

Useless Gender: An immodest proposal for radical justice

“...the body has been for women in capitalist society what the factory has been for male waged workers: the primary ground of their exploitation and resistance, as the female body has been appropriated by the state and men and forced to function as a means for the reproduction and accumulation of labor.” —Silvia Federici, Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation

Women’s bodies, women’s labor

In her incisive book, Silvia Federici describes post-feudal “primitive accumulation” as a foundational process that reveals the structural conditions for the existence of capitalist society. She explains that it is always accompanied by extreme violence—even (or perhaps especially) today: “Primitive accumulation consisted of an immense accumulation of labor-power—“dead labor” in the form of stolen goods, and “living labor” in the form of human beings made available for exploitation...”¹

Further, Federici argues, the rise of capitalist society, witch-hunts, and the persecution of women occurred simultaneously and show gender to be a specific condition of class relations. Femininity and gender become a “labor” function under capitalism. Hence feminist discourses of the “body” emerge as an explicitly political discourse.

The degradation and devaluing of women’s reproductive labor has always been fundamental to capitalism. At the same time, women’s bodies and labor have been exploited as a “natural” resource, a biopower commons or common-

Earth Wilding



yes

wealth. Women have been equated with “the lands,” “mother-earth,” or “the home-lands.” In the Biotech Century, women’s bodies become flesh labs, mined for eggs, embryonic tissues, and stem cells, and used as gestational wombs in Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ART).

The development of biopower is rooted in the rise of capitalism where the promotion of life forces “turns out to be nothing more than the result of a new concern with the accumulation and reproduction of labor power... and it can go hand in hand with a massive destruction of life.”²

“The human body was the first machine developed by capitalism.”³

One of the time-honored tactics of worker’s resistance has been the withdrawal of their labor. Women have practiced the withdrawal of sexual services (Lysistrata) and reproductive services (childfree and single women, nuns, female mystics). Witches and wise women have practiced magic and spiritualism as an attempt to get what they want without labor, thus withdrawing allegiance from a rationalized world of work. Now disobedient gender resisters are experimenting with withdrawal from the normative two-gendered system so fundamental to capital economy and the rule of the church.

Becoming witches, becoming healers

The 14–17th centuries, the age of witch-hunting in the West, also spanned the decay of feudalism and the rise of early capitalism. Historians speculate that witchcraft may have arisen in part from a female-led peasant rebellion after the enclosure of the commons that deprived many women of making an independent living. Witch-hunts were well-organized campaigns that targeted the most defense-

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Three Hanged Witches, 1589

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less populations: mostly poor, widowed, aged females—or those who were considered heretical, sexually deviant, or rebellious.⁴

The *Malleus Maleficarum* (*Hammer of the Witches*) was the manual for witch-hunters. As defined in this book the crimes of the witches were: religious heresy, being sexually active, organizing women, having magical powers of healing and of hurting, possessing medical and obstetrical skills and knowledge. Witches were basically accused of their sexuality, from suspected intercourse with the devil to stealing and hiding penises and un-manning men. Reading between the lines it is clear that among those accused of



Maenad, Gr. 4th C. BC

witchcraft there must have been many people of ambiguous gender, homosexuals, and other gender rebels.

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Women accused of witchcraft were usually lay healers serving poor and peasant populations. The suppression of women as healers was concomitant with the rise of professionalization of medicine as a branch of study for upper-class males. The first trained doctors were not doctors of medicine but of theology and philosophy. They attended to the wealthy and bourgeoisie, not the peasants.

Witches were often the only medical practitioners for people who had no hospitals and who were riddled with disease and afflicted with poverty. The church saw its persecution of peasant healers as attacking the practice of magic and superstition, not medicine. Ironically, it was women healers who were the empirical scientists, gathering data from their practices and experimenting with herbal cures and knowledge derived from direct observation through the senses.

The witch was the scientist of her time, while the Church

still believed in the mumbo-jumbo of prayer, alchemy, bleeding, holy water, and other superstitious practices. For example, women healers and midwives discovered the powers of ergot (a fungus) for the inducement of labor and easing its pain; belladonna as an anti-spasmodic after childbirth; and digitalis for heart ailments. All these plant-derived substances are still in use in modern pharmacology. The witches also used placebo medicine, massage and physical therapy, touching, laying on of hands (reiki), herbal infusions, food, baths, etc. Midwives even practiced pelvic massage (masturbation) on their patients to bring on orgasm and relieve pelvic congestions and tension.⁵

Banished knowledge and bio-piracy

Through contact with the Arab world during the Crusades, the 13th Century saw the rise of the university-educated male medical doctor. Young men of means went to university to study medicine and soon worked to monopolize the practice and banish women from the healing arts—except for midwifery.⁶

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The banishing of common (female and people's) knowledge gained from centuries of inquiry, experimentation, and practice, represents one of the greatest losses to the medical and scientific world in Western history. Contemporary pharmaceutical and bio-prospectors are now trying to recover and exploit some of this knowledge—often in underdeveloped countries where the people cannot easily defend themselves against bio-piracy of big corporations. Ironically, the patents often filed by pharmaceutical companies on plants and drugs “discovered” on bio-prospecting forays, actually function to suppress common knowledge again, and make illegal the free sharing and use of indigenous practices and remedies.

In the US, the rise of the medical profession started in the early 1800s when the “regular” (university trained) male doctors became the only legal healers, replacing the “irregulars” or lay healers many of whom were women and blacks with no formal training. Concurrently, a well-organized “Popular Health Movement” arose during the 1830s and ’40s. Organizations such as the Ladies Physiological Societies, gave public lectures and courses on personal hygiene and anatomy. They advocated frequent bathing, loose-fitting clothing, whole grain cereal, abstention from alcohol and tobacco.

In the Popular Health Movement feminist struggle and class struggle come together. Yet, however influential and popular this movement was, it could not successfully resist the campaign to professionalize the practice of medicine. Pressure came from the captains of industry who had been trained at elite universities, and from a backlash against the autonomy of women’s and people’s medicine. Johns Hopkins for example, was the first US medical school that introduced the German scientific methods of germ theory of disease prevention and therapy. But instead of communicating this important information to midwives and lay healers, male-run medical colleges saw it as an opportunity to exclude them; they refused to train women and black doctors and the profession became increasingly privatized and professionalized. But by the late 19th century, the professional medical monopoly was so strong that even women doctors trained at female medical colleges began to side with the “regulars” against the “irregulars” to demand a complete medical education for all who practiced obstetrics. By the early 1900s midwives were banned from most American states, and nursing became the only legal health care occupation for women.

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Bio-gender/gender tech

In the US during the 1960s–’70s, the “second wave” women’s liberation movement centered on issues of female sexuality and bodily autonomy, choice of sexual orientation, feminist health care, and reproductive rights. The feminist health care movement was founded by amateur practitioners and feminist professionals who organized women’s health clinics and rape crisis centers, fought for reproductive and abortion rights, and campaigned for freedom of sexual choice and bodily sovereignty. While many feminists celebrated the “natural” and creative female body, many more welcomed apparent advances in scientific and bio-medical technologies such as the contraceptive and abortion pill, medically assisted childbirth, and the beginnings of ART and its concomitant separation of sex from reproduction. These differences are still evident among US feminists, some of whom have launched strong critiques of the new bio-medical sciences, the eugenic tendencies of ART, and the extreme medical and pharmacological interventions women’s bodies are often subjected to during pelvic examinations, fertility treatments, pregnancy and childbirth, and the harvesting of eggs and stem cells for biomedical purposes. There is also considerable feminist debate around the increasing medicalization of menopause, and of the technologies of body alteration such as aesthetic surgery, anti-aging and rejuvenation procedures, botox treatments, aesthetic surgery of the female genitals, lipo-suction, breast augmentation, coerced medical gender reassignment and the like.

In the ’80s, the tactical activists of ACT-UP contested the medical system and its treatment of the HIV and AIDS crisis, and emerged as the direct successors of the Feminist

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Health Movement (FHM) though broadening its strategies and concerns. Within the last decade, another strong challenge to the medical establishment has come from gender-queer, transsex and intersex activists who are contending with bio-medical and human rights and legal institutions in many different ways. The radical body interventions used in both freely chosen and coerced sexual and gender re-assignment surgery and therapy, can often involve procedures such as plastic and reconstructive surgery and psychological counseling, as well as genetic testing, hormone and drug therapies, stem cell and fertility technologies. Thus gender-queer people intersect with a wide array of medical, cultural, and disciplinary systems. Borrowing tactics from the FHM, ACT-UP and queer activism, intersex/transsex movement addresses questions of difference, gender and sexual rights that are at the heart of many cultural, political and human rights struggles. Consequently, intersex activism and campaigning could be as significant in bringing about profound legal and societal changes in the 21st century as civil rights, feminist, and ACT UP activists of the 1970s and '80s.

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Useless gender/resistant bodies

Who owns our bodies? The famous feminist health bible, *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, equates the body with the self in its title. Bodies have been the most valuable commodity since human culture and primitive accumulation began. But if our bodies are also the most important sites of sovereignty and contestation then producing non-instrumentalized bodies is a resistant action. We all use our bodies variously as sites on which to inscribe signs of beauty, fitness, health, desirability, pleasure, and sexuality to one degree or another. But what if we refused to lend our bodies any further

to the inscription of the two-gendered system? What if we refused to perform gender in any way any longer. What if we made gender useless to the “labor” of the reproduction of femininity and masculinity and the nuclear family? We would then be left with sexualities freed from the instrumentality of the social categories of gender. In other words it would no longer be compulsory to be female or male in any socially constructed (or biological) terms—you could be “yes species” and make up what that means as you went along, imagine. ...

As we have seen above, capitalism is deeply invested in the compulsory two-gendered system as it guarantees maximum efficiency and control in the production and reproduction of labor power and the harnessing of biopower. Refusal to cooperate with the two-gendered system could be a radically resistant action played out variously by different bodies. All bodies could thus become queered, resistant bodies. “So various, so beautiful, so new,” they would render gender laughable and obsolete in its frigidity and instrumentality. Useless gender and making gender useless has been practiced for hundreds, maybe thousands, of years whether covertly or overtly—consider for example:

yes

- ...Witches becoming-animal flying high on herbal magic
- ...Monstrous cyborg graftings of plant, animal and machine refusing the essentialism of a gendered body
- ...Daphne turning into a laurel tree to escape the embraces of Apollo
- ...The female mystics in the Middle Ages marrying a virtual Christ and dying of spiritual ecstasy, rather than have their bodies controlled by male priests or husbands

- ...The priests of Cybele sacrificing their testicles to the service of the goddess of life
- ...Men becoming women (not female impersonators) to play women's parts in Chinese opera or Shakespeare plays
- ...Sacred harlots (all sexes) pleasuring all strangers in the temple grounds
- ...Women/men/queers choosing not to bear or rear their own children but to cultivate mentorship with other people's children
- ...Queer affinity groups sharing resources, knowledge and sometimes children

Thirsting for justice and joy in the practice of useless gender, we freely choose for a political love, a social love transcending privatized gendered love.⁷



Notes: This speculative text draws heavily on two important books: *Witches, Midwives and Nurses, A History of Women Healers*, Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English (New York: The Feminist Press, 1973); and *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation*, Silvia Federici (New York: Autonomedia, 2004). We have freely mingled their ideas and writings with our own.

1. Federici, pg. 64
2. Federici, pg. 16
3. Federici, pg. 146
4. Under feudalism, the commons were fields, woods, grazing and agricultural lands open to common usage by landless peasants. "Enclosure" was a strategy by rich landowners and aristocracy to eliminate communal land property and extend their holdings. See Federici, pg. 68 and ff.

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5. Much of this paragraph is drawn from *Witches, Midwives and Nurses*.
6. It was the barber-surgeons who were not trained medical doctors, who led the final assault on female midwifery and obstetrics. Brandishing the newly created forceps, they worked to displace midwives, who as women, were not permitted to do surgery.
7. The notion of a "political love" was proposed by Jon MacKenzie at a recent conference.

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