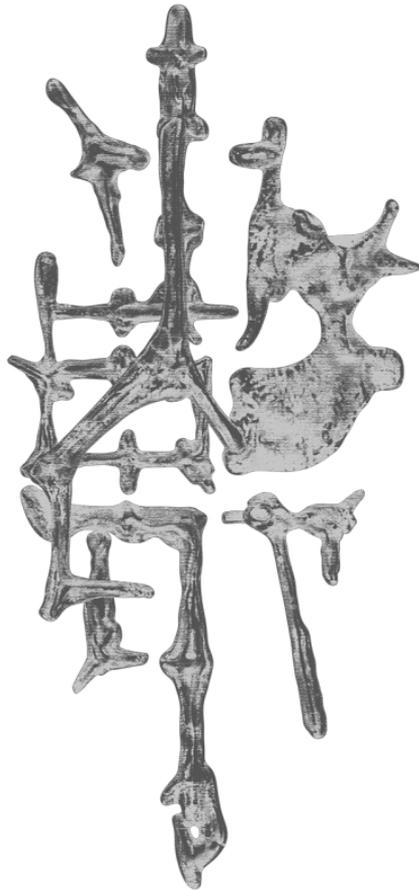


Demonic (trans) feminisms Gender Abolition and End of the Family
- Alexandra Chace



Femininity and Necrophilia

Transsexuality was conceived as modernity's 'solution' for the extremely modernist 'problem' of gender deviance, arriving at the nexus of techno-capitalist innovation, the deindividuating posthuman shock of urbanity, and mechanized global warfare. Sexologists began their diligent work in wake of the American Civil War and the Franco-Prussian War; and psychiatry (Freudian and otherwise) kickstarts in the years preceding and following World War I. World War I concludes in 1918; World War II begins in 1939.¹ The world's first sex reassignment is nestled between, in 1930. Modernity's technological *blitzkrieg*—tanks, cybernetics, airplanes, nukes, urbanization, but also modern medicine and surgical practice—rips humanity apart, reconfiguring flesh, redistributing populations, disintegrating the family. Capital sutures the world and disfigures the populace. Horses bred for war (suddenly out-of-date by World War II) produce the first exogenic estrogens; military developments fill the market with blood-soaked commodities and global warfare drives innovation in surgical procedure and reconstructive medicine.

Predictably, Feminism has a complicated relationship with these events, even whilst modernity provides its fundamental conditions of emergence via industrialization, urbanization, and labour market pressure. Many feminists—particularly so-called 'gender critical' feminists—find themselves at odds with the ongoing meltdown of heterosexual gender relations and the patriarchal family, on the one hand in modernity's debt for their own liberation from the oppression of forced domesticity while nonetheless looking in scorn at the corollary appearance of new sexual and corporeal configurations (queerness, transness). Yet even the queer and trans among us struggle to reconcile anti-capitalist sensibility with our movement's disavowed contingency to capitalist deterritorialization. Accordingly, the peculiar association between queerness and transsexuality with industrial capital and science—negatively or positively—has hardly gone unnoticed by those involved. In her foundational article, *My Words to Victor Frankenstein*, trans scholar Susan Stryker writes:

*The transsexual body is an unnatural body...It is flesh torn apart and sewn together again in a shape other than that in which it was born. In these circumstances, I find a deep affinity between myself as a transsexual woman and the monster in Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. Like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment; like the monster's as well, my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the conditions in which I must struggle to exist.*²

Here Stryker responds to those 'gender critical' that have gained new relevance in recent times: a specifically trans woman exclusive branch of radical feminist thought that finds its origin in the largely disavowed works of feminist scholars Mary Daly and her doctoral student, Janice Raymond. In 1987's *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethetics of Radical Feminism*, Daly, taking a crudely feminist-religious angle, argues that transsexuality is one of a wide, dispersive list of 'necrophilic' strategies carried out in our 'phallocratic' society's march to modernity—a laundry list of technologies and tendencies of so-called “*Dionysian boundary violation*”.³

For Daly, necrophilia is the heart of modernity—“*worship of speed and the machine; poetry as a means of attack; glorification of war; destruction of culture; hate against women; locomotives and airplanes as living forces.*”⁴ The “*passion of necrophiliacs,*” argues Daly, “*is for the destruction of life and since their attraction is to all that is dead, dying, and purely mechanical,*” including “*nuclear reactors and the poisons they produce, stockpiles of atomic bombs, ozone-destroying aerosol spray propellants, oil tankers 'designed' to self-destruct in the ocean, iatrogenic medications and carcinogenic food additives, refined sugar, mind pollutants of all kinds.*”⁵ Thus modernity proliferates “*multiple fetuses/feces of stale male-mates in love with a dead world that is ultimately co-equal and consubstantial with themselves.*”⁶ Necrophilic phallocracy thus denies woman's intrinsic difference by appropriating (destroying) woman's life-giving 'biophilic' energies. Just as a vampire sucks blood,

“men” suck woman’s biophilic energies. Daly, as Stryker notes, “characterizes transsexuals as the agents of ‘necrophilic invasion’ of female space.”⁷

Most striking in Daly’s work, as Stryker leans into quite proudly, is her gothic characterization of modernity and science itself: necrophilia, vampirism, “boundary violation,” and zombies abound. Accepting Daly’s account, Stryker critically reappropriates this monstrosity as her own: “[t]he gender that produced hormonal and surgical sex reassignment techniques is no less pretentious, and no more noble, than Frankenstein’s.”⁸ Once more it is “heroic doctors... [who] endeavor to triumph over nature,” and in fact the medical and psychiatric discourses which “produced sex reassignment techniques [are] inseparable from the pursuit of immortality through the perfection of the body, the fantasy of total mastery through the transcendence of an absolute limit, and the hubristic desire to create life itself.”⁹ This cause—labeled necrophilic—“emerges from a metaphysical quest older than modern science, and its cultural politics are aligned with a deeply conservative attempt to stabilize gendered identity in service of the naturalized heterosexual order.”¹⁰

Yet Stryker’s short engagement with the gothic falls short of identifying the motor propelling (post)modernity towards its gothic vector—that is, *capital*. In *The Dialectic of Fear*, Franco Moretti provides an outline for gothic figures and their corollaries in Marx’s *Capital*. For example, Moretti strikes a direct analogy between Frankenstein’s creation and the proletariat: “Like the proletariat,” Moretti argues, “the monster is denied a name and an individuality,” instead, “he is the Frankenstein monster... he belongs wholly to his creator... just as one can speak of ‘a Ford worker’.”¹¹ He (always *he*)—the monster—“is a collective and artificial creature,” who, much as the proletariat, “is not found in nature, but built.”¹² Daly’s woman is constructed much the same:

The direction of phallotechnic progress is toward the production of three-dimensional, perfectly re-formed “women”, that is, hollow holograms. These projections, or feminine non-women, the replacements for female Selves, could of course eventually be projected in “solid” form – as solid waste products of technical progress, as robots. Eventually, too, the “solid” substitutes could be “flesh and blood” (not simply machines),

*produced by such “miraculous” techniques as total therapy (for example, B.F. Skinner’s behaviorism), transsexualism, and cloning. The march of mechanical masculinist progress is toward the elimination of female Self-centering reality.*¹³

The Frankenstein phenomenon thus aligns with commodity production generally—and the “*solid waste product[s] of technical progress*” are, in Daly’s analysis, by no means exclusively transsexual, though they follow a similar formula. Daly’s contempt is wide and far-reaching. *Gyn/Ecology*—unlike Janice Raymond’s subsequent *The Transsexual Empire*—is *not* simply a matter of transmisogynistic hyper-fixation, rather, in Daly we find a real (if troublesome) attempt to grapple with modernity and its political-economic arrangement: patriarchal capitalism.

Daly’s critique is elucidated, to very different sensibility, in the Marxist terms of her contemporaries, Gayle Rubin and Luce Irigaray. Rubin, for her part, argues that “*the system of relationships by which women become the prey of men...takes up females as raw materials and fashions domesticated women as products.*”¹⁴ Irigaray takes Daly’s “male-mating” even further, declaring that women, signs, and commodities are always referred back to man, and always pass from man to man.¹⁵ Labour power, in her account, is always presupposed masculine, and the products—women—are made objects of use and transaction by men.¹⁶ Irigaray continues:

*Reigning everywhere, but prohibited in practice, hom(m)-osexualité [male homosociality] is played out through the bodies of women (matter or sign), and heterosexuality has been up to the present just an alibi for the smooth workings of man’s relationships with himself, of relationships between men...of [women], men make commerce, but not commerce with them...the economy...in our societies demands therefore that women go along with alienation in consumption, and with exchanges made without their participation, and that men be exempt from use and circulation as commodities.*¹⁷

Irigaray’s claim throughout *Women on the Market*—an equation between ‘woman,’ ‘thing,’ and the commodity form in which

imputed labour power is solely masculine—is reprised by Daly. Daly’s gothic creatures—feminine nonwomen—‘live’ in a “*hollow/solid depthless state*,” termed ‘robotitude,’ or “*marking time hopelessly, a pure repetition of mechanical gestures*,” operating at the “*maintenance level of ‘only not dying.*”¹⁸ Robotitude, hardly limited to women, is the generalized necrophilic state of mechanized ‘life,’ either as commodity or proletarian, and ‘feminitude’ is Daly’s term for female servitude specifically.¹⁹

There is therefore a subjectivity crisis in Daly’s work—and in Rubin and Irigaray’s, for that matter. For Daly, robotitude is the end result of a patriarchal long con which denies “female Self-centering reality.”²⁰ “*As long as that myth (system of myths) [phallograticism] prevails, it is conceivable that there be a society comprised even of 50 percent female tokens: women with anatomically female bodies but totally male-identified, male-possessed brains/spirits...[t]he myth/spell itself of phallograticism must be broken.*”²¹ Daly’s positive project—for women to begin “living”—entails the recovery of a distinctly female Self, such that “*the victim sees and names the fact that the oppressor obliges her to consume her transcendence in vain, changing her into a thing... no kind of tokenism in a transcendence-sapping system will free our Selves from the spell of patriarchal myth.*”²²

Yet the question of a female Self—not to mention our transcendence to it—is not without severe trouble. Feminism has exhausted seemingly every avenue around—rarely through—this trouble. For Daly, this entails a retreat to matriarchal prehistory. For liberal feminism—under former Eastern Block socialism and contemporary Western capitalism alike—the universal subject of the Enlightenment is made forwards compatible with woman as she enters the labour market and exits the home. As in Freud’s theory, woman’s difference is denied, instead reduced to biological disadvantage, sparking Irigaray’s most controversial claim—that “*any theory of the subject will always have been appropriated by the masculine.*”²³ Read through Irigaray’s theory of sexual difference, it becomes clear that, while Daly is right that woman is generally made to be “*male-identified [and] male-possessed,*” her theory of woman’s subjectivity require significant revision.

Irigaray, breaking with Daly, conceives sexual difference

as not a transcendent Idea, but rather as the fact of her actual, albeit disavowed, construction and exchange by men. The commodity form Daly loathes is equated with woman broadly by Irigaray, in the peculiar hyphenation ‘woman-commodity’. For Irigaray, as with Rubin, gender is produced in the family unit, in which woman serves as “reproductive machine,” man as “reproductive agent,” and the child as his product.²⁴ Woman, as machine, is thus dead labor—the infrastructure to man’s relationship and the apparatus of production—which fosters the “*smooth working of man’s relations with himself*.”²⁵ Woman is thus the variable that makes relations—the entire economy—work, and she feeds off man’s living labour, guaranteeing her status as undead. She is thus synonymous with capital—as Amy Ireland puts it, “[w]oman as she is constructed by Man... is continuous with the spectacle.”²⁶ “As everyone knows,” Moretti argues, “the vampire is dead and yet not dead: [s]he is an Un-Dead, a ‘dead’ person who yet manages to live thanks to the blood [s]he sucks from the living.”²⁷ Therefore there is, as Ireland suggests, power in this vampire status: “The stronger the vampire becomes, the weaker the living become.”²⁸ Woman’s status is thus not necessarily one to be lamented. Ireland writes:

*Anything that escapes the searchlight of the specular economy, even whilst providing the conditions of its actualization, has immense subversive potential... The conspiracy of phallic law, logos, the circuit of identification, recognition, and light thus generates its occult undercurrent whose destiny is to dislodge the false transcendental of patriarchal identification. Machines, women—demons, if you will—align on the dark side of the screen: the inhuman surplus of a black circuit.*²⁹

But how exactly does one dislodge the “false transcendental of patriarchal identification,” which has long been guaranteed through the tripartite family structure and the patronymic? This essay explores the nature of this strange alignment—between machines, women, and demons—through the ongoing reconfigurations of gender, sex, and sexual relations in and outside the family structure which is tasked with continuity and preservation. In other words, I ask: What horror does the dark side of the screen bring to bear on the smooth workings of patriarchy?

Demon Insurrection

1973's *The Exorcist* inaugurated a slew of interest in demonic possession—books, films, urban legends—following a familiar formula: man (priest, father, doctor) must save a girl (perhaps a young boy, seldom a man) through the ancient rite of 'exorcism,' at which time the 'demon' is removed and 'normality' is restored. Exorcism, in this formula, always proceeds following a careful diagnostic procedure. In the case of *The Exorcist's* Reagan MacNeil, possession is determined through a haphazard behavior and psychiatric analysis—Reagan begins to misbehave, to disobey, and to act out violently. As her ailment progresses, she is transformed from a young girl into a hideous creature: completely pale, covered in purulent wounds and grey goop. Her girl-like voice deepens; her soft face disappears beneath cracking skin. Reagan's appearance and behavior—androgynous and inhuman—abandons prescribed feminine norms, shedding 'gender' from 'sex'. Reagan becomes an embodied wound: a cunt.

Possession, in Reagan's case, proceeds from a perceived crisis in the family: her working mother and her absent father. It should come as no surprise, then, that her eventual exorcist is both a priest and a trained psychiatrist, i.e. an appropriate representative of phallic law in both its religious and scientific dimensions. Absent a biological Father, her Father is represented by the unity of the church, medicine, and psychiatry, which strives to enact Father's law on an insurgent nature. Confronted with male physicians that would 'cure' her, she screams "fuck me"—equally dare and demand. When a psychologist attempts hypnotism, she grabs his penis and crushes it in her hands. Eventually, Reagan seizes the holy cross—a stand-in for the phallic conspiracy—and stabs her vulva, shouting, mockingly, "*let Jesus fuck you*" in mindless repetition as her mother looks on. The exhibitionist display quickly transitions into a properly incestuous lesbian encounter, as she forces her mother's face onto her bleeding vulva, screaming "lick me!"

A similar eroticism is replicated in *The Exorcist's* recent television sequel by the same name, which follows Reagan as an adult, now living under an assumed identity unbeknownst both

to her husband and daughters. The time, the demon has latched itself onto her youngest teenage daughter in order to enact revenge on the now middle-aged Reagan and her family—an opportunity created through her husband’s recent brain injury. One night, early into possession, Reagan plays voyeur to the demon effectively masturbating her daughter openly at the kitchen table. Once again, possession is marked by gender non-conforming or inappropriate behavior, in this case her daughter’s open displays of sexuality and revealing outfits. In these circumstances, possession arises as an assault on the smooth functioning of the family, itself undermined by paternal absence and/or maternal conspiracy.

In *The Philosophy of Horror*, Noël Carroll argues that “[d]emonically possessed characters typically involve the superimposition of two categorically distinct individuals, the possessee and the possessor, the latter usually a demon, who, in turn, is often a categorically transgressive figure (e.g., a goat-god).”³⁰ Yet this superimposition is hardly a neat Cartesianism, most importantly because possession is hardly constrained to just two personalities or actors which can be neatly divided into ‘ones’. When Father Karras inquires on Reagan’s whereabouts, ‘her’ response is quite telling: “*In here. With Us.*”³¹ More than coincidence, Irigaray’s theory of sexual difference rests upon a distinction—abstract and material—between his oneness and she who is not one. In *This Sex Which is Not One* and *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray seeks to expose Freudian psychoanalysis’s blindness to sexual difference in Freud’s assertion that the “little girl” was always in fact simply a disadvantaged little boy. For Freud, she argues, “*woman’s erogenous zones never amount to anything but a clitoris-sex that is not comparable to the noble phallic organ, or a hole-envelope that serves to sheathe and massage the penis in intercourse, a mono-sex, or a masculine organ turned back upon itself, self-embracing.*”³² Irigaray’s alternative female eroticism rejects this equivalence:

... So woman does not have a sex organ? She has at least two of them, but they are not identifiable as ones. Indeed, she has many more. Her sexuality, always at least double, goes even further: it is plural... The pleasure of the vaginal caress does not have to be substituted for that of the clitoral caress. They

*each contribute, irreplaceably, to woman's pleasure. Among other caresses...Fondling the breasts, touching the vulva, spreading the lips, stroking posterior wall of the vagina, brushing of against the uterus, and so on...*³³

Woman's autoeroticism is horizontal and dispersive, not reducible to the primacy of the phallus. Yet the pleasure woman takes from this "*organ which has nothing to show for itself*" is "*denied by a civilization that privileges phalломorphism.*"³⁴ Only through monstrosity can woman's 'not oneness' be represented. These monsters—the so-called possessors—are thus not quite normative (patriarchal) women, yet do not—despite their coding as male—embody masculinity without serious complications. These demons are instead cast as deficient intruders, aliens subject to exoticification and racialization, and monsters from another plane.

Along this observation, Daly problematizes the supposed gender arrangement of *The Exorcist*, questioning: "*Why is there no book or film about a woman who exorcises a Jesuit?*" Through a feminist lens, Daly argues, "*it is clear that 'Father' is precisely the one who cannot exorcise, for he is allied with and identified with The Possessor...it is women ourselves who will have to expel the Father from ourselves, becoming our own exorcists.*"³⁵ The father thus 'possesses' both the machine (woman) and the product (the child) as things. In Daly's account, exorcism entails a re-exertion of male power tantamount to rape. In Irigaray's terms, "*The one of form, of the individual, of the (male) sexual organ, of the proper name, of the proper meaning...supplants, while separating and dividing, that contact of at least two (lips) which keeps woman in touch with herself, but without any possibility of distinguishing what is touching from what is touched.*"³⁶

The Exorcist and its knock-offs, as a general prescription, depict the ultimate defeat of the female sex by the cult of phallic law (the Father and his stand-ins). Yet alongside and in the aftermath of *The Exorcist's* box office success, a number of European films began to explore again a related myth—the lesbian vampire—to very different ends. Beginning with Sheridan le Fanu's *Carmilla*, but finally coming to light in 1970s exploitation films (notably, Harry Kümel's *Daughters of Darkness*

and Jesús Franco's *Vampyros Lesbos*), the lesbian vampire myth plays up the erotic and psychic elements of the vampire, often at expense of explicit bloodsucking, and recasts vampirism in an explicitly anti-male arrangement. The lesbian vampire myth collides with the possession craze in Franco's own 1974 French work, *Lorna The Exorcist*, which follows an American woman and her slow seduction of a wealthy man's daughter. Before she was born, the woman—Lorna—cuts a deal with her father: trading him the promise of success for his firstborn daughter.

Hoping to finally collect on her loan, Lorna enacts a kind of psychic possession over Linda, visiting her in dreams ranging from erotic, to violent, invigorating, and even orgasmic. In the film's opening scene, we see Lorna in an arrangement more resembling of *The Silence of the Lambs'* Buffalo Bill than anything out of *The Exorcist*: staring deeply into herself at a hotel mirror, masturbating, while Linda watches, also masturbating, from the bed. Lorna seemingly parodies femininity, adopting an absurd, contrived, drag style: high, drawn-on, thin brows arched halfway down her nose, giving form to gaudy, brightly painted eyeshadows in ever-changing colors. Lorna and Linda play part to lavish sex scenes—physically and in dreams—while heterosexual sex and the family unit descends into monstrosity. Sex between Linda's mother and father—the film's sole heterosexual encounter—ends in her mother's death, as flesh-and-blood crabs crawl out from her vagina.

But the film's lesbian sex moves beyond all patriarchal arrangements, without regard for the anachronisms of the family and the individual body. As Ian Olney points out, *The Exorcist's* Eurohorror knock-offs “*tend to queer the whole idea of possession, transforming it into an explicitly erotic act that not only ensures the continuation of a long tradition of female unruliness, but also involves women taking pleasure in one another's bodies in a way that runs completely counter to the heteronormativity of* *The Exorcist*.”³⁷ When Lorna and Linda meet physically, Linda gently suckles from Lorna's breast as Lorna fingers her, and blood (from trauma? from menstruation?) spills. This eroticism challenges the boundaries of the individual, and the appropriately ‘normal’ relations between mother, daughter, and lover, recalling Irigaray's most vivid writing experiment, *When Our Lips Speak Together*:

*I love you, childhood. I love you who are neither mother (forgive me, mother, I prefer a woman) nor sister. Neither daughter nor son. I love you—and where I love you, what do I care about the lineage of our fathers, or their desire for reproductions of men? Or their genealogical institutions? What need have I for husband or for family, persona, role, function? Let's leave all those to reproductive laws. I love you, your body, here and now. If/you touch you/me, that's quite enough for us to feel alive.*³⁸

This eroticism entails the complete destruction of the male order (phallocracy) and the heterosexual family. As Bonnie Zimmerman notes, “[t]he lesbian vampire, besides being a gothic fantasy archetype, can be used to express a fundamental male fear that woman-bonding will exclude men and threaten male supremacy”.³⁹ Likewise, “the ‘anti-male’ bias inherent in the lesbian vampire myth can be expressed and seen as a justification for women’s suppression”.⁴⁰ In the case of *The Exorcist*, the demon’s alignment with the female against the Father provokes a violent response—in this case, an exorcism. The so-called possessor is depicted as an alien (in Lorna’s case, foreign; in *The Exorcist’s* case, ambiguously Middle Eastern) assaulting the family structure from the inside, taking advantage of the father’s absence (*The Exorcist*) or his debt (*Lorna the Exorcist*). Unsurprisingly, possession or vampirism is also depicted as a kind of contagion, spreading through physical and psychic contact, assaulting an already ravaged family immune system. Exorcism is the purification ritual.⁴¹

To now skip several decades, Brad Elmore’s 2019 teenage vampire film *Bit* embraces this more overtly feminist vampirism. In *Bit*, Laurel (an 18-year-old transgender girl—though this is only implied in the film’s diegesis) falls in with and is ‘turned’ by a group of lesbian feminist vampires with a deeply political hatred and distrust of men. The group holds a misandrist mantra as their sole principle: “no fucking boys.” ‘Turning’ men, and by implication, having sex with them, is strictly forbidden. Yet the collective disavows any claim to be a political movement—instead referring to themselves as an anti-male “terrorist organization,”⁴² which makes a habit of targeting men, especially those who harass or assault women.

Yet one male vampire—Vlad—is present spectrally (or glamorously) as the Father throughout the film. Vlad sparks Duke’s (the collective’s informal leader) vendetta against men—for years she was subject to his ‘glamour’ and forced to be one of his brides. Seemingly unable to be destroyed completely, Vlad has been reduced to a blood-starved heart—locked away in a box, itself in a dungeon—which Duke secretly cannibalizes, absorbing his power of glamour for herself and secretly deploying it—against her own rules—on the rest of the collective. Upon his inadvertent reanimation her conspiracy is exposed, and Duke is locked in her own dungeon upon Vlad’s defeat by Laurel, and the collective decided to collectively cannibalize Vlad’s remaining heart, dispersing his power of glamour amongst themselves. In other words, the collective rejects the ‘oneness’ afforded to the vertical power structure (represented by the patriarchy or the matriarch), instead embracing a horizontal, contractual pluralism.

Lesbianism—either as orientation or social practice—“*must be vampirism,*” argues Zimmerman, and thus “*elements of violence, compulsion, hypnosis, paralysis, and the supernatural must be present*”.⁴³ “*One woman must be a vampire, draining the life of the other woman, yet holding her in a bond stronger than the grave.*”⁴⁴ “*Men alleviate their fears that lesbian love could create an alternative model*” by eliding the quotidian violence of patriarchy, casting efforts to undo patriarchal violence as the primary offense. But, as Zimmerman points out, this supposed offense “*can be interpreted by feminists as a justified attack on male power, a revenge fantasy, and a desire for separation from the male world.*”⁴⁵ In this case, the target of this violence is men, but in reality the family itself. And ultimately, this violence is carried out as an assault against the normative arrangements of life itself. The myths, predicated on male fear, inadvertently provide an insightful model of a necessary feminist insurgency hinged on an erotic embrace of the so-called “monstrous feminine.”⁴⁶

Immunizing the Family

In 2018’s *Rapid-onset Gender Dysphoria in Adolescents and Young Adults*, public health scholar Lisa Littman outlines

a theory of trans identity as a ‘social contagion’ spread among adolescent peer groups, spreading principally through online forums and social media. In the midst of a rapid increase in visibility for trans youth, Littman focuses her study on parents’ account of perceived changes in adolescent self-narration and gender identity—accounts that range from negative and suspicious to outright paranoia. Littman describes situations where trans youth’s self-narrations were reported by parents as “[not] sound[ing] like their child’s voice,” or as having “sounded scripted,” “like a form letter,” and “practically copy and paste” from “online and other sources.”⁴⁷ Many parents felt their children were deliberately rewriting their own histories:

*A 12-year-old natal female was bullied specifically for going through early puberty and the responding parent wrote “as a result she said she felt fat and hated her breasts.” She learned online that hating your breasts is a sign of being transgender. She edited her diary (by crossing out existing text and writing in new text) to make it appear that she has always felt that she is transgender.*⁴⁸

Littman further describes seven other respondents “*who conveyed a process where their child was constantly rewriting their personal history to make it consistent with the idea they always were transgender.*”⁴⁹ Although it remains quite unclear whether the children are being gendered in accordance with their wishes in these responses, one nonetheless learns that this possession-like phenomenon applies without regard for assigned sex or gender identity. Littman continues:

One parent said, “...she is actively rewriting her personal history to support the idea that she was always trans.” Another respondent added, “...my daughter denies events I recollect from her childhood and puberty that contradicts her narrative of ‘always knowing she was a boy.’” Another respondent offered, “He is rewriting his personal history to suit his new narrative.” And a fourth respondent described, “[Our] son has completely made up his childhood to include only girl friends and dressing up in girl’s clothes and playing

*with dolls, etc. This is not the same childhood we have seen as parents.*⁵⁰

The preceding accounts are one effect of a decades-long liberalization of the gender identity clinic, which has slowly divorced trans identity from the regulatory bodies which sought to control it. The first modern gender identity clinics were research institutions (e.g. Hirschfeld's Institut für Sexualwissenschaft) and/or were based out of public universities (e.g. UCLA's famed Gender Identity Clinic). Whereas "*some of the early nonacademic gender dysphoria clinics performed surgery on demand,*" many of these research institutions sought to formalize diagnostic criteria, beyond the "*simple and subjective... feeling that one was in the wrong body*".⁵¹ While no unambiguous test was ever developed, normative rules and conventions of weighing patients' 'appropriateness' to their gender of choice exerted a strong selection pressure on generations of would-be transsexuals.

This criteria, according to Sandy Stone, "*constituted a fully acculturated, consensual definition of gender, and at the site of their enactment we can locate an actual instance of the apparatus of production of gender.*"⁵² While this apparatus which produces gender from sex was removed from the home, and the 'product' was dislodged from birth assignment, the clinic and its rules attempted to find a 'cure' for gender non-conformity which would integrate its products into a normative mainstream. Stone, for example, notes that the clinic also took on the role of "charm school," in an effort to "*produce not simply anatomically legible females, but women...i.e. gendered females.*"⁵³ Sex reassignment was thus conceived as the inoculation to the "correctable problem" non-normative gender/embodiment posed. Given that the "*essence of transsexualism [was] the act of passing,*"⁵⁴ the aim of reassignment was to produce unidentifiable transsexuals scattered across society, kept apart by silence.⁵⁵ The floodgates of gender were far from lifted; rather, the Norm was seemingly further entrenched, creating a false sense of scarcity for those who sought surgery and medical treatment.

As a result, the current boom in sex reassignment⁵⁶ was carefully delayed by the top-down regulatory trifecta of the

clinic, law, and the state. Yet, with some geographic variation, these regulatory institutions that characterized the 60s and 70s have now all but faded, increasingly replaced by a transactional ‘informed consent’ model:

Instead of a mental health practitioner assessing eligibility for and granting access to services, transgender patients themselves are able to decide on whether they are ready to access transition-related health services. In this model, the role of the health practitioner is to provide transgender patients with information about risks, side effects, benefits, and possible consequences of undergoing gender confirming care, and to obtain informed consent from the patient.⁵⁷

The diagnostic and surveilling function of the clinic has been subsumed in the discourse of ‘consent,’ and the research clinic—its rules, its standards—has been replaced by the privatized clinic and contractual exchange. This *depsychiatrization* of gender dysphoria (no longer ‘gender identity disorder’) has been swift and unwavering. The notion that one would be ‘diagnosed’ as gender dysphoric—as a ‘real man’ or a ‘real woman’—has gone, and increasingly the role of the marketized medical industry is to simply ‘affirm’ gender non-conformity, rather than to prescribe normative identity, and the normalizing function of power is increasingly dispersed. Thus we no longer speak of ‘sex reassignment,’ but rather of a plethora of ‘gender affirming procedures,’ i.e. those that ‘affirm’ or ‘confirm’ one’s pre-existing proclivities. This new accessibility of medical and surgical procedure coincides with a sharp increase in trans visibility since the early 2000s.

While Littman’s work has been relentlessly critiqued by academics and activists alike,⁵⁸ it does speak not only to contemporary anxieties about the growing trans population, but also to concerns that the family, and heterosexual domestic life generally, is under assault. The paranoia that *The Exorcist* and similar films tap into—over the latchkey phenomenon, working mothers, absent fathers—has been upgraded in recent times with the internet and social media’s ability to covertly ‘enter’ the home unbeknownst to parents. The left and right both speak of

new concerns over ‘screen time,’ which is present as non-political no-brainers. Apple and Google, in this spirit, have both introduced a wide range of surveillance and tracking features to their mobile operating systems. Surveillance, it seems, is permissible under the twin guises of ‘digital wellbeing’ (Google’s suite is literally titled *Digital Wellbeing*) and family/child security. The ‘family’ haunts politics as a whole, posited as a private sphere preceding politicization. British philosopher Mark Fisher writes:

For Deleuze and Guattari, and it is perhaps the family, more than any other institution, that is the principal agency of capitalist reterritorialization: the family as a transcendental structure (“mummy-daddy-me”) provisionally secures identity amidst and against capital’s deliquescent tendencies, its propensity to melt down all preexisting certainties. It’s for just this reason, no doubt, that some leftists reach for the family as an antidote to, and escape from, capitalist meltdown — but this is to miss the way that capitalism relies upon the reterritorializing function of the family.⁵⁹

The retreat to the uncontroverted nuclear family results in the generalized hegemony of *domestic realism*, a term feminist Helen Hester has aptly adapted from Fisher’s own *capitalist realism*. Domestic realism refers to the “*phenomenon by which the isolated and individualized small dwelling (and the concomitant privatization of household labor) becomes so accepted and commonplace that it is nearly impossible to imagine life being organized in any other way,*” despite and “*in the face of otherwise extensive visions of socio-technical overhaul.*”⁶⁰

But domestic realism, as Fisher implies, is a *reaction* to the very real phenomenon of capitalist deterritorialization—a lone island in a fluid meltdown process. But its stability is far from a given, and while fears of familial subversion are certainly largely imagined, there are real signs of futility in the protection racket built around domesticity. The 21st century family is scarcely identifiable with its 20th century cousin, neither in appearance nor power relations. Thus Irigaray and Rubin’s account of the family is sorely in need of an update. Consider the following points:

a) Gender is no longer strictly produced in the home. The gender identity clinic and its subsequent deregulation (in addition to plastic surgery generally) pushes the production of gender from sex firmly into the social sphere. While gender was always a social phenomenon, one's gender no longer necessarily corresponds to one's place within a strict patrilineage.

b) The tripartite family structure (Fisher's "mummy-daddy-me" or Irigaray's "machine-agent-product") is now the exception, rather than the rule. Single mothers, single fathers, high divorce rates, hyphenated surnames, and same sex parents all point to a breakdown of the heterosexual nuclear family, putting the patronymic (the 'brand' by which the family's possessions and 'products' are known) into crisis.

c) The home is no longer just a site of reproduction, but also of surplus value production. Following Hester, the "*border between labor time and life time*" is erased,⁶¹ a phenomenon accelerated drastically by the current COVID-19 crisis. "Work-from-home" is increasingly normalized and/or required across diverse economic sectors.

d) As women have entered the labor market, the 'cult of domesticity' is increasingly outsourced to the labor market. Home-making is no longer labour performed inside the home or family; even the lower classes outsource childcare and other services to the labour market. The old feminist polemic—"Wages For Housework"—becomes not a principle but a real, unfolding process.

The motor driving these phenomena—and the motor of modernity itself—is capital and its deterritorializing function, i.e. its propensity for social meltdown. *Capitalism* is comprised of, on the one hand, self-organizing cyberpositive processes predicated on positive feedback and, on the other hand, stabilizing (cybernegative) objects. This is the model of capital

described by Sadie Plant and Nick Land—capital as an intensifying feedback loop on an integrated circuit. Plant & Land write:

*Rotted by digital contagions, modernity is falling to bits. Lenin, Mussolini, and Roosevelt concluded modern humanism by exhausting the possibilities of economic planning. Runaway capitalism has broken through all the social control mechanisms, accessing inconceivable alienations. Capital clones itself with increasing disregard for heredity, becoming abstract positive feedback, organizing itself. Turbulent finance drifts across the global network.*⁶²

It is in this vein that Steven Shaviro posits capital itself as the sole remaining “transgressive”, because capital “*devours everything without any regard for boundaries, distinctions, or degrees of legitimacy.*”⁶³ Capital is Daly’s “Dionysian” boundary violator—shredding gender, the family, and humanity itself. Capital is an inhuman monstrosity which is “*not a human invention, but a viral contagion, replicated cyberpositively across post-human space.*”⁶⁴

Humanity’s efforts to “*get a grip*” on capitalist schizophrenization takes place as a paranoid “immuno-politics,” governance in the form of an “allergic reaction” to “*security integration, migration policy, and bio-control: the medico-military complex.*”⁶⁵ Immuno-politics is the field of containment politics, where the aim is mass inoculation of society against bodies rendered foreign, real or imagined. In this light, the gender identity clinic was conceived as a disciplinary institution and containment zone where the threat of visible gender non-conformity could be appropriately neutralized, i.e. normalized and invisibilized. Each apparatus of the state targets would-be pollutants, and immuno-politics constitutes the state operationalization of exorcism on a mass scale. Plant & Land write:

Paranoia has moved on since the sixties: even the rivers of blood are now HIV positive. Foreign bodies are ever more virulent and dangerous, insidious invasions of unknown variety threaten every political edifice. The allergic reaction

*to this state of emergency is security integration, migration policy and bio-control: the medico-military complex. Immuno-politics and its cybernetic policing arise together because filtration and scanning are different dimensions of the same process; eliminating contamination and selecting a target. Ever more Command, Control, Communications, and Intelligence to track the aliens. What was SDI [Strategic Defense Initiative] really designed for?*⁶⁶

But immuno-politics also establishes an array of possible contestations, “*since every sophistication of security technology opens new invasion routes faster than it closes the old ones down*”.⁶⁷ The gender identity clinic, intended to stabilize gender, instead releases it from the shackles of the home and the family, and the clinic’s program of containment is exhausted. Rapid-Onset Gender Dysphoria—along with other forms of feminist paranoia—are themselves the latest allergic reactions to the fear—the fact—of that which cannot be immunized against. The threat is revealed immanent: just as there is no clear criteria for exorcism beyond the church’s judgment, “[t]here is no mental nor psychological test which successfully differentiates the transsexual from the so-called normal population.”⁶⁸ And so “[c]orrupt officials open the trafficking arteries, and intelligence computers are infested with viruses. The CIA were the first traffickers in LSD”.⁶⁹ Immuno-politics—in reaction to gender, transness, or any other looming threat—is thus always “*in a state of panic, delirial with anxiety,*” even whilst it “*further develops the conditions for its collapse.*”⁷⁰ Contemporary anxieties about the family and the child’s normative gender embodiment thus reflect a domestic sphere already undermined from the inside—by its own protection racket. For the cat does get out of the bag eventually.

A Cure for the Cure

What to make of this panic, and the violence it incites? Contemporary redemptive politics apologizes for the panic and seeks to bring clarity to delirium by pursuing a program of self-immunization; that is, normalization. The emphasis on agency, individual identity, and subsequent ‘validating’ platitudes

(e.g. “*trans women are women*”) locks queer/feminist politics into ontological capture,⁷¹ instituting a regime of self-exorcism, pushing us back into possession. Unsurprisingly, the return of queer/trans domesticity aligns with appeals to state recognition and legitimation of alternative family compositions. While trans-exclusionary feminists obsess over children’s embodiment and performance of gender, certain trans politics—prominent since the early 2010s—risk being subsumed into a similar obsession with (trans)normative family life. Certainly, recent queer and trans respectability politics welcome the return of LGBTQ+ people to the family, both as relatives and as parents in their own right—but what are we returning to really? Plant & Land write:

*To what could we wish to return? Heidegger completed the degeneration of authenticity into xenocidal neurosis. Being died in the fuhrer-bunker. and purity belongs entirely to the cops. The capitalist metropolis is mutating beyond all nostalgia. If the schizoid children of modernity are alienated, it is not as survivors from a pastoral past, but as explorers of an impending post-humanity.*⁷²

Plant engages in a feminist pessimism, where agency, being, identity, and subjectivity are the dying enemy of modernity, and woman’s lack thereof is reconfigured as her ultimate strength. “Masculine identity has everything to lose from this new technics,” Plant argues, because “[c]ybernetics is feminisation. When intelligent space emerges alongside the history of women’s liberation, no one is responsible. That’s the point...[s]elf-guiding systems were not in the plan.”⁷³ Plant rejects the traditional tactics of collective struggle and positive political projects, instead proclaiming that “*we need no principles.*”⁷⁴ Control, according to Plant, is counter-revolutionary:

Feminist theory has tried every route, and found itself in every cul-de-sac. Struggles have been waged both with and against Marx, Freud, Lacan, Derrida...sometimes in an effort to reclaim some notion of identity, subjectivity, and agency; sometimes to eschew it in the name of undecidability or jouissance...Only Irigaray begins to suggest that there really is no point in pursuing the masculine dream of self-control, self-identification,

self-knowledge, and self-determination. If “*any theory of the subject will always have been appropriated by the masculine*”⁷⁵ before the women can get close to it, only the destruction of this subject will suffice.⁷⁶

It is curious, however, that Plant’s prescriptions—if they are prescriptions—find a strong but inadvertent ally in contemporary Afro-pessimism. In her brief note, *Don’t Exist*, Eva Hayward attempts to weave Afro-pessimism with trans studies in her call for a new “trans negativity,” which “*turns against liberal (white) transgender projects about visibility, accessibility, and progressivism, to expose how these political logics are predicated on racialized humanism.*”⁷⁷ Read with Plant, we see that this humanism is also invariably sexed. Channeling Plant’s own sensibility, Hayward argues:

*The “don’t exist” of trans is not equivalent to the racist refusal of “the human” for blacks—if institutionalized trans only indexes desire for change as disfigurement of, or reification of, sex/gender, then trans is still human oriented. Following [Frank] Wilderson’s critique of “the human” as white beingness, might we ask: is being-ness the problem, rather than the solution, for addressing antitrans violence?*⁷⁸

Clearly the aliens of post-humanity are by now not simply categorically *women*. The erosion of family life destabilizes gender precisely because normative gender, and identity broadly, has been contingent on the smooth workings of the heterosexual nuclear family. Those outside the confines of this family structure are thus considered deficient in identity, and at risk of non-normative gendered embodiment and behavior.

French feminist Monique Wittig brought this to attention in *One Is Not Born a Woman*, arguing that “*Lesbian is the only concept... beyond the categories of sex... because the designated subject (lesbian) is not a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically.*”⁷⁹ In this view, “*what makes a woman is a specific social relation to a man,*” based on domestic and reproductive servitude and economic obligation. Wittig takes interest in the Lesbian as the only figure that, in her conception, ‘escapes’ this heterosexual family economy, precisely in her refusal of

heterosexual marriage. But we can now imagine a plethora of positions outside this economy—queer, trans, but also, notably, Black. The nuclear family and its boundaries are racial constructs. Read together, Wittig, Irigaray, and Plant's claims slot neatly into Hortense Spillers' account of the slave family and plantation life, where the white male slave owner takes the spectral place of the Father, and slaves of all genders, like white women, are identified with his patronymic.⁸⁰ This Father, however, is barred from participation in the child's rearing by social prohibition. The African-American father, meanwhile, is denied—often physically separated from the family through the slave auction—and each African-American man is therefore “touched” by the mother, who gives him his lineage. Spillers writes:

Therefore, the female, in this order of things, breaks in upon the imagination with a forcefulness that marks both a denial and an “illegitimacy.” Because of this peculiar American denial, the black American male embodies the only American community of males which has had the specific occasion to learn who the female is within itself...It is the heritage of the mother that the African-American male must regain as an aspect of his own personhood—the power of “yes” to the “female” within.⁸¹

Outside the confines of white heterosexual reproduction, both the African-American man and woman are necessarily rendered gender ambiguous. The African-American man is denied the status of the Father, and the African-American woman takes a chimeric position outside the white family structure. The African-American woman functions as a woman but assumes the power of ‘naming,’ i.e. the power traditionally afforded to man, outside the boundaries of race-blind gender prescription. For the mother, “*This problematizing of gender places her, in my view, out of the traditional symbolics of female gender.*”⁸² Yet in terms of the sexual economy both the African-American man and woman occupy the position of Irigaray's woman, in that this woman is simply that which is exchanged, i.e. they are made commerce of, yet nonetheless excluded from the white domestic realm which guarantees gendered identity. Spillers doesn't retreat

from this distinctly *trans* position, instead, like Stryker, she calls for an “*insurgent ground as female social subject*,” achieved by “[a]ctually claiming the monstrosity (of a female with the potential to ‘name’)...[which] might rewrite after all a radically different text for a female empowerment.”⁸³

The difficulty of Plant is that, more rightly than wrongly, her political prescriptions curiously align with emergent phenomena. Thus it is not simply a matter of “*wait and see*,” but of encouraging and cultivating a specific tension or process, in a process that is ultimately open-ended. In Spillers we find a similar problematic: the already monstrous must claim monstrosity! *Bit’s Duke* declares: “*The world’s a meatgrinder, kid. Especially if you’re a woman. I don’t think you need a Power Point presentation to know that one’s true. We’re politically, socially, and mythologically fucked. Our roles are secondary. Our body’s suspect, alien, other. We’re made to be monsters, so let’s be monsters.*”⁸⁴ The Xenofeminists, reprising a similar formula, call for “*seiz[ing] alienation as an impetus to generate new worlds*,” at the same time it acknowledges the reality of alienation as our present condition.⁸⁵

Thus this is not simply a “let go” disposition to an unfolding reality, but it is also not a problem that could be approached by the traditional means of resistance and social change. “[I]t’s a matter of creating a real anarchism that would destroy the state. Which is of course, quite happily destroying itself at the moment. So that’s the process that can be encouraged.”⁸⁶ The process of domestic dissolution disentangles gender from its tripartite nuclear form, and *trans* become both a lived reality and the vector of an unfolding postmodernity that must be not directed but embraced. Plant reads the effort to evaluate sex reassignment “on the basis of [trans people’s] abilities to simulate exaggerated versions of the opposite sex” through the lens of the Turing machine, which “can only be judged by their abilities to simulate the human.”⁸⁷ Plant writes:

What such tests prove is only that there is no such thing as being human, male or female. Femmes, drag queens, even male-to-female transsexuals: No one ever arrives at the point of being a real woman. Butches, drag kings, and female-

*to-male transsexuals meet the same problem: There is no real man to become. Transsexuals are transsexuals before and after the long chemical treatments and surgical procedures, always on the way to a destination as impossible as the point of departure they leave behind.*⁸⁸

The alternative is instead to “*arrest the process of becoming,*” by going back to *being*.⁸⁹ Yet as Plant suggests, and in order to take Daly’s call seriously—to become “*our own exorcists*” by endlessly embracing monstrosity, one is brought to Deleuze & Guattari’s call for the “*schizophrenization that must cure us of the cure.*”⁹⁰ The Xenofeminists, similarly, put their stakes in alienation as the “*labour of freedom’s construction,*” calling for the exorcism of “*essentialist naturalism [which] reeks of theology.*”⁹¹ Riding the course of modernity, XF declares: “*It is through, and not despite, our alienated condition that we can free ourselves from the muck of immediacy.*”⁹²

Yet exorcism—sustained revolution—cannot be achieved without upheaval. If Xenofeminism “*seizes alienation as an impetus to generate new worlds,*” then the appropriate corollary is the destruction of our own, which undoubtedly entails the upturning of the family and its allies—the state, gender, and the terms of ‘human’ life itself. Here the Landian-Plantian complex finds itself in alignment with Frank Wilderson’s Afro-pessimism in their mutual call for the veritable end of the world. Consider Land’s prescription:

*For it is only when the pervasive historical bond between masculinity and war is broken by effective feminist violence that it will become possible to envisage the uprooting of the patriarchal endogamies that orchestrate the contemporary world order. With the abolition of the inhibition of synthesis—of Kantian thought—a sordid cowardice will be washed away, and cowardice is the engine of greed. But the only conceivable end of Kantianism is the end of modernity, and to reach this we must foster new Amazons in our midst.*⁹³

Wilderson, in striking parallel, rejects a fatalistic reading of race relationships while also declaring that “*the way out is a kind of*

violence so magnificent and so comprehensive that it scares the hell out of even radical revolutionaries."⁹⁴ Like Wilderson, Land rejects the 'sentimentalism' of mainstream feminism, instead arguing that "*the state apparatus of an advanced industrial society can certainly not be defeated without a willingness to escalate the cycle of violence without limit.*"⁹⁵ Thus every feminist should be a cheerleader for the end of the world—at least as dominated by racist patriarchal capitalism—and the war on being itself. This necessary violence cannot simply take place against the state, it must be, as Julia Kristeva suggests, conceived "*in personal and sexuality identity itself.*"⁹⁶ As Wilderson notes, the state is only an avatar in this deeper struggle, where "*the trajectory of violence that Black slave revolts suggest, whether it be in the 21st century or the 19th century, is a violence against the generic categories of life, agency being one of them.*"⁹⁷ Fortunately, if Land is right that such a war "*can only be fought in hell,*" then conditions seem quite favorable for the demons amongst us.

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