Radical Sense
Isolation Reader Volume 2

2020

I want a dyke for president. I want a person with aids for president and I want a fag for vice president and I want someone with no health insurance and I want someone who grew up in a place where the earth is so saturated with toxic waste that they didn't have a choice about getting leukemia. I want a president that had an abortion at sixteen and I want a candidate who isn't the lesser of two evils and I want a president who lost their last lover to aids, who still sees that in their eyes every time they lay down torest, who held their lover in their arms and knew they were dying. I want a president with no airconditioning, a president who has stood on line at the clinic, at the dmv, at the welfare office and has been unemployed and layed off and sexually harrassed and gaybashed and deported. I want someone who has spent the night in the tombs and had a cross burned on their lawn and survived rape. I want someone who has been in love and been hurt, who respects sex, who has made mistakes and learned from them. I want a Black woman for president. I want someone with bad teeth ~~and an attitude~~, someone who has eaten ~~that nasty~~ hospital food, someone who crossdresses and has done drugs and, been in therapy. I want someone who has committed civil disobedience. And I want to know why this isn't possible. I want to know why we started learning somewhere down the line that a president is always a clown: always a john and never a hooker. Always a boss and never a worker, always a liar, always a thief and never caught.

Chapter 1: Empire, Militancy, and Joy

A concept is a brick. It can be used to build a courthouse of reason. Or it can be thrown through the window.

—Brian Massumi[1]

Personally, I want to be nurturing life when I go down in struggle. I want nurturing life to BE my struggle.

—Zainab Amadahy[2]

Resistance and joy are everywhere

Anyone who has been transformed through a struggle can attest to its power to open up more capacities for resistance, creativity, action, and vision. This sense of collective power—the sense that things are different, that *we* are different, that a more capable "we" is forming that didn't exist before—is what we mean by joyful transformation. Joyful transformation entails a new conception of militancy, which is already emerging in many movements today. To be militant about joy means being attuned to situations or relationships, and learning how to participate in and support the transformation, rather than directing or controlling it.

Everywhere, people are recovering, sustaining, and reinventing worlds that are more intense and alive than the form of life offered up by Empire. The web of control that exploits and administers life—ranging from the most brutal forms of domination to the subtlest inculcation of anxiety and isolation—is what we call Empire. It includes the interlocking systems of settler colonialism, white supremacy, the state, capitalism, ableism, ageism, and heteropatriarchy. Using one word to encapsulate all of this is risky because it can end up turning Empire into a static thing, when in fact it is a complex set of processes. These processes separate people from their power, their creativity, and their ability to connect with each other and their worlds.

We say *worlds*, in the plural, because part of Empire's power is to bring us all into the same world, with one morality, one history, and one direction, and to convert differences into hierarchical, violent divisions. As other worlds emerge through resistance and transformation, they reveal more of the violence of Empire. Insurrections and revolts on the street reveal that the police are an armed gang and that "keeping the peace" is war by other means. Pushing back against sexualized violence reveals the ways that rape culture continues to structure daily life. Indigenous resurgence reveals the persistent concreteness of settler colonial occupation and the charade of apologizing for genocide and dispossession as if they were only part of the past. Holding assemblies where people can formulate problems together, make decisions collectively, and care for

[1] Brian Massumi, "Translator's Foreword: Pleasures of Philosophy," in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), ix–xv.

[2] Zainab Amadahy, "Protest Culture: How's It Working for Us?," *Rabble.ca*, July 20, 2010, http://rabble.ca/news/2010/07/protest-culture-how%E2%80%99s-it-working-us.

one another reveals the profound alienation and individualism of life under Empire. Trying to raise kids (or even share space with them) without controlling them reveals the ways that ageism and schooling stifle young people and segregate generations. Struggles against anti-Black racism and white supremacy reveal the continuities between slavery, apartheid, and mass incarceration, in which slave catchers have evolved into police and plantations have shaped prisons. The movements of migrants reveal the interconnected violence of borders, imperialism, and citizenship. And the constant resistance to capitalism, even when fleeting, reveals the subordination, humiliation, and exploitation required by capital. As these struggles connect and resonate, Empire's precarity is being revealed everywhere, even if it continues to be pervasive and devastating.

There is no doubt that we live in a world of intertwined horrors. Borders tighten around bodies as capital flows ever more freely; corporations suck lakes dry to sell bottled water; debt proliferates as a tool of control and dispossession; governments and corporations attack Indigenous lands and bodies while announcing state-controlled recognition and reconciliation initiatives; surveillance is increasingly ubiquitous; addiction, depression and anxiety proliferate along with new drugs to keep bodies working; gentrification tears apart neighborhoods to make way for glassy condos; people remain tethered to jobs they hate; the whole world is becoming toxic; bombs are dropped by drones controlled by soldiers at a distant computer console; a coded discourse of criminality constructs Black bodies as threats, targeting them with murder and imprisonment; climatic and ecological catastrophes intensify as world leaders debate emissions targets; more of us depend on food and gadgets made half a world away under brutal conditions; we are encouraged to spend more time touching our screens than the people we love; it is easier for many of us to envision the end of the world than the end of capitalism.[3]

We suspect that anyone reading this already knows and feels this horror in one way or another. When we say that struggles *reveal* the violence of Empire, it's not that everyone was unaware of it before. However, upwellings of resistance and insurrection make this knowing *palpable* in ways that compel responses. In this sense, it is not that people first figure out how oppression works, then are able to organize or resist. Rather it is resistance, struggle, and lived transformation that make it possible to feel collective power and carve out new paths.

Sadness and subjection

No, the masses were not innocent dupes; at a certain point, under a certain set of conditions, they wanted fascism, and it is this perversion of the desire of the masses that needs to be accounted for.

—Deleuze and Guattari[4]

In order to rule, those in positions of power need to constantly crush and subdue the forces of transformation. They do not merely need obedience; they need their subjects to be separated from their own capacities. As Audre Lorde writes, "Every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change."[5] Empire's hold is increasingly *affective:* it suffuses our emotions, relationships, and desires, prop-

[3] This phrase is often attributed to Frederic Jameson who wrote "Someone once said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism." See Frederic Jameson, "Future City," *New Left Review* 21 (2003), 77.

[4] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 38.

[5] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg: Crossing Press, 1984), 53.

agating feelings of shame, impotence, fear, and dependence. It makes capitalist relations feel inevitable and (to some) even desirable.

An important insight shared by many radical currents is that these forms of violence and control are ultimately toxic for everyone. For men to "enjoy" the benefits of patriarchal masculinity, their capacities for vulnerability and care must be eviscerated, replaced by a violent and disconnected way of being built upon shame and woundedness. For white people to become white, they have to internalize entitlement and a hostility to difference, hiding from the ways their lives depend on institutionalized violence and exploitation. Settlers must build their lives on a living legacy of genocide, indebted to ongoing extraction and dispossession. Being privileged by Empire means being sheltered from its most extreme forms of violence and degradation, and to be enrolled in a stultifying form of life that recreates this violence. Most of what is called privilege has nothing to do with thriving or joy; this is why privileged white men are some of the most emotionally stunted, closed-off people alive today. None of this is to deny that there are pleasures, wealth, and safety associated with whiteness, heteropatriarchal masculinity, and other forms of privilege. Instead, it is to insist that everyone, potentially, has a stake in undoing privileges—and the ongoing violence required to secure them—as a part of transformative struggle. As Jack Halberstam writes in his introduction to Fred Moten's *The Undercommons,*

> The mission then for the denizens of the undercommons is to recognize that when you seek to make things better, you are not just doing it for the Other, you must also be doing it for yourself. While men may think they are being "sensitive" by turning to feminism, while white people may think they are being right on by opposing racism, no one will really be able to embrace the mission of tearing "this shit down" until they realize that the structures they oppose are not only bad for some of us, they are bad for all of us. Gender hierarchies are bad for men as well as women and they are really bad for the rest of us. Racial hierarchies are not rational and ordered, they are chaotic and nonsensical and must be opposed by precisely all those who benefit in any way from them. Or, as Moten puts it: "The coalition emerges out of your recognition that it's fucked up for you, in the same way that we've already recognized that it's fucked up for us. I don't need your help. I just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly, you stupid motherfucker, you know?"[6]

Empire is killing all of us, in different ways, and all of us, in different ways, are marked by incredible legacies of movement and revolt. Its forms of control are never total, never guaranteed. The word "sabotage" comes from those who destroyed factory machinery by throwing their wooden shoes (*sabots*) in the gears of the early European factories. Slaves broke their tools in the field, poisoned their masters, learned to read in secret, and invented subversive forms of song and dance.

Empire reacts to resistance by entrenching and accumulating what Spinoza called *sadness*: the reduction of our capacity to affect and be affected. We've chosen not to use this word very much in this book because we've found it can be misleading in many ways, but the concept of sadness is important for Spinoza. In the same way that joy gets conflated with happiness, it's easy to hear

[6] "The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons," in *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013), 10. http://www.minorcompositions.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/undercommons-web.pdf.

"sad" in terms of its familiar meaning as an emotion, rather than the way Spinoza intended it: as a reduction of capacities. For Spinoza, sadness cannot be avoided or eliminated completely; it is part of life. All things wax, wane, and die eventually, and the process can provoke thought, resistance, and action. Sadness and joy can be intertwined in complex ways. But Empire *accumulates* and *spreads* sadness. Drawing on Spinoza, here is how Deleuze put it:

> We live in a world which is generally disagreeable, where not only people but the established powers have a stake in transmitting sad affects to us. Sadness, sad affects, are all those which reduce our power to act. The established powers need our sadness to make us slaves. The tyrant, the priest, the captors of souls need to persuade us that life is hard and a burden. The powers that be need to repress us no less than to make us anxious … to administer and organize our intimate little fears.[7]

Empire propagates and transmits sad affects. Sadness sticks to us; we are made to desire its rhythms. Terrible situations are made to feel inevitable. For this reason, we speak of the entrenchment of Spinozan sadness as that which is stultifying, depleting, disempowering, individualizing and isolating. But this entrenchment might not feel agonizing or even unpleasant: it might feel like comfort, boredom, or safety. We have found the notion of "subjection" helpful here, because it goes beyond a top-down notion of power. In an interview, the critical trans scholar and organizer Dean Spade explains why he uses this term instead of the more common activist term "oppression":

> "Subjection" suggests a more complex set of relationships, where we are constituted as subjects by these systems, engage in resistance within these systems, manage and are managed within these systems, and can have moments of seeing and exploiting the cracks and edges of these systems. I chose to introduce this term, despite its unfamiliarity in most activist realms I am part of, because I felt its intervention was a necessary part of my argument about how power works.[8]

Today, especially in the metropolitan centers of so-called "developed" countries, subjects are enmeshed in a dense fabric of control. Some of us are steered into forms of life that are compatible and complicit with ongoing exploitation and violence, while other populations are selected for slow death. New forms of subjection are invented to contain each new rebellion, enrolling subjects to participate in the containment. Prisons and policing come to be felt (especially by white people) as a form of safety and security. Misogyny is eroticized and objectification reaches new heights, taking new forms. Desires for affluence and luxury are entrenched amidst growing inequality. Through cellphones and social media, surveillance and control are increasingly participatory. When they are working, these forms of subjection are felt not as impositions but as *desires*, like a warm embrace or an insistent tug.

[7] Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues II,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 61.

[8] Dean Spade, "On *Normal Life*," interview by Natalie Oswin, *Society and Space* (January 2014), http://societyandspace.org/2014/01/15/on-6/.

Joy is not happiness

With all this in mind, we want to pull happiness and joy apart, in hopes of further clarifying what we mean by joyful militancy. The happiness offered to us by Empire is not the same as joy, even though they are conventionally understood as synonyms. For instance, the Oxford English Dictionary defines joy simply as "a feeling of great pleasure or happiness."[9] But whereas joyful transformation undoes the stultifying effects of Empire, happiness has become a tool of subjection.

Under Empire, happiness is seen as a duty and unhappiness as a disorder. Marketing firms increasingly sell happy experiences instead of products: happiness is a relaxing vacation on the beach, an intense night at the bar, a satisfying drink on a hot day, or the contentment and security of retirement. As consumers, we are encouraged to become connoisseurs and customizers, with an ever more refined sense of the kinds of consumption that make us happy. As workers, we are expected to find happiness in our job. Neoliberal capitalism encourages its subjects to base their lives on this search for happiness, promising pleasure, bliss, fulfillment, arousal, exhilaration, or contentment, depending on your tastes and proclivities (and your budget).

The search for happiness doesn't just come through consumption. Empire also sells the *rejection* of upward mobility and consumerism as another form of placid containment: the individual realizes that what *really* makes him happy is a life in a small town where everyone knows your name, or a humble nuclear family, or kinky polyamory, or travel, or witty banter, or cooking fancy food, or awesome dance parties. The point is not that these activities are wrong or bad. Many people use food, dance, sex, intimacy, and travel in ways intertwined with transformative struggles and bonds. But Empire empties these and other activities of their transformative potential, inviting us to shape our lives in pursuit of happiness as the ultimate goal of life. Rebecca Solnit explains this powerfully:

> Happiness is a sort of ridiculous thing we're all supposed to chase like dogs chasing cars that suggests there's some sort of steady wellbeing … you can feel confident, you can feel loved, but I think joy flashes up at moments and then you have other important things to attend to. Happiness—the wall-to-wall carpeting of the psyche—is somewhat overrated."[10]

Similarly, feminist theorist Sara Ahmed writes that "to be conditioned by happiness is to like your condition … consensus is produced through sharing happy objects, creating a blanket whose warmth covers over the potential of the body to be affected otherwise."[11] As wall-to-wall carpeting or a warm blanket, the search for happiness closes off other possibilities, other textures, other affections. Ahmed shows how the promise of happiness can be treacherous, encouraging us to ignore or turn away from suffering—our own or others'—if it threatens happiness. This promise has a gendered and racialized logic: Empire is designed to secure white male happiness in particular, while the feelings of women, genderqueer and trans folks, and people of color are intensely policed. As Nishnaabe scholar and artist Leanne Betasamosake Simpson writes,

[9] "Joy—Definition of Joy in English," *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/joy.

[10] Rebecca Solnit, "We Could Be Heroes," EMMA Talks, Vancouver, February 17, 2016. http://emmatalks.org/session/rebecca-solnit/.

[11] Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 192.

> I am repeatedly told that I cannot be angry if I want transformative change—that the expression of anger and rage as emotions are wrong, misguided, and counterproductive to the movement. The underlying message in such statements is that we, as Indigenous and Black peoples, are not allowed to express a full range of human emotions. We are encouraged to suppress responses that are not deemed palatable or respectable to settler society. But the correct emotional response to violence targeting our families is rage.[12]

Simpson shows how the restriction of negative emotions can take place in movements themselves: imperatives to be happy, nice, or kind can sustain violence, forcing out anger and antagonism. Unhappiness is pathologized along with so-called "negative" emotions like rage, despair, resentment, and fear when they get in the way of promised forms of happiness.

For those who refuse these imperatives, control and coercion lurk behind happy promises. Being perceived as a threat to the happiness of others—especially white men—can be lethal. These tangled webs of subjection are portrayed as individual failings or pathologies. Unhappiness, outrage, and grief are then perceived as individual disorders, to be dealt with through pharmaceuticals, self-help, therapy, and other atomizing responses.

The point is not that happiness is always bad, or that being happy means being complicit with Empire. Happiness can also be subversive and dangerous, as part of a process through which one becomes more alive and capable. But when happiness becomes something to be gripped or chased after as the meaning of life, it tends to lose its transformative potential. And if we are not happy—if we are depressed, anxious, addicted, or "crazy"—we are tasked with fixing ourselves, or at least with managing our symptoms. The wall-to-wall carpeting of happiness is an *anaesthetic* under Empire.

The challenge is not to reject happiness in favor of duty or self-sacrifice, but to initiate processes of thinking, feeling, and acting that undo subjection, starting from everyday life. Because Empire has shaped our very aspirations, moods, and identities, this always entails grappling with parts of ourselves. This is one of the fundamental questions that runs through the Spinozan current: How are people made to desire their own stifling forms of subjection? How do we come to desire the violent, depleting forms of life offered up by Empire? How do transformative movements get drawn back into the rhythms of capitalism and the state? And most importantly, how can we bring about something different?

Because Empire has a hold on our desires and the rhythms of our lives, undoing it cannot be about discovering a truth or revealing it to others as if we have all been duped. The kind of transformation we are interested in is not about converting people, or finally being able to see clearly.

The power of joy

To emphasize joy, in contrast to happiness, is to move away from conditioned habits, reactions, and emotions. Bubbling up in the cracks of Empire, joy remakes people through combat

[12] Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, "Indict the System: Indigenous & Black Connected Resistance," LeanneSimpson.ca, http://leannesimpson.ca/indict-the-system-indigenous-black-connected-resistance/ (accessed November 28, 2014).

with forces of subjection. Joy is a *desubjectifying* process, an unfixing, an intensification of life itself.[13] It is a process of coming alive and coming apart. Whereas happiness is used as a numbing anesthetic that induces dependence, joy is the growth of people's capacity to do and feel new things, in ways that can break this dependence. It is *aesthetic,* in its older meaning, before thinking and feeling were separate: the increase in our capacity to perceive with our senses. As Mexican activist and writer Gustavo Esteva explained in his interview with us,

> We use the word aesthetic to allude to the ideal of beauty. The etymological meaning, almost lost, associates the word with the intensity of sensual experience; it means perceptive, sharp in the senses. That meaning is retained in words like anaesthesia. Comparing a funeral in a modern, middle-class family and in a village in Mexico or India, we can see then the contrast in how one expresses or not their feelings and how joy and sadness can be combined with great intensity.[14]

Esteva suggested to us that *sentipensar* still carries this meaning in Spanish: the conviction that you cannot think without feeling, or feel without thinking. As the feminist scholar Silvia Federici explained when we interviewed her, joy is a palpable sense of collective power:

> I like the distinction between happiness and joy. I like joy, like you, because I think joy is an active passion. It's not a stagnant state of being. It's not satisfaction with things as they are. It's part of feeling power's capacities growing in you and growing in the people around you. It's a feeling, a passion, that comes from a process of transformation. And it's a process of growth. So this doesn't necessarily mean that you have to be satisfied with your situation. It means that again, using Spinoza, that you understand the situation, and you're active in a way that you feel that you are comprehending and moving along in accordance to what is required in that moment. So you feel that you have the power to change and you feel yourself changing with what you're doing, together with other people. It's not a form of acquiescence to what exists.[15]

This feeling of the power to change one's life and circumstances is at the core of collective resistance, insurrections, and the construction of alternatives to life under Empire. Joy is the *sentipensar*, the thinking-feeling that arises from becoming capable of *more,* and often this entails feeling many emotions at once. It is resonant with what the Black poet and intellectual Audre Lorde calls the erotic:

> For once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life-pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of. Our erotic knowledge empowers us, becomes a lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to

[13] Our interpretation of Spinoza's concept of joy comes from many sources, but one of the most helpful is Mary Zournazi's interview with the affect theorist Brian Massumi, in which he distinguishes joy from happiness. See Mary Zournazi, "Navigating Movements: A Conversation with Brian Massumi," in *Hope: New Philosophies for Change,* by Mary Zournazi (New York: Routledge, 2002), 241-242.

[14] Gustavo Esteva, interview by carla bergman and Nick Montgomery, email, April 26, 2014.

[15] Silvia Federici, interview by carla bergman and Nick Montgomery, telephone, January 18, 2016.

> evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning within our lives. And this is a grave responsibility, projected from within each of us, not to settle for the convenient, the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe.[16]

Lorde makes it clear that this capacity for feeling is not about fleeting pleasure or contentment: following its line requires responsibility and pulls one away from comfort and safety. It undoes stuckness. It makes stultifying comforts intolerable. In our interview with writer and activist adrienne maree brown, she emphasized that joy is the capacity to be more fully present with ourselves and the world:

> I feel very fortunate that my mother read *The Prophet* by Khalil Gibran to me many times. There is this whole thing on how your sorrow carves out the space for your joy, and vice versa. That has helped me a lot. In recent years I have been on a path to learn somatics, how to be in my wholeness, with my trauma, with my triggers, with my brilliance. It's all about being present, being awake inside your real life in real time.[17]

In this sense, joy does not come about by avoiding pain, but by struggling *amidst and through it*. To make space for collective feelings of rage, grief, or loneliness can be deeply transformative. Empire, in contrast, works to keep its subjects stuck in individualizing sadness: held in habits and relationships that are depleting, toxic, and privatized. This stagnation might be held in place by the pursuit of happiness, and the attempt to numb or avoid pain. To be more fully present, in contrast, means tuning in to that which affects us, and participating actively in the forces that shape us.

This tuning-in might be subtle and tender, or it might be a violent act of refusal. Sometimes these shifts are barely perceptible and take place over decades, and sometimes they are dramatic and world-shaking. For Deleuze, thought begins from cramped spaces where one is hemmed in by the forces of subjection. It is not an act of individual will, but a scream that interrupts unbearable forces, opening space for more active combat.[18] This is why so many movements and struggles begin with a scream of refusal: NO, ¡*Ya Basta*!, Enough!, Fuck off. They interrupt Empire's powers of subjection and make new practices and new worlds possible. One spark of refusal can lead to an upwelling of collective rage and insurrection. In this way, joy can erupt from despair, rage, hopelessness, resentment, or other so-called "negative" emotions.

Similarly, in a nihilistic vein, the anonymous authors of the queer journal *Bædan* unpack *jouissance* as something that exceeds simple enjoyment or pleasure, conceiving it as an ecstatic rupture in the social order imposed by Empire:

> We should analyze this distinction between pleasure and pain as being an inscription of the social order into our bodies. And in the same way, it is the mundane and miniscule pleasures produced through contemporary power arrangements which keep us dependent on those arrangements for our well-being. *Jouissance*, in abolishing both

[16] Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 57.

[17] adrienne maree brown, interview by Nick Montgomery and carla bergman, email, November 11, 2015.

[18] This reading of Deleuze is indebted to conversations with Kim Smith and the reading she has developed of Susan Ruddick. See Susan Ruddick, "The Politics of Affect: Spinoza in the Work of Negri and Deleuze," *Theory, Culture*

> sides of this distinction, severs us from pain as a self-preservation instinct and from pleasure as the society's alluring bribe. It is the process that momentarily sets us free from our fear of death (literal or figurative) which is such a powerful inhibitor.
>
> We can locate this *jouissance* in the historic moments of queer riot: Compton's cafeteria, Dewey's, the White Night, Stonewall, and countless other moments where queer bodies participated in rupture—throwing bricks, setting fires, smashing windows, rejoicing in the streets. But more to the point, *jouissance* is located in precisely the aspects of these moments (and of others unknown to us) which elude historians, the ones which cannot be captured in a textbook or situated neatly within narratives of progress for queer people, or of rational political struggle for a better future.[19]

Jouissance is difficult to pin down because it is movement and transformation itself. By breaking the divide between pleasure and pain, it undoes habits that hold subjects in place. We are not suggesting that there is some hidden unity behind queer nihilist *jouissance*, the notion of the erotic in Black feminism, or the Latin American concept of *sentipensar*. But we do think that these and other currents resonate with the Spinozan concept of joy: a process that is transformative, dangerous, painful, and powerful, but also somewhat elusive. A paradox of joy is that it can't be described fully; it is always embodied differently, as different struggles open up more space for people to change and be changed. In fact, to grip it, to nail it down, to claim to represent it fully would be to turn it into a dead image divorced from its lively unfolding. The way to participate in joyful transformation is through immersion in it, which is impossible if one is always standing back, evaluating, or attempting to control things.

Another part of why joyful transformation is difficult to talk about is because of the inheritance of a dualistic, patriarchal worldview in which "real" change is supposed to be measurable and observable, and "intelligence" is the capacity for a detached engineering of outcomes. Even the capacity to live otherwise and reject parts of Empire is often presented in patriarchal ways: the subject of revolution is the heroic, strong-willed individual who has the capacity to see past illusions and free himself from mistakes and errors of the past. As feminist, queer, anti-racist, and Indigenous writers have pointed out, this is a vision that falls back on the detached, masculine individual as the basic unit of life and freedom.

Rather than trying to rationally direct the course of events, an affective politics is about learning to participate more actively in the forces that compose the world and oneself. This is what Spinoza meant by intelligence. Supporting joy cannot be achieved through a detached rationality, but only through attunement to relationships, feelings, and forces—a practical wisdom that supports flourishing and experimentation.[20] This is how organizer and militant researcher Marina Sitrin put it when we spoke with her:

> I am so excited for this project. It all resonates deeply with things I have been thinking, witnessing, fearing, and dreaming. The role of joy, in particular in the way you describe it, is often absent—though not entirely—from our conversations and con-

& Society 27/4 (2010), 21–45.

[19] Bædan, "The Anti-Social Turn," *Bædan 1: Journal of Queer Nihilism* (August 2012), 186.

[20] This notion of wisdom is drawn from Claire Carlisle's helpful explanation of Spinozan wisdom as something akin to "emotional intelligence." See Claire Carlisle, "Spinoza, Part 7: On the Ethics of the Self," *The Guardian*, March 21, 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2011/mar/21/spinoza-ethics-of-the-self.

> structions in the northern part of the Americas and Europe. It is both a fairly large and abstract concept, and at the same time a very simple, direct, and emotive one. How do we feel when we participate in a movement or group? What are our relationships to others in the group? Does it feel open? Caring? Social? Is there trust? Why do we come back to assemblies and actions? Are people open to one another?[21]

These questions are not just about whether people feel good. They are about how spaces and struggles affect us, and about the potential of becoming more alive, open, trusting and creative. Practices that seem to resemble each other might be vastly different, in terms of what they enable affectively (or don't). Depending on the context, the relationships, and the way things unfold, a tactic like a strike or a street demo might be based on a dismal conformity to habit or duty, or it might be a profound experience that connects people in new ways and opens possibilities for creativity and movement. It might also be a messy mix of stale routines, reactive containment, and transformative potential.

As we explore in the next chapter, transformative power might look like a dramatic break from the relationships and life paths that have been offered by Empire, but it might also involve more subtle work of learning to love places, families, friends, and parts of ourselves in new ways. It entails deepening some bonds while severing others, and enabling selective openness through firm boundaries. What could it mean to be militant or fiercely committed to all this? Is it possible to be militant about creativity and care? Can militancy be something that is responsive and relationship-based? Can people be militant about joy?

Militant about joy

We want to connect joy to militancy for a number of reasons. We are interested in how the capacity for refusal and the willingness to fight can be enabling, relational, and can open up potentials for collective struggle and movement, in ways that are *not* necessarily associated with control, duty, or vanguardism. We want an expansive conception of militancy that affirms the potential of transformation at the expense of comfort, safety, or predictability. A common definition of militancy is to be "vigorously active, combative and aggressive, especially in support of a cause."[22] We are interested in the ways that putting joy into contact with militancy helps link fierce struggle with intense affect: rebellions and movements are not only about determined resistance, but about opening up collective capacities. With joyful militancy we want to get at what it means to enliven struggle *and* care, combativeness *and* tenderness, hand in hand.

However, the historical associations and current renderings of militancy are complex. Historically, militancy is often associated with Marxist-Leninist and Maoist vanguardism, and the ways these ideologies have informed revolutionary class struggle and national liberation struggles. These ideals of militancy have been challenged, especially by Black, Indigenous, and postcolonial feminists, who have pointed out the pitfalls of rigid ideology, patriarchal leadership, and the neglect of care and love. The traditional figure of the militant—zealous, rigid, and ruthless—has also been challenged by situationism, anarchism, feminism, queer politics, and other currents

[21] Marina Sitrin, interview by Nick Montgomery and carla bergman, email, February 4, 2016.

[22] "Militant," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Militant&oldid=754366474 (accessed December 12, 2016).

that have connected direct action and struggle to the liberation of desire, foregrounding the importance of creativity and experimentation. From this perspective, the militant is the one who is always trying to control things, to take charge, to educate, to radicalize, and so on. This kind of militant tends to be two steps behind transformations as they manifest themselves, always finding them lacking the correct analysis or strategy, always imposing a framework or program.

The contemporary discourse of counterterrorism associates figures of militancy with ISIL,[†] the Taliban, and other groups named as enemies of the United States and its allies. In this way, the specter of the "militant extremist" helps justify further militarization, surveillance, imperialism and Islamophobia. The suspected presence of one militant is enough to turn a whole area into a strike zone in which all military-aged men are conceived as enemy combatants, and everyone else as collateral damage. Within this discourse, the militant is increasingly the ultimate Other, to be targeted for death or indefinite detention. In all of these representations—from the Maoist rebel to the terrorist extremist—the figure of the militant tends to be associated with intense discipline, duty, and armed struggle, and these ways of being are often posed in opposition to being supple, responsive, or sensitive. It's clear that militancy means willingness to fight, but in its dominant representations, it is cold and calculating.

At the same time, there are other currents of militancy that make space for transformation and joy. When we interviewed her, queer Filipino organizer Melanie Matining spoke about its potential to break down stereotypes:

> The word "militancy" for me is a really, really hard one. It was used a lot in Filipino organizing. I would always connect it to the military industrial complex, and I didn't want to replicate that. And then as I started peeling back the actual things we need to do… As an Asian woman, to be militant—that's really fucking rad. It breaks down sterotypes of submissiveness. The concept of militancy is a new thing for me, and to embrace it I'm unpacking notions of who I'm supposed to be.[23]

Artist and writer Jackie Wang argues that militancy is not only tactically necessary, but transformative for those who embody it. In the context of anti-Blackness in the United States, Wang shows how the category of "crime" has been constructed around Blackness and how mass incarceration has led to a politics of safety and respectability that relies on claims of innocence, contrasted implicitly with (Black) guilt and criminality. Rejecting the politics of innocence means challenging the innocent/criminal dichotomy and the institutionalized violence that subtends it. This form of militancy, Wang argues, is "not about assuming a certain theoretical posture or adopting a certain perspective—it is a lived position."[24] Drawing on Frantz Fanon, Wang writes that militancy has the capacity "to transform people and 'fundamentally alter' their being by emboldening them, removing their passivity and cleansing them of the 'core of despair' crystallized in their bodies."[25] Living militancy, from this perspective, is inherently connected to a process of transformation that undoes the knot of subjection around innocence, challenges the carceral logics of anti-Blackness, and opens up new terrains of struggle.

When we asked Indigenous political theorist Glen Coulthard about his conception of militancy in the context of Indigenous resurgence, he called it an "emergent radicalism" that destabilizes

[23] Melanie Matining, interview by carla bergman and Nick Montgomery, in person, May 6, 2014.
[24] Jackie Wang, "Against Innocence: Race, Gender and the Politics of Safety," *LIES Journal* 1 (2012), 13.
[25] Idem, 10.

relations of domination.[26] Coulthard's work focuses on Indigenous resurgence and resistance to settler colonialism. He reveals the ways that Empire represents Indigenous peoples' oppression as a constellation of personal failings and "issues" to be addressed through colonial recognition and reconciliation. He also focuses on Indigenous refusal and resistance, the revaluation of Indigenous traditions, and a rise in Indigenous militancy and direct action. Militancy, in the context of Indigenous resurgence, is about the capacity to break down colonial structures of control, including the state's monopoly on the legitimate use of force; it is a break with the colonial state's attempt to subjugate Indigenous people and ensure continued exploitation of Indigenous lands. This emergent militancy isn't based on a single program or ideology, but comes out of relationships, as Coulthard says:

> It's emergent in the sense that it's bottom-up. But it also emerges from something, and that's those relationships to land, place, community. So that is the emergent part. Emergent doesn't mean entirely new, because those relationships to place are not new. They've always been there, and are always re-emerging. It comes in cycles. The always-there emergent militancy is acted on through management strategies, recognition and accommodation, whatever. That has its effects: it dampens the crisis, it overcomes contradictions temporarily. And then the militancy will emerge again. And we've seen this four or five times in the last half-century, these series of containment/management strategies.
>
> …What's always prior is agency of Indigenous peoples, and capital and the state are constantly on the defensive, reacting. As opposed to thinking that we're always reacting to colonialism, when we privilege it. It's this resurgent Indigenous subjectivity that the state is constantly trying to quell or subdue. And it's successful, but never totally successful. And it boils over, comes to the surface, and some new technology is deployed in order to manage it, and reconciliation is the latest tool that is doing that work. But it's always because of our persistent presence: we've never gone away and we've been articulating alternatives in words and deeds.[27]

This conception of militancy as emergent is important because it doesn't come out of thin air, or from an enlightened vanguard of militarized men who suppose that they can see things more clearly than common people. It comes out of the ongoing refusal of Indigenous peoples to give up their ways of life. As Kiera Ladner and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson write in their introduction to *This is an Honour Song*,

> The summer of 1990 brought some strong medicine to Turtle Island. For many Canadians, "Oka" was the first time they encountered Indigenous anger, resistance and standoff, and the resistance was quickly dubbed both the "Oka Crisis" and the "Oka Crises" by the mainstream media. But to the Kanien'kehaka (Mohawk) people of Kanehsata:ke, who were living up their responsibilities to take care of their lands, this was neither a "crisis" at Oka, nor was it about the non-Native town of "Oka." This was about 400 years of colonial injustice. Similarly, for the Kanien'kaehaka

[26] Glen Coulthard, interview by carla bergman and Nick Montgomery, in person, March 16, 2016.
[27] Ibid.

> from Kahnawa:ke and Akwesasne who created "crises" by putting up their own barricades on the Mercier Bridge or by mobilizing and/or mobilizing support (resources) at Kanehsata:ke, this really had nothing to do with Oka, a bridge or a golf course. This was about 400 years of resistance. Like every Indigenous nation occupied by Canada, the Haudenesaunee have been confronting state/settler societies and their governments since those societies began threatening the sovereignty, self-determination, and jurisdiction of the Haudenesaunee. It was not a beginning. Nor was this the end. This was a culmination of many, many years of Onhkwehonwe resistance resulting in a decision to put up barricades in defense of, and to bring attention to, Haudenesaunee land ethics, treaty responsibilities, and governance.[28]

Indigenous resurgence and events like Oka are not joyful in the sense of being happy, but in the sense that they are deeply transformative and able to catalyze solidarity across Turtle Island. But unlike Marxist conceptions of militancy in which the vanguard is supposed to usher in a global revolution, it is clear that Indigenous struggles do not implicate everyone in the same way. As it breaks down colonial structures of control and dispossession, Indigenous resurgence implicates us, as settlers, in complicated ways: it unsettles us and our relationship to land and place, and throws into question received ideas about who we are, our responsibilities and complicities, what it means to live here, and our received ideas about what "here" is. It compels us to learn, together, how to support Indigenous resurgence and resist settler colonial violence.

Joyful militancy has also emerged in spaces where people generate the capacity to move *with* despair and hopelessness, to politicize it. In her study of the queer movement ACT UP, queer theorist and activist Deborah Gould shows how their militant tactics not only won institutional victories that prolonged and saved lives; they were also a process of world-making:

> From its start and throughout its life, ACT UP was a place to fight the AIDS crisis, and it was always more than that as well. It was a place to elaborate critiques of the status quo, to imagine alternative worlds, to express anger, to defy authority, to form sexual and other intimacies, to practice non-hierarchical governance and self-determination, to argue with one another, to refashion identities, to experience new feelings, to be changed.[29]

The militancy of ACT UP was not only about a willingness to be confrontational and defy conventions of straight society and mainstream gay and lesbian politics; the movement also created erotically-charged queer atmospheres and sustained networks of care and support for members who got sick. Catalyzed by grief and rage, it blew open political horizons and changed what was possible for people to think, do, and feel together.

When we asked the Argentina-based intellectual Sebastián Touza about militancy, he discussed the danger of defining it once and for all:

> I don't know if militancy can be defined "as such." Probably it is not a good idea to define it that way because that would entail a general point of view, an interchangeable and abstract concept, valid for all situations. But, on the other hand, I would

[28] Kiera L. Ladner and Leanne Simpson, eds., *This Is an Honour Song: Twenty Years since the Blockades* (Winnipeg: Arbeiter Ring, 2010), 1.

[29] Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago

> say that a militant is somebody who struggles for justice in the situation … Thus we have to pay attention to the situation, to the encounters that take place in it, to how meaning is elaborated there, to the subjectivities that arise as a result of those encounters.[30]

This "situated" militancy does not start from a prefabricated notion of justice. It is an attempt to intervene effectively in the here and now, based on a capacity to be attuned to relationships. An example of this could be Touza's discussion of the struggle of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, a feminist organization that formed in resistance to military repression in Argentina in the 1970s:

> Mothers grew up not from strategic plans but from below: from the pain of mothers seeking to recover their children who had been kidnapped, tortured, and "disappeared" by the state. Because they have not separated affects from political activity, Mothers never consider each other means toward ends. Nobody has to be subordinated to strengthen the organization. Rather, they regard each other as ends in themselves. What bonds them together is not an idea but the affect, love and friendship that arises from supporting each other, sharing intimate emotions, moments of joy and sorrow. They organize themselves through consensus, understood not as a system of decision-making or conflict resolution, but as a direct engagement with the lives of one another. As in a now long established feminist tradition, for them the personal is political. Mothers guide themselves by an ethics of intimate conviction whose exercise cannot be detached from everyday life. They have a profound distrust of ideologies and party lines and are proud of their autonomy from the state, political parties, unions and NGOs. Their autonomy does not consist in fighting against a dominant ideology, which might summon the need for the specialized knowledge of a vanguard party, but rather … in the affirmation of liberating aspects of popular culture that already exist among them.[31]

The Mothers are a powerful example of how militancy often springs from everyday life and the bonds of kinship, rather than abstract ideological or moral commitments. These struggles eventually waned or were absorbed by Empire, at least partially. The Argentinean government eventually began using the discourse of human rights and began to offer money and services as an attempt to relegitimize the state and regain control, causing deep divisions between the Mothers and other movements in Argentina.[32] The Canadian government used treaty negotiations, reconciliation discourses, and other formal processes in an attempt to quell Indigenous resurgence and militancy. As Coulthard explains above, new forms of militancy tend to provoke new strategies of containment and absorption by the state, leading to the invention of new forms of struggle. None of these movements stayed frozen in one form: in various ways they transformed, dissolved, shifted, or were institutionalized. But the fact that Empire always invents new forms

Press, 2009), 178.

[30] Sebastián Touza, interview by Nick Montgomery and carla bergman, email, February 2, 2016.

[31] Sebastián Touza, "Antipedagogies for Liberation Politics, Consensual Democracy and Post-Intellectual Interventions" (PhD dissertation, Simon Fraser University, 2008), 136–7. https://www.academia.edu/544417/Antipedagogies_for_liberation_politics_consensual_democracy_and_post-intellectual_interventions.

[32] For a fuller discussion of these dynamics, see Marina Sitrin, *Everyday Revolutions: Horizontalism and Autonomy in Argentina* (London: Zed Books, 2012).

of containment is not evidence that movements have "failed" or that they were misguided. Joyful transformation sometimes ebbs and flows, becomes captured or crushed, grows subtler or percolates into everyday life, but always re-emerges and renews itself.

Militancy is not a fixed ideal to approximate. We cannot be "like" a militant because militancy—in the way we conceptualize it here—is a practice that is based in the specificity of situations. We cannot become these examples, nor should we look to them as ideals. Rather than boiling joyful militancy down to a fixed way of being or a set of characteristics, we see it arising in and through the relationships that people have with each other. This means it will always look different, based on the emergent connections, relationships, and convictions that animate it.

In relation to this, we believe it is important to hesitate, lest our understanding of militancy become another form of rigid radicalism. Not everyone we spoke with has been enthusiastic about this word. For instance, in our interview with them, writer and artist Margaret Killjoy was ambivalent, emphasizing its connection to armed struggle:

> I guess I see it as being someone who is "actively" involved in trying to promote radical social change, and in a non-reformist way. It's dangerous as terminology … I don't use it much myself … because of course the first implication it seems to have is that of armed struggle, which is far from a universally applicable strategy or tactic.[33]

We hope that joyful militancy allows for questions and uncertainties that are too often smothered by conventional conceptions of militancy. We also recognize that many will still prefer different language. We are not suggesting that all joyful struggles share an ideology, a program, or a set of tactics. What the above examples have in common is that they express a form of militancy that is attuned to their local situations and arises from people's needs, desires, and relationships. What we are calling joyful militancy is not a shared content, though we do think there are some shared values and sensibilities. Rather it is an attunement and activation of collective power that looks different everywhere, because everywhere *is* different.

Besides these highly visible examples, joyful militancy also lives in art and poetry that opens people's capacities for thinking and feeling in new ways. It is expressed in quiet forms of subversion and sabotage, as well as all the forms of care, connection, and support that defy the isolation and violence of Empire. It is not a question of being a certain way, but a question of open-ended becoming, starting from wherever people find themselves.

Starting from where people find themselves

Joy arises not from the pursuit of a distant goal, but through struggle in one's own situation. It often erupts through the capacity to say no, to refuse, or to attack the debilitating form of life offered up by Empire. It might come through a riot or a barricade. Or it might come about by refusing Empire's offers of insipid happiness, or through the capacity to be present with grief. Ultimately it is up to people to figure this out for themselves by composing gestures, histories, relationships, feelings, textures, world events, neighborhoods, ancestors, languages, tools, and bodies in a way that enables something new, deepening a crack in Empire. This is at odds with the stiff, macho militancy that attempts to control change from above. It cannot be a kind of more-radical-than-you stance that occupies a fixed position or argues for a single way forward.

[33] Margaret Killjoy, interview by carla bergman and Nick Montgomery, email, March 8, 2014.

How do we create situations where we feel more alive and capable than before? What makes the intransigence of oppression feel a little less stable? What might create more room to move and breathe? What supports people to refuse the all-too-common traps of moralism, clarity, or perfectionism in favor of increasing collective power and creativity? The answers to these questions are infinitely varied and complex. Being militant about collective, enabling transformation is about trust in people's capacities to figure out this way forward together, along with a willingness to participate openly in the process.

Chapter 2: Friendship, Freedom, Ethics, Affinity

To become what we need to each other, and to find power in friendship, is to become dangerous.
—anonymous[1]

I have a circle of friends and family with whom I am radically vulnerable and trust deeply—we call it coevolution through friendship.
—adrienne maree brown[2]

The urgency of making kin[3]

Empire works in part by constantly attenuating and poisoning relationships. Kinship has been enclosed within the nuclear family, freedom within the individual, and values within morality. Together, these enclosures sap relationships of their intensity and their transformative potential. If relationships are what compose the world and our lives, then the "free individual" of modern, Western capitalism (an implicitly straight, white, able-bodied, cis-gendered, property-owning man) is a sad and lonely vision: a strange fiction invented by a violent and fearful society, walled in by morality and self-interest. This is an uprooted being who sees his rootlessness—his very incapacity to make and sustain transformative connections—as a feat of excellence.

We suggest that Empire's grip on relationships is being broken by new and resurgent forms of intimacy through which people come to depend on each other, defend each other, and become dangerous together. Friendship as freedom, in this story, names interdependent relationships as a source of collective power, a dangerous closeness that Empire works to eradicate through relentless violence, division, competition, management, and incitements to see ourselves as isolated individuals or nuclear family units.

Spinoza helps us dissolve the fiction of the modern Western individual—and its oscillation between self-interest and morality—into a relational *ethics*. A lot of people already navigate their everyday lives in this way, attuned and responsive to their own situations and relationships. Along these lines, we draw on a minor current of anarchism associated with Gustav Landauer and others that centers relationships as the basis of resistance and movement. We bring these currents into conversation with Indigenous worldviews and practices, along with the ethical questions that are being asked and answered in a multiplicity of ways, in different places, around decolonizing relationships between settlers and Indigenous people. This conversation always includes questions of how to sever harmful relationships. Freedom, in this sense, is not just the capacity to generate "good" relationships, but also to draw lines in the sand and fight.

[1] Anonymous, "Robot Seals as Counter-Insurgency: Friendship and Power from Aristotle to Tiqqun," *Human Strike*, https://humanstrike.wordpress.com/2013/08/27/robot-seals-as-counter-insurgency-friendship-and-power-from-aristotle-to-tiqqun/ (accessed August 27, 2013).

[2] brown, interview by Nick Montgomery and carla bergman.

[3] The turn of phrase "making kin" comes to us from the feminist philosopher Donna Haraway. See Donna Haraway, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin," *Environmental Humanities* 6/1

Friendship is the root of freedom

These are not just words; they are clues and prods to earthquakes in kin making that are not limited to Western family apparatuses, heteronormative or not.

—Donna Haraway[4]

Freedom and friendship used to mean the same thing: intimate, interdependent relationships and the commitment to face the world together. At its root, relational freedom isn't about being unrestricted: it might mean the capacity for interconnectedness and attachment. Or mutual support and care. Or shared gratitude and openness to an uncertain world. Or a new capacity to fight alongside others. But this is not what freedom has come to mean under Empire.

Look for the dictionary definition of "freedom" today and you'll find *rights, absences* and *lack of restrictions* at the core, applied to an isolated individual. Here are some of its definitions in the Oxford English Dictionary:

> The power or right to act, speak, or think as one wants:
>
> *"we do have some freedom of choice"*
>
> The state of not being imprisoned or enslaved:
>
> *"the shark thrashed its way to freedom"*
>
> The state of not being subject to or affected by (something undesirable):
>
> *"government policies to achieve freedom from want"*[5]

At bottom, all of these definitions are about getting away from external restriction or influence: being unhindered, unaffected, independent. Under capitalism, freedom is especially associated with free markets and the free agent who chooses based on individual preferences. In spite of colonization and capitalism, this vapid form of freedom still can't get a foothold in many parts of the world. Even in Europe, where so many tools of colonization were refined, the roots of freedom were different. Centuries ago, some Europeans had a more relational conception of freedom, which wasn't just about the absence of external constraints, but also about our immersion in the relationships that sustain us and make us thrive.

"Freedom" and "friend" share the same early Indo-European root: fri-, *or pri-*, meaning "love."[6] This root made its way into Gothic, Norse, Celtic, Hindi, Russian, and German.[7] A thousand years ago, the Germanic word for "friend" was the present participle of the verb *freon*, "to love." This language also had an adjective, **frija-*. It meant "free" as in "not in slavery," where the reason to avoid slavery was to be among loved ones. *Frija* meant "beloved, belonging to the circle of one's beloved friends and family."[8] As the Invisible Committee writes in *To Our Friends,*

(2015), 161.

[4] Idem, 163.

[5] "Freedom—Definition of Freedom in English," *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/freedom.

[6] Douglas Harper, "Free (Adj.)," *Online Etymology Dictionary*, http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=free (accessed November 30, 2016).

[7] Ibid.

[8] Editors of the American Heritage Dictionaries, eds., *Word Histories and Mysteries: From Abracadabra to Zeus* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2004), 103.

> "Friend" and "free" in English … come from the same Indo-European root, which conveys the idea of a shared power that grows. Being free and having ties was one and the same thing. I am free because I have ties, because I am linked to a reality greater than me."[9]

A few centuries later, freedom became untied from connectedness. The seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes imagined freedom as nothing more than an "absence of opposition" possessed by isolated, selfish individuals. For Hobbes, the free man is constantly armed and on guard: "When going to sleep, he locks his doors; when even in his house he locks his chests."[10] The free individual lives in fear, and can only feel secure when he knows there are laws and police to protect him and his possessions. He is definitely *he,* because this individual is also founded on patriarchal male supremacy and its associated divisions of mind/body, aggression/submission, rationality/emotion, and so on. His so-called autonomy is inseparable from his exploitation of others.

When peasants were "freed," during this period, it often meant that they had been forced from their lands and their means of subsistence, leaving them "free" to sell their labor for a wage in the factories, or starve. It is no coincidence that these lonely conceptions of freedom arose at the same time as the European witch trials, the enclosure of common lands, the rise of the transatlantic slave trade, and the colonization and genocide of the Americas. At the same time as the meaning of freedom was divorced from friendship and connection, the lived connections between people and places were being dismembered.

As Empire was enclosing lands and bodies, it was overseeing the enclosure of thought as well. The Age of Reason was marked by a new kind of knowledge that could subdue and control nature and the human body, enabling capitalist rationalization and work discipline.[11] Time and space would become measurable, stable, and fixed. Bodies were no longer conduits for magical forces, but machines to be harnessed for production. Plants, animals, and other non-human creatures were no longer kin, but objects to be dissected and consumed.

Even among intellectuals in Europe, not everyone agreed with Hobbes's fearful vision of freedom and the divisions imposed by Cartesian thought. Descartes's contemporary, Baruch Spinoza, articulated a philosophy in which people were inherently intertwined with their world. Spinoza left instructions for his most important work, the *Ethics,* to be published after his death, because he knew he would likely face torture and execution for the ways his relational worldview undermined both monotheistic religion and the dualistic philosophy that was emerging during his own time. Instead of a passive Nature on one hand and an active, supernatural God on the other, Spinoza envisioned a holistic reality in which God is present in all things, and in which all things are active and dynamic processes. Everything is alive and connected. Mind and body, human and non-human, joy and sadness, are intertwined with one another.

We do not mean to present Spinoza's philosophy as a handbook for living in today's world. In many ways, Spinoza remained a product of his time and place: he used the geometric method to create proofs for his philosophical claims, he couldn't overcome patriarchal divisions, and he

[9] Invisible Committee, *To Our Friends*, trans. Robert Hurley (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2015), 127.

[10] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks, 2008), Chapter XIII, Of the Natural Condition of Mankind.

[11] This short account of the Age of Reason is drawn primarily from Silvia Federici. See Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2004), 133–62.

remained wedded to the state as a vehicle for security. Our interest is not in Spinoza himself, or even his philosophy as a whole, but in the way that his ideas are part of a minor current in Western thought that is more relational, holistic, and dynamic. Spinoza's work remains marginal compared to that of Descartes and Hobbes, but his relational worldview has nevertheless been taken up by radicals at the margins of philosophy, ecology, feminism, marxism and anarchism.[12]

Most importantly, for us, Spinoza's philosophy is grounded in affect.[13] Things are not defined by what they are, but by what they *do:* how they affect and are affected by the forces of the world. In this way, capabilities are not fixed for all time, but are constantly shifting. This is a fundamental departure from the inherently ableist and ageist perspective that measures all bodies in relation to the norm of a "healthy," "mature," or "able" body. When starting right from a body's material specificity, without any intervening "should," learning becomes fundamentally different: rather than detached categorization or observation of stable properties, it happens through active experimentation in shared, ever-changing situations.

From morality to ethics

By creating a philosophy based in affect, Spinoza initiated a radical critique of ruling institutions and authorities and the ways they exercise control through subjection, including toxic morality inherited from centuries of Christianity, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, and the state. But Spinoza's philosophy did not just undermine Empire's dominant morality in order to replace it with a different one; it undermined *morality itself*. His worldview was at odds with any notion of an ultimate ground of right and wrong that was uniform for everyone, abstracted from the lively flux of relationships and situations. For Spinoza, life was an exploration of the forces of the world, not conformity to a fixed ideal.

For moralists this is dangerous because there's no guarantee against evil, and no ultimate foundation for moral judgment. Yet the Spinozan lineage is not about everyone doing whatever they please, according to isolated interests and preferences. On the contrary, recognizing our interconnectedness means becoming capable of *more* fidelity to our web of relations and our situations, not less. This fidelity is not moral; it is *ethical*.

Ethics is often spoken of colloquially as an individual morality: a static set of principles held by individuals (ethical consumption, codes of ethics, and so on). In fact, dictionary definitions conflate ethics with the "moral principles that govern a person's behavior."[14] But as Deleuze explains, a Spinozan conception of ethics results in a completely different set of questions:

[12] Some books we have found helpful include Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Gilles Deleuze, *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Zone Books, 1992); Moira Gatens, ed., *Feminist Interpretations of Benedict Spinoza* (University Park: Penn State University Press, 2009); Antonio Negri, *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991); Tiqqun, *Introduction to Civil War*, trans. Alexander R. Galloway and Jason E. Smith (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010).

[13] Our reading of Spinoza is drawn primarily from Deleuze and those he has influenced. For helpful introductions to this lineage, see Gilles Deleuze, "Lecture on Spinoza's Concept of Affect" (Lecture, Cours Vincennes, Paris, 1978), https://www.gold.ac.uk/media/deleuze_spinoza_affect.pdf; Michael Hardt, "The Power to Be Affected," *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society* 28/3 (September 1, 2015), 215–22; Brian Massumi, *Politics of Affect* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015).

[14] "Ethics—Definition of Ethics in English," *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/ethics.

> There's a fundamental difference between Ethics and Morality. Spinoza doesn't make up a morality, for a very simple reason: he never asks what we must do, he always asks what we are capable of, what's in our power, ethics is a problem of power, never a problem of duty. In this sense Spinoza is profoundly immoral. Regarding the moral problem, good and evil, he has a happy nature because he doesn't even comprehend what this means. What he comprehends are good encounters, bad encounters, increases and diminutions of power. Thus he makes an ethics and not at all a morality.[15]

Whereas morality asks and answers the question: "what should one do?" a Spinozan ethics asks: "what is one capable of?" Unlike the cold abstraction of morality, a body's capacities can only be discovered through attunement and experimentation, starting right where you are. You never know until you try. In trying, whether you "succeed" or "fail," you will have learned and changed, and the situation will have changed, even if only slightly. This sounds simple, and in many ways it is. It speaks to the ways that many of us already try to navigate our everyday lives: not by adhering to fixed commandments, but by learning to inhabit our own situations in ways that make us more capable and more jointly alive.

Someone gets in touch with bird migrations, insects, weather patterns: they affect her more and more deeply as she tunes into their rhythms, over months and years. They begin to make her up. The loss is palpable as fewer return each year, and her hatred of the destruction grows alongside her love of the few remaining refuges for non-human creatures where she lives. Her rage and despair finds resonance with others, similarly entwined, and they figure out how to fight together. This is neither individual self-interest, nor moral altruism. It is relational ethics: the willingness to nurture and defend relationships.[16]

Two friends fold their lives together; they draw new capacities out of each other. They hurt each other, and they work through it, emerging more intertwined than before. They are no longer sure which ideas and mannerisms were "their own" and which belonged to the friend. They know each other's triggers and tendencies, intimately. One finds himself in trouble, and the other drops everything to help, at great personal risk. But this risk and sacrifice is not because it is morally right, or because they have calculated that it is in their own self-interest. It is not even felt as a choice; it is something drawn out of them.

Ethics is the dynamic space beyond static morality and vapid self-interest: it is the capacity to be responsive to the relationships that make us up. Whether consciously or not, our desires and choices are the product of everything that affects us. While this kind of thinking and practice may be intuitive, it runs against dominant strands of both Western knowledge and morality, which strive for universalism and generalizability: they tend towards pinning things down, dictating how we should act, or predicting what is likely. They ask what humans are and always will be, what we should always do, or what we usually do (and how we can be controlled). In contrast, a Spinozan ethics is attuned to the singularity and openness of each situation: what are we capable of here and now, together, at *this* time, in *this* place, amid the relations in which we are embedded?

From this perspective, it is not about creating self-contained units, but about participating in complex, shifting, relational processes. We always begin in the middle: amid our situations, in our neighborhoods, with our own penchants, habits, loves, complicities, and connections. There

[15] Deleuze, "Lecture on Spinoza's Concept of Affect."

[16] This anecdote is based on conversations and exchanges with Kim Smith.

is no individual that comes before the dense network of relations in which we're embedded. This relational space eludes the traps of individual self-interest *and* moral duty. It is a space beyond isolated individuals and altruistic saviors. We are always participating in the making of our worlds, and being made by them. From this perspective, freedom can mean nothing other than the ethical expansion of what we're capable of—what we're able to feel and do together. In this vein, the Invisible Committee writes,

> Freedom isn't the act of shedding our attachments, but the practical capacity to work on them, to move around in their space, to form or dissolve them … the freedom to uproot oneself has always been a fantasmic freedom. We can't rid ourselves of what binds us without at the same time losing the very thing to which our forces would be applied.[17]

Freedom here is not the absence of restriction or attachment, but the capacity to become more active in shaping our attachments. This becoming-active is not about controlling things, but about learning to participate in their flow, forming intense bonds through which we become implicated in each other's struggles and capacities. Within the Spinozan current, friendship is being revalued: not as a bond between individuals, but as an ethical relation that remakes us, together, in an ongoing process of becoming otherwise. Similarly, feminist philosopher Donna Haraway has argued that "making kin" across divides of species, nation, gender, and other borders is perhaps the most urgent task today.[18] Through friendship or kinship we undo ourselves and become new, in potentially radical and dangerous ways. In this sense, friendship is at the root of freedom.

There

Where are we? where? There is a *where,* because we are, stubbornly, and have been, and who are we, if not you and me?

Where are we? Out of History, of his or her story, and back into it, out in Space and back to Earth, out of the womb, and then into dust, who are we?

Where is where, where the terror, the love, the pain? Where the hatred? Where your life, and mine?

There is a where, connected to telephone lines, a place for waiting, another for sleeping, a kiss and a flower, and where are we when you are, and where are you when I wait for you to be, be the people I see.

Who are we, a race, a tribe, a herd, a passing phenomenon, or a traveller still travelling in order to find out who we are, and who we shall be?

Are we travelling on a rope, is cancer eating our neighbors, where the sun when night descends, and where paradise on the ocean's asphalt roads?

Who are we, a woman or a man, and is that seasonal, is it eternal, and is it true that there are men and women and it must be true, because you are and I am.

Is there hatred in your heart, and does it mean that I am not here, and where are you when it's getting late?

To go, be going, straight ahead, the world being round, to be coming back, to where, to what, to be a bouncing ball, where, on what, to be defeated by gravity.

Who are you when you're not me, and who am I? Should we be people or fish, sharks, intelligent enough to wipe ourselves off the face of the earth?

And what is earth? some mud, some glue, a meteor, can it belong to itself?

Should you love me because I'm free, and should I follow your destiny instead of mine, out of History, away from Time and its satellites whose names are fear and death? Should I be?

Where are we? In the middle, at the beginning, the end? Who is we, is it you plus me, or something else expandable, explosive, the salt and pepper of our thoughts, the something that may outlast our divinities?

Am I always going by boat, and wherefrom? Am I crying, and why? Are the roads blocked by angels or by soldiers?

I'm asking you to run ahead of yourself and tell me why my bones are cold, or am I wanting you to leave my trees alone and search for water where the rivers overflow?

Going, into a train and stopping nowhere, because *it is* nowhere, with people pouring in, like ripped bags of wheat, birds helplessly flying overhead.

Who are we, us the children of History, whose, which period, which side of History, the wars or the poems, the queens or the strangers, on which side of whose History are we going to be? Are we going to be?

Where are we? In a desert, on a glacier, within a mother's womb or in a woman's eyes, in a man's yearning, or are we into each other, each other's future, as we have been in the past? Are we dead or alive?

I have never been here, where a pleasure boat rocks in the heat, and you have never been in my aunt's garden, where have you been then? We went out to look for you and you were sleeping by a fountain. Where was the moonlight? Where the anguish?

I threw my memories out the window and they came back,

alien, beggars and witches, leaving me standing like a sword. Is that why the sun is so bleak when it looks at us, and why is there so much love under the heat and the truth?

THE GIFT OF SKIN

Margaret said she was sorry to call me on a Saturday but the guy's regular person couldn't make it so she needed a sub and could I help out. The guy only lived a few blocks away from me. His name was Carlos.

A guy named Marty let me in. He was a friend who'd been staying at Carlos's place at night. Marty had to go to work during the day. Margaret had told me all that on the phone. Marty said hi and ushered me into the kitchen, gestured at the fridge, the cabinets, the stove. Marty was a pudgy pear of a guy, mid-thirties, but he still looked like he had his baby fat, and that baby skin, like he almost never had to shave. His skin was pale white, his arms especially. He was wearing a short-sleeved shirt. He showed me his work number by the phone and another number for a guy named Andy. He showed me the hall closet with towels and laundry soap, cleaning stuff, pads, sheets, gloves.

"There's more gloves in the kitchen above the sink," he said, "and in the bathroom."

"Thanks," I said, "I brought my own too." You go through a lot of gloves.

Marty showed me the room he stayed in. It was small and very plain. It wasn't really his room, he explained, just where he stayed. It was really Carlos's guest room, but he never had guests anymore. There was nothing on the walls. And just a single bed like in a kid's room, a chair, and a little table for a desk. No dresser. The closet door was open, and there were only a couple of shirts and a pair of pants. Marty said I could sit in the room and read or whatever because there was not actually much to do.

"Carlos likes to sleep a lot," Marty said. "Anyway, here's the newspaper. I only did half the crossword."

"Thanks," I said, though I always took a book to read.

We went down the hall. Marty said really loudly, "Here's the bathroom." We went in and he closed the door and whispered, "Carlos has been incontinent lately, so we just got this condom catheter. The nurse put it on last night. She said I should change it this morning. I didn't do it yet. I've never done one." He looked away from me. "You've done them before, haven't you?"

"Oh, yeah," I said. "No problem."

It was usually simple. Usually you just had to empty the bag. And even when you had to change the condom part, you just had to be careful, but it wasn't complicated or dangerous or anything.

"How about his meds?" Marty asked.

"Sorry," I said. "Can't do it. I'm not authorized." It was something about insurance. "But I can remind him, open his jars or med tray or whatever. He's got a tray, right?"

They usually did by the time they were in this shape. It was a plastic box with little sections for morning, midday, evening, night, where you put all the pills they needed to take at those times.

"Yeah," said Marty, "it's by his bed. I've given him his morning stuff. He'll just need his noon stuff."

"Right," I said.

"So," Marty said, "come meet Carlos."

We went back through the hall and kitchen and out to where Carlos's bed was set up in what used to be the living room. The room had a nice black leather couch and chair set, a big TV and VCR, a CD player, and billions of CDs. There was a huge yellowing plant as big as a little tree, and a bunch of other plants that didn't look much better. There was a wall of venetian blinds that were closed. The couch had been pushed toward the center of the room. The bed was behind the back of the couch. It was a hospital bed. The head was cranked up part way. Carlos was covered with a sheet up to his neck. His face was thin. He had a patchy beard.

"Carlos," said Marty. "Carlos?"

He opened his eyes. They were brown and watery.

Marty introduced me to Carlos.

"Hi, Carlos," I said. I stepped close to the bed, careful not to knock the urine bag hanging from the side. The IV pole was on the other side. He wasn't on anything just then. I stuck my hand out to shake. It took him a second to get it, then he slowly pulled his right arm out from under the sheet. It was very thin. He didn't have on a shirt. His skin looked washed out, like it used to be darker but now it was pasty. His arms and chest were hairy—black, straight hair. I took his hand and did something between a shake and a squeeze.

"Hi." His voice was small.

"I'm glad to meet you, Carlos." I put my left hand on the back of his so both of my hands were around him. He didn't pull back. You can feel it when they want to, even if they're too weak to move. I kept holding his hand. It was clammy.

Marty told Carlos I was going to be there till two, when the nurse would come. "I've shown her around," Marty said to him, "so just let her know if you want anything, OK?"

"OK," said Carlos. He was used to saying OK to everything. He couldn't really object.

"OK. Bye, Carlos." Marty turned to go. He was halfway to the door when Carlos said, "Bye!" suddenly and very loudly. His eyes were opened wide like he was startled.

Marty came back. "I'll see you this evening,

Carlos," he said slowly. He was trying to reassure him. He wanted to believe it too.

I felt Carlos's hand move. Marty looked at me.

"I'm gonna walk Marty to the door, Carlos," I said. "I'll be right back." I let go of Carlos's hand and laid it on top of the sheet.

At the door Marty gestured for me to step out into the hall. He closed the door behind me.

"My work number is by the phone," he told me again. "Call if you need anything."

"I will," I said.

"If Carlos wants to talk to me, you may have to dial for him," he said.

"OK," I said.

"And if you call and I'm away from my desk, leave a message, or they'll page me, or you can call our friend Andy. Andy's number is there too."

"OK," I said again. He didn't want to leave.

Marty looked at the door behind me. "Yeah . . . well . . . so. . . . You saw the urine bag and everything?"

"Yeah," I said, "I can change it right now."

He looked down at the carpet. "Carlos is embarrassed about the condom catheter. He won't be difficult, but—" Marty paused.

"I understand," I said.

Marty sighed. "The whole idea of him needing the damn—excuse me—the thing."

"That's OK," I said.

"It's another step."

I nodded.

"Everything's another step."

I nodded again.

"Like everything new is something else you've lost." He shook his head then looked down at his watch. "Oh gosh, I really gotta go." He started down the hall but turned back. "If you want to call to just check in with me, that's fine too. It's fine to call me at work."

"OK, Marty," I said again, "I will."

He stood there like he was trying to remember something. He really didn't want to leave but he forced himself to. "Right. OK. Well, now I'm gonna go. Bye," he said very quickly, and he went.

When I went back in, Carlos's eyes were closed. His mouth was slightly open and his breath was jerky. His hand was still above the sheet.

I went to the bathroom and washed my hands and put on some gloves. I found a white plastic pan and took it to the living room. I put it under the urine bag and closed off the tube and opened the bottom valve and the urine drained into the pan. The urine was orange. I closed the valve and made sure the bag was still hooked securely and took the pan to the bathroom and emptied it into the toilet. I cleaned and

bleached it and put the pan back. I took off my gloves and tossed them in the trash and washed my hands.

I don't know how I could hear his voice over the water, but I did.

"Marty!" he was trying to shout, "Marty!"

I ran to the living room.

"Marty?" he said. His eyes were fluttering.

I took his hand. "Marty's at work. He'll be back later."

He squinted at me. "Who are you?"

I told him my name. He looked completely blank.

"I'm from Urban Community Services. I'm gonna be with you for a while until the nurse comes. Marty won't be back till after work."

He kept looking. After several seconds he said, "Oh." Then, "We met earlier?"

"A few minutes ago," I said.

He thought about that for a while. "Where were you now?"

"In the bathroom. I was washing my hands." I held my hands out, palms up, and flipped them over like a kid for inspection. "I didn't have time to wash behind my ears," I said.

That took him a few seconds, then he got it and laughed and said, "Very good."

His laugh was rusty. It was great to hear it. I laughed too.

He took my left hand in his right. "Your skin feels

so clean," he said. He pulled his other arm out from the sheet and took my other hand. "Your skin feels so clean."

I got a big blue dishpan from the kitchen and cleaned it and filled it with warm water and bath oil. I got a pile of fluffy clean towels and washcloths and a clean set of sheets. I put on a new pair of gloves. I rearranged things on the bedside tray. I put the med tray on the couch.

"You can sit up if I help you, right?" I said.

"I think so," he said.

"OK. I'm gonna ask you to put your arms around my neck and hold on, and I'm gonna put mine around your back and lift you a little and move you."

"OK."

I lifted his hands and put them on my neck. He was stiff and his skin was sticky. I put my arms around his back. I could feel his ribs against my forearms and his spine against my wrists. He was very thin.

"Are you all right?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said, but his voice shook.

"OK," I said, "now I'm gonna pull you toward me a little so you can sit up. Then I'll hold you up while I rearrange your pillows and move the bed some."

"OK." He sounded like a child being brave.

The bed hummed when I pushed the button to make it go up. He held my neck tight. My skin

pulled. I stopped the bed when he was sitting up.

"How are you doing?" I asked.

"Fine." He breathed out heavily.

I waited a second. "OK. Now let's turn you some so your legs can hang down the side of the bed."

He nodded.

I tightened my hands around his middle, lifted him slightly and turned him. I heard him take another deep breath.

"You OK?"

"Yes," he said loudly, determined.

"You're doing great," I said. "Now just one more little move and you'll be set. I'm gonna pull you a little toward the edge of the bed so I can put your feet in the pan."

"OK."

But then the sheet lifted off him. "Oh God," he said. He dropped his arms from my neck and covered his dick and the condom part of the catheter with his hands.

"Excuse me," he mumbled.

I looked away to let him cover himself.

"You all right?" I asked after a few seconds.

He didn't say anything. Then, "Yeah, I'm OK now."

When I turned back he'd covered his lap again with the sheet.

I put a towel across his shoulders. "Tell me if you

get cold," I said. The place was stuffy. I was sweating in my t-shirt. I moved the pan and tray with everything closer to him. "Ready?"

"Uh-huh," he said.

I took his palms on top of mine and held them loosely, the way my father did when I was afraid of water and he was teaching me to swim. I held my palms beneath his and lowered them into the water. His hands slipped in with me. I could feel his hands tremble. I held his hands until they were still. I could feel the shape of him, the texture of his skin made smooth by water.

I looked at him. His eyes were closed.

"This is so nice," he said.

I slipped my hands out from beneath his. His stayed in the water. I swished the water around. The light made shifting lines on his skin. I dunked a washcloth and touched the backs of his hands with it.

"I'm gonna wash your arms, OK?"

"Uh-huh."

His eyes stayed closed.

I squeezed the cloth under the water then pulled it up his forearm to his elbow.

He took a deep breath. "Oh, that feels so nice."

I cupped water in my hands and poured it down his arm. I washed his elbows and arms and toweled them dry. I washed the hollows of his armpits and his ribs. I washed his back and stomach and shoulders.

When the water began to cool I filled the pan again with fresh warm water and fresh clean oil. I did his neck and face. I washed his forehead and eyelids and around his beard and mouth. The air began to smell like oil, like mint or eucalyptus.

I sat on the floor and washed his feet. I poured the water over them.

He looked down at me. He touched my head. His face was full of kindness. "Thank you," he said.

When we finished I didn't have to tell him how we needed to move because his body gave to mine. When I lifted his arms he put them around my neck. Our skin felt clean. I put my arms around his back and laid him down. I lifted his legs onto the bed and straightened the catheter tube. I took off the old top sheet and covered him with a towel. I turned him on his side away from me. His body was heavier than it looked, but he moved easily. I undid the near side of the old bottom sheet and put the new sheet halfway on. I rolled him toward me. His skin through my clothes felt cool and clean. I rolled away the old bottom sheet and spread the other half of the new sheet down. I laid him on his back. He was breathing hard.

"You OK?"

"Yes," he panted. "Just a little tired."

I flipped the clean top sheet out and tucked it into the end of the bed and up part of the sides. I slipped

his towel off, careful of the catheter tube, and pulled the sheet up.

I was pulling the sheet up to cover him when he stopped me with his hand.

"Don't cover me yet," he said. "The air feels good, I want to feel the air against my skin."

THE GIFT OF DEATH

Margaret asked if I could fill in for a few hours on a Saturday afternoon for a new client. The guy had just moved, "reluctantly" she said, into a public housing authority building, and needed to have his things unpacked, maybe some light meals, etc. Margaret read this to me over the phone from the intake form. The guy didn't have a primary caregiver, but he had a friend named Andrew who was helping him settle in. The guy's name was Francis.

This housing authority building had ten floors. I'd been there several times before to see clients. There were seniors and handicapped people living there too, not just PWAs. The building overlooked the freeway, so the rooms with views sounded like traffic and the rooms that didn't sound like traffic faced right up against other buildings.

I was supposed to be there at one. As I was walking up to the door I pulled the piece of paper from my pack that had his apartment number on it. I was just about to buzz when a guy who'd been sitting on the wall smoking a cigarette came up.

"Are you from UCS?" he asked, and I said yes. "To see Francis Martin?" and I said yes again. He said he

was Andrew and the apartment buzzer was broken so he'd come down to let me in. He stubbed out his cigarette and we went in. The building smelled like boiled food and dirty laundry. We waited for the elevator. It took forever. There was an old woman in a wheelchair waiting, and a middle-aged guy in a shower cap reading *Soap Opera Digest*. Also a twitchy youngish guy wearing the thickest glasses I'd ever seen in my life. The lenses were completely smudged. He was wearing a Sea World t-shirt with a pair of leaping dolphins. If I'd been by myself I would have taken the stairs, but I didn't want to suggest anything that might be hard on Andrew. You never knew who was sick anymore.

While we were waiting Andrew told me about his friend. Most I already knew from Margaret. Francis had been primary caregiver to a friend of his who had died a while back, and when he started going downhill himself recently, he said he didn't want to fight it, he just wanted to be allowed to die. Andrew said the friend who'd died had had a really painful time of it and Francis didn't want to go through that.

I felt uncomfortable having Andrew tell me all this right there in front of everyone else waiting for the elevator, but they didn't seem to be listening. That kind of story wasn't novel to them. Everyone who lived there had some kind of problem.

Finally the elevator came. There was a slow creak-

ing noise, then a thump, then the doors jiggled open. A beautifully dressed woman with her hair up in a bun got off. She was pushing a little grocery cart. When she walked past me I saw the worn threads of her coat. Her coat was smeared and she smelled sweet but underneath she smelled rancid. There was a huge fat man with huge white hands sitting on a bench in the back of the elevator. The buttons on his shirt looked like they were about to pop. The elevator was like a freight elevator, big enough to fit stretchers and wheelchairs in. I hesitated, waiting for the man on the bench to get off, but everyone got on so I did too. The doors closed and you could smell someone. There was a low creak then a jolt. Then this froggy voice. "Hello Anna Weber."

The woman in the wheelchair sighed. "Hello, Roy." Then it said, "Hello James Green," and the guy in the shower cap said, "Yo, Roy." Then it said, "Hello Mark Ullman," and the guy in the glasses whined, "Hi." Then it said, "Hello Andrew O'Donnell," and Andrew said, "Hello, Roy." Then it said to me, "And who are you?"

I turned around to face him. It was the fat guy on the bench speaking. No one else had turned around to say hello to him. They'd just kept watching the elevator floor lights. I started to say something, but then we were on Anna's floor and the elevator stopped and the doors opened and Anna wheeled herself out.

"Goodbye Anna Weber," he said. "Bye, Roy," she said impatiently. Roy looked between us all out into the hall. He looked very intently to see what was happening on that floor; nothing was.

When the doors closed he asked me again, "And who are you?" and I told him my name and he made this spitting sound; it was him giggling. "I know," he said, like I'd just fallen for this incredibly funny joke. Then he said very seriously, "I know you. I've seen you before."

It felt weird to think of this guy watching me from the elevator when I'd been in the building before.

"Who are you here to see today?" he asked. He really did know everyone's business.

"A friend," I said. Because of the confidentiality thing we didn't tell people who we were seeing or for what. It was up to the clients themselves to say what they wanted their neighbors to know.

The elevator still hadn't moved. Andrew punched the Close button. He waited a couple seconds then hit the floor buttons.

Roy looked at Andrew, then back at me. "Is Andrew O'Donnell taking you to see Francis Martin?"

"Yup," said Andrew. He was hitting the floor buttons.

"Francis Martin has AIDS," said Roy.

"Yup," said Andrew again. The elevator creaked.

Then Roy said, "So do Jean Brownworth, Edward Perry, Keisha Williams, Jordan Williams . . . ," and he went through this list.

I looked up at the blinking elevator lights. James and Andrew were looking up at them too. Mark's head was cocked to the right. He wasn't looking at anything. Roy finished his list of "so do's," then went on with a list of "so did's." It was a long list. Andrew kept hitting the floor buttons, and the elevator began to move. By the time Roy finished "so did," we'd gone up two floors.

The elevator stopped, but the doors stayed closed. Andrew sighed. He punched the Open button and the doors opened. But it wasn't anybody's floor so no one got out. Then he punched the Close button and pulled the doors shut. We sat there and he punched the floor buttons and we started to move again.

I felt Roy looking at me. I turned to him. The elevator was making noise, but it sounded very quiet with no one talking. Roy was staring at me. The elevator stopped between floors.

"That's quite a memory you have, Roy," I said.

"Yes, it is," he said without blinking. "I know all the names from Western State Hospital for fourteen years."

"Uh-huh," I said.

"I was at Western State Hospital for fourteen years before I came here." He was staring at me.

"Oh yeah?" I said.

Andrew crossed his arms and closed his eyes and sighed.

"When's this fuckin' box gonna move," said James.

Mark made a noise.

"Before that I was in Pierce County Youth Services Home," Roy said, still staring at me. "I know all the names from there too."

"That's a lot of names," I said.

"I know your name too," he said.

I felt my skin crawl. Andrew held a floor button down. The elevator groaned and started moving up.

"And I'm glad you do, Roy," I said, as brightly as I could. "It's a pleasure to meet you." I put out my hand for him to shake. He looked down at my hand. His eyes were little and piggy. They were gray and watery like an egg at the edges. Suddenly he shot his hand up and took mine and shook it furiously. His hand was wet and soft.

The elevator thumped then stopped and Andrew pushed the Open button and said, "This is our floor."

I started pulling my hand away from Roy, but he wouldn't let go.

"It's nice to meet you, Roy," I said, "but I have to go now."

Andrew was holding the elevator open. It was starting to buzz.

"I have to go now, Roy," I said.

He was still staring at me. Suddenly he blinked

and snatched his hand out of mine. He balled it up in a tight white fist and slapped it down on his thigh.

As the doors were closing behind us I heard him saying goodbye to me and Andrew by our names.

We walked down the hall.

"Roy is our welcome committee," Andrew said.

"I see," I said.

"I guess archivist is more like it." Andrew tried to laugh. "He also does the obits."

I didn't know if I was supposed to laugh. "It's amazing he remembers all the names."

"It's nice someone does," Andrew sighed.

Then we were at Francis's door.

The apartment had the same layout as a lot of them in the building: small kitchen, tiny bathroom, and a main room with a track on the ceiling and floor where you pulled a partition out to make a wall to separate the bedroom. There were boxes on the floor and kitchen counters and in the bathroom. But not many. The guy didn't have much stuff. The main room had a table and two chairs and nothing else. The partition wasn't out. Francis was lying on his side with his arm over his face.

Andrew said I could put the kitchen things away first, then if I had time, the bathroom. He said there was no set way to do the kitchen, just try to be logical because there would be a lot of different home care aides, etc., in and out.

There was a moan. Francis was turning in his sleep.

Andrew said, "Well, I need to get home and get some rest. I'd like to introduce you, but I don't want to wake him."

"That's OK," I said. "I'll tell him who I am when he wakes up."

Andrew said fine and that he'd be back around five. He left his number in case I needed anything.

Andrew left and I started unpacking the kitchen things. I put away plates and glasses and forks. I looked at Francis's stuff and wondered about what kind of life he had, if he cooked a lot or had dinner parties or takeout and fast food. I laid out shelf paper and arranged things. There were cutesy dish towels from Savannah and Williamsburg and "olde time" pictures of colonial houses with recipes on them for Mom's Apple Pie and Country Fried Chicken. There was an old Betty Crocker and an organic cookbook and a book about power eating to help your immune system. There were half-empty cans of protein powder and bottles of vitamins and oils and tinctures and lots of meds. Most of the plates and things didn't match, like he'd gone to Goodwill or garage sales a lot or inherited things from people who'd died. I thought of this stuff going on to other people after he died and how they would have it until they died. All this stuff would outlast everybody.

I heard another moan. I went to the bed. He rolled over and opened his eyes.

"Hi, Francis," I said. "I'm from UCS."

He blinked at me a couple of times. "I know," he said slowly. "I know you."

"I don't think we've met before," I said. Sometimes with dementia they confused you with other people.

But he went on. "I don't remember your name, but I know you." He tried to raise his hand. I took it to shake. "I'm Marty," he said.

But his name was supposed to be Francis, Francis Martin. Then I got it: Marty.

"Hi, Marty." I shook his hand. "Nice to meet you." I told him my name.

"We've met before," he insisted.

"Uh-huh," I said vaguely. There was no point in trying to correct someone with dementia.

He kept looking at me very intently. "I was Carlos's friend," he said.

I was still shaking his hand, not getting it.

"You came to help Carlos once. He said you were nice. He told me you gave him a bath."

He clutched my hand to stop shaking. Then I remembered and I got a horrible chill. My skin prickled.

"Oh—right!" I said. "Marty!" I tried to sound enthusiastic but it was hard because I was remember-

ing that Marty, Carlos's friend, and I couldn't believe this guy was him. That Marty was about thirty, a pear-shaped guy in polyester pants and a short-sleeved shirt. He looked like he still had baby fat on his face, like he almost never shaved. But this Marty was thin, his face was lined. He wasn't horribly skinny, and if you saw him for the first time you might not think he was sick, just trim. But he didn't look thirty. He looked about fifty. I tried to smile like it was nice to run into him again but it was horrifying.

I saw him recognize the look on my face. But he was polite, he tried to make conversation. "So, you're still doing this, huh?"

"Yeah," I said.

"Shit, girl," he laughed. His teeth were brown. "If I were you I'd have moved on ages ago."

I shrugged. I was remembering how he'd apologized when he'd said "damn" when I'd seen him before.

Then he said, "But I'm glad you didn't. It's nice to see you again."

"It's nice to see you again too, Marty," I said, and I meant it then. I felt something when I thought about Marty and Carlos.

Marty started to cough and I helped him sit up and handed him his glass of water from the floor. He took a drink and I rearranged his pillows behind him.

"Thanks," he said. He handed me the water to put back on the floor. There was no bedside table. Some

of them tried to get rid of most of their stuff before they died so no one would have to deal with it. Also they liked being able to give special things to friends. Or they had to sell things for money. Or they had to get rid of things in order to fit into the tiny places where they had to move.

"What a dump, huh?" he sighed. "I didn't want to move here, but my old apartment got to be too much for me, and I couldn't find anyone to move in. . . . Andrew's already taking care of Michael . . ."

"Jeez." I shook my head.

"So," he said, "it ain't the Ritz, but I guess it's home." He was trying to sound chirpy. "You meet any of my neighbors on your way up?"

"Yeah," I said. "That elevator takes forever."

He snickered. "You're not kidding. It's gonna be great when there's a fire or something here someday." He rolled his eyes. "I told Andrew he needs to find some patron saint of elevator repair. Andy's a good Catholic boy, you know." He winked at me. I laughed. I was glad we were talking about something else.

"I bet you met Roy, huh?"

"Yeah," I said, "he's something."

"Poor bastard," said Marty. "He's lived here forever. I used to see him in the elevator all the time when I came here before I lived here, to visit friends."

I wondered how many of Marty's friends had died.

"It kind of freaked me out when I was moving in and he told me all the names and put me on the list too," Marty said.

I thought of how strange I felt when Roy told me he knew my name. It was nothing compared to what Marty must have felt.

"In a way it's a kick," Marty said. "I mean, he really knows what's what. But when you think that that's his whole life, that all he's ever done is know all these names, it's pathetic. His whole life has been miserable since day one. Always being shuffled around to 'live'"—he spat the word out—"in these godforsaken places . . ."

"Poor guy," I said.

Marty just sat there staring for a minute. Then he went on. "He'll probably live to be a hundred." He shook his head. "And that, truly, is a tragedy. To have to live when your life is nothing. I mean, he's never lived outside an institution, never had a real home. I bet he's never been in love or been to a nice restaurant or taken a vacation. I bet he's never had anyone give him flowers. I mean, I don't think anybody's ever loved him."

He put his hand on his chest. I got his water and held the glass while he sucked through the straw. He drank slowly then caught his breath. But he wasn't finished.

"And all these old ladies who live here—I bet half

of them don't want to be alive. They've been abandoned by their families, or never had families, and they live on ten measly cents a day and eat cat food and watch game shows and are lonely. And if they were ever married they've outlived their husbands by fifty years and are just waiting to die. I bet if you gave them a choice, I mean really gave them a choice, if you said, 'Here, tonight you can go quietly and painlessly and have it over with . . . '"

He stopped talking and nodded for the water. I handed him the glass and he drank. When he finished he said, "I guess you know Carlos died."

In fact I didn't know for sure. But I'd assumed he'd died. You always assumed all of them died.

"Carlos was in a lot of pain at the end," Marty said.

"I'm sorry," I said.

"A whole lot of pain," Marty said. "It was criminal that his docs wouldn't give him something to help him go. He wanted to. But they had no mercy." Marty looked through me, then at me. "They wanted to move him to the hospice but there were never any rooms. That was fine because he didn't want to go, he just wanted to die at home." Marty looked up at the ceiling and blinked. Then he closed his eyes and didn't say anything.

After a while I said, tentatively, "You were with him?"

He opened his eyes, then squinted at me. I didn't look away.

"Yes," he said.

He sighed, and when he spoke again his voice was very quiet. "Carlos and I had known each other since we were kids. We were always just friends, you know, we had never had an affair or anything, but we went through everything together. He'd have done anything for me. Anything absolutely. And me for him."

He looked at me again like he was checking me out. "Have you ever had a friend like that?"

"Yes," I said immediately.

He nodded, his eyes still on me. "Carlos was tired of struggling. He was in so much pain."

Marty's mouth got tight.

"I know what you mean," I said.

He took a deep breath and got this look on his face, like when you ask a question you're not sure you want to know the answer to.

"Do you think it can be a relief to die?" he asked.

"Yes, Marty," I said.

He was holding his breath, then he released it. His mouth softened. Then he looked at me so longingly. He wanted me to know.

"I helped him," he said.

"You were a good friend to Carlos," I said.

"I was," he said. "I was merciful. I gave him the gift of death."

Poem

AKASHA (GLORIA) HULL

for Audre

What you said
keeps bothering me
keeps needling, grinding
like toothache
or a bad
conscience:

"Your silence
will not
protect you"

"Our speaking is stopped
because we fear the visibility
without which
we can not really live"

You quietly stand there,
annealed by death,
mortality shining:

"Whether we speak or not,
the machine will crush us to bits—
and we will also
be afraid"

"Your silence
will not
protect you"

Some of us—
we dumb autistic ones,
the aphasics,
those who can only stutter
or point,

some who speak in tongues,
or write in invisible ink—
sit rigid, our eyelids burning
mute
from birth
from fear
from habit
for love and money
for children
for fear
for fear

while you probe
our agonized silence,
a constant pain:

Dear Eshu's Audre,
please keep on
teaching us
how
to speak,
to know
that now
"our labor *is*
more important than
our silence."

Introduction: Feminist work is justice work

> 'And what does the gift of feminism consist of if not a certain bundle of ways of thinking historically, ways of seeing, ways of hoping?' – Vikki Bell

Feminism is a political project about what *could be*. It's always looking forward, invested in futures we can't quite grasp yet. It's a way of wishing, hoping, aiming at everything that has been deemed impossible. It's a task that has to be approached seriously. This book is for anyone who is beginning to think critically. Feminist histories are unwieldy; they cannot and should not be neatly presented. I hope this book makes you think about the limits of this world and the possibilities contained in the ones we could craft together. I hope it makes you want to read more and become more familiar with radical feminist thought and practice. If this book makes you pick up another book, or watch a documentary, search the archive, reach for a poetry book – if it sparks or reignites your interest in feminism, then it has served its purpose.

Everybody has a story about how they arrived and keep arriving at radical politics. Some of us are politicised by the trauma of our own experiences, by wars waged in our names, by our parents and lovers, by the internet. It's useful to share the ways we become politicised if only because it helps politicise others. Growing up as a young black woman, I felt the oppressive way the world was organised with my body and through interpersonal relations long before I could articulate what those feelings meant. Revelling in the discovery of the word 'feminism' and its history

as a political practice in my early teenage years at school, I found a personal freedom. I read ferociously. Black feminism, Liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, Anarcha-feminism, Eco-feminism. Feminism opened up my world. I saw in it, conflicting theorists and activists, all giving their ideas about the way the world should be. Perhaps most memorably, it released me from the desire to comply with the world as it is. This meant many things for me as an individual; feminism allowed me to be wayward, the wrong kind of woman, deviant. It took me longer to realise that true liberation meant extending this newfound freedom beyond myself. Just because I felt freer in some respects, did not mean I was free.

The material conditions of my life were still determined by the same systems; poverty and racism still trapped the women around me. Disparities in healthcare, education, public services and access to resources limited the possibility for any kind of expansive existence. I saw how black women were locked out of womanhood as defined by a white supremacy and how anyone outside of those accepted boundaries simply did not exist in the eyes of mainstream feminism. I began to understand how my own rebellion, the defiance instilled in me by the feminists I admired, was raced and classed. I read about how freedom requires upheaval and must be fought for, not romanticised. It was during this period that I realised that feminism was not simple. There were no pre-given solutions. The 'answer', if there was one, required us to place different feminisms in conversation and necessitated a radical flexibility in our organising. Feminism was complicated and messy in ways that made me reconsider my foundational political beliefs: equality versus liberation, reform versus abolition. Feminism meant *hard work*, the kind done without reward or recognition, the kind that requires an unshakeable belief in its importance, the kind that is long and tiresome, but that creates a sense of purpose. It proposed a new way of being that transformed the way I looked at the world.

The feminists I admired argued that the abolition of all prevailing systems of violence was crucial to any feminist future. They called for a revolution in the way we think about ourselves and others. Their critiques of the state, capitalism, the family, white supremacy, sex and education

encouraged in me a rejection of what was expected. They provided a place to say the unsayable. bell hooks writes about how she came to theory 'desperate, wanting to comprehend – to grasp what was happening around and within me'.[1] The same can be said for many young women who come to theory to be given a blueprint for a better world; who come to theory looking for a way to be changed.

I knew I had to choose what kind of feminism would form the basis of my understanding. My experiences had taught me that nothing should be taken for granted; there was no coherence or consensus on accepted principles in the feminist movement. If anything, it was defined by conflict. The decision to practice a radical feminism was crucial because I became aware of how it separated those wanting to create a new vision for the world from those merely wanting to climb the rungs of power.

Who's the boss?

There is a divide playing out in the mainstream. The emergence of neo-liberal feminism or 'boss girl feminism', driving many contemporary discussions, clashes with a radical and critical vision of feminism. Broadly speaking, neo-liberalism refers to the imposition of cultural and economic policies and practices by NGOs and governments in the last three to four decades that have resulted in the extraction and redistribution of public resources from the working class upwards, decimated infrastructures of social care through austerity measures, privatised the welfare state and individualised the ways we relate to one another. The neo-liberal model of feminism argues that 'inequality' is a state that can be overcome in corporate environments without overhauling the system, centralises the individual and their personal choices, misguidedly imagines that the state can grant liberation, seeks above all to protect the free market and fails to question the connection between capitalism, race and gendered oppression. This model of feminist thought is most appealing to those who have a limited knowledge of radical history and the gains fought and won by activists who dared to demand what was once deemed impossible. The

consumerist promise of success that neo-liberal feminism offers is hollow, because it is a superficial promise made only to those who can access it.

White feminist neo-liberal politics focuses on the self as vehicle for self-improvement and personal gain at the expense of others. We are instructed by corporate talking heads to 'lean in' into a capitalist society where power equals financial gain. This model works best for wealthy white women, who are able to replace men in a capital structure. Liberal feminism's obsession with getting women 'to the top' masks a desire to ensure that the current system and its violent consequences remain intact. It invisibilises the women of colour, low paid workers and migrant women who must suffer so that others may 'succeed.' It makes their exploitation a natural part of other women's achievements. In this approach there is no challenge to hegemony, only acquiescence. The boardroom has become a figurative battleground upon which many stake their feminist aspirations. If we are to challenge this, we must ask 'what about the fate of the low paid women who clean the boardrooms?' and 'what makes their labour so easily expendable?' A feminism that seeks power instead of questioning it does not care about justice. The decision to reject this way of thinking is also a decision to reject easy solutions. We all have to ask ourselves at some point, who will I be and what will I do? What can my politics help me articulate? What violence will it expose?

All of these questions are crucial to every young feminist because by choosing a feminist politics that is critical, you are making a commitment to a world that has not yet been built. A world other people will tell you that you are foolish to believe in. The decision to shun a simplistic, consumerist and neo-liberal feminism will shake your understandings of the principles that underpin feminist thinking. Refusing neo-liberalism will open you up to a world where 'feminist' means much more than 'woman' or 'equality.' Making these connections is crucial to any revolutionary work because it means that nobody is left behind, nobody's exploitation goes unseen. It asks us to practice radical compassion, to refuse to ignore the pain of others. It demands that we see how tackling seemingly unrelated phenomena like prison expansion, the rise of fascism, neocolonialism and climate crisis must also become our priorities.

The task

'Feminist work is justice work.' When I heard this phrase at a university event, something changed. It came to define how I think about feminism and its goals. The phrase stuck with me because it was different to what I saw in the mainstream. 'Feminist work is justice work' proposes that feminism has a purpose beyond just highlighting the ways women are 'discriminated' against. It taught me that feminism's task is to remedy the consequences of gendered oppression through organising and by proposing new ways to think about our potential as human beings. For me, 'justice work' involves reimagining the world we live in and working towards a liberated future for all. But how do we begin to reimagine? We refuse to remain silent about how our lives are limited by heterosexist, racist, capitalist patriarchy. We invest in a political education that seeks above all, to make injustice impossible to ignore. We ensure that nobody is allowed to suffer in silence, that no one's pain goes unseen.

Feminism has re-entered the public imagination in a big way. Where the word was once taboo, young people are being exposed to it now more than ever. We have to ask whether its rebellious roots are still at the core of our understanding. Has feminism lost its radical implications?

Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche's Ted Talk popularised by Beyonce in 2013 was not only a cultural moment, but a good example of how feminism has been packaged and resold to a younger audience. T-shirts and tote bags abound. The feminism on sale was stripped of a structural analysis and instead became solely about behaviours, attitudes and 'teaching' men to be better. This opened the floodgates. Debates about which celebrities identify as 'feminist' took centre stage in magazines, interviews and press junkets. While critiquing this trend is a necessity, it is also important to remember that, when used strategically, public narrative and mainstream discussions can be a useful tool to make oppression visible and give people the strategies to combat it. Cultural conversations about feminism have a purpose; they can do the work of bringing the problem to attention. Artistic creations provide an avenue for reflection on the dynamics that

govern our lives. They bolster what Gramsci called 'optimism of the will,' having the courage to believe that a more dignified world is possible, reinvigorating movements that have lost their energy. Pop culture and mainstream narratives can democratise feminist theory, remove it from the realm of the academic and shine a light on important grassroots struggle, reminding us that feminism belongs to no one.

We all begin somewhere. A feminist understanding is not inherent; it is something that must be crafted. Theory does not only mean reading dense academic texts. Theory can be *lived*, held, shared. It is a breathing, changeable thing that can be infused in many political and artistic forms. Learning requires the patience and empathy of those around you and an investment in the importance of radical education. This radical education comes in many forms. When feminism enters the mainstream, it does not automatically lose its meaning or its appeal. What matters is the way it is discussed and whether or not that discussion challenges or affirms the status quo. How often have the articles about feminism in mainstream publications inspired revolt? We have to ask what comes next after identifying the problem. As a starting point, can we move mainstream conversations about period poverty beyond the clutches of feminine hygiene companies and towards the fundamental idea that we cannot tackle this problem without ending austerity? Can we link the public disclosures of trauma facilitated by #MeToo to the fact that many victims and survivors cannot leave violent situations because of the lack of available social housing or domestic violence provisions? Can we use intersectionality as it was intended, a meaningful framework that exposes a matrix of domination, and seeks to improve vital women's services, and not a vehicle for a laundry list of our identities?

Feminist visions

Feminism provokes a kind of feeling, a reaction, repulsion in the eyes of its detractors, and rightfully so. There are men who have built their careers on deriding us, media outlets that gleefully malign the seriousness of the task at hand. In 2018, Sp!ked Magazine ran two articles with the following

headlines: 'No, women aren't at risk from men'[2] and 'Not everything is a feminist issue'[3] A great deal of recruitment of young men into fascism and Incel communities relies heavily on disproving or finding the logical 'flaws' in feminist ideology. 'Feminism is cancer' is a common slogan. Feminism is a threat. It is also a call to action. 'How should we think about the world?' remains one of the most important, frustrating, joyful questions to answer because it requires a recognition that our lives, our fate, our successes and disappointments are all connected. When we do feminist work, we are doing the kind of work that changes the world for everybody. It is important to feel free but it is more important to make sure we get free – socially, politically, economically, artistically. Here we see why the decisions we make early on about what kind of feminists we will be are so important; it is vital to correct the misinformation about what it means to be a feminist in theory and in practice.

Imagine this: A world where the quality of your life is not determined by how much money you have. You do not have to sell your labour to survive. Labour is not tied to capitalism, profit or wage. Borders do not exist; we are free to move without consequence. The nuclear family does not exist; children are raised collectively; reproduction takes on new meanings. In this world, the way we carry out dull domestic labour is transformed and nobody is forced to rely on their partner economically to survive. The principles of transformative justice are used to rectify harm. Critical and comprehensive sex education exists for all from an early age. We are liberated from the gender binary's strangling grip and the demands it places on our bodies. Sex work does not exist because work does not exist. Education and transport are free, from cradle to grave. We are forced to reckon with and rectify histories of imperialism, colonial exploitation, and warfare collectively. We have freedom *to*, not just freedom *from*. Specialist mental health services and community care are integral to our societies. There is no 'state' as we know it; nobody dies in 'suspicious circumstances' at its hands; no person has to navigate sexism, racism, disabilism or homophobia to survive. Detention centres do not exist. Prisons do not exist, nor do the police. The military and their weapons are disbanded across nations. Resources are reorganised to adequately address

climate catastrophe. No person is without a home or loving community. We love one another, without possession or exploitation or extraction. We all have enough to eat well due to redistribution of wealth and resource. We all have the means and the environment to make art, if we so wish. All cultural gatekeepers are destroyed.

Now imagine this vision not as utopian, but as something well within our reach.

The vision I have presented has its limitations. There are gaps, contradictions and things that have been omitted. But without the capacity to imagine in this way, feminism is purposeless. Let us fight over a vision because our demands must spring from somewhere. This is the task handed down to us and we must approach it with the urgency it demands. We must rise to the challenge with a revolutionary and collective sense of determination; knowing that if we do not see this world, someone else will.

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1 bell hooks, 'Theory as Liberatory Practice,' in *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), pp. 59–75.

2www.spiked-online.com/2018/08/02/no-women-arent-at-risk-from-men/ (last accessed 11/2018).

3www.spiked-online.com/2018/07/25/not-everything-is-a-feminist-issue/ (last accessed 11/2018).

Chapter 10

Solidarity is a doing word

> We the women of the YPJ, the women's self-defence militias, salute all the women fighters of Latin America. We want these women to know that we are not just taking up a military struggle against ISIS but that also one of the main goals of our struggle is to create a new society where women are free. We want to express our support for the right of all women to free, safe, and legal abortion. As Kurdish women, we are closely following your struggle. Not one more woman dead due to a back-alley abortion! ¡Jin Jian Azadi! – Women, life and freedom! – YPJ, Women's Protection Units

> حرية سلام و عدالة و الثورة خيار الشعب, (Freedom, peace, justice . . . the revolution is the choice of the people) – Sudanese Revolution Chant

> We climb the mountain in our ways, towards the same summit. As we continue in our respective ways to resist the Hong Kong Police Force, the summit of our imagining may well emerge the form of a new, anti-carceral collective – Jun Pang

Solidarity has always been at the heart of feminist practice. Ideas of 'global sisterhood' rose to prominence in the late twentieth century, its advocates called for the need to view women's liberation across borders and continents. Although this relied on the flawed concept of a 'universal patriarchy', it opened up space to consider the power of refusing to remain divided by something as arbitrary as geographical location. What has

always underpinned radical feminist movements is the global nature of their demands and their ability to understand the interlocking nature of structures of oppression. Perhaps one of the most galvanising instances of international solidarity in recent history was inspired by the arrest and detainment of the black political revolutionary Angela Davis, falsely charged in connection with the murder of Judge Harold Haley in 1970. Feminist groups from across the world called for her release through letters, statements and acts of solidarity. These groups included: The National Union of Mexican Women, The Angolan Women's Committee, Somali women in Mogadishu, The Egyptian Women's Committee and Guyana's Women's Progressive Organisation. In this instance, the feminist collectives that practiced transformational politics understood what was lost when movements isolated themselves and made demands only within the boundaries of nation states.

Solidarity breaks down the concept of the nation or the idea that the world and the many countries it contains are not linked by present and historical networks of exploitation, colonial rule and military alliances. The work of knowing what is happening in the complex puzzle that is the world, means acknowledging the struggles that occur parallel and adjacent to our own. Often, the demands feminists make in their respective countries are the same. In Ireland, STRIKE4REPEAL, a grassroots feminist coalition that called for women to wear black and go on strike if the Irish government continued to delay a referendum were inspired by the Black Protests that took place in Poland on 3 October 2016. Movements have always been attuned to one another, and in a climate where fascists are gaining ground because of strong links across the globe, it is crucial that feminists across the world do the same.

Solidarity is hard to define. In the simplest terms, it can range from: working across difference, standing together in the face of shared oppression and standing alongside those with whom you do not share a common experience of the world. It's a slippery concept, it moves about, it unites and divides the movements we are part of. A feminist definition might understand solidarity as a strategic coalition of individuals who are invested in a collective vision for the future. At the core of solidarity is

mutual aid: the idea that we give our platforms, resources, legitimacy, voices, skills to one another to try and defeat oppressive conditions. We give and we take from one another, we become accomplices and saboteurs and disrupters on each other's behalf. Solidarity has multiple dimensions: the symbolic, the practical, the aesthetic. Symbolically, it is represented in the protest image or the song or the poem or the speaker that tries to direct energy and attention away from themselves and onto someone or something else. Practically, it means sharing strategies – seeing how tactics that were successful in one context, might work in another. Aesthetically, the beauty that arises from instances of solidarity evokes emotive responses that make us feel like it is possible to change the world as we know it.

In 2019, the Mwasi Collectif, a radical French Afro-feminist collective organised the Nyansapo Festival, a festival of European black feminist thinkers, scholars and activists who came together to consolidate their links, share thoughts, feelings, ideas and tactics through a planned series of workshops, training and panel events. Actions like these demonstrate the necessity of working across borders and recognising a common ground from which to launch campaigns and demands.

What solidarity offers to feminist movements at the most basic level is more bodies to do the work. The work of raising awareness, of building consciousness, of petitioning, striking, blocking roads, bridges, towns, the work of shutting down hostile governments. More people engaged in struggle means the practical work of resistance might be achieved with new speed, new vigour or at the very least, a renewed energy. Solidarity refuses a narrow worldview and invites us to link our visions for the future to one another. It is also an affective experience: often it means bearing witness to the violence that takes place across the world and marking it where you are. In London 2019, members of the Sudanese Diaspora marked the violence and bloodshed of the ongoing revolution with vigils, including political readings, poetry and songs outside the European Commission. Solidarity can also be a site of healing, of naming your own complicity and refusing to remain silent.

There's no local without a global. There is no better answer to combat a fractured society obsessed with individualism than a politics that connects the dots. When we show solidarity to one another, we are demonstrating that we recognise that politics happens everywhere, at every level, in every region of the world. We break open the idea that feminism has a continental origin point; to recognise each other in struggle is to say, I *see* you, I understand that you have agency and because I cannot stand alongside you, I wish to bolster you from where I am. Solidarity, in an internationalist context, requires an emergent political practice. This means the ability to remain flexible in our responses and solutions; to listen to those on the ground and to redistribute resources.

When Carola Rackete, a German ship captain of the migrant NGO rescue ship Sea-Watch 3, rescued 43 migrants off the coast of Libya and defied Italian authorities to bring them into the Mediterranean Island of Lampedusa, she defied state orders and risked arrest to do so. Recognising that human life is more precious than the bureaucratic systems of power that are premised on its extinction is solidarity in action. Similarly, groups like Women on Waves, a Dutch non-profit organisation that sails boats to the coast of countries with the most restrictive abortion restrictions, picks up women and navigates them to international waters to provide free abortion pills and abortion support demonstrate that solidarity is an active, courageous principle. 'The fact that women need to leave the state sovereignty to retain their own sovereignty – it makes clear states are deliberately stopping women from accessing their human right to health,'[1] Leticia Zenevich told the Huffington Post. Anna Campbell, a 26-year-old woman from Bristol, was among seven British people who died volunteering for the YPJ, a group fighting ISIS based in Rojava in March 2018. She died after Turkish missiles struck her position, as she helped to evacuate citizens in Afrin. Solidarity requires us to *risk* something (our lives, citizenship, freedom) in order to support others; to put our theoretical principles to the test.

No bounds

Neha Shah, an anti-racist organiser tells me that her understanding of solidarity is informed by the knowledge that oppressive projects know no bounds and so, neither must our resistance:

> Solidarity has to come from understanding, and understanding comes from listening to those who are in a position to know what they're talking about. The toxic effects of the colonial control of Palestinian land disproportionately harm women. Feminist solidarity in the Palestinian context has to start with listening to Palestinian women – for instance, with joining their call to organise against Donald Trump's so-called 'Deal of the Century' that seeks to disappear the Palestinian people and dismantle their collective rights, or heeding their call to campaign for boycotts, divestment and sanctions (BDS) against Israel.

For her, solidarity requires us to think beyond the nation:

> There's a simple reason to think transnationally as feminists – if we don't, we give up one of our greatest strengths. The struggle for freedom is too difficult to embark on alone, and we share that struggle with women all over the world. Furthermore, feminism has to be transnational because patriarchy is transnational; we can't understand and resist the oppression of women as a group if we allow our analysis to stop at borders.

Solidarity can also help us think about the future. Elif Gun, active in the Kurdish women's movement, tells me that imagining a liberated future is closely linked to our ability to recognise each other in struggle:

> A feminist future in my perspective is a struggle, because I honestly believe that without struggle and resistance life is not as beautiful, and I take this from Sakine Cansiz, one of the great minds behind the Kurdish women's movement. Without armed women, without women resisting always and continuously against the system, a feminist

future is quite impossible, and a feminist future for me is only something we can achieve through active and collective resistance.

Looking outwards challenges the idea that politics revolves around the West and the people who live in it. While the power dynamics that underpin the organisation of the world often remain firmly in place because of the complicity of governments, something we must sit with and turn over in our heads, transnational solidarity offers us something. It offers us the ability to imagine that the world could be organised in a different way: it denaturalises the existence of borders, nations and states. To work in the spirit of common interest and mutual aid models the kind of world feminists are striving for: one that recognises that we would like to live as a collective rather than as individuals siphoned off into units. Call these units what you like: countries, continents, hemispheres or families. When we consider that nation states as we know them are relatively new inventions, we are reminded that our histories have always involved one another. Solidarity is a doing word – it offers us no blueprint or blindly optimistic visions for the future. It does not require us to always like each other or to erase the harm that might occur in our interpersonal interactions.

If solidarity can help us to find comfort in one another, it can also turn us into each other's worst nightmares. There are countless examples of the way that practices of solidarity have reduced the geopolitics of entire regions and continents for easy consumption. When Boko Haram kidnapped 276 girls from a secondary school in Chibok, Borno State, Nigeria in 2014, NGOs and public figures were quick to insert themselves into the narrative in an act of solidarity. 'Bring Back Our Girls' was the liberal slogan that travelled across the world, in hashtags and photo campaigns, with everyone from Michelle Obama to the Pope taking part. This act was intended as a signifier of the global concern for the girls' welfare, but everything from the nature of the campaign, to the wording of the infamous slogan revealed a reproduction of Western hegemony. 'Bring back our Girls': that *our* betrayed an understanding of the complexities of the situation at hand.

As of 2019, there are still girls that have yet to be freed. Perhaps the most pertinent question is, what happens to feminist solidarity beyond the symbolic slogan? It starts with recognising how gender is utilised by terrorist organisations for shock value. Undoing the symbol of the vulnerable girl and instead examining what keeps her vulnerable, what locks her in poverty, what makes her an easy target for terror might be solidarity in action. Understanding the complex set of relations that cause a political crisis before we proclaim ownership of its victims goes some way in refusing to reduce acts of solidarity to a mere 'coming together against evil' or 'standing together in the face of hate.'

In 1982, Hazel Carby argued, 'of white feminists we must ask, what exactly do you mean when you say "we"?' When practiced haphazardly, solidarity throws up the ugliest parts of our feminist movements: exposing the racial and class dominations that plague us. The women's marches that took place in the UK and US in 2018 were prime examples of why solidarity alone cannot bolster our movements unless it is underpinned by a serious and earnest engagement with the different conditions we are forced to live under. The marches were littered with biologically essentialist rhetoric, racist deification of black feminist figures, a lack of intersectional analysis and incoherence on the rights of sex workers. Mainstream responses to political crisis often ignore and actively silence dissenting voices for the sake of the urgency of the political moment. Those on the outskirts of womanhood and the boundaries of flaccid, liberal politics have always been cast as the disrupters of political harmony. They introduce mess where an otherwise simple narrative might have been triumphant; they complicate that which should be easy. But feminism does not promise us easy answers. It promises us the hard work of seeing each other for all we are: including our faults, oversights and the ways we fail one another. In mainstream feminism, whiteness is central to that failure. When these oversights are addressed, solidarity is impeded by defensiveness and a refusal to recognise that women can be perpetrators of structural violence too. The terminology we use can also be a shield for other kinds of solidarities, obscuring for example, how 'women of colour'

may enact anti-black coalitions that increase proximity to whiteness and reinforce hierarchies of being.

Womanhood, the central pillar under which we gather to make our demands, is not real. It is only a vantage point that we use strategically to lessen the brutality we experience. Lessening that brutality requires us not to be so preoccupied with harming one another that we forget who our enemies are. Once free, we might be free to hate each other, to deride solidarity, to argue that it does not work. But as long as we live under the conditions that we do, solidarity is one of the most important political tools we can use to maximise our success and make demands that cut across the structural barriers that seek to individualise our experiences. Individuals are right to be sceptical of the clumsy mobilisation of solidarity and attuned to its many failings. Perhaps a hopeful pessimism is our best chance – we organise across difference not because it solves our problems, but because the visions we seek to enact must be able to account for everyone. We are too involved in one another's lives, for better or worse. Chandra Mohanty argued 'the practice of solidarity foregrounds communities of people who have *chosen* to work and fight together.' She cites Jodi Dean, who argues that 'reflective solidarity' is crafted by an interaction involving three persons: 'I ask you to stand by me over me and against a third.'[2] Solidarity is a belief in one another that should be extended and rescinded accordingly. At the very least, it helps sharpen our focus on that *third*, who threatens our attempts to build a feminist future.

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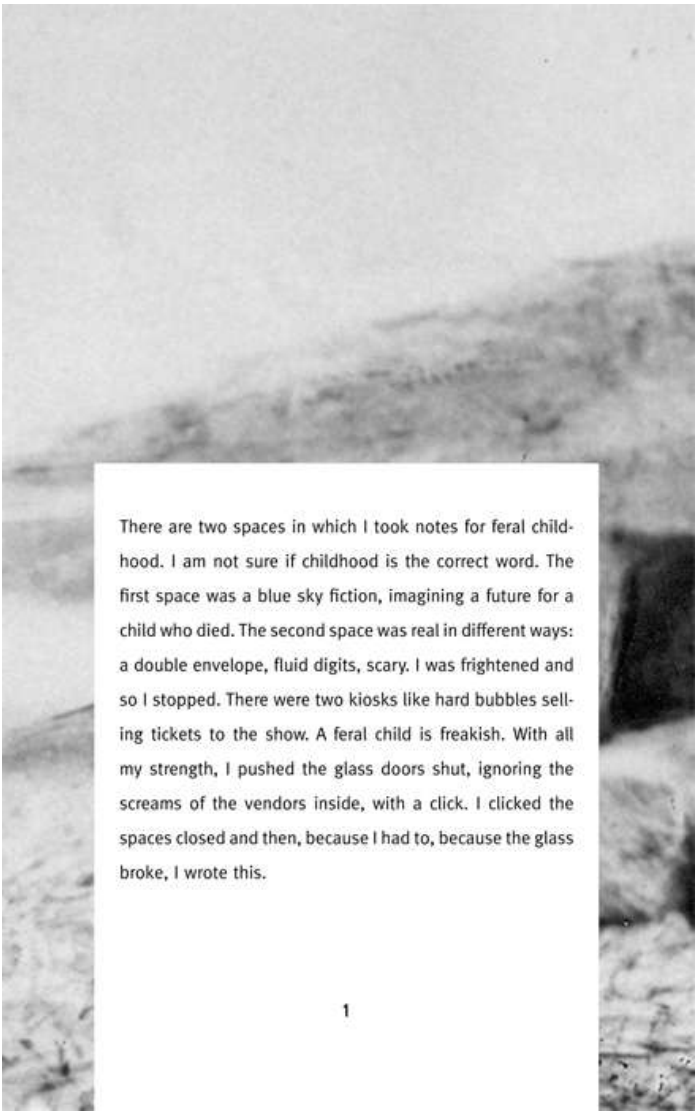
1www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/women-on-waves-abortion-boat_n_590b8338e4b0d5d9049a857c (last accessed 07/2019).

2 Chandra Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicising Solidarity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

Write my daughter so that you may live

Writing was forbidden
to both women and slaves,
because their destiny was to die,
and because immortality was reserved
for male gods alone.
In my childhood I used to be afraid,
so terrified that I obeyed
the commands of God, and King,
the commands of nation, father and mother.
My mother always came last,
even though she was the only one I saw,
the first face I got to know,
and the first voice I heard.
Though first, she was pushed to be last.
She wrote in secret and hid her words underground.
Like me she was afraid, and so she died.
But before breathing her last, she said to me,
'Don't follow in my footsteps, child.
Write… write so that you may live.'



There are two spaces in which I took notes for feral childhood. I am not sure if childhood is the correct word. The first space was a blue sky fiction, imagining a future for a child who died. The second space was real in different ways: a double envelope, fluid digits, scary. I was frightened and so I stopped. There were two kiosks like hard bubbles selling tickets to the show. A feral child is freakish. With all my strength, I pushed the glass doors shut, ignoring the screams of the vendors inside, with a click. I clicked the spaces closed and then, because I had to, because the glass broke, I wrote this.

HUMANIMAL 1

BLUE SKY FICTION FOR A FUTURE CHILD.

Balled up, her shaven head and spine visible through her skin, the wolfgirl was a singular presence, almost butter-yellow against the granular fabric of the Kodak paper. When she died, it was Easter, the hot dry month before monsoon. Bowing to custom, the priest covered her face with marigolds, soaked the stems with olive oil then lit a match.

Behind the graveyard was a church, intensely white in the pale pink day.

Behind the church was the jungle.

At the edge of the jungle was a seam, a dense shedding of light green ribbons of bark. A place where things previously separate moved together in a wet pivot. I stood and walked towards it in a dream.

Her eyes were grim, intensely clarified against her charred skin, as she looked up. Above her, the trees were dense with a dark green fruit I could not identify. In the minutes before capture, the girl reached up, her arms criss-crossing rapidly beneath the bleached, low-hanging vines of the perimeter. She was wearing a white cotton dress shredded at the sleeve and hem.

When I developed the film in New Delhi, the x-ray of a marine skeleton was superimposed upon her left arm. Her elbow as thick as a knot. I said it was cartilage—the body incubating a curved space, an animal self. Instead of hands, she had four streaks of light. An imprimatur, she saw me and flinched.

HUMANIMAL 2

A MATRIX OF FLUID DIGITS. IMAGES OF CHILDREN IN THE UNDER-WORLD. AN ALPHABET TO O, A KIND OF MOUTH.

1. The humanimal sky is copper like lids. Retrograde stars litter this intimate metallic curve above the jungle. Can you see it?

A. All the branches stir in their silver. Like a liquid metal—the jungle. For her, the girl—tentacular. Does the skin crêpe, where her fingers are too wet, trailing in the river? This is what a child does, as in fairytales. This is walking. I want to. All branches fear life. It pushes and pushes: life. Out to the tips where the color is. Does this happen in Asian forests? Does this tree say yes, damaged by its yes, to phloem—the food to the lips? Of the branches where the leaves are and thus a leaf girl—leaping from branch to branch in her dream of being a girl and not this, this other disastrous thing?

2. Like automata, the trees rise up in rows, mechanically. Because it's January, we don't see scat or paw marks or tufts of blue hair caught in the low-lying branches. This is tracking but the wolves—wild black dogs with elongated torsos—are deeper in. The District Forest Officer lifts a luminous skin from a termite mound with the snout of his rifle and holds it up to show me. When I reach out to gather another section of the skin, he stops my hand with his. When I ask if snakes are active at this time of year, he says: "Oh no, no, madam, the Indian anaconda is not a problem at this time of year. Not at all. No problem!" Nevertheless, we return in short order to the jeep with footage, only, of a rudimentary perimeter in which giant insects have constructed conical temples from the moist, ochre earth beneath the trees. I want to stay, but the film-makers are stubbing out their cigarettes in the dirt. I didn't know the jungle would be red.

B. I want to stand up but I can't do that here. They would know I am a wolf by my sore hips, the look in my eyes. At the edge of the garden was a line of blue chalk. My mother was crouching there, waiting for me in her dark coat. In the dream, I walk towards her and she stands up. She opens up her coat like two wings and I step into her cloth heart, her cleft of matted fur.

3. The girl, I cannot retrieve even one foot from her small leg. A tendon. A nail. One eye. I saw her grave in a city where the edge had been. In your city, or where you grew up, was there an overgrown scrubland? Was there a tree? Imagine a dark tree, like a lemon tree, its fruit still green, studded with parrots. The edge of sal: lemon and banana plantings intermixed with the regular blue. It is blue leaves at night and brown, yellow or doubly green by day. But it was day. But blue. I put my hand on her grave and waited, until I could feel the rhythm, faintly, of breathing. Of a cardiac output.

c. Mist rose in cubes. With hard fingers, they tore strips from my spine. All blonde-black fur. All hair from a previous life.

4. Feral children are fatty, complex, and rigid. When you captured the two children, you had to brush the knots out of their hair then scrape the comb free of hard butter. Descent and serration. No. I don't want to ask primal questions.

5. Kamala slips over the garden wall with her sister and runs, on all fours, towards the complex horizon between Midnapure and its surrounding belt of sal. The humanimal mode is one of pure anxiety attached to the presence of the body. Two panicked children strain against the gelatin envelope of the township, producing, through distension, a frightening shape. The animals see an opaque, milky membrane bulging with life and retreat, as you would, to the inner world. I am speaking for you in January. It is raining. Amniotic, compelled to emerge, the girls are nevertheless reabsorbed. I imagine them back in their cots illuminated by kerosene lanterns. I illuminate them in the colony—the cluster of residences, including the Home—around St. John's. No. Though I've been there, it's

impossible for me to visualize retrieval. Chronologies only record the bad days, the attempted escapes.

D. I was almost to the gate. I was almost to the gate when a hand reached out and pulled me backwards by my hair, opening my mouth to an O. The next day, I woke up with a raw throat. The cook gave me salt in warm water. I waited until she was gone and then I bit it. I bit my own arm and ate it. Here is my belly, frosted with meat. Here are my eyes, bobbling in a tin.

6. It's Palm Sunday and Kamala, with the other orphans in a dark, glittery crocodile, walks from Home to church. Her two arms extend stiffly from her body to train them, to extend. Unbound, her elbows and wrists would flex then supinate like two peeled claws. Wrapped, she is a swerve, a crooked yet regulated mark. This is corrective therapy; the fascia hardening over a lifetime then split in order to re-set it, educate the nerves.

E. The cook fed us meats of many kinds. I joined my belly to the belly of the next girl. It was pink and we opened our beaks for meat. It was wet and we licked the dictionary off each other's faces.

7. Is this the humanimal question? No, it's a disc, transferring light from corner to corner of the girl's eye. Like an animal tapetum. The way at night an animal. Animal eyes, glinting, in the room where he kept her, his girl, deep in the Home.

8.i. Where is the future child? Curled up with wolves, sub-red, the wolfgirl's eyes reflected light. She was seven when her Father found her, coiled in a den. A tall, extremely handsome Father, sidetracked from his Mission —dressed in black despite the heat—caught her in a bed-sheet, and wrote: "I cut a hole and removed her from the cave."

8.ii. Your scars lit up then liquefied. Lucidly, holographically, your heart pulsed in the air next to your body; then my eyes clicked the photo into place. Future child, in the time you lived in, your arms always itched and

flaked. To write this, the memoir of your body, I slip my arms into the sleeves of your shirt. I slip my arms into yours, to become four-limbed.

9. In Midnapure, in a back room, a jute bed is converted to a low cot. Strapped in, the wolfgirl turns her face from the window. Does the Home have windows? It's 1921, mid-November, and I can't find her sometimes, on the other side of everything. Stresses of light—I don't know how to change them, these amounts. This is absurd. I write on a piece of paper all morning, then fold it in two.

10.i. This is the humanimal project. All the fingers are still inside the hands. A mother-to-be's hips ache. In the forest behind her hut, the birds are so red, the wrong red, against the bed of green. A forest is a bed for animals. When the rains come each June, these animals make nets in the upper branches, suffering nightly, twitching, from an incomplete, lunar darkness. It's the time before electricity. Those are not birds. They are wolves, switching their glossy brown tails in the heat. As custom dictates, the woman gives birth, then places her newborn girl on a shawl beneath a tree, massages her with coconut oil, and leaves her there to sun. Lit up like that, the baby is vulnerable, naked thus flesh-like, fleshed like prey, but flailing—four legs in the air like pink, elongated stars.

10.ii. I am not interested in animals. Return to the work as memory. Say it is a wolf becoming a girl, the action in reverse.

10.iii. They strapped her down to the limited table where a knife spun in a jar of blue water. There were marigolds and red thread sewn into the white cotton curtains. Oranges lined up on the sill. Like a spell. Like an angel, the priest fed Kamala from a coil of linen, squeezing water into her open mouth. She spat it out and so the doctor came with his packet of edges. Dipped one into the glutinous foam and began. Her arms first. The thick dorsal hair, ashy. Her legs first and then her skull.

11. The air is pink by seven and there is Naxalite graffiti on the tree trunks of the stupid jungle. These are sal trees in West Bengal. A girl facing sal, 1920; it's still Orissa. These are notes for a separate project. But I'm here and I'm trying to see it, eighty-four years later: the humanimal trait. How she, through a density I can't manage but overlaid by a separate forest. I

can't manage her forest and say it is sal, but a century on the sal is regulated.

12.i. How she moved, through sal. But these new trees are new, too young to be hers. The de-forest. The way land is always settled, gives up and then there are mercies. A planting. People—Britishers, then Hindi speakers from the north—swerving sal with their agricultural systems. In this third space, the trees make a sort of heart, a red space filtered loosely—pink light—to the rim. Gleaners—nomads, from Bhutan and present-day Orissa—are pushed back each year into the darker, more rigid sections of the jungle. Behind the film-makers, I walk through alternating bars of sunlight and shadow, luxuriating, nowhere. Footsteps. The police escort assigned to our party, panting, says: "Madam! Please tell them, they are not understanding. Are you Indian? Please talk to them on this point. The tribals have started up again. They know you are here, with your film equipment and all this. Madam, are you France? Are you American? I think you are born in a different country. Am I not right?"

12.ii. Walking through a jungle lit by blue paper. When they filmed the jungle they made pockets of soft blue light. "Walk more slowly, like you're thinking. Again! One more time. Yes! Now … very naturally, very casually, look left, into the trees, as if you're looking for wolves."

13. But how she went into her garden, an indivisible red, and was not seen by her mother when a passing wolf picked her up in her quick beak. The mouth of the wolf was the sharp pink O that covered her and kept her still as they— the girl and her new, animal mother—crossed into the green. Nearer to the sal, I can see the tree trunks are redorange, dusty, and that the lines they make are clear. I walk for hours between the rows as she did not. This is a different place and I want to know what happened, to the trees.

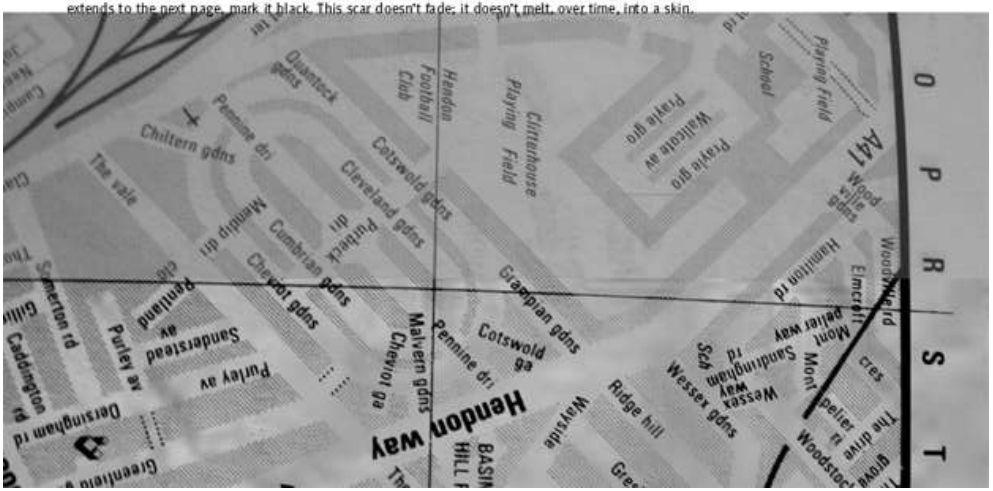
F. The cook scraped vernix or matte and saw a shape beneath the fats, suitable for reaching. "Your arm." "Your hand." "Your left." And sliced them free of the wild animal.

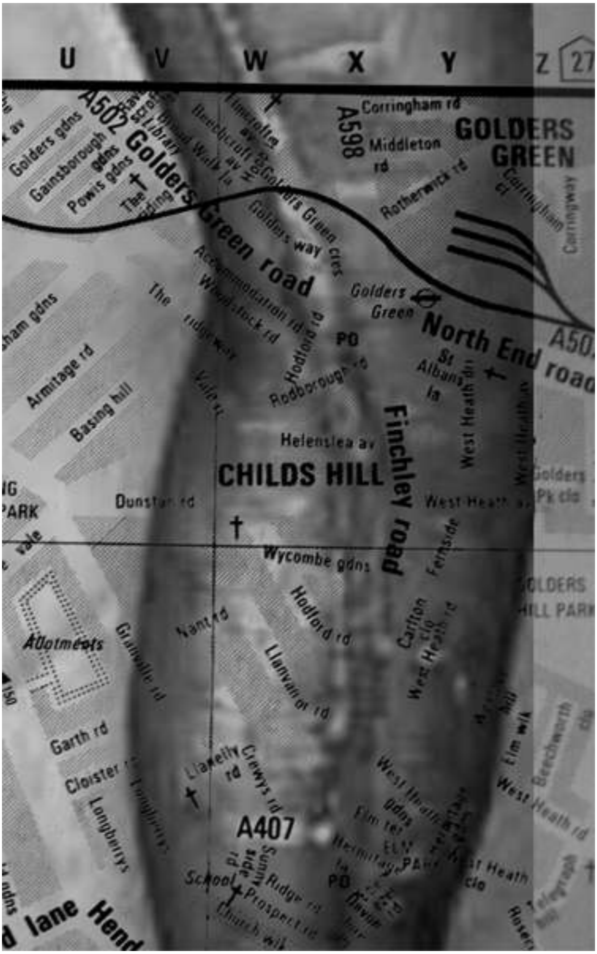
14.a. The earth is red and shiny on this January night. I have wandered away from a shot. I crouch down next to the man, who is barefoot, trousers

rolled up to the knee, navy blue nylon windbreaker zipped to the chin. He is kneading a baby-sized loaf of red clay, scooping water from a bucket with his cupped hand, by candle-light. In rudimentary Bengali, I ask him what he's doing. He's curt: "Dushu." "What is it for?" "The river." The documentary translator, a Calcutta native and film student from Paris, R., has followed me to tell me they're ready. I ask her to ask what dushu is. In a monotone, clearly tired from the late shoot, she translates: "Sarasvati. She is our mother and we give her back to her mother. The river is our mother. I take her to the river."

14.b. In the morning, I go back to the village and see a tiny army of goddesses, some sun-baked, some still wet and some painted, delicately, with necklaces of white and red

Krishan, my father, was born in India in 1937, ten years after Kamala died. This is a photograph of scar tissue, to represent a deep cut in his leg from a street beating. What is a street? Here, the flesh is healed over, repaired by natural processes. If the image, the excess rectangle, extends to the next page, mark it black. This scar doesn't fade; it doesn't melt, over time, into a skin.





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27
A502
A598
Corringham rd
Middleton rd
GOLDERS GREEN
Golders gdns
Gainsborough gdns
Powis gdns
Rotherwick rd
Golders Green road
Golders way
Golders Green
North End road
PO
Armitage rd
Basing hill
Helenslea av
CHILDS HILL
Finchley road
West Heath av
Dunstan rd
Wycombe gdns
Hodford rd
Allotments
Garth rd
Llanvanor rd
A407
West Heath rd
Elm wlk
Longberrys
lane

dots. Some of the heads are separate to the torsos and when I come upon him, the sculptor has one of these heads in his left hand. With his chin, he gestures to another head and to the leaf, like a bowl, with a white paste in it. “Really?” He shakes his head in a figure of eight, and I set to work massaging the paste into the faces then putting them aside to dry.

15. Coming over a ridge, Joseph saw two pale animals, their heads hanging down and thick with brown dreadlocks. They were drinking from a river with a pack of wolves. A twig snapped underfoot as Joseph strained to look but at that moment, the animals fled, in one sharp curve, back into the green. At night, the animals came once again to drink. In his hide, Joseph shivered. He could not see them clearly but he knew they were there. In the moonlight, the wolves and their companions were whitish, with eyes that shone when they turned towards him, mildly, reflexively. Blue.

G. Wet, wet, green, green. I mix with them and prosper. Sticky then my mother licks me clean. The nest is brown. Best is brown next to yellow. Best is blue then brown. Best yellow. Where will the sun go when it is finished? I ask my mother. I put my lips against her skin and drink. Her milk is white and then the sun goes in the ground. Because my mother does, she does so every night. We watch her disappear and then we disappear. Blue as blue then brown then green then black.

16.i. In the bedroom, he tried to feed her with a copper spoon, a mineralized utensil to replenish her blood. He made her eat, watching the pink food—a kind of semolina pudding mixed with jam—pool in her mouth. Her mouth was an O and with his fingers he tried to press her gums and teeth together. *“Eat.”* In the time I am writing of, villagers from the settlement of Midnapure came regularly to the orphanage, lining up at the gate to catch a glimpse of the two jungle children. For a few minutes a day, Joseph’s wife, the Home’s Mother, let them in and they swarmed to the room where the youngest girl was failing. They watched her fade and jerk in her cot, the spittle coming down over her chin. From these stories, I

constructed an image of the dying girl as larval; perennially white, damp and fluttering in the darkness of the room.

16.ii. “She was buried in the churchyard of St. John’s Church, Midnapure, on the twenty-first of September, 1921. Her death certificate ran as follows: This is to certify that Amala (wolf-child), a girl of the Rev. Singh’s Orphanage, died of nephritis on September 21, 1921. She was under my treatment. September 21, 1921. sd/-s.p. Sabadhicari. Indian Medical Service.” —Joseph Singh.

16.iii. In Midnapure, I met the grandson of Dr. Sabadhicari. As the film-makers asked him to describe the stories his grandfather had told him, I sketched, in my notebook, the emerald green, rusted spiral staircase partially illuminated in the dark hallway behind him. Suspicious of our cameras, Dr. Sabadhicari retold the tale his grandfather had told him, of the two feral children, from the front step of his door. “What is this for? Are you American?”

17. I substitute images for events, my humanimal prerogative. Thus, here are the legs, wrapped in cotton wool to prevent them from breaking; for the shocks absorbed in transport, in the act of getting here at all.

18. A doctor came from Midnapure with a vial of herbal medicine and a knife. Wizardly, grandmother-like, he stuck out his chest and stomach and said: “Where are they?” The girls. The doctor strung a knife above the cot where one girl lay on the white sheet. Her face was wet. The cook soaked the water up with a square of cotton and the Father backed out of the room. In the garden, the sky hung down in violet sections like a torn net and the Father stood there, beneath it, calling out to the angels in their dominion. When the youngest girl died, the doctor came out into the garden and sank into a wicker chair. It was a chair from Nepal, the edge of the region. The Mother brought the doctor a plate of buttered chicken and chilies, which he ate quickly and sloppily, like a dog.

19.i. A light blue rain fell in intervals upon the upturned faces of wolves.

19.ii. Each feral moment is valuable. Magically, the legs slip out of their sockets deep in the hips. Milky photographs fell out of my skirt and I

crouched to collect them by the grave.

20. Translating her story from Punjabi, I wrote this: “When it started to rain, the banyan tree outside the girl’s room, where she lay in a profound coma, shook. Then the rain stopped and there was no wind but the tree was still going hard, rattling. I heard something growling in the branches. A small white snake was lying on the roots. The tree shook into the night and at midnight, when it stopped, visitors from the nearby village were allowed to see the girl. I went with my mother, a woman whiter than any white person we know. She had brown-green eyes. My mother placed a gift of oranges on the bed. There was an herbal doctor in the room and he took one of the oranges and placed it on the girl’s belly. As soon as he did this, blood began to trickle out of the girl’s belly-button and also from the orange. A painting on the wall tilted of its own accord and we ran from the house, screaming. By morning, the girl was dead.”

H. A white smoke fills the compound. Children gallop in the garden of the Home. I want my mother. With one crack in the stuff of her she was gone. But these are my hands. But the sun burns my hands. Kill the sun.

21. Slow, wet orange sun and such a bright full moon over the jungle’s horizon. Looking down from the lodge, there are long saffron scratches where the sun has caught a mineral vein. Notes for film: “A girl emerges from a darker space into the upper rooms of the jungle. Blurry photographs/transitions of light.” How does this sentence go into animals? Notes for an animal-human mix: “Reaching and touching were the beginning actions.”

22. I wake up stiff, wrapped in a quilt, on the wicker chair. The sun is a pale green disc in the white sky. I dreamed last night that I was crawling on the floor with a circus acrobat from the 1940s. He was Chinese and his eyes were ringed with black lead. As if in a trance, I left my seat in the audience and danced with him. It was a dance based upon the movements of a black panther and a white eagle. We crossed them. This was mating deep inside the market. We danced until we were markets.

23. The humanimal conquest is a moonlit capture. The moonlight illuminates the termite mound where the wolves have hollowed out an underground cave with their beaks. Sub-red, animal wolves and human wolves curl up with their mother, in sequence, to nurse. When the babies fall asleep, the mother slips out into the jungle. As she crosses the blue clearing, Joseph cocks his gun and aims, the culmination of weeks of hunting. There is a dazzling break in the darkness.

24. The trees rise up in rows. A red disc shines through the thin curtain but the trees look spiky through the nylon grid. I came here to write. Can feeling grow here? In waves—a memory of the ocean bed it once was? An animal flowers in the elements. It grows wings. A cat with wings alights on the doorstep, as if to say, I'm off. I don't need your food anymore. These are notes for a separate project, in which the jungle is a "kind of foreign language extracted from the maternal language, on the condition that the sounds of phonemes remain similar."

25.i. The film-makers have hired the local folkloric theater, a troupe funded by the state's Marxist council, to re-enact the capture of a girl by a wolf. They don't need me in this scene, so I lie down behind the drummers, three elderly men pounding cotton-wrapped mallets on drums as huge as them. I lie on the ground beneath the music. A lean, bearded man in a wolf costume is holding a girl in his arms. R. sarcastically says: "They want her to act as if she's almost dead. And the wolf is carrying her home to eat." R. is smoking a Gauloise and as I watch, she throws it on the dirt and grinds it down beneath her boot. Army boots, long black hair to the waist, jeans, ridged yellow fingernails. I can tell she thinks this is dumb. Indeed, later, back at the lodge, she says: "Do you mind?" Smoking, she jabs the air with her cigarette, trailing ash over the azaleas: "I wish it was just you and me. I want *hazard.* I want to travel everywhere in India. Not just here. There is no CHANCE in this film." But below us, in the parking lot, the film-makers are packing their lamps into leather satchels with hard backing. One of them looks up at us and waves. R. and I look at each other and burst into giggles. A boy opens the door but we can't stop laughing. "Chai?" We take the tiny glasses of steaming ginger tea from him and resume our exchange. When the boy comes back to get the

glasses, R. says: “What do you want? What are you looking at? Get out of here, you damn bloody fool.”

25.ii. Of the sixteen children who were born, only seven—six boys and a girl—survived into childhood proper. One of the boys pushed the girl off the roof and then there were six. My father was the second oldest, and though I am not sure if the image—my aunt Subudhra falling upside down to her death, a kite’s slim rope still bound to her wrist and wrapped twice around her knuckles—is relevant to the story I am telling, it accompanies it. In the quick, black take of a body’s flight, a body’s eviction or sudden loss of place, the memory of descent functions as a subliminal flash.

i. With nets and sheets, they made a canopy over my body, and I curled up inside the air. With teeth and earth, they made a net around my body, and I curled up inside my hair.

26.i. In the photograph, a girl climbs a tree, reaching out to grasp the tail of a cat. I climbed that tree, disturbing a true sphere with its knotty fingers, elongated thigh muscles, and blue eyes brightly lit even in a darkened room. I wrote then stopped. What stopped my hand?

26.ii. The Reverend Joseph slipped an ankle-length black dress over his head and his gun over that; the strap dug into his left shoulder as he transgressed a wild space of gold, smashed grasses and transparent mountains, to reach the caves. The cave was littered at its entrance with bones. The porters gave him their coarse, white woolen shawls and he threw them over their forms. Two girls. “I saw them first.” Flailing then rigid then soft.

27. A woman left her daughters beneath a tree then tiptoed back to town. A wolf woke up deep in the tree. A girl was a speck on the ground, so the wolf picked her up in her hairy beak and flew off into the trees. When the girl was found in a milky cave, they shot her mother the wolf and tore her out of her hair. Then there was tea. Sugary tea with milk sucked from a rag, and they bound her pelvis in cotton. There is a formal photograph that survives in anthologies of this period: the wolfgirl seated, center front of a row of orphans, at Joseph’s feet. The eyes of the good children do not

waver. When the photographer shouts from under his black cape—1, 2, 3—our girl is the only one who looks up at a raven passing overhead, shaking her head like a dog on a rope, to howl. "Owowwoow." Joseph kicks her hard, his face completely blank for the camera, but it is too late. It is 1924. The photograph will be blurry. Two faces blossom from one thin neck.

j. When she came for me, I was ready. Limp in her teeth, where she had me by the scraw. From the threadless, dusty stretch between my mother's house and the edge of the world. Into a channel the color of fevers, white, white, white then green. I saw a white-pink face with ash in its forehead lines. It was a woman, sitting in a tree. One big eye saw me then shut and we continued. I saw a turtle flying from branch to branch, a white, hooded snake in her yellow beak. I saw three thousand eyes switch on and off. They saw me and I saw them. Nobody followed us but when the Reverend found us, he wrote: "Remembering without sound." Then he put down his pen. To listen. "What a dog is." "Lop lop." "Trees and dogs, which no one can change."

28. Though I waited, there was no memory of a cross—the lifting up, loss and going—that I was so interested in when I first began to think of her, the feral child. In a white dress, like an insect, she waited with the others for the meat. Biscuits. A bell.

K. I had a tail. I have a hymn. My frayed blue hymnal I left in the box by my cot and the Father smacked my side with a wand. I wore a skirt. I had a dress. A grey skirt with maroon cotton stitching on the hem. But there was milk in my mouth and so I drank it. With my mother, there in the curve of the cup. A red cup and I drank it. When I wept, she licked me clean, wetting down my hair with her tongue. No. It's Friday. I must still be a child.

29.i. Perimeter space transfuses moonlight. The trees filtrate it. Is it filtration, or is it pre-history? Is it ambience? To cull the sal for export, the British erased sections of the forest, then re-planted it like a Norfolk copse, brutally. Linearity is brutal. Yet, now, the jungle is more luminous and spacious than it would have been naturally. It's early, about five a.m. Staring at the perimeter from the verandah, I warm my hands on a glass of ginger chai. Here, I have a private view of a corrupt, humanimal landscape, a severed fold.

29.ii. The legs: as a child, my father ate butter straight from the cow. Once, when his mother caught him red-handed at the churn, she beat him to blood with a bamboo cane. My father, a tiny, wiry boy, was smoking by age seven. Switching the cows home through fields of rape, his chest level with the sharp yellow blossoms. Barefoot, his feet resembled those of a goat's: hard, rough, and smooth. Were his cells even then beginning to pulse? Pulse and break up/proliferate? What is a membrane? It's the light on the field in 1947, by which I can barely see a boy. He slips out of the field, disappearing into a settlement of shacks. Dusk. I can smell the country fires, bread popping and burning on dry, freshly lit cakes of dung. The sun is slipping over the roof of the tall building across the street. In a few minutes, India will be illuminated.

WHAT YOU ARE

I want to write you a poem that unravels
from the gut, hurls itself towards you
like a slap across the mouth. Let my words
unleash themselves upon you like dogs
looking for a fight, like seeds bursting
from overripe pods. Let every vowel
explode in your face like cruel laughter,
every consonant pronounce itself like
death into your ear, every comma
trip up your speech, every full-stop
prevent you from finding your way
home. I hope you were not expecting

sweet nothings, loves songs, cherished
clichés; the heart that triumphs over
adversity, finds strength in the adoring
eyes of a child, realises that we are
not so different after all. Surely you are
not so naïve, not thinking I am going to turn
this into some love poem, waxing lyrical
about secrets whispered between sweethearts,
or about hands held on crowded trains
at dawn. Or about you, as if you take root
at the base of my spine, fingers climbing
each vertebra one by one. This is not

some ode with your name on it. I want
to write you a poem that drives a bullet
through your beliefs, plagues you
with your own reflection, smashes every
illusion like bricks through a window
pane; let it stir the birds in your chest
so hard they burst through your flesh
in a spectacle of sound and despair. I
want to write you a poem that lingers
on your breath like cigarettes, stings
your eyes like salt, a finger pointing
unflinchingly: this is what you are.

Chapter two

Humiliation

The economy of daily life is based on a continual exchange of humiliations and aggressive attitudes. It conceals a technique of attrition itself prey to the gift *of destruction which paradoxically it invites (1). Today, the more man is a social being, the more he is an object (2). Decolonisation has not yet begun (3). It will have to give a new value to the old principle of sovereignty (4).*

1

TRAVELLING THROUGH a busy village one day, Rousseau was mocked by a yokel whose barbs delighted the crowd. Confused and discountenanced, Rousseau couldn't think of a word in reply and was forced to take to his heels amidst the jeers of the villagers. By the time he had finally regained his composure and thought of a thousand possible retorts, any one of which would have silenced the joker at a stroke, he was two hours' distance from the village.

Aren't most of the trivial incidents of daily life like this ridiculous adventure? But in an attenuated and diluted form, reduced to the duration of a step, a glance, a thought, experienced as a muffled impact, a fleeting discomfort barely registered by consciousness and leaving in the mind only a dull irritation at a loss to discover its own origin? The endless minuet of humiliation and its response gives human relationships an obscene hobbling rhythm. In the ebb and flow of the crowds sucked in and crushed together by the coming and going of suburban trains, coughed out into streets, offices and factories, there is nothing but timid retreats, brutal attacks, smirking faces, and scratches delivered for no apparent reason. Soured by unwanted encounters, wine turns to vinegar in the mouth. Don't talk to me about innocent and good-natured crowds. Look how they bristle up, threatened on every side, clumsy and embarrassed in enemy territory, far, very far, from themselves. Lacking knives, they learn to use their elbows and their eyes as weapons.

There is no remission, no truce between attackers and attacked. A flux of barely perceptible signs assails the stroller, who is anything but solitary. Remarks, gestures, glances tangle and collide, miss their aim, ricochet like bullets fired at random, killing even more surely by the continuous nervous tension they produce. All we can do is enclose ourselves in embarrassing parentheses; like these fingers (I am writing this on a café terrace) which slide the tip across the table and the fingers of the waiter which pick it up, while the faces of the two men involved, as if anxious to conceal the infamy which they have consented to, assume an expression of utter indifference.

From the point of view of constraint, daily life is governed by an economic system in which the production and consumption of insults tends to balance out. The old dream of the theorists of free trade thus finds its realisation in the customs of a democracy given new life by the lack of imagination of the left. Is it not strange, at first sight, to see the fury with which 'progressives' attack the ruined edifice of liberalism, as if the capitalists, its official demolition gang, had not themselves already planned liberalism's nationalised reconstruction? But it is not so strange, in fact: for the deliberate purpose of keeping all attention fastened on critiques which have already been overtaken by events (after all, anybody can see that capitalism is gradually finding its fulfilment in a planned economy of which the Soviet model is nothing but a primitive form) is to conceal the fact that the only reconstruction of human relationships envisaged is one based on precisely this economic model, which, because it is obsolete, is available at a knock-down price. Who can fail to notice the alarming persistence with which 'socialist' countries continue to organise life along bourgeois lines? Everywhere it's hats off to family, marriage, sacrifice, work, inauthenticity, while simplified and rationalised homoeostatic mechanisms reduce human relationships to 'fair' exchanges of deference and humiliation. And soon, in the ideal democracy of the cyberneticians, everyone will, without apparent effort, earn a share of unworthiness which he will have the leisure to distribute according to the finest rules of justice. Distributive justice will reach its apogee. Happy the old men who live to see the day!

For me — and for some others, I dare to think — there can be no equilibrium in sickness. Planning is merely the other face of the free market. The only thing subject to planning is exchange — and with it the mutual

sacrifice it entails. But if the word 'innovation' means anything it means transcendence, not camouflage. In fact, a truly new reality can only be based on the principle of the *gift*. Despite their mistakes and their poverty, I see in the historical experience of workers' councils (1917, 1921, 1934, 1956), and in the pathetic search for friendship and love, a single and inspiring reason not to despair over present 'reality'. Everything conspires to keep secret the positive character of such experiences; doubt is cunningly maintained as to their real importance, even their existence. By a strange oversight, no historian has ever taken the trouble to study how people actually lived during the most extreme revolutionary movements. At such times the wish to make an end of free trade in human behaviour shows itself spontaneously, but in the form of negation. When malaise is challenged, it shatters under the onslaught of a greater and denser malaise.

In a negative sense, Ravachol's bombs or, closer to our own time, the epic of Caraquemada, dispel the confusion which reigns around the total rejection — manifested to a varying extent, but manifested everywhere — of relationships based on exchange and compromise. I have no doubt, since I have experienced it so many times, that anyone who passes an hour in the cage of constraining relationships feels a profound empathy for Pierre-François Lacenaire and the passion for crime. The point here is not to make an apology for terrorism, but to recognise it as an action — a most pathetic yet noble action — which is capable of sabotaging and exposing the self-regulating mechanisms of the hierarchical social community. Intrinsic to the logic of an unlivable society, murder, thus conceived, can only appear as the concave form of the gift. It is that absence of an intensely desired presence that Mallarmé described — the same Mallarmé who, at the trial of the Thirty, called the anarchists "angels of purity".

My sympathy for the solitary killer ends where tactics begin; but perhaps tactics need scouts driven by individual despair. However that may be, the new revolutionary tactics — which will be based indissolubly on the historical tradition and on the practice, so widespread and so disregarded, of individual self-realisation — will have no place for people who want only to mimic the gestures of Ravachol or Bonnot. But on the other hand, these tactics will be condemned to theoretical hibernation if they cannot, by other means, attract *collectively* the individuals whom isolation and hatred for the

collective lie have already won over to the rational decision to kill or to kill themselves. No murderers — and no humanists either! The first accepts death, the second imposes it. Let ten people meet who are resolved on the lightning of violence rather than the agony of survival; from this moment, despair ends and tactics begin. Despair is the infantile disorder of the revolutionaries of daily life.

Even today I still feel my adolescent admiration for outlaws, not so much out of a regressive romanticism as because they expose the alibis by which social power avoids being compromised *directly.* Hierarchical social organisation is like a gigantic racket whose secret, exposed precisely by anarchist terrorism, is to place itself out of reach of the violence it gives rise to, by consuming everybody's energy in a multitude of irrelevant struggles. (A 'humanised' power cannot allow itself recourse to the old methods of war and genocide.) The witnesses for the prosecution can hardly be suspected of anarchist tendencies. The biologist Hans Selye notes that, "As specific causes of disease (microbes, undernourishment) disappear, a growing proportion of people die of what are called stress diseases, or diseases of degeneration caused by stress, that is, by the wear and tear resulting from conflicts, shocks, nervous tension, frustrations, debilitating rhythms . . ." From now on, no one can escape the necessity of conducting his own investigation into the racket which pursues him even into his thoughts, hunts him down even in his dreams. The smallest details take on a major importance. Irritation, fatigue, rudeness, humiliation . . . *cui bono?* Who profits by them? And who profits by the stereotyped answers that Big Brother Common Sense distributes under the label of wisdom, like so many alibis? Shall I be content with explanations that kill me when, since all the cards are stacked against me, I have everything to win?

2

THE HANDSHAKE ties and unties the knot of encounters. A gesture at once curious and trivial which we quite accurately say is *exchanged:* isn't it in fact the most simplified form of the social contract? What guarantees are they trying to seal, these hands clasped to the right, to the left, everywhere, with a liberality that seems to make up for a total lack of conviction? That agreement reigns, that social harmony exists, that life in

society is perfect? What more disturbing than this need to convince ourselves of these lies, to believe them by force of habit, to assert them with the strength of our grip. Our glances convey nothing of these accommodations, affecting not to see the exchange. When our eyes meet someone else's they become uneasy, as if they could make out their own empty, soulless reflection in the other person's pupils. Hardly have they met when they slip aside and try to dodge one another; their lines of flight cross at an invisible point, making an angle whose width expresses the divergence, the deeply-felt lack of harmony. Sometimes unison is achieved and eyes connect: the beautiful parallel gaze of royal couples in Egyptian statuary, the misty, melting gaze, brimming with eroticism, of lovers: eyes which devour one another from afar. But most of the time eyes give the lie to the superficial agreement sealed by the handshake. All the backslapping that goes on could not be more phoney. Its commercial overtones are not hard to find, of course: the handshake clinches a deal. More important, though, is the fact that this energetically reiterated affirmation of social concord is an attempt to trick our senses — to 'adjust' our perception to the emptiness of the spectacle. "You have to face up to things", people used to say; the received wisdom of consumer society has given this sentence a new force, for things have indeed become the only available reality.

Become as senseless and easily handled as a brick! That is what the social order benevolently asks everyone to do. The bourgeoisie has continued to share out frustrations more fairly, allowing a greater number of people to suffer them according to 'rational' norms, to economic, social, political, or legal requirements. The splinters of constraint produced in this way have in turn fragmented the cunning and the energy devoted collectively to evading or smashing them. The revolutionaries of 1793 were great because they dared to usurp the unitary hold of God over the government of men; the proletarian revolutionaries drew from what they were defending a greatness that they could never have seized from their bourgeois enemy — their strength derived from themselves alone.

A whole ethic based on exchange value, the pleasures of business, the dignity of labour, restrained desires, survival — and on their opposites, pure value, gratuitousness, parasitism, instinctive brutality and death: this is the filthy tub that human faculties have been bubbling in for nearly two

centuries. From these ingredients — refined a little of course — the cyberneticians are dreaming of cooking up the man of the future. Are we quite sure that we haven't yet achieved the security of perfectly adapted beings, moving about as uncertainly and unconsciously as insects? For some time now there have been experiments with subliminal advertising: the insertion into films of single frames lasting one twenty-fourth of a second, which are seen by the eye but not registered by consciousness. The first slogans give more than a glimpse of what is to come: "Don't drive too fast" and "Go to church". But what does a minor improvement like this represent in comparison with the whole immense conditioning machine, each of whose cogs — city planning, advertising, ideology, culture — is capable of dozens of comparable improvements? Once again, knowledge of the conditions which are going to *continue* to be imposed on people if they don't look out, is less relevant than the sensation of living in such degradation *now*. Huxley's *Brave New World*, Orwell's *1984* and Touraine's *Cinquième Coup de Trompette* push back into the future a shudder of horror which one straight look at the present would produce; and it is the present that develops consciousness and the will to refuse. Compared with my present imprisonment the future holds no interest for me.

✧

The feeling of humiliation is nothing but the feeling of being an object. Once understood as such, it becomes the basis for a combative lucidity in which the critique of the organisation of life cannot be separated from the immediate inception of the project of living differently. Construction can begin only on the foundation of individual despair and its transcendence; the efforts made to disguise this despair and pass it off under another wrapper are proof enough of this, if proof were needed. What is the illusion which stops us seeing the disintegration of values, the ruin of the world, inauthenticity, non-totality?

Is it that I think that I am happy? Hardly! Such a belief doesn't stand up to analysis any better than it withstands the blasts of anguish. On the contrary, it is a belief in the happiness of others, an inexhaustible source of envy and jealousy, which gives us a vicarious feeling of existence. I envy therefore I am. To define oneself by reference to others is to perceive oneself

as other. And the other is always object. Thus life is measured in degrees of humiliation. The more you choose your own humiliation, the more you 'live' -- the more you live the orderly life of *things*. Here is the cunning of reification, the means whereby it passes undetected, like arsenic in the jam.

The gentleness of these methods of oppression throws a certain light on the perversion which prevents me from shouting out "The emperor has no clothes" each time my sovereignty over daily life is exposed in all its poverty. Obviously police brutality is still going strong, to say the least. Everywhere it raises its head the kindly souls of the left quite rightly condemn it. But what do they do about it? Do they urge people to arm themselves? To take appropriate reprisals? Do they encourage cop-hunts like the one which decorated the trees of Budapest with the most loyal servants of the AVO? No: they organise peaceful demonstrations at which their trade-union police force treats anyone who questions their orders as an *agent provocateur*. The new-style police are already with us, waiting to take over. Psychosociological cops have need neither of truncheons nor of morgues. Oppressive violence is about to be transformed into a host of equitably distributed pinpricks. Meanwhile, the high-minded people who denounce the cynicism of the police are the very ones who urge us to live in a state of well-policed cynicism.

Humanism merely upholsters the machine described in Kafka's *Penal Colony*. Less grinding and shouting! Blood upsets you? Never mind: men will be bloodless. The promised land of survival will be the realm of peaceful death that the humanists are fighting for. No more Guernicas, no more Auschwitzes, no more Hiroshimas, no more Sétifs. Hooray! But what about the impossibility of living, what about this stifling mediocrity and this absence of passion? What about the jealous fury in which the rankling of never being ourselves drives us to imagine that other people are happy? What about this feeling of never really being inside your own skin? Let nobody say these are minor details or secondary points. There are no negligible irritations: gangrene can start in the slightest graze. The crises that shake the world are not fundamentally different from the conflict in which my actions and thoughts confront the hostile forces that entangle and deflect them. (How could it be otherwise when history, in the last analysis, is only important to me insofar as it affects my own life?) Sooner or later the

continual division and re-division of aggravations will split the atom of unlivable reality and liberate a nuclear energy which nobody suspected behind so much passivity and gloomy resignation. That which produces the common good is always terrible.

3

FROM 1945 to 1960, colonialism was a fairy godmother to the left. With a new enemy on the scale of fascism, the left never had to define itself (there was nothing there); it was able to affirm itself by negating something else. In this way it was able to accept itself as a thing, part of an order of things in which things are everything and nothing.

Nobody dared to announce the end of colonialism for fear that it would spring up all over the place like a jack-in-the-box whose lid doesn't shut properly. In fact, from the moment when the collapse of colonial power revealed the colonialism inherent in all power over men, the problems of race and colour became about as important as crossword puzzles. What effect did the clowns of the left have as they trotted about on their anti-racist and anti-anti-semitic hobbyhorses? In the last analysis, the effect of smothering the cries of all those who are not Jews or blacks — starting with the Jews and blacks themselves. Of course, I would not dream of questioning the spirit of generosity which inspires anti-racism. But I lose interest in the past as soon as I can no longer affect it. I am speaking here and now, and nobody can persuade me, in the name of Alabama or South Africa and their spectacular exploitation, to forget that the epicentre of such problems lies in human beings, in each person who is humiliated and scorned by every aspect of our own society.

I will not renounce my share of violence.

Human relationships can hardly be discussed in terms of more or less tolerable conditions, more or less admissible indignities. Qualification is irrelevant. Do insults like 'wog' or 'nigger' hurt more than a word of command? When he is summoned, told off, or ordered around by a policeman, a boss, an authority, who doesn't feel deep down, in moments of lucidity, that *he* is a darkie and a gook?

The old colonials provided us with a perfect portrait of power when they predicted the descent into bestiality and wretchedness of those who found

their presence undesirable. Law and order come first, says the guard to the prisoner. Yesterday's anti-colonialists are trying to humanise today's generalised colonialism. They become its watchdogs in the cleverest way: by barking at all the after-effects of past inhumanity.

Before he tried to get himself made president of Martinique, Aimé Césaire made a famous remark: "The bourgeoisie has found itself unable to solve the major problems which its own existence has produced: the colonial problem and the problem of the proletariat." He forgot to add: "For they are one and the same problem, a problem which anyone who separates them will fail to understand."

4

I READ IN GOUY'S *Histoire de France:* "The slightest insult to the King meant immediate death." In the American Constitution: "The people are sovereign." In Pouget's *Père Peinard:* "Kings get fat off their sovereignty, while we are starving on ours." Corbon's *Secret du peuple* tells me: "The people today means the mass of men to whom all respect is denied." Here we have, in a few lines, the vicissitudes of the principle of sovereignty.

Monarchism designated as 'subjects' the objects of its arbitrary will. No doubt this was an attempt to wrap the radical inhumanity of its domination in a humanity of idyllic bonds. The respect due to the King's person cannot in itself be criticised. It is odious only because it is based on the right to humiliate while subordinating. The thrones of kings were rotted by contempt. But what about the citizen's sovereignty: the rights multiplied by bourgeois vanity and jealousy, sovereignty distributed like a dividend to each individual? What about the divine right of kings democratically shared out?

Today France contains twenty-four million mini-kings, of which the greatest — the bosses — are great only in their ridiculousness. The sense of respect has become degraded to the point where the right to humiliate is all that it demands. Democratised into public functions and roles, the monarchic principle floats belly up, like a dead fish: only its most repulsive aspect is visible. Its will to be absolutely and unreservedly superior has disappeared. Instead of basing our lives on our sovereignty, we try to base our sovereignty on other people's lives. The manners of slaves.

Chapter three

Isolation

Para no sentirme solo
Por los siglos de los siglos

All we have in common is the illusion of being together. And the only resistance to the illusions of the permitted painkillers come from the collective desire to destroy isolation (1). Impersonal relationships are the no-man's-land of isolation. By producing isolation, contemporary social organisation signs its own death sentence (2).

1

IT WAS AS IF they were in a cage whose door was wide open, without their being able to escape. Nothing outside the cage had any importance, because nothing else existed any more. They stayed in the cage, estranged from everything except the cage, without even a flicker of desire for anything outside the bars. It would have been abnormal — impossible in fact — to escape into something which had neither reality nor importance. Absolutely impossible. For inside this cage, in which they had been born and in which they would die, the only tolerable framework of experience was the Real, which was simply an irresistible instinct to act so that things should have importance. Only if things had some importance could one breathe, and suffer. It seemed that there was an understanding between them and the silent dead, that it should be so, for the habit of acting so that things had some importance had become a human instinct, and one which was apparently eternal. Life was the important thing, and the Real was part of the instinct which gave life a little meaning. The instinct didn't try to imagine what might lie beyond the Real, because there was nothing beyond it. Nothing important. The door remained open and the cage became more and more painful in its Reality, which was so important for countless reasons and in countless ways.

We have never emerged from the time of the slavers.

On public transport, which throws them against one another with statistical indifference, people assume an unbearable expression of mixed disillusion, pride and contempt — an expression much like the natural effect of death on a toothless mouth. The atmosphere of false communication makes everyone the policeman of his own encounters. The instincts of flight and aggression trail the knights of wage-labour, who must now rely on subways and suburban trains for their pitiful wanderings. If men are transformed into scorpions who sting themselves and one another, isn't it really because nothing has happened, and human beings with empty eyes and flabby brains have 'mysteriously' become mere shadows of men, ghosts of men, and in some ways are no longer men except in name?

We have nothing in common except the illusion of being together. Certainly the seeds of an authentic collective life are lying dormant within the illusion itself — there is no illusion without a real basis — but real community remains to be created. The power of the lie sometimes manages to erase the bitter reality of isolation from men's minds. In a crowded street we can occasionally forget that suffering and separation are still present. And, since it is only the lie's power that makes us forget, suffering and separation are reinforced; but in the end the lie itself comes to grief through relying on this support. For a moment comes when no illusion can measure up to our distress.

Malaise invades me as the crowd around me grows. The compromises I have made with stupidity, under the pressure of circumstances, rush to meet me, swimming towards me in hallucinating waves of faceless heads. Edvard Munch's famous painting, *The Cry*, evokes for me something I feel ten times a day. A man carried along by a crowd, which only he can see, suddenly screams out in an attempt to break the spell, to call himself back to himself, to get back inside his own skin. The tacit acknowledgements, fixed smiles, lifeless words, listlessness and humiliation sprinkled in his path suddenly surge into him, driving him out of his desires and his dreams and exploding the illusion of 'being together'. People touch without meeting; isolation accumulates but is never realised; emptiness overcomes us as the density of the crowd grows. The crowd drags me out of myself and installs thousands of little sacrifices in my empty presence.

Everywhere neon signs are flashing out the dictum of Plotinus: *All beings are together though each remains separate.* But we only need to hold out our hands and touch one another, to raise our eyes and meet one another, and everything suddenly becomes near and far, as if by magic.

✧

Like crowds, drugs and love, alcohol can befuddle the most lucid mind. Alcohol turns the concrete wall of isolation into a paper screen which the actors can tear according to their fancy, for it arranges everything on the stage of an intimate theatre. A generous illusion, and thus still more deadly.

In a gloomy bar where everyone is bored to death, a drunken young man breaks his glass, then picks up a bottle and smashes it against the wall. Nobody gets excited; the disappointed young man lets himself be thrown out. Yet everyone there could have done exactly the same thing. He alone made the thought concrete, crossing the first radioactive belt of isolation: interior isolation, the introverted separation between self and outside world. Nobody responded to a sign which he thought was explicit. He remained alone like the hooligan who burns down a church or kills a policeman, at one with himself, but condemned to exile as long as other people remain exiled from their own existence. He has not escaped from the magnetic field of isolation; he is suspended in a zone of zero gravity. All the same, the indifference which greets him allows him to hear the sound of his own cry; even if this revelation tortures him, he knows that he will have to start again in another register, more loudly; with more *coherence.*

People will be together only in a common wretchedness as long as each isolated being refuses to understand that a gesture of liberation, however weak and clumsy it may be, always bears an authentic communication, an adequate personal message. The repression which strikes down the libertarian rebel falls on everyone: everyone's blood flows with the blood of a murdered Durruti. Whenever freedom retreats one inch, there is a hundredfold increase in the weight of the order of *things.* Excluded from authentic participation, men's actions stray into the fragile illusion of being together, or else remain locked in its opposite, the brutal, total rejection of social life. They swing from one to the other like a pendulum turning the hands on the clockface of death.

✧

Love in its turn swells the illusion of unity. Most of the time it founders and is aborted in triviality. Its songs are crippled by the fear of always returning to the same single note: the icy fear, whether there are two of us or ten, of finishing up alone as before. What drives us to despair is not the immensity of our unsatisfied desires, but the moment when our newborn passion discovers its own emptiness. My insatiable desire to fall in love with so many pretty girls is born in anguish and the fear of loving: we are so afraid of never escaping from meetings with *objects*. The dawn when lovers leave each other's arms is the same dawn that breaks on the execution of revolutionaries without a revolution. Isolation *à deux* cannot overpower the general isolation. Pleasure is broken off prematurely and lovers find themselves naked in the world, their actions suddenly ridiculous and pointless. No love is possible in an unhappy world.

Love's boat breaks up on the reefs of the everyday.

Are you ready to smash the reefs of the old world before they wreck your desires? Lovers should love their pleasure with more consequence and more poetry. A story tells how Prince Shekour captured a town and offered it to his favourite for a smile. Some of us have fallen in love with the pleasure of loving without reserve — passionately enough to offer our love the magnificent bed of a revolution.

2

TO ADAPT TO THE WORLD is a game of heads-you-win, tails-I-lose, in which one decides *a priori* that the negative is positive and that the impossibility of living is an essential precondition of life. Alienation never takes such firm root as when it passes itself off as an inalienable good. Transformed into positivity, the consciousness of isolation is none other than the private consciousness, that potential of individualism which respectable people drag around like their most sacred birthright, unprofitable but cherished. It is a sort of pleasure-anxiety which prevents us from either settling down in the community of illusion or remaining trapped in the cellar of isolation.

The no-man's-land of impersonal relationships stretches from the blissful acceptance of false collectivities to the total rejection of society. It is the

morality of shopkeepers: "You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours", "There's good and bad everywhere", "Things aren't so bad really": politeness, the art (for art's sake) of non-communication.

Let's face it: human relationships being what social hierarchy has made of them, impersonality is the least tiring form of contempt. It allows us to pass without useless friction through the mill of daily contacts. It does not prevent us from dreaming of superior forms of civility, such as the courtesy of Lacenaire, on the eve of his execution, urging a friend: "Above all, please convey my gratitude to Monsieur Scribe. Tell him that one day, suffering from the pangs of hunger, I presented myself at his house in order to worm some money out of him. He complied with my request with a touching generosity; I am sure he will remember. Tell him that he acted wisely, for I had in my pocket, ready to hand, the means of depriving France of a dramatist."

But the sterilised zone of impersonal relationships only offers a truce in the endless battle against isolation, a brief transit which leads to communication, or, more frequently, towards the illusion of community. I would explain in this way my reluctance to stop a stranger to ask him the way or to 'pass the time of day'; to seek contact in this doubtful fashion. The pleasantness of impersonal relationships is built on sand, and empty time never did me any good.

Life is made impossible with such cynical thoroughness that the balanced pleasure-anxiety of impersonal relationships functions as a cog in the general machine for destroying people. In the end it seems better to start out right away with a radical and tactically worked-out refusal, rather than going around knocking politely on all the doors where one mode of survival is exchanged for another.

"It would be a shame to die so young", wrote Jacques Vaché two years before his suicide. If desperation at the prospect of surviving does not unite with a new grasp of reality to transform the years to come, only two ways out are left for the isolated man: the pisspot of political parties and pataphysico-religious sects, or immediate death with *Umour*. A sixteen-year-old murderer recently explained: "I did it because I was bored." Anyone who has felt the drive to self-destruction welling up inside him knows with what weary negligence he might one day happen to kill the organisers of his

boredom. One day. If he was in the mood.

After all, if an individual refuses both to adapt to the violence of the world and to embrace the violence of the unadapted, what can he do? If he doesn't raise his desire to achieve unity with the world and with himself to the level of coherent theory and practice, the vast silence of society's open spaces will erect the palace of solipsist madness around him.

From the depths of their prisons those who have been convicted of 'mental illness' add the screams of their strangled revolt to the sum of negativity. What a potential Fourier was consciously destroyed in this patient described by the psychiatrist Volnat: "He began to lose all capacity to distinguish between himself and the external world. Everything that happened in the world also happened in his body. He could not put a bottle between two shelves in a cupboard because the shelves might come together and break the bottle. And that would hurt inside his head, as if his head was wedged between the shelves. He could not shut a suitcase, because pressing the things in the case would press inside his head. If he walked into the street after closing all the doors and windows of his house, he felt uncomfortable, because his brain was compressed by the air, and he had to go back home to open a door or a window. 'For me to be at ease', he said, 'I must have open space . . . . I must have the *freedom of my space.* It's a battle with the *things* all around me'."

The Consul stopped. He read the inscription: *"No se puede vivir sin amar."*

Chapter seventeen

Survival sickness

Capitalism has demystified survival. It has made the poverty of daily life intolerable in view of the increasing wealth of technical possibilities. Survival has become an economising on life. The civilisation of collective survival increases the dead time in individual lives to the point where the death forces are liable to carry the day over collective survival itself. The only hope is that the passion for destruction may be reconverted into a passion for life.

UP UNTIL NOW men have merely complied with a *system* of world-transformation. Today the task is to make the system comply with the transformation of the world.

The organisation of human societies has changed the world, and the world in changing has brought upheaval to the organisation of human societies. But if hierarchical organisation seizes control of nature, while itself undergoing transformation in the course of this struggle, the portion of liberty and creativity falling to the lot of the individual is drained away by the requirements of adaptation to social norms of various kinds. This is true, at any rate, so long as no generalised revolutionary moment occurs.

The time belonging to the individual in history is for the most part dead time. Only a rather recent awakening of consciousness has made this fact intolerable to us. For with its revolution the bourgeoisie does two things. On the one hand, it proves that men *can* accelerate world transformation, and that they *can* improve their individual lives (where improvement is understood in terms of accession to the ruling class, to riches, to capitalist success). But at the same time the bourgeois order nullifies the individual's freedom by interference; it increases the dead time in daily life (imposing the need to produce, consume, calculate); and it capitulates before the haphazard laws of the market, before the inevitable cyclical crises with their

burden of wars and misery, and before the limitations invented by 'common sense' ("You can't change human nature", "The poor will always be with us", etc). The politics of the bourgeoisie, as of the bourgeoisie's socialist heirs, is the politics of a driver pumping the brake with the accelerator jammed fast to the floor: the more his speed increases, the more frenetic, perilous and useless become his attempts to slow down. The helter-skelter pace of consumption is set at once by the rate of the disintegration of Power and by the imminence of the construction of a new order, a new dimension, a parallel universe born of the collapse of the Old World.

The changeover from the aristocratic system of adaptation to the 'democratic' one brutally widened the gap between the passivity of individual submission and the social dynamism that transforms nature — the gap between men's powerlessness and the power of new techniques. The contemplative attitude was perfectly suited to the feudal system, to a virtually motionless world underpinned by eternal gods. But the spirit of submission was hardly compatible with the dynamic vision of merchants, manufacturers, bankers and discoverers of riches — the vision of men acquainted not with the revelation of the immutable, but rather with the shifting economic world, the insatiable hunger for profit and the necessity of constant innovation. Yet wherever the bourgeoisie's action resulted in the popularisation and valuing of the sense of transience, the sense of hope, the bourgeoisie *qua* power sought to *imprison* human beings within this transitoriness. To replace the old theology of stasis the bourgeoisie set up a metaphysics of motion. Although both these ideological systems hinder the movement of reality, the earlier one does so more successfully and more harmoniously than the second: the aristocratic scheme is more consistent, more unified. For to place an ideology of change in the service of what does not change creates a paradox which nothing henceforward can either conceal from consciousness or justify to consciousness. Thus in our universe of expanding technology and comfort we see people turning in upon themselves, shrivelling up, living trivial lives and dying for details. It is a nightmare where we are promised absolute freedom but granted a miserable square inch of individual autonomy — a square inch, moreover, that is strictly policed by our neighbours. A space-time of pettiness and mean thoughts.

Before the bourgeois revolution, the possibility of death in a living God lent everyday life an illusory dimension which aspired to the fullness of a multifaceted reality. You might say that man has never come closer to self-realisation while yet confined to the realm of the inauthentic. But what is one to say of a life lived out in the shadow of a God that is dead — the decomposing God of fragmented power? The bourgeoisie has dispensed with a God by economising on men's lives. It has also made the economic sphere into a sacred imperative and life into an economic system. This is the model that our future programmers are preparing to rationalise, to submit to proper planning — in a word, to 'humanise'. And, never fear, they will be no less irresponsible than the corpse of God.

Kierkegaard describes survival sickness well: "Let others bemoan the maliciousness of their age. What irks me is its pettiness, for ours is an age without passion . . . . My life comes out all one colour." Survival is life reduced to bare essentials, to life's abstract form, to the minimum of activity required to ensure men's participation in production and consumption. The entitlement of a Roman slave was rest and sustenance. As beneficiaries of the Rights of Man we receive the wherewithal to nourish and cultivate ourselves, enough consciousness to play a role, enough initiative to acquire power and enough passivity to flaunt Power's insignia. Our freedom is the freedom to adapt after the fashion of *higher animals*.

Survival is life in slow motion. How much energy it takes to remain on the level of appearances! The media gives wide currency to a whole personal hygiene of survival: avoid strong emotions, watch your blood pressure, eat less, drink in moderation only, survive in good health so that you can continue playing your role. "OVERWORK: THE EXECUTIVE'S DISEASE", ran a recent headline in *Le Monde*. We must be economical with survival for it wears us down; we have to live it as little as possible, for it belongs to death. In former times one died a live death, a death quickened by the presence of God. Today our respect for life prohibits us from touching it, reviving it or snapping it out of its lethargy. We die of inertia, whenever the charge of death that we carry with us reaches saturation point. Where is the scientific institute that could measure the intensity of the deadly radiation that kills our daily actions? In the end, by dint of identifying ourselves with what we are not, of switching from one role to another, from one authority to

another, and from one age to another, how can we avoid ourselves becoming part of that never-ending state of transition which is the process of decomposition?

The presence within life itself of a mysterious yet tangible death so misled Freud that he postulated an ontological curse in the shape of a 'death instinct'. This mistake of Freud's, which Reich had already pointed out, has now been clarified by the phenomenon of consumption. The three aspects of the death instinct — Nirvana, the repetition compulsion and masochism — have turned out to be simply three styles of domination: constraint passively accepted, seduction through conformity to custom, and mediation perceived as an ineluctable law.

As we know, the consumption of goods — which comes down always, in the present state of things, to the consumption of power — carries within itself the seeds of its own destruction and the conditions of its own transcendence. The consumer cannot and must not ever attain satisfaction: the logic of the consumable object demands the creation of fresh needs, yet the accumulation of such false needs exacerbates the malaise of men confined with increasing difficulty solely to the status of consumers. Furthermore, the wealth of consumer goods impoverishes authentic life. It does so in two ways. First, it replaces authentic life with *things*. Secondly, it makes it impossible, with the best will in the world, to become attached to these things, precisely because they have to be *consumed*, ie, destroyed. Whence an absence of life which is ever more frustrating, a self-devouring dissatisfaction. This need to live is ambivalent: it constitutes one of those points where perspective is reversed.

In the consumer's manipulated view of things — the view of conditioning — the lack of life appears as insufficient consumption of power and insufficient self-consumption in the service of power. As a palliative to the absence of real life we are offered death on an instalment plan. A world that condemns us to a bloodless death is naturally obliged to propagate the taste for blood. Where survival sickness reigns, the desire to live lays hold spontaneously of the weapons of death: senseless murder and sadism flourish. For passion destroyed is reborn in the passion for destruction. If these conditions persist, no one will survive the era of survival. Already the despair is so great that many people would go along with Antonin Artaud

saying: "I bear the stigma of an insistent death that strips real death of all terror for me."

The man of survival is inhabited by pleasure-anxiety, by unfulfilment: he is a mutilated man. Where is he to find himself in the endless self-loss into which everything draws him? He is a wanderer in a labyrinth with no centre, a maze full of mazes. His is a world of equivalents. Should he kill himself? Killing oneself, though, implies some sense of resistance: one must possess a value that one can destroy. Where there is nothing, the destructive actions themselves crumble to nothing. You cannot hurl a void into a void. "If only a rock would fall and kill me," wrote Kierkegaard, "at least that would be an expedient." I doubt if there is anyone today who has not been touched by the horror of a thought such as that. Inertia is the surest killer, the inertia of people who settle for senility at eighteen, plunging eight hours a day into degrading work and feeding on ideologies. Beneath the miserable tinsel of the spectacle there are only gaunt figures yearning for, yet dreading, Kierkegaard's 'expedient', so that they might never again have to desire what they dread and dread what they desire.

At the same time the passion for life emerges as a biological need, the reverse side of the passion for destroying and letting oneself be destroyed. "So long as we have not managed to abolish any of the causes of human despair we have no right to try and abolish the means whereby men attempt to get rid of despair." The fact is that men possess both the means to eliminate the causes of despair and the power to mobilise those means. No one has the right to ignore the fact that the sway of conditioning accustoms him to survive on one hundredth of his potential for life. So general is survival sickness that the slightest concentration of lived experience could not fail to unite the largest number of men in a common will to live. The negation of despair would of necessity become the construction of a new life. The rejection of economic logic (which economises only on life) would of necessity entail the death of economics and carry us beyond the realm of survival.

you up?
you think food would taste different
if you ate it underwater? how long you
think magic hour lasts for on neptune?
what do you think cellulite would look
like on fish? can you believe olives are
a fruit? you ever notice that OM is, okay,
yes, the sound of the universe, but also
the sound literally every little kid makes
when speaking into a fan?
you up? you ever think about how
english maybe isn't our first language?
the way I'm sitting right now is my
first language. the way I bring my
hand to your jawline is my first language. the
way I become movement inside
your hands is my first language.
you up? did your mom ever make you
talk to shit? my mom imbued life into
every corner and crumb of my small
world, and now as an adult woman
my heart breaks every time I find
an empty snail shell, or for the worms
on rainy mornings who aren't going
to have enough time to make it to
the other side of the driveway.
you up? you ever feel like when you
fall in love it's just this feeling of
having known someone before,
but also of wanting to find out
how much time you can kill
counting the pockets and handles
you can make together with your
bodies? there's the age-old that goes
love is forgetting about death but
when I'm with you I also
forget about the internet.
you up? how do you arrange your
apps, by the way? what's your
favorite shade of blue? sometimes
when men talk about themselves I
like to imagine I'm transcribing their
monologues in my head and I like
to picture how many page breaks
I have to make. I file them into a mental
folder called *brief interviews with hideous*
men. but with you I would take the things
you say and I would stick them inside a
leaf book. did I ever tell you about the time
a dude asked me to be his scribe for him?
you up? why are people who love
each other still sending each other
heart emojis when there's the shooting
star emoji? the sunset on the horizon emoji?
I want to trace an excel sheet over your
body and share it with you on google
drive. I want to do with you what
night does to the smell of the
ground by morning.

AGAINST ORDINARY LANGUAGE: THE LANGUAGE OF THE BODY

Kathy Acker

Preface Diary

I have now been bodybuilding for ten years, seriously for almost five years.

During the past few years, I have been trying to write about bodybuilding.

Having failed time and time again, upon being offered the opportunity to write this essay, I made the following plan: I would attend the gym as usual. Immediately after each workout, I would describe all I had just experienced, thought and done. Such diary descriptions would provide the raw material.

After each workout, I forgot to write. Repeatedly. I...some part of me... the part of the 'I' who bodybuilds... was rejecting language, any verbal description of the processes of bodybuilding.

I shall begin describing, writing about bodybuilding in the only way that I can: I shall begin by analyzing this rejection of ordinary or verbal

language. What is the picture of the antagonism between bodybuilding and verbal language?

A Language Which is Speechless

Imagine that you are in a foreign country. Since you are going to be in this place for some time, you are trying to learn the language. At the point of commencing to learn the new language, just before having started to understand anything, you begin forgetting your own. Within strangeness, you find yourself without a language.

It is here, in this geography of no language, this negative space, that I can start to describe bodybuilding. For I am describing that which rejects language.

Elias Canetti, who grew up within a multitude of spoken languages, began his autobiography by recounting a memory. In this, his earliest remembrance, the loss of language is threatened: "My earliest memory is dipped in red. I come out of a door on the arm of a maid, the door in front of me is red, and to the left a staircase goes down, equally red..." A smiling man walks up to the child; the child, upon request, sticks out his tongue whereupon the man flips open a jackknife and holds the sharp blade against the red tongue.

"...He says: 'Now we'll cut off his tongue.'"

At the last moment, the man pulls the knife back.

According to memory, this sequence happens every day. "That's how the day starts," Canetti adds, "and it happens very often." [1]

I am in the gym every three out of four days. What happens there? What does language in that place look like?

According to cliché, athletes are stupid. Meaning: they are inarticulate. The spoken language of bodybuilders makes this cliché real. The verbal language in the gym is minimal and almost senseless, reduced to numbers and a few nouns. "Sets", "squats", "reps",... The only verbs are "do" or "fail" adjectives and adverbs no longer exist; sentences, if they are at all, are simple.

This spoken language is kin to the "language games" Wittgenstein proposes in his *The Brown Book*. [2]

In a gym, verbal language or language whose purpose is meaning occurs, if at all, only at the edge of its becoming lost.

But when I am in the gym, my experience is that I am immersed in a complex and rich world.

What actually takes place when I bodybuild?

The crossing of the threshold from the world defined by verbal language into the gym in which the outside world is not allowed (and all of its languages) (in this sense, the gym is sacred) takes several minutes. What happens during these minutes is that I forget. Masses of swirling thought, verbalized insofar as I am conscious of them, disappear as mind or thought begins to focus.

In order to analyze this focusing, I must first describe bodybuilding in terms of intentionality.

Bodybuilding is a process, perhaps a sport, by which a person shapes her or his own body. This shaping is always related to the growth of muscular mass.

During aerobic and circuit training, the heart and lungs are exercised. But muscles will grow only if they are, not exercised or moved, but actually broken down. The general law behind bodybuilding is that muscle, if broken down in a controlled fashion and then provided with the proper growth factors such as nutrients and rest, will grow back larger than before.

In order to break down specific areas of muscles, whatever areas one wants to enlarge, it is necessary to work these areas in isolation up to failure.

Bodybuilding can be seen to be about nothing but *failure*. A bodybuilder is always working around failure. Either I work an isolated muscle mass, for instance one of the tricep heads, up to failure. In order to do this, I exert the muscle group almost until the point that it can no longer move.

But if I work the same muscle group to the point that it can no longer move, I must move it through failure. I am then doing what are named "negative reps", working the muscle group beyond its power to move. Here is the second method of working with failure.

Whatever way I chose, I always want to work my muscle, muscular group, until it can no longer move: I want to fail. As soon as I can accomplish a certain task, so much weight for so many reps during a certain time span, I must always increase one aspect of this equation, weights reps or intensity, so that I can again come to failure.

I want to break muscle so that it can grow back larger, but I do not want to destroy muscle so that growth is prevented. In order to avoid injury, I

first warm up the muscular group, then carefully bring it up to failure. I do this by working the muscular group through a calculated number of sets during a calculated time span. If I tried immediately to bring a muscle group up to failure by lifting the heavist weight I could handle, I might injure myself.

I want to shock my body into growth; I do not want to hurt it.

Therefore, in bodybuilding, *failure* is always connected to counting. I calculate which weight to use; I then count off how many times I lift that weight and the seconds between each lift. This is how I control the intensity of my workout.

Intensity times movement of maximum weight equals muscular destruction (muscular growth).

Is the equation between destruction and growth also a formula for art?

Bodybuilding is about failure because bodybuilding, body growth and shaping, occurs in the face of the material, of the body's inexorable movement toward its final failure, toward death.

To break down a muscle group, I want to make that group work up to, even beyond, capacity. To do this, it helps and even is necessary to visualize the part of the body that is involved. Mind or thought, then, while bodybuilding, is always focused on number or counting and often on precise visualizations.

Certain bodybuilders have said that bodybuilding is a form of meditation.

What do I do when I bodybuild? I visualize and I count. I estimate weight; I count sets; I count repetitions; I count seconds between repetitions; I count time, seconds or minutes, between sets: From the beginning to the end of each workout, in order to maintain intensity, I must continually count.

For this reason, a bodybuilder's language is reduced to a minimal, even a closed, set of nouns and to numerical repetition, to one of the simplest of language games.

Let us name this language game, *the language of the body.*

The Richness Of The Language Of The Body

In order to examine such a language, a language game which resists ordinary language, through the lens of ordinary language or language

whose tendency is to generate syntax or to make meanings proliferate, I must use an indirect route.

In another of his books, Elias Canetti begins talking from and about that geography that is without verbal language:

> A marvelously luminous, viscid substance is left behind in me, defying words...
>
> A dream: a man who unlearns the world's languages until nowhere on earth does he understand what people are saying.[3]

Being in Marrakesh is Canetti's dream made actual. There are languages here, he says, but I understand none of them. The closer I am moving toward foreignness, into strangeness, toward understanding foreignness and strangeness, the more I am losing my own language. The small loss of language occurs when I journey to and into my own body. Is my body a foreign land to me? What is this picture of "my body" and "I"? For years, I said in the beginning of this essay, I have wanted to describe bodybuilding; whenever I tried to do so, ordinary language fled from me.

"Man," Heidegger says, "is the strangest."[4] Why? Because everywhere he or she belongs to being or to strangeness or chaos, and yet everywhere he or she attempts to carve a path through chaos:

> Everywhere man makes himself a path; he ventures into all realms of the essent, of the overpowering power, and in so doing he is flung out of all paths.[5]

The physical or material, that which is, is constantly and unpredictably changing: it is chaotic. This chaos twines around death. For it is death that rejects all of our paths, all of our meanings.

Whenever anyone bodybuilds, he or she is always trying to understand and control the physical in the face of this death. No wonder bodybuilding is centered around failure.

The antithesis between meaning and essence has often been noted. Wittgenstein at the end of the *Tractatus*:

> The sense of the world must lie outside the world. In the world everything is as it is, and everything happens as it does happen—in it no values exist, and if they did, they'd have no value.

> For all that happens and is the case is accidental.[6]

If ordinary language or meanings lie outside essence, what is the position of that language game which I have named *the language of the body?* For bodybuilding (a language of the body) rejects ordinary language and yet itself constitutes a language, a method for understanding and controlling the physical which in this case is also the self.

I can now directly talk about bodybuilding. (As if speech is ever direct.)

The language game named *the language of the body* is not arbitrary. When a bodybuilder is counting, he or she is counting his or her own breath.

Canetti speaks of the beggars of Marrakesh who possess a similar and even simpler language game: they repeat the name of God.

In ordinary language, meaning is contextual. Whereas the cry of the beggar means nothing other than what it is; in the cry of the beggar, the impossible (as the Wittgenstein of the *Tractatus* and Heidegger see it) occurs in that meaning and breath become one.

Here is the language of the body; here, perhaps, is the reason why bodybuilders experience bodybuilding as a form of meditation.

"I understood the seduction there is in a life that reduces everything to the simplest kind of repetition,"[7] Canetti says. A life in which meaning and essence no longer oppose each other. A life of meditation.

"I understood what those blind beggars really are: the saints of repetition..."[8]

The Repetition Of The One: The Glimpse Into Chaos Or Essence

I am in the gym. I am beginning to work out. I either say the name "bench press", then walk over to it, or simply walk over to it. Then, I might picture the number of my first weight; I probably, since I usually begin with the same warm-up weight, just place the appropriate weights on the bar. Lifting this bar off its rests, then down to my lower chest, I count "1". I am visualizing this bar, making sure it touches my chest at the right spot, placing it back on its rests. "2". I repeat the same exact motions. "3"... After twelve repetitions, I count off thirty seconds while increasing my weights. "1".. The identical process begins again only this time I finish at "10"... All these repetitions end only when I finish my work-out.

On counting: Each number equals one inhalation and one exhalation. If I stop my counting or in any other way lose focus, I risk dropping or otherwise mishandling a weight and so damaging my body.

In this world of the continual repetition of a minimal number of elements, in this aural labyrinth, it is easy to lose one's way. When all is repetition rather than the production of meaning, every path resembles every other path.

Every day, in the gym, I repeat the same controlled gestures with the same weights, the same reps,... The same breath patterns. But now and then, wandering within the labyrinths of my body, I come upon something. Something I can know because knowledge depends on difference. An unexpected event. For though I am only repeating certain gestures during certain time spans, my body, being material, is never the same; my body is controlled by change and by chance.

For instance, yesterday, I worked chest. Usually I easily benchpress the bar plus sixty pounds for six reps. Yesterday, unexpectedly, I barely managed to lift this weight at the sixth rep. I looked for a reason. Sleep? Diet? Both were usual. Emotional or work stress? No more than usual. The weather? Not good enough. My unexpected failure at the sixth rep was allowing me to see, as if through a window, not to any outside, but inside my own body, to its workings. I was being permitted to glimpse the laws that control my body, those of change or chance, laws that are barely, if at all, knowable.

By trying to control, to shape, my body through the calculated tools and methods of bodybuilding, and time and again, in following these methods, failing to do so, I am able to meet that which cannot be finally controlled and known: the body.

In this meeting lies the fascination, if not the purpose, of bodybuilding. To come face to face with chaos, with my own failure or a form of death.

Canetti describes the architecture of a typical house in the geographical labyrinth of Marrakesh. The house's insides are cool, dark. Few, if any, windows look out into the street. For the entire construction of this house, windows, etc., is directed inward, to the central courtyard where only openness to the sun exists.

Such an architecture is a mirror of the body: When I reduce verbal language to minimal meaning, to repetition, I close the body's outer windows. Meaning approaches breath as I bodybuild, as I begin to move

through the body's labyrinths, to meet, if only for a second, that which my consciousness ordinarily cannot see. Heidegger: "The being-there of historical man means: to be posited as the breach into which the preponderant power of being bursts in its appearing, in order that this breach itself should shatter against being."[9]

In our culture, we simultaneously fetishize and disdain the athlete, a worker in the body. For we still live under the sign of Descartes. This sign is also the sign of patriarchy. As long as we continue to regard the body, that which is subject to change, chance, and death, as disgusting and inimical, so long shall we continue to regard our own selves as dangerous others.

Notes

1. Elias Canetti, *The Tongue Set Free*, New York: The Seabury Press, 1979, p.5.
2. Here and throughout the rest of this article, whenever I use the phrase "language game", I am referring to Ludwig Wittgenstein's discussion of language games in *The Brown Book*, (Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books*, New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1960).
3. Elias Canetti, *The Voices of Marrakesh*, New York: The Seabury Press, 1978, p.23.
4. Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, New York: Anchor Books, 1961, p. 125. By "man", Heidegger means "human".
5. Ibid., p. 127.
6. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosphicus*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1972, p. 145.
7. Canetti, *The Voices of Marrakesh*, p. 25.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
9. Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 137.

Around

Time is pleased
to draw itself
out,

permit itself
pendulous loops,

to allow them
meaning,

this meaning,

as it goes

along.

*

Chuck and I are pleased
to have found a spot
where my ashes can be scattered.
It looks like a construction site
now
but it's adjacent
to a breathtaking, rocky coast.
Chuck sees places
where he might snorkel.
We're being shown through
by a sort of realtor.
We're interested but can't get her
to fix the price.

*

"The future
is all around us."

It's a place,

anyplace
where we don't exist.

Report from the Bahamas

1982

I am staying in a hotel that calls itself The Sheraton British Colonial. One of the photographs advertising the place displays a middle-aged Black man in a waiter's tuxedo, smiling. What intrigues me most about the picture is just this: while the Black man bears a tray full of "colorful" drinks above his left shoulder, both of his feet, shoes and trouserlegs, up to ten inches above his ankles, stand in the also "colorful" Caribbean salt water. He is so delighted to serve you he will wade into the water to bring you Banana Daquiris while you float! More precisely, he will wade into the water, fully clothed, oblivious to the ruin of his shoes, his trousers, his health, and he will do it with a smile.

I am in the Bahamas. On the phone in my room, a spinning complement of plastic pages offers handy index clues such as CAR RENTAL and CASINOS. A message from the Ministry of Tourism appears among these travellers tips. Opening with a paragraph of "WELCOME," the message then proceeds to "A PAGE OF HISTORY," which reads as follows:

> New World History begins on the same day that modern Bahamian history begins—October 12, 1492. That's when Columbus stepped ashore—British influence came first with the Eleutherian Adventurers of 1647—After the Revolutions, American Loyalists fled from the newly independent states and settled in the Bahamas. Confederate blockade-runners used the island as a haven

during the War between the States, and after the War, a number of Southerners moved to the Bahamas...

There it is again. Something proclaims itself a legitimate history and all it does is track white Mr. Columbus to the British Eleutherians through the Confederate Southerners as they barge into New World surf, land on New World turf, and nobody saying one word about the Bahamian people, the Black peoples, to whom the only thing new in their island world was this weird succession of crude intruders and its colonial consequences.

This is my consciousness of race as I unpack my bathing suit in the Sheraton British Colonial. Neither this hotel nor the British nor the long ago Italians nor the white Delta airline pilots belong here, of course. And every time I look at the photograph of that fool standing in the water with his shoes on I'm about to have a West Indian fit, even though I know he's no fool; he's a middle-aged Black man who needs a job and this is his job—pretending himself a servile ancillary to the pleasures of the rich. (Compared to his options in life, I am a rich woman. Compared to most of the Black Americans arriving for this Easter weekend on a three nights four days' deal of bargain rates, the middleaged waiter is a poor Black man.)

We will jostle along with the other (white) visitors and join them in the tee shirt shops or, laughing together, learn ruthless rules of negotiation as we, Black Americans as well as white, argue down the price of handwoven goods at the nearby straw market while the merchants, frequently toothless Black women seated on the concrete in their only presentable dress, humble themselves to our careless games:

"Yes? You like it? Eight dollar."

"Five."

"I give it to you. Seven."

And so it continues, this weird succession of crude intruders that, now, includes me and my brothers and my sisters from the North.

This is my consciousness of class as I try to decide how much money I can spend on Bahamian gifts for my family back in Brooklyn. No matter that these other Black women incessantly weave words and flowers into the straw hats and bags piled beside them on the burning dusty street. No matter that these other Black women must work their sense of beauty into these things that we will take away as cheaply as we dare, or they will do without food.

We are not white, after all. The budget is limited. And we are harmlessly killing time between the poolside rum punch and "The Native Show on the Patio" that will play tonight outside the hotel restaurant.

This is my consciousness of race and class and gender identity as I notice the fixed relations between these other Black women and myself. They sell and I buy or I don't. They risk not eating. I risk going broke on my first vacation afternoon.

We are not particularly women anymore; we are parties to a transaction designed to set us against each other.

"Olive" is the name of the Black woman who cleans my hotel room. On my way to the beach I am wondering what "Olive" would say if I told her why I chose The Sheraton British Colonial; if I told her I wanted to swim. I wanted to sleep. I did not want to be harassed by the middleaged waiter, or his nephew. I did not want to be raped by anybody (white or Black) at all and I calculated that my safety as a Black woman alone would best be assured by a multinational hotel corporation. In my experience, the big guys take customer complaints more seriously than the little ones. I would suppose that's one reason why they're big; they don't like to lose money anymore than I like to be bothered when I'm trying to read a goddamned book underneath a palm tree I paid $264 to get next to. A Black woman seeking refuge in a multinational corporation may seem like a contradiction to some, but there you are. In this case it's a coincidence of entirely different self-interests: Sheraton/cash = June Jordan's short run safety.

Anyway, I'm pretty sure "Olive" would look at me as though I came from someplace as far away as Brooklyn. Then she'd probably allow herself one indignant query before righteously removing her vacuum cleaner from my room; "and why in the first place you come down you without your husband?"

I cannot imagine how I would begin to answer her.

My "rights" and my "freedom" and my "desire" and a slew of other New World values; what would they sound like to this Black woman described on the card atop my hotel bureau as "Olive the Maid"? "Olive" is older than I am and I may smoke a cigarette while she changes the sheets on my bed. Whose rights? Whose freedom? Whose desire?

And why should she give a shit about mine unless I do something, for real, about hers?

It happens that the book that I finished reading under a palm tree earlier today was the novel, *The Bread Givers*, by Anzia Yezierska. Definitely autobiographical, Yezierska lays out the difficulties of being both female and "a person" inside a traditional Jewish family at the start of the 20th century. That any Jewish woman became anything more than the abused servant of her father or her husband is really an improbable piece of news. Yet Yezierska managed such an unlikely outcome for her own life. In *The Bread Givers*, the heroine also manages an important, although partial, escape from traditional Jewish female destiny. And in the unpardonable, despotic father, the Talmudic scholar of that Jewish family, did I not see my own and hate him twice, again? When the heroine, the young Jewish child, wanders the streets with a filthy pail she borrows to sell herring in order to raise the ghetto rent and when she cries, "Nothing was before me but the hunger in our house, and no bread for the next meal if I didn't sell the herring. No longer like a fire engine, but like a houseful of hungry mouths my heart cried, 'herring—herring! Two cents apiece!'" who would doubt the ease, the sisterhood of conversation possible between that white girl and the Black women selling straw bags on the streets of paradise because they do not want to die? And is it not obvious that the wife of that Talmudic scholar and "Olive," who cleans my room here at the hotel, have more in common than I can claim with either one of them?

This is my consciousness of race and class and gender identity as I collect wet towels, sunglasses, wristwatch, and head towards a shower.

I am thinking about the boy who loaned this novel to me. He's white and he's Jewish and he's pursuing an independent study project with me, at the State University where I teach whether or not I feel like it, where I teach without stint because, like the waiter, I am no fool. It's my job and either I work or I do without everything you need money to buy. The boy loaned me the novel because he thought I'd be interested to know how a Jewish-American writer used English so that the syntax, and therefore the cultural habits of mind expressed by the Yiddish language, could survive translation. He did this because he wanted to create another connection between us on the basis of language, between his knowledge/his love of Yiddish and my knowledge/my love of Black English.

He has been right about the forceful survival of the Yiddish. And I had become excited by this further evidence of the written

voice of spoken language protected from the monodrone of "standard" English, and so we had grown closer on this account. But then our talk shifted to student affairs more generally, and I had learned that this student does not care one way or the other about currently jeopardized Federal Student Loan Programs because, as he explained it to me, they do not affect him. He does not need financial help outside his family. My own son, however, is Black. And I am the only family help available to him and that means, if Reagan succeeds in eliminating Federal programs to aid minority students, he will have to forget about furthering his studies, or he or I or both of us will have to hit the numbers pretty big. For these reasons of difference, the student and I had moved away from each other, even while we continued to talk.

My consciousness turned to race, again, and class.

Sitting in the same chair as the boy, several weeks ago, a graduate student came to discuss her grade. I praised the excellence of her final paper; indeed it had seemed to me an extraordinary pulling together of recent left brain/right brain research with the themes of transcendental poetry.

She told me that, for her part, she'd completed her reading of my political essays. "You are so lucky!" she exclaimed.

"What do you mean by that?"

"You have a cause. You have a purpose to your life."

I looked carefully at this white woman; what was she really saying to me?

"What do you mean?" I repeated.

"Poverty. Police violence. Discrimination in general."

(Jesus Christ, I thought: Is that her idea of lucky?)

"And how about you?" I asked.

"Me?"

"Yeah, you. Don't you have a cause?"

"Me? I'm just a middle aged woman: a housewife and a mother. I'm a nobody."

For a while, I made no response.

First of all, speaking of race and class and gender in one breath, what she said meant that those lucky preoccupations of mine, from police violence to nuclear wipe-out, were not shared. They were mine and not hers. But here she sat, friendly as an old stuffed animal, beaming good will or more "luck" in my direction.

In the second place, what this white woman said to me meant that she did not believe she was "a person" precisely because she

had fulfilled the traditional female functions revered by the father of that Jewish immigrant, Anzia Yezierska. And the woman in front of me was not a Jew. That was not the connection. The link was strictly female. Nevertheless, how should that woman and I, another female connect, beyond this bizarre exchange?

If she believed me lucky to have regular hurdles of discrimination then why shouldn't I insist that she's lucky to be a middle class white Wasp female who lives in such well-sanctioned and normative comfort that she even has the luxury to deny the power of the privileges that paralyze her life?

If she deserts me and "my cause" where we differ, if, for example, she abandons me to "my" problems of race, then why should I support her in "her" problems of housewifely oblivion?

Recollection of this peculiar moment brings me to the shower in the bathroom cleaned by "Olive." She reminds me of the usual Women's Studies curriculum because it has nothing to do with her or her job: you won't find "Olive" listed anywhere on the reading list. You will likewise seldom hear of Anzia Yezierska. But yes, you will find, from Florence Nightingale to Adrienne Rich, a white procession of independently well-to-do women writers. (Gertrude Stein/Virginia Woolf/Hilda Doolittle are standard names among the "essential" women writers).

In other words, most of the women of the world—Black and First World and white who work because we must—most of the women of the world persist far from the heart of the usual Women's Studies syllabus.

Similarly, the typical Black History course will slide by the majority experience it pretends to represent. For example, Mary McLeod Bethune will scarcely receive as much attention as Nat Turner, even though Black women who bravely and efficiently provided for the education of Black people hugely outnumber those few Black men who led successful or doomed rebellions against slavery. In fact, Mary McLeod Bethune may not receive even honorable mention because Black History too often apes those ridiculous white history courses which produce such dangerous gibberish as The Sheraton British Colonial "history" of the Bahamas. Both Black and white history courses exclude from their central consideration those people who neither killed nor conquered anyone as the means to new identity, those people who took care of every one of the people who wanted to become "a person," those people who still take care of the life at issue: the ones who wash and who feed and who teach and who diligently

decorate straw hats and bags with all of their historically unrequired gentle love: the women.

Oh the old rugged cross
on a hill far away
Well I cherish the old rugged cross

It's Good Friday in the Bahamas. Seventy-eight degrees in the shade. Except for Sheraton territory, everything's closed.

It so happens that for truly secular reasons I've been fasting for three days. My hunger has now reached nearly violent proportions. In the hotel sandwich shop, the Black woman handling the counter complains about the tourists; why isn't the shop closed and why don't the tourists stop eating for once in their lives. I'm famished and I order chicken salad and cottage cheese and lettuce and tomato and a hard boiled egg and a hot cross bun and apple juice.

She eyes me with disgust.

To be sure, the timing of my stomach offends her serious religious practices. Neither one of us apologizes to the other. She seasons the chicken salad to the peppery max while I listen to the loud radio gospel she plays to console herself. It's a country Black version of "The Old Rugged Cross."

As I heave much chicken into my mouth tears start. It's not the pepper. I am, after all, a West Indian daughter. It's the Good Friday music that dominates the humid atmosphere.

Well I cherish the old rugged cross

And I am back, faster than a 747, in Brooklyn, in the home of my parents where we are wondering, as we do every year, if the sky will darken until Christ has been buried in the tomb. The sky should darken if God is in His heavens. And then, around 3 p.m., at the conclusion of our mournful church service at the neighborhood St. Phillips, and even while we dumbly stare at the black cloth covering the gold altar and the slender unlit candles, the sun should return through the high gothic windows and vindicate our waiting faith that the Lord will rise again, on Easter.

How I used to bow my head at the very name of Jesus: ecstatic to abase myself in deference to His majesty.

My mouth is full of salad. I can't seem to eat quickly enough. I can't think how I should lessen the offense of my appetite. The other Black woman on the premises, the one who disapprovingly prepared this very tasty break from my fast, makes no remark. She is no fool. This is a job that she needs. I suppose she notices that at

least I included a hot cross bun among my edibles. That's something in my favor. I decide that's enough.

I am suddenly eager to walk off the food. Up a fairly steep hill I walk without hurrying. Through the pastel desolation of the little town, the road brings me to a confectionary pink and white plantation house. At the gates, an unnecessarily large statue of Christopher Columbus faces me down, or tries to. His hand is fisted to one hip. I look back at him, laugh without deference, and turn left.

It's time to pack it up. Catch my plane. I scan the hotel room for things not to forget. There's that white report card on the bureau.

"Dear Guests:" it says, under the name "Olive." I am your maid for the day. Please rate me: Excellent. Good. Average. Poor. Thank you."

I tuck this momento from the Sheraton British Colonial into my notebook. How would "Olive" rate *me*? What would it mean for us to seem "good" to each other? What would that rating require?

But I am hastening to leave. Neither turtle soup nor kidney pie nor any conch shell delight shall delay my departure. I have rested, here, in the Bahamas, and I'm ready to return to my usual job, my usual work. But the skin on my body has changed and so has my mind. On the Delta flight home I realize I am burning up, indeed.

So far as I can see, the usual race and class concepts of connection, or gender assumptions of unity, do not apply very well. I doubt that they ever did. Otherwise why would Black folks forever bemoan our lack of solidarity when the deal turns real. And if unity on the basis of sexual oppression is something natural, then why do we women, the majority people on the planet, still have a problem?

The plane's ready for takeoff. I fasten my seatbelt and let the tumult inside my head run free. Yes: race and class and gender remain as real as the weather. But what they must mean about the contact between two individuals is less obvious and, like the weather, not predictable.

And when these factors of race and class and gender absolutely collapse is whenever you try to use them as automatic concepts of connection. They may serve well as indicators of commonly felt conflict, but as elements of connection they seem about as reliable as precipitation probability for the day after the night before the day.

It occurs to me that much organizational grief could be avoided if people understood that partnership in misery does not necessarily provide for partnership for change: *When we get the monsters off our backs all of us may want to run in very different directions.*

And not only that: even though both "Olive" and "I" live inside a conflict neither one of us created, and even though both of us therefore hurt inside that conflict, I may be one of the monsters she needs to eliminate from her universe and, in a sense, she may be one of the monsters in mine.

I am reaching for the words to describe the difference between a common identity that has been imposed and the individual identity any one of us will choose, once she gains that chance.

That difference is the one that keeps us stupid in the face of new, specific information about somebody else with whom we are supposed to have a connection because a third party, hostile to both of us, has worked it so that the two of us, like it or not, share a common enemy. *What happens beyond the idea of that enemy and beyond the consequences of that enemy?*

I am saying that the ultimate connection cannot be the enemy. The ultimate connection must be the need that we find between us. It is not only who you are, in other words, but what we can do for each other that will determine the connection.

I am flying back to my job. I have been teaching contemporary women's poetry this semester. One quandary I have set myself to explore with my students is the one of taking responsibility without power. We had been wrestling ideas to the floor for several sessions when a young Black woman, a South African, asked me for help, after class.

Sokutu told me she was "in a trance" and that she'd been unable to eat for two weeks.

"What's going on?" I asked her, even as my eyes startled at her trembling and emaciated appearance.

"My husband. He drinks all the time. He beats me up. I go to the hospital. I can't eat. I don't know what/anything."

In my office, she described her situation. I did not dare to let her sense my fear and horror. She was dragging about, hour by hour, in dread. Her husband, a young Black South African, was drinking himself into more and more deadly violence against her.

Sokutu told me how she could keep nothing down. She weighed 90 lbs. at the outside, as she spoke to me. She'd already been hospitalized as a result of her husband's battering rage.

I knew both of them because I had organized a campus group to aid the liberation struggles of Southern Africa.

Nausea rose in my throat. What about this presumable connection: this husband and this wife fled from that homeland of hatred against them, and now what? He was destroying himself. If not stopped, he would certainly murder his wife.

She needed a doctor, right away. It was a medical emergency. She needed protection. It was a security crisis. She needed refuge for battered wives and personal therapy and legal counsel. She needed a friend.

I got on the phone and called every number in the campus directory that I could imagine might prove helpful. Nothing worked. There were no institutional resources designed to meet her enormous, multifaceted, and ordinary woman's need.

I called various students. I asked the Chairperson of the English Department for advice. I asked everyone for help.

Finally, another one of my students, Cathy, a young Irish woman active in campus IRA activities, responded. She asked for further details. I gave them to her.

"Her husband," Cathy told me, "is an alcoholic. You have to understand about alcoholics. It's not the same as anything else. And it's a disease you can't treat any old way.

I listened, fearfully. Did this mean there was nothing we could do?

"That's not what I'm saying," she said. "But you have to keep the alcoholic part of the thing central in everybody's mind, otherwise her husband will kill her. Or he'll kill himself."

She spoke calmly, I felt there was nothing to do but to assume she knew what she was talking about.

"Will you come with me?" I asked her, after a silence. "Will you come with me and help us figure out what to do next?"

Cathy said she would but that she felt shy: Sokutu comes from South Africa. What would she think about Cathy?

"I don't know," I said. "But let's go."

We left to find a dormitory room for the young battered wife.

It was late, now, and dark outside.

On Cathy's VW that I followed behind with my own car, was the sticker that reads BOBBY SANDS FREE AT LAST. My eyes blurred as I read and reread the words. This was another connection: Bobby Sands and Martin Luther King Jr. and who would believe it? I would not have believed it; I grew up terrorized by Irish kids who introduced me to the word "nigga."

And here I was following an Irish woman to the room of a Black South African. We were going to that room to try to save a life together.

When we reached the little room, we found ourselves awkward and large. Sokutu attempted to treat us with utmost courtesy, as though we were honored guests. She seemed surprised by Cathy, but mostly Sokutu was flushed with relief and joy because we were there, with her.

I did not know how we should ever terminate her heartfelt courtesies and address, directly, the reason for our visit: her starvation and her extreme physical danger.

Finally, Cathy sat on the floor and reached out her hands to Sokutu.

"I'm here," she said quietly, "Because June has told me what has happened to you. And I know what it is. Your husband is an alcoholic. He has a disease. I know what it is. My father was an alcoholic. He killed himself. He almost killed my mother. I want to be your friend."

"Oh," was the only small sound that escaped from Sokutu's mouth. And then she embraced the other student. And then everything changed and I watched all of this happen so I know that this happened: this connection.

And after we called the police and exchanged phone numbers and plans were made for the night and for the next morning, the young South African woman walked down the dormitory hallway, saying goodbye and saying thank you to us.

I walked behind them, the young Irish woman and the young South African, and I saw them walking as sisters walk, hugging each other, and whispering and sure of each other and I felt how it was not who they were but what they both know and what they were both preparing to do about what they know that was going to make them both free at last.

And I look out the windows of the plane and I see clouds that will not kill me and I know that someday soon other clouds may erupt to kill us all.

And I tell the stewardess No thanks to the cocktails she offers me. But I look about the cabin at the hundred strangers drinking as they fly and I think even here and even now I must make the connection real between me and these strangers everywhere before those other clouds unify this ragged bunch of us, too late.

Carla Bergman & Nick Montgomery
Joyful Militancy (2017)

Rebecca Brown
The Gift of Skin & The Gift of Death (1994)

Lola Olufemi
Feminism, Interrupted: Disrupting Power (2020)

Bhanu Kapil
Humanimal: A Project for Future Children (2009)

Raoul Vaneigem
Humiliation & Isolation & Survival Sickness (1967)

Kathy Acker
Against Ordinary Language: The Language of
the Body (1993)

June Jordan
Report from the Bahamas (1982)

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Zoe Leonard
I Want a President (1992)

Etel Adnan
There (1997)

Akasha (Gloria) Hull
Poem (1979)

Nawal El Saadawi
Write my daughter so that
you may live (ND)

Tania De Rozario
What You Are (2013)

Rachelle Toarmino
You Up? (2016)

Rae Armantrout
Around (2009)