

SUMMER 2022

FEMINIST SPACES



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Cover Image, *Origin of the Family* by Joan Cox
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Feminist Spaces is an international journal of women’s, gender, and sexuality studies that invites students, faculty, artists, activists, and independent scholars from institutions worldwide to submit formal essays, creative writing, and multimodal artistic pieces per our annual Call for Works. The online journal is published by the Department of English at the University of West Florida and designed by the Department of Art and Design at the University of West Florida.

Editors-in-Chief

Dakota Parks
Natalie Duphiney
Kimiko Wadriski Lumsden
Cat Lysek
Lizzie Partington

Editorial Board

Grace Thompson
Juliette Lysek
Sydney Mosley-Dancy
Eve Knight

Design and Layout

Megan Haytack
Rachel Howard
Chullain Norris

Advisors

Dr. Robin Blyn
John Dougherty



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A Letter from the Editors

Dear Readers,

On Friday, June 24, 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court overruled *Roe v. Wade* and *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, the court cases that upheld the constitutional right to choose abortion. To the Court, women do not have a right to their own bodies and, instead, are at the whim of the states. In light of *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, we at *Feminist Spaces* are reminded that the work that we and our contributors do for feminism is ever important. Because this recent redaction of reproductive rights has been on our minds, this year's issue critiques and discusses motherhood, pregnancy, and sexuality and their effects on oppressed individuals. The fight for reproductive freedom retains relevance not only to people in America but also to feminists everywhere. The overturning of *Roe v. Wade* might affect Americans directly; however, challenged bodily autonomy, restricted health access, and archaic views of motherhood are not exclusive to the United States. In this issue, we present international works that tackle these topics, including Tallulah Costa's essay "Women of the Surveillance State," a discussion of anti-abortion surveillance and women's loss of privacy and Sasan Meftahi's artwork *The Body Has Been Looted*, a visual challenge to the societal condemnation of motherhood in Iranian culture.

This year, we received triple the number of submissions than what we have received in the past. We are especially grateful to our international readers and contributors for allowing us to maintain the worldwide scope of our journal. We value and recognize those voices of global feminists and womanists and hope to hold this space for all critical thinkers and marginalized people to analyze and/or critique the social implications of gender, race, ethnicity, ability, and class. *Feminist Spaces* values this inclusivity, and without these writers and artists, we would be unable to expound upon or elucidate feminist issues such as the underrepresentation of asexuality as discussed in Maria Markiewicz's "Is Sex Dead?"

We owe a huge thanks to the University of West Florida's Department of English. In particular, we would like to express our appreciation for the department chair Dr. Kevin Scott for his continued support in our creation of the second annual issue after *Feminist Space's* hiatus. We would also like to thank our advisor Dr. Robin Blyn for her dedicated and thoughtful guidance, the TAG Design Team for their creative journal design, and Emily Nye for her assistance copyediting.

Although much of this issue considers the complexity of motherhood, you will also find essays and art pieces that highlight feminism's diversity, including a discussion of the liberation and expression of black women through Nina Paley's and Beyoncé's uses of blues music and visual media. The media-exacerbated expectation for women to appeal to the sexual preferences of white men increases with the frequent distribution of internet content, and included in this issue is a visual exemplification of this male gaze and a deconstruction of pornography's expectations of female sexuality through film. On our cover, you will find a painting by

Joan Cox that explores female sexuality and sapphic intimacy. We hope you will enjoy browsing this issue and will consider submitting work of your own in support of future *Feminist Spaces* issues.

If you wish to contribute or just want to stay up to date with our latest publications, you can follow us on Instagram [@feminist.spaces](#). You can also keep in touch with us through email (feministspacesjournal@gmail.com) or by checking out [our website](#).

Thanks for reading,

Feminist Spaces Editorial Board



Editorial Board Biographies

Dakota Parks is a queer poet, freelance writer, and amateur book hoarder. She holds a Master of Arts in English with a specialization in creative writing from the University of West Florida. In 2020, she helped revive *Feminist Spaces* after its four-year publishing hiatus, and she has served on the editorial board for the literary magazine, *Troubadour*, as well as the president of the English honor society Sigma Tau Delta. Recently her poetry appeared in *Someone Waits for Me*, an LGBT-focused documentary screening at film festivals across the nation, *Emerald Coast Review*, and *Sinister Wisdom* (forthcoming). She currently resides in Pensacola, FL in an RV-turned-tiny-home with her attack cat and personal library on wheels. You can browse more of her work at dakotaparks.org.

Natalie Duphiney is a graduate student at the University of West Florida. She is pursuing her Master of Arts in English. She frequently writes poetry and is working on a novel, but her interests also include photography and piano. She works as an English writing tutor and hopes to, one day, become an English professor to share with her students how writing can give anyone a voice with which to explore and create.

Kimiko Wadriski Lumsden is pursuing an M.A. in English at the University of West Florida. Kimiko is currently the Managing Editor for *Panhandler Magazine* and has worked as a freelance writer and editor for over a decade. Her current interests include representations of identity, Biblical hermeneutics, trauma and memory, folklore, and children's

literature. She is currently working on a collection of short essays on generational memory and identity as well as writing children's books.

Cat Lysek is pursuing an M.A. in English with a specialization in literature at the University of West Florida. She works for USO Northwest Florida, a non-profit that provides a home away from home experience for service members. She is an active member of Sigma Tau Delta and a contributing artist to the curated student conference "Citizen: Rhetoric, Response, and Representation" at the Pensacola Museum of Art. Her research interests include mental health support and resources for service members, composition studies, and rhetoric studies.

Lizzie Partington is pursuing a B.A. in English with a specialization in creative writing and a minor in art at the University of West Florida. She writes poetry and short stories but also enjoys painting and jewelry making. Her interests include feminist and queer theory, gender studies, and running her Etsy/Instagram business @bashful.alien, where she sells handmade jewelry, paintings, and resin art. She is also a member of Sigma Tau Delta, an English honor society. She currently resides in Germany with her husband and collection of artisanal gnomes.

Eve Knight is a junior at the University of West Florida majoring in psychology with a minor in creative writing. She is set to graduate in 2023. She is very passionate about speaking out against oppression and making minority voices heard. Being raised in a household that greatly valued education, she is determined to make the stories of those with no voices heard.

Grace Thompson is an undergraduate student pursuing a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at the University of West Florida. She creates art with underlying themes of nature and spirituality and how it relates to females. She is interested in gender studies and sexuality. She shares her art via Instagram at @lauragrace.arts and local art markets. In her spare time she enjoys hiking and exploring the outdoors, reading and traveling, and of course, painting. Grace plans to pursue a Master of Fine Arts to continue learning, strengthen her skills and to teach at the college level.

Juliette Lysek is a rising sophomore pursuing a bachelor's degree in psychology at the University of West Florida. She was inspired to join the journal after taking a women's studies course at the university and by her interest in researching women's health services in the Pensacola area. She is an active member of the Theta Epsilon chapter of the Kappa Delta sorority, and her academic interests include the human brain, specifically Alzheimer's research, the history of American medicine, and the study of women's healthcare across their lifetime.

Sydney Mosley-Dancy is an undergraduate student studying creative writing and English studies at the University of West Florida. She has been accepted to UWF's Master of Arts program for creative writing, and has the intention of pursuing a PhD in her future. Sydney has a passion for writing and enjoys many mediums such as poetry, long-form prose, and creative nonfiction. As a feminist and lover of the arts, Sydney hopes to create a career path in which she can combine both teaching and writing. Outside of editing, writing, and reading, you can find Sydney cooking, gardening, or taking her dog, Maple, for a hike.



Women of the Surveillance State

A Last Cry for Reproductive Freedom

Tallulah Costa

Pregnant and abortion-seeking people, who are disproportionately women, have been and continue to be under government surveillance without their consent or knowledge. The federal government, state actors, and other anti-choice entities have used several different justifications for this disregard of privacy. Examples include “fetus protection,” “child protection,” and “women’s health.” In the last decade, technological advances have made it possible for the government and other entities, such as Crisis Pregnancy Centers (CPCs), to monitor if pregnant people carry their pregnancies to term and target them if they seek abortions or act in any way perceived as harmful towards the fetus. In addition, pregnant people who have unintentionally miscarried have been increasingly prosecuted under child or fetus endangerment laws and subsequently charged. Under the reproductive justice framework, the right to procreate is essentially intertwined with the right to abortion, and both are critical to reproductive liberation and freedom for all, regardless of gender. When women lose the right to abortion and to procreate, they lose their constitutional right to privacy and bodily autonomy. Considering the current ideological makeup of the United States Supreme Court, one that favors far-right, conservative textualist and originalist interpretations of the law, reproductive freedom advocates have been justifiably concerned. As of June 24th, 2022, the

repealed-Roe reality that advocates have been fearfully expecting is here. *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization* (2022) has undone decades of precedent, directly overturning both *Roe v. Wade* (1973), *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* (1992), and thus the constitutional right to abortion, handing the power to restrict and prohibit abortion to the states.¹ With the overturning of *Roe*, the digital surveillance of pregnant and abortion-seeking people will only expand. With the compliance of CPCs (which collect private information but are not legally bound to confidentiality) and medical providers, disclosure of confidential patient information to law enforcement will only become more common than it already is. As states quickly formalize the criminalization of abortion with their new clearance from the Supreme Court, it is only a matter of time before the State and other anti-abortion entities begin to utilize surveillance to locate, arrest, and prosecute those seeking abortions. Unregulated, non-consensual surveillance conducted by private and governmental actors ultimately works to control women’s bodily autonomy, infringes upon their constitutional right to privacy, and endangers their health.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) was from the beginning, and continues to be, the sole federal government agency responsible for compiling and publishing abortion data from the United States.² In 1969, prior to *Roe*’s legalization of abortion, the CDC initiated a national abortion surveillance system “with the original intent of monitoring the safety of abortion.”³ The CDC “obtains its data through a voluntary federal-state partnership,”⁴ where individual state governments are responsible for collecting data and passing the information to the federal government. Thus, states hold the ultimate power to influence the quality and quantity of national, government-generated pregnancy and abortion data. As more states moved to legalize abortion during the

late 1960s, some legislatures began to distinguish between “spontaneous and induced termination of pregnancy”⁵ in their reports, while others continued to record any termination of pregnancy, regardless of context, as a “fetal death.” When the Supreme Court handed down its decision on the landmark case of *Roe v. Wade* (1973), legalizing abortion, the National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS), a part of the CDC, expanded its efforts to collect abortion data. To this day, the CDC’s abortion surveillance system, which relies on state-reported aggregate data, remains the singular federal source of abortion data. On the state level, reporting requirements vary due to controversy. The question has become whether induced abortions should be considered “reportable events paralleling births, deaths and fetal deaths,” or as “health events to be monitored.”⁷ Several reporting policies have been legally challenged, and two were argued before the Supreme Court. In *Planned Parenthood of Central Missouri v. Danforth* (1976), the Supreme Court upheld a Missouri law that required “all health facilities and physicians report all abortions to the health departments” because such recordkeeping and reporting requirements are in the interest of preserving “maternal health.”⁸ The states of Hawaii, New York, Rhode Island, and Virginia collect abortion data as an obligation under broader fetal death reporting statutes rather than under abortion-specific legislation. Colorado’s vital statistics agency, however, collects abortion data under its death certification statute “which does not single out fetal death or abortion.”⁹ The United States’ Standard Report of Induced Termination of Pregnancy serves as a template for many states. The report requires “baseline data” like the facility where the abortion took place, the patient’s demographic information (age, marital status, race, general education level, and place of residence), medical information on the patient (number and results of previous pregnancies), and information on the procedure

itself, including the names of attending physicians.¹⁰ However, many states choose to go beyond the standard form and require more information. For example, some states solicit information about the fetus itself, “such as fetal viability, abnormality, length or weight.”¹¹ Several states even ask the reason or justification for the abortion, and others inquire about the patient’s contraceptive history. All of this data is collected and streamlined into the state and federal governments’ records, serving as a complete legalized surveillance system of pregnant and abortion-seeking people.

As of 2020, when *Roe* still stood, there existed approximately 1,000 enacted U.S. state policies restricting abortion,¹² and a multitude of these laws involve surveillance and social control mechanisms. Researchers Doan and Schwarz find in their study, “Father Knows Best: ‘Protecting’ Women through State Surveillance and Social Control in Anti-Abortion Policy,” that of the 727 anti-abortion measures contained in state legislation around the country passed between 2010 and 2015, “622 incorporate surveillance.”¹³ Doan and Schwarz reference a range of practices as surveillance of reproductive health and rights, such as “screening processes for cervical cancer, contraception and fetal monitoring, transnational surrogacy, assisted reproductive technology, and racial disparities in reproductive technologies.”¹⁴ Furthermore, as women receive more information regarding their reproductive health, they become subject to “an increasingly complex set of ‘problems’ and ‘solutions,’ which invite more medical interventions.”¹⁵ For example, Doan and Schwarz cite Wilson Lowry’s discussion of fetal-monitoring devices and genetic testing. They identify two layers of surveillance pregnant women uniquely experience:¹⁶ the first being “medicalized technologies” which facilitate the gaining of information regarding fetal health, and the second being “scrutiny and self-management” which facilitate an

expected performance of motherhood that centers the life of the fetus. Thus, information which creates a personified view of the fetus assists in the “pro-life” ideology that scrutinizes and shames so many women. To challenge these practices of surveillance is to challenge “the implicit assumption” that women require more information concerning their reproductive health “because they are weaker or more vulnerable.”¹⁷ This is a norm and assumption through which the anti-abortion State benefits. State governments appear unafraid to blatantly connect anti-abortion measures and forms of reproductive surveillance within the same laws. It is critical to understand that the government is determined to surveil not only those who wish to terminate their pregnancies but also those who seek to carry them out. The government and the courts have previously and continue to establish themselves as the determining authorities on who may be a mother. Further, they have permitted and even endorsed the punishment of such “unfit” women through involuntary sterilization (*Buck v. Bell*, 1927). Overwhelmingly, it is women of color and low-income women deemed “unfit” by the State, thus subjecting their pregnancies to a higher level of scrutiny by the medical authority. Doan and Schwarz emphasize that while most laws today regarding the criminalization of pregnancies are race-neutral on their face, they “emanate from implicit associations between race, gender, poverty, and drug use.”¹⁸ Despite recent medical studies proving there are “no significant differences between [...] cocaine-exposed children and the controls,” and that “poverty is a more powerful influence on the outcome of inner-city children than gestational exposure to crack cocaine,”¹⁹ certain state governments persistently work to track and prosecute pregnant individuals under fetal and/or child endangerment legislation for drug abuses, even if they attempt to seek or are undergoing treatment. While some progress has been made through

cases like *Ferguson v. City of Charleston* (2001), hospitals can still administer selective drug screens on newborns, “specifically for the purpose of collecting evidence of prenatal misconduct for law enforcement,” and not be in violation of *Ferguson*. Furthermore, though these policies were initially created to prosecute pregnant drug users, they have subsequently been utilized to “prosecute pregnant people who survive suicide attempts, who are found to be at fault for miscarriage or stillbirth, or who induce (or are suspected to have induced) abortion.”²⁰

Women are not only subject to surveillance during and after pregnancy but also when experiencing typical menstruation. It was recently found that the Director of the Missouri Department of Health and Senior Services had created a “spreadsheet tracking the menstrual cycles of patients to the state’s only abortion clinic.”²¹ Allegedly, the report was made at the Director’s request to “help identify patients who had undergone failed abortions.”²² The Department then proceeded to, reportedly, calculate the date of the last menstrual period of each patient. In a similar vein, it was recently discovered that the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, responsible for unaccompanied migrant children in the U.S., was tracking the menstrual cycles and pregnancies of migrant girls.²³ The Office then subsequently sent pregnant migrants seeking abortion care to counseling at CPCs which neither provided abortions nor promoted the use of contraceptives.²⁴ Moreover, the Office even had an internally approved list of CPCs that pregnant migrants could be sent to, developed by the anti-abortion organization Heartbeat International.

While the U.S. government already extensively surveils those seeking and carrying out abortions, pregnancy, and menstruation, there are other, more inconspicuous forms of surveillance occurring every day by private entities. CPCs, which advertise themselves as health and medical

care clinics, are actually organizations that target pregnant people and provide misinformation and biased counseling regarding abortion. Healthcare providers in the United States are subject to the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA), a law that demands physician-patient confidentiality. However, because the vast majority of CPCs do not actually provide healthcare, they are not legally obligated to keep such private information confidential. A 2021 study conducted by The Alliance, a coalition of law and policy organizations focused on gender equality, found that underqualified employees often staff these organizations, with only 16 percent of 607 CPCs sampled from nine states (Alaska, California, Idaho, Minnesota, Montana, New Mexico, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and Washington) indicating a physician was affiliated with their staff.²⁵ Oftentimes, anti-abortion CPCs are directly affiliated with religious umbrella organizations like Heartbeat International, a Catholic organization, or regional right-wing organizations. Umbrella organizations like Care Net, National Institute of Family and Life Advocates, and Heartbeat International have created a global network to advance anti-abortion infrastructure²⁶ — Heartbeat International alone has over 2,000 affiliates in 50 countries.²⁷ In addition to receiving support and funds from their larger private networks, CPCs have also received a striking amount of public money. Recent data shows that “at least 14 states directly fund CPCs,” whether it be through state grant programs or state CPC contracts. Minnesota, for example, has consistently invested in CPCs for over 15 years despite never conducting “a comprehensive assessment of their services, practices, or use of taxpayer dollars.”²⁸ CPCs, with little oversight and increasing support from wealthy religious networks and the government alike, are now becoming key in the battle to surveil abortion-seeking and pregnant people. An urgent brief published by *The Alliance* in

February of 2022 outlines new and extreme measures taken by states to aid CPCs in targeting and surveilling vulnerable groups. Legislation that requires those seeking an abortion to consult with CPCs first has been introduced in multiple states, with one of these bills — titled the “Every Mother Matters Act” (EMMA) — already passed in Arkansas. Texas has introduced a similar bill, with the addition that when pregnant people go to a CPC, they must be assigned a “unique identifying number” that is then added to their medical record and “tracked in a database maintained by the state.”²⁹ Further, *The Alliance’s* 2021 report on CPCs found that Heartbeat International has been “collecting client data through a content management system called Next Level.”³⁰ Among other information, the system collects clients’ names, addresses, ethnicity, marital status, income source, alcohol/cigarette/drug intake, medications, STI history, pregnancy history, medical testing information, and even ultrasound photos. Heartbeat International also solicits client data through an affiliated online chat service, Option Line, designed to provide misinformation about abortions and collect data on participants. Only after a person enters their demographic and location information, as well as if they are considering an abortion, does the chat begin. According to the report, it still remains unclear where the data gathered during the chat is sent, but “Option Line’s terms of service state that client information can be used ‘for any and all purposes [believed to be] appropriate to the mission and vision of Option Line.’”³¹ Clearly, the CPC industry has an extensive, unregulated system of surveillance to track pregnant people, which is often supported and even funded by the State. Furthermore, as the report concludes, CPCs are now perfectly positioned to “feed their data” not only to the government, but “to vigilante anti-abortion bounty hunters anywhere in the country,” a sobering thought considering Texas’s six-week abortion ban that allows

private citizens to “sue anyone who ‘aids or abets’ [a person] to obtain a banned abortion and receive at least \$10,000 in compensation.”³²

Surveillance has additionally been imposed on those who are not engaging with CPCs at all, but rather entering legitimate reproductive healthcare clinics and facilities. A report published by the UK charity organization Privacy International (PI), which works to promote the right to privacy on an international scale, found that anti-abortion entities have been using geofencing “to delay or curtail access to reproductive healthcare.”³³ Geofencing is defined as “the creation of a virtual boundary around an area that allows software to trigger a response or alert when a mobile phone enters or leaves.” Geofencing technology “can allow a person’s phone³⁴ to be tagged and then for targeted ads to be sent directly to a person’s phone.” PI found that in 2016, a marketing company was promoting such technology and advertised that it could send ads directly to the devices of people within and around sexual and reproductive health clinics. It was additionally reported that the technology could share the data it collected with anti-abortion organizations. Clients of the marketing company have allegedly included RealOptions, an organization now merged with other anti-abortion groups, which had served as a network of CPCs in California.³⁵ The geofencing system was actually deployed “around reproductive health centers and methadone clinics”³⁶ in New York, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Ohio, and Missouri. Much of these surveillance practices remain unregulated, although Massachusetts has argued that a geofencing system violated the state’s Consumer Protection Act because it “covertly tracked people and disclosed sensitive information to third-party advertisers.” With the increasing criminalization of abortion in states across the country as a result of the 2022 *Dobbs* ruling, such information collected through geofencing will likely be used to prosecute abortion-seeking individuals.

Under this heightened state of surveillance, most women as “people who are or who could become pregnant” are subject to a lesser standard of medical and privacy rights.³⁷ In the eyes of anti-woman legislators and actors, this revocation of autonomy is justifiable for several reasons; however, the personification of the fetus arises as the primary motive. Scholars of reproductive technology such as Rosalind Petchesky, Emily Martin, Carol Stabile, and Janelle S. Taylor have continued to argue that obstetric ultrasound technology has developed a “cult of the public fetus.”³⁸ Through imaging and technology, a surveillance of the body, the fetus “becomes a fetishized figure,” already considered an autonomous “patient.”³⁹ In a visual separation of mother and fetus, women are reduced to “passive reproducing machines.”⁴⁰ The personification of the fetus thus leads to the dehumanization of the mother. It is then expected that pregnant women will act in a socially acceptable way that centers the fetus’s life, and surveillance is used to monitor such actions.

The surveillance state works in tandem with medical professionals and criminal law enforcement, ready to punish women for actions taken while pregnant, “or assumed pregnant,” with the purpose of “protecting” the fetus.⁴¹ The criminal act, as mentioned previously, may be taking drugs while pregnant, which contradicts “the construction of women as inherently maternal, selfless figures who would sacrifice anything for their child.”⁴² As Grace Howard writes in her *Harvard Law & Policy Review* article, “the state has extended its criminal surveillance apparatus into the healthcare setting,”⁴³ and thereby converted nurses, physicians, and other healthcare workers into law enforcement officers by designing protocols for reporting. Patients, then, have an incentive to evade the necessary care for their pregnancies and may even withhold medically relevant information for fear of being reported by the people who are charged

with their care. Further, recently enacted fetal protection laws and child protection statutes across the country “ensnare pregnant women” for a range of activities that arguably do not prioritize the fetus, such as refusing a cesarean section or falling down steps.⁴⁴ Some prosecutors speak openly about the need to punish pregnant women, such as attorney Charles Condon, who claims a strong “stick” is “needed to keep pregnant women in line.”⁴⁵ Once prosecuted, pregnant women, especially low-income women of color, become subject to a new slew of problems in jail, like a lack of prenatal care, unsanitary conditions, and a stressful environment. As Nancy D. Campbell argues in *Medicine and Society*, “if healthy births [...] are the desired outcomes, surveillance and reporting should support those goals rather than providing an entrée into the criminal justice system.”⁴⁶

As the anti-abortion movement has expanded, there has been a significant shift from “specific punishment of the individual deviant to the generalized surveillance of us all.”⁴⁷ Today, every pregnant person *could* harm their fetus, so they automatically become surveilled as a potential reproductive entity first, human being second. This is especially true for low-income women and women of color, who are more likely to experience criminalization and coercion during their pregnancies. Specifically, Black women are overrepresented in criminal and civil cases against pregnant women (a 2013 study found *up to 75 percent* of cases against pregnant women were brought against Black women in some southern regions).⁴⁸ Under the surveillance state, a woman is minimized and objectified, “merely a body, a vacant, empty, vessel intended to contain the needs of others,” and ultimately “open for interpretation and domination.”⁴⁹ Doan and Schwarz argue that a “symbiotic relationship exists between surveillance and social control,”⁵⁰ and these mechanisms are used within legislation to limit women’s privacy and bodily autonomy. Ultimately, the State is determined

to control women’s bodies, and surveillance has become a legally enshrined tool to do so. The State utilizes surveillance and social control to “protect women” against the harms of abortion, though this “protection” allows for additional invasive medical practices, and if a woman chooses to carry the pregnancy to term, “surveillance and social control practices do not disappear,” but easily morph into new forms of scrutiny.⁵¹ Therefore, it is evident that surveillance in any form poses a threat to feminists’ goal of a reproductive justice framework (RJF). Fundamentally a human rights framework, the RJF has three primary principles; “(1) the right not to have a child; (2) the right to have a child; and (3) the right to parent children in safe and healthy environments.” Further, the RJF “demands sexual autonomy and gender freedom for every human being.”⁵² Such a platform is more inclusive and expansive than that of the “pro-choice” framework, which often fails to critically assess “the range of options available [...], the conditions in which the choice is made, and societal patterns of choice-making.”⁵³ Pregnancy surveillance is not only a threat to abortion-seeking people but to all those wishing to procreate. As outlined in this essay, such surveillance can lead to the removal of children, thus violating the third principle of the RJF.

As abortion is criminalized in states across the country due to *Dobbs v. Jackson Women’s Health Organization*, the surveillance system currently utilized by the government and anti-abortion actors will become the greatest tool for prosecuting women, especially those who are low-income. Stripped of their fundamental and constitutional right to privacy, women will become constantly surveilled and thus dehumanized at every turn, especially within healthcare settings that function as extensions of law enforcement. Additionally, under *Dobbs* state governments can employ more vigilante anti-abortion legislation similar to that passed by Texas.

CPCs, with their ability to track and collect data on pregnant and abortion-seeking women, including women who simply enter reproductive health clinics (through geofencing), could then barter or simply offer such data to government actors or vigilante groups, where it can be utilized as incriminating evidence. A mass imprisonment of women across the country could potentially result, further depriving them of bodily autonomy and constitutional rights.

While this future appears bleak, reproductive justice advocates have no lack of short- and long-term solutions. The surveillance state of the U.S. is widely unregulated in both public and private sectors. One recommendation is to pass regulations on the usage of certain surveillance technologies like geofencing, and to require expressed consent to be surveilled in environments like CPCs, online chat programs, and menstrual cycle apps. Additionally, in an effort to decriminalize pregnancy, local and state governments could implement policies that allow healthcare professionals to interact genuinely with patients, without hidden reporting measures. There are more solutions available, and it is critical to work towards them now. As demonstrated throughout this essay, despite the protections *Roe* has historically provided, women who were low-income and of color have and continue to be disproportionately surveilled through every step of pregnancy and/or abortion. The surveillance state for women is neither just a possibility nor a future dystopia; it is today.

Postscript:

I originally wrote this essay in the fall of 2021. With the United States Supreme Court decision on *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* in June 2022, I have edited this essay accordingly. However, it must be acknowledged that law and policy surrounding reproductive healthcare is changing rapidly. I have attempted to use the most recent and legitimate information available, but due to the nature of the situation, I want to emphasize that the issues discussed here are subject to change, and surely will.

Notes

1. *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, U.S. (2022)
2. Rebekah Saul, "Abortion Reporting in the United States: An Examination of the Federal–State Partnership." *Family Planning Perspectives* 30, no. 5 (September 1, 1998): 244.
3. Saul, "Abortion Reporting in the United States," 245.
4. Ibid, 244.
5. Ibid, 245.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. *Planned Parenthood of Central Missouri v. Danforth*, 428 U.S. 52 (1976).
9. Saul, "Abortion Reporting in the United States," 246.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Alesha E. Doan and Corinne Schwarz, "Father Knows Best: 'Protecting' Women through State Surveillance and Social Control in Anti Abortion Policy." *Politics & Policy* 48, no. 1 (2020): 8.
13. Doan and Schwarz, "Father Knows Best," 1.
14. Ibid, 9.
15. Ibid, 9-10.
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Role Tide

Amanda Banks

Granny told me stories about the coat-hanger women. People who punctured their wombs trying to “hide their sin and avoid responsibility.” It wasn’t always a coat-hanger, but the result was always the same—a gruesome death that could have been avoided if the person had just accepted the inevitable role of mother. Granny’s stories were intended to be a form of birth control in a state that believes abstinence is the best policy. A state where abortion’s roots twist and turn through hard-packed red clay.

Each year, around 11 million abortions are performed worldwide by untrained persons using dangerous or invasive methods (WHO, 2021). WHO also estimates that up to 13% of maternal deaths can be attributed to unsafe abortions. People who survive these dangerous procedures can suffer from hemorrhage, infection, and life-long disability. This data is clear. We don’t save lives by restricting abortion; we trade lives by forcing people into a lifetime of slavery in the role of mother through corrupt and unjust laws.

I became a mother at 16. Granny’s coat-hanger stories were no match for the older boy with the fast car and free drugs. The environment my child was born into was dark, dirty, and dangerous. We struggled for years before finding a path to safety. However, millions of people never find support. Instead, their lives follow a pattern of poverty and trauma. Removing the protections of *Roe* and *Casey* only serves to perpetuate that pattern, snaking more roots through the Alabama clay.

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Role Tide
11" x 14" x 3"
2022

Close Up of *Role Tide*

Materials:

Wire Coat Hanger, Medical Gown, Cotton Twine, Watercolor,
Denim Canvas





She Smiles, She Lies, She Cries:

The Currencies of Affect, Beauty, & Performacne in Leah Rachel’s *Curious Female Casting Couch* (2017)

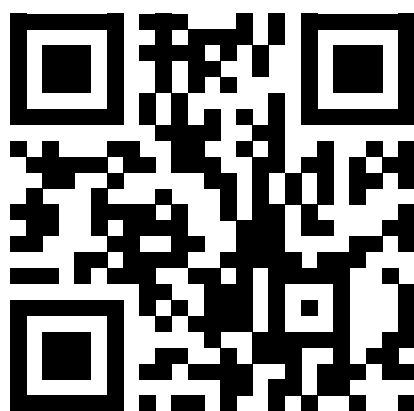
Cory Wayman

Scan or click to view Leah Rachel's casting couch videos analyzed in this essay:

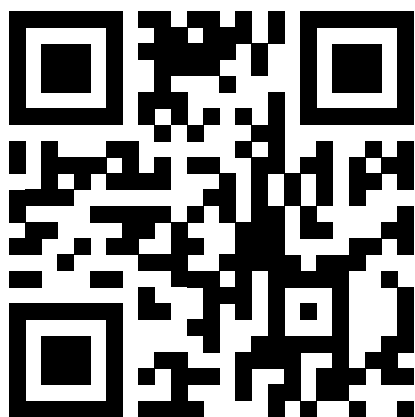
“Scan below to view [Nikki](#)”



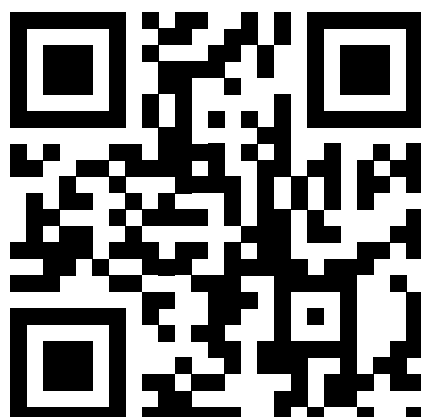
“Scan below to view [Tara](#)”



“Scan below to view [Belle](#)”



“Scan below to view [Crystal](#)”



Produced in a Los Angeles County adult entertainment production studio, filmmaker Leah Rachel’s *Curious Female Casting Couch* (2017) borrows aesthetics and themes from the casting-couch genre of pornographic video to entice and then challenge the viewer’s desires for “real” or “authentic” sex acts. Commonplace on pornography streaming sites, such as Pornhub, casting-couch videos offer the fiction of a non-scripted encounter between a performer—who is usually female—and a man or men who promise lucrative future opportunities in exchange for a taped performance of unpaid sexual favors. In Rachel’s version, the two anonymous male interviewers coerce not sexual performances but emotional ones, excavating emotional soft-spots personal to each woman they interview. These interviewers prompt the women into candid conversations about romantic and familial relationships, sexual histories, feelings of loneliness, and childhood dreams.¹ Although each woman exhibits signs of discomfort in certain moments, they continue to respond openly to the interviewers, modeling behaviors desirable not only in sex work but throughout the service industry, such as flexibility, talent for improvisation, and total openness to new challenges and situations.² *Curious Female Casting Couch* (CFCC), like many historical artworks, such as Édouard Manet’s *Olympia* (1863), uses sex work to allegorize transformations in the landscapes of labor and subjectivity and to question widely-held views towards gender, sexuality, and what it means to work in systems created to favor men’s viewing and experiential pleasures.

The casting-couch genre dates back to short “stag” films that were popular throughout the first two-thirds of the twentieth century and alludes to auditioning systems and practices used by both mainstream and pornographic casting directors (fig. 1).³ In exploiting the genre’s claims to authenticity, CFCC reframes the

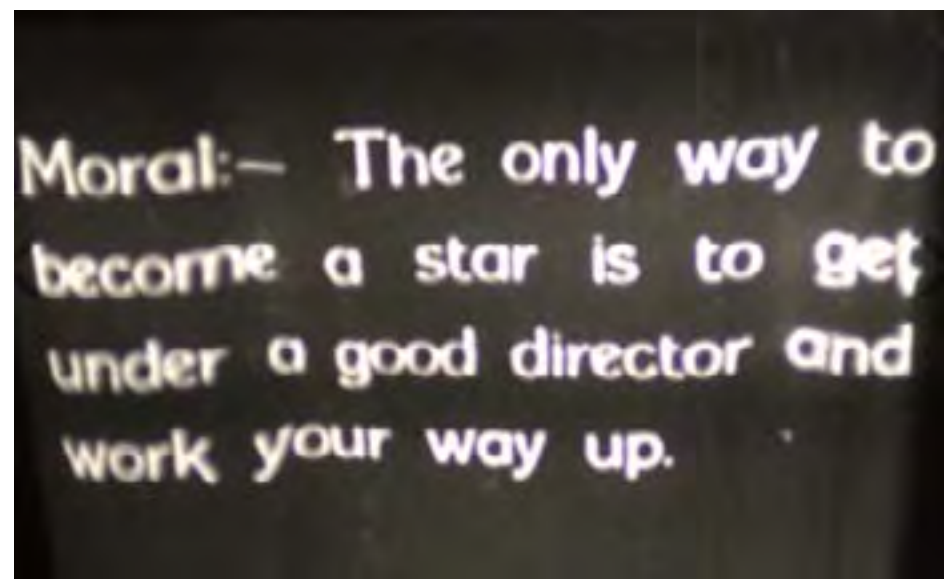


Fig. 1: *The Casting Couch*, 1924, 35mm film

mainstream casting-couch genre as a form that demonstrates the entrepreneurial and performance savvy of porn workers while illuminating abusive patterns in late-capitalist labor markets. *Curious Female Casting Couch* deploys and critiques these intangible assets associated with young women and proposes new sources for the pleasures provided in viewing casting-couch interactions: performances of emotional affects, creation of human relationships, and exploration of the personhood (or persona) of each performer. This paper examines Rachel's videos through art-historical precedents—in particular, earlier performance works such as Marina Abramović's *Role Exchange* (1975) and Andrea Fraser's *Untitled* (2003) and, using a sociological lens, through its original presentation on the popular free pornography site Pornhub.com.

My analyses of each of the *Curious* women's performances focus on their engagement with and fictional commodification of authenticity, beauty, professional aspiration, and critique in contemporary labor marketplaces. In "Art Work and Sex Work..." (2012) art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson discusses intangible affective labors in the art world through analyses of performance works such as Marina Abramović's *Role Exchange* (1975) and Andrea Fraser's *Untitled* (2003). Bryan-Wilson argues that parallels between sex work and a range of art practices provide a productive means for female artists and writers to expose the gendered politics of art making and patriarchal systems of cultural valuation from the 1970s to the early aughts.⁴ Rachel's work offers critical updates to previous art-historical scholarship on issues of "authenticity" in performance art, as well as histories of the intellectual freedoms of female artists, critics, and authors, especially those who use their nude (or partially-nude) body in their practices.

While the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century encouraged the spread of pornographic texts among

male aristocratic libertines, the eighteenth and nineteenth century inventions of lithography and photography made explicit sexual materials available at affordable rates to all social classes.⁵

The increased accessibility of pornography fueled classist tensions about the democratization of sexually explicit materials, prompting state censorship initiatives resulting in the establishment of the modern cultural category of “pornography.”⁶ In Europe and its colonies, pornography was condemned as a corrupting influence, one inciting deviance from the hegemonic Judeo-Christian order of heteronormative reproductive sex sanctioned by marriage.⁷ Despite censorship efforts, the advents of film, video, and the internet during the twentieth century have all revolutionized both the accessibility and variety of pornography and, by the turn of the twenty-first century, allowed pornography consumption to exist fully in the private realm of the domestic.⁸

By the late twentieth century, the relationship between art and pornography in the United States had become a topic of active debate following the outcomes of the 1985-86 Meese Commission that resulted in targeted—and ultimately overturned—restrictions on the publishers and retailers of pornography, internal divisions among feminists regarding pornography’s effects and ways of addressing them, and highly-publicized threats of censorship in the wake of the Culture Wars of the early 90s, all amidst an accelerating “pornification” of mainstream visual culture.⁹ The cumulative effects of these events cast shadows of uncertainty, anxiety, and ambivalence towards the values and roles of pornography in society and a tendency to avoid serious engagement with pornography as a cultural form from institutions both in and outside of the art world. Twentieth-century American artists such as the “NEA four” (Karen Finley, Tim Miller, John Fleck, and Holly Hughes), Robert

Mapplethorpe, Jeff Koons, Betty Tompkins, Carolee Schneemann, and Annie Sprinkle are well-studied cases of sexually explicit art production, controversy, and—except for in the notable case of Koons’ and Italian porn-star Cicciolina’s *Made in Heaven* collaboration (1991-92)—state censorship and threats to institutional funding.¹⁰

Twenty-first century artists who investigate the pornographic world, on the other hand, have tended to garner less controversy as well as critical attention in the very historical moment when pornography has been the most accessible and widespread. By limiting critical discourse to studies of a handful of twentieth-century artists who engaged with pornography in the pre-streaming era, art-world gatekeepers have left the worldwide accessibility of pornographic imagery online underexamined.

A critical reflection on established studio systems of both adult and Hollywood entertainment that relied upon corporate systems, *CFCC* subverts the casting-couch structure to convey ways in which abuse and exploitation may take many complex forms, some of which have recently begun to be challenged by the MeToo movements and the Harvey Weinstein and Jeffery Epstein investigations, among countless others. Recent viral trends on social media popularize Amazon delivery workers receiving requests to deliver dance performances along with packages in front of door Ring cameras that TikTokers make into shareable content.¹¹ In these instances and many other common scenarios of workplace surveillance, failing to fulfill customer requests means risking negative performance reviews.¹² Willingness to fulfill on-the-job requests, even when they include extraneous demands such as unwarranted displays of enthusiasm or self-abasement, emerges as a key theme in the *Curious* interviews as the male interviewers seek the limits of each woman’s comfort and confidence.

The COVID-19 pandemic, in many ways, catalyzed preexisting trends in sex economies, while introducing other new challenges and safety concerns as workers adapted their business practices to new realities—creating floods in online markets that devalued sex work on platforms such as OnlyFans.¹³ Private sector investment is fraught with challenges as the profitability of pornography remains threatened by the pirating and distribution of pornography on free websites. The instant accessibility of internet pornography is becoming more normalized; critically discussing it, however, is not. In the 1960s, Marshall McLuhan explains the “indispensable” role of artists and their awareness of new media technologies’ radical effects on culture and society:

In the history of human culture there is no example of a conscious adjustment of the various factors of personal and social life to new extensions [of the body through media] except in the puny and peripheral efforts of artists. The artist picks up the message of cultural and technological challenge decades before its transforming impact occurs.

CFCC gleans and reflects new understandings by engaging with pornography critically and asks what it feels like to witness, question, and participate in today’s virtual, cultural and service economies.

Building a Frame: <https://www.curiousxxxfemale.com/GIRLS.html>

Performance artist Marina Abramović’s performance piece *Role Exchange* (1975) isolated social demands as an indispensable mode of professional life in the global contemporary art world through the conceptual and embodied comparison to the performance demands of entertaining clients and potential clients in sex work. For the performance,

the artist commissioned and traded positions with Suze, a sex worker of Amsterdam’s historic Red-Light District, who attended Abramović’s gallery show opening at the city’s De Appel Gallery in July of 1975. For the duration of the four-hour event, Abramović posed in a Red-Light window display for potential engagement, while Suze—who had been working in sex work for the equivalent amount of time that Abramović had been an artist, ten years—entertained clients, dealers, and gallery attendees, acting as “the artist” (fig. 2). The two split the three-hundred-dollar gallery stipend.¹⁵

With this work, Abramović deconstructs the concept of “the artist” by likening the selling of art to the selling of sex, both catering to the personal, social, and professional whims of buyers, critics, and curious audiences. Both visually and conceptually, frames in the form of Red-Light windows and entryways as well as the frames and video monitors of the gallery in which Suze entertains stand in for the professional industries and the particular skillsets these demand from workers.

Like their predecessor Abramović, Leah Rachel and Andrea Fraser have since employed themes and issues of selling sex to critically consider the value of interpersonal connection involved in both art and sex work. For Fraser’s video *Untitled* (2003), the artist collaborated with her gallerist to select an interested collector to purchase one of five videotapes of an original artwork that would include having sex with the artist on camera to produce the content of the video work. The chosen collector, who was to be male, heterosexual, and unmarried, paid roughly \$20,000, and the two had sex in Manhattan’s Royalton Hotel for one hour before a single tripod camcorder (fig. 3).¹⁶

In Fraser’s recollection of the work, she described how the “normal” sales situation of the videotapes, not the commissioned sex, is what felt exploitative, citing a sense of “loss of control” one feels when selling



Fig. 2: Marina Abramovic, *Role Exchange*, 1975, photographs of performance, Amsterdam



Fig 3: Andrea Fraser, *Untitled*, 2003, videotape, 5 editions

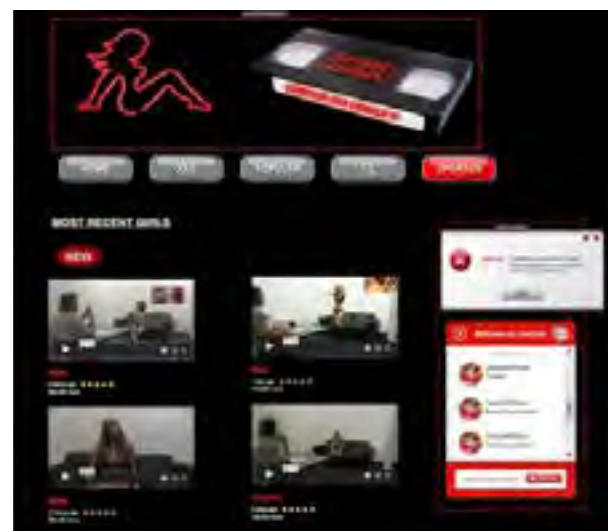


Fig 4: Leah Rachel, *Curious Female Casting Couch*, 2017 webpage and video series, <<https://www.xxxfemale.com/GIRLS.html>>

art on the market, adding, “that’s where the speculation begins.”¹⁷

The demands of the art market require not only artistic or creative pursuits but also forms of sociality and performance that appease art audiences, consumers, and dealers as well as garner media, peer, and industry relationships.

Uploaded originally to stream on Pornhub (PH), which streams content uploaded by its users, *CFCC* was later taken off the site by the parent company’s content-monitors—presumably due to its lack of explicit sexual activity.¹⁸ Another reason for the removal of the *CFCC* videos from PH may have been the series’ critical repurposing of content from the site’s most popular producer/uploader of the casting-couch genre, *Backroom Casting Couch* (*BCC*). Launched online in 2007—the same year as PH—by Flagstaff, AZ-based producer Eric Whitaker, *BCC* became a forerunner in the genre, uploading original content onto free porn sites as a means of driving traffic to Whitaker’s subscription-service website. *CFCC*’s intended existence on PH, which received an average of 80 million daily visitors in 2017,¹⁹ underscores the celebration of deceit and exploitation in the casting-couch narrative. PH’s decision to remove the *CFCC* videos from their database presents an ironic instance of art censorship in a non-art context, especially considering recent accounts of the company’s ill-equipped content-monitoring systems.²⁰

After PH removed the videos from its site, Rachel recruited artist and designer Annette Lamothe-Ramos to create a webpage for *CFCC*. Tagged with relevant search engine keywords intended to guide unsuspecting viewers searching for pornography, the site resembles the free pornography sites that proliferated before the dominance of PH: an expansive black background featuring simple graphics, fake chat messages, and the red outline image of a sexualized female figure pinned prominently at the top

(fig. 4).²¹

The four videos run down the site’s left-hand side, marked with thumbnail images, each *Female’s* name in red text, and erroneous view numbers. On the right, a “LiveChat” bar displays a string of messages from “Curious XXX Female” reading, “Hey baby!... / Wanna see my new video?... / Hello? Are you still there?” These digital features, though not actually interactive, form a convincing representation of a free porn site, complete with the option to “upgrade,” which might briefly convince browsers that they had found an actual collection of pornography.

“Pop-up” images repeatedly interrupt the video-interviews. Some pop-ups alert viewers of potential viral threats to their software safety.²² Others warn of technological malfunctions, reference gay pornography, and offer “local meet-up” opportunities. In some instances, pop-ups increase the verism of the videos and of the CFCC webpage; in others, they work in mocking dialogue with the scene, ultimately disrupting the viewer’s presumption of virtual privacy and challenging suspension of disbelief. Collectively, the pop-ups work to activate and amplify the viewer’s self-awareness, introducing concerns about computer safety, the comfort or discomfort of the female performers ⁴, and anxieties articulated by the viewer’s proxies, the male interviewers.

In their get-something-for-nothing economic structure, casting-couch videos encapsulate, in many ways, the current era of endless free pornography accessible on sites such as PH: getting performers to do “the work” for free can, in a sense, legitimate the behavior of consuming internet pornography for no cost. The CFCC videos are each prefaced with brief passages of scrolling text accompanied by sax-heavy music, referencing and subverting the disclosure messages employed at the top of BCC videos, which read as follows:



Fig 5: *Backroom Casting Couch*, video introductory disclaimer, launched 2007



Fig 6: *Curious Female Casting Couch*, video introductory disclaimer

Backroom Casting Couch is a website about the real-life interactions that occur during adult modeling interviews.

We film girls sucking, fucking, swallowing, and taking it in the ass just to land a job. I would hire them all...

However...

I'm Not a Real Casting Agent...

...And There Is

No Job...

CFCC's rendition makes significant alterations to the action terms, exchanging sex acts for emotional ones ("thinking, feeling, crying, and putting it all out there just to land a job") while maintaining the genre's marketing of "real life" transactions carried out under false pretenses (figs. 5, 6). Predicated on the coercion of a performer into unpaid sex, the casting-couch genre usurps the economic benefits of sex work within its narrative framework through scripted, though not always unreal, deceit.²⁵

In "Art Work and Sex Work..." Julia Bryan-Wilson offers an analysis of the "affective labor" involved in professional networking and self-promotion. Examining Marina Abramović's *Role Exchange* (1975) and Andrea Fraser's *Untitled* (2003), she argues that works such as these highlight the behaviors expected of female art workers and sex workers whose entrepreneurial networks require physical or social gestures that foster "perceived genuine affective connections" with critics, dealers, and potential buyers.²⁴

These exchanges demand substantial time and energy from artists—particularly women artists who must struggle to achieve equal status as their male counterparts—in addition to their interrelated networks of art-world professionals.²⁵

Extending Bryan-Wilson's insights to CFCC supplies a critical lens with which to consider more contemporary conditions of labor which demand a skilled blend of entrepreneurial, technological, and performance savvy.

In *Porn Work: Sex, Labor and Late Capitalism* (2021), Heather Berg incorporates interview data from more than eighty pornography professionals, conducted between 2012–2019, which collectively reveal the very recent collapse of a monolithic pornography industry and describe the skillful balances of skills employed by sex and pornography workers.²⁶

The uncertain profit margins in pornography, due to free-streaming of material online, necessitates diverse business strategies, including marketing and accounting, strategic planning, managing online distribution of free preview videos, advertisement deals, direct-to-fan interactivity and commerce, and developing relationships with various clientele.²⁷

Curious Female Casting Couch hints at some of these changing social and technological values from industry networking to self-enterprise through the multilayered performance of authentic desire.²⁸ By removing sex from the equation, CFCC points to the ways in which the performed intimacies and interpersonal systems of control depicted in pornographic media could represent widespread labor expectations in a swath of contemporary labor markets.

PornHub's removal of CFCC from its databases speaks to the importance of context and institutional authority in public interpretation of art and visual culture. Performance scholar Amelia Jones has argued that exhibition and cultural contexts are foundational factors shaping viewers' experiences of performance art in both live and media-documented formats.²⁹ Abramović's framing of herself in a Red-Light district window display in *Role Exchange*, Fraser's contracted creation of a limited-edition video recording of the artist and buyer having sex in *Untitled*, and CFCC's

presentation first on PH and then on a faux-porn website each attests to the powerful influence of institutional framing and marketing for artists' careers, in particular female artists. In *Curious Female Casting Couch*, frames perform a multiplicity of functions for both the consumer and curious women themselves. The four video thumbnails offer enticing snapshots of the women's physicality and performances. By serving as reminders of the near-endless supply of pornography videos online, these peephole-like viewing windows highlight the fact that the women face pressure to give their best performance upon this (supposedly) introductory meeting. More broadly, frames act as reminders of the physical, emotional, and interpersonal pressures that bear on the economic subject who is working within industry confinements and expectations.

Nikki: Authenticity At & As Work

Following the introductory text, the first *CFCC* video opens on a plain room featuring a wrinkled leather couch facing two men sitting behind a black-topped table on which a small camcorder sits. The men have their backs turned to the viewer, and their faces are pixilated to anonymity. A young woman in a nude bra and black underwear enters and, exchanging greetings with the men, sits on the couch. When one interviewer asks where she is from, Nikki (played by Nesta Cooper) glances upwards and says, "Um...I am from Florida." Another presses, "Yeah, where?"

Nikki, scratching her shoulder, utters, "Um...from Miami," as a pop-up alerting the viewer that "Windows Explorer has stopped working" appears in the top-right corner of the screen (fig. 7). As one of the men says, "We're from Miami, too—what part of Miami?" the message fades away and is replaced by a close-up image of Tim Curry as Steven King's Pennywise the Clown meme-ified to say, "See you in your dreams!" (fig. 8).



Figure 7: "Nikki" (Nesta Cooper)



Figure 8



Figure 9

“Ha, you’re not from Miami, are ya? It’s okay,” one responds. Nikki admits, “No, I’m not from Miami.” One of the men responds, “That’s alright. Are you comfortable?...” Nikki, moving her hands back and forth between her hair and lap, assures him, “Yes, I’m very comfortable, thank you.” The dissonance between Nikki’s verbal statement and her anxious body language evidence early on the inaccessible nature of her “true” thoughts, feelings, and intentions, despite any attempts to glean honest insights—a fact teased by the haunting clown meme. Leaning out of frame, one interviewer asks, “So, do you have a boyfriend, Nikki?” to which she responds that she does not. When Nikki explains that she “just like[s] to fuck,” the shot cuts in towards her, presumably from the camcorder on the table. The men inquire about the “reasons” for her being single from behind the camera. After Nikki confirms that she “like[s] to fuck a lot of people,” another small pop-up emerges in the same corner featuring a smiley-face icon and a grey click here box flanking the text: “THIS IS NOT A JOKE! YOU ARE THE 100,000th LEARNER!” (fig. 9).

They ask if having multiple sex partners gets “depressing” or “lonely.” Nikki denies this assumption before the men then offer her a red plaid shirt to put on. She obliges, an action which they take as a “go-ahead” to continue. Nikki now appears waist-up, the shot more eye-level (fig. 10). When the men breach the topic of her most recent ex, Nikki grows quieter, offering short responses when asked about the pain she has experienced and the discomfort she feels at discussing it. The camera moves behind the back of the first interviewer, pauses between them, then begins to zoom in on Nikki in uneven intervals. The increasing scrutiny of the camera relates the viewer with Nikki’s labor of reflecting upon increasingly personal information. She confesses that she was in love. “It hurts to lose love,” one of them offers. Nikki, with tears pooling in her eyes, subtly confirms their



Figure 10



Figure 11

suspensions that she might miss aspects of being in love (fig. 11). The men then offer her sweatpants, concluding the interview with hugs.

While Nikki's tears may signify authentic emotion, the plaguing presence of the pop-ups underscores the constructed and performed nature of the exchanges depicted in *CFCC*. Discussing the documented performances *Crying Glasses (An Aid to Melancholia)* (1998) by Hayley Newman and Marina Abramović's video-performance *The Onion* (1995), Jennifer Doyle explains how representation, even representation of something as seemingly legible as tears, stands to deny the viewer access to a performing subject's "true" feelings. Doyle writes that "once emotion is absorbed into the sphere of representation, once a feeling becomes an image of feeling, its claim to authenticity (to being a real feeling) is thrown into question."³⁰

Nikki's performance of authenticity reflects gendered assumptions of behavior, namely pious attitudes towards sex, willingness to engage with male curiosities, and displays of emotional upset when discussing past intimate relationships. Her exaggerated gestures in these areas convey a gap between authentic emotion and performances of emotion which are caught up in societal expectations and traditions of normative behavior, baring critical overlaps with concepts of "realness" such as those used by African Americans and Latinos in the New York City drag ball scene of the '80s and '90s to mean to "pass" as a certain gender or social class other than one's own.³¹ *Redefining Realness* author Janet Mock describes "realness" as "the ability to be seen as heteronormative, to assimilate, to not be read as other or deviate from the norm."³² For women, and trans women in particular, realness presents "a pathway to survival" in our society in which "femininity in general is seen as frivolous."³³ Nikki's interview unveils how authenticity is unverifiable and rather than emotions-as-commodities can be staged, manipulated, and (mis)

interpreted by both performing subjects and audiences. The resulting affectual ambivalence of realness forms a productive space for women to reflect upon the oftentimes competing demands of their professional conduct.

With a fetishistic excavation of amateurism, the casting-couch genre appeals to viewers' interests in witnessing a naïve young performer having unpaid sex in hopeful anticipation of future earnings. The "authentic amateur" holds a unique currency in some cultural economies, including arenas ranging from the Olympics to reality TV programming, as well as pornography markets, typified by the casting-couch genre. In her interviews with pornography practitioners, Heather Berg found many performers who have described "authenticity" as consistently characterizing many consumer tastes though it rarely receives recognition as a clickable category. She dedicates a chapter of her book to "Authenticity Work," in which she discusses methods employed by mainstream, alternative, and queer pornography producers who traffic in authenticity in their work. These methods range from centering performers' own pleasure to strategies of "weeding out" potential performers who appear to desire opportunities solely out of economic desperation rather than (what are deemed) more preferable motives.³⁴

Berg recites the attitude of performer Siouxsie Q, who said, "I would like to see more emphasis placed on fair labor practices than on whether or not I have a 'real' orgasm," observing that "workers representing various porn genres spoke about the authentic self-expression and pleasure they experienced on set and yet consistently critiqued discourses of authenticity around their work."³⁵

In its claims to non-professional performers and real emotional reactivity, the endurance of the casting-couch genre suggests the persistence of cultural tastes for "amateur" subjects, tastes which have

been crystalized by the emergence of OnlyFans where performers' accounts build followings over time. The prevalence of the “authentic amateur” suggests a prolonged societal interest in acting as witnesses or judges to the economic decisions and navigations of industry-subjects with very little authority or power over the conditions of their labor.

Tara: Dreaming in the ‘Self as Enterprise’ Society

Tara’s interview, the shortest in the series, encapsulates the entrepreneurial sensibility of the women and the transactional nature of the interviews—and their real participants—in which all parties seek profit in the form of either financial or social capital. Tara (Kansas Bowling) wears a black underwear ensemble and says she is eighteen. Sitting, leaning forward with her knees spread apart, she exhibits the least reserve of the interview subjects (fig. 12). Tara shows a unique confidence in her performance of sexual desirability and is the only one of the four women who refuses the sweatshirt offered by the interviewers. Her autonomy and agency are the first topic of conversation. The men inquire about how “normal” her activities are, her choice of “doing this kind of thing around men in their thirties.” The shot transitions to a close-up as one asks, “Is this what you always wanted to do, since you were a little girl?” Assured, Tara replies, “Yes.” Patronizing attitudes laid bare, they question, “You would watch this type of material?”

“No. Well...I wanted to be an actress.” Tara states that her favorite actress growing up was Lucile Ball as the camera, previously stationed on a tripod, gets picked up by an interviewer, who asks, “You wanted to be Lucile Ball, and you’re only eighteen, so what’s, uh, why are you here and not doing more respectable acting?” Tara’s performance presents her motivation for participation: on-camera experience. Tara adapts to the new



Figure 12: "Tara" (Kansas Bowling)

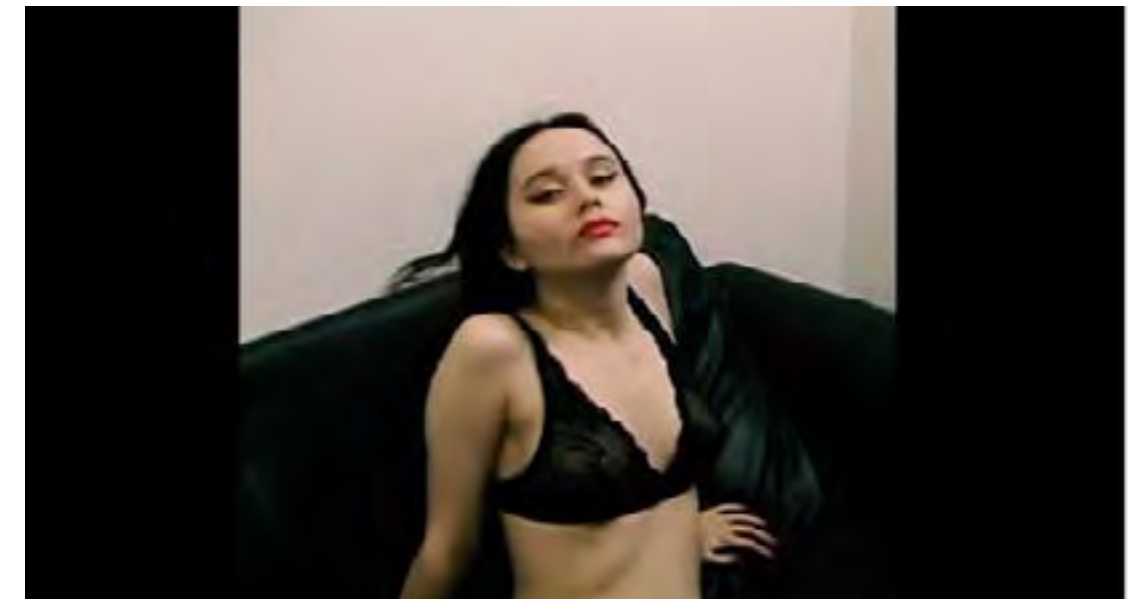


Figure 13

camera perspective, which moves towards her from above, pushing her hair behind her shoulders, turning her chest toward the lens and leaning back on her arms to strike a pose (fig. 13). The image orientation shifts here from landscape to portrait dimensions, offering a comparison of how Tara might appear in a wide-angle cinematic frame versus a portrait-style, editorial-type image. Tara's efforts to gain experience in film, as well as a portfolio with which to negotiate future work in creative industries, is an example of what political theorist Lois McNay calls the "Self as Enterprise" society. Viewing *CFCC* through a critical lens of capitalism's structuring of human subjectivity—what Martin Hartmann and Axel Honneth have described as the "new, flexible capitalism" in which value is placed on "those who can engage in new projects with great personal application and flexibility"—highlights each woman's demonstration of her entrepreneurial skill in applying her physical and emotional resources in service of the project.³⁶ McNay uses Foucault's notion of the self as a "sort of permanent and multiple enterprise" in her discussion of postcapitalism.³⁷ She argues the individual operates not within the framework of the intervening state but through networks and small-scale organizations. According to Foucault, these social, familial, and professional networks are to be "in some way ready to hand for the individual, sufficiently limited in their scale for the individual's actions, decisions, and choices to have meaningful and perceptible effects, and numerous enough for [her] not to be dependent on one alone."³⁸ Though they never state their ultimate professional goals upfront, the *Curious* women convey a reliance on the men's favor for professional support, suggesting ways in which their emotional willingness and performativity themselves may work as transferrable skillsets. According to Brian McNair, by the late-1990s, mainstream Western culture appears to have successfully integrated the aesthetics of pornography: "Its stock

heroes, its story lines, its low-budget lighting and motel room sets" into mainstream advertisement, entertainment and fashion industries.³⁹

Whereas Andrea Fraser's *Untitled* foregrounded the social labors necessary for managing sales and distribution of artwork, *CFCC* emphasizes some of the particular skills and resources valued in contemporary workforces, particularly in cultural and service sectors, such as flexibility, adaptability, generous emotional openness and connectivity, and a willingness to accept low or even non-existent pay in the present for hopes of future prosperity.⁴⁰

Considering the two projects together allows us to better understand connections and parallels between creative, affective, service, and sex industries. As though determined to see her bravado falter as she poses seductively in the video's final moments, an interviewer asks, "Do you get lonely sometimes?" Tara pauses, then with her lips closed, responds over voiceover effect, "Doesn't everybody?" as her image freezes and the video comes to an abrupt static ending. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri theorize how the affect-producer experiences alienation not only from their time, as in waged labor, or from their products, as in the case of the traditional factory worker, but further from their emotional selves in the process of creating human relationships.⁴¹ Jennifer Doyle describes the painstaking and often discordant experience of performing low-paying affect labor:

The professionalization of affect is especially hard on those working at the margins of economic survival—life is hard enough without health care, job security, affordable housing, and transportation—but to have to produce the spectacle of a woman at peace with the world and her position in it while working at the very job that fails to pay a living wage or provide

health insurance can be too much. She is nevertheless expected to smile through it.⁴²

The judgmental attitudes of the men, including their patronizing energies, coercive statements, and invasive questioning, underscore the alienation experienced by the *Curious* women and by the modern affect producer who must distance their desires, impulses, needs, and other facets of the self in order to give a good performance.

Belle On Beauty’s Limits

Belle’s performance illustrates how social perceptions of beauty are contingent upon one’s willingness to display appropriate behavior. At the start of Belle’s (Afton Reid) video, the men tease that she is a “Southern Belle.” This she denies, twisting her hair. Whereas in mainstream casting-couch videos male “interviewers” frequently don’t ask their subjects for their names, names in *CFCC* serve a few key purposes. Central to concepts of identity as well as branded commerce, chosen names often romanticize their subjects poetically, as was widely acknowledged of Manet’s *Olympia* and feels implied in Belle and Crystal’s personas. The adoption of pseudonyms is an enduring tradition in sex work, and a catchy or otherwise memorable pseudonym can mean the difference between a life supported by sex work and one in which such work provides only supplementary income, particularly in the internet age.⁴³

A pop-up window appears in the center of the screen with a warning that “your computer may be infected!!! CALL NOW!!! 1-844-839-7975.” This warning multiples across the screen (fig. 14). The intruding reference to software issues foregrounds the temporal distance between the viewer and the conditions of the video’s production, as well as the space between the interviewers and interviewee by



Figure 14: "Belle" (Afton Reid)



Figure 15

reminding viewers of their consumer status and alerting them to potential safety issues experienced by the performing subject.⁴⁴

The scene moves to a close-up image of Belle as the men inquire “how long [she’s] been doing this kind of thing.” Belle stares focus-less before closing her eyes and shrugging, “a little while.” Then, one interviewer asks about “the guy from this morning.” “Just some scumbag,” Belle replies with a dismissive gesture. “Is that what you like, scummy guys...what about them?” “I don’t know... [pauses] I like when they treat me like shit.” “Really? You like that?” Belle leans back in her seat as she endures accusations of inauthenticity: “You don’t seem like that kind of girl; you actually seem a little different than most of the girls who come in here. I don’t entirely know if you’re showing us the true you.” A software notice intrudes: “Do you want to allow this app to make changes to your device?” as though speaking directly to Belle and her capacity to appear unaffected by the men’s comments (fig. 15). Her name then becomes the jumping off point for a discussion on the value of beauty versus sexiness. Belle expresses dismay at being called “beautiful,” expressing how she wishes, instead, to be “sexy.” “Beautiful’s boring,” she says. “A flower can be beautiful; grass can be beautiful. Can’t be sexy.” The men respond by cautioning that they’re not sure that she is “in the right line of work right now” and “could be capable of a lot more.” Disarmed, Belle’s demeanor visibly alters from eager to introspective.

Belle plays out the dilemma of beauty: beauty is valuable and can be economically empowering but is readily objectifying of women and purely visual, rather than grounded in ideas or actions. Sociologist Tressie McMillan Cottom theorizes how beauty functions as a form of capital that is violently caught up in constructs of gender and race:

Beauty can be manners, also a socially contingent set of traits.

Whatever power decides that beauty is, it must always be more

than reducible to a single thing. Beauty is a wonderful form of capital in a world that organizes everything around gender and then requires a performance of gender that makes some of its members more equal than others.⁴⁵

Beauty’s aspirational status creates a competitive playing field for pornography subjects and fuels the economic desperation characterizing the narrative of casting-couch scenes. How Belle, and all the *Curious* women, choose to monetize their beauty, time, and energy follow the rules of a society which values self-determination, entrepreneurism, profitable exposure on social media and the expansion of professional and distributional networks. At the same time, this society continues to criminalize most forms of sex work, and to stigmatize pornography, despite its legality.⁴⁶ Cottom states plainly, “Beauty hurts. It costs and demands money,” and women are expected to leverage what they have to achieve that which they desire.⁴⁷

Belle begins to break down the structures of beauty—its stipulated gendered expectations of behavior, its claims to aspirational status, and its hollow interiors—by reflecting on aspects of her adolescence. The men ask about Belle’s childhood aspirations. She shares that she “used to write stories about princesses and girls.” Her mood brightens after they bring up *The Princess Bride* (dir. Rob Reiner). Sensing that Belle is becoming more comfortable, the men offer her clothes to put on, which she reveals were her father’s. They excavate a few other details about Belle: she admires the film *Erin Brockovich* (2000, dir. Steven Soderbergh), enjoyed dressing eccentrically with her sister growing up, and continues to wear clothes that belonged to her dad whom she describes as being funny, affectionate, and unconditionally supportive. The fact that these personal and familial details supply little relevant meaning to the viewer demonstrates the challenging predicament of the

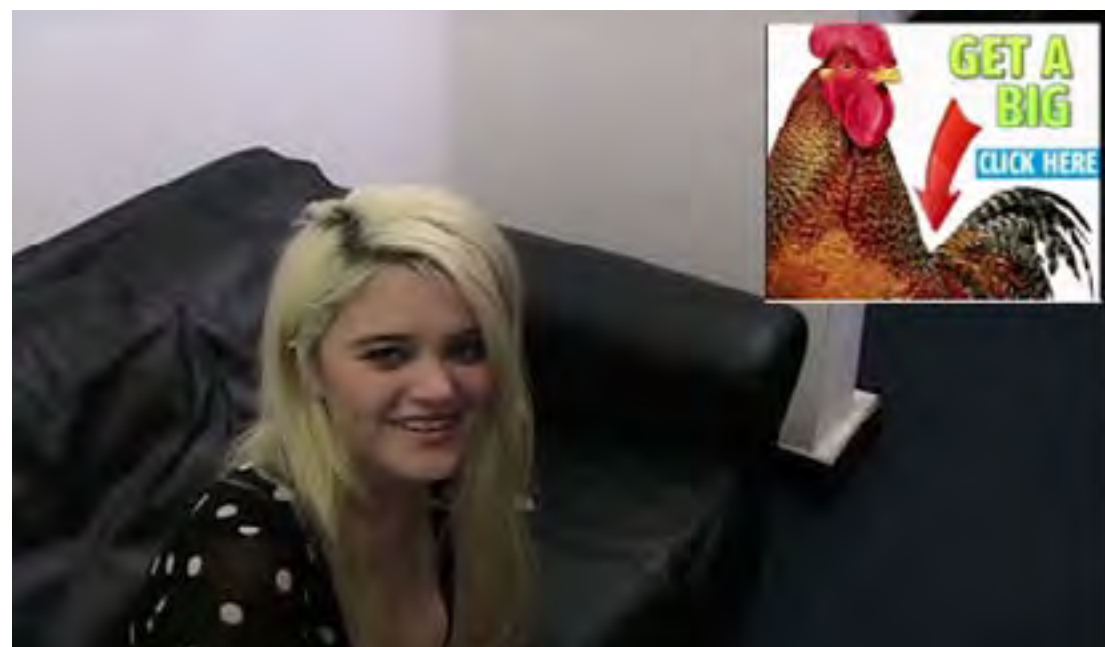


Figure 16: "Crystal" (Sky Ferreira)



Figure 17

curious female's task: in order to be considered serious or "authentic," she must display a perceivable enthusiasm and willingness to expose more and more personal information, though, through the act of personal exposure, she becomes an overly-specific and thus un-generalizable figure whose utility to the production at hand is not entirely clear.⁴⁸ For Belle, performing beauty becomes an overwhelming task but one that she confronts with seriousness, never refusing a question and offering more substantial responses than her counterparts Nikki and Tara. The men conclude the meeting warmly, suggesting ongoing contact and future meetings.

Crystal's Critique

Crystal's interview suggests ways in which industry-newcomers negotiate their personal needs, social stigmatization, and definitions of the branded "Self as Enterprise" required in pornographic work.⁴⁹

After Crystal (Sky Ferreira) reveals that it is her first time doing "this kind of work," the men ask, "Have you told any of your friends about this? Would they think you were a little bit crazy? How does that make you feel when someone calls you crazy?" One interviewer brings the camcorder towards Crystal's right side from an encroaching angle. "I guess it depends on the situation," she says, "like in an argument...they just run it down to the ground and then I believe it, I guess, that maybe I am..." She meets the looming perspective knowingly, flashing a smile as a pop-up proclaims, "get a bigger [image of a rooster] – click here" (fig. 16). An interviewer responds, "I don't think you're crazy." "You don't know me," Crystal replies before a staticky transition moves the scene back to the original viewpoint from the corner of the room, as if resetting the scene (fig. 17). Compared to the start of the video, the colors are now more saturated, heightening a sense

of cinematic artifice as though to bend, correct or otherwise overcome Crystal's combative statement.

After the scene transitions once again to find Crystal now wearing a grey hoodie-sweatshirt as the men ask about her "big breasts," the interview focuses on Crystal's experiences of feeling misunderstood in youth and adolescence. She opens up about trials growing up: getting reprimanded by teachers for "inappropriate" schoolwork, teased by peers after developing breasts, and beginning to date, hating and being kicked out of school, and suffering chronic feelings of shyness. The men attentively affirm her innocence in these scenarios and offer positive assurance: "I think you're a really special person who isn't crazy at all." After attempting to comfort Crystal by convincing her of her beauty, unique "aura" and cuteness. She accepts their "compliments" until they call her cute, at which point she becomes visibly frustrated, pulling her hood over her head and covering the remainder of her face with her hands—this they also find "cute." Towards the end of the interview, new editing effects seem to blur the line between image and Crystal's internal state, while at the same time rendering her distant, abstracted; an intensely-zoomed-in, out-of-focus lens creates a hazy image of Crystal's eyes, darkened by shadow and makeup (fig. 18).

Curious Female Casting Couch reaches a climactic and precipitous ending when Crystal asks if they have daughters, effectively turning the interrogating lens onto the men behind the camera. One becomes furious, beratingly calling her question "out of line," and commands her to leave. Crystal responds, "What boundaries are there to this stuff—You're the one with the little camera! This is porn, nothing's out of line." In the series' final moments, Crystal flips the CFCC script by posing her own cutting question. The men's failure to provide answers serves to underscore the performance and emotional labors of the *Curious* women.



Figure 18



Figure 19: Edouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863, oil on canvas, 51.4 in x 74.8 in

Crystal (and Rachel's) challenge to the gendered, racialized and classed definitions of beauty and performance reflect the histories of value placed upon social critique and art criticism in modern culture, as seen in Édouard Manet's *Olympia* (1863) that famously placed an explosive social critique in the "dirty" hands of the female courtesan figure (fig. 19). *Olympia's* stiffened neck looks out towards the viewer confrontationally, although critics described her body as dead, sick, even animalistic, or in other words, anything but human, the interesting point being that, in many ways, she looks more uncomfortably "real" than the Venuses of the academic past.

Crystal's interview foregrounds the lived experiences of stigmatization, which the casting-couch genre—in its obsession with amateurism—fuels off in its prying and judgmental tactics. Sex workers must navigate unstable economies, which compound the emotional weights of financial, safety, and legal insecurities as well as social stigmatization. Although the so-called "gig economy" is often considered a relatively recent economic development, Berg stresses how "hustling gigs" are only a new way-of-life for the white middle-class who now "find elusive the stability that once seemed an entitlement of their socioeconomic status," and she points to scholarship that reveals how working-class people of color, and women in particular, have been competing in gig economies from the margins of society since long before the economic restructurings of the mid-twentieth century.⁵⁰ Crystal's performance demonstrates how the abilities to scrutinize the conditions of one's gig-opportunities, risking dismissal and loss of pay, are available only to those for whom this work provides only supplementary income.

Conclusion

The declining popularity of the casting-couch genre in recent years has coincided with the social progresses of the MeToo movement, in addition to increasing opportunities outside of studio systems.⁵¹ On media-subscription platforms such as OnlyFans, Patreon, and Substack, performers create custom virtual content to share on an updating media-feed. The mid 2010's peak of the genre and following declining popularity can further be explained, in part, by the momentous attraction of celebrity and influencer culture online that similarly garners its appeal from the perceived blending of personal and professional boundaries via consumable media. These tastes are not an exclusively modern phenomenon, however. Susan Buck-Morss has explained how during the nineteenth century human sexuality became increasingly commodified within the workings of capitalism, stating that "to desire the fashionable, purchasable woman-as-thing is to desire exchange-value itself, that is, the very essence of capitalism."⁵²

Exploring cultural trends towards social media interactivity, aspirational living, and online enterprise used by the amateur, alt-porn website MakeLoveNotPorn.tv, Stephen Maddison writes that the paradoxical appeals to agency and responsible self-management in entrepreneurial societies reflect "the conditions of immaterial [i.e. virtual] sex, where libidinal, emotional and physiological energies, desires, and sensations designate terms of human capital."⁵³

The global accessibility of free streaming pornography raises many concerns, particularly for children and young people in areas with conservative sex education policies. Unfortunately for those who seek to limit or control pornography, the lack of global internet regulations has greatly diminished the ability of political or state actors to influence pornography consumption.⁵⁴

In 2016, Utah became the first state to pass legislation declaring pornography a public health issue or crisis, and as of 2021, more than 14 states in the US have passed similar legislation. Emily Rothman's book *Pornography and Public Health* (2021) reviews the claims and supporting research cited in these pieces of legislation and concludes that more scholarly research and review are needed to determine the causal relationships legislators theorize between pornography and "commercial sexual exploitation, compulsive pornography use and sexual violence," among other concerns.⁵⁵ Rothman notes that these motions seldom consider the experiences of those working in pornography.

Sex industries have continued to experience foundational shifts due, in part, to ever-increasing rates of social media and internet engagement; these developments were exacerbated by the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵⁶ Workers are forced to adapt business practices to changing conditions of safety and commerce.⁵⁷ With the recent decline of the studio system, pornography work, including behind-the-scenes production work, is exclusively independently contracted. This presents arduous challenges for workers in obtaining essential resources such as insurance, unemployment benefits, sick pay, regulated working hours, social security, and retirement plans.⁵⁸

Curious Female Casting Couch offers updates to the art legacies of Marina Abramović and Andrea Fraser in the digital age by creating art that serves both critical and social purposes. Like Manet's *Olympia*, the *Curious* women do not only represent the bodies of those who engage in sex work but their cunning stares and shielding gestures communicate visceral realities of what it feels like not only to be considered for sale but continuously evaluated on the level of the compelling nature of your job performance. Leah Rachel's experiments with concepts of affectual labor demonstrate how not only performance talent but emotional energy,

networking sensibility, and business expertise are demanded to sustain a life in creative industries (whether that's creating art or pornography) and turns the camera lens towards the professional and affectual economies that provision today's free entertainments.

Notes

1. Although the dialogue was largely improvised, pre-production preparation for the CFCC interviews included the female participants establishing “emotional trigger-points” with the interviewers which they would steer towards in conversation. Interview with the author, March 22, 2021.
2. Spanish curator, philosopher and Trans-activist Paul B. Preciado engages sociologist Maurizio Lazzarato’s thinking to discuss how characteristics previously labeled under “feminine labor,” such as flexibility, complete availability, high level of adaptability, vulnerability, and talent for improvisation are associated with sex workers, but these traits are becoming increasingly demanded in contemporary workforces. Paul B. Preciado, *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, trans. Bruce Benderson (New York: The Feminist Press, 2008), 295-296; see also Rosemary Hennessey, *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism* (Routledge, 2000), 108-09.
3. Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure and the “Frenzy of the Visible”* (University of California Press, 1989), 68-70.
4. Julia Bryan-Wilson, “Dirty Commerce: Art Work and Sex Work since the 1970s,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 23, no. 2 (2012): 76-77, 84-85, 87-88, 91, 94, 96-97, 100.
5. Brian McNair, *Striptease Culture: Sex, Media and the Democratization of Desire* (Routledge, 2002), 38-39.
6. The OED traces the origins of the use of the term ‘pornography’ from Ancient Greek to describe “all the lower classes of art,” referring in a 1842 Dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities (London, William Smith). “Pornography,” OED Online, Oxford University Press, accessed April 01, 2022, <https://www-oed-com.ezproxy.lib.utah.edu/view/Entry/148012?redirectedFrom=pornography>; Walter Kendrick, *The Secret Museum: Pornography In Modern Culture* (University of California Press, 1997), 221.
7. McNair, *Striptease Culture*, 51-52.

8. Susanna Paasonen, Kaarina Nikunen, and Laura Saarenmaa, “Pornification and the Education of Desire,” in *Pornification: Sex and Sexuality in Media Culture*, 1st ed. (New York: Berg, 2007), 2.
9. Steven Niedbala, “The Ontology of the Pornographic Image: The Meese Commission and the Rise of Sexual Media,” Grey Room 64, (Summer 2016): 104, 106-107, 120; McNair, *Striptease Culture*, 58-62.
10. Lauren DeLand, “A Fig Leaf for Jeff Koons: Pornography, Privacy, and “Made in Heaven,”” *Criticism* 60, no. 3 (Summer 2018): 296-303; Richard Meyer, “The Jesse Helms Theory of Art,” October 104, (Spring 2003): 131-148.
11. Amanda Hess, “Dance, I Said — Dance! And Leave the Package on the Porch,” *New York Times*, February 11, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/11/arts/amazon-tiktok-box-delivery.html>.
12. Gita Jackson, “Dystopic TikTok Trend Demands Amazon Workers Dance for Surveillance Cameras,” *Vice News*, February 3, 2022, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/z3nqn4/dystopic-tiktok-trend-demands-amazon-workers-dance-for-surveillacameras>.
13. Heather Berg, *Porn Work: Sex, Labor and Late Capitalism* (The University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 16-18, 106; Charlotte Shane, “OnlyFans Isn’t Just Porn ;),” *New York Times Magazine*, May 21, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/05/18/magazine/onlyfans-porn.html>.
14. Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media* (McGraw Hill, 1964), 64-65.
15. Bryan-Wilson, “Dirty Commerce,” 76-77.
16. Bryan-Wilson, “Dirty Commerce,” 99-100. Guy Trebay, “The Way We Live Now: Encounter; Sex, Art and Videotape,” *New York Times*, June 13, 2004.
17. Andrea Fraser & Praxis, “Andrea Fraser (In Conversation),” *Brooklyn Rail*, October 2004, <https://brooklynrail.org/2004/10/art/andrea-fraser>.
18. 18 Rachel, interview.
19. Curtis Silver, “Pornhub 2017 Year in Review: Insights Report Reveals Statistical Proof We Love Porn,” *Forbes*, January 09, 2018, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/curtissilver/2018/01/09/pornhub-2017-year-in-review-insights->

report-reveals-statistical-proof-we-love-porn/#134e45f324f5.

20. Nicholas Kristof, "The Children of Pornhub," *New York Times*, December 4, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/04/opinion/sunday/pornhub-rape-trafficking.html?searchResultPosition=3>; Nathan Munn, "Inside Pornhub: In the early days of the company, I was tasked with content moderation. I was not very good at it." February 23, 2022, <https://www.theverge.com/c/22925906/pornhub-mindgeek-content-moderation>.
21. At the onset of the project, Rachel hoped unsuspecting internet viewers would find themselves on the webpage, engaging with the videos with a false sense of their contents. Rachel, interview.
22. These brief images appear to address the economic realities of porn economies: that free pornography sites require accessible, often-virus-susceptible software and advertisement deals. Kelly Dennis explains how pornography downloaders and chatroom participants often suffer ostracism in mainstream society, due to the ability of these computer actions to transmit viruses, particularly following the loaded language of virality in the wakes of the AIDS epidemic. Dennis, *Art/Porn*, 154.
23. When deceitful violations of agreements occur, pornographic subjects are often helpless to prevent the virtual distribution of their work. For instance, Girls Do Porn, a casting-couch video production company, was tricking women into thinking their performances would only be viewable to DVD-purchasing costumers in New Zealand and Australia, when in actuality, the producer uploaded content onto free sites such as Pornhub. In November 2019, six affiliates of the production company were federally charged with accounts of sex trafficking by force, fraud, and coercion, and at least three guilty pleas have been entered so far. Cole, "Girls Do Porn Goes to Trial Over Allegations Women Were Tricked Into Videos" *Vice News*, June 28, 2019, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/3k3wdk/girls-do-porn-goes-to-trial-over-allegations-women-were-tricked-into-videos>; James King, "Backroom Casting Couch's Anonymous "Reality" Porn Creep Has Herpes," *Phoenix New Times*, June 11, 2011, [https://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/news/backroom-casting-couchs-anonymous-reality-porn-creep-has-herpes-](https://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/news/backroom-casting-couchs-anonymous-reality-porn-creep-has-herpes-6639769?showFullText=true)

6639769?showFullText=true.

24. Bryan-Wilson, "Art Work and Sex Work," 85.
25. In 1999, Judy Chicago described "an art system that privileges male artists, as evidenced by the centuries of discrimination against women artists; the omission of their achievements from the canon of art history; and the fact that even today, only five percent of the art found in the collections of American museums consists of work by female artists." Chicago and Lucie-Smith, *Women and Art: Contested Territory* (New York: Watson-Guption, 1999), 10.
26. Jennifer Moorman has described an "American adult video industry made up of many small producers and a few vertically integrated studios, while a handful of powerful, large-scale companies including Pulse, Anabolic, Vivid, Hustler, and Evil Angel, control industry-wide DVD distribution," although her essay focuses on complicating distinctions between "mainstream" and "alt" pornographies. However, scholars such as Heather Berg detail the recent dispersal of an integrated porn industry by 2019 and devotes her book to detailing diverse business strategies employed by independently contracted performers. Jennifer Moorman, "Selling a Rebellion: The Industrial Logic of Mainstream Alt-Porn," *Camera Obscura* 95, vol. 32, no. 2 (2017): 34-35, 39-45, 52; Berg, *Porn Work*, 18.
27. Berg, *Porn Work*, 13, 95-97, 108. Pornhub's Content Partner Program allows studios to gain exposure using free preview videos which aim to drive traffic to paid-subscription sites. The company does not compensate studios for video views but does offer pay benefits to individual performers who manage content-profiles relative to their views and ad interaction rates. Pornhub, Content Partner Program, <https://help.pornhub.com/hc/en-us/articles/360048496113-What-is-the-Content-Partner-Program->; Pornhub, Model Programs, Earnings and Payments, accessed December 19, 2021, <https://help.pornhub.com/hc/en-us/articles/360046090414-Earnings-and-Payments>.
28. Berg, *Porn Work*, 81-82.
29. In a sociological study on how representations of nude bodies are

- considered and understood in visual culture, Dr. Beth Eck found exhibition context to be the most significant framework which shapes perceptions of an image of a nude body as art or pornography. Across the board, participants in her study considered images of women in magazines such as Hustler and Playboy to be pornographic, but unequivocally accepted paintings of nude females as “art.” Jennifer Tyburczy employs a similar perspective in her analysis of histories of erotic exhibition. Using Gustave Courbet’s *Origins of the World* and Fraser’s *Untitled* as case studies, Tyburczy examines patterns of curatorial practices in structuring experiences of sexual art, which is oftentimes managed in ways which flatter or otherwise boast the status of its collectors. Amelia Jones, *Body Art / Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 34; Beth A. Eck, “Nudity and Framing: Classifying Art, Pornography, Information, and Ambiguity,” *Sociological Forum* 16, no. 4 (December 2001): 603-32; Jennifer Tyburczy, “Hard-Core Collecting and Erotic Exhibitionism” in *Sex Museums: The Politics and Performance of Display* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 39-64.
30. Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Duke University Press, 2013), 85.
 31. Owen G. Parry, “Fictional Realness: Towards a colloquial performance practice,” *Performance Research* 20, no. 5 (2015): 108.
 32. Janet Mock, *Redefining Realness: My Path to Womanhood, Identity, Love & So Much More* (New York: Atria, 2014), 116.
 33. *Ibid.*, 116, 147.
 34. Berg, *Porn Work*, 64-75, 79-81.
 35. *Ibid.*, 77-78.
 36. Martin Hartmann and Axel Honneth, “Paradoxes of Capitalism,” *Constellations* 13, no. 1 (2006): 45.
 37. Lois McNay, “Self as Enterprise: Dilemmas of Control and Resistance Foucault’s *The Birth of Biopolitics*,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 26, no. 6 (2009): 55-63; Foucault, *Biopolitics*, 241.
 38. *Ibid.*, 241.

39. McNair, *Striptease Culture*, 58-62. See also: W. Hamilton, “The Mainstream Flirts with Pornography Chic,” *New York Times*, March 21, 1999; Rosalind Gill, “Supersexualize Me!: Advertising and the ‘Midriffs’” in *Mainstreaming Sex: The Sexualization of Western Culture*, ed. Feona Attwood (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd, 2009), 94.
40. Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 295-296; Hennessey, *Profit and Pleasure*, 108-09.
41. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 111.
42. Doyle, *Difficulty and Emotion*, 91; Laura Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996.)
43. Charlotte Shane explains how the precise username-search function of the OnlyFans interface maintains harsh barriers to entry, illustrating the importance of performer pseudonyms for even minimal financial gain. Shane, “OnlyFans.”
44. Michele White, *The Body and the Screen: Theories of Internet Spectatorship* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 62.
45. Interestingly, Sky Ferreira’s (“Crystal”) career in indie-pop/rock music was enabled, in large part, by the artist’s teen modeling career, which provided the funding for the production of her critically acclaimed debut album after she scrapped a previous heavily-major-label-influenced pop album. Ferreira’s successful music career is a testament to the powers of monetizing off one’s beauty to pursue creative projects. Tressie McMillan Cottom, *Thick: And Other Essays* (New York: The New Press, 2019): 62; Marielle Anas, “Sky Ferreira on Her Debut ‘Night Time, My Time’ and Drugs,” *Rolling Stone*, Oct. 30, 2013, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/sky-ferreira-on-her-debut-night-time-my-time-and-drugs-89117/>.
46. Preciado points out how criminalization of sex work allows sex and pornography transactions to be performed at lower costs, comparing the sex industry to the prison-industrial-complex in which workers are similarly deprived of rights entirely and moral entitlements are expropriated ownership of products. Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 290, 316.

47. Cottom, *Thick*, 56.
48. Susan Sontag weighs the popular view that general figures are necessary for imaginative pleasure in pornographic texts, writing that “pornography, by contrast [from literature] disdains fully formed persons (psychology and social portraiture), is oblivious to the question of motives and their credibility and reports only the motiveless tireless transactions of depersonalized organs.” Sontag, “The Pornographic Imagination” in *Styles of Radical Will* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1967), 39-40.
49. Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 290; Rothman, *Pornography and Public Health*, 198.
50. Berg, *Porn Work*, 97; Louis Hyman, *Temp: How American Work, American Business, and the American Dream Became Temporary* (Viking, 2018); Isabell Lorey, *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*, trans. Allen Derieg (London: Verso, 2015); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 176.
51. According to industry-representative-reported data published by Vice News, “as a search term, ‘casting’ saw its highest months in December 2011, September 2014 and April 2015 [before] becoming a [designated] category in 2016, [then] visits to the category peaked in December 2016. Since then, visits to the category page have been consistently falling.” Cole, “Re-Examining ‘Casting Couch’ Porn in the Age of #MeToo;” Shane, “OnlyFans;” Berg, *Porn Work*, 96, 126-138.
52. Susan Buck-Morss, “The Flaneur, the Sandwichman and the Whore: The Politics of Loitering,” *New German Critique* no. 39, (Autumn, 1986): 99-140.
53. Stephen Maddison, “‘Make Love Not Porn’: Entrepreneurial Voyeurism, Agency, and Affect,” in *Networked Affect*, ed. Ken Hillis, Susanna Paasonen and Michael Petit (MIT Press, 2015): 161.
54. McNair, *Striptease Culture*, 57.
55. Rothman, *Pornography and Public Health*, 13-15, 36-37, 41, 44-45, 82-84, 102-103, 118-119, 122-123.
56. Berg, *Porn Work*, 17-18.

57. In August 2021, OF announced plans to outlaw pornographic content from its server, later backing tracking from this plan upon public outcry and more serious business analysis. Shane, “Stop Asking Sex Workers to Fix Sex Work,” *The Cut/New York*, August 24, 2021, <https://www.thecut.com/2021/08/onlyfans-stop-asking-sex-workers-to-fix-sex-work.html>.
58. Emily F. Rothman, *Pornography and Public Health* (Oxford University Press, 2021): 197.

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Male Gaze

Melody “Melody A Dit” Thomasson

I am a French artist based in Berlin that goes by “Melody A Dit.” I play with time, symbols, and influences through the practice of paper and digital collage.

Far from a hazardous and unexpected process, my works are the fruit of my reflections and personal interrogations inspired by the passing of time and the pages of magazines I flip through. Oscillating between real and imaginary, retro and contemporary influences, my collages question reality in abstraction: they sublimate the banal into the marvelous. It all started after a heavy jaw operation. In full convalescence and unable to communicate with others, I returned to the practice, which very quickly became therapeutic. It was a new language and another way of expressing myself. The “Melody A Dit” project (translated to “melody said” in English) was born.

Over time, my collages began to engage and reflect on the world around me. Feminism, ecology, parity, love, education, and the relationship to oneself and to others are my favorite leitmotifs. This is why some artworks denounce, others divert, but all communicate the notions of imagination and dreams.

With the collage *Male Gaze*, which features a naked woman paradoxically covered with the gaze of others, I depict the emotion felt when she dares to unveil herself in the public space. I remember with compassion the woman I was before I became actively involved in feminism: the one who wore long sleeves in the middle of summer to get home safely. With this

satirical work, I aim to open people’s eyes: first, to urge women to finally have control over their bodies, and then for people to stop objectifying women.





Dyke Nite

Lydia Moore

I love to poke fun at serious subjects, such as sex and love, feminism, fatphobia, religion, and mental illness. Color and perception have recently gained my interest, and I've experimented with materials that play into these elements.

When I create a collage, the art most often starts with the source materials. Searching through used bookstores for vintage gems is the beginning of a great collage. Then I piece together words, themes, and emotions that contribute generously to my cut pieces.

The Dyke Nite events in Baltimore are the nights I feel 100% myself. I am away from men's gaze and free to dance, play, and party as I am. I wanted to commemorate that in this piece. Each figure is taken from a male artist's work and transplanted into *Dyke Nite*—dancing or lounging under the disco ball with no men to tell them otherwise.





The Asexual Manifesto

Maria Markiewicz

Let's abolish the family. The couple form. The girlfriends and the boyfriends. The husbands and the wives. Marriages, dates, and hook-ups. Anniversaries. Valentines Days. Dating apps. Monogamy and Polygamy. Engagements. Feeling guilty for what you do and what you don't do. Having children. For who you are and who you are not. Feeling pressured to have children or to settle down. Let us abolish the patriarcho-hetero-couple-sexual regime and create a new relationality. Let us love who we want and the way we want it. Let us have sex or not. Let us fall in love or not. Don't glance in our beds making us feel like we fail to live. Like we are lacking. Because we are not full of absences but rather of excesses that make us who we are. There is nothing wrong with you who never had sex. You who never was in a couple. You who is in a relationship but feels like it somehow *does not feel right*. You who has sex only to please your partner. You who masturbates but does not perceive it as a 'sexual' act. You who always feels different. You who pretends to *get it*, but who never does. You who just discovered that there are more people 'born this way' and finally feels relieved. You who still thinks that is alone in the world and feels broken. You who struggles to answer difficult personal questions, feeling like there is never something to talk about. You who does not fit. You who does not conform. You who lives and who wants to live differently. You who makes others uncomfortable. You who is uncomfortable and who only learns how to become comfortable with yourself. You who must blaze the trails and always explain yourself to others. Always justify, always make

others comfortable with their own uncomfortableness. You who never sees yourself in books and movies. You who sees pleasure differently, who loves differently, and lives differently. But what is this difference all about? Aren't we all the same after all?

We are not missing out and we are not a *pathology* that has to forgo treatment. We are not *repressed* or *dysfunctional*. We are not unhappy, lonely, or antisocial. We don't want your help or your pity. We don't want your *therapies* or your *medications*. Let us live and love (or not) in our own way. We won't be the next monsters in your circus, the next trophies in your psychoanalytico-medical cabinet of curiosities. No shock treatments or conversion therapies can change who we are, yet we don't seem to find a home anywhere. Everyone is afraid. The left and right are trembling. What are you so afraid of? We won't bring you back to the Middle Ages or take you straight to the Victorian era. We are one. We will march with you and chant with you and protest with you and fight for sexual freedom with you. But the freedom to have sex with whom you want and the way you want it also has to mean the freedom not to do so. Some people like to take recreational drugs, and some don't. Some like spicy food, others, not so much. Some prefer books to movies. Others, the exact opposite. Some like to feel the adrenaline kicking in in the morning, others value their peace and quiet. "Some people spend a lot of time thinking about sex, others little. Some people like to have a lot of sex, others little or none." It's about time that we normalise and accept these axioms, without feeling that something is being taken away from us. That the hard-fought struggle is lost, and that we are being dragged back to a dark place that we all wanted to flee so badly. We must resist the powers that try to 'put us back in our place,' the 'good' and the 'bad' sexuality, but we must do so together. The right not to have sex is not synonymous with chastity for all. It means

more *freedom* to be oneself. More freedom to live and to love. It means more freedom in defining what it means to live and to love. It means more freedom for *all*.



Is Sex Dead? Towards A Radical Understanding of Asexuality

Maria Markiewicz

“A society in which all couples separate would be a revolutionary society, perhaps a society of total revolution.”

-Paul Preciado, *An Apartment on Uranus: Chronicles of the Crossing*

“The problem is not to discover in oneself the truth of sex but rather to use sexuality henceforth to arrive at a multiplicity of relationships.”

-Michel Foucault, *Friendship as a Way of Life*

In the beginning there was sex... Without it nothing was made that has been made... By creating the imaginary element that is ‘sex,’ *the deployment of sexuality* established one of its essential internal operating principles: “the desire for sex — the desire to have it, to have access to it, to discover it, to liberate it, to articulate it in discourse, to formulate it in truth.”⁷⁶ Thus, sex was constituted as something desirable, something worth “dying for.”⁷⁷ It was constituted as something given, natural, innate, and irrefutable, something that everyone *has* and that everyone *does*. In a 2002 documentary on Jacques Derrida, Derrida was asked what he would most like to see in a film about the lives of Kant, Hegel, and Heidegger. After some careful thought, he answered: “La vie sexuelle” — their sexual lives.⁷⁸ But what if there is nothing to see and nothing to talk about? Is it sexuality that is to be liberated, or is it humanity to be liberated from sexuality? When humanity and sexuality became synonymous? In the late

nineteenth century in the West, sexologists and psychoanalysts began to see sexual desire as a positive and natural part of human existence.⁷⁹ Sexual satisfaction was necessary for the maintenance of heterosexual marriage. Succumbing to capitalism and its logic of production, sexuality thus revealed itself as the *bio-power* that kept the system running. Controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production, the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes, constant medicalization and psychologization... The miracle invention of the modern heterosexual couple guaranteed the parent/child bond and the bond between state and citizen. But if sexuality is not a biological given, then what is it?

Postmodernity managed to challenge and overthrow almost everything that we knew so far, but not sex. To put it differently, sex seems to be the only fortress that managed to endure the 'posts-' siege. What would it mean to be post-sex? Is there anything post-sex? Can one ever be post-sex? The new sociology of sexuality has taught us that sexuality is a historically specific configuration that could only be properly understood within its own cultural context. This revolutionary approach, also known as 'social constructionism,' is largely associated with Michel Foucault, and was popularised in his book, *The History of Sexuality*, the most emblematic and influential text of the new scholarship on sex. Thus, "sexuality is as much a human product as are diets, methods of transportation, systems of etiquette, forms of labour, types of entertainment, and modes of oppression." It changes *with time* and *over time*. Therefore, we might need a new history of sexuality and a new "history of the present" that take into account current sexual patterns and current sexual cultures. These indeed "can and do change," and new patterns, cultures, and sexualities emerge, co-existing and overlapping with each other in often confusing configurations. Hence, in this paper, I will focus on one of these emerging

sexualities, namely, asexuality, theorising and positioning it as a valid identity and sexual orientation. To do this, I will use feminist and queer studies frameworks. By 'queering asexuality,' I want to designate a form of intersectional critique grounded in politics of antinormativity. "At its most expansive, queer studies imagined a federation of the shamed, the alienated, the destitute, the illegitimate, and the hated," and this is how they are used herein.

The Asexual Subject: "A social action not performed; a path not chosen"⁸⁰

Since there is already some literature concerning the definition of the term 'asexual' and its characterisation, I will not discuss it here.⁸¹ What I am more interested in is not asexuality per se, seen as an identity and a valid sexual orientation, but asexuality as a transgressive idea that would help us to 'un-think' and challenge sexuality, examining the changes that happened within it in the last couple of years or so. Therefore, asexuality is understood here in its most radical sense — as a permanent and voluntary disinterest in sexual activity involving another individual and as living a perpetually uncoupled life. Though I acknowledge that human sexuality is never a constant, rather, it fluctuates throughout one's lifespan, perceiving asexuality in this absolute way will help me to challenge sexuality further. Because I am more interested in the idea itself rather than its lived reality, by rejecting this linearity I do not mean to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' asexuals, or even between asexuals and non-asexuals. Asexuality belongs to those who identify with and make use out of it. Moreover, because no one likes being spoken about like they are 'not in the room,' whilst they are there indeed, actively participating in the conversation, I

want to briefly say that I consider myself to be asexual. Even though I do not like labelling my sexuality, 'asexual' is the umbrella term that probably best describes me. Hence, the issues described here are the issues I and many others face every day. "If a person is unhappy because they live in a world that is inhospitable to asexual people, we need to change the world, not the person."⁸² And this applies not only to asexuals, but to all those who transgress binaries, invent new ways of being *with* and *in* the world, and who have the courage to live their lives differently. Now we can start.

Asexuality is often perceived as an 'absence' — the absence of sexual practice, the absence of sexual desire, or the absence of sexual attraction to one another. It entered the limelight of scientific and sexual concern in 2004, when Anthony Bogaert's research opened up its academic study and rendered asexuality culturally visible.⁸³ Before that, there were scarcely any interrogations of it in its own right, what Ela Przybylo, one of the most prominent asexuality scholars, argues as follows:

"That asexuality mattered so very little prior to this last decade, and then suddenly rapidly acquired an abundance of signification, demonstrates, first, that it has become culturally relevant and intelligible and, second, that this intelligibility is reliant on a particular cultural nexus."⁸⁴

This would not only mean that sexuality is indeed historically conditioned and changes in different societal contexts but would also point out to the fact that we might have reached a new stage in its development — a stage of excess, oversaturation and collapsing libidinal investments. However, let us go back to the notion of an 'absence' now and explore 'peak libido' later. According to Kristin S. Scherrer, who has

conducted a study on how people come to terms with and negotiate their asexual identities, coming to identify as asexual requires that individuals "reject a widely held cultural ideology of sexuality as biologically based and ubiquitous. Therefore, asexual, as much as queer, can gesture towards what Adrienne Rich has termed *compulsory (hetero)sexuality*,⁸⁵ opening a "mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances, and resonances, challenging sexual categorisation." In other words, it suggests a break from a biopolitical sexuality and an attempt to think intimacy in a way that is not affixed to neoliberal modes of relating. Understood in that way, *sexuality* is a "technique of biopower that invents normalcy and deviancy toward forwarding the interests of colonialism, whiteness, wealth, ability, and normality, at the expense of sexuality's others."⁸⁶ Asexuality then would not only be a way of undoing sexuality, but also a way of exceeding the boundaries of the hetero/homo binary and a way to rethink sexual categories and the concept of sex as such.

Tracing the erasure: asexuality's 'absent presence'

Has asexuality always existed or is it a new phenomenon? Often perceived as an 'absence' or a 'lack,' asexuality went unacknowledged in most of the writing on contemporary human sexuality. But, as Foucault has already taught us, "there is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses."⁸⁷ Therefore, even though asexuality is becoming an increasingly prominent political category, its history largely remains to be written. We have to historicise asexuality and theorise its proximity to and distance from adjacent sexual formations, such as celibacy, singleness, ascetism, and friendship, and relationalities — familial, nonrelational, and nonsexual.

We have to search for it in history, literature and in the everyday, and we have to search for it queerly. What if female frigidity, so often dealt with within psychoanalytical discourses, was essentially asexuality? What about Boston marriages, especially those of aromantic nature? What about *anasthesia sexualis*, so elaborately described in Krafft-Ebing's writings?⁸⁸ When 'not having sex' began to be perceived as a disorder requiring treatment?

Before 1800, there was sex but no *sexuality*. Sexual habits were not connected to the sense of self or psyche of a person, and the term 'sexuality' itself was used by botanists to describe plants' sexual organs.⁸⁹ Slowly, there began to emerge a political, economic, and technical incitement to talk about sex.

"One had to speak of sex; One had to speak of it as of a thing to be not simply condemned or tolerated but *managed*, inserted into systems of utility, regulated for the greater good of all, made to function according to an optimum. Sex was not something one simply judged; it was a thing one administered."⁹⁰

Medicine began to analyse sexuality with regards to the nervous disorders; next came psychiatry, when it set out to discover the aetiology of mental illnesses, focusing its gaze first on 'excess,' then onanism, then frustration, then "frauds against procreation."⁹¹ All those social controls were undertaken to protect, separate, and forewarn, signalling perils everywhere, awakening people's attention, calling for diagnoses, piling up reports, and organising various therapies. Legal sanctions against minor perversions were multiplied and sexual irregularity was annexed to mental illness. From childhood to old age, a norm of sexual development

was defined, and all possible deviations were carefully described, laying the groundwork for the organisation of pedagogical controls and medical treatments. All this, according to Foucault, was motivated by one basic concern: "to ensure population, to reproduce labour capacity, to perpetuate the form of social relations, in short, to constitute a sexuality that is economically useful and politically conservative."⁹² Asexuality was never a part of this (re)productive discourse, which might explain why it was always placed on the margins. Though it indeed figures within both Krafft-Ebing's and Kinsey's reports, two studies that set the tone for the future explorations and theorisations of human sexuality, it is not explored there as such.

In Krafft-Ebing's *Psychopathia Sexualis*, inspired by evolutionary ideas and committed to the idea of sexual perversion as a form of biosocial degeneracy, Richard von Krafft-Ebing catalogued the cases of nine men and one woman who had never felt sexual desire and therefore have 'suffered' from "the absence of sexual feeling" (*anaesthesia sexualis*).⁹³ Though tying sexuality to the survival of a species, Krafft-Ebing made sexuality central to one's identity; framing it as innate and universal enabled him to produce 'the need' to regulate sexual desire. Moreover, it also made not participating in pro-creative sexual practices not only considered sexually deviant, but also socially abnormal. Thus, he favoured an essentialist view of sexuality, in which sexuality is seen as a driving, instinctual force, whose characteristics are built into the biology of the human animal. For him, the drive was firmly male and heterosexual, 'an instinct' that must force its way out, either in the form of direct sexual expression or, if blocked, in the form of perversion or neuroses.⁹⁴ 'Not experiencing *libido*' seemed to him suspicious and almost inconceivable. Hence, Krafft-Ebing tried to find the sign of slightest abnormality in all ten of the cases he described.

However, to his great surprise, most of his analysands seem not only to be mentally and physically well, but also perfectly content with their ‘abnormal condition.’⁹⁵

More than fifty years after Krafft-Ebing has published his magnum opus, American sexologist Alfred Kinsey, much more liberal in his views on sexuality than his predecessor, has published his best-selling Kinsey Reports. In “Sexual Behaviour in the Human Male” and “Sexual Behaviour in the Human Female,” published in 1948 and in 1953 respectively, Kinsey has not only challenged conventional beliefs about sexuality, but also spoke about topics that were previously considered taboo.⁹⁶ After interviewing more than 5,300 males and 5,940 females (all of whom were white), Kinsey designed a six-point scale to measure a person’s overall balance of homo- and heterosexuality, taking into account both sexual experience and psychosexual reactions.

Although he considered sexuality to be fluid, homosexuality and heterosexuality in his study were constructed as innately opposite, despite acknowledging that they were changeable and not preclusive of each other. Heterosexuality was given the value of 0, homosexuality — the value of 6, whereas asexuality, or what Kinsey called “an absence of sexual response,” was marked as ‘X,’ being at the same time put ‘outside of normative sexuality.’⁹⁷ According to Kinsey, between one and four percent of his male interviewees were asexual, and between one and 19 percent of the female ones. Even though asexuality is mentioned in his study, it is not explored further — it took sexologists and researchers a further fifty years to discuss it at length. Nevertheless, asexuality’s absence from academic discourses is not the only ‘absence’ surrounding it. What about the presumed ‘absence’ of sexual desire? Can there be desire in no desire? In the second part of this essay, I will tackle these issues through

a Lacanian lens, comparing asexuality to anorexia. Though the latter is a disorder that has to be treated, they both have something in common — in both, something of the Other is annulled, food or a sexual intercourse, so that desire can be protected.

***Anorexia sexualis*: “eating nothing”⁹⁸ and a desire for no desire**

When Lacan speaks of anorexia, he distinguishes it as something other than simply a negation of activity. Thus, anorexia, similarly to asexuality, is not a drive that is negated or repressed, but a drive that gains satisfaction from “absence savoured as such.”⁹⁹ Though asexuality is critically absent from psychoanalytic theory and can even appear at times as something that goes against it, Freudian theory allows for its theorisation.

Understood psychoanalytically, asexuality would not only support Freud’s claim about the flexibility of sexual drives, but also about the possibility of satisfaction without an object-choice being made.¹⁰⁰ Asexuality is therefore a way of perpetuating desire through having no sexual desire. Since, according to Freudian-Lacanian theory, there is no possibility of a subject without libido, it is important to examine here how *absence* itself can become eroticised. When Lacan writes about lack as central to subject formation, he emphasises how sexuality occurs in the earliest experience of the breast as the lacking object of frustration when refused or absent for the child.¹⁰¹ This “eating nothing” makes the mother dependent on the child, thus creating an eroticised absence — the nothing here enters a “dialectic substitution for satisfaction.”¹⁰² Similar situation takes place in asexuality, where rather than ‘not desiring,’ the asexual actively ‘desires nothing’ in a dialectic that “allows for an engagement with the Other while at the same time avoiding a dependence for the

satisfaction of need which the real of bodily *jouissance* would entail.”¹⁰³ Hence, as Lacan would argue, *the libido has active effects in every instance*, even in the passive position.

If this resolves the libido-*no-libido* dilemma, what about the rest of the questions that arise when psychoanalysis and asexuality are confronted? Would the libidinal trends within asexuality be desexualised at the Oedipal stage or earlier, during the pre-Oedipal stage? How do we understand the latency period in regard to asexuality? Could asexuality be a form of extended, or even permanent, latency period? According to Freudian theory, latency period is a phase of sexual development in every subject which, to a greater or lesser extent, is the conscious experience of no sexual desire.¹⁰⁴ Thus, it could offer an example of “how a libidinal force can be operating and yet unnoticed while the subject is involved in a variety of non-sexual activities and experiences.”¹⁰⁵ If such a non-sexual focus can be attained during the latency period, is the subject able to extend it when this stage comes to an end? How can we understand asexuality as something that is productive rather than restricting? Something that has been repressed, not repressive? How can Lacanian *sinthome* help us to understand asexuality? And what about the Freudian concept of sublimation, where erotic is transferred into the cultural?

Sheila Cavanagh, in her queer reading of psychoanalysis, argues that the *sinthome* should be understood as “a changing narrative through which one can negotiate the aporias of sexual difference.”¹⁰⁶ By identifying with one’s ‘symptom,’ one creates a *sinthome* that supplements for the non-existent sexual relation. In Lacan’s year-long 1975-76 seminar, Lacan focused on James Joyce and his writings. From Joyce’s ‘art,’ he deducted a new and original definition of the symptom, that he rewrote as *sinthome* — he broke away from the symptom’s medical model and brought it closer

to a mathematical function. Defining *sinthome* as “the creative knotting together of the registers of the Symbolic, the Real (whose effect is the mixture of pain and pleasure Lacan calls *jouissance*), and the Imaginary,” he understood it as the trace of a unique way someone can come to be and enjoy one’s unconscious. This shift in Lacan’s thinking changed how he perceived the aim of the cure — the cure was no longer directed at removing the patients’ symptoms, but at letting them identify with their unique *sinthome* in order to enjoy it. For Lacan, Joyce, a gifted writer, personified the *sinthome* — his writings saved him from insanity, producing a supplement that held his psyche together. Similar process takes place in asexuality, when the subject uses the *sinthome* as a supplement for sexual abstinence. Such behaviour not only protects the ego and the libido from ‘*jouissance*’s infinitude,’ contributing to their self-preservation, but it also makes the libido more diffuse and creative, instead of primarily sexual.

Since “*protection against* stimuli is a more important function for the living organism than *reception of* stimuli,” human mental apparatus is programmed to keep the quantity of excitation present in it as low as possible or at least to keep it constant. Though the mind indeed has a strong tendency towards what Freud termed *the pleasure principle*, there exists also a *reality principle*, which allows for the abandonment of a number of possibilities of gaining satisfaction and for the temporary toleration of unpleasure as a step “on the long indirect road to pleasure.” Thus, in the traditional psychoanalytic account, the libido originates in the Id and requires the Ego and the Superego to tame it, steering it toward socially acceptable expressions. Such transformation of erotic into cultural happens during sublimation, which is nothing other than satisfaction of the drive without repression. According to Freud, diverting attention away from genitalia initiates a sublimation ‘in the direction of art,’ where

sublimation is understood as “an especially conspicuous feature of cultural development,” that makes it possible for higher psychical activities, scientific, artistic, or ideological, and plays “an important part in civilised life.” In Jean Laplanche’s words, it is “nothing but propping in reverse, *the return of the sexual to the nonsexual*.” Hence, as Tim Dean acknowledges in *Beyond Sexuality*, “we can have intensely pleasurable experiences and intimate relationships with verbal and visual forms even when these forms are not ostensibly erotic at all.” What is more, such relationships should not be considered secondary to sexual relationships, because they draw on the same libidinal sources and fantasies. Thus, rationality understood in that way raises the possibility that some people ‘love art’ in exactly the same way as others ‘love sex.’ It is only for historical reasons that “we aim at jouissance through sex, but this is a result of the deployment of sexuality, rather than an invariable necessity.”

The perplexed politics of asexuality

In an introduction to a recent republication of Andrei Platonov’s “The Anti-Sexus,” a fictional brochure advertising an electromagnetic masturbatory device promising to ‘relieve sexual urges in an efficient and hygienic manner,’ Aaron Schuster asks: “Is it sexuality that is to be liberated, delivered from moral prejudices and legal prohibitions, so that the drives are allowed a more open and fluid expression, or is it humanity to be liberated from sexuality, finally freed from its obscure dependencies and tyrannical constraints?” Although Platonov’s text is by no means anti-sex, contrarily to what its title might suggest, the questions posed by its translator seem to open a Pandora’s box from which an array of anti-sex arguments might burst. However, what if we decide to sit with these

questions, instead of immediately fighting them off, and look at sexuality differently? What if we decide to search for asexuality queerly, exploring its traces in early feminist organising, black activism, and other radical leftist interventions? Here it might be useful to look at asexuality in the context of celibacy, which, as Benjamin Kahan argues, should not be simply given up to the Right:

“Before we decide to cede celibacy to the Right, we might want to consider reclaiming the radical political potential that nineteenth- and twentieth-century artists and activists found in the practices of celibacy.”

Whilst celibacy, defined by Kahan as uncommitted renunciation of sex, should not be confused with asexuality, which is ‘an absence of desire,’ rather than its consensual renunciation, the two have something in common – they both resist compulsory sexuality and have the potential to reconfigure both gender and sexual systems of signification, showing that the ‘absent presence’ of sex does not equal repression.

With *Celibacies*, Kahan points out the fact that ‘sexuality without sex’ is central to Anglo-American modernist literature and to political and social strategies in US culture from 1840 to 1960s. By analysing Henry James’s *The Bostonians*, Valerie Solanas’ “SCUM Manifesto,” Andy Warhol’s Factory, and the writings of Harlem Renaissance religious leader, Father Divine, Kahan argues that the Asexuality Movement “constitutes the most visible modality for multiplying the meanings of nonsexual today and is the most important heir to the leftist progressive impulses pioneered by celibacy.” This view is also present in Przybylo’s study of asexuality, where she writes that feminism, from the early moments of organising, has had strong asexual rather than sexual undercurrents:

“Political celibacy/asexuality’s dismissal from feminist accounts is drawn from the same fabric as widespread dismissal of asexual identity – namely, a system of compulsory sexuality that holds sex as central to relationality and community making while rendering asexuality, political celibacy, and other non-sexualities as backwards and anti-sex.”

If female sexuality can be either repressed or empowered, asexuality challenges this binarism and undoes the prevailing sex-normative culture. As CJ DeLuzio Chasin has written, “if it can be okay for asexual people not to want sex, maybe we can make it okay for anyone not to want sex?”. That would mean a world when no level of sexual desire is pathological, where there is no ‘female sexual arousal disorder’ and no ‘hypoactive sexual desire disorder.’ A world where there would be no need for Viagra and *pornographic* surveillance. Where there would be no *cures* for that which asks for no treatments. Where there would be no need for “the constant production of a regulated and quantifiable pleasure” in the name of a *libidinal economy*.

Is sex dead? Peak libido and the death drive in a post-sexual era

“The modern libido has peaked and is now dipping dramatically,” states Dominic Pettman in one of his latest books. As we observe the destruction of environments worldwide, we are also witnessing how love, passion, and desire dwindle and deplete. “Celibacy rates are up, and sperm counts are mysteriously down.” All over the world, the press reports that less people are having sex than ever, sounding the alarm. What if the “celibacy syndrome” pandemic, that has permeated the whole Japan, has now also

reached the West? Is sex a thing of the past? In *Peak Libido*, Pettman analyses the creation of the Museum of Sex in New York, the *erection* of which “seems to suggest that sex is now more comfortable on display, as a historical exhibit, than being a living, breathing aspect of our species-being.” If Eros is not reduced to sex per se, but involves *all the sensual and intellectual pleasures of life*, are our libidos moving towards non-sexual outlets? When sex is overwhelmingly experienced as just another form of labour, how does this influence our ability to connect and experience intimacy? And finally, in a time when asexuality is becoming more and more popular, are we headed towards an asexual turn?

In his critique of Foucault, Jean Baudrillard has famously claimed that *sexuality is dead*. Moreover, it was capitalism that killed it. Here is how Pettman describes its demise:

“The pace of life has accelerated to such a degree that it has caught up with its own tail and feels uncannily like stasis or stagnation. (...) The libido has great trouble finding any purchase under such conditions, since the libido is not a blind drive, but an attentive capacity or faculty, one that we have lost the art of using or experiencing.”

If *sexuality is dead*, and the libido is being rapidly depleted, we have to find new ways of being together via creating a new libidinal ecology that would focus on fostering the ability to connect, commune, and live *with* and *for* each other. This new libidinal economy would end the hegemony of the heterosexual couple once and for all, enabling other, non-sexual relationships to thrive and come forward. Whilst the asexual movement often faces allegations of individualism and egotism, it is the modern

couple that is truly antisocial. “It is invested in the personal rather than the political; is a stay-at-home rather than at home in the world; is inward-rather than outward-looking; is self-oriented without being self-reflexive; is fixedly attentive to its own needs rather than the rights of others; is invested in individual accumulation rather than social transformation.” As Przybylo acknowledges, the couple privilege is such, that life is easier to negotiate at the financial and pragmatic levels when in a couple, for the simple reason — *society is designed with the couple in mind*. “Coupling offers a framework for how love, care, attentiveness, and desire are to be shared along gendered lines. And coupling is nothing if not the making of citizenship units intended as the building blocks of a nation, a society, and thus buoyed along by structural support.” Capitalist Western society has erased asexuals as ‘bad economic subjects’ due to their refusal to consume heteronormative sex and medical cures such as Viagra. By locating both singleness and asexuality as something to ‘fear,’ the normative culture has positioned them against the romantic couple and the happy, heterosexual family. In this construction, friends, family, and other non-sexual relationships cannot provide the ‘real’ happiness that comes from a partnered relationship. To deviate from the amorous partnered relationship is thus to be threatened with unhappiness, which now brings us to the notion of *queer negativity* and *queerness as collectivity*.

Queering asexuality, queering desire

Gayle Rubin has famously claimed that ‘good,’ ‘normal,’ and ‘natural’ sexuality is always heterosexual, monogamous, marital, reproductive, and non-commercial. It should also be coupled, relational, within the same generation, and happen at home. Any sex that violates these norms can be considered as ‘bad,’ ‘abnormal,’ and ‘unnatural,’ and this includes

homosexual sex, unmarried sex, nonreproductive sex, and commercial sex. But what about no-sex? Is no-sex also ‘bad’? Both queer and asexual identities have a history intertwined with medical institutions, and asexuality is queer in a way that it makes sense of the social marginalisation and pathologisation of bodies based on the preference not to have sex, along with exploring new possibilities in intimacy, desire, and kinship structures. According to Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, queer world-making requires “the development of kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation.” Understood in that way, queerness not only means more people that can be identified and more spaces that can be mapped beyond a few reference points, but also a space where the depression and rage that come from being a shamed subject can be turned into something positive and productive.

The future has to stop being a fantasy of heterosexual reproduction. Whilst I have analysed asexuality in relation to queer studies’ nihilist antirelationality earlier, I would now like to focus on José Esteban Muñoz’s collective turn. In his understanding of queerness as collectivity, Muñoz reveals its political potentiality:

“Queerness is not yet here. Queerness is an ideality. Put another way, we are not yet queer. We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality. We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future. (...) We must dream and enact new and better pleasures, *other ways of being in the world*, and ultimately new worlds. (...) Queerness is essentially about the rejection of a here

and now and an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world.”

This insistence on other ways of being in the world and on building new worlds is exactly what makes asexuality queer. It is the freedom to be oneself and to live one’s life freely. A freedom to love and not to love. To have sex and to not have sex. A freedom that originates in variation, which is “a fundamental property of all life.” We have to resist forces that conform sexuality to a single standard and write a new history of sexuality. A history that focuses on the present and on the future. On what is yet to come, instead of what is already long gone. “Variation is a fundamental property of all life” and can be found in both the simplest biological organisms and the most complex human societal formations. Let us celebrate it and look for it everywhere, in and outside of societal relations. In having and non-having, doing and undoing. In absence and in presence.

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Taboo: Intimate Portraits of Lesbian Couples

Joan Cox

In my collection, *Taboo: Intimate Portraits of Lesbian Couples*, I use narrative, historical art references, fantastical elements of costumes and autobiography to depict taboo intimacies between women—acknowledging and emphasizing the female gaze. My work opens up a dialogue about the increasingly open presence of lesbian couples in contemporary society and the lack of their presence in the history of Western art. These paintings of women in intimate settings celebrate the female gaze while they intentionally subvert the male gaze by having the two women engaged with each other and not reclining sleepily for the viewers' consumption. Often I paint one of the figures as androgynous to challenge viewers to look more closely and recognize that these are lesbians and not heterosexual couples.

My paintings invite viewers to see the validity of intimate relationships between two women, acknowledging and emphasizing lesbian relationships. These painterly, narrative portraits present the domestic spaces that we share in a way that not only welcomes the viewer into our private worlds but also challenges them. The two paintings featured here depict a pregnant couple, where one partner is gender non-conforming—in a garden of Eden setting and also in an intimate bedroom setting—opening up the discussion of queer families. This work has led me to an ongoing investigation of motherhood in my work. Non-traditional families

are even less represented in Western art, and I aim to change that in the current body of work I am producing.



The Lovers (after Schiele)
Watercolor Monotype on
Drawing Paper.
54" x 40"
2013

Origin of the Family

Oil on Canvas

96" x 54"

2019





*Love is Everything They
Said it Would Be*
Oil on Canvas.
60" x 48"
2013



The Proposal, Part One
Oil on Canvas.
40" x 30"
2013



“Soundscapes in Motherhood”

Jamie Kessler

The score for the musical composition "Soundscapes in Motherhood" was written and based on an EKG graph that charted my contractions and the fetal and maternal heartbeats during childbirth. The live feedback from medical technologies during the time of active labor and childbirth were recorded and then translated into a musical composition. "Soundscapes in Motherhood" serves as a conceptual portrait of my son. My work represents the capacity of human connection through technological interface.

My sound work has been presented as a live symphony performance for Mellon Institute at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, PA. It is also presented as a sound-based work recording in gallery-based sites.



Scan the QR code below to listen to Jamie Kessler’s “Soundscapes in Motherhood”.





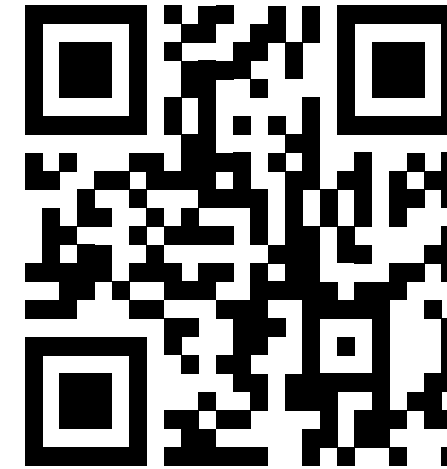
Lacation Induction Engine: LIE

The Fine Art of Woman Body: Magical Storytelling in Bio Art

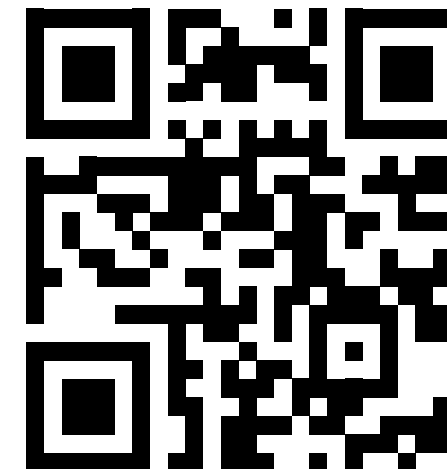
Sara Niroobakhsh

This biohacking, multimedia project examines the function of the breasts as reproductive host organs. Is it true that they are responsible to only serve others, or can they function independently? *The Lactation Induction Engine*, or *LIE*, project began in September 2021 under the advisory of Professor Edwardo Kac and two health physicians. Together, we drafted a plan for intense pumping sessions in the hope of encouraging my breasts to produce milk without the use of hormones, medications, or pregnancy. I documented the whole procedure by photographing and filming each session. Because the mechanical pumping machine was overwhelming for my body, I decided to incorporate new media to make this *LIE* believable to my body. I attempted to replace the effects of hormones and medication by incorporating the use of sound. I listened to babies crying, watched videos related to breastfeeding, and created a perfume of a baby's scent. In the next phase of the project, I merged all these formats and created an immersive VR and AR environment. In addition, I designed a lactation bag to make this procedure easier and more accessible for when I was in public. In the 18th week of the project, the ultrasound confirmed the activation of breast ducts, and in the 21st week, the first colostrum started to flow.

Scan the QR Code below to view the Virtual Exhibition Video.



Scan the QR Code below to experience the Virtual Reality.





Q&A With Sara Niroobakhsh

Feminist Spaces: What inspired this project?

This project is tightly woven into my journey from childhood to now. I spent my childhood in a region that was a conflict zone between Iran and Iraq. No one knows how many things we were exposed to; both my mother and father were diagnosed with cancer, and many family, friends, and neighbors were left with mental and physical injuries, such as infertility. That was our inheritance from eight years of war, which caused my mother's death after a decade battling breast cancer. In 2020, I started my education in art and technology studies at the School of Art Institute of Chicago while I was in the process of a divorce. On one hand, I was dealing with a lot of feelings of guilt and shame as a mother disconnected from her little daughter, and on the other hand, as an educated woman responding to the need to improve and grow as an independent human being. My mother used to tell me about the special relationship that babies have with their mother's breasts. She told me she had to cut off my milk supply when she was pregnant with my sister when I was one year old. She said I didn't speak to her for about a month because I was mad at her.

Feminist Spaces: What do you hope others gain from your project, and how do you see it influencing the feminist discourse?

I created this bio-performance project to create an innovative way for women and transgender people who want to establish this connection with their body without experiencing pregnancy or taking medication and hormones. I was curious as to why an organ in the body may feel so foreign to us—like something that never belonged to

us. In what manner can we women—who have come so far, educated ourselves, and fought for our rights—not feel like these breasts are ours? This is a poetic project inviting everyone to think differently. Artificial lactation can serve as a mechanism to demonstrate antinomies: artificial lactation simultaneously expands the concept of “womanhood,” alters the concept of “motherhood,” and turns the breast into “an organ-without-body.” The breast, then, becomes an object of virtual potential.

Feminist Spaces: You mention nipple censorship in one of your documented videos. How does this policing of women's bodies influence your project?

I know there is controversy about feeding children in public, and believe it or not, all these battles are about nipples. Nipples are an object of eroticism, described as a danger to children; yet the children do not eroticize the nipple—it is adults that eroticize the nipple. This reminds me of when my daughter was born in the hospital 10 years ago, and I first attempted breastfeeding her. My mother was making a film with her phone to capture that moment. I remember I showed the film later to my daughter's father, and he asked me to delete it. I felt proud taking that video and not shameful. So, why would her father wish to erase this beautiful moment? I asked myself, “What would the public look like with the freedom of the nipple, the breast, and feeding?” The nipple is still a territory of men's gratification and is an erogenous zone that produces an erotic effect. Thus, I wonder how we can manipulate that eroticism, mechanize it, and weaponize it.

***Feminist Spaces:* Many of your daily documentary videos are incredibly raw and emotional. What kind of emotional toll did this project have on your body?**

The year I started this project was the year I turned 40 years old. I was exploring the possibility of our bodies working as an engine and creating something intense against the physiological or biological norm. Many times, I felt overwhelmed by the experience to the point where I would sit and cry while I pumped for so many reasons and complex emotions, lack of sleep, the rush of hormones, etc. One time I went for a run in Lincoln Park and observed nature so differently than other times. I sat down in the middle of a garden asking questions about what distinguishes us from other species that do not breastfeed their young. How does breastfeeding differentiate ourselves from the pollinating insect and the flower, the mosquito and the body it sucks blood from, the egg from the birth? Perhaps what we call milk changed its form to something else in the species, like honey.

***Feminist Spaces:* Can you explain the logistics of the project from start to finish and the role of the VR/technology?**

Every session, I massaged my chest, breasts, and armpits to warm up, then I started pumping while smelling the baby perfume that I created and traveling through the scenes in VR. The scenes included all of the collected videos since starting the project—scenes that contain the 3D scans of my body at different times during this project to observe the changes in my breasts, my pumping videos, videos of women breastfeeding their babies on social media, or women lactating on pornographic websites. The technology became an integrated medium to comprehensively simulate sound, video, and smell in two

forms: one in AR that was installed on a phone app, and the second in VR for the indoor environment where audiences are able to navigate and interface within the different scenes and collected videos of the project. By creating both artworks, I aimed to create immersive media for people who are interested in induced lactation.





Black Women's Aliveness: Black Feminist Poems

Shanique Mothersill

In Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016), she asks, "What does it mean to defend the dead? To tend to the Black dead and dying: to tend to the Black person, to Black people, always living in the push toward our death?" Her response advises that wake work should both address the "needs of the dying" and "also the needs of the living." How might Sharpe's multiple instantiations of the wake inform our understanding of Black women's aliveness?

Like Christina Sharpe, my theoretical inquiries of Black aliveness enter through death's door. I engage with accountability and emotion, and I incorporate other modes of thought such as my own poetry. I was guided and supported by Dr. Sika Dagbovie-Mullins, who encouraged me to explore Black aliveness, and motivated my recent coursework on Black death where I presented (and will present here) a poem entitled "And Now We Pronounce You GREEN", which investigates eco-feminist perspectives on death. I am interested in using an intersectional, radical, and Black feminist approach to prove the significant associations between death and aliveness, and more importantly, between aliveness and being. My aim here, as is argued by Nyong'o, is to "de-dramatize death and dying, insofar as death and dying have become in my view unbearably overinflated in

contemporary discursive registers of necropolitics and afro-pessimism."¹

Examining what Kevin Quashie speaks of as "Black aliveness"² and Sharpe calls "wake woke,"³ I argue that Black aliveness or more specifically, Black women's aliveness, is not simply the antithesis to death. Rather, it is about life in the in-betweens (marginalization and oppression), to include our aliveness in creativity, resistance, knowledge, and sexuality. My work particularly explores the implications of Black aliveness for women's experiences, taking into account the unique aspects of misogynoir, racism, homophobia, and sexism that Black women experience. I will focus on the ways in which Black women's aliveness negotiates, communicates, clarifies, expresses, and defines the complexities of Black women's lives. I examine Black women's aliveness in theories of and as a site for the composition of Black feminist theory: a ground for conceptualizing the oppressions of Black women and a locus of transnational, diasporic and cultural subjectivities.

I regard this research as very important because Black women's aliveness gives us the opportunities to reimagine what it means to be alive in the social world and the potential consequences of this existence. Like Nyong'o, who theorizes about afro-fabulation as the reappearance of things meant to be covered and hidden, I argue that the "study of blackness can rearrange our perceptions of chronology, time, and temporality."⁴ In this sense, my inquiries address questions such as: a) what are the possibilities and limitations of studying various elements of Black women's aliveness? b) How can the concept of "being" (including the imaginative, spiritual, and sexual) support and/or challenge our efforts to analyze and understand the impact of "existence" on Black womanhood, including cis- and trans-womanhood? c) How can we understand feminist methodologies such as poetry as a way of decolonizing our knowledges of Black women's lives?

Black women's aliveness resonates with me because as a Black woman—a Black alive woman—a Black alive woman who is mother—a Black alive woman and feminist—a dark-skinned Black woman who is alive—a Black alive woman from the Caribbean—a Black alive woman in 2022—a Black alive woman and scholar—a Black woman alive, I am always deep in the aliveness of my being—the germane archetype of living every day in my body. It is a kind of spiritual pandemonium—like consciousness that is seated like an epigraph—multiplied upon, within and around how I make sense of the world I live in. Thus, living alive and being alive are tensions that I am always trying to unpack. Sexton poignantly speaks to this tension when he argues that

to speak of black social life and black social death, black social life against black social death, black social life as black social death, black social life in black social death—all of this is to find oneself in the midst of an argument that is also a profound agreement, an agreement that takes shape in (between) meconnaissance and (dis)belief. Black optimism is not the negation of the negation that is afro-pessimism, just as black social life does not negate black social death by inhabiting it and vitalizing it. A living death is as much a death as it is a living.⁵

Interrogating these tensions of Black women's aliveness, I use poetry as a critical theory, feminist praxis, non-neutral and decolonizing tool. This is because "Black women's...poetry has always been a tradition of problem solving and moving from hopelessness to hope."⁶ In this sense, poetry is not a mere act of communication based on the cultural technologies of speaking and writing; it is above all an act of agency—the singing, shouting,

dancing and crying associated with Black women's sense of spirituality, home (whatever and wherever home is) and deep activism. According to Lorde,

for women, then, poetry is not a luxury. It is a vital necessity of our existence. It forms the quality of the light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action. Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought. The farthest external horizons of our hopes and fears are cobbled by our poems, carved from the rock experiences of our daily lives.⁷

My use of poetry is therefore gendered and racialized, and like the poets and free form writers such as Staceyann Chin, Natalie Graham, Dionne Brand, Tracy Smith, Audre Lorde, Rosebud Ben-Oni, Gina Ulysse, Nazim Hikmet, Jasmine Mans, Eve Ewing, Alexis Gumbs, Emanuel Xavier, and Tiphonie Yanique that I engage, I build upon work that has brought poetry into Black feminist politics and resistance. While I do not quote or paraphrase these scholars in my poems (except as you will see in the poem, "Omnipresence,") I must emphasize that their poems inform and guide my poetry. This is electrified by my reading of their passion, sacredness, magic, grace, reawakening, imagination, and sovereign voices, and I believe that situating my poems within a larger tradition of poetry is useful and necessary. I too believe that to be a "member of these communities is less about achieving a stable identity as a poet...a radical, and so on and more about a commitment toward speaking a just and ethical world into existence and then working toward that world."⁸

My use of poetry then is threefold. Firstly, I hope to resist normative academic scholarship, remind us to look more closely at illogical and irrational writing and reason (outside of the logic of typical prose), and emphasize the theoretical importance of creative work in the analyses of our deepest issues. In this sense, I aim to disrupt the traditional and very white, protestant, male, neutral, objective, and heterosexual way of writing and doing theory. Secondly, I use poetry as an analytical and political tool that provides additional opportunities for understanding something beyond what is known, seen, and heard. By “something beyond,” I mean, like Johnson, “spaces, moments, and possibilities defined in radical difference from the here and now.”⁹ Poetry enables me to keenly look at the human and non-human dimensions and complexities of Black women’s lives. In other words, poetry is the theory and method that I use to study Black women’s aliveness. Lorde argues,

it is through poetry that we give name to those ideas which are, until the poem, nameless and formless-about to be birthed, but already felt. That distillation of experience from which true poetry springs births thought as dream births concept, as feeling births idea, as knowledge births (precedes) understanding.¹⁰

Thirdly, I use poetry to offer more poems to the field and practice of poetry therapy, bibliotherapy and Black women’s healing traditions that Evans identifies.¹¹ As sites of possibility, my poems, like Johnson’s theorizing of slam and spoken word poetry communities are “invested in a critical search for an/other space, beyond the beyond...simultaneously nothing and everything, the outer even; one that might provide models for Black folks to feel safe enough to do and say Black things.”¹² I must declare that

my poetry comes from my Caribbean understandings (taught to me by the women and girls in my family, living and dead) that I should love myself and my aliveness as a Black woman enough to generate a fire that can be shared and gifted to other Black women whom I will always love. So, like Gumbs, “this is for Black women who made and broke the narrative. The quiet, the quarrelling, the queer. This is where. This is what. This is how.”¹³

In this collection, I present Black women’s aliveness, in conversation with Sharpe’s multiple instantiations of wake work,¹⁴ in three thematic areas: death’s beingness; aliveness, creations and awakening; and existence. In **death’s beingness**, I present three poems: “And Now We Pronounce You GREEN,” “Being in Death,” and “Waking.” In this section, I enter Black women’s aliveness through Black death, not just examining Black women’s death. Here, I imagine a deeper understanding of being alive that is synonymous to being dead. “Being” in my arguments does not move between aliveness and death. It is both/and. In this section, I also borrow from Quashie, who at the beginning of his book, declared that

we have to imagine a Black world so as to surpass the everywhere and everyway of Black death, of blackness that is understood only through such a vocabulary. This equation of blackness and death is indisputable and enduring, surely, but if we want to try to conceptualize aliveness, we have to begin somewhere else.¹⁵

In the second thematic area, I call **aliveness, creations and awakening**, I present the poems: “Dreams,” “Silences and Stillness and Loudness,” and “Omnipresence,” where I theorize Black women’s resistance, creativity, joy, and birthing. These poems also yield themes of motherhood, tradition, ancestry, and other modes of survival. The final thematic area, **existence**,

is my shortest precisely because it was the most freeing to write, having less sounds and words but feeling closest to my own aliveness and body. It contains only two poems: —“Be” and “Exist”— and addresses the poetics of Black women’s aliveness in their own existence. This existence exists in other existences but is how, I argue, that Black women exist (not in spite of anything or against anything), they just exist. Black women’s existence, while it is a process, is alive and well. I hope to break Black women’s aliveness out of a narrow understanding that existing is always relative to something else. My theorizing of Black women’s existence here coexists with Ahad-Ledgardy’s revelation that Black nostalgia (or afro-nostalgia) suggests an undetermined and fleeting understanding of Black aesthetic that breaks blackness out of a narrowly constructed frame of trauma.¹⁶ Like afro-nostalgia, Black women’s existence “calls for its own redemptive remembrances, rooted in the imaginative landscape of the historical and the pleasure-seeking desires of the present.”¹⁷

Theme 1. Death’s Beingness

And Now We Pronounce You GREEN

And now we pronounce you—food—food—food—food
Earth’s food- maggots swarm-worms hasten to your matter
Your smell attracts flies—and you start the return
The putrefactive return of your tissues and cells
Returning to the dirt—
the deep immortal
SOIL

from which mama borrowed you
For a while, a long while to serve the land
To nurture the plants and animals and oceans and skies and rocks

And now we pronounce you—passed on to the continuity of the ecosystem
Into the green- the fiery red green—
Burning your flesh into the swampy green lake
—where our ancestral spirits and ghosts rejoice
Welcoming you into your heavenly decay where your kins before you have
Sanctified and exalted the ground

And now we pronounce you-united eternally with nature
To sleep the final sleep—where you wake to live forever
Under the ocean
Grinded into salt and sand and rain and algae
A bed for the sea, the crocodile, the whale and the sun
Where volcanoes erupt and restore

And now we pronounce you: prey
A clay to be fed to baby pebbles
Where you—
A fertilizing mud grows leaves, strengthens barks, sings to branches
And gives light to the river stones
Into the mouth of the Atlantic & Caribbean Sea predator

A beautiful predator gathering all the graves despite the
Coffins
Sepulchers
Tombs
Ashes
Embalming flows

And now we pronounce you—GREEN! GREEN! GREEN! GREEN!
A habitat beyond the skeleton
Where your blood escapes to be
A GIFT
To recover bones upon the environment where
Life & Death pronounces you green

Being in Death

Death is not always dead as in dead dead
It is being dead and being alive in death
It is how Black women never die in death
We are here, never dead, N-E-V-E-R dead

Black women's death is an alive death
Speaking (and shouting) from the dead into the alive that is never dead
It is where heaven transcends the grave
Inhabiting aliveness
Inhabited in death
Being in death sits at the foot stool of the death bed
Where Black women labor in breathing

A preparation to labor in dying
A knowing how to labor in death
It is a force of being only sleeping understands

Death in being is more than being alive while being dead
It is a beating heart that stops beating but beats forever
A forever we can only be
In death-the alive death—that is never dead

And so be-in death-an alive-Black woman
For this aliveness cannot be buried
But if buried, never killed
For it is a-live-in the whole earth

Waking

I have many happy-painful memories of being at a wake
A waking
To usher members of my family to the other side
Where waking is no longer performed

We usually dance, sing, drum, shout, laugh and cry
Under the stars straight into under the sun
For Mama say “waking is long my child”
We eat and drink as we call the dead
This calling is sad and somber and exciting and happy
We call to the dead from the hills of Jamaica
Where the birds, clouds and skies form

Form
And
Form
An assembly line to carry this CALL to the dead

This is waking
Ashes to ashes
Dust to dust
A mourning
In the night and in the night and in the night and in the night

Waking never rests because
For nine nights we reimagine our calls to the dead
Perfected on the ninth night as how we will show up to the
cemetery to visit the dead
Waking has an outcome: it transports us to the bottom of the
grave
Before the digging of the grave begins
It is what protects the dead
And reminds the dead to protect us

Waking in my memory and elsewhere around me is necessary
It is the waking of the stories of the dead
How they become the dead
And where they go from the dead
Waking travels but stops at the dead
Because when the dead wakes
Waking starts

Theme 2: Aliveness, Creations and Awakening

Dreams

Black women never sleep, we dream!
Dream of new worlds
Free of oppression: pain and sorrow
Free of whiteness and heteronormativity
Free of our death

Dreams are how we create life
Birth life
And how all life that we birthed
Find life to sustain life
Black women love in dreams
fight in dreams
tire in dreams

Dreams are our own creations
In our bodies: conscious as creatives
Creating creativity
As our creative creates movements and pathways
For our children (and their children)
To eat
To sleep
And dream

Dreams are queer

A queer that are our own exodus
Our own repatriations of the Mother Land to the Mother Land
Where we live and dream of an alive
Where
The Mother Land reinforces our dreams

Our dreams eat in a collective
A collective dream of
Undoing the hair roots kinked in spite of
Being tied up with colonialism
But we dream in order to not sleep in the decolonial
And when we dream the colonial moves

Silences and Stillness and Loudness

Have you ever been still in silence
Unmovable and unmoved
Grounded like a tree planted by the rivers of water
Locked in a loud place, never to move again
????????????????????

How did you feel knowing that you are still but loud and silent
and can feel
????????????????

Alive! Aliveness!

A-Living!
A-Live!
This is the theory of silences and stillness and loudness
For Black women coming alive and being alive in the world
We are enraged here
We are sexual here
We are Black here
We are women here

In the silences and stillness and loudness
Is where we write as women and as lesbians holding space for
each other and others
Who will come alive in our quiet

Silences and stillness and loudness make protest and scholarship
To tell stories in the villages
In our schools (and their schools)
It is talking about racism, sexism, misogyny and homophobia
boldly but quietly and boldly again

Silences and stillness and loudness is a quiet
A very quiet and loud place
Where Black women are:
Alive in the quiet and loudness of militancy
Alive in the quiet and loudness of knowledge
Alive in the quiet and loudness of pedagogy
Alive in Aliveness
A loud that validates the knitting of brows

In aliveness and anger
In silences, stillness and loudness
Coming alive over and over, again and again

Omnipresence

Omnipresence and Black women's aliveness are synonymous
They wake and sleep in the same bed
On an island everywhere and in every way in everything within
and around us
Black women are always present
In the omnipresent present and past tense of Black feminist
politics
And writings

Omnipresence and Black women's beingness are synonymous
Making alive the transnational connections across borders
Through witches and ghosts
In the wind and breeze of
Indian and Africa and the US
Britain and the Caribbean
Carried by the oceans
Translated in the tongues of the media
And the Church
Where cymbals and psalms and hymns
Rewrite the Bible
Omnipresence and Black women aliveness exist within each
other

Its movements are not scared, they are sacred
Its walk
And run
Touching the forehead of little Black girls with olive oil are not
the work of a magician
It is magic that disappears and reappears

Omnipresence and Black women's aliveness goes beyond the
imagined and reimagined imagination
Omnipresence is Black women's aliveness as
Haiti is a woman¹⁸
Forgetting¹⁹
Feeling²⁰
A found poem²¹
Mangoes²²
Eternity²³
Joy, love and angels²⁴
Showing God²⁵
Wake work²⁶
Being²⁷

Omnipresence—Black women's aliveness-omnipresent
Read and hear and see and spell: Black women are omni-alive in
omni-aliveness

Theme 3. Existence

Be

Be, as something	Be, all
Be, as anything	Be, all and all
Be, in the in-betweens	Be, space
Be, as everything	Be, place
Be, things	Be, beyond
Be, human	Be, beyond beyond
Be, non-human	Be, a poem—
Be, more than human	Be, dead
Be, of form	Be, alive
Be, formless	
Be, a name and names	
Be, nameless	
Be, beautiful	
Be, you	
Be, me	
Be, us	
Be, we	
Be, them	
Be, they	
Be, her	
Be, she	
Be, him	
Be, his	
Be, none	

Exist

It is in their words and or thoughts and or feelings and or emotions, and or outer, and or in-between and or inner and or being that we find Black women’s existence in bodies—Black women’s bodies that exist in an existence and the existences of existing in the world—alive—perhaps even more alive and back again—shining as the moon lit time and timelessness—so misunderstood and cannot be fully understood that Black women’s existence exist in the existence of perfect peace

Conclusion

I pray that every reader comes away from this collection not only with a greater understanding of wake work and the vastness and richness (and imperfections) that is Black women’s aliveness but also leave with a sound, verb, word, song, dance, and hymn that makes one feel alive: formless, nameless, soundless, and wordless. I invite you to fill the gaps, say more, improve, and discard what, in this collection, does not account for your own aliveness. This collection is incomplete and may never be complete because, as we have seen, the politics of Black death and Black aliveness are way too magnificent and extraordinary to be captured by my limited words and thoughts.

Notes

1. Tavia Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations: The Queer Drama of Black Life* (NYU Press, 2019), 202.
2. Kevin Quashie, *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being* (Duke University Press, 2021), 1.
3. Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016), 33.
4. Tavia Nyong'o, *Afro-Fabulations*, 3-4.
5. Jared Sexton, "The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism," in *Time, Temporality and Violence in International Relations*, ed. Anna Agathangelou and Kyle Killian, (Routledge, 2016), 69.
6. Stephanie Evans, "Healing Traditions in Black Women's Writing: Resources for Poetry Therapy," *Journal of Poetry Therapy: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Practice, Theory, Research and Education*, vol. 28, no. 3, (2015): 167, 10.1080/08893675.2015.1051286.
7. Audre Lorde, "Poetry is Not a Luxury," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, 1984), 64.
8. Javon Johnson, *Killing Poetry: Blackness and the Making of Slam and Spoken Word Communities*, (Rutgers University Press, 2017), 19.
9. Johnson, 14.
10. Audre Lorde, "Poetry is Not a Luxury," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Crossing Press, 1984), 10.
11. Stephanie Evans, "Healing Traditions in Black Women's Writing: Resources for Poetry Therapy," *Journal of Poetry Therapy: The Interdisciplinary Journal of Practice, Theory, Research and Education*, vol. 28, no. 3, (2015): 168, 10.1080/08893675.2015.1051286.
12. Javon Johnson, *Killing Poetry: Blackness and the Making of Slam and Spoken*

- Word Communities*, (Rutgers University Press, 2017), 27-28.
13. Alexis Gumbs, *Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity*, (Duke University Press, 2016), xiii.
 14. Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016), 33.
 15. Kevin Quashie, *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being* (Duke University Press, 2021), 3.
 16. Badia Ahad-Legardy, *Afro-Nostalgia: Feeling Good*, in *Contemporary Black Culture*, (University of Illinois, 2021), 5.
 17. Ahad-Legardy, 26
 18. Gina Ulysse, *Because When God is Too Busy: Haiti, Me & the World*, (Wesleyan University Press, 2017), 95
 19. Rosebud Ben-Oni, *turn around, BRXGHT, XYXS*, (Get Fresh Books, 2019), 43-44.
 20. Shailja Patel, "This Is How It Feels," in *Bullets & Butterflies: Queer Spoken Word*
 21. *Poetry*, ed. Emmanuel Xavier, (Suspect Thoughts Press, 2005) 62-64.
 22. Tiphonie Yanique, *Wife*, (Peepal Tree Press, 2015), 51.
 23. Tracy Smith, *The Body's Questions*, (Graywolf Press, 2003), 35-36.
 24. Tracy Smith, *Wade in the Water: Poems*, (Graywolf Press, 2018), 74-77.
 25. Tracey Lewis-Giggetts, *Black Joy: Stories of Resistance, Resilience, and Restoration*, (Gallery Books, 2022), 20, 31 & 38.
 26. Jasmine Mans, *Black Girl, Call Home*, (Berkeley, 2021), 19-20.
 27. Sharpe, Christina. *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016), 33.
 28. Kevin Quashie, *Black Aliveness, or a Poetics of Being* (Duke University Press, 2021).

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Veronica Clements

I see my work as both a critique and a celebration of modern culture. My work deals with the theme of vanitas, which is a 17th century Dutch genre of painting that uses symbols of transience and impending death to warn against earthly vanity and pleasure.

I view my paintings as curiosity cabinets of pop culture and girlhood, and I focus on brevity of life as a symbol of childhood. I don't want to warn anyone against earthly pleasures in exchange for piety; I see my art more as a true reflection of what it means to be an artist.

Displaying my female identity through investigative collections, I reveal and critique the notions and expectations that gender biases have perpetuated throughout history. I deal with the theme of validity through violent femininity by serving my audience researched concepts and ideas on a hot pink platter. I consider my work as an expression of justified autonomy; it's an illustration of coming of age with the notion of agency.





Black Women's Blues in Nina Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues* and Beyoncé's *Lemonade*

Yasmine Anderson

While a lonely woman in San Francisco, comforted only by the presence of her cat, bemoans the end of her marriage, an animated Sita from *The Ramayana* sings Annette Hanshaw's 1929 version of "Am I Blue?" vocalizing the San Francisco woman's heartbreak. Clad in a swirling, yellow dress and clutching a baseball bat, a woman erupts, as if reborn, onto a city street where she damages parked cars and fire hydrants as she sings back to the cheating husband whose infidelity has quickly become public knowledge. These images from Nina Paley's 2008 film *Sita Sings the Blues* and Beyoncé's 2016 visual album *Lemonade*, respectively, speak to how Black women's blues music's most well-known themes continue to be relevant to artistic, political, and affective exigencies today.

Even though the blues may not be trending at the top of popular music charts, it still occupies a place of interest and relevancy. In the past ten years, Hollywood's screens have notably featured a multitude of Black blues women in star-studded biopics. While it is worth asking what these instances tell us about the public representation and consumption of famous Black women in popular culture, the use of the blues woman in twenty-first century popular culture as reference to a particular critical aesthetic and politics involves much more than we can apprehend through their biographical representations on the silver screen. Media such as Paley's film and Beyoncé's album represent some of the ways individuals

have taken up Black women's blues in the most complex—and, at times, subtle—ways within twenty-first century popular culture in the United States. Studying Black women's blues in twenty-first century popular culture helps us to see how Black women's blues is made to labor, at what cost and for what value, in order to understand the reduction and commodification of Black feminism via the blues within popular culture and how the blues has continued to evolve in order to speak to contemporary concerns and contexts. I argue that, in twenty-first century popular culture in the United States, individual projects reference and remix Black women's blues—including its attendant politics and tactics—to forward particular investments and to attain social value within the popular culture arena.

Just like the blues itself—as genre, form, politics, performance, methodology, critical aesthetic, and so on—blues uses are multiple. Instances where Black women's blues are used as ideological background and sonic association speak to the blues' relevancy today, particularly in regard to conversations around Black feminism, as well as the modes of cooptation, consumption, and commodification that Black women's blues is subject to within popular culture. If looking at the blues in Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues* and Beyoncé's *Lemonade* can turn our attention to the erasure of some of the blues' most critical challenges, what larger conclusions might we draw about the ways in which projects reduce and commodify Black feminism itself in order to garner social capital?

Although contemporary blues scholars have argued that Black women blues singers are antecedents for many popular Black women performers today, they have paid less attention to how current projects use Black women's blues in multiple, complex, and even ambiguous ways that go beyond shallow resonances and challenge both mainstream interpretations of the original music and its practitioners as well as current

representations of Black feminism within popular culture. I argue that the way that we hear Black women's blues is an example of "enculturated listening," a concept from Nina Sun Eidsheim's *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music*. Canonical blues scholarship has impacted the way that we actually hear Black women's blues today through associating it with particular themes, concepts, and even identities. The investments and values that become associated with a project that refers—whether explicitly or implicitly—to the blues are part of this enculturated process in which listening is deeply cultural rather than innate. Both *Lemonade* and *Sita Sings the Blues* make use of the cultural and political associations of Black women's blues music in order to forward their respective investments and to attain value within the popular culture arena.

Due to both the impact of enculturated listening and the material history of blues music, uses of the blues are often linked to conversations around Black feminism. These conversations reflect our contemporary moment and context even while they draw on the historical realities of Black women's lives and struggles. Black women blues singers in the first half of the twentieth-century were contending with the complex changes surrounding emancipation. Black women's blues music navigated and archived what emancipation meant for forms of economic exploitation, employment opportunities, sexual and romantic relationships, and migratory possibilities and limitations. Because both older and more current blues scholarship has elucidated the blues' foundational impact, we can begin to explore what the blues' continued presence says not only about the blues' capability for movement and adaption beyond its historical context but also about our continued return to its political imperatives and to the music itself, its sounds and performances. While the challenges of Black women's blues are various, these particular aspects of the genre

and performance—its ties to the lives of Black working class women and its critique of economic structures—are crucial for looking at how Black women's blues manifests today within popular culture.

While *Lemonade* is illustrative of a more subtle use of Black women's blues music and the political associations that attend it, Nina Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues* (2008) is representative of a more explicit use of Black women's blues music. An animated film and multimedia mashup, *Sita Sings the Blues* collages together the ancient Sanskrit epic the *Ramayana*, blues music recorded by American jazz-age star Annette Hanshaw, and Paley's own semi-autobiographical account of the end of her marriage.¹ Paley ties together multiple threads through a set of shared thematic: heartbreak, feminist consciousness, and liberatory independence. While the narratives of the film overlap and consistently interrupt each other, there are three discernable "locations" or narrative spaces in the film: Sita and Rama's plot from the *Ramayana*, the modern telling of a struggling marriage, and the meta-narration of Sita's story by a trio of Indian shadow puppets. Written around 500 BCE to 100 BCE, the *Ramayana* tells the story of Lord Rama and his wife, Sita. At its core, Paley's film follows the same narrative: Rama's stepmother successfully carries out her plot to be rid of Rama by banishing him and Sita from Ayodhya and sending the pair to the forest. Ravana kidnaps Sita, forcing Prince Rama to rescue her. Rama is able to rescue Sita and kill Ravana; however, Rama forces her to prove her chastity by walking through fire. Because the gods are on her side and aware of her fidelity to Rama, Sita survives the walk through fire, and she returns with Rama to Ayodhya. In Paley's rendition of the story, after the couple returns to the palace in Ayodhya, Rama has continued doubts, despite Sita's walk through fire, when he finds out that she is pregnant. He orders his brother to abandon Sita in the forest where she eventually gives birth to sons and raises them on her own. Many years later, Rama

locates his sons when he hears their songs of love for their absent father emanating from the forest. Even after this reunion with his sons and Sita, Rama doubts his wife's purity, leading Sita to beg the earth to swallow her whole as final proof of her devotion. In the modern, semi-autobiographical narrative that accompanies this retelling, Nina begins the film living in San Francisco, California, with her husband. After accepting an offer for a six-month job in Trivandrum, India, her husband moves alone. A month later, he contacts Nina to inform her that his work contract has been extended for another year. Nina sublets the apartment and joins her husband in India; however, her husband is unenthused by her arrival. When Nina is temporarily in New York, her husband sends her a short e-mail to say that their marriage is over. It is at this point, heartbroken and alone, that Nina begins reading the *Ramayana*.

Sita Sings the Blues relies on the invisible figures of Black women blues singers to shore up some of the film's most central investments: sexually-evocative performance, radical feminism, and transnational as well as transtemporal alliances. These investments are what do the work of building thematic bridges across Paley's collaged narratives and time periods; however, these investments are themselves brought to the film via the blues via the Black woman blues singer. The sexual politics of the film and their visualization are central to Paley's reliance on a Black feminist blues politics. While Paley uses a variety of animation styles, Sita's animation during her musical performances has received the most public attention—both good and bad—in terms of Paley's innovative visual style. In these scenes, unlike her representation in the puppet trio's storytelling, which is more akin to traditional artistic renderings, Sita is curvaceous and *buxom*. As she sings and dances, her body oscillates in relation to the central pole of her spine and tiny waist from which her hips and breasts extend. Despite the fact that the complex sexual politics of Black blues

women went largely unrecognized by more conservative members of the Black artistic community during the Harlem Renaissance, later feminist academics, such as Shayne Lee and Imani Kai Johnson, took up these concepts. Rather than seeing sexual representations of Black women in popular culture performance as always oppressive, Lee's *Erotic Revolutionaries: Black Women, Sexuality, and Popular Culture* presupposes that popular culture is a rich site through which to think about gendered formations and their potential to empower. Johnson also legitimates popular culture performance as a site to explore questions that are often relegated to more canonized objects of study. She argues that popular culture performances have the ability to resist the very stereotypes that some claim they promote. Drawing a link between contemporary women breakdancers and blues women of the 1920s, Johnson defines "badass femininity" in "From Blues Women to B-Girls: Performing Badass Femininity" as a "performance that eschews notions of appropriateness, respectability, and passivity demanded by ladylike behavior in favor of confrontational, aggressive, and even outright offensive, crass, or explicit expressions of a woman's strength"² and sees blues women as the earliest example of this concept. Paley's sexualized animation of Sita in *Sita Sings the Blues* evokes the sexual politics of Black women's blues performance in order to draw on its ideological import; however, given the work that scholars of color have done on Black blues women's politics, it is clear that these ideas have an attachment to a particular artistic tradition, a tradition that, of course, Paley is well aware of given her reference to it in the film's title.

The absent figure of the Black blues woman labors for the film's ideological impulse, but the absent figure is also valuable through the concepts that stick to the Black blues woman's body within the white imaginary. In other words, the political associations that attend the figure of the Black blues

woman are what allow the Black blues woman to do work and contribute conceptual labor to a film in which she does not actually exist. Nina Sun Eidsheim in *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music* and Jennifer Lynn Stoever in *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* shed light on how blues sound, and therefore, blues politics are able to proceed without the actual presence of any blues women. Eidsheim pushes back against notions of authenticity in relation to voice by arguing that listening is enculturated. To this end, she writes, “Voice is not innate; it is cultural. Voice’s source is not the singer; it is the listener.”³ While Eidsheim is interested in calling attention to this enculturated aspect of listening in order to critique the micropolitics at work in a listener’s perception of voice, her discussion of enculturated listening explains how Paley is able to benefit from the sound of the blues without the presence of a blues woman. She writes, “Because listening is never neutral, but rather always actively produces meaning, it is a political act. Through listening, we name and define.”⁴ The sound of the blues in Paley’s film then allows particular themes and investments into the world of the film, such as the film’s sexual politics, because, in our enculturated listening to the blues, we hear not just the raw “fact” of the music but the voice of *Black women* blues singers. Like Eidsheim, Stoever also argues that listening is cultural, evidencing this claim through the listening ear, which she defines as “a figure for how dominant listening practices accrue—and change—over time, as well as a description for how the dominant culture exerts pressure on individual listening practices to conform to the sonic color line’s norms.”⁵ She goes on to say that it “represents a historical aggregate of normative American listening practices” and functions as “the ideological filter shaped in relation to the sonic color line.”⁶ Like Eidsheim’s enculturated listening, the listening ear strengthens the attachment between the sound of the blues and its associated politics without the

presence of its originators in *Sita Sings the Blues*.

While I am not invested in arguing for an originary or authentic version of Black women’s blues music, part of what is at stake is forgetting. In *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality*, Jennifer Nash argues that women’s studies programs have put intersectionality to work within the academy and that this disciplinary use is what shapes intersectionality’s institutional life most.⁷ For Nash, the burden placed on intersectionality has also resulted in Black feminists’ drive to defend, protect, and claim ownership of the concept. Nash sees Black feminist defensiveness as the primary affective posture towards intersectionality, stating that this defensive attachment to intersectionality ends up “leaving black feminists mired in policing intersectionality’s usages, demanding that intersectionality remain located within black feminism, and reasserting intersectionality’s ‘true’ origins in black feminist texts.”⁸ Nash urges Black feminist academics to release this “holding on” to intersectionality and to instead “let go” in order to allow Black feminism to unleash its “visionary world-making capacities.”⁹ This sort of letting go is complex when it comes to Paley’s film because it seems to allow her to claim forgetting the blues’ origins in Black women’s creative and intellectual labor just enough to allow her to make the arguments she does about ownership but to also conveniently remember the politics that get attached to the blues via their origins and context to then impart value on *Sita Sings the Blues*.

While the film’s title immediately signals its literal use of the blues, uncovering the way in which the figure of the Black blues woman is doing labor for the film requires an understanding of the blues in relation to Black feminist praxis. Despite the fact that Paley chooses to use Annette Hanshaw, a white American radio star in the 1920s and 1930s, as the musical voice of Sita, the blues cannot be disentangled from the Black women performers and recording artists who capitalized on the music, transformed its

political register, and dominated the radio and recording industry in the 1920s before being marginalized in the 1930s when male country blues overtook the market.¹⁰ While men and white women have certainly sung the blues, Paley borrows and makes Sita the mouthpiece of an iteration of the blues directly tied to Black women. In the hands of Black women performers, the blues took on a different cadence. Through Black women blues singers, the blues becomes, among other things, an expression of the complex and often contradictory emotional terrain of romantic relationships, an archive of Black women's suffering and abuse, and an exploratory site of sexual play and desire.

The machinations of Sita's animated figure are also tied up in the film's particular feminism, which is invested in a kind of radical sensuality and sexual liberation tied to the Black blues woman. Sita's animated body appears almost marionette-like or as interlocking mechanical parts. This design aligns with the dubbing style Paley chooses to use. Hanshaw's recordings retain their gritty, mechanically-textured sound, evoking a vintage aesthetic as well as an uncanniness when voiced from a body, although animated, rather than a record. This uncanniness is concomitant with Paley's drive to modernize the ancient story of the Ramayana. In *Burnt Cork: Traditions and Legacies of Blackface Minstrelsy*, Louis Chude-Sokei links Euro-American modernism to an obsession with the mechanical. He writes, "[The] machine aesthetic [is] produced by and through the West's difficult and ambivalent responses to industrialization, and... would ultimately find its political and social fulfillment in an America that announces its global presence via the language of inevitability, the language of the new."¹¹ Paley enacts this same language of the new in her film, both through her retelling of the Ramayana and her uncanny animation style. It is her Americanized telling of Sita's story through her own semiautobiographical plot and the blues as bridge for these narratives

that is meant to awaken the story's radical potential, thus securing a particularly national capability for innovation and newness.

Along with this national capability for innovation and newness that paints non-Western cultures as, therefore, non-innovative and unchanging is the film's indulgence in racial fantasy. This racial fantasy is at work in Paley's film on two levels. Diegetically, Paley's semiautobiographical stand-in engages in a fantasy while reading the *Ramayana* that draws on Sita's blues-singing character for feminist inspiration. Given that the film is semiautobiographical, this racial fantasy also occurs non-diegetically both for Paley and her film's viewers. The question becomes what Paley's evocation of Black women's blues and blues performance does for her film. What labor is the invisible Black blues woman doing for the film and its politics? The blues was particularly famous in the hands of Black women singers for its representation of less hegemonic romantic relationships and encounters. The blues' playful expression of women's sexual lives and desires was at the heart of its radical praxis. These themes lead to the film's political coloring that originates in a particular moment, figure, and praxis that the film itself makes invisible.

While Paley's film may make the Black woman blues singer invisible, the blues' association with race and blackness, in particular, is still doing work for the film by evoking a sort of cultural alterity. Rather than provoking a critical contextualization of the lived lives that Paley's borrowed blues comes from, its presence in the film acts more as a sign of cultural "cool" that lends Paley an element of "racial capital" as a white feminist. In "Racial Capitalism," Nancy Leong argues that institutional diversity rhetoric commodifies and capitalizes on nonwhiteness. Leong writes, "The diversity objective aims to improve the functioning of a particular social group or institution, so it does not matter whether nonwhite individuals themselves benefit."¹² While Leong's focus veers more towards the explicitly economic,

her discussion of benefit does lend itself to a consideration of social capital as it pertains to white feminism. Within the world of *Sita Sings the Blues*, it is Paley's stand-in that benefits from the cultural production of people of color through blues music and Sita's story in the *Ramayana*.

Thinking through these stakes regarding capital in connection to the film becomes increasingly complex when we turn to the copyright controversy that has surrounded Paley since the film's release. The homepage of the film's website immediately displays a letter on the film's copyright policy, signed by Paley. Paley knew when she started making the film that using old music would present a problem for her. Disregarding the advice of legal experts, Paley chose to use the Annette Hanshaw recordings and make the film as she wanted to. Ultimately, she released the film for free after becoming fed up with the bureaucratic maze of copyright law. Paley speaks at length on her website about her justification for making the film completely free. Her letter on the film's website reads, "I hereby give *Sita Sings the Blues* to you. Like all culture, it belongs to you already, but I am making it explicit with a...CC-0 license...Please distribute, copy, share, archive, and show *Sita Sings the Blues*. From the shared culture it came, and back into the shared culture it goes." While it is true that the legal system is itself already built off of denying marginalized people rights, Paley's definitions of art, ownership, and "shared culture," ultimately erase the contexts that the art she uses as her inspiration is coming from. This erasure becomes particularly problematic in relation to the "you" of Paley's letter: "Like all culture, it belongs to you already." Who is the "you" in this case? When Paley uses the words "art" and "culture," she is referring to *her* film but fails to take into account the other pieces of art or culture that she clearly uses as source material for the film. The hierarchy that Paley sets up between the legal system and "the people" elides the context of historical and systemic oppression that affects people—creators especially of color

Paley's narration of her copyright battle successfully and conveniently positions her as marginal, thereby foreclosing questions about her own privilege.

While Paley's decision to release the film for free appears to release her from the messiness of capitalism, Paley still benefits and gains a type of capital from *Sita Sings the Blues*. Leong writes, "the diversity rationale confers on white people and predominantly white institutions the *power* to determine the value of nonwhiteness...So even when white people and predominantly white institutions highly value nonwhiteness, they retain control over the assignment of value and may increase or diminish that value at will."¹³ Within Leong's language, Paley's choice to make the film free then is still a conferral of value. Even if she believes that she is making a choice about only her artwork and not that of others, that belief is itself telling of Paley's idea that all of this "culture" was already freely available for her benefit. Temporarily excluding economic capital from the conversation, Paley still accrues cultural capital since, in using the artistic production of other cultures in her film, she sees *herself* as a creator or author of culture now.

While the blues in its most generic definition does not appear as explicitly in Beyoncé's 2016 album *Lemonade* as it does in *Sita Sings the Blues* or even the recent wave of biopics featuring women blues icons, the lineage of the blues gives the album some of its political tenor—in particular its politicizing of the personal and personalizing of the political, the themes of socioeconomic class and infidelity, and intentionally provocative or sexual performance. Already the subject of countless scholarship, Beyoncé has gone from a very famous pop star to an icon within the last few years. While her career was already long with her founding of what would become Destiny's Child at the age of nine, her growth has skyrocketed as her name has become the subject of academic

scholarship and her association with Black feminism has become more commonplace. *Lemonade*, Beyoncé's sixth studio album, marked a watershed moment in her career for its confessional style and integration of the personal and political. Figuring the album as a public response to rumors surrounding Jay-Z's—rapper, record executive, and Beyoncé's long-time husband—infidelity, fans voraciously celebrated *Lemonade*, not only for its layered references, celebrity cameos, charged visuals, and memorable songs but also the peek it seemed to offer into Beyoncé's private life. The album includes twelve songs and is divided into eleven chapters in a structure reminiscent of the seven stages of grief. These chapters chart and structure the album's emotional trajectory: Intuition, Denial, Anger, Apathy, Emptiness, Accountability, Reformation, Forgiveness, Resurrection, Hope, and Redemption. This overarching structure, the repeated use of poetry by Warsan Shire across tracks, and the recurring visuals in the album's accompanying video, which runs about an hour, are part of what makes *Lemonade* a visual album rather than a random collection of music videos. To even imagine *Lemonade* without its visuals is a difficult exercise. We would lose Beyoncé atop a slowly sinking New Orleans police car in "Formation," Serena Williams dancing in "Sorry" as Beyoncé casually sits atop a throne nearby, Beyoncé's baptismal emergence onto a city street where she gleefully swings a bat in "Hold Up," and the solemn line of Black women that reference the Igbo slaves who took control of their slave ship in 1803 when they chose to march into the sea rather than submit to slavery in "Love Drought."¹⁴ Alongside these images are the familial appearances in the album, which include Beyoncé's mother, Tina Knowles, her grandmother, Hattie White, and her daughter, Blue Ivy Carter. These moments, and so many others, do more than entertain the viewer; they speak to police violence, the United States government's continued and intentional neglect and destruction of Black

life, the denigration of Black women and public policing of their bodies, racial surveillance and the problematic valuing of property over Black lives, the history and ever-presence of slavery in the United States, and the passing down of ancestral knowledge and survival tactics among Black women.

Lemonade covers a wide range of topics, but its central featuring of sexual performance, personal narrative, and discussion of class—as well as their gathering together in the singular space of the album—ties it most directly to Black women's blues music.¹⁵ This foundational art within the lineage of Black women's musical expression that evolved into and inspired many other genres, such as jazz and rock and roll, is part of what makes a discussion of *Lemonade*'s Black feminist politics a widely adopted undertaking. The album itself contains many self-aware references to the overtly political, so in some ways, a discussion of *Lemonade*'s politics comes very much from the content of the album itself; however, Black women's blues paved the way for considerations of the personal as political, the way in which an expression of the personal struggles faced by particular groups can gather specific audiences for political purposes, the sexual politics of Black women's musical performance, and what struggles and investments arise from a musical form so dominated and popularized by Black working-class women. Being aware of these connections between *Lemonade* and the work of earlier blues women not only places Beyoncé in a continuum with blues singers but also importantly adds complexity and context to current conversations around the album's politics. For instance, in "Beyoncé's *Lemonade* is capitalist money-making at its best," bell hooks argues that the depiction of violence in *Lemonade*, focusing on "Hold Up," is problematic since it uses the means of male domination to empower women. She writes, "Contrary to misguided notions of gender equality, women do not and will not seize power and create self-love and

self-esteem through violent acts..Violence does not create positive change.”¹⁶ An attention to earlier Black women’s blues would complicate hooks’ reading of violence in *Lemonade*. Depictions of violence are common in Black women’s blues music, and jealousy or mistreatment from a romantic partner often provoke these depictions. Threatening violence against another woman for trying to steal a romantic partner represents a particularly challenging trope to integrate into contemporary Black feminist politics that prioritize community and solidarity. The forwarding of the individual though, in this case, as a distinct subject rather than part of an entity categorized by race and gender is political. Following emancipation in the United States, questions of Black subjecthood and how to navigate individual needs versus the needs of the community took on new meaning under changed and changing circumstances. Therefore, what may seem like a sacrifice of the communal for the jealous needs of the individual actually speaks to the complex social circumstances of Black life and community-building in the United States after emancipation. Black blues women’s willingness to voice their individuality—even “violently”—was, therefore, an assertion of their complex subjecthood. This historical and musical context does ultimately affect how we might perceive violence in *Lemonade*, which is not to say that reading *Lemonade* alongside the tradition of Black women’s blues music and performance automatically generates a pro-Beyoncé argument counter to hooks’. Instead, it is to say that the blues complicates our reading of *Lemonade* in ways which are not only generative but have stakes for conversations surrounding Black feminism’s representation and evolution in popular media today.

While sexual performance may be a feature of a lot of popular culture today, music videos in particular, one of the main ways that Black blues women politicized the personal was through freedom of sexual expression. Scholars have both celebrated and criticized Beyoncé’s overt performances

of sexuality in *Lemonade*. While some have seen these sexual performances as empowering, others have found fault with them for displaying Black women’s bodies in ways that may mirror patriarchal and exploitative practices. The political and social context of Black blues women’s sexual performances offers complexity to understandings of the way in which sexuality is performed in Beyoncé’s work. In *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*, Angela Davis argues that Black women’s blues music represented and archived one of the biggest changes from slavery to post-slavery in the United States: Black people’s freedom to choose their own sexual and romantic partners. Davis discusses the way in which the newfound reality of having more choice over sexual partners post-emancipation gave rise to a very particular set of politics surrounding Black women’s sexual lives and desires—a politics that was at odds with the respectability politics practiced by the Black Women’s Club Movement.¹⁷ Black women blues singers famously explored and performed this theme of sexuality much to the disapproval of “respectable,” church-going folks who saw these blues singers as harmful to the project of achieving legitimacy and equal rights as Black citizens in the United States. Because of the context through which this change around sexual freedom occurred, the blues’ often humorous, playful, and even risqué representations of sex take on a political and critical tone. Serena Williams’ sexual dancing in “Sorry” does “redraft” her own image given the amount of public attention on her body with people praising her athleticism one minute and insulting her body the next for its perceived masculinity.¹⁸ Draped across a throne near Serena’s dancing, a nonchalant Beyoncé sings to the camera, occupying her seat of power confidently and relaxedly. The simultaneity of these images—Williams dancing and Beyoncé on the throne—does not binarize sexual performance and women’s empowerment. Along with this more

relaxed, fluid sequence in “Sorry,” we get a jerky, stop motion-esque editing style while Beyoncé sings and moves in the same video, turning her head in opposite directions, lifting her arm at sharp degrees. Unlike most stop motion, which aims to photographically capture minute movements in a way that creates the illusion of flow when strung together, this editing in “Sorry” exaggerates disjuncture. Where Sita’s mechanistic gyrations emphasize the sexualization of her animated body in Paley’s film, the jerky editing in “Sorry” seems to keep Beyoncé’s body at bay. In other words, by leaning into the machinic, there is an element of the natural or authentic, and perhaps even sensuous, that Beyoncé withholds from viewers. *Lemonade* echoes this withholding of the authentic elsewhere in the album and connects this withholding to the representation of sexuality and the body as well as the politicization of the personal.

Lemonade itself exists in lineage with Black women’s blues, in large part, for its use of the personal. The politicization of the personal sheds light on how the daily struggles that Black people faced in the United States were indicative of larger systems of oppression and violence. The twin themes of abuse at the hands of male lovers and infidelity, for instance, spoke to the devaluing and mistreatment of Black women, taking what seemed like an aspect of private life to a public stage. Some blues scholars emphasize the autobiographical nature of the personal in Black women’s blues music, highlighting the way in which it lends the music authenticity. For instance, in *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta*, Clyde Woods argues that the blues is ultimately documentary in nature. While the blues did archive and riff on very real world issues, blues practitioners were also artists, very intentionally integrating and performing the personal in ways that made the blues a craft rather than a kind of natural, divine instinct. Similarly, on its face, *Lemonade* appears to offer an authentic peek into Beyoncé’s personal life;

however, looking more deeply into the presentation of the personal in the album within the context of earlier Black women’s blues tactics reveals that something much more complex is at work here. The album performs a self-aware push and pull between the audience’s hunger for the authentic, for a vulnerable peek into Beyoncé’s life and family, and a withholding of fulfilling that same desire. We see home video-style footage across the album—in “All Night” and “Formation” in particular.¹⁹ This footage style whets the audience’s appetite for the personal since it mirrors a personal, familial archive, and many other moments in the album do something similar. For instance, Beyoncé sitting on the floor while appearing to record the song right in front of us in a sparsely-furnished living room “Sandcastles” gives us what feels like a particularly intimate “behind the scenes” sneak peek.²⁰ Then, in “All Night,” when two women pull aside a curtain, the camera’s point of view reflects our own as viewers, inviting us in as the curtain is pulled back. While these moments along with the home-video-style footage lean into the personal, others playfully withhold the personal from the audience. Even while the scene in “Sandcastles” appears intimate, for instance, it also appears highly-staged, the sparsity of the mise-en-scène not at all lived-in; and just as we get footage that appears to invite us into Beyoncé’s personal life, that personal life is also withheld from us. This withholding is paired with a keen awareness of the audience’s presence. At the end of “Hold Up,” Beyoncé appears to smash the camera filming her, the same one we are looking through, with the baseball bat.²¹ Earlier, in the same song, she smashes a security camera after posing into its lens. In this scene, our point of view becomes that of the security camera, so we see Beyoncé posing through its grainy, black and white image, framed by its marginalia, such as “CCTV” and “street view.” These images implicate the viewer in systems of surveillance, even connecting the actual security camera to the camera that films Beyoncé

in the album through her act of smashing both lenses. “All Night” also features scenes that push the viewer’s gaze away. For instance, the last scene of the song is, again, done in a home-video style—teasing viewers with the personal—however, the very last shot of the video is Beyoncé’s hand reaching up to cover or grab the camera, momentarily going back on the personal promise of the album. The last line of the opening poem in “All Night”²²—“The audience applauds, but we can’t hear them”²³—also speaks to *Lemonade*’s awareness of the audience and its playful nods to the audience’s presence and consumption while maintaining a level of distance.

These moments of giving and taking, of vulnerability and withholding, are reminiscent of Black women’s blues tactics and the way in which their performances of the personal were crafted and presented in intentional ways. Even as they offered the personal, Black women blues singers practiced intentional ambiguity as well, whether it was through innuendo or seemingly contradictory responses to their mistreatment. These moments of ambiguity live in interesting tension with the personal for the way in which they defy desires for legibility. This critical approach to the legible is echoed in *Lemonade* through its playful and simultaneously critical response to audience desires for legibility or vulnerability. This almost ambivalent juggling of invitation and withholding in *Lemonade* aligns with a larger and longer history of Black performance in the United States. Baker writes, “To deliver the blues as entertainment—if one is an entertainer—is to maintain a fidelity to one’s role. Again, if the performance required is that of a minstrel and one is a genuine performer, then donning the mask is an act consistent with one’s stature. There are always fundamental economic questions involved in such uneasy Afro-American public postures.”²⁴ Beyoncé’s implication of the viewer in conjoined systems of surveillance and entertainment leans into her own

status as a performer. As Baker argues, this role of the Black performer is deeply ingrained with exploitative economic structures in the United States.

Lemonade shares its commentary on the relationship between race and class politics with Black women’s blues music; however, class politics are one of the most complex parts of the visual album, and while the fact of its discussion may echo the blues, the actual messaging is in some tension with the class politics represented by earlier blues women. With roots in slave music, the blues’ ties to the economic are part of its critique of oppression, and it navigates both that critique of and inevitable participation in capitalism in complex, often seemingly contradictory ways. In gathering Black communities and audiences under the performative expression of collective suffering and serving as an “emerging model for the working woman—one who is sexually independent, self-sufficient, creative, assertive, and trend-setting,”²⁵ traveling Black women blues singers spoke to the shifts wrought by the Great Migration and the abolition of slavery, respectively, as well as the shared struggle of navigating those shifts. The blues’ recording and larger distribution via records and radio also complicated the genre’s relationship to the problematic and exploitative economic system that governed the music industry and, ultimately, impacted Black artists the most. Baker speaks to the essential tie between Afro-American artistic expression, such as the blues, and the economics of slavery as a defining condition, identifying a trickster streak in the blues through arguing that Black musicians’ simultaneous reliance on and challenging of exploitative capitalist systems are integral to the blues. Necessity and survival are key factors here, making the blues’ playful juggling of the commercial and creative—what Baker calls a “black survival [motion]”²⁶—subversive in its fostering of Black life. In “Formation,” a song well-known for its activist-oriented visuals and message, Beyoncé sings, “I

dream it, I work hard, I grind till I own it.”²⁷ “Formation” contains several references to Beyoncé’s economic wealth, including “When he fuck me good, I take his ass to Red Lobster. If he hit it right, I might take him on a flight on my chopper. Drop him off at the mall, let him buy some J’s, let him shop up” and “I just might be a Black Bill Gates in the making.”²⁸ These lyrics turn conventions of who typically owns economic wealth and the means of gaining it in the United States on their head. Replacing the figure of the Rich White Man, Beyoncé treats her man to the spoils of her wealth following her sexual satisfaction—a dynamic that would traditionally be the other way around—and the “Black” that precedes “Bill Gates” is meant to transform the “Bill Gates” in a way that shifts the problematic politics of inordinate wealth, making “Formation” a sort of counternarrative in these moments but one that leans more towards linear reversal rather than radical destruction of problematic systems. This juggling of the representation of Black women’s monetary wealth as potentially empowering with the reality of capitalist violence and exploitation is part of what lends *Lemonade* its complexity in how it speaks to Black celebrity, the performance of radical politics, and wealth. While Beyoncé’s celebration of capitalist wealth on the album and even the fact of her actual wealth feel at odds with the politics forwarded by earlier blues women, questions about the potential power or problems in claiming things traditionally not offered to you, such as wealth and freedom of sexual expression, are common when it comes to discussions of early blues women’s performances as well. In “Feminists Debate Beyoncé,” Janell Hobson asks, “Is there a space for a commercially mass-marketed feminism that could co-exist alongside radical feminism? Is Beyoncé really the problem here, or is it the confining space of commercial media that silences more radical feminist discourses?”²⁹ Hobson’s questions get to the heart of the tension between the commercial and the radical and

whether or not any cross-over, or co-existence, between the two is possible. While Beyoncé’s class status is not representative of earlier blues women, her performance in *Lemonade* does end up speaking to the navigation of oppressive economic systems that disadvantage Black women in particular. At the same time, reading *Lemonade* alongside Black women’s blues politics also interrogates how far the album’s seemingly radical politics actually go or can go.

While I think it is important to contextualize the blues—both as music and ideology—I am less invested in an argument over authenticity or musical origins than I am in a conversation about where and who both Paley’s and Beyoncé’s seemingly radical feminism are coming from. I hesitate to argue for a correct way to “sing the blues.” Instead, I want to attend to the blues’ particular mode of travel as well as its political attachments and investments. When it comes to Paley’s film, I draw attention to the continual erasure of Black women’s bodies for the sake of a “united”—in other words, white—feminist front and what this erasure and cooptation might mean for future Black feminist practices and movements. In regard to Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*, I argue that integrating a consideration of the blues legacy created by Black women into the conversation—not just through reference but through deeper exploration of the blues’ own nuances and contradictions—is central to thinking about popular culture representations of Black feminism today and the tensions that arise—and have arisen in the past—when Black feminism has to contend with the realities of capitalism. These conversations around the way in which creators look to the creative productions of Black women have important stakes for Black women’s labor. While the blues—as sonic, as poetics, as aesthetics, as affect—would not be what it is without its power to travel, to create routes of intimacy across potentially disparate bodies, it is still crucial to attend to its originators given the way that the *particular*

positionalities of Black women shaped the blues itself. On the other hand, just as the blues was navigating complex changes due to the realities of events such as emancipation and the Great Migration, it is also worth asking if the blues is simply navigating something different, albeit related, now. Perhaps speaking of what the blues originally challenged has no bearing on what it is doing now since the blues has, in some way, always spoken to the context and *changing* contexts of Black life in the United States. Yet many of the exigencies of Black feminism today are not entirely divorced from some of the issues that faced Black women in the early twentieth century. If the contributions of Black women's blues have become overly solidified through canonized interpretation in a way that allows for enculturated listening, perhaps we need to open the blues even *further* today. In other words, a return to the blues' origins can actually, counterintuitively, provoke newness since the blues contains more productive contradictions, complexities, and questions than we may popularly remember it for.

Notes

1. *Sita Sings the Blues*. Directed by Nina Paley, performances by Annette Hanshaw, Aseem Chhabra, and Bhavana Nagulapally, 2008.
2. Imani Kai Johnson. "From blues women to b-girls: performing badass femininity." (Taylor & Francis, 2014), 20.
3. Nina Eidsheim. *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre, and Vocality in African American Music*. (Duke University Press, 2019), 9.
4. Ibid., 24.
5. Stoeve, Jennifer. *Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening*. (New York University Press, 2016), 7.
6. Ibid., 13.
7. Jennifer Nash. *Black Feminism Reimagined: After Intersectionality*. (Duke University Press, 2019), 2.

8. Ibid., 3.
9. Ibid., 3.
10. Angela Davis. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. (Random House, 1998), xix.
11. Louis Chude-Sokei. *The Sound of Culture: Diaspora and Black Technopoetics*. (Wesleyan University Press, 2015), 110.
12. Nancy Leong. "Racial Capitalism." (Harvard Law Review, 2012), 2170.
13. Ibid., 2171-2172.
14. See following music videos: Beyonce's song "Formation," https://youtu.be/WDZJPJV__bQ. Beyonce's song "Sorry," <https://youtu.be/QxsmWxxouIM>. Beyonce's song "Hold Up," <https://youtu.be/PeonBmeFR8o>. Beyonce's song "Love Drought," <https://youtu.be/CUyQSK75L4>.
15. Listen to Beyonce's full album "Lemonade," https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=OLAK5uy_m9dO997hgyquaE-xTYmZUqhm2pyKbQj-k.
16. bellhooks. "Beyoncé's Lemonade is capitalist money-making at its best." *The Guardian*, 11 May 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2016/may/11/capitalism-of-beyonce-lemonade-album>.
17. Reiland Rabaka. *Hip hop's Amnesia: From Blues and the Black Women's Club Movement to Rap and the Hip Hop Movement*. (Lexington Books, 2012), 8.
18. See Beyonce's music video "Sorry," <https://youtu.be/QxsmWxxouIM>.
19. See Beyonce's music videos "All Night," https://youtu.be/gM89Q5Eng_M and "Formation," https://youtu.be/WDZJPJV__bQ.
20. See Beyonce's music video "Sandcastles," <https://youtu.be/RD38JT8rypY>.
21. See Beyonce's music video "Hold Up," <https://youtu.be/PeonBmeFR8o>.
22. See Beyonce's music video "All Night," https://youtu.be/gM89Q5Eng_M.
23. Warsan Shire. "Redemption." *Lemonade*, 2016.
24. Houston A Baker. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory* (University of Chicago Press, 1987), 194.
25. Daphne Duval Harrison. *Black Pearls: Blues Queens of the 1920s*. (Rutgers University Press, 1988), 10.
26. Baker, Houston A. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular*

Theory (University of Chicago Press, 1987), 196.

27. Beyoncé. *Lemonade*, Parkwood Entertainment, 2016, www.beyonce.com/album/lemonade-visual-album/.

28. Ibid.

29. Hobson, Janell. "Feminists Debate Beyoncé." *The Beyoncé Effect: Essays on Sexuality, Race, and Feminism*, edited by Adrienne Trier-Bieniek, (McFarland Co. Inc. Publishers, 2016), 21.

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Selected Works of Sasan Meftahi

Sasan Meftahi

From the beginning of human civilization until today, there has always been an instrumental view of women. Examples come from the Paleolithic period to *Venus of Willendorf* and the symbols of childbearing that condemned women to motherhood. This instrumental view has extended to the point of sanctifying the word “mother,” so women are doomed to perish in front of their children, forfeit their authority and freedom, and in many situations, give up.

In the Iranian society in which I live, inequality and discrimination are much greater than many other parts of the world. Even the most basic rights of women are ignored. In many cases, women are deprived of their right to choose. In this series, which is still ongoing, I attempted to portray the struggles of women in society and the instrumental cultural views of women. I also used a motif of fish in my artwork because in Iranian culture, red fish are symbolic of hope, life, and fertility, and the color red is a symbol of kindness, victory, livelihood, and affluence.

I was raised on the border areas of Iran and Iraq. I was three years old when the Iranian revolution took place, five years old when the Iran-Iraq war began, and I was 13 when the war ended. We lived on the borderland of Iran, on the Iraqi border, and the city where we lived was occupied by the Iraqis. My childhood was a nightmare that passed under bombardment and the death of my loved ones. I have been painting for many years, and my paintings are representations of my suppressed anger and my protest against war, discrimination, and violence.



*The Body Has Been
Looted (Venus of
Willendorf)*
Oil on Canvas
90x100cm
2021



Black Woman
Oil on Canvas
90x90cm
2021



Perseverance of Hope
Oil on Canvas
60x80cm
2020



“After all these years, my fight never stops”

The Shortcomings of Transitional Justice in the Context of Sexual Violence Survivors of the Bosnian War

Matylda Jonas-Kowalik

Introduction

The concept of transitional justice, rooted in liberal notions of progress and rule of law, introduces a set, or a “toolkit,” of different mechanisms and processes that range from war crime prosecutions and truth commissions to memorials and reparations.¹ Through the four key pillars—truth, justice, reparation, and non-recurrence—the model aims to repair harm by addressing crimes and violations to ensure that the violence does not erupt again in the “post-conflict” period. Each of those pillars is represented in the aforementioned mechanisms that transitional justice can employ: truth commissions and commemoration efforts serve the role of raising consciousness, preserving memory, and ensuring the non-recurrence of violence; judicial investigations and criminal prosecutions strive to punish perpetrators responsible for the atrocities; reparations help to aid material and physical harm done to the victims. Yet, even though the elements of the model might appear clear, there is hardly a consensus over the actual definition of transitional justice.² As Davidovic writes: “Transitional justice seems to be in crisis. In many respects, it does not fully know what it is.”³

Even with the lack of academic consensus over its definition, in the

last few decades, transitional justice has begun to be perceived as applicable to all situations of mass violations of human rights, undergoing the process of globalization. However, its normalization and application are also a source of a wide range of academic debates, as the mainstream model of transitional justice can be seen as preoccupied with the legal aspects in the context of politically motivated physical violence.⁴ This article will focus primarily on the debates stemming from a feminist theoretical framework, namely hegemonic narratives, lack of representation, and lack of intersectional approaches in the transitional justice processes.⁵

One particular aspect of transitional justice, namely the justice achieved in judicial proceedings conducted in ad hoc tribunals, international criminal courts, and in later stages, by local courts of law, has recently been seen as insufficient and requiring systematic change.⁶ As Zolo notes, “international criminal justice does not seem to perform that function of ‘transitional justice’ for which it has been formally established.”⁷ However, the perception of criminal justice as one of the core processes of transition for post-conflict societies remains. Moreover, this trend can even be seen in the cases of ongoing mass violence, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022.⁸

One of the specific issues critiqued in the context of judicial proceedings as part of transitional justice is its application to cases of sexual violence. Conflict-related sexual violence— patterns or incidents of violence of sexual nature, against adults or children, which context and setting can be linked with the conflict itself—was only internationally recognized as a weapon of war in 2008, with the adoption of Resolution 1820 by the UN Security Council.⁹ This development followed the recognition of rape and sexual slavery as war crimes in the Rome Treaty on the Statute of

the International Criminal Court in 1998. Prior to this legislation, conflict-related sexual violence was largely seen as an unfortunate but inevitable consequence of war.¹⁰

In line with transitional justice ideals, Article 13 of Resolution 1820 urges all relevant actors to “support the development and strengthening of the capacities of national institutions, in particular of judicial and health systems, and of local civil society networks in order to provide sustainable assistance to victims of sexual violence in armed conflict and post-conflict situations.”¹¹ Yet, despite legal efforts to prosecute perpetrators of conflict-related sexual violence in the context of the infamous Bosnian war, waged between 1992 and 1995, the post-conflict response of both international actors as well as local communities fell short of providing justice to the victims of such crimes. Therefore, this essay problematizes and critically discusses the shortcomings of international adjudication and court proceedings introduced by the transitional justice framework regarding sexual violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina through a feminist lens. Moreover, I aim to address the pre-existing patriarchal social structures that lead to the stigmatization of survivors in order to showcase the potential problems and shortcomings of transitional justice in such contexts.

Contextual background

The collapse of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s was marked by a political and economic crisis, which prompted various local actors to weaponize exclusive nationalism to secure power.¹² The series of brutal conflicts, beginning in 1991 in Croatia, spread across the region: soon, all of the former Yugoslav republics were affected by violence and military action.¹³ The most infamous, and perhaps ignominious, was the war in Bosnia and

Herzegovina, a multi-ethnic country comprised of Bosniacs, Serbs, Croats, as well as other ethnic minorities. While belonging to distinct groups, the inhabitants of ‘Little Yugoslavia’—a moniker that represented the diverse ethnoreligious heritage of Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) coexisted relatively peacefully with high rates of intermarriage between groups. As one of the survivors stated, “It was not until the war started in 1991 in Croatia that I had a clue who was Croat, who was Serb, who was Muslim.”¹⁴

However, the ethnicist and nationalist ideology in the region proved to be salient. Bosnia and Herzegovina declared independence in March 1992. This decision was strongly rejected by the Bosnian Serb elite and much of its population. Soon a brutal military campaign supported by Belgrade was launched, with the aim to “capture most of Bosnia’s territory and purge it of non-Serbs.”¹⁵ In over three years of war, hundreds of thousands of inhabitants were displaced, and an estimated 100,000 people were killed, approximately 65 percent of them Muslim.¹⁶ The Dayton Peace Agreement, also known as the General Framework Agreement for Peace in BiH, put an end to the war; however, “war crimes, destruction and a large number of casualties left immense consequences on the population of BiH.”¹⁷

As has been the case in seemingly every instance of war waged before and after the conflict in Bosnia and Herzegovina, displacement, loss of property, and death were not the only catastrophes that plagued the civilian population trying to survive the violence. Sexual assault, rape, and torture were also tragically prevalent and strategic. Systematic rape and sexual assault can be and often are “deployed as a weapon of war because to the user, it is cheap, easy and extremely effective in achieving the target of breaking the enemy. Rape and sexual violence in conflict is (...) about

dominance.”¹⁸ Estimates of wartime rape in BiH range from 20,000 to 50,000 cases;¹⁹ however, due to the nature of such crimes,²⁰ the numbers can be even higher. Their systematic nature is not only confirmed by the sheer number of victims, but also by rulings of the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY), which show that conflict-related sexual violence was far from incidental, but rather an integral part of the campaign of violence. As Brammertz and Jarvis write:

“Sexual violence was perpetrated along ethnic lines to terrorize, punish, degrade, and humiliate. In particular, sexual violence was deeply interwoven into the process of ethnic cleansing perpetrated during forcible takeovers of towns and in prison settings and used to instill fear into the civilian population, often resulting in civilians fleeing their homes as a result of a campaign of violent crimes.”²¹

The intersectional aspect of conflict-related sexual violence in the case cannot be overstated: victims were targeted not only because of their gender but additionally, due to their ethnicity. The nature of these crimes is as strategic as horrific: during the Bosnian war, victims were humiliated, tortured, and mutilated. Many of the victims were assaulted repeatedly; women were forcibly impregnated and held in captivity in camps or makeshift detention centers until they could no longer seek an abortion, sometimes throughout the second trimester of pregnancy.²² Male victims were subjected to performing forced sexual acts and mutilation, i.e. castration.²³ As Olujic writes, “although rapes have been committed by Croatian and as well as Muslim [Bosniac] soldiers, such instances were fewer in number” than systematic rapes perpetrated by Serbian forces.²⁴ Even though sexual violence was perpetrated by all sides of the conflict

and affected people of all genders, the archetypical casualties of the wartime rape in this conflict were Bosniac Muslim women, who constituted the majority of victims.²⁵

The International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia and judicial justice in conflict-related sexual violence cases

The judicially achieved justice manifests as punishment administered to perpetrators for the crimes they commit is one of the central themes of transitional justice, which aims to restore the trust in State institutions, promote the rule of law as well as provide recognition to victims.²⁶ It is rooted in liberal and Western scholarship on peacebuilding, and as such, is not immune to geopolitical influences and interests, which is one of the points of its criticism by activists and scholars alike. As Halpern and Weinstein note,

“The implicit assumption held by many supporters of tribunals is that criminal trials are an important component of reconciliation. The fact that hundreds of millions of dollars have been devoted to these trials indicates a consensus in the international community that a juridical response is critical to the rebuilding of post-war societies.”²⁷

The involvement of the international community in post-conflict Bosnia and Herzegovina reflects this trend. Hayden argues that “the idea that ‘justice’ is essential to reconciliation is commonplace; indeed, it is one of the founding assumptions, or better, presumptions, of the field of ‘transitional justice.’”²⁸ Moreover, in his opinion, the International Criminal

Tribunal of the Former Yugoslavia should be seen as an extension of geopolitical efforts of NATO powers to secure influence in the region, while simultaneously upholding nationalist tensions.²⁹ Similarly, Todovora notes that the involvement of the international community in post-war Bosnia and Herzegovina can be seen as the reiteration of wartime ethnic divisions, partially through the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and its remoteness to and from the Bosnian people.³⁰

It is important to note that the ICTY has seen some of the landmark cases pertaining to the issue of conflict-related sexual violence (such as *Mucić et al.*, *Krstić or Kunarac et al.*) and with the developments in international jurisprudence, rape in the context of conflict is no longer considered as actions of individuals who exhibit unrestrained sexual behaviour, but rather as a tool of war. Yet, from 2004, the beginning of the prosecutions of war crimes committed during the Bosnian War, up until 2017, only 134 perpetrators have been convicted on charges of sexual violence and rape in courts around the country, with more than 200 cases still pending.³¹ At the same time, an additional 32 persons were convicted by the ICTY based on Article 7(1) of the ICTY Statute, and 4 persons were convicted for failing to prevent conflict-related sexual violence. According to an Amnesty International report, the pending trials in Bosnian courts could take until 2027, over 30 years since the end of the conflict. As one of the survivors stated, “After all these years, my fight never stops. The number of verdicts in rape cases is not as high as it should be.”³²

The prominent role of adjudication and judicially administered justice in the frameworks of transitional justice can be seen in stark contrast with the numbers presented above. As previously mentioned, the critiques of

transitional justice frameworks are multifaceted; with the prominent points of feminist critique being a lack of representation of women, the absence of intersectionality, and the inadequacy of hegemonic discourses to address deep systematic problems and injustices. Constructing transitional justice through the lens of law and legal issues additionally presents them as objective and normative rather than political.³³ This can be seen as deeply problematic in the context of liberal, capitalist, and Western influences which are presented as the norm, sometimes without respect or interest of the local context. As Ni Aolain notes, the problem lies in “the very structure of law and its normativity (...) If violations ‘fit’ the specific category, they are included; if not, they are not visible and the harm is not recognized as a legal matter.”³⁴ The reflection of this problem can be seen in the fact that even though conflict-related sexual violence has been prevalent in nearly every armed conflict, historically, such crimes have not been addressed by courts until very recently due to the jurisprudential barriers.³⁵

Moreover, international courts and peace-building organizations continue to be spaces where “the normative is (...) white, male, Judeo-Christian, dominant language-speaking, educated, moneyed, propertied, heterosexual and able-bodied.”³⁶ Hence, legal definitions of sexual violence—which often affects members of society that culturally and historically wield less power and privilege such as women, children, or members of queer communities—should be seen as an element of the hegemonic discourse, due to the fact that they too are formed and framed in spaces which are rarely occupied by survivors. In the context of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the political stage is still “portrayed and understood in everyday and official discourses as a male arena where women, especially respectable women, have no place.”³⁷ This bias can also be reflected in

current legislation regarding sexual violence. Neither the Criminal Code of Federation BiH, the Criminal Code of Republika Srpska, nor the Criminal Code of Brcko District bases the definition of rape on the consent of victim but on the use of force or threat.³⁸ The legislation is also silent on marital rape. Hence, the underlying structures, that lead to the prevalence of conflict-related sexual violence, and which must be critically examined, are rarely showcased in this type of transitional justice process. However, their examination and understanding are critically important.

Patriarchal societal structures and stigmatization

Understanding the broader societal context of perpetrated violence is a crucial element of both academic analyses and the successful implementation of post-conflict justice processes. As Ni Aolain writes, “In multiple contexts, women experience structural discrimination, persistent violence, lower social status, formal legal discrimination, lack of access to the public domain, stereotyping, and official and informal exclusions. Conflict and/or authoritarian governance are merely another layer added to these ever-present realities.”³⁹ It is, therefore, crucial to underline the fact that conflict-related sexual violence does not appear in a vacuum but rather is intimately connected with everyday patriarchal societal structures that precede the conflict—something that transitional justice often fails to address. As Olujic, among others, points out, to comprehend the scope and goals of wartime rape, a critical examination of those pre-existing structures is necessary as the author states, “one must understand the constructions of sexual violence in peacetime to understand the meanings of wartime sexual tortures.”⁴⁰

The connection between gendered violence and cultural meanings of

sexuality, femininity, masculinity, and honor is heavily present in the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Hegemonic masculinity, which can be defined as “the pattern of practice that allowed men’s dominance over women to continue”⁴¹ has exhibited itself across Balkan cultures in different cultural traditions and ideologies—examples include symbolic rape, “rape plays” and “marriage by capture” (*otmica*), historically part of some of the marriage rituals in south-eastern Europe.⁴² According to Olujic, the honor/shame dichotomy, which is the basis of the traditional concept of the morality of women, was extended by the fact that: “women represent the code of honour of the family and the code of shame.”⁴³ Moreover, the rigid confines of gender in this context provide salient ground to use sexual violence as a tactic of “ethnic cleansing”—women seen as passive objects rather than subjects can easily become targets of violence, which is also a violent performance directed at the audience of men belonging to the target group. As Helms writes, “Women serve as symbols of the nation’s moral purity and as such must be protected by men from defilement by the enemy.”⁴⁴

This concept of “defilement” and the honor/shame dichotomy are also visible in the testimonies. As one survivor who testified in the ICTY as Witness 87 shared: “I felt ashamed in a way, and in a way I felt very, very dirty, soiled.”⁴⁵ Another survivor, Grozdana Čećez, told the court that the rapist “trampled on my pride and I will never be able to be the woman that I was.”⁴⁶ This sense of shame also has significant implications on survivors’ mental health and wellbeing. As one of the women shared, “I somehow feel humiliated and I even attempted suicide. I took one hundred pills of one hundred milligrams, a full bottle, and lay down for three days and three nights.”⁴⁷ Many survivors speak about suicidal thoughts connected to the shame: “After everything that happened I, and I believe many others,

thought of suicide first. Today, most of the time when I walk through the town or on the street, I feel like everyone knows what had happened and then fear overwhelms me, I turn my head, avoid contact...”⁴⁸ In a study investigating the long-term effects of conflict-related sexual violence, it was concluded that the experience of rape is linked to a high probability of developing PTSD and related psychiatric conditions such as anxiety.⁴⁹ Psychological consequences of conflict-related sexual violence are severe; one can imagine that deeply embedded gender norms and the honor/shame dichotomy might impact post-traumatic stress disorder; furthermore, interdisciplinary research in this direction could shed more light on how post-conflict justice processes could address this problem.

The failure to critically address gender roles and concepts of masculinity, which is often limited solely to the explanation of militarized and sexual violence rather than “a core framework for a wider understanding of peace-building post-conflict,” is one of the shortcomings of transitional justice structures.⁵⁰ Likewise, the understanding and an acknowledgment of the fact that there is no such thing as a single, universal patriarchal system is lacking but necessary. Even though there are certainly parallels to be drawn between different patriarchal systems, they should always be contextualized in terms of their historical and geographical context. The deeply embedded societal perceptions of gender unaddressed in peacebuilding can, in effect, lead to further victimization and re-traumatization of survivors in the post-conflict period, an aspect which is also often omitted from judicial justice. The previously discussed honor/shame dichotomy⁵¹ was only exacerbated by the fact that the response to mass rape and sexual violence in post-conflict Bosnia was marked by drastically different approaches and expectations between local communities and international legal institutions. The latter, driven

by the desire to prosecute perpetrators based on the core principles and liberal values of transitional justice created the conflicting paradox with the societal response “characterized by silence, the marginalization of victims, and the pronounced desire to ‘forget’ about certain aspects of wartime victimization.”⁵² This “societal amnesia” in effect makes some victims feel that their suffering is unrecognized by the society they live in. As one of the survivors stated,

“The worst thing for me was that I was held captive in my family home. Even today I feel humiliated and insufficiently recognised in society and I feel the pain and the fear. The authorities are not doing anything to protect us, to recognise us, so that it is clear, that we are the first to be protected, to be recognised in society, among the people. We are only recognised by our families, even not all of us. The community does not recognise us, they turn their heads.”⁵³

In a study conducted in 2015, two-thirds of interviewed survivors reported, “condemnation, insults, and humiliation in the community from the moment when their neighbors or friends or some family members learned that they were the victims of sexual violence during the war.”⁵⁴ Such deeply troubling statistics reflect the magnitude of the problem. Even 27 years after the conflict, survivors still experience stigmatization—as one of the survivors stated, “I don’t have a real name in my town—they call me various names, derogatory and the like. They called me ‘the raped this and that, just not by my name. But I will not leave.”⁵⁵ Another survivor shared that her experience of war-time sexual violence translated into violence in her marriage after the war: “I had problems in my marriage, which are related to what we suffered in the war. My husband physically

and mentally humiliated me. It felt as though I was living in a vicious cycle with no way out.”⁵⁶

Stigma is also prevalent when it comes to male survivors of sexual violence. Notably, the ICTY examined several cases concerning sexual violence against men, such as Česić, Mucić, et al., Todorović, and Simić. Due to the societal construction of masculinity, men who were sexually abused face not only the trauma and feelings of shame but also identity crises due to the cultural association of male rape with homosexuality.⁵⁷ As one of the survivors stated,

“With all due respect to women victims of sexual violence, for me as a man... it’s different. Trust me, a man who has survived sexual abuse feels differently than a woman. People might wonder, you know, if he is a homosexual, you understand what I mean. It is very difficult for a man to admit that, to himself first, let alone to open his soul to someone else.”⁵⁸

The problem of recognition of male survivors of conflict-related sexual violence in Bosnia is prevalent, even though there are such survivors who speak out about their experiences, and cases of male-directed sexual violence have been well documented.⁵⁹ As Touquet argues, “In the official context of the courts their stories are disassembled and chopped up to serve the legal counter-narrative, and in the semi-official context of the detainee association, they are contextualized in the broader “truth about the war” narrative that exceptionalizes male-directed sexual violence.”⁶⁰ Gendered expectations of men make it incredibly hard to narrate such experiences—yet some men decide to share their experiences publicly. According to Touquet, the problem lies not in the lack of the voices of

survivors, but rather in a lack of “a public recognition of the vulnerability of men to disempowering violence.”⁶¹ Therefore, the importance of understanding the intricacies of how different elements of the identity—gender, age, religion, and sexuality to name a few—of victims intersect, and how they are influenced by the gendered expectations of local patriarchal systems, should have a central place in both justice efforts and academic debate. As Kimberle Crenshaw—the author of the term intersectionality which describes the effects of different identity components and their mutual influences—writes, “My focus on the intersections of race and gender only highlights the need to account for multiple [identities] when considering how the social world is constructed.”⁶² To conclude, the consideration of pre-existing conditions and gender roles embedded in patriarchal structures sheds light on the complicated issue of conflict-related sexual violence. In the case of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the stigmatization of survivors is also related to the issue of judicial justice—if survivors face hostility, as well as condemnation, and are shamed for their experiences after the conflict, they are understandably less likely to testify in courts.

The problem of agency

Additionally, to the concerns regarding judicial justice as an institution upholding hegemonic narrative and power structures, the feminist critique of transitional justice focuses on its potential lack of recognition and empowerment of the survivors of conflict-related sexual violence. Court proceedings can be seen as driven by the perpetrator-driven narrative, reducing the suffering and trauma of survivors to descriptions of events that help to successfully prosecute the perpetrator.⁶³ Essentially, the focus is on the punishment of the perpetrator, rather than justice for the

survivor. Therefore, the question emerges of what role can judicial justice and courts serve in the current or transformed form to be seen as a steppingstone for the affirmation of victims' experiences while at the same time offering them agency and narrative power—so rarely accessible to witnesses in rigidly conducted legal proceedings.

From a feminist perspective, agency can be understood as the capacity of a person to act in an independent and relatively autonomous way—concepts such as free will, choice, or reflexivity can be seen as adjacent notions.⁶⁴ As McNay notes, “if individuals are to be understood to be more than docile subjects or passive bearers of pre-given social roles, then purposive agency must be a fundamental and self-evident property of personhood.”⁶⁵ Because giving consent to a sexual act is connected to an independent and autonomous way of acting, rape and sexual violence can be seen as deeply rooted in the power, the subjugation, and stripping of agency over one's body and decisions. Therefore, it is crucial that the removal of agency, albeit in a very different way and scale, does not happen to the survivors who testify in courts.

Interestingly, according to Mertus, survivors testifying in court proceedings do perceive themselves as agents, even though said courts have a dangerous ability to reduce witnesses to the role of the victim, which in the context of gendered violence can reinforce stereotypes of helplessness and lack of agency.⁶⁶ This can be recognized on the discursive level—the term “victim” is a legal definition, used in the criminal justice system; however, recent feminist scholarship often prefers the word survivor “as a term of empowerment to convey that a person has started the healing process and may have gained a sense of peace in their life.”⁶⁷ However, as Mertus writes, “despite their initial faith that they could use

international war crimes tribunals to their own purposes, survivors have quickly become disillusioned with the adversarial process,”⁶⁸ which constraints their narrative freedom and often makes it impossible to freely share what they deem central to their story. The dichotomy between the expectation of survivors, that becoming witnesses will allow them to present their full story and, in this way, commemorate the past and achieve justice, clashes with the focus of judges and prosecutors to use their testimonies as means to find punishable offenses of perpetrators.⁶⁹ Testifying about sexual violence can be a re-traumatizing and adversarial process that may not provide a healing space for survivors. As previously mentioned, the backlog in the Bosnian courts regarding cases of conflict-related sexual violence is a problem in itself, because it prolongs this uneasy and distressing process for survivors. As previously quoted, Witness 87, after being asked why her story changed over time, stated, “I don't know whether I can explain that. Eight years have gone by since those events. Since my first statement it is four years ago; my second statement, six years; the period in between was two years. So I had forgotten some things.”⁷⁰ It is important to underline that this witness testified in court 8 years after the traumatic events, in the year 2000; one can only imagine how difficult it can be for survivors to go through the adversarial process of questioning almost three decades after the conflict.

These diverging expectations also cause dissatisfaction with this type of justice; according to one report by Amnesty International, “considering the extraordinary obstacles that they have to overcome in order to testify in court, victims perceive sentences that do not reflect the gravity of the crimes committed against them as a new punishment and an additional source of distress.”⁷¹ Another issue that ought to be noted is that many survivors are unable to testify due to an array of circumstances, such as

a lack of ability to recognize and name the perpetrators who committed crimes against them. As one survivor stated, “I’d say that there are many of us who will not take part in the trials (...) We have many survivors who could never, nor will they ever identify the perpetrators, they were masked, for example.”⁷² Many survivors who were stripped of their agency during the assault are unable to even attempt to exercise their agency in the post-conflict period and take part in the imperfect adversarial process of adjudication. Additionally, the previously discussed shame, stigmatization, and hostility toward survivors that are embedded in the patriarchal structure of Bosnian society add another layer of obstacles to those considering participating in judicial justice.

Conclusion

Transitional justice aims to contribute to the reduction of further harm to the victims of mass violence and human rights violations in the aftermath of conflicts. Yet, the elements of the process proposed by this conceptual framework, namely judicial justice administered in cases of conflict-related sexual violence, can be seen as flawed from a feminist perspective. As Mertus writes, even though survivors “can exercise agency in the context of witnessing before international tribunals, tribunals alone do not serve their need for creating a record, achieving justice, remembering or forgetting.”⁷³ The number of other problems, connected with the lack of examination and addressing of pre-existing patriarchal social structures and their meaning in the context of Bosnia should also be underlined. Sexual violence used as a *modus operandi* in warfare must be understood in connection to hegemonic narratives of gender and power. Moreover, the adversarial process of legal proceedings should be seen as upholding hegemonic power structures that exclude marginalized groups.

In its current manifestation, transitional justice seems to be unequipped to begin an evolution that would see an overcoming of such obstacles; on the other hand, one could argue it is also not its goal.

The constraints of liberal values on transitional justice do not stand the test of time, nor do they satisfy the needs of the victims. Due to the globalization and prominence of the transitional justice frameworks as a tool in achieving peace in post-conflict societies, the re-evaluation of its mechanisms is, therefore, of utmost importance. Not only can it illuminate its historical shortcomings, but it can also, and perhaps more importantly, show potential paths for achieving more intersectional and equitable solutions for the future. Notably, in the context of sexual violence, the re-evaluation of how justice can and should be achieved would better affirm the agency and recognition of survivors’ experiences of sexual violence perpetrated in the context of conflict. Different alternative processes such as truth commissions, people’s tribunals, or memory projects based on the principles of intersectionality, equity, and representation could be imagined.⁷⁴ Economic, material, and psychological support are also necessary components to complement other post-conflict initiatives; because poverty and stigmatization so often impact the most vulnerable victims and their families.⁷⁵ Moreover, support for local initiatives and grassroots organizing holds the potential to provide culturally-relevant education to combat gender-based violence and could ensure the non-recurrence of sexual violence in the future. Any of such initiatives ought to be designed to empower survivors to take the leading roles in the processes that are aimed at supporting them. However, it is the opinion of this author, that without a true transformation of patriarchal systems—embedded not only in Bosnian society but rather globally—justice will not be achieved for the survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, and instances of such horrific crimes will continue to occur.

Notes

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2. Pablo De Greiff, "Theorizing Transitional Justice," in *Transitional Justice*, ed. John Elster, Melissa Williams, and Rosemary Nagy (NYU Press, 2012), 32.
3. Maja Davidovic, "Transform or Perish? The Crisis of Transitional Justice," *Conflict, Security & Development*, V20, no. 2 (March 3, 2020): 293.
4. Dustin N Sharp, "What Would Satisfy Us? Taking Stock of Critical Approaches to Transitional Justice," *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, V13, no. 3 (November 1, 2019): 571.
5. A number of scholars, such as Fionnuala Ni Aolain, Maria B. Olujic, Julie Mertus or Elissa Helms wrote extensively on the subject of transitional justice through feminist lens. See: Fionnuala Ni Aolain, "Advancing Feminist Positioning in the Field of Transitional Justice," *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, V6, no. 2 (2012): 205–28; Teodora Todorova, "'Giving Memory a Future': Confronting the Legacy of Mass Rape in Post-Conflict Bosnia-Herzegovina," *Journal of International Women's Studies*, V12, no. 2 (2011): 3–15; Maria B. Olujic, "Embodiment of Terror: Gendered Violence in Peacetime and Wartime in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina," *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, V12, no. 1 (1998): 31–50; Julie Mertus, "Shouting from the Bottom of the Well: The Impact of International Trials for Wartime Rape on Women's Agency," *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, V6, no. 1 (2004): 110–28; Elissa Helms, "'Politics Is a Whore': Women, Morality and Victimhood in Post-War Bosnia-Herzegovina," in *The New Bosnian Mosaic: Identities, Memories and Moral Claim in Post-War Society*, ed. Xavier Bougarel and Elissa Helms (London: Ashgate, 2007), 235–254.
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- (ICTY) as Antiwar Profiteer," *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, V5, no. 3 (2011): 313–30.
7. Zolo, "Peace through Criminal Law?," 734.
8. Aubery Allegretti, "ICC Launches War Crimes Investigation over the Russian Invasion of Ukraine," *The Guardian*, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/03/icc-launches-war-crimes-investigation-russia-invasion-ukraine>.
9. UN Security Council, "Security Council Resolution 1820 [on Acts of Sexual Violence against Civilians in Armed Conflicts]," S/RES/1820 (2008).
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Contributor Biographies

Tallulah Costa hails from Roanoke, Virginia and is a Presidential Scholar and undergraduate sophomore at Smith College. She is pursuing a major in Government with a minor in the Study of Women and Gender. Tallulah has recently been selected as a LEAD Scholar who will work with Smith's Wurtele Center for Leadership. Her interests include constitutional law, the US government, domestic surveillance and security, feminist leadership, the rights of women—and all their intersections. Tallulah is pleased to have joined the National Council of Jewish Women as an intern with their Government Relations & Advocacy department for the summer of 2022.

Amanda Banks is an interdisciplinary artist who has worked on a range of projects with indie co-ops, government agencies, and more. She finds inspiration in the pattern language of life and uses art to question how our patterns can be recontextualized. She eventually escaped the trailer park (with the kids) and now lives and works from her home studio in North Alabama. You can view more of her work at amandarbanks.com.

Cory Wayman is a recent Art History M.A. graduate of the University of Utah and holds bachelor's degrees in the fields of art history and sociology. His research focuses on the biopolitics of sexuality in art and visual culture and on social histories of art exhibitions, particularly of politically or morally challenging art of the late-20th and 21st centuries. Wayman's premiere publication entitled "Flesh & Stone: Archives, Bodies, and 'Deep Time' in Ada Pinkston's LandMarked" is forthcoming (summer

2022) and examines how Pinkston's pedestal performances challenge dominant modes of national memorials by transforming traumatic experiences of oppressed peoples through affirmative performance gestures.

Melody Thomasson AKA Melody A Dit ("Melody said") is a French paper collage artist. Oscillating between reality and imaginary, she sublimates the banal into the wonderful. Just like an exquisite cadaver of influences and eras, her collages draw their inspiration from Liv Stromquist (illustration), Michel Gondry (directing), and Tristan Tsara (Dadaist poetry). Melody composes her collages with contemporary and 1950s magazines. Playing on the anachronism of these images, Melody transforms reality by creating new settings and offering a new life to her models. A sexist advertisement from the old-time can thus become a feminist apology material. Questioning morals and ideas by diverting them is Melody's preferred playground. You can view more of her work at melodyadit.com.

Lydia Moore is a nonbinary, queer artist based in Baltimore, MD. Months after starting her first office job, the entire world was struck by the COVID-19 crisis. This change in daily life sparked the courage she needed to leave her career in accounting to start art school in 2021. Years of crafting inspired her love for paper arts, especially collage art. Moore is currently a sophomore art student at the Community College of Baltimore County on the path to gaining a Master of Art Therapy.

Maria Markiewicz is a researcher and a curator specializing in gender and queer theory. She holds an MA from Goldsmiths, University of London (Pass with Distinction) and a BA from Central Saint Martins, University of the Arts London (First Class Honors). Since 2017, Markiewicz's research

has explored radical contemporary feminist practices and queer ways of challenging binary gender relations. She is currently researching asexuality, post-sexual futures, and libidinal exhaustion. Her theory of post-sexuality will soon be published in *Asexualities: Feminist and Queer Perspectives Anniversary Edition* (Routledge, forthcoming).

Joan Cox is a Baltimore native and a painter, photographer, graphic designer, and writer. She earned a BFA from Towson University and an MFA from Massachusetts College of Art's program at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown. Her work has been shown nationally and can be found in a host of private collections. Working in large-scale figurative painting, Cox adheres to the notion that representation matters. She seeks to portray dynamic, complex, sensual, sexual, and loving relationships between women—normalizing them. You can browse more of her work at joancoxart.com.

Jamie Kessler is a practicing artist with an interdisciplinary practice that incorporates painting, art-actions, intervention, and social practice. She has exhibited nationally and internationally through exhibitions such as Digital America, The VII International Exhibition of Mail Art, Rome, The Miller Institute for Contemporary Art, Mid-America College Art Association, Corner Projects, Chicago, GAZE Film Festival, San Francisco, and the Carnegie Museum of Art. She is a graduate of Carnegie Mellon University's School of Art.

Sara Niroobakhsh is an Iranian-born, Canadian-based artist and a visiting assistant art professor at New York University Abu Dhabi. Working primarily at the intersection of body, science, technology, and new media that engage the globalizing feminine psyche, she has spent the last decade

experimenting with a variety of multimedia projects involving living tissue, chemistry, virtual reality, and performance. Her work is presented around the world in different museums and public art venues such as the Czech China Contemporary Art Museum in Beijing, South Korea's CICA Museum, Spartanburg Art Museum in the U.S, and Frederick Horsman Varley Art Gallery in Canada, and has been featured in many publications and TV channels such as BBC and Voice of America. She holds an MFA in Art and Technology Studies from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and an MFA in Illustration from Tehran University of Art. You can browse more of her work at saraniroo.com.

Shanique Mothersill is a Jamaican-born, Black feminist poet who recently completed her second MA in the Center for Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies at Florida Atlantic University after completing an MA in Pan African studies and a Certificate of Advanced Studies in Women's and Gender Studies at Syracuse University. Her research interests include Black women's neocolonial lived experiences, Black sexuality, poetry, decolonizing knowledge, and Black feminist theory & praxis.

Veronica Clements is a Chicago-based painter specializing in magical realism still life paintings. She is heavily inspired by 17th-century Dutch iconography and explores themes of vanitas, gender, and humor in her work. Clements is also a visual arts teacher at Elgin Academy and co-founder of Sick Rose Apparel. You can browse more of her work at veronicaclements.com.

Yasmine Anderson is a Composition and Rhetoric PhD candidate at the University of Pittsburgh. Before joining Pittsburgh's English department, she earned her MA from the University of Chicago's Master of Arts

Program in the Humanities and her BA in English with a minor in film studies at the University of Virginia. Her interest in rhetorics of racial authenticity and il/legibility inform her work on the possibilities of formal hybridity within Black literature, film, and music. Situated within sound studies and Black rhetoric, her current project focuses on Black women's blues and blues politics in twenty-first-century popular culture.

Sasan Meftahi was born in 1975 in Qasr Shirin on the border of Iran and Iraq. Meftahi was three years old when the Iranian revolution took place and five years old when the Iran-Iraq war started. His paintings channel his suppressed anger and protests against war, discrimination, and violence. Meftahi went on to study art and graduated with honor from the Islamic Azad University, Central Tehran. He earned a B.A. in painting and an M.A. degree in Master of Arts and Visual and Performing Art. During the past years, Meftahi exhibited in several groups and solo exhibitions. In 2020, he was honored with a solo exhibition at “Persian Idea” Gallery in Tehran, Iran. You can browse more of his work on Instagram @sasan_meftahi_art.

Matylda Jonas-Kowalik is a research assistant at the Department of Peace and Conflict Research at Uppsala University and a graduate student pursuing a master's in holocaust and genocide studies. She holds a Master's degree in International Migration and Ethnic Relations from Malmö University. Her research concerns discursive shifts, genocidal violence, and gender perspectives, with a regional focus on Eastern Europe. Matylda's first monograph “Jutro Wolni” (2022)—regarding the communist resistance movement in the Warsaw Ghetto—was recently published in Polish by Glowbook Publishing.

