to freedom, this line of thinking would diverge from Fanon's thesis on the freedom and liberation of oppressed Algerians: "What is the true nature of violence? We have seen that it is the true intuition of the colonized masses that their liberation must, and can only, be achieved by force."¹⁹ While Fanon's use of the Hegelian alienation of "self and other" was fundamental to his assessment of the condition of colonization, Olsson's film exhibits a pragmatic approach by showing sites of knowledge production as manifesting freedom.

"Freedom manifests itself through moral law," Gabriella Basterra has written, reflecting on Kant.²⁰ While the origins of the law are not easily determined, and notwithstanding that freedom is not easily proven to exist in Kant, the law can still be grasped – it is actual and it exists. Thus, if freedom is inextricably linked to law, then law in the frame of colonization (e.g., the Black Code and other penal codes) shapes colonial

subjectivity, and embodies the "aspirations" to European values as protocol. Evident colonial anxieties that emerge from these subjectivities readily contradict such freedoms,²¹ further elucidating the subject of freedom in Fanon's writing about the "violence with which the supremacy of white values is affirmed and the aggressiveness which has permeated the victory of these values over the (native's) ways of life and thought."²² The violent and destructive policies of settler colonialism are, for Fanon, forms of dispossession: the burning and looting of anything the native owns, chasing them off their land, and repossessing it for the purpose of mineral extraction and economic exploitation. Fanon's reuse of Hegelian alienation applies to the redistribution of stolen wealth through violence, an everyday violence that seamlessly connects the Caribbean to French colonial Algeria.

4. Desire

In Fanon's chapter "Concerning Violence" in *The Wretched of the Earth* and its translation to cinema in Olsson's film, I am drawn to the former's suggestion that for the native, violence is the only means to real autonomy and freedom. He writes: "The colonized man finds his freedom in, and through, violence."²³ This impulse in Fanon's writing could be described as Kantian, in the sense that Basterra confirms that violence "prov[es] freedom's existence."²⁴ Basterra's inquiry asks whether we can know freedom at all, yet she adds that for Kant, practical reason was possibly aimed at revealing the power of desire.

Fanon followed Kant in his unwavering conviction to articulate and reveal the native's desires and fantasies. Basterra further explains how these ideas of analyzing freedom can be contradictory. How, for example, do we prove freedom's existence? In her book, *The Subject of Freedom*, Basterra makes clear that the ways "freedom constitutes the subject is not easy to explain."²⁵ She considers Kant's practical philosophy and its gesturing towards the power of desire, writing: "Proving freedom's existence and its causality in constituting the subject is the challenge Kant's practical philosophy must meet. Here, theoretical reason is charged with the formidable task of explaining how practical reason – a reason that does not reason – motivates the power of desire."²⁶

Through Basterra's readings of Kant, it becomes clear that Fanon's practical philosophy rests on the analytical work of his psychiatry. The challenge for Fanon, therefore, is identifying subjectivity through his patients' fantasies and, perhaps unconsciously, through their desires. Basterra names the unconditional freedom being

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called into question “excess,” a word that Kant also used. In Fanon, that same freedom unconditioned by colonial laws is a kind of anarchic fantasy, whether conscious or unconscious. Fanon’s analysis suggests that the colonial subject is shaped by dreams of anarchy, and the possibility of attaining these dreams – that is, his practical philosophy – is characterized by the power of desire, a desire masked, at least in part, by violent dreaming.

5. Nightmare

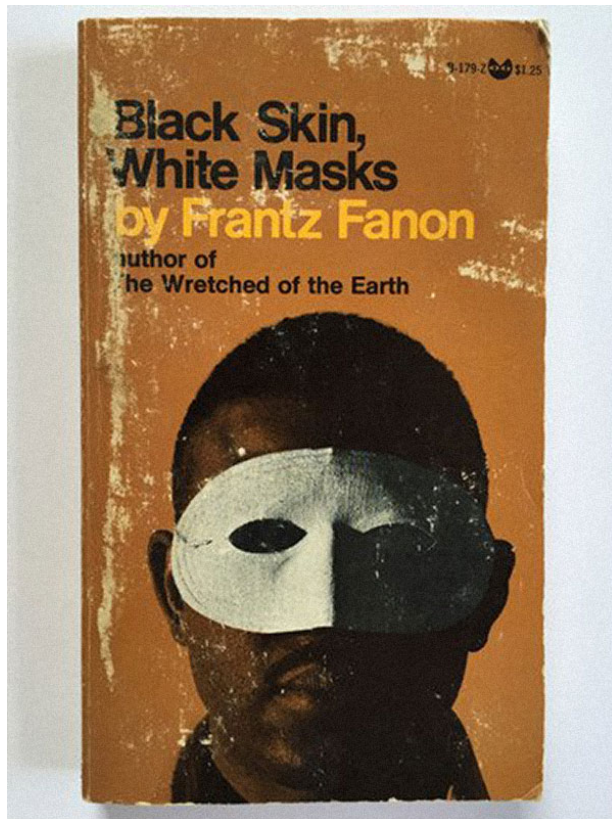
According to Kristeva, a condition is diagnosed by identifying both conscious and unconscious fantasies.²⁷ Fanon’s case studies in *The Wretched of the Earth* – his patients whose accounts are noted and reproduced in the book – provide the basis for his postcolonial critique and Kantian analysis. The invocation that “the colonized man finds his freedom in, and through, violence” emerges directly from Fanon’s dutiful study of his patients and his commitment to their psychological well-being. Among the many patients he examined, two stand out. The first is “Case No. 3,” an Algerian soldier fighting on behalf of the National Liberation Front (FLN), the Algerian nationalist anti-colonial organization: “When he started thinking of his mother, the

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disembodied woman rose up before him in redoubled horror.”²⁸ The text mentions that the soldier had been part of a mission that left two Algerian civilians killed.

This is firstly a nightmare, but also an actual fantasy about a woman the soldier murdered while fighting for the FLN. Earlier, Fanon brings up the question of guilt, which he attributes in a footnote to Freud’s *Mourning and Melancholia*.²⁹ The thought of having survived a war in which others have perished returns in this section and with this patient. The terror brought by the wounded and dead woman in the nightmare is triggered, in the Freudian sense, possibly, by the guilt of having committed murder: “At nightfall that evening, as soon as the patient went to bed, the room was ‘invaded by women’ in spite of everything.”³⁰

While no actual adaptation of these fantasies appears in Olsson’s film, a battle scene in a forest with a wounded Portuguese soldier fighting in Guinea does approach horror. In this dire situation, four or five men perform a medical procedure on the wounded. The fantasy that Fanon identifies in these soldiers is mostly unconscious, and the patient is not necessarily aware of the impact of this fantasy on his psyche. The fantasy – in this case, of being



Cover of an English edition of Frantz Fanon's book *Black Skin, White Masks*.

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Film still from Göran Hugo Olsson's documentary *Concerning Violence* (2014).

haunted and terrorized by dead or zombie-like women – speaks to Fanon’s placement of violence and dispossession at the center of analysis, whether dispossession of property or the armed, gendered violence evident in the experiences of Case No. 3.

Following Basterra’s ideas on subjectivity and freedom, can we seek an unconditioned freedom in Fanon’s patients or in their fantasies? In observing the reality of the Algerian War (1954–62) – the war of independence between the French Army and the FLN – Fanon compares the case of a white army officer fighting for France to an Algerian officer fighting for the FLN. Now, if subjectivity is formed by the patient’s participation in violence, then how do the fantasies and desires of the white soldiers fighting on behalf of France diverge from those of the Algerian soldiers fighting for the FLN? In considering lawful violence, what can be said of the native Algerian soldiers fighting on behalf of colonial France? Are they to be seen as traitors? What happens to their subjectivity after the war is over? Subsequent accounts show that the French failed to repatriate the Algerian soldiers who fought on their behalf. After losing the war, these native soldiers were hunted down and killed.

Case No. 3 diagnoses the unavoidable banality of violence in the French colony during the Algerian War to reveal fantasies of “redoubled horror,” but similarly opens the question of the gendered nature of these pathologies.³¹ In her spoken preface to Olsson’s film, philosopher Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak points out that, though anti-colonial struggle temporarily brought women to the front lines in equal standing, old gender barriers returned once the war of liberation was won.³² Thus, fantasies of horror in Case No. 3’s experiences explicitly reference the violence inflicted upon native women in colonial Algeria.

6. Horror

Horror and catharsis are fundamental to how history ends up being told, especially the history of the transition from being the colony of another nation to being an independent nation. Kristeva says that the ancient Greeks experienced catharsis through the myth of Oedipus,³³ and Glissant shows that this has persisted into the twentieth century, for example in Faulkner’s novel *Absalom! Absalom!* That cinema is particularly rich in horror as a subject reveals its debt to the plays of Shakespeare, Cervantes, and Schiller, among others. Fanon’s thesis in the section on violence in *Wretched* – once again, the claim that “the colonized subject attains his freedom in, and through, violence” – prompts me to ask how postcolonial horror and catharsis are

to be located in the cinematic frame. Though fantasies of anarchy can be traced back to Kant’s concept of unconditioned freedom, in the space of excess we also experience a “reason that does not reason,” in the words of Basterra.³⁴ The second noteworthy patient who Fanon examines in *Wretched* feels overwhelming guilt at “having murdered one’s mother.”³⁵ The patient’s recurring fantasy is a horror at carrying out violence on one’s own people, or one’s kin. A further horror neither depicted in *Wretched* nor in its film adaptation is the massacre of natives who fought on behalf of France in the war. According to anthropologist Mahmood Mamdani, “What ‘horrifies’ the modern political sensibility is not violence per se but violence that does not make sense.”³⁶ How does the idea of sense-making connect to the modern political sensibility? If violence is sensible when attached to progress, where can Fanon’s question of desire be placed or juxtaposed in relation to unlawful violence? In a modern political context, is the colonial subject meant to experience the unconditioned freedom that Basterra describes?

While Mamdani references Belgian colonial policy in Rwanda and customary law in Uganda focused on ethnic and racialized subjectivity, we are, as readers, still faced with his argument’s moral and theological challenge, which is rooted in the notion of the sensible and sense-making that he borrows from Paul Ricoeur, who “explored the problem of how to account for the existence of evil.”³⁷ For Mamdani, sense-making in the colonial contexts of Rwanda and Uganda begins with race and ethnicity as a means of identifying a process of colonial subject formation. Though there is little doubt as to which colonial policies and customary laws produce the racialized and ethnic subject, I am drawn here to Ricoeur’s interpretation predicated on a “making sense of the existence of evil.”³⁸ By shifting focus from the postcolonial violence that Mamdani has identified in the pluralist legal system, to evil *proper*, I aim to highlight the theological roots of Mamdani’s argument. Could it be that, by revealing the fantasies of anarchy that possess natives and their desires, Fanon is purposefully articulating both subjectivity and freedom? What can be made of Fanon’s reliance on Freudian analyses of guilt? Should we then uphold the idea that postcolonial violence is sinful? Where does this ethical line of thinking leave native soldiers who murdered innocent Algerian civilians? These questions of freedom and desire in the postcolony are always marked by pathologies and forms of anarchy that run the risk of betraying both progress and sense-making.

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Oleksiy Radynski
**Is Data the New
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Is Data the New Gas?

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1.

In Brussels on May 1, 2019, Rick Perry, then-US energy secretary, announced that “seventy-five years after liberating Europe from Nazi Germany occupation, the United States was again delivering a form of freedom to the European continent.” And, in the twenty-first century, he added, “rather than in the form of young American soldiers, it’s in the form of liquefied natural gas.”¹ Perry was referring to a deal that would double the size of US gas exports to Europe. But from what, exactly, would Perry’s “freedom gas” liberate Europe?

Perry’s colorful statement came as an explicit snub to the Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline, a project that Russia and Germany have been pursuing since the 2010s to link the two countries directly via the Baltic seabed. The pipeline’s route bypasses intermediary countries like Ukraine, whose state budget depends heavily on gas transit revenues. Nord Stream 2 is expected to double the capacity of the already existing Nord Stream pipeline, increasing the volume of transmitted gas up to 110 billion cubic meters a year. Into 2020, Merkel’s government continues to defend this massive gas infrastructure project that’s been mired in controversy from the start.

Strangely enough, most of the criticism facing the Nord Stream 2 project comes from a geopolitical, rather than an ecological, perspective.² Its critics say that this pipeline would disproportionately increase the EU’s dependence on Russian fossil fuel exports.³ It’s also quite clear that the actual political rationale for this project is to render obsolete the subterranean, Soviet-era natural gas arteries that run through large parts of the European continent that are no longer under Russia’s control. Following Russia’s invasion and annexation of Ukrainian territories in 2014, Merkel’s government’s adherence to the Nord Stream 2 project did not cease to raise eyebrows.⁴ After the downing of a passenger plane over the Donbass in July 2014 by pro-Russian proxies, the ensuing sanctions against Russia did not affect the project in any way. In German public debate, the fact that the completion of Nord Stream 2 would likely cause the economy of Ukraine to collapse, a country at war with Russia, has been constantly referenced – but to little avail.⁵

The intricacies of the ongoing Nord Stream 2 debate, however, miss a rather large elephant in the room. Without questioning the importance of countering Russia’s neocolonial wars in Ukraine and elsewhere, it is easy to see why the biggest problem with the new pipeline is not at all the fact that it will deprive Russia’s neighbors of their transit revenues. Such revenues, in fact,



Smiley-face graffiti on a gas pipe at the Nord Stream 2 construction site in Lubmin, Germany. Copyright: Nord Stream 2 / Axel Schmidt.



Gerhard Schröder, ex-chancellor of Germany and chairman of the board of directors of Nord Stream 2, and Matthias Warnig, former member of the Stasi and CEO of Nord Stream 2. Copyright: Nord Stream 2 / Wolfram Scheible.

fuel gross corruption schemes, like those that define Ukraine's political process, and guarantee the concentration of exorbitant wealth in the hands of oligarchs.⁶ Nor is the biggest problem the fact that Nord Stream 2 will provide the Russian autocratic elite with another powerful tool to subvert European politics. The real problem is that this tool, just like its countless counterparts, undermines the future of planet Earth by bringing the irreversibility of climate change one large step closer. And this time, placing the blame squarely on Russia is clearly not an option.

With Germany's ex-chancellor Gerhard Schroeder as a manager, and Mathias Warnig (an ex-Stasi officer with a long-standing connection to Vladimir Putin) serving as the CEO of the project, it is not surprising that the German government values its Nord Stream 2 commitment more than its widely anticipated green transition. In a truly Orwellian move, Nord Stream 2 presents itself as an environmentally friendly initiative that will help decrease carbon emissions from oil and coal, fossil fuels that are, it is claimed, much dirtier than natural gas. This argument is refuted by ecologists who assert that, despite being relatively "cleaner" than much of the existing carbon infrastructure, projects like Nord Stream 2 would increase the structural, long-term dependency on fossil fuels to such an extent that a transition to a carbon-free economy – something that the Earth's biosphere needs much earlier than we plan to institute – might actually never occur.

At the time of this writing, the construction of Nord Stream 2 has been halted due to US sanctions against the project, which will most likely merely delay the pipeline's completion by about a year. But why is it that the only real form of opposition to Nord Stream 2 comes from the power that would simply prefer to cook the planet with its own "freedom gas"?

2.

In May 2017, Russian president Vladimir Putin signed an executive order titled "On the Strategy of Economic Security of the Russian Federation until 2030." This order includes a list of ongoing "challenges and threats to the economic security" of Russia identified at that time. High on the list – number six of twenty-five points – is a threat formulated as follows: "Changes in the structure of global demand for energy resources and their consumption patterns; development of energy-saving technologies and reduction of material consumption; development of 'green technologies.'"⁷

This statement warrants closer attention. It's not difficult to see why the "development of 'green technologies'" is an existential threat to

the Russian Federation, one of the world's largest exporters of fossil fuels and, according to most estimates, the owner of the largest stock of reserves of natural gas on Earth. This particular list of "threats and challenges" also happens to coincide more or less with a number of actions that are necessary to undertake if humanity is serious about its survival on the planet. As it becomes increasingly evident that the future of humankind depends on its ability to switch to a global economic model that would make the industrial burning of fossil fuels obsolete, the mere hope of such a switch – however distant it might seem at the moment – is now officially recognized as a threat to the regime that governs Russia. Clearly, the Russian political model values the future of fossil fuel and capital flows over the future of the innumerable species (including humans) whose existence is threatened by climate change. A question worth asking, then: Is the Russian government actually being, perversely, more straightforward than most other governments about the fact that they are ultimately accountable to entities such as gas, oil, and their derivative petrocurrencies, rather than to the members of human society who voted them into power?

Well before Trump came to power, it was abundantly clear that the global carbon-based capitalist model is incompatible with the futures of democracy and of the environment. Despite the broad scientific consensus on the grave effects of the fossilized economy on the planetary climate, and despite the cautious intergovernmental half-measures to prevent a catastrophic scenario (like the nonbinding Paris Accord of 2015, which the US government has already opted out of anyway), "extreme" fossil fuels investments continue to surge.⁸ Of all the fringe ideologies and discarded ideas that the Trump presidency has brought into the mainstream, climate change denialism could probably have the most lasting and damaging impact on the future of humankind. Of course, Donald Trump's "climate skepticism" is far more publicized than that of his Russian counterpart and political patron – even though the effect of the latter could be more fundamental, given Putin's global support of fossil fuel kleptocrats and right-wing conspiracists, Trump included. Like Trump, Putin has repeatedly questioned the human-made nature of climate change, and went as far as to ridicule the use of alternative energy sources like wind turbines for the alleged harm their vibration may cause to worms, urging them to "come out of the ground." (The US president, meanwhile, focuses on turbines' apparently murderous effect on birds). Again, this unprecedented (and scientifically baseless), disproportionate concern for subterranean,



Participants in the Baltic Sea Day Environmental Forum 2017 couldn't care less about the ecological aspects of Nord Stream 2. Copyright: Nord Stream 2 / Anatolij Medved.

nonhuman entities – inanimate, like oil and gas, or animate, like worms – provides clues as to the actual allegiance of a certain public servant named Vladimir Putin.

Most commonly, the Russian political model is the object of human rights–based, postcolonial,⁹ or liberal-democratic criticism of what the Putinists themselves call “the illiberal model.” In order to make sense beyond the redundantly anti-communist “post-sovietology” in the vein of “Cold War 2.0,” these perspectives should necessarily be supplemented with (or sublated in) more universalist – that is, ecological – modes of critique. It is well-known that the infrastructure for the extraction and transportation of fossil fuels – mainly, the oil and gas pipelines that cover the Eurasian continent – form the basic source of the economic and political survival of Putinism. Moreover, those networks guaranteed the emergence of a particular political regime, which arose in the 1990s on the ruins of the Soviet Union and solidified in the early 2000s – largely due to high prices of oil and gas on the global market.

Surprisingly, Russia’s catastrophic climate policies are largely ignored in most critical accounts of the looming ecological disaster. Naomi Klein’s verdict in *This Changes Everything* (2015) – that capitalism is incompatible with the survival of planetary ecology – is nowhere more obvious than in the case of Russia’s current capitalist model. Still, Russia is conspicuously absent from Klein’s critique: in *This Changes Everything*, Russia is only mentioned twice; the collapse of the USSR also gets two mentions. For the ecological critique of capitalism to become a truly global political front, as Klein urges, Russia’s disproportionate exemption must be overcome.

Given the overwhelming importance of oil in the twentieth-century economy, political and economic theorists have given this kind of fossil fuel a great deal of attention. In many cases, this scrutiny is informed by the notion of the “oil curse,” that is, the tendency of oil-rich states to evolve into autocracies: internally oppressive, externally aggressive, and overall inefficient. This notion has of course been unfavorably applied to Russia and the fossil fuel lobby that is running the country, along with Iran, Venezuela, Nigeria, and other states “cursed by oil.” In *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*, Timothy Mitchell exposes the limitations of the “oil curse” theory. Instead, Mitchell undertakes a study of “democracy as oil – as a form of politics whose mechanisms on multiple levels involve the process of producing and using carbon energy.”¹⁰ Mitchell’s book seeks to answer a critical question: “Can we follow the carbon itself, the oil, so as to connect the

problem afflicting oil-producing states to other limits of carbon democracy?”¹¹ As natural gas overtakes oil’s previous status as the most important fossil fuel of the current century, this inquiry should be extended. Will oil-based liquid modernity make way for a data-based, gaseous postmodernity?

What follows is an attempt to “follow the carbon itself,” by tracing and collaging its various footprints within histories of ideas, technology, and popular culture, in an effort to grasp the evasive substance of natural gas through the no-less-evasive field of the social imagination – informed by the Cold War and the current geopolitical attempts at its reenactment.

In 2017, *The Economist* famously claimed that “data is the new oil.” At the time, Wendy Chun’s response to this statement was: “Big data is the new COAL. The result: global social change. Intensely energized and unstable clouds.”¹² Still, both coal and oil are likely to decline as energy sources. Another question worth asking, then, is: what if data is actually the new gas?

3.

The first-ever computer hacker to feature in a Soviet film appeared in a political drama called *Deal of the Century* (1985). In one scene, this American hacker (played by popular actor Valentin Gaft) struggles to break the computer security system of a Soviet trade mission in Germany, in his effort to prevent the signing of a gas contract between West Germany and the USSR. The film is generously interspersed with documentary news footage of the Reagan administration’s attempts to prevent the deal that would allow the export of Siberian gas to West Germany. Those attempts did, in fact, happen, but they failed to halt a decades-long process that ultimately led to the emergence of the Soviet Union – and later, of Russia – as a major carbon empire.

In 1970, the Soviet Union and West Germany signed the contract that inspired the film. The contract was preceded by a decade-long global dispute following the discovery of unprecedented reserves of natural gas in Siberia. The Soviet Union lacked the technology to construct the pipeline system needed to transport the gas to consumers, while West Germany – whose industry was capable of providing these pipes – began showing interest in helping the Soviets build this system. West Germany’s offer of assistance with construction came with the condition that the new pipelines would penetrate the Iron Curtain and that Siberian gas would flow to the West. Throughout the early 1960s the US government fiercely opposed the idea, and in 1963 then-chancellor



A munitions clearance operation on the Nordstream 2 pipeline route, which runs in close proximity to World War II chemical weapons dumping grounds.
Copyright: Axel Schmidt.

Adenauer had to ban German pipe exports to the USSR. Still, part of German industry cherished the plan, and in 1970 the pipe ban was overcome. After the deal was signed in Essen in 1970, it was colloquially called “gas in exchange for the pipes.” Russian historians unequivocally refer to this contract as “the deal of the century.” This was the first in a long series of deals between Western powers and the Soviet Union that, after its collapse, has led to the emergence of an autocratic system based on a ruthless extractivist attitude to the Earth’s resources, facilitated by transcontinental oil and gas transportation networks.

Those networks – the world’s longest at the time – required unprecedented technological expertise, and in this regard the Soviet Union could not count on Western technology (as it did with the German pipes). In the Soviet TV series *Acceleration* (1984), a group of cybernetic scientists are tasked with computerizing the natural gas transportation network after the US blocks delivery of some needed technology. In one of the scenes, the cyberneticians discuss this gas network as a self-regulating living organism. One of them proposes the concept of the “animation/resuscitation of the equipment.”¹³ In other words, they recommend reframing the gas network as an intelligent being with a subjectivity of its own, carrying billions of cubic meters of natural gas to be emitted into the atmosphere – a truly post-humanist utopia of a Soviet kind.

This animation or resuscitation of the gas network wasn’t an outlandish fantasy on the part of the filmmakers. In fact, the plot of *Acceleration* was loosely based on the life story of Viktor Glushkov, a pioneering computer scientist tasked with building oil pipeline networks, among other things, after his bold idea of an information network for the USSR was shelved, and his groundbreaking research on socialist artificial intelligence was put on the back burner by authorities. Glushkov was a leading figure in Soviet cybernetic science, a science that he claimed had to be applied to each and every sphere of socialist society. He declared that cybernetics allowed for the transformation of “the social sciences into exact sciences.” As a result, he claimed, society as a whole would function as one gigantic cybernetic organism running on feedback loops and socialist self-regulation. In 1970 – the same year of the “deal of the century” – top party officials downsized Glushkov’s idea for an overwhelming information-management-and-control network to a series of smaller-scale, disparate network projects. For the better part of the 1970s, he was busy computerizing the Druzhba (Friendship) oil pipeline network that carried Siberian oil into

Eastern Europe.

In public, Glushkov held that his Druzhba network was an example of a perfect marriage of cybernetics and ecology, claiming that

we’ve developed methods that allow for the use of contemporary computing machines to predict the behavior of all kinds of ecological systems, to model all future options for the development of these systems, and to discover the solutions that would allow us to find the right compromise between the economic needs of the people and their natural need to preserve the environment.¹⁴

During closed-door meetings, however, he delivered much darker accounts of his fossil fuel networks, claiming that they were not economically feasible due to the inevitable exhaustion of oil resources.¹⁵

Glushkov’s cybernetics had its roots in the Cold War reception of Norbert Wiener’s cybernetic theories, which proliferated in the USSR soon after Stalin’s death. However, Glushkov’s vision of cybernetics as a tool for mastering nature stemmed from a strand of philosophical thought that had much deeper roots in the Soviet context. It’s hard to ignore the affinity between Glushkov’s vision of cybernetics as a mode of total socialist management and the “universal organizational science” of Alexander Bogdanov – philosopher, natural scientist, and militant Bolshevik. Bogdanov coined the term “tektology” to describe his totalizing vision of a neopositivist science outlining the universal principles (those of organization as opposed to disorganization) that underlie every known phenomena in the universe: from galaxies to human societies to bacteria. Bogdanov radically undermined not just the distinction between natural sciences and the humanities, but also between theory and practice – a stance later adopted by Glushkov, who claimed “unity of theory with practice” as a founding principle of his cybernetic science. The latter’s position also shared with Bogdanov’s tektology the belief that natural, social, and technological systems function according to the same organizational principles, which may be scientifically identified and put to purposeful use.

For Bogdanov, nature was “changeable,” following knowledge of the universal rules of progress that he had offered to the Bolsheviks (no wonder that McKenzie Wark, in her 2015 book *Molecular Red*, regards Bogdanov as a Soviet prophet of the Anthropocene). Bogdanov’s work on tektology, published in the Soviet Union throughout the 1920s, was no doubt a major influence on the Bolshevik project of

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Construction corridor for the Russian onshore section of Nord Stream 2 pipeline. Copyright: Nord Stream 2 AG / Agiteco.

“revolutionizing nature,” as Oksana Timofeeva names the Soviet effort of “diverting rivers, blasting mountains, making animals speak: the idea was to transform the Earth by means of technology in order to make it, as Andrei Platonov says, more ‘kind to us.’”¹⁶ Bogdanov’s tektology is also cited as a major (albeit, uncredited) influence on Ludwig von Bertalanffy’s general system theory, the cybernetic theories of Ross Ashby, and the writings of Norbert Wiener himself – via the German translation of *Tektology*, published in 1926. For instance, it’s been pointed out that in *Tektology*, Bogdanov described the notion of feedback, crucial for cybernetic science, using a different term of his own coinage: “bi-regulation.” In the Soviet Union, Bogdanov’s writings were officially denounced as idealistic perversions of materialist dogmas. His tektology only made a comeback in the postwar decades, as it was incorporated into Western cybernetic science and reimported back to the USSR in a vertiginous transcontinental give-and-take of ideas.

The abridged English translation of *Tektology* starts with a claim that’s actually absent in Bogdanov’s original – at least in such straightforward terms: “In the struggle of mankind, its aim is dominion over nature. Dominion is a relationship of the organizer to the organized.”¹⁷ Still, this entangled paraphrase of Bogdanov accurately reflects the perception of his ideas by later practitioners. When Glushkov proposed building a computer network for the total management of economic and information flows, he was setting out on a truly tektological endeavor. When the Soviets were building the transcontinental networks for fossil fuel flows, they were guided by the idea of “changeable” nature. Few could see the direction this change was taking.

4.

In the summer of 1982, a gas explosion of unprecedented proportions was said to have destroyed the Trans-Siberian gas pipeline. In his 2004 memoir *At the Abyss*, Reagan administration official Thomas Reed claims that this explosion was caused by Canadian equipment added to the pipeline – sabotage via a Trojan horse tactic. (Post-)Soviet experts, on the other hand, vehemently deny that this explosion ever took place.¹⁸ They claim that the Trans-Siberian gas pipeline network could not be hacked at the time, because it was not yet computerized to a sufficient degree. Given the lack of evidence related to this purported explosion, it seems that the gas network hack took place in the realm of information, rather than through technology – a case of information

warfare.

By that time, massive amounts of Siberian natural gas were being exported to Western Europe, and new contracts signed in the wake of the Soviet–German “deal of the century” were proliferating. This caused consternation amongst US officials, who saw this German strategy as suicidal: not only would Europe’s access to energy be dependent on Soviet gas networks, but the latter could also, according to some military experts, be used to fuel the Soviet army in case of European invasion. The Germans themselves, though, had adopted a more dialectical-materialist approach to the problem of Soviet natural gas.

Otto Wolf von Amerongen, chairman of the German East–West Trade Committee from 1955 to 2000, later recalled the logic behind the deal: “The gas pipe through the continent is, if you wish, an instrument that not only makes us dependent on the Soviet imports, but also, vice versa, renders their ‘crane’ dependent on the West.”¹⁹ In his conversations with German chancellor Ludwig Erhard, von Amerongen introduced the political dimension into this dialectical vision: “If we are linked together through our gas pipelines, this will mean much more than the sale of pipes or the purchase of gas. The will also lead to a positive change in the political picture in the Soviet Union.”²⁰

What kind of change would that be, and how would it be achieved? Von Amerongen: “I was always sure that this deal had introduced another *constant medium of communication*, a reliable bridge for further development, or to be more precise, the rebirth of the traditional German–Russian connections that were lost in the course of decades after the October coup in Russia in 1917.”²¹

With gas as a medium of communication, what kind of message did its networks convey? At stake was no less than the legacy of what von Amerongen (an ex-Nazi) referred to as “the October coup.” In the 1980s, with the Soviet economy failing while (and, in fact, because of) the lucrative fossil fuel export deals proliferated, party elites were faced with the chance to put this enormous wealth to personal gain. The top-down collapse of Soviet Communism was, among other things, the result of a successful attempt by the party apparatus to privatize the enormous profits derived from the extractivist economic model in its transition to capitalism. The message delivered by the Western elites to their Soviet counterparts – “abandon communism for your personal profit!” – was conveyed through the medium of natural gas.²²

In the post–Cold War world, after the “end of history” – which is gradually morphing into the end of a habitable climate – is a project like Nord

Stream 2 designed to serve as another channel of constant communication? With US sanctions against Nord Stream 2 strangely appearing as a reenactment of the Reagan-era sanctions against the Trans-Siberian pipeline, are we definitively stuck in a final historical loop, a dead end in which the only real resistance to this politically and environmentally devastating project comes from a no-less-devastating competitor whose only solution is: burn “freedom gas” instead? *Abandon the planet for your personal profit!* – this is the message conveyed by virtually every communications medium in this echo chamber, be it the medium of an underwater gas pipeline or a liquid natural gas terminal.²³

But if carbon infrastructure is a medium of communication, then it can be – like any other such medium – disrupted, subverted, and hacked. This is where, to quote Nick Dyer-Witford, the dominant structures are most vulnerable today: “If we’re going to look at the equivalent of something that was like strike power, we need to look to hacking, we need to look at the new vulnerabilities of capital that lie in its transportation and logistics networks, we need to look at the possibilities of the interruption of its various types of energy flows: both electrical and otherwise.”²⁴ But who would be the agent of this strike power?

One recent development in the extraction industry provides a glimpse of what form this agent might take. In January 2020, Russian Gazprom announced a major decrease in its monthly production of natural gas. The reason for this decrease? Unexpectedly high temperatures in gas extraction areas.²⁵

Postscript: This is a revised version of an essay that was intended for publication in the *Almanac of the Center for Experimental Museology*, but it was withdrawn by the author after it was censored by the publisher, V-A-C Press (Moscow). The fragment excised by the editors is reproduced here in full:

The moment at which this text is written is crucial and greatly impacts what I have to say in the following paragraphs. I’m writing these lines on the fortieth day of Ukrainian film director Oleg Sentsov’s hunger strike, while he is held in a Russian prison camp in the Arctic. Sentsov demands the immediate release of all political prisoners from Ukraine currently jailed in Russia. Before he was kidnapped by the Russian Federal Security Service during the military occupation of the Crimean Peninsula in May 2014, Sentsov resided with his family in Crimea. Together with the anti-fascist eco-activist Olexander Kolchenko, he was

accused of plotting a terrorist attack as a protest against the annexation of Crimea by the Russian army. Detained in Crimea, Sentsov and Kolchenko were then kidnapped and transported to the Russian Federation, where, in defiance of all judicial norms, the two were stripped of their Ukrainian citizenship and put on a show trial that found them guilty – despite the absence of evidence, and on the basis of forced confessions by two other tortured political prisoners. Sentsov and Kolchenko were sentenced, respectively, to twenty and ten years in prison camps. In Russia, this trial had been instrumental in silencing any possibility of dissent against the 2014 occupation of Crimea and Russia’s sparking of the war in East Ukraine. This silencing especially targeted artists and cultural workers: the scapegoating by the Russian secret services of Oleg Sentsov, who had worked in Crimea as an auteur filmmaker, was conspicuously random, as if its sole meaning was to send a message to other artists: stay away from politics, for this can happen to anyone. In a similar vein, the conviction of Olexander Kolchenko was meant to introduce a purely Orwellian dimension into this process: a committed anti-fascist, he, along with Sentsov, was accused of participation in a far-right Ukrainian group. The imprisonment of Sentsov and Kolchenko led to a swift deterioration of cultural and artistic links between Russia and Ukraine, with numerous Ukrainian artists and cultural workers boycotting any Russia-related projects. As a counterpart to this boycott, since 2015 I’ve been practicing a strategy of accepting invitations from Russian non-state institutions with the purpose of hijacking public debate and staging interventions based on the cases of Sentsov and Kolchenko. While working on this particular essay, I was surprised to discover that no special intervention of this kind would even be needed in this case, as my research trajectory had actually brought me to a point that reflects the context of Sentsov’s case with unexpected clarity. While this research is focused on the manifold ways that the exploitation of natural resources, primarily natural gas, affects cultural and political developments by boosting colonial and authoritarian practices, Sentsov is holding his hunger strike in a town called Labytnangi in the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Region in Russia’s Far North, which is where one of the world’s largest gas fields is located.

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There, reduced to the position of *homo sacer*, Sentsov is challenging the regime from the very heart of Russia's natural gas empire. It is an extremely dire, but somehow, still strangely hopeful coincidence which reinforces the intuitions that brought this text into existence.

As of March 2020: Oleg Sentsov survived his hunger strike, which lasted for 145 days. He and Oleksander Kolchenko were released by the Russian government in a prisoner swap in September 2019.

V-A-C press is a project of V-A-C Foundation, cofounded by Leonid Mikhelson, head of Novatek company, Russia's second-largest natural gas producer, based in the Yamalo-Nenets Autonomous Region where Oleg Sentsov was held illegally.

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Oleksiy Radynski is a filmmaker and writer based in Kyiv. His films have been screened at Oberhausen International Short Film Festival, Institute of Contemporary Arts (London), DOK Leipzig, Bar Laika by e-flux, and Kmytiv Museum among other venues, and received awards at a number of film festivals. His texts have been published in *Proxy Politics: Power and Subversion in a Networked Age* (Archive Books, 2017), *Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and East Europe: A Critical Anthology* (MoMA, 2018), *Being Together Precedes Being* (Archive Books, 2019), and in *e-flux journal*. After graduating from Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, he studied at Ashkal Alwan's Home Workspace Program (Beirut). Radynski is a participant of the Visual Culture Research Center, an initiative for art, knowledge, and politics founded in Kyiv, 2008. Currently, he is a BAK Fellow at basis voor actuele kunst, Utrecht.

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1
Frédéric Simon, “‘Freedom Gas’: US Opens LNG Floodgates to Europe,” *EURACTIV*, May 2, 2019 <https://www.euractiv.com/section/energy/news/freedom-gas-us-opens-lng-floodgates-to-europe/>.

2
One notable, albeit decidedly belated, exception is found in Maria Haensch, “Green Group Challenges Nord Stream 2 Permit in Germany,” *Montel News*, March 5, 2020 <https://www.montelnews.com/de/story/green-group-challenges-nord-stream-2-permit-in-germany/1094429>. It’s also curious that most of the available ecological criticism of Nord Stream 2 focuses mostly on the damage done by the pipeline to the Baltic seabed, rather than the problem of increased emissions as a result of the project.

3
See, for example the Rethink Nord Stream 2 Campaign <https://rethinkthedeal.eu/>.

4
See, for instance, this document by Rethink Nord Stream 2 <https://rethinkthedeal.eu/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2019/10/Brochure-A4-Germany-EN-Web.pdf>.

5
In December 2019, a contract on gas transit between Russia and Ukraine was extended for five more years, which helped to avoid a full-blown “gas war” of the kind that happened in 2009, but still looks more like an attempt to extend the agony. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2009_Russia%E2%80%93Ukraine_gas_dispute.

6
The fact that a certain Ukrainian natural gas company, of all things that Trump messed with, found itself at the epicenter of the recent impeachment proceedings, speaks volumes of the unprecedented political importance of post-Soviet carbon infrastructure.

7
See <http://kremlin.ru/acts/bank/41921/page/1>.

8
Arthur Nelson, “‘Extreme’ Fossil Fuel Investment Have Surged Under Donald Trump, Report Reveals,” *The Guardian*, March 28, 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2018/mar/28/extreme-fossil-fuel-investments-have-surged-under-donald-trump-report-reveals>.

9
See, for instance, David Chioni Moore, “Is the Post- in Post-colonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique,” *PMLA* 116, no. 1 (January 2002). Available at <http://monumenttotransformat>

[ion.org/atlas-of-transformat](http://atlas-of-transformat)
[ion/html/p/postcolonial-post-soviet/is-the-post-in-postcolonial-the-post-in-post-soviet-toward-a-global-postcolonial-critique-david-chioni-moore.html](http://html/p/postcolonial-post-soviet/is-the-post-in-postcolonial-the-post-in-post-soviet-toward-a-global-postcolonial-critique-david-chioni-moore.html).

10
Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (Verso, 2011), 5.

11
Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*, 6.

12
See <https://twitter.com/whkchun/status/927576076796203008>.

13
In the original Russian: “одушевление оборудования.”

14
As quoted in the film *Plenyat' Zadachey Nebyvaloy* (Kievnauchfilm, 1982).

15
Victor Glushkov, “Pro ekonomicheskuyu kibernetiku. Doklad na zasedanii Prezidiuma AN USSR” (About economic cybernetics: Report at a meeting of the Presidium of the Academy of Sciences of the Ukrainian SSR), sound recording.

16
Oxana Timofeeva, “Ultra-Black: Towards a Materialist Theory of Oil,” *e-flux journal*, no. 84 (September 2017) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/84/149335/ultra-black-towards-a-materialist-theory-of-oil/>.

17
Alexander Bogdanov, *Essays in Teknology*, trans. George Gorelik (Intersystems Publications, 1980), 1. Thank you to David Muñoz Alcantara for inadvertently drawing my attention to this translational misunderstanding.

18
An essay refuting Reed’s hypothesis was cowritten by none other than Viktor Glushkov’s daughter, Vera Glushkova: V. D. Zakhmatov, V. V. Glushkova, and O. A. Kryazhich, “Vzryv, kotorogo ... ne bylo!” (An explosion that ... wasn’t!) <http://ogas.kiev.ua/perspective/vzryv-kotorogo-ne-bylo-581>.

19
Ekaterina Labetskaya, Fedor Lukyanov, Alexey Slobodin, and Yuri Shpakov, “Truba v beskonechnost’ Khronika samoy bol’shoy sdelki v rossiysko-germanskoy istorii” (Pipe to infinity: A chronicle of the largest deal in Russian-German history) <http://www.vremya.ru/print/3739.html>.

20
Labetskaya, Lukyanov, Slobodin, and Shpakov, “Truba v beskonechnost’.”

21

Labetskaya, Lukyanov, Slobodin, and Shpakov, “Truba v beskonechnost’,” emphasis mine.

22
When discussing carbon infrastructure, Aleksander Etkind claims that during the Cold War gas was as essential to state socialism as oil was to capitalism. Since it was much harder to stockpile gas than oil, gas was transported based on long-term guaranteed contracts, which, according to Etkind, made it an ideal resource for the planned economy. Furthermore, he writes that *liquefied* gas changed the political economy of gas: it could now be stored and sold according to need – that is, gas became a market commodity. Aleksander Etkind, *Priroda zla: Syrie i gosudarstvo* (Evil nature: Raw materials and the state) (Novoye Literaturnoye Obzoreniye, 2019).

23
In the context of Russian political economy, data is quite literally the new gas: the superprofits acquired through fossil fuel exports make it possible for the Russian state to fund its massive disinformation campaigns around the globe, as well as high-profile hacking operations, troll armies, and proxy militias. Gas is exported to foreign consumers whose payments are then converted into malicious data, unleashed upon those consumers themselves.

24
Nick Dyer-Witthof, “Cybernetic Revolutions and Surplus Populations,” lecture delivered at The School of Kyiv, October 25, 2015, Q&A.

25
See https://meduza.io/news/2020/02/02/dobycha-gazproma-v-yan-vare-upala-do-minimuma-za-tri-goda-iz-za-neozhidanno-tep-loy-pogody?utm_source=telegram&utm_medium=live&utm_campaign=live.

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“The war in the Persian Gulf ended just three months ago,” the *New York Times* alerted its readers in May 1991, “but some museums are already collecting artifacts from the conflict.”¹ Spooky *spolia* from America’s “first” Iraq campaign – such as Barbara Bush’s fatigue jacket or cookies found in discarded Iraqi uniforms – were making their way to assorted US military and state museums for public display. The objects said *this is what we did*, but these cast-offs of imperial plunder came also to be wrapped in revisionist identitarian empathy for the plunderers. The *Times* quotes a Smithsonian curator proudly proclaiming, “If you had come to this museum in 1960, it was essentially a white, elitist story. We have tried to convey that this is a much more complicated, much different story. Just as we have George Washington’s uniform, we want to have uniforms of a sergeant from a tank unit.”²

In the aftermath of Operation Desert Storm, Allan Sekula described that asymmetrical liberal empathy surrounding the first American war in Iraq as a selective mathematics of “innumerable third world bodies” and “precisely enumerated first world bodies.”³ But today’s theater of American exhibition-making flips these terms: precisely enumerated “others” counterpose innumerable masters lost in the fog of American regret. This reversal is characteristic of the empathetic errand of “unstrangering” foundational to modern humanitarianism and American counterinsurgency alike, for it drives the motor of military domination by juicing it culturally.⁴ Though it verges on the paranoid, this is one way a visitor to “Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991–2011” might have understood how the curators at MoMA PS1 – the Museum of Modern Art’s affiliate in Queens, New York, where the exhibition was on display from November 2019 to early March 2020 – came to deck their galleries with so many “hearts and minds”: artistic victims, witnesses, and far-flung observers of endless (Iraq) war.

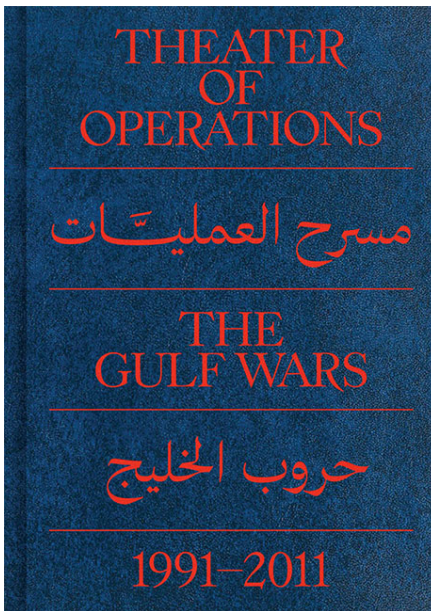
We empathize with our imagined visitor’s paranoia. While the exhibition tinged its titular historical event with a generic humanist regret for its toll, it all took place, after all, in an institution at whose organizational summit sits a certain Leon Black – billionaire investor, Iraq war profiteer, and chairman of the MoMA board. (While PS1 began as an independent institution in 1971, it was acquired by MoMA in 2000.⁵) Black is the founder and CEO of the private equity firm Apollo Global Management (named for a god the Greeks called *Ἀλεξίκακος* – *Alexicacus*, “averted of evil”). He has profited from the Iraq campaign through Apollo’s ownership of a grim menagerie of private military contractors, including the civilian-murder outfit formerly known as



Installation view of Allan Sekula, *War Without Bodies*, 1991/1996. On view in the exhibition "Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991–2011" at MoMA PS1, New York, 2020. Photo: Matthew Septimus.



Michel Auder, *Gulf War TV War* (still), 1991. (Edited 2017). Hi8 video and mini-DV transferred to digital video, 102 min. Courtesy the artist and Martos Gallery, New York.



Left: Cover of the catalog for "Theater of Operations" (MoMA PS1, 2019). Right: Jeremy Deller, *It Is What It Is: Conversations About Iraq*, 2008, exhibition view at New Museum, New York.

Blackwater. And Black's connection to US war-making in Iraq doesn't stop there. On the board of Apollo sits A. B. Krongard, the executive director of the Central Intelligence Agency during the run-up to the 2003 ground invasion of Iraq. (Krongard was responsible for the CIA's initial hiring of Blackwater under a lucrative Afghanistan contract in 2002; he was repaid in turn when Blackwater's then-owner Erik Prince asked him to join its board in 2007; and he quickly vacated his Blackwater board seat under subsequent conflict-of-interest scrutiny.⁶) Further, the exhibition thanks and features works lent by the person who has overseen the Iraqi national pavilion at the Venice Biennale since 2013, Tamara Chalabi, scion and on-the-ground accomplice of a crucial CIA-funded "native" asset in that invasion, Ahmed Chalabi.⁷ One could go on.

Count on us for the vulgar tally: Three hundred artworks from around eighty artists; two curators (Peter Eeley and Ruba Katrib); one exhibition ("Theater of Operations") about a twenty-year period (1991–2011) understood to represent the historical frame of the Iraq wars, occupying all three floors of MoMA PS1. One billionaire MoMA board chairman (Leon Black); nine formerly separate private military contractors rolled into a conglomerate (Constellis) now owned by Black's Apollo Global Management; seventeen Iraqi civilians murdered in the infamous Nisour Square massacre of 2007, perpetrated by mercenaries employed by Blackwater – a company that is now part of Constellis⁸ (and that was twice renamed after said murders "tarnished its brand"); one million overall civilian deaths (too many to rebrand).

First the inventory, then the self-accounting. Near the beginning of their catalog, the exhibition's cocurators, Eeley and Katrib, explain: "The artworks brought together here convey experiences and positions that counter the essentializing tendencies of mainstream narratives, particularly those that seek to define certain people as the 'enemy' and attempt to place them beyond the reach of our empathy."⁹ Soon this revisionist empathy cracks up: Eeley, in his longer essay later in the catalog, self-critically hedges that framing Iraqi artistic production "through the reductive lenses of violence and victimhood" might be counterproductive. Delirious acrobatics follow: "In assembling this exhibition, we worked with an awareness of these distorting pressures of reception, undoubtedly reinforced some of their political deformations, which must also be understood to have affected Western artists, albeit differently."¹⁰

How to address an exhibition that professes to "counter ... mainstream narratives," then

refuses to construct an organizing counter-narrative of its own, then admits that its reckoning – "undoubtedly" – made things worse? One could say that the exhibition's contortionist contrition itself sounds a lot like the current "mainstream narratives" of the Iraq wars, in which critical-historical accounting for cause and effect is voided by a scattershot plurality of times and places, people and events, stories and mediations. Curatorially evacuated of historical and institutional consciousness, "Theater of Operations" has a posthistorical event par excellence – the titular "Gulf Wars 1991–2011" – come home to roost at the posthistorical museum.¹¹

"Rather than reducing this complex subject into a linear trajectory," PS1 director Kate Fowle explains in her foreword to the catalog, "*Theater of Operations* offers a range of responses made in the context of two US-led wars in Iraq."¹² That much is clear, more or less – the two-wars narrative, as her colleagues acknowledge in their essays, is a fabrication of the public-relations apparatus of endless war. But there's a linear trajectory right there in the exhibition title – a chronology, perhaps even a period – that the actual exhibition shirks at every turn. This failed historical burden comes into view earlier in the same foreword, when Fowle gives three examples of similar exhibitions that "foregrounded this institution's commitment to such historical presentations": "EXPO 1" (2013); "Stalin's Choice: Soviet Socialist Realism 1932–1956" (1993); and "The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945–1994" (2002). Fowle was right to group them, since they all represent different reactions to the historical subjects of the posthistorical museum: the first exhibition by moving toward the futural mode of "speculation" (the house style of posthistorical historicism); the second through rote semi-triumphalist nostalgia toward the aesthetically and politically defeated; and the last, organized by the late Okwui Enwezor (it traveled to PS1), through a valiant postcolonial resuscitation of the task of critical periodization.¹³

Instead of critical periodization, "Theater of Operations" punts the Gulf Wars in favor of a grab bag of poorly articulated "stories" resolving to an underlying curatorial ethos of confused regret, a self-flagellating self-congratulation. It mirrors the lack of serious investigation into the Gulf Wars by most American left-liberals, who either believed that they "should not have happened" or simply withdrew rather than tangle deeply with the reality and spread of their ongoing repercussions. When it came time for the *New York Times* to cover the exhibition, arts writer Jason Farago decided to forego a traditional

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review and instead printed a “conversation” with a former *Times* Baghdad bureau chief.¹⁴ The latter wondered, after seeing the exhibition, “what contemporary art in Iraq might have looked like” if the wars hadn’t taken place. (Never mind that the *Times* had stenographed the case for war to its credulous readers.) This exculpatory counterfactual speaks to the logic of identification and identity at the center of this show’s morbid humanitarianism: Iraqis are indelibly marked by the travesty we have made of their country, but their ethical nobility consists purely in their impossible resilience to this mark we made. Our greatest form of empathetic identification, then, is to spare them in retroaction, un-marking them as we un-mark ourselves. The only form of identification ultimately imaginable is for “us” to hold out for Iraqis the image we hold of ourselves: we, the shifty half of aggressor and aggressed – guilty, maybe, but whole and holier for it.

The loose suggestion of the exhibition’s central historical conceit – that it produces a kind of Iraqi art history – is undercut by the cluttered and forced juxtaposition of artworks made by so-called “Western” and “non-Western” artists and the modish refusal to chronologize or even synthesize these contents spatially as an event-driven transnational history. Neither the physical arrangements nor accompanying texts do much to examine Iraq’s deep and deeply scattered modes of artistic production. In this, “Theater of Operations” reenacts that most tedious trope of postcolonial critique: the West as concept, the East as content.

In the rare moments where the show promises to narrate an Iraqi art history worth considering, as in Shakir Hassan Al Said’s extraordinary twinned paintings *Fragmentation No. 1* and *Wall #1*, both from 1991, the wall texts do little to explain how they fit into the histories to which they allude. To wit: “Al Said’s works provide a crucial point of reference for many of the artists in *Theater of Operations*, who have looked to him as a leading advocate for the establishment of abstraction as a key strategy in Iraqi art.” This is a surprisingly important sentence to find secreted away in the middle of a small paragraph in a remote gallery on the exhibition’s second floor, and odder still that these paintings are installed next to Paul Chan’s 2003 video *Baghdad in No Particular Order*, a work whose appearance here might perhaps be best explained by applying its title to the curatorial method of “Theater of Operations.” Al Said’s work, like the Iraqi art history of which it is a part, cannot and should not be understood within the singular framework of war, even and especially as staged in the unexamined frame of institutions, like PS1 or the Iraq pavilion in

Venice, whose conditions of existence abutt and abetted that war.

At the level of layout and content, the show itself was garlanded by 24/7 distraction, with cable television anachronized as material and medium, a kind of Internet 1.0: the oversized *Necklace*, CNN, a self-explanatory 2002 sculpture by Thomas Hirschhorn, was installed alone in the gallery opposite the building’s entrance. Hirschhorn’s gold-foil-enrobed links teased the sequence of large projections that patterned the rest of the exhibition’s ground floor, where video works by Monira Al Qadiri (*Behind the Sun*, 2013) and Michel Auder (*Gulf War TV War*, 1991/2017) framed the exhibition’s first impression with the grainy spectacle of cable B-roll, blown up beyond the scale of even the biggest-screen TV, curatorially montaged into canonical media works from Harun Farocki and Dara Birnbaum, among others. And there are many others. It is as if, since the Gulf Wars began some decades ago, there has been no examination that might compel the show to update either its media-theoretical determinism or clash-of-civilizations historicism, evident in lame distributions of passive and active agency: East/West, viewer/soldier, Iraqi/non-Iraqi. The wars were not even enacted by a strictly geographic “West.” The first Gulf War was largely funded by Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. (The 2003 invasion and subsequent regional wars were made possible by Qatar’s Al Udeid Air Base, which remains the largest US base in the region.) Many of the artists in the show have lived outside of Iraq, in “the West,” for almost the entirety of their formation and career, again blurring the curatorial vulgarity of identity.

The purpose of the show was, ostensibly, to examine “the legacies of these conflicts beginning with the Gulf War in 1991, featuring over 300 works by more than 80 artists based in Iraq and its diasporas, as well as those responding to the war from the West.”¹⁵ As laudable and relevant as this may be, the exhibition overdetermines the legacy of the wars (or was it “conflicts”?) by pinning it all on the screen, as if to say *it was the media, stupid!* A selection from Jean Baudrillard’s “Gulf War” writings is the exhibition catalogue’s first outside text, appearing sandwiched between essays by the show’s two curators. The first Gulf War’s televisual, more-than-real mediation was infamously figured as noneventfulness by Baudrillard, who also wrote that Western audiences all live “in a uniform shameful indifference.”¹⁶ But the idea that millions of citizens were simply slackjawed out of historical consciousness by CNN soothsayers oversimplifies a much more enduring passivity, if

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NYPD at the MoMA Divest protest at PS1, March 1, 2020. Photo: MoMA Divest.

not complicity, in ongoing massacres in Iraq that remain on display. As nicely packaged a theory as the medium it aims to critique, the delirium of cable news did not exactly spirit away our ability to confront his *guerre du Golfe*, nor fast-forward its brutal body count. The stupor was not alchemically induced but somehow willed.

Moreover, the exhibition's swerve to telecommunicative mediation seems at cross-purposes with its desire to foreground work by "Iraqi" artists. This appears to suggest that the civilian on the ground in Iraq was inaccessible to American audiences as an ethical subject at the time, justifying the exhibition's concern with artistic practice as a kind of belated humanization. Artists in Iraq, particularly young artists who came of age during the invasion, have never lacked the desire or ability to create art. But globally visible contemporary art, as anyone in the field knows, often assumes a ladder of prestigious art-school attendance, production support, mentorship, residencies, international travel, and social skill, usually in English. At Iraq's two main art schools in Baghdad, which are free of cost, middle- and working-class students hardly have access to resources reserved for elites. Instead of journalists speculating what Iraqi art could have looked like – or curators failing to engage with artists outside their comfort class – it would be more useful to consider how actually-existing forms of production could be supported and understood. Young Iraqi artists never stopped working, and are informed – formally and informally – by the extensive visual and political histories that stretch from the Sumerian era to Baghdad's current sprawling metropolis. Which "Iraq" is ultimately being recuperated in this exhibition?

One of these is that of big-budget American films like *Jarhead* (2005) and *Hurt Locker* (2008). These Hollywood dramas exhibit Iraqis as an enemy staged prophylactically against sympathetic and identifiable American forces, though this extends even to Werner Herzog's *Lessons of Darkness* (1992), which was screened on both the opening and the closing days of the PS1 show. It applies as well to Jeremy Deller's *It Is What It Is* (2009) videos, also screened for the show; these videos are part of a larger artwork that included an American PSYOPS officer, an American curator, an Iraqi military translator newly arrived to the US, and Deller himself in an all-male traveling crew of supposedly "non-biased" experts on Iraq and/or the art of conversation.¹⁷ (The translational gimmick of the "Theater of Operations" catalog cover calls back to a banner Deller produced, its theater of Arabic script curtaining the untranslated English of its contents.) Along with the film screenings, the exhibition included works by artists Steve

Mumford and Francis Alÿs, the former embedded with US troops (2003–11), the latter embedded with Kurdish forces in a 2016 commission by the aforementioned Tamara Chalabi's Ruya Foundation.¹⁸ "It Is Still Ongoing" is the title of a catalog essay by one of the exhibition's curators, prompting one to imagine that the contextualization of Iraq's ongoing violence has in fact been subversively understood. Instead, here the curators rehabilitate Iraq's pop-military narration and similarly constructed artistic theater.

Fixed squarely inside this exhibition is the assumption that Iraqis should be grateful for an American institution of note finally acknowledging these wars, however superficial this acknowledgment might be. Yet the violence of these wars lives irrevocably on inside the US and its "coalition partners," and addressing that is hardly a benevolent act. Perhaps worst of all for a contemporary art institution, the attempt to generalize and pluralize the theme of a brutal and ongoing campaign of terror resulted in an exhibition that precisely mirrors the crux of the problem when it comes to US thinking on Iraq: it is not rooted in any substantial understanding or attempt to address the complexity of Iraqi experience. Iraqis *inside* Iraq are today revolting against the iterative "theaters of operations" that have taken their voices and their lives and all but canceled their future. They are – remarkably, and historically – resisting with their own protests and artworks. And these protests have no inroads into "Theater of Operations" at PS1 because the exhibition – outside of profiteering board members – does not communicate, in any way, with Baghdad.

The cost of the exhibition's incapacity to stage a historically situated claim to artistic production around the Gulf Wars, and the inevitable contradictions of its institutional linkages to American capital (and therefore American war), was perhaps most evident in its alienated and alienating treatment of the only two artists in the show who had any recent residence in Baghdad, Ali Eyal (b. 1994) and Ali Yass (b. 1992). Yass, currently living as a refugee in Berlin, planned to use proxies to intentionally tear his work on display at the show – childhood sketches that comprised *1992; Now*, (2016–17) – on the final day of the exhibition. Conceived as a protest against the museum's silence regarding Black's position on its board, Yass's action was unauthorized, unlike several other politically flavored – and officially sanctioned – interventions on the exhibition's public program of "performances."¹⁹ This kind of reactive antagonism toward the institution has long been accepted as a part of the officially unofficial culture of artistic discourse, an artistic "right" of

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Ali Eyal, *Nightmare*, 2020. Black ink on pillowcase. Courtesy of the artist. Photo: Diana Cantarey.

which MoMA has a long history and to which Yass alluded in his own explanation.²⁰ But here PS1 felt threatened by this insubordination, summarily deinstalling his work prior to the last day of the exhibition and making the rare decision to escalate the presence of private security guards by calling in armed police to the gallery in which Yass had choreographed an activist group (MoMA Divest) to express his artistic position.²¹

Eyal, for his part, discovered that an image of his work from the show, *Painting Size 80x60cm* (2018), was being used on social media by PS1 to advertise free admission for military veterans on the American holiday Veteran's Day. The work is comprised of pillowcases on which the artist has drawn illustrations and writing in Arabic, recounting the dreams of the members of an Iraqi family who have lost loved ones in the war. These acts of alternative memorialization are part of an ongoing series. The museum, which does not own Eyal's work and did not remunerate him (or any other artist) for participating in the exhibition, had not sought permission to use his artwork in this way. Eyal later produced a new pillowcase work on the "nightmare" of having his art cater to "the ones responsible for the destruction in my country." In his youth he had experienced American soldiers as a violent occupying force, abusing civilians in his neighborhood and invading the home he shared with his mother south of Baghdad. In their above-quoted preface, the curators toggle conceptually and grammatically between objects ("artworks") and subjects ("certain people," i.e., Iraqis). These objects are subject-oriented: according to the curators, the exhibition of the former is meant to produce "empathy" for the latter. A paradox of autonomy, because those to whom "empathy" is due ("certain people") are, of course, also producing artworks for their exhibition.

On the exhibition's opening day last November, Constellis posted a job listing for a "Designated Defensive Marksman" – which is to say a sniper – for its Baghdad theater of operation.²² The same week that the call for a sniper to join Leon Black's company went out, more than 250 Iraqi protesters were killed by military-grade tear gas canisters and live fire from an array of irregular "security forces" in Iraq, including snipers. The countrywide youth-led protests, past their half-year mark, have galvanized the Iraqi public's frustration with crushing corruption, unemployment, and heavily deteriorated living conditions – in short, the immeasurably traumatic and ongoing legacies of the Gulf Wars. Inevitably, some artists and organizations – MoMA Divest, the Veterans Art Movement, and thirty-seven artists participating

in the exhibition – have called on the museum to "divest" itself of Leon Black and other unsavory funders in an open letter.

This "toxic philanthropy" narrative rushes to fill the void left by an absence of conceptual precision and clear thinking about "empathetic" exhibitions like "Theater of Operations."²³ In the case of the 2019 Whitney Biennial, Warren B. Kanders was a peripheral figure easily sacrificed to preserve the broader unity of the philanthropic apparatus. Leon Black is impunity incarnate, his wealth and power so vast that even publicized connections with the late pedophile Jeffrey Epstein, let alone war crimes in Iraq, have not moved him from MoMA's board. This may be one reason why that open letter sent to the MoMA board, administrators, and curatorial staff was ignored, save for refusals of the artists' requests to register their objections in the galleries by updating their work. Yes, these artists had not been previously aware of the relationship between Black and Blackwater; they learned of this long-public fact at the time of the exhibition's opening from the authors of this essay. This is not a recrimination but a broader comment on the political limitations of haphazard or belated artistic denunciations of "toxic philanthropy." Not only is such philanthropy immanent to the social basis of art under capitalism; curatorial malpractice here and elsewhere exacerbates and disguises the problem, trolling the political consciousness of artists by pressing catchall liberal-ethical messaging into ever greater and more explicit contradiction with the facts of the museum's economic reality.

As far as haphazard and overwhelming thematic exhibitions go, "Theater of Operations" was in some sense par for the course: An unwieldy conceit. A doddering artist list whose magnitude and claims to exposure and discovery belied its procurement from a small number of prominent private collections. An eccentric catalog, to which one of the authors of this piece contributed an essay. For all of the show's problems, there remain works that should be seen, conversations that ought to be had, failures that need to be documented. Unfortunately, while the exhibition's curators rightly noted that the time for an examination of Iraq is overdue, there seems to have been little research or thought given to the specific time period addressed – a period which, properly framed, could have allowed PS1 to show how advanced creative work can turn received ideas about history on their head.

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1

Our title, besides being a riff on the activist group-cum-slogan “Decolonize This Place,” is meant to make the negative image of cultural “decolonization” productive, especially as raised by the specific institutional and historical frame of “Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991–2011,” a recent exhibition at MoMA PS1 in New York. Activist reaction aside, we wonder how the immanent violence of the institution might be thought here in terms of the intellectual duties of exhibition. We are prompted also by a recent work by Francisco Godoy Vega, who has proposed a “recolonial” understanding of exhibitions of Latin American art staged in the Iberian peninsula during roughly the same period covered by “Theater of Operations” – a similar historical encounter between the avowedly redemptive cultural politics of “decolonization” and the political economy of colonialisms past and present. See Francisco Godoy Vega, *La exposición como recolonización: Exposiciones de arte latinoamericano en el Estado español, 1989–2010* (*The exhibition as recolonization: Exhibitions of Latin American art in the Spanish state, 1989–2010*) (2018).

2

“Souvenirs of Gulf War Find Way to Museums,” *New York Times*, May 28, 1991 <http://e-flux.com/journal>.

3

Allan Sekula, “War Without Bodies,” pamphlet and article in *Artforum*, November 1991.

4

See Rijin Sahakian, “A Reply to Nato Thompson’s ‘The Insurgents, Part I,’” *e-flux journal*, no. 48 (October 2013) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/48/60042/a-reply-to-nato-thompson-s-the-insurgents-part-i/>. The historian Keith Watenpugh has argued that the “history of modern humanitarianism tells us that at the center of humanitarian reason is a project of unstrangering the object of humanitarianism.” What he means is that humanitarianism belongs not to the liberal schema of stranger-ethics, that opening up of “compassion – as opposed to pity – to the generic stranger,” but rather positions its others as “knowable, similar, and deserving.” See Keith Watenpugh, *Bread from Stones: The Middle East and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism* (University of California Press, 2015), 19. For a broader view on the epistemic implication of the humanitarian frame in the construction of “global” historical narratives, see Daniel Bertrand Monk and Andrew Herscher (and respondents) in “A Discussion on the Global and the Universal,” *Grey Room* 61 (Fall 2015): 66–127.

5

In private discussions with one of the authors of this article and various exhibition participants, the curators of this show have contended that PS1 and MoMA are distinct entities. This is essentially untrue. The chairman of the board of the Museum of Modern Art has a permanent appointment, ex officio, on the PS1 board. Insofar as PS1 is, for historical and logistical reasons relating to the public land it occupies, a separate legal entity, MoMA is the “sole corporate member” of that separate legal entity. Here is how MoMA has described this relationship in its tax filings: “The Museum as sole Member of PS1 Contemporary Art Center, Inc (DBA MoMA PS1). In 2000 MoMA PS1 and the Museum entered into an affiliation to promote the study, knowledge, enjoyment and appreciation of modern and contemporary art through a collaborative program of exhibitions, research, special projects and other educational and curatorial activities. MoMA PS1 retained its separate corporate status and is a support corporation of the Museum with the Museum as its sole corporate member. The Museum has the right to appoint all members of the MoMA PS1 board of Directors. MoMA PS1 and the Museum entered into a management assistance and services agreement whereby the Museum provides management assistance and service to MoMA PS1 in certain areas, including accounting and payroll, fundraising and development, coordination of MoMA PS1’s information technology, insurance and legal affairs.” Museum of Modern Art, Internal Revenue Service Form 990, Schedule I, Part IV, Page 2 (2016).

6

A. B. Krongrad served as the executive director of the CIA from 2001 to 2004; see his bio here <https://www.apollo.com/stockholders/corporate-governance>. He briefly served on the board of Blackwater, resigning after an incredible episode in which his brother, who was then the State Department inspector general and therefore responsible for investigating the company, perjured himself when asked under oath if his brother A. B. was on its board. See Scott Shane, “Brothers, Bad Blood and the Blackwater Tangle,” *New York Times*, November 17, 2007 <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/17/us/17brothers.html>.

7

Mostafa Heddaya, “An Outsourced Vision? The Trouble with Iraq’s ‘Neocolonial’ Venice Pavilion,” *ARTINFO*, April 2, 2015 <https://web.archive.org/web/20160330151727/http://www.blouinartinfo.com/news/story/1126765/an-outsourced-vision-the-trouble-with-iraqs-neocolonial>. In a review of Tamara

Chalabi's 2011 family memoir, a *New York Times* reporter fondly recounts meeting her while embedded with US Special Forces: "The Chalabis occupied the one intact structure on the bombed-out, postage-stamp-size air defense installation, while we camped in the twisted ruins and fly-infested dirt. Tamara graciously shared with me the transformer shed she had rigged into a shower." Linda Robinson, "By the Banks of the Tigris," *New York Times*, January 21, 2011

<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/23/books/review/Robinson-t.html>. *Bookforum's* reviewer was less sanguine: <https://www.bookforum.com/print/1704/tamara-chalabi-s-memoir-sidesteps-her-father-s-role-in-the-iraq-invasion-6674>.

8 See Mike Stone, "Apollo Global in Talks to Buy Constellis," *Reuters*, August 5, 2016 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-constellis-m-a-apollo-idUSKCN10G26P>.

9 *Theater of Operations: The Gulf Wars 1991–2011*, exhibition catalog, eds. Peter Eleey and Ruba Katrib (MoMA PS1, 2019), 10.

10 *Theater of Operations*, 27.

11 We are influenced in this formulation not only by the exhibition's reanimation of Jean Baudrillard, to whom we will briefly return below, but also by Baudrillard's employment in a broader intellectual history, one critically engaged by Lutz Niethammer's *Posthistoire: Has History Come to an End?*, trans. Patrick Camiller (Verso 1994), and Hal Foster's *The Return of the Real: Art and Theory at the End of the Century* (October Books, 1996), in which the term "posthistorical museum" also makes an early appearance. In an evocative footnote, Foster quotes the artist Ashley Bickerton's posthistorical identification with an end of politics: "We are now in a post-political situation," 257n34.

12 Kate Fowle, "Foreword," in *Theater of Operations*, 7.

13 As Enwezor wrote about "The Short Century": "Perhaps there is a need to clarify a central operating principle of this exhibition, namely to examine the link between independence movements and liberation struggles as methods for achieving African political autonomy and cultural self-awareness." Okwui Enwezor, "An Introduction," *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa 1945–1994*, exhibition catalog, eds. Okwui Enwezor and Chinua Achebe (Prestel, 2001), 11.

14 Jason Farago and Tim Arango, "These Artists Refuse to Forget the Wars in Iraq," *New York Times*, November 15, 2019 <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/14/arts/design/iraq-wars-art-momaps1-review.html>.

15 See MoMA's description of the exhibition on its website <https://www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/5084>.

16 Jean Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Indiana University Press, 1995), 24. The granting of keystone catalog real estate to that catastrophizing Cassandra of posthistory is meant as a keyword association with the Gulf War but is also a calling card for the "posthistorical museum" itself, which took shape during the very same period called into question by this exhibition. For Baudrillard, the Gulf War was a case study in the violent mediations of "anorexic history" that he, along with other diagnosticians of posthistory on either side of the Atlantic, had signaled in the penultimate decade of the twentieth century. "Theater of Operations" portends to dissolve this old posthistory, what with its past flattening of Iraqi agency, only to propose a new one that sounds just like it – a "contiguous globalized ether that presupposes a borderless relationality internally consistent with itself," per the curatorial jargonization.

17 See Rijin Sahakian, "It Is What It Is," *Jadaliyya*, February 22, 2012 <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Detailes/25300>.

18 "Francis Alÿs on his Embedment with the Kurdish Army in Mosul," *Artforum*, February 9, 2017 <https://www.artforum.com/interviews/francis-aly-s-on-his-embedment-with-the-kurdish-army-in-mosul-66451>.

19 Dia Azzawi darkened the gallery room that held his work *Mission of Destruction* (2004–07) on February 6, 2020, to mark the anniversary of Colin Powell's UN speech claiming that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction. On the same day, and to mark the same event, Wafaa Bilal held a performance, *October*, that involved altering books that visitors had brought into the museum, which were to be sent to the College of Fine Arts in Baghdad.

20 In his words: "By remaking this piece yet again through its unmaking, I claim my right to resistance, in the museum, and in solidarity with Iraqis leading a revolution against their destruction and exploitation today." See the video of Yass delivering his statement on

YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yXEMyZfGzcc>.

21 According to a spokesperson for the museum, "There are no circumstances under which MoMA PS1 would accept the destruction of artworks or aggression towards our staff or visitors. When a few dozen protesters arrived at MoMA PS1 on the last day of 'Theater of Operations,' they were offered public space within the museum to be heard. The protesters' threats to staff, property, and art forced the temporary closure of several exhibition galleries to the public. We are proud of the unwavering respect and professionalism our team showed to all." Quoted in Alex Greenberger, *ARTnews*, March 2, 2020 <https://www.artnews.com/artnews/news/ali-yass-moma-ps1-protest-removal-1202679638/>.

22 The listing, which has since disappeared, was posted on the Constellis website https://constellis.jobs.net/search?missing_job=true.

23 The term "toxic philanthropy" came into currency around the public strafing of Whitney trustee Warren B. Kanders in connection with that museum's 2019 biennial, where, like "Theater of Operations," liberal-ethical messaging (and contemporaneous media outrages) highlighted a longstanding institutional affiliation with carceral border policing, at least in the form of Kanders's business interests. While the public humiliation of plutocrats is never unproductive, "toxic philanthropy" is nevertheless an imprecise sobriquet: it turns the identity of capital into a reformable trait. David Joselit recently proposed a parallel if ultimately different diagnosis of the "double bind" between artistic reaction and institutional messaging. See Joselit, "Toxic Philanthropy," *October*, no. 170 (Fall 2019). For an example of the toxic philanthropy narrative used in the context of "Theater of Operations," see Zachary Small, "Michael Rakowitz Wants to Pause His Video Work at MoMA PS1 as a Protest Against Museum's ties to 'Toxic Philanthropy,'" *The Art Newspaper*, December 2, 2019 <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/michael-rakowitz-says-moma-ps1-curators-repeatedly-denied-his-requests-to-pause-video-work-in-gulf-war-exhibition-as-a-protest-of-moma-trustees>.

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Luis Camnitzer
**Escuela
Nacional de
Bellas Artes**

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Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes

In 1958, thanks to the efforts of its students and the Federación de Estudiantes Universitarios del Uruguay, the Escuela Nacional de Bellas Artes (ENBA) in Montevideo was integrated into the national university. This allowed students and graduates to participate in the government of the school and to effect curricular reform in a hitherto extremely conservative art academy. The text below was an attempt to bring together collective ideas and suggestions that could structure that reform. Some students had already started to work on this in the early fifties. Until 1958 the school had been rigidly controlled by the Ministry of Education and Culture, which had made change impossible. This is an abridged text composed of fragments from the much longer document which I have translated from the original Spanish. Footnotes have been added for the reader's benefit.

I don't believe that there is any other aesthetic premise than freedom, as much personal as collective. As this is also an ethical premise, I don't believe that one can detach aesthetic premises from pedagogical methodologies. In reference to art, leaving aside any precise definition, I understand that it should be a universal form of expression, since every action should be aesthetic and everything should be creative. The opposite is neutral and stagnant. I understand that there is no "anti-art" but, if anything, there is an "other-art" with the same rights and validity.

Undoubtedly, the most common means of expression is the word. It's misused and abused. It determines thought rather than being a consequence of it. Metaphors have become formal sentences that have lost their original image, and that is how we think.

The academy tends to undergo this same process in other forms of artistic expression. It is a totalitarian process, inasmuch as it tries to annul individual creativity and impose an ultimate and absolute truth. Technique tends to repeat that same process in the other forms of expression by forcing alienated structures onto the individual rather than allowing the individual to challenge, change, and create structures.

From an ideal point of view, the classification of "artistic" and "non-artistic" forms of expression is as arbitrary and absurd as the classification of "major" and "minor" art forms. I understand that the ENBA must eradicate this division. In saying this I'm also saying that art is an attitude and, following this, that it is an attitude of freedom (which is obviously an engagement; freedom is the correct use of individual potential). And in a panorama that comprises "word," "academy," and "technique," art is a warmongering attitude, where the weapon serves as much to kill as to

give birth.

I understand that every human being is able to express him- or herself artistically. It is done to a greater or lesser degree, or it's not done at all (a case I consider hypothetical) depending on the interference of academies, of empty forms, and of prejudice, all of which generally hamper natural development.

I understand that there are individuals with a greater potential for sensitivity than others, although I also believe that sensitivity can be developed. A child is not considered to be a valid artist only because their position is not validated by the community. The same is true of the mentally impaired, but they too are capable of expressing their sensitivities without being inhibited by superstructures.

As Maria Montessori wrote: "Free drawings are only possible if we have a free child who was allowed to grow and perfectly assimilate the surrounding environment ... and who, left free to create and express, really creates and expresses."¹ I understand that this is equally true of adults, and this should be one of the fundamental tenets for the pedagogy at the ENBA. Our society is not composed of "free children," nor are those who will attend our school "free." The school has to transform them and give them the strength to transform others. For that it has to return to them the capacity for original and primitive experience, the capacity to renew their naivety, the capacity for unprocessed feelings, discovery, invention, and play in Fröbel's sense.² The First Period of the ENBA [curriculum] achieves some of this by introducing the student to different techniques and materials in order to define a path. Or better, a sensorial orientation.³

This sensorial orientation should be intensified during the Fundamental Studios [the Second Period of the curriculum]. Here the instructors will be better equipped than the technicians [in the First Period] to calibrate the needs of the student, since the student will already have some idea of their own direction and a panoramic overview of a vast range of materials that will allow, at any moment, for synthesis (a minimum to be demanded from the Second Period). This means that everything will be reflected in the student's attitude toward the material. The choice of material will no longer be arbitrary, but has to be directed first toward the achievement of a pure experience and then toward a special experience. This is what will define the Fundamental Sculpture Studio, as long as this title is not limited by the historical meaning of the words.

The student will aim at a total revision of herself and of her relations with the environment. These relations will no longer be reduced to a chain of actions governed by the

need for subsistence and replicating the market. Instead they will express the militancy that arises automatically between an individual aware of freedom and an environment of oppression.

In the case of sculpture, it's no longer about making equestrian monuments, intimate portraits, or objects for the shelf, all of which subordinate space to their own existence. Sculpture has to create spaces, not subordinate them. It must take a human scale, and the militancy that corresponds to it is an education that refuses hyper- and infrahuman scales. It is in this sense that a science of design following the ideas of Gropius may have validity. But we should go even further. It's not about creating spaces for the people, but about teaching people to create their own spaces. It's only from here that artists may spring onward, owing to a higher degree of specialization and vocation, and not because of accident ("my son draws very well") or manual skills. This is the only way an artist can be a normal human being, like a shoemaker, whose higher degree of professionalization is indispensable for the community. Klee once said: "We have all the conditions to be artists, what we lack is a people." In our case we have the conditions for neither, and their formation is closely linked.

Let's now discuss the organization of the Fundamental Sculpture Studio. For this there are two considerations: the studio is a community of shared interests, and it's also a conglomerate of individuals. This will be reflected in both team activities and individual works, beyond permanent group discussions. The work plan sketched out here is open to revisions and changes according to group discussions and individual needs (a discussion, by the way, should not necessarily be limited to the use of words). The plan for the studio has two areas: one is the more or less animalistic relation with the material, with a slow integration of connective and formal elements; the other, with a plastic intention, goes from formal speculation to the placement in the environment (which for some may be a further development of the formal speculation). It is in this second area where the individuality of the student may offer some danger to the instructor. At this stage, the student's confidence is still fragile when self-criticism is applied to their intuitive instruments rather than their practical decisions, as was the case in the first area. A lack of doubt may lead to the wrong path, and an excess of doubt may inhibit the work.

I understand that, at moments like this, it's useful for the instructor to delineate the basic limits of each student. Not dividing by type along Kretschmer's or Jung's categories, which done

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without proper knowledge may be too schematic, but by studying the student's reactions when confronted with specific problems, including the use of tests. Without the use of complex tools like Rorschach blots, one may reach conclusions by comparing a drawing by the student with his or her handwriting (looking at consistency, conventionality in either, family influence in the handwriting, etc.); by gauging their reaction when having to fill space (fear, shyness, crowding, or emptiness); or their representation in a self-portrait (for example, the placement within a rectangular frame of a profile implies inhibitions). With these elements one may avoid undesirable dead ends for the student, and find a path by construction rather than by destruction (like those students who have to overcome academic training).

The first step in the studio is creating an original experience of the material. The student will take a piece of clay and press it through his fingers, tear off pieces, feel it with more and less water. Splinter a piece of wood in different directions; tear and fold a sheet of paper; dent and perforate metal; let ink drip into water; create smoke and move it into shapes. There will be an immediate critical reaction that will define a basic sensorial range: viscous, soft, etc.; and a second comparative one: dry, humid, wet. Each student will draw personal theoretical conclusions from this. They should be written down and fed into teamwork, where the work will be complemented [by the experiences of the group]. A second step in this will be to allow materials to generate their own forms: shapes that were created during the first step, but that hadn't been properly focused on. The results will present texture and structure problems. Texture will be explored by repeating the first step and by grouping the results of different materials: fabric, glass, sandpaper, brick, etc. After a period of individual research, the team will classify the experiences according to different criteria: smooth to rough, glossy to matte, etc. Individually again there will be experimentation with structure, like paper balls, fabric extended in space, and so on. The structure problem will be solved by making constructions that minimize waste, from mountains and stalactites made with wet sand, to towers made with sticks, folded paper structures that bear weight, and self-supporting wire structures. The difference between the first and second becomes blurred, and the next step is to compose and to integrate basic functions: shapes made to touch, to roll, to push, activities that merge with the material. The results will be classified individually and collectively into collections. The cultural history instructor will help situate the experience in the context of the histories of different cultures.⁴ At

the same time the geometry instructor will discuss geometric and non-geometric connections, and present exercises in topological geometry.

The following work is about mixed structures in which forms and textures are combined, and also considers the colors of the materials: for example, finding four materials in the garden to build a vertical structure.

Over time, academic art favored some materials over others based on their physical durability. This created a dogmatic faith in some materials over others and precludes the free use of new materials. The process of study here tries to reconsider this hierarchy. Newsprint is a material as valid as gold and, according to how it's used, may have more expressive possibilities. It's only beyond a certain level of progress in the aims of expression that durability may become an issue. While a scientific research into the durability of a material is beyond the requirements of the Fundamental Studio, it may be picked up later in the specific Technical Studios according to the student's interest and the practical resources of the school. In the event that the school doesn't have the facilities to address the research, links with commercial industries or the Industrial School should be set up, but always under supervision of the corresponding ENBA instructor.

The problems that ensue are spatial. The student will evolve forms, first in two dimensions, to understand the essence of the assignment, and then in three dimensions, to study its kinetic aspects. In the first case a basic shape will be drawn (triangle, square, etc.) to study variations on the page: square, square with open side, broken open side, different angles, etc. In the second case, different materials will be used. A wire square may be deformed into different shapes without cutting the wire. The same may be done with an open square, to be closed after it has been deformed. Different rules may be introduced (taking a square without adding or subtracting material, but introducing cuts into the surface).

The next series of assignments studies light and shadow. The student determines a desired shape for a shadow and builds a structure that, using a fixed light source, casts a shadow to fit the shape. After a first trial, the next step includes predetermined shadows on and between the things used. The exercise will be repeated as teamwork.

I consider education toward teamwork to be crucial, as a problem's complexity often surpasses the ability of a single individual to solve it. Teamwork is an effective instrument to bring a problem down to a manageable scale. Teams shall work horizontally, and every member

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has to participate. Later teams will be expanded to include members of other studios, so that ultimately they will be able to work with architects and industry.

Besides the development of a personal vantage point, the sensitivity of the student has to extend to the perception and digestion of the reality of the environment. For our purposes this reality has two parts: an ethical one and a plastic one. Sensitizing in the first part is the responsibility of the cultural history instructor. The second part is the responsibility of the studio instructor. This does not mean that the studio experience should extend to ingesting mescaline, but it should make it possible to reconsider previous studio experiences when confronted with everyday objects. The student should be able, imaginatively, to abstract and compose from fixed reality (meaning reality that cannot be [physically] transformed by the perceiver): to find signs, characters, and monsters, to speculate with the development of a shadow, to deform and distort spaces without touching them. This phase includes interpretive exercises in the spirit of Johannes Itten in regards to a corner of the studio, the garden, street, table, flower vase, or even a work of art. They will be expressed fundamentally through sketches. The student now will have to make sure that expression is consistent or, even more, that when confronted with existing things he or she uses consistent attitudes.

The group of students will be supplied with a phrase made up of two words which are as incommensurate as possible. Each student will have to find a mode of expression that makes them coherent, thus putting order into his universe. The words will first refer to objects (car, faucet), then in a more complex step to concepts or qualities (fatness, finality). At this point the student is already on a personal path. Corrections will eliminate any subordination of the plastic form to the natural form, trying to give the plastic form a new origin. Obsequious realism does not belong to the sphere of art. The problem is not of imitating reality, but of the translation or the direct use of things.

Maybe this is an aesthetic postulate, though for me it continues at the same time to be an ethical one. The student now is free in the sense of being able to aim the act of creation at whatever he or she pleases. It will be the student who dictates the place from which the instructor works, and any discussion of the student's production has to respect that demand, or not take place at all.

x

This text, originally written in 1960, is an excerpt from *One Number Is Worth One Word* by Luis Camnitzer, forthcoming in April 2020 from *e-flux journal* and Sternberg Press.

Luis Camnitzer is an Uruguayan artist living in New York.

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1

Maria Montessori, *The Advanced Montessori Method* (Montessori-Pierson, 2007), 308.

2

Friedrich Fröbel (1782–1852) was a German educationalist best known for his promotion of learning through play and the invention of the kindergarten.

3

In his *Crónicas del entusiasmo* (Banda Oriental, 2018), historian Gabriel Peluffo Linari refers to this period of the ENBA as “experimentalist.” The observation is illustrative, because the contact with the array of techniques was not intended to develop crafts, but to experience materials and dimensions.

4

The course was called “Cultural and Historical Instruction.”

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On Juliana
Huxtable**

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It was such a great moment that I barely remember it. Juliana Huxtable played us through to dawn at the itinerant queer techno rave party known as *unter*. Images of Jessie's blond hair floating through the fog, of Yaya's painted nails gripping her fan. I texted them to ask that they remember it for me. Yaya: "We worked hard, like Chinese hand fans. It was queer euphoria, Planet Huxtable and we had landed." Jessie: "It was a really astonishing fusion that never felt like genre mashing or jumping, just raw intensity of speech and propulsion."

Juliana and I only hung out once. I don't know her. I want to write about her on a first-name basis, but I don't want that read as either familiar or diminishing. Quite the opposite. There's power in routing around the patronymic, even that of an adoptive screen dad. Rawness, intensity, and propulsion on a planet where day and night change places, where none of us know our names.

After *unter*, I started coming to her shows, and listening to her dj mixes on Soundcloud.¹ The vocal samples that hook me (versus those that don't) clock me relative to Juliana at different velocities in history and geography: "Playgirl" by Ladytron, "Boys Wanna Be Her" by Peaches, "Pigeon Man" by Jamilla Woods, "Sleeper in Metropolis" by Anne Clark, and "Spleen" by Charles Baudelaire. Moments in a social graph where our playlists intersect. #okboomer: that her hip-hop samples don't resonate situates me as middle-aged, middle-class, white, antipodean, and – ever since I cracked my egg – trans.

I'm picturing Juliana as I saw her at another *unter*: standing in the night, in the chillout yard, looking out over the heads of the crowd that parts and flows around. She is in the flow, always, but cutting it off, shaping it, seeing it while being seen. A singular point in the torrent of signed and signed-off bodies, an instance of how to be a 21c artist. I said hello but she doesn't register. I don't stand out in this crowd; she has no option not to.

One time I was hanging with my friend Jackie and I read aloud the title piece to Juliana's book *Mucus in My Pineal Gland* while Jackie improvised on piano.² And there it was again, astonishment, fusion, propulsion. *Mucus in My Pineal Gland* is, among other things, a kind of aberrant black, queer, trans autobiography, but one where the larval Juliana is legible only as refracted, or not, through mediating surfaces. COLORING IN COLORING BOOKS, DISNEY PRINCESSES WITH CRAYON BROWN FACES AND CRAYON BLACK COIFS, AS IF THEY HAD RELAXERS IN WHATEVER PARALLEL TIME THEY WERE "IN."³ Agency in a world of presets. It's writing that's also a theory of its own aesthetic

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methods. I want to write with this writing, rather than about it. Think of this as a remix. Everything in ALL-CAPS is from Juliana.

I ALWAYS PICKED THE GIRLS WHEN I PLAYED VIDEO GAMES. IF FOR NO OTHER REASON THAT OUT OF SHEER SPIE AT THE EASE OF IDENTIFICATION THE BOYS AROUND ME HAD WITH THEIR UNINTERESTINGLY PHALLIC/KAMEHAMEHA SUPER-HEROES ... I WENT TO EVERY LAN PARTY IN HOPES I COULD WITNESS THEM LOSE BATTLE AFTER BATTLE TO HYPERBOLIC DEPICTIONS OF THE SAME FIGURES THEY WOULD LATER JERK OFF TO ... THE SAME IMAGINARY CUNTS AND PHANTASTICAL PUSSIES THAT WOULD (AND STILL DO) TEMPT THEM TO TOUCH AND CONQUER THE VITAMIN ENRICHED TUNA OF MY BODY.⁴

The boys want to be her; the girls want to be her. I imagine a work like *Untitled (Lil' Marvel)* from 2017 as embodying that fantastical pussy, slicked onto the skin and into an image. Braids fly, the hands summon some magical power, while the figure stands, probably on her own planet, against a night sky of the chaos of stars. To be in the place that is the attractor of attention, a lot of which you don't want, and turn it back into the world, but not quite from the

place expected.

Let's rewind. The possibilities for Juliana to become Juliana emerge, among other things, out of a particular moment in the evolution of media technics. One in which the internet vectored through the space of the domestic and turned it inside out. It's the witching hours. Bodies as lonesome as the blackened ocean of night reach out through the wires for other information. I DISCOVERED NIGHT AS A PLACE OF REMOVE ... HOUSEHOLD SOUNDS HOPEFULLY DISTRACTING ANY ROLLING SLEEPER WHO MIGHT HEAR THE GUST OF A DELL PC EXHAUST FAN UPON STARTUP.⁵ Night as remove from the familiar and familial, where bodies are what they are, but their desires are opaque. Night as glowing with glints and murmurs of what bodies aren't but are motivated to want: a *Nuwaubian Princess*, for instance, as in a 2013 piece. A fuck-off stare from two Julianas, bodies rippling as sand ripples, some serene alien night.

The codes of race, of gender, of sex, so seemingly immutable in daylight, in the IRL world, flip over into something else, at night, through the wires. PORN NEVER REALLY APPEALED TO ME (I WAS RAISED A FEMINIST AND ANTI-RACIST) BUT WHAT I SAW WAS AN INVITATION TO AN INTIMACY I QUESTIONED BUT

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Instagram flyer for *Unter x Discwoman* 18th May 2018, designed by Ryan Davis, based on a classic British rave poster by Tim 'The Thrill of Zilch' Ryan.

HONESTLY COULDN'T DECLINE – A CLOSE PROXIMITY TO THE VERTIGO I FELT WHEN I FIRST SAW PHOTOS OF LYNCHINGS.⁶ Daylight is a phantasm of the real; by nightlight here comes the real of the phantasm. In the light of day, a reminder of the night, like in *History (Period Piece)* from 2013: Juliana confronts the gaze, the flags of two empires reduced to decorating a hairstyle, a colonial scene in the background. The colonial and pornographic gazes seem like night and day but are maybe related, just in different degrees of privacy and privation.

The internet mediates the images which might mediate a turn to a fugitive life, at night.⁷ I WAS ALWAYS TURNED ON BY PRIVACY. LIKE MANY, I EXPLORED MY ADOLESCENT SEXUAL CURIOSITY IN AIM CHAT ROOMS, CAT-FISHING FOR THE REPRESSED BABY-BOOMERS WHO NEVER ENJOYED SUCH A LUXURY IN THEIR OWN YOUTH.⁸ The dynamism of the forces of production burst through the backyard stasis pooling in postwar suburbia. THERE ARE SO MANY SKELETAL REMAINS IN LOCKED XANGAS, LIVEJOURNAL, AND MYSPACE ACCOUNTS. THE FINAL FRONTIER OF THE OLD TRIBES AND THEOLOGIES.⁹

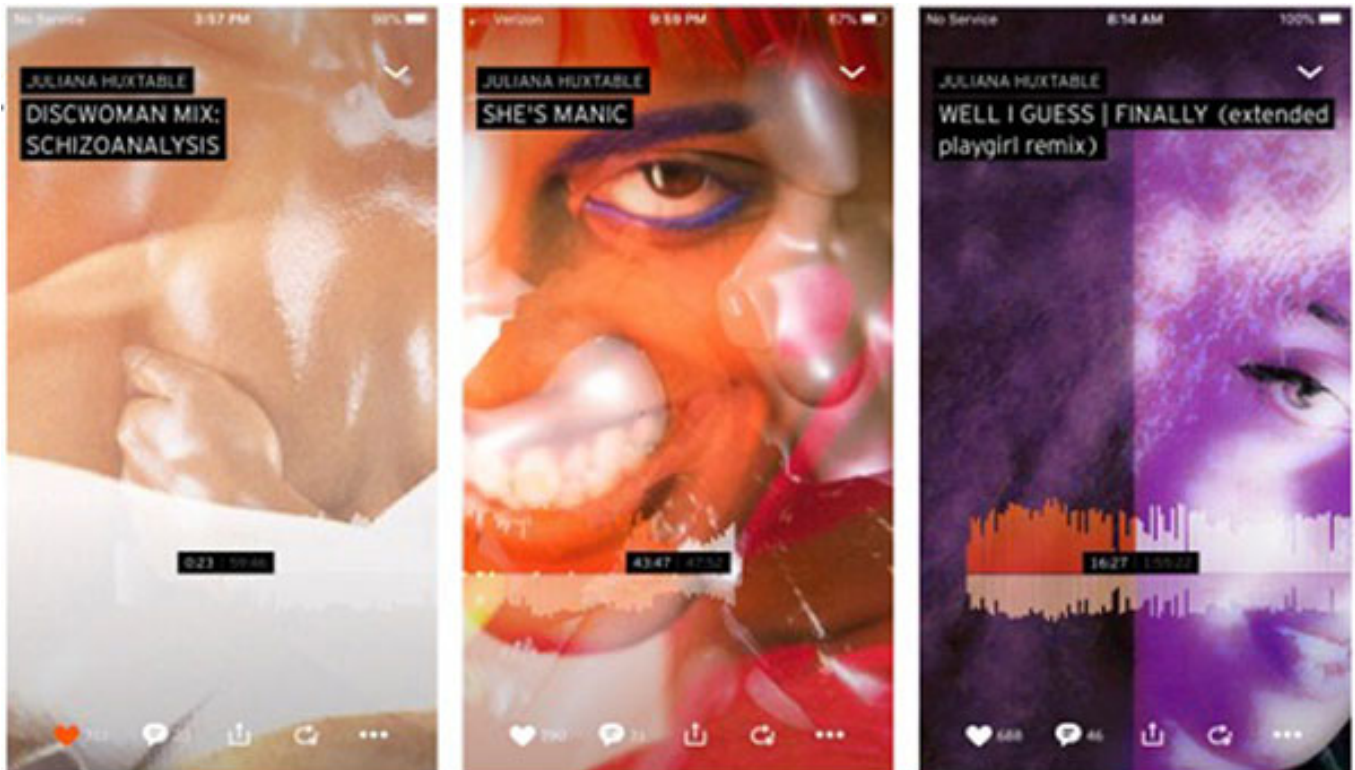
What seems bound by property and privacy in daylight harbors covert vectors of the night. LIVE FEEDS OF MYSELF TO 600 MATURBATING MEN IN BUSH'S AMERICA. CONNECTING WITH

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THE 35-YEAR OLD "PEDOPHILE" ... IT WAS 4AM AND I'D SNUCK OUT OF THE HOUSE TO MEET HIM. IN SO MANY WAYS, IT WAS THE MOST "NATURAL" WAY FOR SOMEONE LIKE ME TO DISCOVER THEIR SEXUALITY.¹⁰ Sleep your way out of your hometown.

The discovery of any sexuality is always mediated. Maybe the discovery of one's sex is too. Maybe technics is a third gender that distributes bodies into the other two (or not). The transsexual body isn't unique in relation to the third gender of technics, but it highlights the role of that technics for all bodies, of any sex or gender. The transsexual body is nowhere more legible than in porn, where at least our bodies exist, are wanted, fuckable, even have agency. Okay so maybe it's not great "representation," but it's better than what we get in most movie matinées.

In the daylight hours, the fever dreams of transphobes become a panic ideology in which we are the secret agents for some phantasmal empire.¹¹ The 2017 piece *Transsexual Empire* is mounted like a poster on metal, surrounded by fridge magnets, the everyday vernacular of slogans and logos we mistake for our own thoughts. EVERY 18–32 YEAR OLD IN THE DEVELOPED WORLD NOW KNOWS THE TRUTH OF THE TRANSEXUAL EMPIRE ARMING PSEUDO-WOMEN WITH VAGINAS IN SERVICE OF THE



Screenshots of the author's favorite Juliana Huxtable mixes on Soundcloud.



Juliana Huxtable, *Lil' Marvel*, 2015. Color inkjet print, 40 x 30 inches. Courtesy of the artist and JTT, New York.

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Juliana Huxtable, *Untitled (Anachronism)*, 2013. Color inkjet print. 10.50 x 15.75 inches. Courtesy of the artist and JTT, New York.



Juliana Huxtable, *Transsexual Empire*, 2017. Inkjet print, vinyl, magnets on metal sheet. 96 x 48 in. Photo: Joerg Lohse. Courtesy of the artist and Reena Spaulings Fine art, NY/LA.



Juliana Huxtable, *Herculine's Prophecy*, 2017. Inkjet print, vinyl, magnets on metal sheet. 96 x 48 in. Photo: Joerg Lohse. Courtesy of the artist and Reena Spaulings Fine art, NY/LA.



Juliana Huxtable, *The Feminist Scam*, 2017. Inkjet print, vinyl, magnets on metal sheet. 96 x 48 in. Photo: Joerg Lohse. Courtesy of the artist and Reena Spaulings Fine art, NY/LA.



Juliana Huxtable, *S.H.A.R.P.*, 2018. Oil, acrylic, fabric, handmade buttons, metal grommets and inkjet print on canvas, 35 7/8 x 31 1/2 x 1 1/8 in. Courtesy of the artist and Project Native Informant, London.

CURIOUS MEN BAITED AND PUBLICLY BROUGHT TO JUSTICE ON *TO CATCH A PREDATOR*.¹²

The trans-image mostly exists to comfort the cis by figuring the limit case of what the cis body is not. The cis gaze reads the trans body through a grid marked by a lust-disgust axis and a pity-envy axis. Pity and disgust are the public, daytime cis gaze; envy and lust are their private, nighttime doubles. And so: WE'VE BEEN EXPORTED AS SYMBOLS ENUNCIATED IN THE REFLECTION BETWEEN THE TRENCHES OF PORNHUB AND THE PATHETIC, DESPERATE TREMBLE OF [ANOJNI] AS SHE SANG "YOU ARE MY SISTER."¹³ Where Pornhub is the private, nighttime lust-attractor and "You Are My Sister," for the cis gaze, attracts a more respectable cis attention, whose affect is pity.

The trans-image is a hard thing to free from this infertile matrix. We trans-es shape ourselves by selecting from presets made in different – and conflicting – discourses, to make the real of the phantasm over into a body-image for the phantasm of the real. This real of nocturnal transmissions is a hard one to live out in the fantastic day that imagines it is all that exists, in which we're wandering spirits with no country, and always trailing into daylight the attention the cis gaze would rather lavish while itself out of sight.

Nocturnal transmissions: the secret history of America might be encoded in the dark. AND WHERE ARE THE LOVERS? PRESUMABLY NOWHERE. LEFT IN PRIVATE ARGUMENTS WITH PARTNERS OVER UNEARTHED SHEMALE PORN, DELETED EMAILS FROM ANONYMOUS ACCOUNTS ON HOOKUP SITES THAT A FEW DATABASE ENGINEERS AT THE NSA COULD PLAUSIBLY DISCOVER.¹⁴ The private gaze has an uncanny habit of becoming overexposed.

Herculine's Prophecy (2017) name-checks Herculine Barbin, an intersex memoirist made famous by Foucault.¹⁵ Herculine's sensual diary, particularly its early pages of resonant non-genital pleasures, foreshadows this proliferating and often inadvertent documenting of the twilight of the sex-and-gender regime, one where clinical categories such as "intersex" or the older "hermaphrodite," with their obsession with classifying everyone's bits, don't necessarily have purchase. Neither do categories of "transsexual" and "transgender." Increasingly aggressive practices, institutional as well as memetic, try to shine a bright-enough light to keep the categories clear, but the insomnia of reason breeds monsters.¹⁶ Transsexual and intersex bodies have to be fixed, by medicine or law, to one category or another. If allowed to propagate or differentiate – then these limit cases might no longer function to secure the cis body as unproblematic given.

Which came first, the transsexual or the egg? There are positive feedback loops between the form of images and the form of bodies, where the form of one is the content of the other. MAYBE WHEN I GET MY SURGERY, ASSUMING THAT I DO AT SOME POINT, I WILL FINALLY FEEL LIKE THE WOMAN I AM INSIDE BY POSTING PHOTOS OF THE \$32,000 PUSSY GOD GAVE A TALENTED SURGEON IN THAILAND THE ABILITY TO SCULPT FROM A SCARRED BODY DISTORTED BY YEARS OF DYSPHORIA. IN REALITY, THE PHOTOS WOULD BE NO MORE A TESTAMENT TO THE TRUTH OF THE MATTER THAN TO THE IMPLOSION OF THE LINK BETWEEN TEMPORALITY, USER-NAME-IN-PHOTO, AND TRUTH.¹⁷ The old night/day, private/public, lust/disgust matrices no longer hold the body in a grid of observation. The images flood and eddy and pool. Without the lure of rarity the image lacks the power to charge desire.

Digital image culture, that anime monster, fed by nocturnal vectors, blindsided by its own fetishistic love/hate matrices of gender, sex, and race, balloons out to swallow us. IT'S A DISGUSTING HYPERTROPHY THAT'S KILLED MY CURIOSITY, SEXUAL DRIVE AND DESIRE FOR SEX REASSIGNMENT IN ONE BLOW.¹⁸ It short-circuits lack and desire, but maybe also bursting like an overripe fruity pustule out of the symbolic order. In *The Feminist Scam* (2017), we see panic-signs from, in this case, a black masculinist vertigo about the power of women and queers. The codes mutate and replicate into any and every combination, some more viral than others, but all of them out there in the night for the dedicated wanderer through obscure websites, reddit, podcasts, streams.

Positive feedback loopdy-loop between body and sign, mediated by the internet vector, drives bodies to seek IRL worlds that might replicate their teeming phantasmagoria. Perhaps the night of the net could be doubled by the night of the street. And so, Juliana takes the Yellow Brick Road to New York City. THE SPACES I GREW UP WANTING TO INHABIT WERE DIGITAL – SIMS CLUBS, LABYRINTH AND UNDERWATER WORLDS IN 3D FISHTANK SCREEN SAVERS, PLAY-PLACE STRUCTURES IN FLASH ANIMATED SITES WHOSE CONTENTS TOOK UP TO TWENTY MINUTES TO LOAD ... THE VISUAL, SONIC AND SCULPTURAL POTENTIALS OF A SPACE WERE ALL IN SPITE OF THE CORPORATE EARMARKINGS OF THE REAL (IRL) SPACES AROUND ME AND NOW THE SAME IS TRUE OF BOTH.¹⁹

For a hot minute, the night of the real could be lived on net and street, but the commodity form caught up with information and mutated to consume it, and all our bodies with it. The fuck-off stare in the 2015 image *Untitled (Psychosocial Stuntin')* may be returning the viewer's gaze-

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Juliana Huxtable, *Untitled (Wall)*, 2017. Detail view. Paint and images printed on vellum. Dimensions vary. Photo: Joerg Lohse. Courtesy of the artist and Reena Spaulings Fine art, NY/LA.

filters at dawn or at dusk, either way the psychosocial power comes from access to codes you don't have, and even if you could access them, by then, they wouldn't work.

It's an open question whether the city is still a space of promise in an information economy in which to live as a bohemian in the city is to live in a terrarium and have one's cultural organs harvested for branded real estate.²⁰ In this mode of production, the rave is less a utopia to come, more a legacy refuge. WHEN I FIRST MOVED TO NEW YORK IT SEEMED LIKE EVERYONE HAD GIVEN UP ON THE ENDEAVOR ALTOGETHER, WITH THE EXCEPTION OF THE NIGHT. YET EVEN HERE, THE FLYER WAS THE AESTHETIC PRE-LOADED WITH REFERENCES, COORDINATES FOR GOOGLE SEARCHES AND HASHTAGS. BUT THE EDIFICES WERE BARREN, EPHEMERAL, A LASER AND FOG MACHINE.²¹

Works like *Corporeal Anarchy* (2017) and *S.H.A.R.P.* (2019) extract from the detritus of night some swatches of ornament, peeled from bodies or bathroom walls. Archaeological evidence of this civilization, such as it is, that will never be on display in a millennium from now that may not even be there to archive us. The work of the work of art is not now for posterity.

Roaming about New York City, a *dérive*

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constrained by race- and gender-coded surveillance and policing, is an MFA in itself.²² OVER-DISTRIBUTED OBJECTS OF CONSUMPTION, SATURATING THE LIQUIDATED MARKETS OF FACTORY PRODUCED HOUSEHOLD ORNAMENTS. SIMULTANEOUSLY SUPPORTING THE FOUNDATION'S ENTERPRISE AND TEACHING ME FUNDAMENTALS OF A VISUAL LANGUAGE, CASTRATED OF ITS GRAMMATICAL STRUCTURE IN THIS FORM.²³ No more syntax as daddy – even if he comes back, again and again, now in unambiguously monstrous form, precisely because he's no stand-in for the big other anymore. Meanwhile, even in daylight, information as commodity now affixes itself like a hormone patch to any warm impulse.

The bursting out of order of signs as flows rather than forms is a liberation from residual dumb hierarchies but in favor of other, dumber ones. *Untitled (Wall)* from 2017 tracks just one potential thread of memetic stupidity spooling out of the conflicted matrix of the white gaze. It's cold comfort that the signs of racial authenticity are always taken from someone else. REPRODUCTIONS FLATTENED THE TEXTURES LEFT IN THE TRIALS OF BRUSH STROKES AND MERGED THE MOST BENEVOLENT SYMBOLS IN THIS LEXICON TO THE MOST IMMEDIATE “ON



Juliana Huxtable, *Invisible Chattel*, 2017. Inkjet print, vinyl, magnets on metal sheet. 243.84 x 121.92 cm 96 x 48 in. Photo: Joerg Lohse. Courtesy of the artist and Reena Spaulings Fine art, NY/LA.



Juliana Huxtable, *Blue Jeans*, 2017. C-type print, 24 3/8 x 16 1/8 in. Courtesy of the artist and Project Native Informant, London.



Juliana Huxtable, *Untitled (HM2)*, 2016. Oil, acrylic, inkjet print on canvas and mylar, 40 x 30 in. Courtesy of the artist and Project Native Informant, London.



Juliana Huxtable, *Untitled*, 2019. 12 color archival ink print on linen, collage and homemade badges in artist frame, 54 x 42 1/8 x 2 3/8 in. Courtesy of the artist and Project Native Informant, London.

SALE” MONSTERS OF THE NEOLIBERAL ORDER.²⁴ Gone the hand of the author, the authority, the authentic, which separates the real object of desire from its panting fans. That part is clear as day.

Desire no longer negates the object it lacks. Want gorges on the images that flood it. The trick is to picture how this works without reanimating negativity by positing the loss of negativity in general as the condition of thinking the present.²⁵ If there’s only an aesthetics of affirming the plurality of proliferating wants, how to make the right fusion within the glut? The *War on Proof* – as a 2017 work names it – is a tricky business when you want neither to affirm several sediments of sentimental hogwash about various empires nor propagate the mental herpes that were its idiot cultural givens.

Maybe it’s about standing in the flow, not where it’s a stagnant pool or a cascading blast, but where it eddies and still trickles. Maybe that stillness is actually propulsion if we think again about what moves relative to what. Maybe there are still times and places that, while not free, at least enable certain bodies and signs a little breathing room. Maybe certain bodies need that more than others, and hence find their way. EVERYTIME MY HAIR IS TOO UNKEMPT, I MIS-SPEAK, MISPRONOUNCE A WORD IN WHITE SPACES, SO MANY MIRRORS ARE HELD UP TO, THROWN AT MY FACE. RACIAL DIVIDES AND PROHIBITIONS PERSIST IN AN EROTIC DEMILITARIZED ZONE.²⁶

One might as well live in a phantasmal elsewhere, as in *Untitled in the Rage (Nibiru Cataclysm)* from 2015, which gives us a human figure in otherworldly greens and yellows. “Nibiru cataclysm” supposedly refers to ancient Sumerian astronomy about a mysterious Planet X that will collide or near-miss the Earth. The figure in this work seems to contemplate that possibility with equanimity.

Juliana wanders uptown: THERE IS STILL A PLACE WHERE BLACK UNICORNS RUN FREELY ... WHERE THE ONTOLOGICAL CHAINS OF THE ATLANTIC TRIANGLE REVERBERATE TO SHATTERING POINT IN PATTERNS, BEATS, RHYMES AND TECHNICOLOR INSISTENCES ON A NEW WORLD.²⁷ Decolonizing the third nature of the vector, like decolonizing the second nature of the empire, starts with acknowledging the leadership, political or aesthetic, of the colonized. The paranoid intuition of being an *Invisible Chattel* (2017) bears further investigation. The transubstantiation of the commodity form from the ownership of things to the ownership of information seems still to have plenty of ways of classifying and enslaving bodies, and much the same bodies.²⁸

Juliana still finds discrete niches folded into

the night. I’VE MET NEARLY EVERYONE I KNOW AT NIGHT. A TIME/PLACE AMONG THOSE WHO SIMULTANEOUSLY LIVED WITH AND IDOLIZED EACH OTHER WITHOUT MOURNING DECADES PAST. A PLAYGROUND OF CAREER AESTHETES, QUEENS (OF ALL VARIETY), CRITICALLY-INCLINED CURMUDGEONS-WHO-WRITE, INTERNET PERSONALITIES, AND ARTISTS WHOSE WORKS I ONLY SAW AS PROPS IF AT ALL – YOUNG AT HEART IF NOT IN SPIITE OF YEARS ACCRUED.²⁹

Just speaking for myself and my friends: sometimes it’s only space tattooed by pounding beats pummeling my dysphoric body that make me feel incorporated in my own flesh. Even if you have to use your elbows to make elbow room. SUBWOOFERS SHOVED ME INTO A FLOATING AND BOUNDLESS MASS OF SHADE FROM SHITTY FAGGOTS, ANGRY BIDDIES, AND DISENFRANCHISED BROS.³⁰ Which is pretty much what Jessie, Katie, and I had to contend with dancing to Juliana at Basement – and we’re white girls.

Riffing on Hito Steyerl on Frantz Fanon: THE DEMOCRATIC NATURE OF ELECTRONIC MUSIC PRODUCTION AND ACCESSIBILITY ATTACKED THE WHITE-WASHED LEGACY OF MISSHAPES, PITCHFORK, AND RUFF CLUB WITH A BASS-DRIVEN SIEGE FROM THE WRETCHED OF THE EARTH, BOTH ABROAD AND WITHIN THE CITY LIMITS.³¹ As came up in her dialog with Che Gossett, in nightlife was the possibility of existing, both as a black and a trans woman.³² There were precedents, there were openings. The economy of who and what has value differs from day to night. What is denied in the light is sought in the dark. Well, that’s problematic – but it’s a living, a life.

If you want to know how culture codes work, look not to the text, the piece, the file – but to the bodies to which they attach. The fridge magnet pieces could also be buttons, badges pinned through flesh. THE SUPERSTRUCTURES MAKE THEMSELVES KNOWN, PRESENT IN microRNA – DISTILLED AND ELEMENTAL – IN ACTS OF FLESH – DANCING, FIGHTING, FUCKING – WE REWORK.³³ Bodies process ripples of signs, heat, light, noise – into meaty pulsations and propulsions. Sometimes it’s the best you can do to render yourself as useless animation, the body whipped along by its own propulsion but to no productive purpose.

What percentage of Uber rides are for hookups? The vector, rendered mobile by the cellphone, extends nighttime wanting all over the map. SHOUT OUT TO MY URBAN ANGELS SEARCHING FOR POST OR PRE-GENITAL DESIRE VIA GPS. LIKE SNOT, MUCUS, CUM, SHIT, SWEAT – THE UNITING ELEMENTS THAT FORM THE BASIS OF REALITY.³⁴ The leaky goo that smears

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Juliana Huxtable, *COW 1*, 2019. Inkjet mounted on Dibond, 39 3/4 x 26 1/2 in. Photo: Joerg Lohse. Courtesy of the artist and Reena Spaulings Fine art, NY/LA.



Juliana Huxtable, *BAT 3*, 2019. Inkjet mounted on Dibond. 29 3/4 x 44 3/4 in.

bodies out of themselves. MUCUS IN MY PINEAL GLAND: the pineal is the seat of the soul for Descartes, but in Bataille, is a monstrous eye-opening out of the top of the skull onto the blackness that negates the pure expenditure of the sun.³⁵ It's maybe something else again here. Its over-coded symbolic function congested after a good, hard fuck. There's a far more contemporary, less Catholic, more unselfconsciously ecstatic play at the edges of the visible here, at a far remove too from #edgelord wannabes.

The collapse of desire and lack into want and excess doesn't succeed in eroding the old codes, just in making them presets. THEY HAD DEVELOPED THE MOST ADVANCED SYSTEMS FOR MAPPING DESIRE KNOWN TO MAN (LITERALLY). THEY ALL SEEMED SATISFIED TO LIVE IN A WORLD OF TOPS/BOTTOMS, MASCS/FEMS DIVIDED INTO VARIOUS SIZE, SHAPE, HAIR LEVEL, AFFILIATIONS. IT WAS LESS A RESULT OF SEXUAL EXPLORATION THAN A MARKETPLACE THAT MIMICKED THE ARTIFICIAL VOLUTION OFFERED BY A SHOPPING MALL.³⁶ We're just beginning to think what we know we feel: that the commodification of want in the fast, hard, techno loop of information is a colonizing vector that ramifies through the sedimentary layers of past colonizations. In *Blue Jeans* (2017) it appears as if they are tattooed on a black person's back. Product of forced and sweated labor, returned as in Kafka's "The Penal Colony" as the punishment for being black while being.³⁷

The information vector troubles the old empire of day and night presets: cis straight girls wanna cruise; cis gay boys wanna marry. There are apps for both. But perhaps there's still some other way of honoring each other's mutable, sign-riddled bodies. STEADY SINGULAR LOVE OF MUTABILITY AND CONTINUAL SHAPE-SHIFTING à la THE CYBORG AS LOVER. A CONSTANT DECAY AND BIRTH, SOME PIECES ARE PERMANENT, OTHERS EPHEMERAL, DIMINISHING AGAINST THE HORIZON OF OPENNESS AS A PRE-EMPTIVE TO DIVORCE.³⁸

It's a #nodads world, where it might if anything at least not be a disadvantage not to have one, at least emotionally. Even if there's a downside to not inheriting his property when his #dadbod gives out. Instead, family by choice, although maybe it's not much of a choice, and not so much about choice as about labor, thought in terms of who does the work.³⁹ INFORMED AND FORMED BY COLLECTIVE MEMORIES OF DENIED LABOR. THE LABOR OF SELF-CARE, THE LABOR OF LOVE, THE LABOR OF FAMILIAL CONTRIBUTION AND PARTICIPATION ... THE LABOR OF MEDIATION ... SISTERHOOD AND BROTHERHOOD AS MODELS OF LATERAL SOCIAL

AND FAMILIAL RELATIONS, SUPPLEMENT THE HIERARCHICAL NATURE OF PARENT/CHILD.⁴⁰ Maybe that's all we have: covens of care, and the work we do for each other outside of reproducing either commodity value or "family values." Even if these gestures too are recuperable as information and commodified.

Untitled (HM 2), from 2016: Whenever we gather, we're always already ghosting. Checking out to check phones. Bringing the real of the phantasmagoria into every conversation. I'VE TRIED ROMANTICIZING ACTUAL IRL CONVOS AS CONTRABAND, BUT I KNOW THAT'S A SILLY CONCEPT GIVEN THE CAPABILITIES OF SHAZAM SOFTWARE.⁴¹ Your friends have seen your outfit as an Insta bathroom selfie before you even make it to the club. ATOMIZATION HAS DESTROYED CONCEALMENT. WHAT DO WE GATHER AROUND? FOR WHAT PURPOSES? PICKING UP PIECES OF OUR NEED FOR CONTACT IN THE FACE OF ITS COLLAPSE.⁴² It's hard enough to be a body, let alone a coven of care, when there's a technics that gloms on, not to bodies or selves but to parts, both psychic and corporeal. NOT THAT US IS EVEN US AT THIS POINT AS OUR SEPARATIONS DISSOLVE WITH EVERY CAUSTIC "AGREE TO TERMS OF SERVICE."⁴³

Sometimes I think of the trans people I know as actually having one advantage against the torrent, despite the many and multiple disadvantages. We have to actually attend with intention to how images stick to us, how we process them through flesh. THE iMOBLE, EVER PRESENT SHARE-TUMBLE-TWEET-POST-REBLOG REGIME SEEMS TO HAVE SUCCESSFULLY KILLED THE FLESH OF IT ALL. THE BODY BEHIND THE IMAGE.⁴⁴ It might not be the worst thing to have to actively shape the flesh as well in order to live. An image like *TBT* (2019) hovers in the quadrant, a fluctuating attractor for lust-disgust and pity-envy. It all depends on where the viewer locates their own boundaries in the act of looking. In this case the image edges also towards that deeply troubled fever dream in which some bodies are not even human.

That which cannot be negated need not be affirmed. One might affirm instead that which threads through the raw intensity to another raw intensity, one that connects all those others that the panic mode of digital fascism would (and will) annihilate if it can. TO THE DEGREE THAT I'VE ALWAYS BEEN AS NOSEY AS I WAS CURIOUS, THE CULT OF PERSONALITY THAT BIRTHED AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM HAS TURNED ON A POPULATION IN WHICH WE ARE EACH OTHER'S PERSONALITIES. EACH OF US AN ICON IN OUR OWN RIGHT WITH LEGACIES AND MYTHOLOGIES – AND DIRTY MATERIAL – LINGERING IN BINARY

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CODES. I NOW FIND MYSELF FIGHTING AN INCESSANT NEED TO UNVEIL AND TO REVEAL THE FALLIBILITY OF THE INFALLIBLE POPULATION OF COWARDLY WITCH-HUNTERS.⁴⁵ Maybe better to be discreet about who even knows about our covens of care.

By day, they hate us; by night they desire us. A desire only kept afloat by the pretense of a prohibition, always honored in the breach and sans-breeches. The trans body as the last frontier of desire, suspended in a bubble of negativity fueled by prohibition. One of the few last unutterable desires, none of them pretty. THE AMERICAN DREAM THAT SUSTAINED THE FANTASY OF MOBILITY IS HAVING ITS OLD ACCOUNTS AND DRUNKEN TEXTS BROUGHT TO THE PUBLIC'S ATTENTION. THE UNDERBELLY OF PRIVACY IT PROUDLY PROTECTED HAS EMERGED AS CRAIGSLIST, PORN, THE RIGHT TO KILL TRESPASSERS.⁴⁶ That's the problem: they buck up a fascist desire that can only negate its object. Fuck it; kill it. It's why they are ashamed and we're not.

Frank Benson's sculpture *Juliana* (2015) ports something from the Dionysian world of night into the Apollonian day. It's Juliana as classic, an object of contemplation. Beauty of form, harmony of parts (*these parts*). The black

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body in the ultimate place of whiteness. A black that shades into iridescent greens and blues from another planet. I can't but think of how the classical orders, art of Greek slavery, became clip art for American slavery. I'm reminded here too of C. Riley Snorton's devastating critique of the origins of the modern categories of gender in scientific experiments on black bodies.⁴⁷ Two deadened orders of visibility: the aesthetic and the scientific, both based on the body as thing. Any possible future art that cuts against these currents has to improvise hard and fast, look for anything of use as it flees. It might have to discard this fine piece as it flees, though, immobile as it is.

I'm personally aware of those cis dudes who want to be dommed by trans women. I'm not of those white dudes who want to be dommed by black men. Or of how, when the sun sets, race in America becomes the real of the phantasm. America's latent destiny seems to be a play-party of racialized lust that in daylight hours can scarcely be acknowledged. THE MYTHICAL BLACK PHALLUS INSIDE OF WHITE ORIFICES – A GESTURE THAT FASCINATES THE MIND OF THE WORLD OVER, BUT IN ITS TRUEST FORM IN AMERIKKA. AS LIMITING AS THIS PENETRATIVE ROLE MAY BE, IT'S ALSO, AT A MINIMUM, A



Instagram selfie by the author at Juliana Huxtable, *Interfertility Industrial Complex: Snatch the Calf Back*, Reena Spaulings, New York 12th October 2019.

SUGGESTION OF STRENGTH AND VIRILITY IN BLACKNESS. AS IF WHITE AMERICA, BY INCORPORATING THE RECEPTION OF BLACK DICK AS A RITE OF PASSAGE, SOMEHOW MITIGATES THE HISTORY OF EMASCULATION THAT PROMPTED THE STATEMENT "I AM A MAN."⁴⁸ The bodies that have no choice but to be visible versus those allowed to see.

What if one took the particularities of the self, not as an identity at all, but as an eddy in the flow from which to sense and touch what's elided in the bright-lit glitter of what (white) washes over us? EVERY LIKE ON MEDIEVALPOC.TUMBLR.COM AS AN AFFIRMATION THAT THE ESTIMATION OF MY PLACE ISN'T TOTALLY WHITEWASHED NOR TAINTED BY THE TUCK UNDERNEATH MY PETTICOAT HIDING THE BLACK MEMBER THAT BETRAYS ANY CLAIM TO A LEGACY-BASED ENTANGLEMENT WITH HERSTORY THAT I MIGHT HAVE.⁴⁹

Maybe a black, trans body might find ways to connect itself to others that the operative categories of history and phantasm might exclude or render only as monstrous. I want to end with Juliana's 2019 show "Interfertility Industrial Complex: Snatch the Calf Back." As in her work in sound and text, there's a plunge into raw intensity and a crossing of information flows. Here, borrowing from the visual language of furry subcultures, layered together with certain unpleasant facts about industrial livestock farming. The not-human body, both as site of production and site of pleasure.

A becoming-animal of the human juxtaposed with the becoming-object of the animal. The animal being that's taken is one denied the industrialized animal body. The fake headlines imagine a bigoted response to the body of the becoming animal as doubled by an extension of the labor demands of the human to the animal. As Eva Hayward reminds us, the linguistic ripple of "trans" could pulse between species as much as between genders, and already does.⁵⁰

Right now, before the flood, before the seven lean years, as we realize the life we could have but which, in the midnight hour, we feel in our bones are just borrowed time, I click for signals that pulse with the possibility of at least dancing in the ruins. I asked my friend Katie once, in a break between sets, what we'll do when there's no electricity to power the music or to deliver our hormones. Without missing a beat, she says: "We're going down with the ship." THE THRUST OF DRIED RIVERBEDS UNENDING. A CAPITAL V VITALITY. BLOOD! DUSTY MOTHERBOARDS SPIT FLICKERS OF SPILLED SOLAR ENTRAILS. PAST INFRARED FOSSILS SEDIMENT; WE, NEXUS POINTS YET TO NEVER-

HAD-COME.⁵¹

Well that's a #mood. As a chaser, let me loop back to a Juliana *unter* rave moment, as described by my friend Nick: "It consisted of, if I can remember properly, about three simultaneously layered decks of churning, magmatic industrial/hardcore tracks, mixed not for precision but such that they created an immersive mutant sonic texture, throbbing, machinic lurching, almost helicopter-like as they noisily pulsed in and out of phase. Then on a fourth deck over the top of this Juliana mixed in a dementedly pitched up a cappella (or more likely she was layering in the original, but who can say) – "Ring of Fire." It was a really interesting citation or reference for me especially considering Juliana's whole thing about queering representations of American history in all her other aesthetic work." As the empire falls, dancing in raw space to its digital detritus is where you'll find us Nexus Sevens.

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- 1
The Well I Guess | Finally (Extended Playgirl Remix), Discwoman Mix: Schizoanalysis, and She's Manic are my favorites.
- 2
You can hear Juliana herself read that piece on her She's Manic mix on Soundcloud, at about forty-three minutes in.
- 3
Juliana Huxtable, *Mucus in My Pineal Gland* (Capacious & Wonder, 2017), 172.
- 4
Huxtable, *Mucus in My Pineal Gland*, 23.
- 5
Huxtable, *Mucus in My Pineal Gland*, 33.
- 6
Huxtable, *Mucus in My Pineal Gland*, 71.
- 7
The figure of the fugitive is in honor of Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013).
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Huxtable, *Mucus in My Pineal Gland*, 45.
- 9
Huxtable, *Mucus in My Pineal Gland*, 16.
- 10
Huxtable, *Mucus in My Pineal Gland*, 34.
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Arthur Kroker, *Panic Encyclopedia* (St Martin's Press, 1989).
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Huxtable, *Mucus in My Pineal Gland*, 45.
- 13
Antony and the Johnsons, "You Are My Sister," from the album *I Am A Bird Now*, 2005. She Antony uses the name Anohni. Huxtable, *Mucus in My Pineal Gland*, 39.
- 14
Huxtable, *Mucus in My Pineal Gland*, 39.
- 15
Michel Foucault, *Herculine Barbin* (Vintage, 1980).
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On the trans body and the monstrous, see Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," *GLQ* 1, no. 3 (1994): 237–54.
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Huxtable, *Mucus in My Pineal Gland*, 46.
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Matteo Pasquinelli, *Animal Spirits: A Bestiary of the Commons* (nai010, 2009).
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Rebecca Solnit and Joshua Jelly-Schapiro, *Nonstop Metropolis: A New York City Atlas* (University of California Press, 2016).
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How I'm thinking about the "decline in symbolic efficiency," as thought by Jodi Dean, *Blog Theory: Feedback and Capture in the Circuits of Drive* (Polity Press, 2010).
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Huxtable, *Mucus in My Pineal Gland*, 78.
- 27
Huxtable, *Mucus in My Pineal Gland*, 109.
- 28
See Jackie Wang, *Carceral Capitalism* (Semiotext(e), 2019) on algorithmic policing as the control logic of the prison-industrial complex.
- 29
Huxtable, *Mucus in My Pineal Gland*, 91.
- 30
Huxtable, *Mucus in My Pineal Gland*, 51.
- 31
Huxtable, *Mucus in My Pineal Gland*, 53.
- 32
In *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, eds. Reina Gossett, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton (MIT Press, 2017).
- 33
Huxtable, *Mucus in My Pineal Gland*, 59.
- 34
Huxtable, *Mucus in My Pineal Gland*, 7.
- 35
George Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927–1939* (University of Minnesota Press, 1985).
- 36
Huxtable, *Mucus in My Pineal Gland*, 37.
- 37
Franz Kafka, *Complete Stories*

(Shoeken Books, 1995).

38
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On family by choice and its limits, see Sarah Schulman, *Ties That Bind: Familial Homophobia and Its Consequences* (The New Press, 2012).

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Huxtable, *Mucus in My Pineal Gland*, 87.

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Huxtable, *Mucus in My Pineal Gland*, 47.

42
Huxtable, *Mucus in My Pineal Gland*, 18.

43
Huxtable, *Mucus in My Pineal Gland*, 16.

44
Huxtable, *Mucus in My Pineal Gland*, 47.

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Huxtable, *Mucus in My Pineal Gland*, 47.

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Huxtable, *Mucus in My Pineal Gland*, 47.

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