

No one had asked us,
when we were still faceless
whether we'd like to live, or rather not.
Now I'm wandering around alone in a large city,
and I don't know if she cares for me.
I'm looking into living rooms
through doors and windows,
and I'm waiting and waiting
for something.

If I could wish for something
I'd feel awkward
What should I wish for,
a bad or a good time?

If I could wish for something
I'd want to be only a bit happy
because if I were too happy
I'd long for being sad.

IF I COULD WISH FOR SOMETHING

A Book of Visual and Text Essays

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Film still from *If I Could Wish for Something*, by Dora García, digital film, 68', 2021. Original footage by Gisela Castillo, documenting the demonstrations during the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, November 25, 2020, Mexico City

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LA
CRIANZA
es
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12 Introduction

Antonio Cataldo, Artistic director of Fotogalleriet, Oslo

Dora García, ed.

Pieter Vermoortel, Artistic director of Netwerk Aalst



Demonstrator (Sra. Margarita Robles de Mendoza) in Mexico, 1934; the sign reads: "Revolution, fulfill your promise, emancipate women!"
Photo: Casasola, Fototeca Nacional, Mexico City

The sadness of a feminist book: it is pedagogy. Mrs. Dalloway: she touches a nerve. Feminism: living in proximity to a nerve. When I think of how Mrs. Dalloway is evoked and recalled, I think of how sadness can be an inheritance, a feminist inheritance. I think of all the books that caught my attention not just because of the sadness they expressed, but because of the rebellion they enacted in this expression. It can be rebellious not to be made happy by what should make you happy. This sadness is not always or only about a personal revelation; even when eyes well with tears, those tears do not always form words. It is a sadness that can be too difficult to reveal to ourselves, let alone to others, because it is sadness with the world and thus sadness in the world. So often this sadness is distributed in things that surround a body; her body, allowing a space to be registered as confinement, as restriction. So, when I spoke of feminism as sensory intrusion ... we might think of how becoming feminist put us in touch with all that sadness, all those emotions that represent a collective failure to be accommodated to a system as the condition of possibility for living another way.

—Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*

An old Weimar song written in 1930 by Friedrich Hollander, “Wenn ich mir was wünschen dürfte,” is the inspirational foundation of this book and of the film and the exhibitions it accompanies (all of them carrying the same title: *If I Could Wish for Something*). Its verses read:

If I could wish for something
I'd feel awkward
What should I wish for,
a bad or a good time?

If I could wish for something
I'd want to be only a bit happy
because if I were too happy
I'd long for being sad.¹

According to the *Neue Musikzeitung*, the song, written in 1930, came out of *The Blue Angel* period (the 1930 film in which Marlene Dietrich played the iconic cabaret singer and femme fatale Lola Lola; Marlene Dietrich famously commented she “never played any recommendable character”).² Hollander was sitting in a film studio shortly before Marlene Dietrich went to Hollywood. During a break she came in, listening to the cacophony of the directors in the other parts of the building, and she felt tired. She hummed to herself, “If I could wish for something.” The sadness of her voice seized Hollander so firmly that he instantly composed this song. During her last visit to Germany in the 1930s, she played the song for Franz Hessel on a gramophone, who wrote that with this number she “continued to sing about nostalgia for sadness in the midst of happiness. There she stood, the great wish-fulfiller, the dream of thousands. Her head tilted sideways to her echo in the box, and an expression of melancholy and loneliness on her face, which poets, musicians, and film directors still have much to learn and create from.”³

This song, which has been in the memory of many for so long, was for Dora García a powerful way to express a complex concept, often difficult to understand in the middle of a political feminist struggle. The disappointment of women has been going on for so long. The promise made to them by the revolution (see image at the beginning of this text) has remained for so long unfulfilled, delayed, and negated. Thus the sadness and vulnerability rooted in this feeling of abandonment has been turned into a shelter and a shield, and perhaps even a sword. In sadness we overcome the temptation of

victimhood and use pain as a conduit to recognizing others' suffering, opening the possibility of an ethical encounter.

Scholar Sara Ahmed makes clear to us that this "longing for sadness" stands very far from "the acceptance of defeat." On the contrary: "I think of how sadness can be an inheritance, a feminist inheritance. I think of all the books that caught my attention not just because of the sadness they expressed, but because of the rebellion they enacted in this expression. It can be rebellious not to be made happy by what should make you happy."⁴

This is how the song "Wenn ich mir was wünschen dürfte," written in 1930, has accompanied the making of the film *Si pudiera desear algo* (*If I Could Wish for Something*). From the very early stages of imagining the film, Dora García's idea was to make a "Mexican modernization" of the old song that could function as a soundtrack to the incredible demonstrations that appropriated and altered public space and discourse in Mexico City over the past five years. The singer La Bruja de Texcoco, a trans woman known and celebrated for her contemporary reactivation of traditional Mexican music, adapting the lyrics, often in Indigenous languages, to the feelings of the trans community, took on this nearly impossible task. Remarkably, Friedrich Hollander's lyrics from 1930 appear in the film in 2021 translated into Purépecha.⁵

This book is an essential part of the migration of thought through text, sensitivities, bodies, and meetings. Complexity can only come through a multiplicity of people. So next to La Bruja de Texcoco,

Marlene Dietrich, and Friedrich Hollander, this journey has been made with the Mexican producer Olga Rodríguez Montemayor, researchers and authors Carla Lamoyi and Paloma Contreras Lomas, and author and thinker Sayak Valencia; and with the generosity of the authors from this side of the Atlantic: Saddy Choua, Agnieszka Gratzka, Andrea Valdés, and Hilde Methi.

It is important that we mention here as well the two figures who have been central for this book, the first one as object of research, the second as poetic inspiration and political guide. The first is Alexandra Kollontai, Russian revolutionary, sexual activist, and fiction writer, who was ambassador in Mexico in 1926–27 and who has been the figure unifying a labyrinthine research project under the title "Amor Rojo" (Red Love, 2018–22), of which this book is part. The second central figure is Gloria E. Anzaldúa, Chicana feminist, author, and poet. Gloria Anzaldúa, together with Cherrie Moraga, edited *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (Persephone Press, 1981), a milestone in the opposition to white feminism by women of color, and the groundwork for what would be called, later on, "intersectionality." Studying Kollontai's and Anzaldúa's texts, a parallel emerged between Kollontai's concept of the (proletarian) "younger sisters" and the "Third World feminism" of Chicana feminists.

The early life of Alexandra Kollontai speaks of political agitation, exile, and migration, which brought her to look for a more equitable life outside the confines of her native land. In her peregrinations to Berlin, Copenhagen, Oslo, the United States,

and Stockholm, before returning to Russia, she continued corresponding and advocating for women's suffrage and the right to a notion of love free of bourgeois convention and possessiveness, coining the concept of comradely love.⁶ For Kollontai, the emancipation of women from their exploitation and subjugated condition *had* to intersect with humanity's liberation from the prison of capital and class domination.⁷ Today, fundamental individual rights seem to have been generally achieved (sadly, mainly from a Western perspective). In contrast, sovereignty over one's body continues to be questioned in the age of militarized neoliberalism, with its extractivist logic of productive bodies and possession over the land. Capitalism labels human and non-human lives as worthy or worthless, deciding that only productivity determines the worth of a life. We continue to learn how "lawful" violence, inscribed into the nation-state model and fueled by corporations, hits harder on women's bodies.⁸ Threatened by any form of dissent, the patriarchal structure of capitalism inevitably perpetuates the gendered nuclear family as the only possible worldview to project onto our next of kin and society at large. Kollontai explored how traditional bourgeois sexual and family relations could transform once freed from the demands of property and dependence, liberating bodies from cyclically performing a given normativity. She called out the immorality of these structures, and her indignation reverberates in the *If I Could Wish for Something* project.⁹

If I Could Wish for Something brings together a network of peers across generations and lands into a conversation, giving continuity to Kollontai's specter of "comradely love" in the present moment.

What kind of grammar can we imagine for society when we liberate love from the limitations and norms we have inherited, determined by possessiveness of one another, love as a binding contract of ownership between gendered bodies? How can we go deeper into the current implications of love as a couple-binding agreement that traverses nation-state formation, colonial powers and appropriation, and power relations extending outside the household? Which politics of (in)visibility are we unveiling when these categories are exposed and dismantled?

The street has been fundamental in expressing our rights even in the absence of rights, when rights are not recognized or denied. In the past decades, technology and image-making for the many have indirectly (and perhaps reluctantly) supported such demands, transcending geographic borders and fostering sentiments of solidarity across time and space, calling for more extensive liberation movements from repressive regimes—releasing a feeling of collective sadness and disappointment with a given situation that in a particular place at times seems inescapable.

As exhibiting institutions at the intersection of educational and aesthetic discourse, we assert the "situatedness" of our thinking, raising awareness and participating in the politics of (in)visibilities of theories and institutionalized gender politics. We look into how our given arts canons are contributing to the gender politics sanctioned by state practices, explicitly and implicitly, and how these gender politics escalate into forms of violence, especially when we stay silent about this violence. Keeping this context in mind, the project *If I Could Wish for*

Something addresses the fact that we are living a historical moment in which democratic institutions and principles, lacking support from the (declining) economic system, cannot be taken for granted.

The contributions to this book began taking shape in a series of online conversations between the authors that helped connect their very different practices, backgrounds, and forms of thought. The texts that were the end result of these conversational processes can be understood as a refusal of the notion of history (and art history) as a univocal narrative coming from above, determining truth—a truth that most often equals violence by inviting a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion.

Dora García's presentation of *If I Could Wish for Something* at Fotogalleriet and Netwerk Aalst transforms the physical space of the two art institutions into an exhibition-in-motion, a space for debate and criticality¹⁰ about issues that are both local and global, demanding a networked alliance for a new politics of love—meaning, simply, other ways of living together.

As much as we rely on the physical (and currently fragile) space of encounter, we would like to think of this book as a tool of thought beyond material locations and specific times, navigating thinking paths in unexpected ways and finding surprising confrontations—all of it within this collectively constructed frame of radical melancholy understood as a fundamental trait of femininity.

In the inspiring words of La Bruja de Texcoco, femininity is the possibility to become a composer (of time) instead of remaining an interpreter.

1

“Wenn ich mir was wünschen dürfte / Käm ich in Verlegenheit, / Was ich mir denn wünschen sollte, / Eine schlimme oder gute Zeit / Wenn ich mir was wünschen dürfte / Möchte ich etwas glücklich sein / Denn wenn ich gar zu glücklich wär’ / Hätt’ ich Heimweh nach dem Traurigsein.” Translated in Griselda Pollock, “Redemption or Transformation: Blasphemy and the Concentrationary Imaginary in Liliana Cavani’s *The Night Porter* (1974),” in *Concentrationary Imaginaries: Tracing Totalitarian Violence in Popular Culture*, ed. Griselda Pollock and Max Silverman (London: I. B. Tauris, 2015), 139.

2

Often cast as a vamp, a sexually charged figure, Dietrich frequently empathized with those the puritan bourgeoisie considered the outcasts of society. Penelope McMillan, “Marlene Dietrich, Classic Femme Fatale, Dies at 90,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 7, 1992.

3

Viktor Rotthaler, “Ich weiß nicht, zu wem ich gehöre. Marlene Dietrich zum 100. – Eroberung der Welt in sieben Liedern,” *Neue Musikzeitung*, no. 12 (2001), <https://www.nmz.de/artikel/ich-weiss-nicht-zu-wem-ich-gehoere>. Dora García’s translation.

4

Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 62.

5

The Purépecha are an Indigenous people centered in the north-western region of Michoacán, Mexico, mainly in the area of the municipalities of Cherán and Pátzcuaro.

6

Alexandra Kollontai coins the concept of “comradely love” in her text “Make Way for Winged Eros” (1923). Comradely love is love between two equal and independent beings, united in their comradeship, able to transcend the selfishness of the couple to direct their affection to the community.

7

Yngvild Sørbye, *Revolusjon, kjærlighet, diplomati: Aleksandra Kollontaj og Norden*, ed. Y. Sørbye (Oslo: Unipub, 2008), 9–31.

8

Natália Maria Félix de Souza, “When the Body Speaks (to) the Political: Feminist Activism in Latin America and the Quest for Alternative Democratic Futures,” *Contexto Internacional* 41, no. 1 (April 2019): 89–112.

9

Alexandra Kollontai, “Communism and the Family” (1918), first published in *Komunistka*, no. 2 (1920), and in English in *The Worker*, 1920; available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollontai/1920/communism-family.htm>.

10

“[W]e have been able to move ... to operating from an uncertain ground which while building on critique wants nevertheless to inhabit culture in a relation other than one of critical analysis; other than one of illuminating flaws, locating elisions, allocating blames.... [B]y their undoing of the dichotomies of ‘insides’ and ‘outsides’ through numerous emergent categories such as rhizomatics, folds, singularities, etc. that collapse such binarities and replace them with a complex multi-inhabitation, ‘criticality’ is therefore connected in my mind with risk, with a cultural inhabitation that performatively acknowledges what it is risking without yet fully being able to articulate it.” Irit Rogoff, “From Criticism to Critique to Criticality,” *Transversal* (online), January 2003, <https://transversal.at/transversal/0806/rogoff1/en>.



Film still from *If I Could Wish for Something*, by Dora García, digital film, 68', 2021. Original footage by Gisela Castillo, documenting the demonstrations during the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, November 25, 2020, Mexico City

26 She Has Many Names

Dora García

ALP

Anna Livia Plurabelle is the heroine of *Finnegans Wake*; she is the wife of Mr. Earwicker, HCE, the hero. She is Everywoman, Everygoddess, Everyriver. She is Artemis.¹ She is especially Dublin's little, winding, brown-red, polluted river, Anna Liffey, which rises in the Wicklow hills and meets salt Dublin Bay at Island Bridge. She is Sarah.² The old name of the river Liffey was "Ruir tech," meaning "swift running." The river took then the name of the place whereupon it was running, called Magh Liffé, or "plain of life." Liffey-Leafy, alive, live, life. This ties Anna Livia with Eve, meaning "life" in Hebrew. Ana is also Dana,³ mother of the Irish gods. Anna means "grace" in Hebrew, relating then to the Virgin Mary, and to Joyce's mother, Mary Murray, and his daughter, Lucia Anna Joyce. Robert Graves says in *The White Goddess* that if you need a single, simple, inclusive name for the Great Goddess, Anna is probably the best choice.⁴ Plurabelle is an addition to the river names, connecting with the plurality of persons that is Eve, mother of all living, and connects with names such as Belle, Isabel, Elisheba, Laura/Daphne, Laura Belle, Rain (*Pluie*, in French). Liffey connects with life and with Livia, spouse of Augustus, but especially with Livia, the wife of Italo Svevo, Livia Veneziani Schmitz (the real name of Svevo was Aron Hector Schmitz).

When Joyce met Livia Veneziani Schmitz, she was a beautiful middle-aged woman notable for her finely drawn face, her small, perfect nose, and famously long, thick blond-reddish hair. Italo Svevo received private English lessons from James Joyce in Trieste. In the eyes of the Triestine merchant class, Joyce was a member of a lower class, and his wife,

Nora, had to work. Livia was thankful to Joyce for encouraging her husband Ettore (Aron Hector) to continue writing and helping him to publish. Well aware of the terrible economic troubles at the Joyce household, *Signora* Schmitz employed both Nora and Joyce's sister, Eileen, as domestic help. In 1924, Livia Veneziani discovered that Joyce had given her name to the female heroine of his new novel, still called "Work in Progress." Joyce told Svevo as such in a letter dated February 20, 1924:

A propos of names, I have given the name of Signora Schmitz to the protagonist of the book I am writing. Ask her however not to take up arms, either of steel or fire, since the person involved is the Pyrrha of Ireland (or rather of Dublin) whose hair is the river beside which (her name is Anna Liffey) the seventh city of Christendom springs up, the other six being Basovizza, Clapham Junction, Rena Vecia, Limehouse, S. Odorico in the vale of Tears and San Giacomo in Monte di Pietà.

And in a later letter, November 21, 1925:

Reassure your wife with regard to Anna Livia. I have taken no more than her hair from her and even that only on loan, to adorn the rivulet which runs through my city, the Anna Liffey, which would be the longest river in the world if it weren't for the canal which comes from far away to wed the divine Antonio Taumaturgo, and then changing its mind goes back the way it came.⁵

If between Italo Svevo and James Joyce there had been a real, deep friendship, recognizing each



Livia Schmitz. Museo Sveviano, Trieste

other as intellectual equals, with Joyce being invited many times to Svevo's house as a friend, there was no such friendship between Nora Joyce and *la Signora* Schmitz, who had always taken good care of underlining their class difference.

When Ellmann interviewed Livia Schmitz for Joyce's biography, she told him that when she "heard that Joyce in *Finnegans Wake* was using her flowing hair as a symbol of the lovely river Liffey, she was flattered, but when she heard that in the river there were two washerwomen scrubbing dirty linen, she was disgusted."⁶

She seems to have been a bit of a snob. John McCourt writes, "More than Schmitz she attached importance to class, and more than

once she ignored Nora on the street even though they had known one another from the time Nora had, in desperation, taken in washing and ironing for her.”⁷

If Anna Livia Plurabelle took from *Signora* Schmitz the name and the hair, she took from Nora the quasi-illiteracy, and her being a laundress. And perhaps her way of writing too: “Do you notice how women when they write disregard stops and capital letters?” Joyce asked Stanislaus after a brief unpunctuated interpolation by Nora in one of his letters.⁸

These are (almost) all the different names of ALP in *Finnegans Wake* (with page number):

addle liddle⁹ phifie Annie (4)
 Apud¹⁰ libertinam parvulam (7)
 alp¹¹ (17)
 Annos longos patimur¹² (100)
 A.L.P. (102)
 Annah the Allmaziful,¹³ the Everliving,
 the Bringer of Plurabillities (104)
 Amy Licks Porter (106)
 alp or delta¹⁴ (119)
 Anna Livia (128, 195, 196, 198, 199)
 annoys the life out of predikants (138)
 Amnis¹⁵ Limina¹⁶ Permanent (153)
 All about aulne and lithial and allsall allinall
 about awn and liseias? (154)
 anna loavely long pair (182)
 all her lines, with love, license to play (197)
 Annushka Lutetiavitch Pufflovah (207)

Anna was, Livia is, Plurabelle's to be (215)
 Ann (220)
 Approach to lead our passage (262)
 And let luck's purseplutteral Lucy at ease! (262)
 Apis amat aram. Luna legit librum. Pulla petit
 pascua¹⁷ (262)
 ALP (in diagram), alpha-pi-lambda (293)
 A is for Anna like L is for Liv (293)
 Ante Ann you're apt to ape aunty annalive (293)
 Antiann (293)
 A.L.P (297)
 Anne Lynch¹⁸ (406)
 artis litterarumque patrona (495)
 Alas for livings' pledjures! (496)
 Anna Lynsha's Pekoe (506)
 Annabella, Lovabella, Pullabella (512)
 Absquelitteris puttagonniann (512)
 Appia Lippia Pluviabilla (548)
 my annie, my lauralad, my pisoved (548)
 Annshee lispes privily (571)
 alptrack (577)
 Arbor to La Puiree (579)
 alpsulumpy¹⁹ wrought! (595)
 Ad Piabelle et Purabelle? (610)
 Arrive, likkypuggers, in a poke!²⁰ (613)
 Are we for liberty of perusiveness (614)
 A plainplanned liffeyism assemblaments (614)
 ancient legacy of the past (614-615)
 Alma Luvia Pollabella (619)

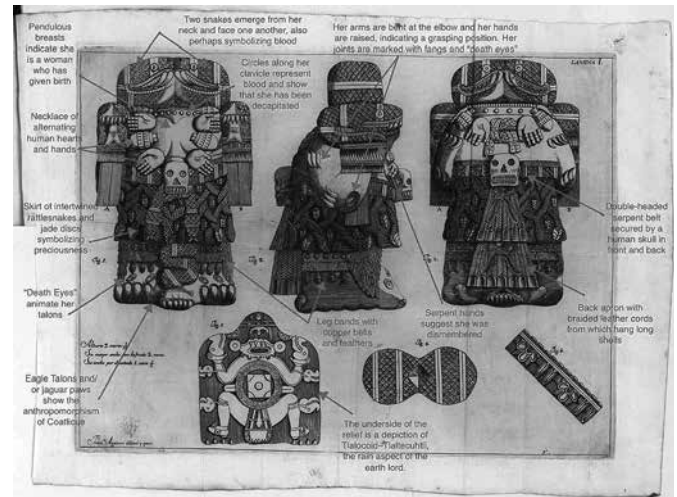
Coatlicue

She has this fear that she has no names
 that she has many names that she doesn't
 know her names She has this fear
 that she's an image that comes and goes
 clearing and darkening the fear that she's
 the dreamwork inside someone else's skull
 She has this fear that If she takes off her
 clothes shoves her brain aside peels off her
 skin that if she drains the blood vessels
 strips the flesh from the bone flushes
 all the marrow She has this fear that
 when she does reach herself turns around
 to embrace herself a lion's or witch's or
 serpent's head will turn around swallow her
 and grin She has this fear that if she digs
 into herself she won't find anyone that
 when she gets "there" she won't find her
 notches on the trees the birds will have
 eaten all the crumbs She has this fear
 that she won't find the way back²¹

In *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Chicana feminist and scholar Gloria Anzaldúa (1942–2004) dramatically vindicates feminine cultural figures that were at one or other moment in history labeled as *defectors* from the community. Gloria Anzaldúa analyzes the figures of Malintzin (La Malinche), La Llorona, and Coatlicue (identified as Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe or Our Lady of Guadalupe). All of them are figures of transition and syncretism.

La Llorona, the phantasmatic female figure crying for her lost (drowned) children, is an incarnation or version of Cihuacoatl,²² who abandoned her child at

a crossroads (and could never find it again, finding instead a sacrificial knife). Cihuacoatl is the deity presiding over childbirth and is associated as well with Eve or Lilith of Hebrew mythology.



Annotations on an original image of a Coatlicue statue by Francisco Agüera, 1792. © John Carter Brown Library, Box 1894, Brown University, Providence, RI

La Malinche was the translator, negotiator, and lover of Hernán Cortés, mother of the first Mestizo, Don Martín (as son of a Spanish man, Cortés, and a Nahuatl woman, Malinche). La Malinche was *the* key figure in the unlikely and amazing conquest of the Aztec empire; she made it possible. Forever shadowed by the great mystery of her relation to Cortés and her long-lasting shaming as “traitor” to her people, perhaps one of the most reasonable narratives of her life is the one speaking of revenge and protection. Enslaved at the age of fourteen, she had been a slave for ten years when she met

Cortés; her ability with languages elevated her to the category of translator, acquiring a power that no woman ever had before among the Aztecs. She used this power to protect her people from what she saw as unavoidable (the Spanish domination) and to seek revenge on those who had enslaved her. Her name “Malinche” is a Hispanicization of the name Malin-tzin, meaning, “Lady (Tzin) Marina” (the Aztecs could not pronounce the “r”); and Marina was the Christian name the Spanish conquistadores gave her through baptism: her real name is unknown.²³

Coatlicue²⁴ was the Mother Goddess of the Aztec pantheon, her name meaning “snake skirted.” A gigantic sculpture of Coatlicue (2.5 meters) was accidentally rediscovered in 1790 in the Plaza Mayor of Mexico City, located above the ancient ruins of the Aztec Great Temple, when workers were constructing an underground aqueduct. The vision of the decapitated Goddess, two snakes coming out of her neck, with a necklace made of hearts and hands, pendulous breasts, skirt of intertwined rattlesnakes, was so monstrous that they decided to bury her again,²⁵ under the patio of the university, to preserve the Mexican youth from what they perceived not only as ghastly but also in defiance of all the European preconceptions of femininity. The case of interpreting Coatlicue’s body as monstrous falls into the pattern of European patriarchal fears projected onto the New World. Furthermore, in Christian imagery the snake represented the devil, or the temptation of Eve and the fall of man. But for the Aztecs, snakes were sacred animals representing, through the shedding of skin, their vision of cyclical time, rebirth, and renewal.



Coatlicue, 1325–1521 AD.
Museo Nacional de Antropología,
Mexico City



Mami Wata figure, 1950s. The Norman
Gabrick Endowment for African Art,
Minneapolis Institute of Art

The iconography of the snake and the female archetype goes back to the beginning of times. One example really worth mentioning is the figure of Mami Wata, or Yemayá, a water spirit venerated in West, Central, and Southern Africa as well as in the African diaspora in the Americas: Haiti, Cuba, Brazil. A large snake wraps itself around her, laying its head between her breasts. Mami Wata often carries a mirror in her hand, representing a movement through the present and the future. In her form of Yemayá, she is one of the most powerful orishas, or African spirits; her name comes from the Yoruba *Yeyé omo ejá*, “Mother of fish children,” and she is connected to rivers and river mouths, female fertility, the genesis of the world, and the continuity of life. Yemayá, goddess of water and the sea, was syncretized by the African diaspora with the image

of the Mother Mary. They are both dressed in blue and white; however, Mother Mary is white, and Yemayá is black; Mother Mary is motherly and demure, Yemayá exhibits an opulent sexuality. But Mother Mary has a relation to the serpent as well: in the book of Genesis (3:15), shortly after Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit in the garden, God cursed the serpent who tricked them and foretells its ultimate destruction: "I will put enmities between thee and the woman, and thy seed and her seed: she shall crush thy head, and thou shalt lie in wait for her heel."

Following Anzaldúa, the vindication of such figures underlines the transitional, mutable character of Mestiza feminism, transfeminism, lesbofeminism—and its dispossession:

As a mestiza I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.) I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos; yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet. Soy un *amasamiento*, I am an act of kneading, of uniting, and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and

gives them new meanings. We are the people who leap in the dark, we are the people on the knees of the gods. In our very flesh, (r)evolution works out the clash of cultures. It makes us crazy constantly, but if the center holds, we've made some kind of evolutionary step forward. *Nuestra alma el trabajo*, the opus, the great alchemical work; spiritual mestizaje, a "morphogenesis," an inevitable unfolding. We have become the quickening serpent movement.²⁶

Her death: A way a lone a last a loved a long the

"Yet is no body present here which was not there before. Only is order othered. Nought is nulled. *Fuit fiat!*"

(FW, IV, 613)

"What has gone? How it ends?

...

Forget! remember!

...

Forget!"

(FW, IV, 614)

"If I lose my breath for a minute or two don't speak, remember! Once it happened, so it may again."

(FW, IV, 625)

O

tell me all about

Anna Livia! I want to hear all

(FW, I, 8, 196)

Finnegans Wake by James Joyce is a book that contains all books and a story that contains all stories. Multiple threads can be picked up to lead our way through the *Wake* maze. The one thread I would like to pick up now is one of the characters, Anna Livia, and the final part of the book, Book IV. Among many other things, *Finnegans Wake* is the story of a family, the Earwicker family (or sometimes the Porter family), composed of a father, a mother, two sons, and a daughter. Characters, in *Finnegans Wake*, are principles. And so, the father, HCE or Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker, is every father, everybody's father, every male figure of authority, risen or fallen; and a mountain. The mother, ALP or Anna Livia Plurabelle, is all mothers, the mother of everyone, the stem mother, and a river, the river Liffey. The children are Shem and Shaun, twins, one a writer and man of observation, the other a postman and a man of action, one a tree and the other a stone, one time and the other space; and Issy, the daughter, every pubescent female, and a cloud. The book is structured in four parts that correspond to the cyclic theory of history by Giambattista Vico (1668–1744), consisting of three phases separated by thunder: the first is the age of the gods, a primitive society producing language, religion, and the family; second is the age of the heroes, with endless wars; and third is the democratic age, of people, where everyone is equal after several revolutions. After these three ages follows a period of chaos and collapse, whereupon we return (*ricorso*) to the age of the gods.

Book IV, Chapter 1 (FW, IV.1), is the section of the *ricorso*, leading back to the beginning of the book. It is as well the phase of the death of ALP, the river Liffey reaching the sea.

This chapter 1 of a four-sectioned book is structured as well into four parts. The first three parts, pages 593 to 619, are representative of the rest of the book, with this language that appears to be English but is in fact *Wakese*, a language where all languages are present simultaneously, where every word has multiple meanings.²⁷ But the fourth part is different. It begins with a signature: “Alma Luvia, Pollabella.”—“Alma” (“soul,” in Spanish, Italian, Latin) “Luvia” (“rain,” in Ladino or Old Spanish), “Pollabella” (multiple meanings: hen, multitude, many, people, beautiful).

In this page 619, we learn that ALP is signing all preceding pages, that the whole book is a letter that she signs now. She did not write it, as she is illiterate. She dictated it to her son Shem, the scrivener; her other son, Shaun the postman, will deliver it. This is done and finished.

What follows, pages 619 to 628, will be the slow death of Anna Livia Plurabelle, and her farewell. The language is different: these are the true sounds of the wind, of breathing, of lips, of whispering, of the rustling of leaves, of language, of murmurs, of memory, of the “hearseyard” (621), of the “traumscrap” (DREAMSCRIPT, 623).

These are the final words of Anna Livia (Liffey) Plurabelle:

... Yes,
tid. There's where. First. We pass through
grass behush the bush to. Whish! A gull. Gulls.
Far calls. Coming, far! End here. Us then.
Finn, again! Take. Bussoftthee, mememormee!

Till thous-endsthee. Lps.
 The keys to. Given!
 A way a lone a last a loved a long the

Ending in “the,” to connect immediately from this final page 628 to the first page of the book, page 3: “riverrun, past Eve and Adam’s, ...”

The time of *Finnegans Wake*, the eternal death and resurrection of Anna Livia (the river into the sea and then back to the young cloud and the spring and the tiny stream...) is a dream time, a mythic time, a cyclic time, an eonic time, the breakdown of linear time, the time of “Yes.”²⁸ Freud repeatedly stressed that the unconscious knows neither negation nor time.

It seems that memories of events survive on average between 500 and 800 years. As we read in several passages of *Finnegans Wake*, memories quickly become “embellished,” distorted purposefully or unavoidably, to fit the needs of each new generation. Literate societies who put events in writing, often resulting into multiple copies and translations, preserve collective memory less accurately than nonliterate societies where the transmission is done orally.²⁹ Illiterate, gossipy (“giddy-gaddy, grannyma, gossipaceous Anna Livia”; FW, I.7, 195, 3–4) Anna Livia would remember better; and so would American Indigenous communities, who did not have writing in the sense we give to the word (they had other, very ingenious systems, that we still do not completely understand).

The statue of Coatlicue had been ordered to be destroyed by the Spaniards after the capitulation of Tenochtitlan,³⁰ but the inhabitants did not dare to

destroy the Mother of All Things and instead buried her. When she was uncovered again, the devotion to her was intact, and the people of Mexico rushed to bring flowers and offerings, to the exasperation of the Catholic priests. The people referred to her as “Tonan-tzin,” meaning “Our Sacred Mother” in the Nahuatl language, the same name they used for the Virgin of Guadalupe, that syncretic figure which was able to catholically sugarcoat the persistent cult of Coatlicue. They did not only have serpents in common: both had also been impregnated by a “ball of feathers,” or a bird. Through the ear. They both gave birth to their sons without male intervention: Jesus and Huitzilopochtli. Both will bitterly weep for the death of their sons.

The cult and legends of the Holy Mother Virgin Mary, Coatlicue, and the Pietà/La Llorona converge in the cult of the Holy Death or La Santa Muerte. The Holy Death is celebrated on October 31 (the traditional *Día de Los Muertos*, Day of the Dead) and is a modern cult (dated 2001³¹) with very ancient roots: the sacred feminine in pre-Hispanic Mexico was associated with blood, dismemberment, decapitation, and death (the sacrificial knife or *tecpatl* of Cihuacoatl). La Santa Muerte is a semi-clandestine cult of a deity of the night; she helps taxi drivers, mariachis, bartenders, policemen, soldiers, gays, prisoners, prostitutes.³² She has been associated with criminal gangs and *narcotraficantes*.

Sayak Valencia notes in her fundamental book *Gore Capitalism*³³ that if, according to Marx, wealth, in societies dominated by the capitalist mode of production, is presented as an immense accumulation of products, in gore capitalism

this process is subverted, and the *destruction of bodies* becomes the product, the merchandise. The accumulation now is defined by the number of dead, since *death has become the most profitable business*. This accumulation of bodies is the result of the explosion of unlimited and overspecialized violence, in the interstices of capitalism. Life is not important anymore, there is nothing to lose, and there is no future that can be anticipated. This is the result of neoliberalism, unable to generate belonging, community, or a believable future. Neoliberalism cannot propose any model of social integration, unless it is based in consumerism and the distortion of the concept of labor. The border/*frontera* city of Tijuana shows the symbiosis of violence as an object of consumerism, death as spectacle and way of life, perhaps inherited from pre-Hispanic culture.



Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, Basílica de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, Mexico City, 1531



Ravi Zupa, *Love Obviously*, 2019 (Image of the Holy Death or La Santa Muerte). © The Artist



Cihuacoatl, 1250–1521. Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Mexico City

Holy Mother Virgin Mary, Coatlicue, the Pietà/La Llorona, La Santa Muerte, are not fiction. Myth is the very basis of the human, an infrastructure that goes beyond the biological but also determines it: dreaming, stories, songs.

It is not the case that first of all there are human beings, and the mythic arrives afterwards, as a kind of cultural carapace added to a biological core. Humans are from the start—or from before the start, before the birth of the individual—enmeshed in mythic structures. Needless to say, the family itself is just such a mythic structure.³⁴

Death of the Family

The historian Rina Ortiz, in her fantastic book *Alexandra Kollontai en México. Diario y otros documentos*, has translated into Spanish all the writings by Alexandra Kollontai related to her stay in Mexico as Soviet Ambassador, 1926–27: diaries, personal letters, and notes to self. In the book we can find loving references to the Indigenous peoples of Mexico, their culture, the survival of their culture through the Spanish colonial rule, the *indigenismo*³⁵ movement, and Emiliano Zapata, as well as her apprehension of the cruelty and strangeness of the ancestral Aztec religion. She rejects, however, the stigmatization of the original Indigenous beliefs:

Has the bloodlust ritual of human sacrifice been surpassed? Are human beings not currently being sacrificed in the name of the god Capital, in the name of politics, in the name

of class interests? Recently in Cuba three revolutionary workers were executed. And what happens in England? And here in Mexico?³⁶

* * *

In 1908, Kollontai wrote what would become a defining contribution to Marxist theory on women's liberation, *The Social Basis of the Woman Question*. Here, she spelled out why there could be no genuine alliance between working-class and ruling-class women.

She wrote:

The women's world is divided, just as is the world of men, into two camps: the interests and aspirations of one group bring it close to the bourgeois class, while the other group has close connections to the proletariat, and its claims for liberation encompass a full solution to the woman question. Thus, although both camps follow the general slogan of the "liberation of women," their aims and interests are different. Each of the groups unconsciously takes its starting point from the interests and aspirations of its own class, which gives a specific class coloring to the targets and tasks it sets for itself.... However apparently radical the demands of the feminists, one must not lose sight of the fact that the feminists cannot, on account of their class position, fight for that fundamental transformation of society, without which the liberation of women cannot be complete.³⁷

There are very clear echoes between this hostility of Kollontai toward bourgeois feminism (which was shared by other Marxist feminists such as Clara Zetkin) and the discourse of intersectional feminism³⁸ and Third World feminisms.³⁹

This text must end somehow, and, among many other possible ways of ending it, I would like to close it by mentioning an important point in Kollontai's legacy, namely the idea that not only "a fundamental transformation of society" would be the necessary condition for the liberation of women, but much more than that: the imperative of ending the basic structure of society and tool of women's submission—the family. And neither love, nor socialism, will be able to save it:

Ellen Key's⁴⁰ devotion to the obligations of maternity and the family forces her to give an assurance that the isolated family unit will continue to exist even in a society transformed along socialist lines. The only change, as she sees it, will be that all the attendant elements of convenience or of material gain will be excluded from the marriage union, which will be concluded according to mutual inclinations, without rituals or formalities—love and marriage will be truly synonymous. But the isolated family unit is the result of the modern individualistic world, with its rat-race, its pressures, its loneliness; the family is a product of the monstrous capitalist system. And yet Key hopes to bequeath the family to socialist society! Blood and kinship ties at present often serve, it is true, as the only support in life, as the only refuge in times of hardship and misfortune. But will they be

morally or socially necessary in the future? Key does not answer this question. She has too loving a regard for the “ideal family,” this egoistic unit of the middle bourgeoisie to which the devotees of the bourgeois structure of society look with such reverence. But it is not only the talented though erratic Ellen Key who loses her way in the social contradictions. There is probably no other question about which socialists themselves are so little in agreement as the question of marriage and the family. Were we to try and organise a survey among socialists, the results would most probably be very curious. Does the family wither away? Or are there grounds for believing that the family disorders of the present are only a transitory crisis? Will the present form of the family be preserved in the future society, or will it be buried with the modern capitalist system? These are questions which might well receive very different answers...

With the transfer of educative functions from the family to society, the last tie holding together the modern isolated family will be loosened; the process of disintegration will proceed at an even faster pace, and the pale silhouettes of future marital relations will begin to emerge. What can we say about these indistinct silhouettes, hidden as they are by present-day influences?

Does one have to repeat that the present compulsory form of marriage will be replaced by the free union of loving individuals?

The ideal of free love drawn by the hungry imagination of women fighting for their emancipation undoubtedly corresponds to some extent to the norm of relationships between the sexes that society will establish. However, the social influences are so complex and their interactions so diverse that it is impossible to foretell what the relationships of the future, when the whole system has fundamentally been changed, will be like. But the slowly maturing evolution of relations between the sexes is clear evidence that ritual marriage and the compulsive isolated family are doomed to disappear.⁴¹



Ellisif Wessel,
*Portrait of Kristine
Ærillæ, Laitimor,*
sitting in a doorway
for a photograph
in September
1898. She is in her
ninety-sixth year
and from Vaggatam
in Sør-Varanger.
Laitimor stands for
“mother of people,”
as she was believed
to be the direct
ancestor of most
people in the area.
Nasjonalbiblioteket,
Oslo

We all know that it is not a too far-fetched idea to directly relate this “ritual marriage and compulsive isolated family idea” to the violence against women. And that violence against women originates in archaic patriarchal structures, often assimilated to the very idea of the state, giving unsettling connotations to the chants heard in the Mexican feminist demonstrations: “No, no, no, no es un caso aislado, los feminicidios son crímenes de estado” (No, no, no, they are not isolated cases, femicide are state crimes).⁴² The state—as superstructure mirroring the patriarchal family—kills women.

1

The Greek goddess of the hunt, the wilderness, wild animals, the Moon, and chastity. The goddess Diana is her Roman equivalent.

2

In the biblical narrative, Sarah is the wife of Abraham. Knowing Sarah to be a great beauty and fearing that the Pharaoh would kill Abraham to be with Sarah, Abraham asks Sarah to tell the Pharaoh that she is his sister.

3

In Irish mythology, Danu; modern Irish Dana is a hypothetical mother goddess of the Tuatha Dé Danann (Old Irish: “The peoples of the goddess Danu”). Though primarily seen as an ancestral figure, some Victorian sources also associate her with the land.

4

Robert Graves, *The White Goddess* (London: Farber and Farber, 1948; repr. New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 378: “[M]asculinized in two out of the three mentions of her, she is principally celebrated as the mother of Aholibamah (‘tabernacle of the high place’), the heiress whom Esau married on his arrival in the Seir pastures. (Ana’s alleged discovery of mules in the wilderness is due to a scribal error.) James Joyce playfully celebrates Anna’s universality in his Anna Livia Plurabelle. And indeed if one needs a single, simple, inclusive name for the Great Goddess, Anna is the best choice. To Christian mystics she is ‘God’s Grandmother.’”

5

Niny Rocco-Bergera, “James Joyce and Trieste,” *James Joyce Quarterly* 9, no. 3 (Spring 1972): 346–47.

6

This is a reference to one of the most popular—and sublimely beautiful—chapters of the book, Chapter 8 of Book I, starting with the famous words “O, tell me all about Anna Livia! I want to hear all about Anna Livia. Well, you know Anna Livia? Yes, of course, we all know Anna Livia. Tell me all. Tell me now. You’ll die when you hear.”

7

"A Photo of Anna Livia's Hair," *From Swerve of Shore to Bend of Bay* (personal blog), <http://peterchrisp.blogspot.com/2016/09/a-photo-of-anna-livias-hair.html>.

8

Letter to Stanislaus Joyce, October 3, 1906, in *Letters of James Joyce*, ed. Stuart Gilbert and Richard Ellmann, vol. 2 (New York: Viking Press, 1966), 173, quoted in Derek Attridge, "Molly's Flow: The Writing of 'Penelope' and the Question of Women's Language," *Modern Fiction Studies* 35, no. 3 (1989): 543–565, available online at www.jstor.org/stable/26283002.

9

Alice Liddell.

10

Latin: "at, by, in the presence of, in the writings of."

11

Alptraum or *Albtraum*, meaning "nightmare." The etymology of *Alb-Alptraum* is the following: *Alben*—derived from *Alb* or *Elb*—is the original name for elves (Ger.: *Albi*; Old Saxon: *Alf*; Eng.: elf). In Germanic mythology, the elves were the nature spirits responsible for dreams. The bad dreams were attributed to these treacherous, goblin-like creatures. In particular, one imagined the elves, mostly in a human-like shape, crouching on the sleeping person's chest, which triggered an uncomfortable feeling of pressure, hence the older name of night pressure.

12

Meaning: "we suffered long years."

13

Almighty / All merciful.

14

Delta is the fourth letter of the Greek alphabet. A river delta (originally, the Nile River delta) is so named because its shape approximates the triangular uppercase letter *delta*.

15

From Old Latin: **abnis*, from Proto-Indo-European: **h₂ep-*, cognate with Sanskrit अप् (*ap*, "water"), Old Persian: *a-p-i-y-a / apiyā* ("into the water") Tocharian: *B āp* ("water"), Hittite: *ha-pa-a* ("towards the river").

16

From Greek *limnion*, "small lake," diminutive of *limnē*, "marshy lake."

17

Latin for "The bee loves the altar. The Moon is reading a book. The hen seeks the pastures."

18

Anne Lynch and CO.—Tea merchants, with shops at 162 North King Street and several other locations in Dublin. See also Anna Lynsha's Pekoe.

19

In Irish, *alp* means "lump."

20

Like a pig in a poke (a saying)—buying something without knowing what you are buying.

21

Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), 43 (ch. "The Coatlicue State").

22

Meaning "Snake Woman," one of a number of Aztec motherhood and fertility goddesses.

23

She was one of twenty enslaved women given to the Spaniards by the natives of Tabasco in 1519.

24

Ann De León, "Coatlicue or How to Write the Dismembered Body," *MLN* 125, no. 2 (2010): 259–86, available online at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40606256>.

25

The statue was disinterred again in 1803, so that Alexander von Humboldt could make drawings and a cast of it, after which it was reburied. It was again dug up for the final time in 1823, so that William Bullock could make another cast, which was displayed the next year in the Egyptian Hall in Piccadilly, London, as part of Bullock's *Ancient Mexico* exhibition. The statue remained on the patio at the university until the first national museum was established.

26

Gloria Anzaldúa, "La Consciencia de la Mestiza/Towards a New Consciousness," in *Borderlands / La Frontera*, 102–3.

27

One does not read *Finnegans Wake* but rather deciphers it, unravels it, knowing that the maze is ultimately unsolvable, a bottomless pit of language. One can read *Finnegans Wake* as the narration of a dream, a night of endless interconnected nightmares, a journey into the unconscious. We will refer to Jacques Lacan here, because it is very pertinent: the unconscious is structured like a language in the sense that it is a signifying process that involves coding and decoding, ciphering and deciphering. That's how you read *Finnegans Wake*.

28

"Yes" is the fundamental word in the final soliloquy of Molly Bloom, the predecessor of Anna Livia, closing the book *Ulysses*: "I was a Flower of the mountain yes when I put the rose in my hair like the Andalusian girls used or shall I wear a red yes and how he kissed me under the Moorish wall and I thought well as well him as another and then I asked him with my eyes to ask again yes and then he asked me would I yes to say yes my mountain flower and first I put my arms around him yes and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts all perfume yes and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes." James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Paris: Shakespeare and Company, 1922; repr. London: Penguin Books, 1968), 704.

29

Patrick D. Nunn and Nicholas J. Reid, "Aboriginal Memories of Inundation of the Australian Coast Dating from More than 7000 Years Ago," *Australian Geographer* 47, no. 1 (2016): 11–47, available online at DOI: 10.1080/00049182.2015.1077539. "Stories belonging to Australian Aboriginal groups tell of a time when the former coastline of mainland Australia was inundated by rising sea level. Stories are presented from 21 locations from every part of this coastline. In most instances it is plausible to assume that these stories refer to events that occurred more than about 7000 years ago, the approximate time at which the sea level reached its present level around Australia. They therefore provide empirical corroboration of postglacial sea-level rise ... they appear to have endured since ... 5300–11 120 BC. The implications of this extraordinary longevity of oral traditions are discussed in this article, including those aspects of Aboriginal culture that ensured effective transgenerational communication and the possibility that traditions of comparable antiquity may exist in similar cultures." (Abstract of the article)

30

"The Fall of Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztec Empire, was a decisive event in the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire. It occurred in 1521 following extensive manipulation of local factions and exploitation of pre-existing divisions by Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés, who was aided by the support of his indigenous allies and his interpreter and companion La Malinche." Wikipedia contributors, "Fall of Tenochtitlan," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fall_of_Tenochtitlan.

31

"The clandestine cult of La Santa Muerte became public in Mexico City in 2001 when Mrs. Enriqueta Romero installed a six-foot-tall figure of La Niña Blanca in an altar built especially for her in Calle Alfarería, in the Tepito neighborhood of Mexico City." Patrizia Granziera, "Coatlicue and the 'Holy Death': Two Terrible Mothers of the Mexicans," *Researcher: European Journal of Humanities & Social Sciences* 4, no. 2 (2019): 39–52.

32

Ibid.

33

Sayak Valencia, *Gore Capitalism* (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2018).

34

Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater, 2017), ch. 12: "Eerie Thanatos: Nigel Kneale and Alan Garner."

35

"Indigenismo, movement in Latin America advocating a dominant social and political role for Indians in countries where they constitute a majority of the population. A sharp distinction is drawn by its members between Indians and Europeans, or those of European ancestry, who have dominated the Indian majorities since the Spanish conquest in the early sixteenth century. In Mexico, beginning with the Revolution of 1911, the movement became very influential, particularly during the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–40), when serious efforts were made to reconstitute the nation according to its Indian heritage. In Peru the Aprista movement was strongly influenced by Indigenismo, and its members even proposed that Latin America be renamed Indo-America." The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, "Indigenismo," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Indigenismo>.

36

Rina Ortiz, *Alexandra Kollontai en México. Diario y otros documentos* (Xalapa, Mexico: Universidad Veracruzana, 2012), 106.

37

Alexandra Kollontai, *The Social Basis of the Woman Question* (1909; pamphlet), in *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai*, trans. and ed. Alix Holt (London: Allison & Busby, 1977); available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1909/social-basis.htm>. Originally published as *Sotsialnye osnovy zhenskogo voprosa* (Petrograd: Znanie, 1909 and 1916).

38

Kimberlé Crenshaw, an American law professor who coined the term in 1989, explained intersectional feminism as "a prism for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other." Katy Steinmetz, "She Coined the Term 'Intersectionality' Over 30 Years Ago. Here's What It Means to Her Today," *Time*, February 20, 2020, available online at <https://time.com/5786710/kimberle-crenshaw-intersectionality/>.

39

Postcolonial feminisms are born as resistance to the idea that the feminist struggle can be embodied solely by European/white feminisms, without taking into account forms of oppression beyond gender, such as class or race. Postcolonial feminism originated in the 1980s as a critique of feminist theorists in developed countries that emphasized the universalizing tendencies of dominant feminist ideas. Third World feminisms emphasize that feminisms in Third World countries are not imported from the European metropolises but originate from internal ideologies and sociocultural factors.

40

Ellen Key, in full Ellen Karolina Sofia Key (b. December 11, 1849, Sundsholm, Sweden; d. April 25, 1926, Strand), Swedish feminist and writer whose advanced ideas on sex, love and marriage, and moral conduct had wide influence; she was called the "Pallas of Sweden."

41

Kollontai, *The Social Basis of the Woman Question*.

42

We read in Valencia's *Gore Capitalism*, 54, "Carlos Monsiváis tells us that the term *macho* is highly implicated in the state's construction of Mexican identity. The term gained widespread use in post-revolutionary Mexico as a sign of national identity ... During this period, the term *machismo* was associated with the peasantry and the working class; in the incipient Mexican nation, *macho* became an intensification of the concept of manliness that later would become naturalized as a *national heritage*."



Film still from *If I Could Wish for Something*, by Dora García, digital film, 68', 2021. Original footage by Gisela Castillo, documenting the demonstrations during the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, November 25, 2020, Mexico City

58 They Can't Take Meadows Away from Us

Agnieszka Gratzka

Narva River flows out of the Pepsi-colored waters of Lake Peipus, which is called *Peipsi* in Estonian, and into the amber-tinged Baltic Sea. For its entire run, the seventy-seven-kilometer-long river is a natural border between Estonia and Russia. The eponymous city built on Narva's banks is also, perforce, a border town located on the outer edges of Europe.¹ The fishermen on each side of the river, waste-deep in it, can easily hold conversations across the water. Its smooth, mostly unruffled surface reflects the equally imposing outlines of the fifteenth-century Danish castle on the Estonian side, and of the well-preserved walls of the Ivangorod Fortress dating to 1492 on the Russian side.

The island of Kreenholm by Narva Falls lies in the middle of the river and it is connected by bridges—effectively borders, with the attending security—to both countries. Since the Kreenholm Manufacturing Company went bankrupt in 2010 and laid off most of its remaining employees, the island has become a no-man's-land, sealed off from the rest of the town and accessed only as part of a guided tour. The ruins of what was once the largest factory of its kind in Russia and in Europe, employing at the height of its activities some 12,000 textile workers, men and women alike, loom large in Narva. The city has been struggling to reinvent itself following the closure of an enterprise deemed by many to be its lifeblood.

Back in September 2020, I visited the abandoned complex while staying at Narva Art Residency (NART), located in a villa originally built on the edge of the compound to house a textile factory director. Founded in 1857 by Ludwig Knoop (1821–1894), a wealthy cotton merchant from Bremen who

had learned his trade in Manchester, the textile manufacture was fitted out with English machinery and supervised by English staff. Modeled on English working-men villages, the red-brick Kreenholm district comprised, in addition to housing facilities, a hospital, a school, a kindergarten, various shops and amenities, a Lutheran and an Orthodox church, as well as Kreenholm park.

Visiting the ghost town that Kreenholm Textile Factory has become, a mere decade following the closure of its operations, was a melancholy and somewhat creepy experience. As a NART resident, I had leave to explore the sprawling industrial ruins at my leisure, unaccompanied. The derelict, empty warehouses one could peer into through the gaping windows and doors bore tell-tale traces of past activities—a bolt of fabric here, a giant wooden reel there. The drained riverbed leading up to the falls that once powered the cotton mills, water turbines, and spindles made the whole site resemble an ecological disaster zone, overgrown with weeds and slowly being reclaimed by nature.² From the rickety bridge by which one gains access to the island, you could see the craggy river bottom dotted with pools of stagnant water. Oppressive in its sheer scale, the whole place felt forlorn and eerily quiet, except for birdsong and the occasional gust of wind bringing some unidentified metallic object in the recesses of the multistoried factory buildings to life. Rarely had I felt so alone.

Watershed Moment

Although I didn't know it at the time, a visit in March 1896 to the then fully operational Kreenholm

textile manufacture was what determined Alexandra Kollontai to embrace the revolutionary cause. What *The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman* boils down to three lines,³ warrants a self-standing chapter in a collection of autobiographical writings published in Russian in 1974 as *Iz moei zhizni i raboty* (Of My Life and Work).⁴ The chapter heading—"Perelom" (Turning Point)—speaks volumes about the significance of this watershed moment not only in Kollontai's life as a political activist but also as a married woman.

The trip to Narva, as vividly related in "Perelom," was meant to mix business and pleasure. Together with a fellow engineer, Kollontai's first husband Vladimir Kollontai (1867–1917) was tasked with making much-needed improvements to the ventilation and heating system at the Kreenholm textile manufacture. It was settled that Alexandra and her friend Zoya (Leonidovna Shadurskaia) would travel with them from St. Petersburg—located 150 kilometers away—to do some sightseeing. Alexandra, who by her own admission loved travel, was giddy with anticipation at the prospect of a change of scenery after a long winter, during which she felt trapped in the small apartment the couple shared. (At that point they had been married for three years or so; their son, Mikhail, was born in 1894.)

Over lunch, following a visit of Narva's old town, the four of them engaged in an animated discussion concerning technological advance and whether it can foster greater human happiness, as the two men contended. Whereas Zoya took an ecological view of the matter and pointed out that industrial development had the power to wreck nature's

beauty, adducing the example of Narva's waterfalls harnessed and put to work for the factory's sake, Alexandra brushed aside her companion's remark—quite relevant, in fact, from a present-day perspective. For her, the whole question was meaningless without a prior reform of social and economic relations, one that would give every Russian rights and liberate them. In response, her husband merely chided her for forever harping on about freedom. To his mind, full freedom, unchecked by laws, could only result in chaos.

The following morning, while the men got to work, the women took up Kreenholm administrators on their offer to show them around the factory, which in those days prided itself on meeting the highest standards when it came to technical equipment, work conditions, and hygienic norms. Kollontai saw it as an opportunity to see what a model factory looked like. Yet the reality on the ground fell woefully short of expectations, starting with the infirmary where there was no qualified doctor or nurse on call, and the small library stocked with nothing but literary works and no up-to-date technical literature to speak of. The vast majority of the workers were illiterate anyway, and among those who overcame fatigue to attend the evening classes at the end of a twelve-hour working day, there was not a single woman.

Kollontai's observations, based on what she glimpsed on the official tour of the facilities but also behind the scenes, peering into the insalubrious and overcrowded living quarters, and on what she could glean from exchanges with the younger workers (more willing to talk than their elders), who complained bitterly about being effectively locked

up inside the factory walls and only allowed to go into town on Sunday, make for grim reading. But the full horror of the place is brought home by her description of "child care":

On the floor, amid the bunks, small children were playing, lay sleeping, fought or cried, looked after by a six-year-old nanny. I noticed a small boy, the same age as my son, who was lying motionless. When I leaned down to see what was wrong with him, I discovered to my horror that the child was dead. A tiny corpse amid living, playing children. When I asked what this meant, the six-year-old nanny calmly replied:

—It does sometimes happen with them that they die during the day. At six o'clock, auntie will come and take him away.⁵

Writing years later, Kollontai saw this as a life-changing experience, a turning point that sealed her fate as a revolutionary, even as she and her husband drifted further and further apart from each other. That very evening, Kollontai's impassioned outcry at the inhuman, prisonlike conditions she and her friend encountered at the Kreenholm factory—for all its reputation of having its employees' welfare at heart—only met with incomprehension on the part of her husband, more concerned about the dinner and comic opera outing he had planned for them. Upon their return to St. Petersburg, Kollontai took up the study of Marxism with renewed energy, eventually leaving her husband and their four-year-old son behind in order to study political economy in Zurich, at one of the few universities women were allowed to attend at the turn of the century.

Witches, Saints, and Abortifacients

During my stay at NART, I came across the account of a witch trial that took place in Narva in 1615.⁶ The story, whose protagonist was a Finnish beggar woman called Birgitta, resonated with me in a number of ways. Like many victims of witch trials before her, Birgitta was an outsider. She came to Narva—then under Swedish rule—from Vyborg, where she worked as a servant in a pastor's house. Although married to a town's guardsman, she was poor and went around asking for alms, beer, and wine. Accused of witchcraft by a widow and her two daughters, Birgitta was subjected to trial by water, which was deemed “inconclusive” (she did not sink), then put in prison and tortured until she admitted to casting spells, in line with the evidence given by seven witnesses who testified against her under oath. Found guilty, she was burned at the stake on May 5, 1615.

In her seminal 2018 book *Sorcières. La puissance invaincue des femmes* (Witches: The Undefeated Power of Women), Swiss journalist and editor Mona Chollet argues that the stigma still attached to being a single, childless, aging, or simply free woman has its roots in the Renaissance and early modern witch trials. For Chollet, the witch is the antithesis of a mother figure. She notes that many of the victims of the witch craze were healers and midwives accused of aiding and abetting the termination of pregnancies, or of making children die.⁷ The case of Birgitta bears this out. Despite being married, she was childless, which would have made her prone to envying other women's children in the eyes of her contemporaries. Of the seven witnesses summoned by the widow whose daughter's baby had taken ill shortly after

the beggar was turned away, several either accused Birgitta of making children sick or, on the contrary, of healing them by methods she at first denied having any knowledge of, and which amounted to sorcery.

The stretch of the Narva River between Kreenholm island and the Narva Castle fortifications is the most likely setting of the trial by water that initiated the series of torments culminating in Birgitta's ordeal. Incidentally, death by fire was a common enough fate met by the early Christian martyrs later canonized as saints. Birgitta's name put me in mind of Saint Brigid, an Irish saint whose feast celebrated on the first of February—midway between the winter solstice and the spring equinox—marks the start of spring. The nuns who tend to a perpetual flame at her sanctuary at Kildare appear to be descendants of the Roman Vestals, just as the saint herself has many attributes in common with the Celtic goddess Birgit, her namesake.

Titled *The Damned, the Possessed, and the Beloved*, Louise Bourgeois's contribution to the Steilneset Memorial dedicated to the victims of the Finnmark witchcraft trials in Vardø, Norway, consists of a perpetually burning chair housed in a square-shaped pavilion with tinted glass panes designed by architect Peter Zumthor.⁸ The five-pronged flame is reflected in seven oval mirrors suspended above the chair in a circle, as if they were witnesses in a trial. The chair itself recalls the so-called cucking and ducking stools, the former used to publicly shame misbehaving women (William Langland's medieval dream poem *Piers Plowman* alludes to the practice as “women's punishment”), while the latter helped identify witches in the trials by water, otherwise known as “swimming tests,” where the victim was

strapped to a chair and dunked in a river or some other body of water. If she did not drown in the process, she clearly had devil on her side. A case of “damned if you do and damned if you don’t.”

Wendy Morris, a fellow participant in “The Astronaut Metaphor” at Netwerk Aalst,⁹ drew my attention to the fact that Saint Brigid’s mythological counterpart was believed to be “a woman of healing, and a smithy who invented a whistle for women to call to one another through the night.”¹⁰ There is a case to be made for an ephemeral memorial to Birgitta, or simply a commemorative action that would take the form of two women whistling to each other after dark while walking along the banks of Narva River, on the Russian and Estonian sides respectively, in a silent conversation of sorts staged on the day of her “martyrdom” (May 5). No such memorial exists at present and Birgitta’s story is not all that well known. But this does not preclude the possibility of social haunting—to draw on a concept elaborated by sociologist Avery Gordon in his *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (2008) to show how distant traumatic events continue to bear on the present.¹¹

The witch craze in Europe, according to Chollet, coincided with the criminalization of contraception and abortion. While I was staying in Narva, Wendy Morris invited me to contribute a recording to her collaborative *Radio Hush Hush* project, which was to be exhibited at Netwerk Aalst in November 2020 as part of the show *No one would have believed*.¹² To make the recording, I could draw on a list of one-line plant-based recipes meant to induce abortions or menstruation (often a veiled way of designating an abortion). These “could be read, sung, chanted,

whispered, repeated, uttered, muttered, stuttered, recorded during a walk, at the dead of night, read as a long, dry litany of remedies.”¹³ Sitting on the edge of Narva reservoir overlooking Kreenholm park, next to one in a row of electricity pylons which emitted an unnerving buzzing sound that I wanted to be part of the sonic landscape, I found myself whispering to the reeds and waves around me: “Calamint... Nepeta... Black Horehound... Gladwin... Bracken... Root of Dittany... Bay tree... Rue...”

What the Thunder Says

Last spring, in response to a query regarding how widespread the knowledge and use of herbs with contraceptive and abortifacient properties was in my home country, a Polish artist and activist sent me a link to an article. “They Can’t Take Meadows Away from Us. About Herbal Abortion,” its heading read.¹⁴ The interview with a doula, photographed with a bouquet containing wild carrot, marigold, and other well-known emmenagogues, was first published in the immediate aftermath of the “women’s strikes” against the proposed legislation for a near-total ban on abortion, which took place in September–October 2016. They became known as the Black Protests because those who demonstrated in them wore black. Umbrellas and coat hangers, symbolizing the most primitive means of carrying out an illegal abortion, were also part of the visual identity of this grassroots movement. In light of the massive turnout of pro-abortion protesters on the streets of all the major Polish towns, the parliament did not vote through the controversial proposal—at least not on that occasion.

The red lightning or thunder sign that, more recently, has come to embody the Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet (Polish Women's Strike)—its name referencing the day when Icelandic women went on strike in October 1975—started life as an image posted on Facebook by graphic designer Ola Jasionowska in September 2016. Traditionally a male attribute associated with the likes of Zeus or Perun, the God of Thunder in the Slavic pantheon, the symbol was co-opted to powerful effect by an emphatically female movement. In an interview for the liberal *Newsweek* magazine, the author of the widely imitated logo explains that she was not so much interested in the mythological or religious symbolism of lightning when she first created the posters to support the movement, but rather as a warning sign signifying danger.¹⁵



Aleksandra Klimkiewicz, "Wybór, nie zakaz!" (Choice, not prohibition!), 2020

Whether on its own or appearing against the black outline of a female head that it strikes across, the red thunderbolt gained traction as the movement's

undisputed logo only during the second wave of mass demonstrations that swept over Polish towns, large and small, in the days following the Constitutional Tribunal ruling that declared abortion carried out on the grounds of severe and irreversible fetal defects unconstitutional on October 22, 2020—almost a century after abortion was decriminalized for the first time in Soviet Russia, under the auspices of the People's Commissariat for Public Health and Justice headed by Alexandra Kollontai, and weeks before the landmark law legalizing abortion on request in Argentina, which came into effect in January 2021, despite Pope Francis's last-minute efforts to sway public opinion against it in his country of birth.

The latest turn of the screw, in a country which already had one of the most restrictive abortion laws in Europe, put it on a par with Malta, the Vatican, San Marino, and Monaco. Biding their time, the pro-life activists got their way, on the eve of the second lockdown. I happened to be staying in my home city, Kraków, at the time. The main square of the old town, which I found surreally empty during the first wave of the pandemic, was packed full of mostly young women and their male friends and partners, chanting slogans, displaying protest signs, and getting ready to march toward the archbishop's palace. The red thunderbolt gave a measure of their anger, reflected in strong language aimed above all at the ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party but also the Church that stands behind it, judging by some of the signs that caught my eye—"Piekło kobiet" (Women's hell), "Moja macica to nie kaplica" (My womb isn't a chapel), or "Polska laicka, nie katolicka" (Secular, not Catholic Poland). But the thunder also speaks of the untapped energy that is released when lightning strikes.

1

Eléonore de Montesquiou explores this aspect of Narva in her artist book *Na Grane* [On the Border] (Berlin: argobooks, 2010).

2

As part of her residency at NART, artist Sandra Kosorotova has made several works inspired by "Kreenholm Plants."

3

"A visit to the big and famous Kregolm textile factory, which employed 12,000 workers of both sexes, decided my fate. I could not lead a happy, peaceful life when the working population was so terribly enslaved. I simply had to join this movement." Alexandra Kollontai, *The Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman*, trans. Salvator Attanasio (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1926/autobiography.htm>.

4

Alexandra Kollontai, *Iz moei zhizni i raboty. Vospominaniia i dnevniki* [Of My Life and Work: Memories and Diaries] (Moscow: Sovetskaiia Rossiia, 1974). The collection was also translated into German in 1980. I would like to thank *Dead Ladies Show* co-founder Katy Derbyshire for helping me track down this episode, which she alludes to and quotes from in Podcast #31 dedicated to Alexandra Kollontai (<https://deadladiesshow.com/2020/03/08/podcast-31-alexandra-kollontai/>), as well as Rina Ortiz, for making the original Russian text available to me.

5

Kollontai, *Iz moei zhizni i raboty*, 79. The translation is my own.

6

"Witch trial in Narva, prosecuting a Finnish woman named Birgitta," on Histrodamus (website), http://185.46.22.81/index.php?event=Show_event&event_id=1604&layer=71&lang=eng#1604. The trial is also addressed by Aarne Ruben in *Nõiaprotsessid Eestis* (Tallinn: Varrak, 2016), 120–21.

7

Mona Chollet, *Sorcières. La puissance invaincue des femmes* (Paris: Zones, 2018). In this regard, see in particular chapter 2: "Le désir de la stérilité."

8

The permanent installation was unveiled on June 23, 2011, a year or so after Bourgeois passed away, making this her last major work.

9

About the "Astronaut Metaphor, Politics, Aesthetics and the Human" program, see <https://netwerkaalst.be/en/the-astronaut-metaphor-1>.

10

Wendy Morris, in an e-mail exchange with the author from September 7, 2020.

11

I am grateful to artist Liina Siib for introducing me to Gordon's work and for her help in translating source materials in Estonian relating to Birgitta's trial.

12

On *Radio Hush Hush*, part of a wider body of work investigating plant-based remedies and in particular emmenagogues and abortifacients, see <https://www.nothingofimportanceoccurred.org/works/radio-hush-hush/>.

13

Morris, e-mail, September 7, 2020. On the subject of abortifacients, see John Riddle, *Eve's Herbs: A History of Contraception and Abortion in the West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

14

Kinga Michalska, "Łąki nam nie odbiorą. O aborcji ziołowej," *Krytyka Polityczna*, October 12, 2016.

15

Emilia Stawikowska, "Czerwona błyskawica – symbol protestów – nawiązuje do nazistowskich źródeł? 'Zarzut pravicowców jest absurdalny,'" *Newsweek*, April 16, 2020, <https://www.newsweek.pl/polska/ogolnopolski-strajk-kobiet-autorka-blyskawicy/ph9d2xk>.



Film still from *If I Could Wish for Something*, by Dora García, digital film, 68', 2021. Original footage by Esthel Vogrig, documenting the demonstrations during International Women's Day, March 8, 2019, Mexico City

74 *Zami*, a Radio Program by Saffina Rana and Saddle Choua

Saddle Choua

You are listening to *Zami*, a program combining the collective imaginings of Saddle Choua and Saffina Rana.

Welcome to episode 3 of *Zami*, a program about friendship between women.

Between fiction and nonfiction we imagine new possibilities.

The questions that occupy us, that we want to explore, are about how we can connect our personal experiences as women and how we can ensure that sisterhood leads to something new for us.

Do we have to challenge memory and her-story by creating another story, another perspective? Or can we play with connections and associations to rewrite his-story? How do we restore solidarity as part of the healing process?

In each episode we share with you the favorite music of one of our favorite women. Today Alexandra Kollontai. Alexandra Kollontai, in the world from 1872 until 1952, a great Russian revolutionary, a woman who has radically changed the world for women. Want to hear more? Then stay with us for a while. And enjoy.

Zami is a podcast by Pecola Productions. Listen here:



Bessie Smith

1915. At the invitation of the American Socialist Party, Alexandra Kollontai goes on a US lecture tour of more than four months. She gives about one hundred lectures and visits more than eighty cities. It's the beginning of the war and she takes a strong stand against it. This is what her lectures are about. They're also about socialism and women's rights.

One night when she can't get to sleep, she takes some air on the balcony of her hotel room, and her attention is drawn to groups of people in the street. They are all dressed up and seem to be going to a party.

Alexandra decides to go out and follows them until she arrives at a blues club. The Rabbit's Foot Company is an itinerant band of black musicians, traveling through the Southern states.

She follows in the people, hoping it's not a minstrel show. She has previously expressed her distaste for racial segregation in the United States and is uncomfortable with the minstrel shows that were still popular in the US.

That evening Alexandra looks out with admiration and a bit of shock at the black musicians on stage. She feels an incredible attraction to the youngest member of the band.

Before she goes to bed that night, she writes the name Bessie Smith in her notebook. Bessie Smith was seventeen when she was brought into the company by mother of the blues, Ma Rainey. The Rabbit's Foot was strong at promoting young talent and Bessie saw her chance to become famous.

In the days that follow, Alexandra Kollontai sees Bessie Smith everywhere: in the many African American women on the streets, working in restaurants, in factories, and in the countryside. Later, Kollontai told her best friend about the night at the club: "I just stood there. I stood there and watched her, and my whole life changed."

1923. Alexandra is appointed ambassador to Norway and Bessie signs with Columbia Records. On New Year's Eve Alexandra takes a walk through the city. Her gaze glides from shop window to shop window through the buzz of the city; people walk happily and hopeful into the New Year, and stop now and again to wish acquaintances a good year, and chink mulled wine glasses together. She hears the voice of Bessie Smith echo from one of the cafés in the town square. Bessie Smith has released an album.

That evening Alexandra Kollontai tells all her friends. That evening Alexandra Kollontai writes a card to Bessie Smith to congratulate her and wish her a happy New Year.

Alexandra, a fan from the off, continues to follow Bessie. Both women have more in common than we might initially think. They both argue for a love life for the working woman. Alexandra Kollontai does this through politics, Bessie Smith lets her music speak.

In slavery, women were used as commodities according to their fertility and ability to bear future strong slaves, and sexual abuse by their bosses was rife. It's not hard to understand why Bessie Smith was different to the mainstream, why black blues singers were different, when popular white variety

acts sang about romantic love associated with marriage. Bessie Smith broke with this idealized view of sexuality based on the mores of the white middle class. She withdrew the women in her music from the place of the woman in the family, the woman as a housewife. She made women, black women, dream of their own story. She gave women their own sexual experience, she let women make decisions, end marriages, and she let women choose other women.

No one knows if Alexandra got an answer to her card, but what is certain, on October 5, 1937, the mailman rings the doorbell with a telegram from the United States. Bessie Smith, forty-three, has died in a car accident. Some say Bessie Smith died because the ambulance took her to a whites-only hospital and she had to be transferred to a hospital for black people, losing time. Others say the doctor at the hospital ignored her and gave a white couple priority.

Though much loved, Bessie Smith was buried in Philadelphia without a memorial. In 1948, a memorial was organized in New York to give the mourned Bessie Smith her own headstone, but the money disappeared at the hands of her ex-husband. Finally, it is singer Janis Joplin and nurse Juanita Green who put the money together to honor Bessie Smith with a stone of their own.

"She's dead," Alexandra whispers to the mailman, and softly closes the front door.



Bessie Smith
"Sam Jones Blues"

(Spoken: Who's that knockin' on that door?
Jones? You better get away from that door. I
don't know nobody named Jones. You're in the
right church, brother, but the wrong pew)

Sam Jones left his lawf'ly wife, just to step around
Came back home, 'bout a year
Took it for his high brown
Went to his accustomed shore

And he knocked his knuckles sore
His wife she came, but to his shame
She knew his face no more

Sam said, "I'm your husband, dear"
But she said, "Dear, that's strange to hear"
You ain't talkin' to Mrs. Jones
You speakin' to Miss Wilson now

I used to be your lawf'ly mate
But the judge done changed my fate
Was a time you could-a' walked right in
And call this place your home sweet home
But now it's all mine, for all time

I'm free and livin' all alone
Don't need your clothes, don't need your rent
Don't need your ones and twos
Though I ain't rich, I know my stitch

I earned my strutting shoes
Say, hand me the key that unlocks my front door
Because that bell don't read Sam Jones
no more, no
You ain't talkin' to Mrs. Jones
You speakin' to Miss Wilson now

Yma Sumac

In her diaries, Alexandra Kollontai regularly refers to music from Latin America. This may have to do with her stay in Mexico, or perhaps it is her predilection for Spanish and Indigenous languages. As a diplomat in Mexico in 1926, Alexandra Kollontai meets Frida Kahlo. Frida is a young artist and recent member of the Communist Party. They become friends. The two keep in touch and Kollontai greatly admires Frida Kahlo's work. In 1945, Kollontai retires and moves from Stockholm back to Moscow where she becomes an advisor to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. She is working on a new publication that will be published the following year, *The Soviet Woman*. In between writing, Kollontai visits Mexico. Things aren't going well for Frida Kahlo. Kollontai is seventy-two but her age doesn't stop her from taking care of her friend.

Let's be honest, Frida is tired, and Alexandra is tired, exhausted by illness and struggle, but they luckily have enough energy to find each other in Frida's beautiful blue house, to laugh and talk and keep the struggle alive. The struggle that perhaps matters most, the shared struggle for something greater.

But not every day comes naturally, and on such days they allow themselves to be carried by the silence. A comforting silence in the face of fear and pain. You could usually find Alexandra in the courtyard of Frida's house, where she continues to write her text between the cacti and the fuchsias. Sometimes she strolls into town, stopping at the food stalls and buying fresh fruit for Frida, who is spending more and more time at home. Frida's frail body needs rest. In nature she seeks healing for her grief. She paints

plants and flowers. "I paint flowers, so they won't die," she tells Alexandra. Alexandra also likes to be inspired by nature. Nature calms with her beauty and teaches how to be resilient.

An invitation arrives for a concert by Compañía Peruana de Arte at the Palacio de Bellas Artes. The request comes from first lady Soledad Orozco de Avila Camacho. Frida doesn't feel like going. She has been at odds with Mrs. Orozco de Avila Camacho for some time now. In 1942, she asked Frida to paint a still life for the dining room of the presidential palace—allow me to tell this story for a moment—so Frida got the assignment, but of course has her own thoughts about still lifes. For her, still lifes should do more than just decorate. For this assignment she called it *Naturaleza Muerta*, a womb with native flowers, fruits, and vegetables. The heroine, the heart of the work, is the pumpkin, the staple vegetable of Mexican cuisine, both past and present. With *Naturaleza Muerta*, she draws attention to this common vegetable, which has seldom been elevated to an art form. A tribute to the beauty, usefulness, and fragility of native Mexico. Or is it rather a self-portrait of Frida's fateful life? It is not only a meaningful work but also a technically strong painting in which Frida has invested a lot of time. But it failed to please the presidential palace. Soledad Orozco de Avila Camacho finds the erotic references indecent, says she was personally hurt, refuses the work, and returns it to Frida Kahlo.

Well, we digress.

Alexandra goes to the concert alone. The Palacio de Bellas Artes, west of the historic center of the city, is a poignant, stately building. She is welcomed

by Soledad, who, wrapped in a cloud of perfume, assigns her a seat beside her.

It is touching to see frail young Yma in such an immense building. Compañía Peruana de Arte owes its success mainly to singer Yma Sumac. Yma Sumac, born in Ichocán in Peru, five singers in one body, as someone once described her, has an exceptional vocal range of up to five octaves. She is even mentioned in the Guinness Book of Records. The group's repertoire consists of Peruvian folk songs. Alexandra Kollontai listens carefully to the music. Yma's voice has a calming spirit. A heart can feel at home in different countries, she thinks.

After the concert, Alexandra gets the opportunity to meet Yma. Of course, she doesn't know yet how popular Yma will become in Russia and how the Russian people will respect her. Yma Sumac becomes a global star. Even Vanessa Paradis sings her praises in one of her songs.

There are many mythical stories about Yma; she could be an Inca princess or just a girl from Brooklyn named Amy Camus. Everyone loves the Yma, the exotic Yma. First Yma plays along with the game, but it doesn't make her happy. While everyone loves her *Mambo!* album, Yma prefers songs like "Waraka Tusuy," we know from a good source.

When Alexandra takes up her pen the next morning, cheerful and full of life, enjoying Frida's garden, the doorbell rings. Yma Sumac has a medallion, a spherical pendant, depicting the sun, for Alexandra. While Alexandra gently holds the medallion in her hands, she sees three girls playing Rock Paper

Scissors in the street. *Piedra, papel, tijeras*. A child's game but significant. How paper can wrap a rock and the scissors that cut paper are blunted by the rock.



Yma Sumac
"Birds"

Cheikha Rimitti

On a sunny spring day in 1911, Alexandra Kollontai boards a train to Paris. In Berlin, together with a number of other women, she had organized the first International Women's Day. A successful first International Women's Day, she told everyone who wanted to hear. Suddenly the train comes to a stop between two stations. A group of workers forms a barricade on the track. A human shield is screaming its dissatisfaction with the current crisis. The woman sitting across from her looks nervously out the window. She nods in agreement. The weather may be brilliant, but the existence of many in France is not. When the train starts up again an hour later, Alexandra raises a fist of solidarity to salute the strikers.

A surprise awaits her in Paris, taxi drivers have stopped working. Not only is Alexandra's journey disrupted, but the whole country is on fire.

In August, Alexandra travels further to the north of the country. This is where the battle is most fierce. In Maubeuge, a group of housewives has revolted against excessive food prices. The Amazons Maubeugeoises do not seem to give up their struggle until their objectives are achieved.

In the intoxication of being together, they go from municipality to municipality, from market to market. And Alexandra comes along. On her first day in Maubeuge, she's befriended by one of the strikers, Dounia. Dounia notices that Alexandra is new and takes her aside for a moment; they sit down at the pickets and drink tea together. Dounia is different from the striking housewives. She works as a maid for a French family. And she is Algerian. In both Algeria and France, the Algerians are considered inferior and there are no equal rights. "Algeria is considered France, but I am not considered French," says Dounia. "Not that I want that, I want a free Algeria. The sun is high and the drought weighs in. Goods are scarce and prices are doubled." Dounia screams, "Eggs 40 cents / bread 20 cents!!" Like a mantra. "Eggs 40 cents / bread 20 cents. Eggs 40 cents / bread 20 cents!!" Soon the sun will go down and the dogs will howl until morning.

You will not believe it, but on exactly March 8, 1912, Alexandra receives a letter from Dounia. Alexandra is in Stockholm at the time and surprised that Dounia manages to find her. She accepts Dounia's words. Dounia is back in Algeria and plans to join the resistance against the French occupation. She's twenty. In her letter she asks many questions, such as: What is revolution? What literature can you recommend to me? How do we organize ourselves as women? How do we relate to others in a group? Weapons or not? "I often think of you," is how Dounia ends her letter.

What does Alexandra know about Algeria? What does Alexandra know about women in Algeria? She can probably imagine more than those colonial

postcards with women with bare breasts. That image isn't exactly right. It serves mainly to send out to the world a needy image of Algeria, an exhausted Algeria that would embrace the colonizers with open bosoms. And what about the free sexuality that is casually supposed? A metaphor to invite France to penetrate Algeria and Algerian society? Alexandra certainly realizes the latter. She replies with a long letter. One sentence is in capital letters: "THE ONLY THING THAT MAKES THE STRUGGLE TENABLE IS THE SISTERHOOD BETWEEN WOMEN."

It has become a tradition. Every year around International Women's Day there is a letter, a telegram, a package from Algeria. Sometimes Alexandra suspects the postman is tricking her. Or one of her acquaintances, laughing at the door: fooled. But who would care about that now.

The correspondence between Dounia and Alexandra lasts more than forty years. I really recommend that you read those letters. Sometimes it's just a few sentences, like this letter from 1939:

Dear Alexandra, dear friend,
This afternoon I was in the kitchen preparing dinner when I heard a woman singing. The walls are thin and the windows can no longer close completely. I immediately stopped cutting vegetables and sat down for a moment. It took a while for what I was hearing to sink in. I decided to go to the neighbors and I was very surprised when I found a sixteen-year-old girl, still a child. I had never heard anything so beautiful. This is what I wanted to tell you tonight.
Love, Dounia.

Sometimes they were long letters, funny, sometimes sad, or so committed that you would immediately start a revolution.

Dounia often writes about the singing girl. Her name is Saadia El Ghilizania and she grew to be the great star Cheikha Rimitti, and founder of Rai, which grew out of Bedouin music.

“C’est le malheur qui m’a instruit, les chansons me trottent dans la tête et je les retiens de mémoire, pas besoin de papier ni de stylo.”¹ Making Rai music is about doing politics. She performs in bars and at parties, often with a female band. What normally happens in private, she brings to public places. A number of musicians are murdered, but Cheikha Rimitti continues to sing about poverty, feminism, the virginity of women, freedom, her own life.

Alexandra follows with wide eyes. “I must confess that I feel a secret curiosity about Algeria and Saadia,” she writes.

In 1952, Cheikha Rimitti releases her first album. Alexandra Kollontai dies in 1952. We don’t know exactly how it went, but the most beautiful song on the record is played at the funeral, “Errai Errai”; loosely translated: “that’s how I imagine the world.”



Cheikha Rimitti
“Hak Hak”

1

“It was misfortune that taught me, the songs run through my head and I remember them from memory, no need for paper or pen.”

PLAYLIST ALEXANDRA KOLLONTAI

Bessie Smith	“Sam Jones Blues”
Ma Rainey	“Shoe Shopping”
Josephine Baker	“Bye Bye Blackbird”
Yma Sumac	“Waraka Tusuy”
Yma Sumac	“Gopher Mambo”
Billie Holiday	“Strange Fruit”
Aracy de Almeida	“Batucada Surgiu”
Cheikha Rimitti	“Errai Errai”
Cheikha Rimitti	“Charak Gataa”



Zami, Episode 3: Alexandra Kollontai. Photo: Saddle Choua

En este momento en
algún lugar del mundo
una mujer acaba de ser
asesinada

teman
machos

Film still from *If I Could Wish for Something*, by Dora García, digital film, 68', 2021. Original footage by Liz Misterio and Una Pardo, documenting the demonstrations during International Women's Day, March 8, 2019, Mexico City

90 Spirits in the Dry Plates

Hilde Methi

Ellisif Wessel (1868–1949) was a revolutionary socialist, photographer, poet, publisher, and community activist who lived in Kirkenes from 1886 until her death.

This text is collaged from found material and reworked into a polyvocal attunement. In the first part all the titles of the entries are titles borrowed from poems by Ellisif. Toward the end there is a shift into an alphabetically organized index that pulls words from the text above into an explanatory selection of sources and facts.

Always More Distant

The trip up north takes us three weeks. On the headland there are three other Norwegian families living here, and a Norwegian church. Otherwise, there are Kvens, Skolt Sámi, Sea Sámi, Anaar Sámi, Northern Sámi, Russians, and Finns in the surrounding area. The few Norwegians here are civil servants, one is a merchant, and some settlers have moved inland to the river valley. Some Sámi people move between their different stations along the coast and by the riverbank, depending on the season, but most have one stationary place to stay.

There is little knowledge about the habitats, species, peoples, and lifestyles from this outpost. I take photographs. We travel by sleigh, wagon, and riverboat. We move over soft marshes, barren plains, and steep rock shelves. We find our bearings. We cross the border rivers when we visit different settlements—homes, summer cottages, and farms—seeking out the places where misery and disease prevail.

Photographs by Ellisif Wessel

In the Temple

I march in step with sustainable development.

The Escape

The rooms open out.



When I Joined the Socialists

The box camera is a magazine camera made from wood, bound in black leather, with falling plates. The glass negatives drop into a chamber inside the camera body as they are exposed. The camera has a swivel lid in front of the aperture. There is a spirit level on one side to adjust the horizontal and vertical position. The cardboard purse is covered with light brown canvas fabric on the outside and felt fabric on the inside. The purse has a long leather strap and handle on the lid, which is attached with a buckle at the front. The tripod is made of wood. It has three legs that can be adjusted with screws that are found on the top of the legs.

Toward Pasvik

In the fall, we take guests on excursions in the river valley. It is so dense with shrubs along the shore. Birds swim, tame and confident, right next to the boat. The red cloudberry marshes go all the way to the houses and the river, and they offer their sweet richness: pick and take.

The first waterfall is a long series of rapids. In the lower part we can row and navigate using the currents. A little further up, they become stronger and the boat needs to be towed ashore. A long path through the forest has been cleared. Logs are laid out with a suitable distance between them, designed especially for towing boats. Of all the trekking paths along the Pasvik River, this one is the longest and most hazardous.

Other forms of rapids are long. The ascent is slack. By the sandy riverbank there is a steep slope. At the bottom, the bank gives way to a narrow path. We reach land. The most valuable items are unloaded onto the shore, and a rope is attached to the boat. My comrade helps me carry the camera tripod up the slope. I set up the camera and take a photograph of the man walking along the shore with the boat being pulled with the rope on the river.

The Glitches

The sun gives evidence.



Victory

The mailboat's encounter with the edge of the ice is emphatic. A body charged with excitement and turmoil extends itself beyond the ordinary. None of the camera's glass plates break.

I'm being helped down onto the ice. It's a landing onto a vast, temporary foundation.



The Lake

Stories of origin are stories of arrivals.

Soon – – !

I would have liked to send you some of my Finnmark pictures—photographs, but we still have the “polar night,” which prevents copying. Here, it is a little different than most other places on earth, and I love it too—I often wonder about it!—the wilderness, the white, infinite mountain ranges with the wild Arctic Ocean in the distance. I wish you knew what it's like here, and I'll send photos in the spring or summer.

The Star Promise

The camera forms its own enclosure set up on stilts on the thick ice. The light outside the dark room is let

in through a small hole in the box. For a few seconds, the light beam drills inward and spreads outward in a trapezoid shape until it meets the rectangular glass plate on the end wall. A compressed, detailed inverted image based on a specific angle and a specific moment is captured from the outside.

In the dark enclosure I come in contact with the geo-photo-graphic era.

Happiness

We establish a network of precisely determined points as a basis for further measurements. We eliminate and reduce constant and systematic errors by using suitable methods of observation. Errors of vertical collimation in the theodolite are sometimes entirely eliminated by observing angles “face right” and “face left” and taking the mean of the two sets of readings. Similarly, errors of horizontal collimation in leveling are sometimes eliminated by keeping “backsights” and “foresights” equal in length.



No, the Weather Will Storm Today

I'm composing new short verses. I am writing with light reflected from the ice. The northern polar

ground is very special, because its main memory medium is not simply earth or stone, but ice. Depending on temperatures below zero, ice seems to be the most vulnerable, the most unstable natural memory medium. When ice melts and recedes, the memory transfers to the ocean, and my light flashes into the sea.

Morning

Rebecca Bloch is a Russian proletarian, an agitator in the class of Alexandra Kollontai.

What Are These White Sheets

My gaze seeks the horizon. It rests in straight lines on terraces and beaches from the late glacial times. Motifs are preserved in a thin layer of emulsion, supported by glass plates.



Winter and Spring

In the coldest and darkest winter months, the camera is what gets me out of bed, out of the house, out of the darkest stillness that has become both sad and painful. It is well wrapped and tethered to the foot of the sleigh under the protective reindeer skin. I tie the ropes tightly to my arm and quickly throw myself onto the sleigh. The reindeer start at full gallop. The sleigh



glides over snow-covered rocks and tufts. I keep my balance. On the way down the long hill I push my arms and legs into the snow in order to slow down, so that the sleigh does not catch up with the animal. The river road swims with large, light flakes of blue snow crystals.

After a few kilometers inland on the ice from the mouth of the river, we arrive at the Russian enclave with the church and we witness the annual baptismal ceremony of the Skolt Sámi. An attractive motif. It is almost daylight, but the vast expanses of snow absorb the dim light from a sun that is light years from the horizon.

I set the camera up on the ice. In the biting cold, I adjust the stand, tighten and loosen the screws with my bare hands. The flat gray light makes everything flow together, blending into a whole—the sky, snow-covered landscape, and the ice. It is January. The counter shows that I have five unexposed glass plates left in the magazine. I focus on the subject. The small group of people are dark gradients in the image that give depth and perspective. I focus further.

Humans lower their naked bodies into the water through the hole in the ice and they are forgiven for their sins.

Tatjana

Automats and photo-synthesis wash ashore.



Heaven and Earth

The light sensitivity of the dry plates varies with the different manufacturers. The density and opacity of the silver-gelatin emulsion on the glass plate in regards to the amount of light received is informed by scales on the Warnerke sensitometer.



Empty Halls

From the moment glaciers stopped sending new ice and moraine masses out to sea, a double process was initiated: in the lower reaches, the ice front was attacked horizontally by the sea, which in the widest fjords soon formed tongues in the glaciers; at the same time, the inland ice melted vertically, so that the highest cliffs appeared first. Large melting water masses flushed the mountain, and over large areas only the heaviest moraine material remained. The meltwater (and not least the considerably warmer rainfall water) gradually melted down the exposed rocky cliffs, eventually finding paths to the sea in subglacial drainage channels.



The Roads

Errata.

Baptized

Tundra illuminates Tai-ga.

I Was So Happy to Have a Dream

We carry the devices with us in the bag and feed the algorithms with local data. My dog, Xerox, is with me. The devices are different transmitters and receivers of signals that we have made especially

for our studies on the influence of different rhythms on the algae. The outdated, heavy optical devices are transported out in advance by boat, together with the provisions. After a day's march, we arrive at the station further out in the fjord, where there are natural low-tide shores and a coastal kelp forest. We recalibrate the circadian rhythm to the tidal rhythm.

And Therefore

Sometimes, with the apparatus in use, I am put in a state where my senses and instincts are amplified in an intense presence with my surroundings. My body becomes part of the apparatus in the here and now, just as space and time disappear. I'm losing myself. I weather cosmic love.

A Question

Is the water rising, or is it the land sinking?



Gray Weather Mood

PS. In the attached photograph, taken in 1903, you see a reindeer and sleigh at the ice edge, which at that time was between fifteen and twenty kilometers



out in the fjord. For the photograph, which is part of my slideshow *In the Land of the Sámi People*, the caption reads as follows: "The mail ship is expected. It is the middle of May with the midnight sun, and a wonderful color-rich atmosphere over the frozen fjord. Often the ice does not melt until around Midsummer. After the Sydvaranger mines began operating in 1906, the fjord has been kept open by icebreakers. All this has meant that the climate has become significantly milder in Kirkenes and the surrounding area, where there was previously a harsh inland climate."

These days, the ice barely settles on the fjord in winter, and spring is significantly earlier as each decade passes. The ice edge is retreating further and further off Svalbard too, creating excellent conditions for polar coastal low-pressure weather systems; this already means a wetter and wilder climate! Our politicians and global companies want to capitalize on this El Dorado—and what can one say?—a new ice-free area offers possibilities for the extraction of oil and gas further north!

On this night we need a clear floodlight, a full bundle of rays!

I Was on the Run

Body and apparatus are moving on water. The weather conditions are optimal. An even distribution of light in the clouds gives them a color scale from white to gray. The river is natural, sensitive and feminine, life-giving and metaphorical, with its inexhaustible currents and rapids. Dams and power plants have long since removed the salmon, the waterfalls, and the rough rapids, and have replaced them with calm water. Bodies of water have taken over large areas of land in something reminiscent of reservoirs or lakes. The boat is moved between dams using a car and a boat trailer.

An irregularity may have occurred in the atoms that scatter the light upon the surface, because the still water no longer reflects my face. The water flows in me and across me. I am a permeable compound.

It Calls Out

Tipping points drift.



Sailing

I'm a guest on the research ship *Helmer Hanssen* on an expedition to the northern waters. On board the ship, it is difficult to get a recording that flows smoothly.

In temperatures of -20°C , the camera wears out and the batteries need to be continuously replaced. The lens copes with competing crystals from glass, salt, and ice. Spurious electronic signals and malfunctions appear as glitches on the recorded material.

The First Day of Spring

The perfect mountain-shaped rocky mass of white minerals stands out and seems to reflect a spiritual energy. A spiral of running reindeer appear inside the fences on the fell. Men, women, and youngsters focus on their tasks. There is a hanging carcass, cans of fuel, some wooden structures, and a few four-wheel all-terrain vehicles. We park next to them. We ground the recording equipment to the earth in the hope of capturing the vibrating infra-sounds of the running hooved animals.

Suomi's Song

I get in the car and drive along the asphalt road. My camera is in the passenger seat. The borderlines of Finland rise ahead. I stop by the vast mires near Neiden / Njavdam / Näätämö. I get out of the car to examine the pingos maintained by permafrost ice on the swamps.

When a pingo reaches a certain size, it grows as a result of freezing water underneath the formation, and thus the ice lens grows larger in a self-reinforcing process. The peat layer is lifted and pushed upward until at a certain height it breaks, with gravity causing the blocks of peat to fall downward as a peat avalanche. It is a slow process.

The ice melts from within when the earth warms or if it is exposed to the air, and thus the pingo as

a phenomenon (and expression) depends on the permafrost lasting through the summers and on the process remaining underground. The ice is pushed upward both because the ice itself is expanding and because the object is lifted vertically by the buoyancy.

I am dispatched to the swamp on my own. I have to approach it indirectly both in order to maneuver in the wet terrain and also because the phenomenon requires studying the visible parts without being able to see the actual ice, the processes, and the forces below the surface. I explore openings, cracks, and folds in the pingo's surface in an optical recording that attempts to read the pingo's signature.



The Border Mountain Galgo-oaive

The denser the ground the stronger the echo.

Look Upward

I measure the distance between given points. The laser measurement could not establish an accurate reading due to the motion of the waves, the properties of the ocean, and reflections from the sunshine, therefore I use a rope: I take the rope out through the rising tide and fix it to the rock. With the rope pulled tight, I mark the measurement on the shore side using a piece of electrical tape.

LEXICON

Alexandra Kollontai

in her diary: "I am also interested in Ellisif Wessel. She lives in the High North above the Arctic Circle, in Kirkenes. She is hopelessly ill, but a brave revolutionary woman and opponent of the war. She publishes a magazine. Lenin is exchanging letters with her. She adores him. (Holmenkollen Hotel, September 1, 1915)." In *Ellisif Wessel. En biografi*.

Algae

"Perhaps connected to Latin *ulva*, 'grass-like or rush-like aquatic plant,'" according to *Online Etymology Dictionary*.

Distance measurement

is a direct or indirect measurement by optical or electro-optical methods. The measurements can be performed with great precision. All measures are subject to errors of observation, which can be taken into account and eliminated.

Circulating Sites

Photography and text by Morten Torgersrud, in *Hotel Polar Capital*, 2011.

Cloudberry

Perennial herb in the rose family. As a ripe fruit, it is first orange and red and then pale yellow. It is juicy and tasty.

"Dirty Pictures"

by Susan Schuppli, in *Living Earth*, 2016.

Dry plates

Technology that has been on the market since 1871. The dry plate replaced the wet plate and meant that you no longer needed to travel around with chemicals and darkrooms. The dry plate revolutionized field photography.

Echo

Reflection.

Ellisif Wessel. *En biografi*

by Steinar Wikan, 2008.

Ellisif Wessel. *Du ber om mit fotografi*

(You Ask for My Photography) by Elisabeth Johansen, Liv Marie Austrem, and Gro Røde, 2007.

Emulsion

Mixture of two liquids where one liquid exists as droplets distributed within the other. Emulsions can be oil-in-water or water-in-oil, which are stabilized by surfactant molecules.

Errors of Observation and Their Treatment

by J. Topping, 1972.

Geo-photo-graphic era

is a concept used by artist and researcher Susan Schuppli to propose that polluted environments operate as vast photosensitive arrays, as registrars and recorders of the changes brought about by industrialization and its contaminating processes, and this is a photographic condition rather than a metaphoric attribution in which environments are merely read as inscriptive surfaces. The “dirty images” and their traces “are multi-scalar and multi-planar stretching back in time as well as throwing their contaminants forwards into the far distant future.” The geological reorganization and transformations that led to the claim of a new geographical era (the Anthropocene) has to include their fundamental visual dynamics, and require new conceptions of the aesthetic, in which ways we observe and make sense of these massively entangled nature-culture hybrids. In “Dirty Pictures.”

Glass negative

Much of the photographic production of Ellisif Wessel was lost in the destruction caused during World War II. Surviving prints were located in private collections and rephotographed. “Consequently, a lot of her work now exists as copies of paper prints in the form of plastic film negatives. These copies are currently deposited in a museum in the same area where most of Wessel’s images were made. Here, they are stored alongside the remaining original glass negatives which are kept individually in white paper envelopes.” The booklet *Fra vor grændse mod Rusland* (From Our Border With Russia) with photography by Ellisif Wessel taken along the Pasvik River (1903) was reprinted in the 1970s at the local printshop and is being sold in the museum as part of the local history collection. A work of the artist Morten Torgersrud, exploring photography as place-bound and simultaneously as a distributional fragmentation of place, shows how Wessel’s photographs appear as “colonial displacements”—and participate in the territorial manifestation of the new Norwegian nation-state (sovereign in 1905)—but “return as located facts.” In *Circulating Sites*.

Ice

Water in solid form, a mineral with a crystal structure.

***It Calls* (Det kalder)**

Collection of poems self-published by Ellisif Wessel, 1930.

Kelp

and seaweed forests are carriers of our carbon (in an amount equivalent to the rainforest).

Kilometer

Unit of measure for length.

New Short Verses (*Nye smaavers*)

A collection of poems by Ellisif Wessel published in 1904. Her poems deal with existential issues and social injustice; they praise people and nature in the north, and they express hope for a better (socialist) future. She also expressed herself through letters and correspondence, and she once was so provocative that several newspapers stopped printing her work. Then she created her own periodical, *Klasse mot klasse* (Class Against Class), which ran for six editions.

Not Planet Earth: or How to Denaturalise the Image?

Video by Susan Schuppli, at susanschuppli.com.

Opacity

Quality of a material that does not allow light to pass through it.

Pasvik River

The border river between Norway and Russia.

Photographs

All presented photos by Ellisif Wessel are from the collection of the Grenselandmuseet (The Borderland Museum). At DigitaltMuseum, <https://digitaltmuseum.no/search/?q=Grenselandmuseet+ellisif+wessel>.

Photography

is for Ellisif Wessel an apparatus for detachment (providing her a profession and income) and awakening through observation. Of the more than 700 preserved photographs, the depictions of Sámi people, portraits, scenes from everyday life, and documentation of social and political events are the most popular, according to Gry Andreassen at the Grenselandmuseet. A quarter of the collection is landscape photography. A political turning point is in the years 1904–05, when she experiences famine around her and the shock that no one wanted to help.

Rural Reading Room

Collective actions in landscapes (2013–15) by Espen Sommer Eide, Hilde Methi, Kristin Taarnesvik, and Morten Torgersrud.

Store norske leksikon (lexicon)

snl.no.

Swamp

Slow decomposition of organic material by microbacteria.

Sydvarangers gruver

Iron ore mining setup in the area of today's Sør-Varanger Municipality. Ellisif Wessel was central in the establishment of Nordens Klippe, the trade union for the miners who, in the first couple of decades of the twentieth century, were forced to withstand extreme conditions. There are mentions of a workers' house falling apart and experimentation with explosives so powerful that no remains of those involved in accidents could ever be found. In *Ellisif Wessel. En biografi*.

Temperature fluctuations

are inferred by taking the ratio of the width of the distribution of resistance measurements and the separately measured change of resistance with temperature.

The Encyclopedia of Photography

edited by Willard D. Morgan, 1963.

The Tidal Sense

Activities surrounding and furthered by a "sounding" canvas stretch through the intertidal zone in Ramberg during six weeks in 2019, by artist Signe Lidén.

Water

A primordial substance.

Weathering

A collective term for the physical and chemical changes that occur over time when oil is exposed to evaporation, breakdown, and exposure to light from the sun, etc.

Winter and Spring: Short Verses from Finnmark

(*Vinter og vaar. Smaavers fra Finnmarken*)

Collection of poems by Ellisif Wessel, 1903.



Film still from *If I Could Wish for Something*, by Dora García, digital film, 68', 2021. Original footage by Gisela Castillo, documenting the demonstrations during the National Day for the Decriminalization of Abortion, September 28, 2020, Mexico City

We were in that time when any daily occurrence was preceded by death. We were in that time when victories were won according to the number of ... the murdered.

—Angélica Liddell

The feminist movement must be a movement of survivors. A movement with a future.

—Cherríe Moraga

112 Transfeminism Is Not a Genderism

Sayak Valencia

I am witnessing, with great alarm, the incessant rise in the figures of femicide and transfemicide in Latin America and the world. Currently, in Mexico a girl, young woman, or adult woman is murdered every four hours. We women are being killed viciously, with extreme violence. Some of the causes of death described by the news media and international reports are “mutilation, asphyxia, drowning, strangulation, or by throat-slitting, burning, stabbing, or bullet wound.”¹ We women are being killed, raped, put on display, and erased from the world with rage, with patriarchal or phraternal hatred, with social premeditation and juridical advantage.²

Trans and genderqueer people are not only killed as women, with overwhelming sexual frenzy, but are also socially murdered for disobeying the biologicistic mandate to resign themselves to live in a body whose gender has been medically assigned and with which they do not identify, and which has erased them from the conceptual map of the possible and enunciable. So far this year (2017), Trans Murder Monitoring (TMM) has reported “325 cases of reported killings of trans and [genderqueer] people.”³

I begin this text with this reminder of figures and deaths to speak of the state of emergency and the necropolitical and necro-administrative context in which we trans women, cisgender women, and other minorities-in-becoming must survive. I summon up death because, unfortunately, it appears to be the common bond between dissident bodies. I mention death as the persistent center of the organization and propagation of Western modernity/coloniality, death as a kind of civilizing technology that persists into our day and connects the present context with colonial intermittency. Death, moreover, as a revitalizing mechanism of necropolitics and the continual pillaging of our bodies and territories.

Thus, violence and death appear as common elements in the coloniality of gender,⁴ whose radical consequence is precisely the elimination of potentially indocile populations whose intersections dismantle sexual dimorphism and denaturalize oppressions. As María Lugones states, “race is no more or less fictitious than gender; both are powerful fictions.”⁵ In this context, it is urgent to forge alliances among feminist movements, because we are in the era where political actions appear to make sense only as postmortems, where the central feminist demand is not to be murdered, as shown by the transnational movements represented in virtual social networks by the hashtags #NiUnaMenos (“not one [woman] less”) and #VivasNosQueremos (“we want ourselves alive”), and where the tools and discourses of our struggles are expropriated by the friendly face of fascistic democracies⁶ through the cosmetic commodification of our political demands. In this social space of convergence between markets and protests, necropolitics expands as a constitutive

exterior⁷ that surrounds us and wants us to be inert and segregated.

I say the word “death” and I tremble, tremble in a country filled with the dead and disappeared. I say the word “death” and then there appears the word “feminisms” as one of the bastions that still make sense in speaking of politics of life and its sustainability in the face of this binary, heteropatriarchal, and necro-neoliberal cis-tem.⁸ However, to say the word “feminisms” is not a simple act; to say “feminisms” is to speak of multiple currents, historical perspectives, situated strategies, localizations, embodied experiences, and world visions on a political and personal level that cannot be grasped or standardized in a definitive version. Perhaps it is in this difficulty to be standardized where the survival of feminist movements is rooted.

The difficulty in naming feminisms in a definitive way is, by any reckoning, its power: the fact that they lack a single given name, but many surnames, activates their strategies and turns them into a reticular movement, filled with processes and strategically located actions. Nonetheless, it appears that the surnames of feminism being popularized among young people, and in a transnational manner, are neoliberal feminism and trans-exclusionist radical feminism. It is precisely these points that the present text will emphasize, from a transfeminist perspective.

Calling Oneself a (Trans)feminist

The focus of this essay is grounded in a transfeminist perspective, understood as an epistemological tool

that cannot be reduced to the incorporation of the transgender discourse into feminism, nor does it propose itself as a supersession of feminisms. Before all else, it involves a network that considers the conditions of gender transit, migration, *mestizaje*, vulnerability, race, and class, in order to articulate them as heirs to the historical memory of insurrectional social movements. The goal here is to open discursive spaces and fields to all those practices and subjects of contemporaneity and becoming-minoritarian that are not directly considered by hetero-white-biologistic institutional feminism—that is, those subjects that remain outside or energetically distance themselves from the neoliberal reconversion of feminisms' critical apparatuses, known to us now as gender politics or "women's politics." These are public politics of pillage, which neoliberalize and reduce the political struggle of feminisms to the "issues and guidelines of an eminently female, pragmatic, and reformist feminism, converted into the prey of state machinery and its techno-administrative language."⁹

In the face of this scenario, transfeminism's major objective is to re-politicize and de-essentialize glocal feminist movements, in a counteroffensive to governmental discourse and the NGOs that employ, as a strategy of political deactivation, the capture and standardization of the language of feminisms, reducing it to a kind of orthopedic critique reappropriated by the circuits of the market and the state as manager of the social choreographies of gender by means of "purplewashing."

Purplewashing is a technique of appropriation in which the arguments of enlightened feminism are used to make simplistic, denigrating, and

moralizing readings of certain practices of corporal reappropriation carried out by racialized or lower-class women. Brigitte Vasallo, who formulated the term, defines it as:

The process of instrumentalization of feminist struggles with the goal of legitimizing politics of exclusion against minoritized populations, usually of a racist type. The paradox is that these minoritized populations also include women. It is a term derived from "pinkwashing," thoroughly developed by Jasbir Puar and Dean Spade, and which indicates the warlike instrumentalization of the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans (LGBTI) populations while simultaneously generating a nationalist identity around the (apparent) respect for these rights.¹⁰

Now, transfeminism takes on meaning in a context where capitalism, while it never ceased being an economic system, diversified to the point of establishing itself as a biointegrated cultural construction,¹¹ in which the management of the biopolitical and psychopolitical regime¹² becomes fundamental for the neoliberalization of the contemporary world. This neoliberalization, which also reached feminism, works with the production of "demobilization of the scenes of struggle."¹³ For present-day neoliberalism, the production of capitalist subjectivity¹⁴ is as profitable as hydrocarbons, and in it the aggravated violence against civilian populations (especially toward those who contravene the mandates of sexual and racial binarism, of gender, class, and functional diversity) also becomes a tool of economic, social, cultural,

and political control on the basis of the deliberate practice of massacre in the Southernized contexts of the global North and in the geopolitical Souths.

Hence, it becomes urgent to locate ourselves, from the vantage point of different feminisms, within a common front; as Audre Lorde declared in the 1980s, “without community there is no liberation,” and further, without community there is “only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between the individual and her oppression.”¹⁵ In this regard, the project of creating a common good must be revisited, with the understanding that “community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist.”¹⁶ On the contrary, the creation of a common good is based on an attitude of self-criticism and redefinition, which involves putting on the table the various topics of concern to the first feminisms (equal rights and access to full citizenship), as well as the new feminisms (everyday sexism, femicide, harassment and violence on social media, multimodal violence) and transfeminisms (destigmatizing of sex work, de-pathologizing of trans bodies, broadening of the political subject of feminism, intersectionality, coloniality, systemic violence, extractivism, the good life, etc.), germane to the specific context of our contemporary realities.

The call of transfeminisms is for the realization of a self-critique that does not leave out, as subjects of feminism, those “outside the circle of this society’s definition of acceptable women ... those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are black, who are older,”¹⁷ who are from Indigenous communities, who are trans, who are not part of the Western

aesthetic canon, who have functional diversity, who are refugees, migrants, undocumented, precarious, who speak in tongues, and who precisely for their subjectivizing and desubjectivizing intersections are caught up in the physical, psychological, and medial consequences of the increasing globalization of explicit, bloody, and morbid violence, namely, the gore violence that has real effects on generally feminized bodies.

Transfeminism, more than a mere dissident gesture or an adoption of a particular aesthetic and prosthetic linked to gender performances, calls for the construction of a common social and political front that takes into account the violences that establish and artificially naturalize a “deliberately fractured narrative strategy”¹⁸ that has to do with all discursive fields and that may be identified most emphatically in the way the media presents male violence. Transfeminism as a political front positions itself in “defense of anti-normative and anti-assimilationist practices and ways of life.”¹⁹

In this sense, I am not proposing, as a transfeminist, that the categories to demonstrate our different intersections and their relationship to violence should be valid and identical in all contexts and for all feminisms. I understand that violence as a tool of enrichment may be increasingly identified in different, geopolitically distant spaces, and that their consequences repeatedly fall on feminized bodies and subjects. Identifying this could display the routes of the political cartographies of necro-liberalism, given that it is interwoven with the creation of a subjectivity and agency determined by capitalism’s forces of control and production.

From the vantage point of transfeminisms, we also call for the complexification of the political subject of feminisms, as it is not our wish to reduce the subjects of our struggles. On the contrary, women as political subject of feminisms exceed the biological essentialism proclaimed by trans-exclusionist feminism. Women as political subject of feminisms are a discursive enclave for critically understanding that the artificial differentiation and naturalization of the inequality that calls upon the binarily sexed body forms part of a project of plunder that begins with the seizure of common property from European peasant populations, the intensive femicide known as “witch hunts,” the colonization of America in the fifteenth century (and its coloniality of gender anchored in the coloniality of power, being, and knowledge), and which crystallizes between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries through a necropolitical process disguised as biopolitics and aimed at governing free bodies in America, Europe, Asia, and Africa alike, as well as inventing confronting political fictions of gender, race, and sexuality in order to forestall possible alliances between the vulnerable multitudes.

I provide this brief historical account to remind us that women, along with all those subjects considered to be subaltern or dissenting from hetero-patriarchal and cis-sexual categories, have lived with explicit violence throughout history.²⁰ Violence in its different forms (physical, symbolic, economic, psychological, mediatic) has been used against us as a kind of pedagogy of subalternization applied to racialized, poor, feminized, or non-binary bodies. These accumulated violences have become part of our daily existence and our education, and have

had different objectives depending on the historical, geopolitical, and economic context within which they are practiced.

Violence as a foundational element in the construction of discourse²¹ presupposes that the conditions of vulnerability and damageability are inherent to women’s manifest destiny,²² something like an inverted privilege, a stigma that introduces us to the Russian roulette of barbaric vermin. Hence, it is we who seek to trace a response to the fierce abuse practiced by contemporary gore capitalism,²³ which permeates the broad spectrum of bodies, which cannot be reduced to the rigid hierarchies of feminine and masculine.

The radicality of violence locates us on the knife-edge, in the transmutation of an era that requires us to revise our classic concepts, to shake up our theories and bring them up to date, because like Barbara Cameron said, “I’m not interested in pursuing a society that uses analysis, research, and experimentation to concretize their vision of cruel destinies ... a society with arrogance rising, moon in oppression, and sun in destruction.”²⁴ And above all, I am not interested in reproducing violence and exclusion of other bodies by means of separatist polemics that partake of flat, simplistic argumentation that calls upon biology as a form of certifying and validating differences, and in this summoning collides with its own limit, since it employs arguments familiar to the patriarchy for excluding women. Cis-sexist arguments are no different from racist arguments, because in both cases their point of departure is the essentialization and legitimization of specific bodies, white in the latter case and cisgender in the former, in order to elide and justify the supremacy of one

subject over others. The quarrel over representation that prizes one identity over others turns out to be unrealistic, because the frenzy of gore capitalism leaves no way out beyond the creation of new political subjects for feminism, that is, “a becoming-woman [understood as] any break with society’s present mode of functioning,”²⁵ which succeeds in forming alliances with other minority becomings and that proposes answers to “a ‘phallocratic’ mode of production of subjectivity—a mode of production in which the accumulation of capital, prestige and power are the sole guiding principles,”²⁶ and in which are anchored bloody capitalism and necro-masculinity as foundation stones of Western political, sexual, racial, and economic rationality, deployed in its geopolitics and extended, through patriarchal linkage,²⁷ into formerly colonial territories.

More specifically, the transfeminist movement seeks to prove that masculinity (as a living political fiction) is a mechanism of implementation and conservation of a project of modernity/coloniality and nation which in its transformation is tied to the emergence and updating of the capitalist economy. Thus, masculinity as a political fiction (and not as a singular genderized body) is a social phenomenon related to wage labor, violence, and oppression as forms of providing continuity to projects of social and economic hegemony, imbricating the necropolitical regime with biopolitics through the model of Enlightenment democracy and the “heterosexual nation.”²⁸ Thus, to consider oneself a feminist while professing a trans-exclusionary position is to make a pact with the necro-patriarchal, pimping, and femicidal state that reappropriates our struggles by means of separatism and the destruction of the common good.

On the other hand, in a context of intensive necropolitics against feminized bodies, the demand for the protection by the state of (bio)women implemented by the political lobby of institutional feminism becomes nonsensical, given that the death of cis-, trans-, and non-binary women operates in favor of the capitals of control that the state itself generates. Demanding protection and dialoguing with the sovereign without questioning masculinity as a necropolitical project that sustains the generalized plunder on which the contemporary state is based, is not feminism but rather its neoliberal retranslation into gender politics that in large part represent the interests of cisgender, heterosexual, white, middle- or upper-class educated women who reproduce and wish to subscribe to Western sexual rationality.

Feminism Is Not a Genderism

From the perspective of transfeminisms, we ask ourselves whether the essentialist genderism that speaks only to and for women who do not wish to seem “aggressive” and assume the “bother” they can cause men (placing themselves on the side of power relations and pleading that the “punishments” for First World heterosexual, white, middle-class women, or for those in the comfortable classes of the Third World, not be too exemplary), is not a form of administering our energies and keeping us busy with a dialogue that, instead of broadening the political subject of feminisms, obtusely reduce and amputate it.

This genderist becoming of one part of the feminist movement is the result of the capture of the language of critique and its intent to institutionalize the language

of protest. Genderism is a reformist movement that strives to “stretch across the gap of male ignorance, and to educate men as to our existence and our needs. This is an old and primary tool of all oppressors to keep the oppressed occupied with the master’s concern.”²⁹ Genderism as a neoliberal movement is interested in showing the consequence of patriarchal or phraternal violence, but does not show the root of the problem; that is, it does not dispense with the idea of power and reproduces the pragmatic, rational program of the West, avoiding the fact that it is precisely this instrumental reason that grounds the problem of the domination and violence of the heterocentric, patriarchal, colonial cis-tem.

Institutional Genderism and the Officialization of the Language of Protest

At present in the world powers, feminism as a social movement is undergoing a kind of critique that considers it outdated and ahistorical, even for the most progressive social movements, even as the creation of groups dissenting and resisting the system is defended. This is the result of the political unraveling of feminisms’ language, which is also the result of the intensive pillaging to which the various feminisms have been submitted. And it becomes contradictory for society to demand equal access to social justice while eliminating the word “feminism” from its vocabularies, because it is precisely through the intersectional assertion of oppressions that feminisms have been able to articulate a situated language for protest, and have complexified, along with anti-racist, proletarian, anti-speciesist, and functional pro-diversity movements, the lexicon of insubordination.

It is absolutely hypocritical for genderism to seek to eliminate feminism from its conceptual maps; it also exemplifies the present state of things, in that society and certain critical groupings “fiercely denounce racial and social injustice, but are indulgent and understanding when it comes to male domination.”³⁰ That is, this constant refusal to call oneself a feminist collides with the social uses accorded feminist grammars and the sexual dissidence that flood many of the discourses of contemporary pop culture, and which conceal the feminist, rebellious roots from which emerged many cultural practices that were articulated within the political imagination of feminisms. As Virginie Despentes states, “Many [men] try to explain that the feminist struggle is ancillary, a luxury sport of little relevance or urgency. You would have to be a moron, or else horribly dishonest, to think one oppression insufferable and another full of charm.”³¹

Transfeminism is important in this world that destroys the commons and the sustainability of life—and in this case, the differences between First and Third World are minimal—where the women who dwell in both worlds “earn less money than men, hold less senior posts, and are used to not being acknowledged”;³² and where “capitalism is an egalitarian religion in the sense that it demands general submission, making everyone feel trapped—as all women are.”³³ The capitalist system is the demonstration of the bankruptcy of the labor system, the obscene radicalization of liberalism, the becoming-gore of the economic system, and it is the visible form, still persistent and broadly accepted, of where male oppression, plunder, death, and violence are expressed against those who have historically been considered minorities.

Now, transfeminist discourse and practice are intimately related to sexual dissidence and queerness but cannot be reduced to an aesthetic and prosthetic discourse; rather, among its objectives is to configure itself as a political and ethical project linked intersectionally with the interdependence that enables the sustainability of life. I use the phrase “sustainability of life” from the standpoint of a feminist economy. This conceptualization places at the center of discussion those labors that are sustaining life—reproductive labor, care work, domestic work, sex work—all of which are fundamental to the development of social and economic relations, since they are the foundation for the capitalist economy’s generation of surplus value, although the ruling economic system renders them invisible.

Within the feminist economy, the sustainability of life is connected, as Amaia Pérez Orozco reflects, to the critique of three basic elements of the system:

Displace markets as the axis of analysis and political intervention; in other words, the center of attention should no longer be monetary flows and the creation of exchange value and instead focus on the processes of the sustainability of life.

Locate gender as a key variable that traverses the socioeconomic system; in other words, it is not an added element, but rather, gender relations and inequality are a structural axis of the system; capitalism is heteropatriarchal.

The third element is not to believe in objectivity as a valorizing neutrality: to believe that every

knowledge of the world is related to a specific political position; make your position explicit and create knowledge with a clear vocation to transform the system.³⁴

In this regard, the feminist analysis of the economy that places these three elements at the center of discussion seeks to articulate a space of agency where subject-agents are not only women, but where the effort to sustain life brings together different trajectories, corporealities, and sexualities into the common project of constructing a livable life, outside the paradigms of traditional economy and politics.

The transfeminist movement recovers this common goal of the sustainability of life in order to complexify the relationships among genders and de-essentialize the subject of feminism so that the latter is no longer only cis-, white, and heterosexual women. It should be specified that transfeminist movements are made up of contradictory multitudes³⁵ that direct their forces toward common objectives that are not nor will be equivalent in all cases and that vary and reconfigure in relation to their geopolitics, but that have in common a refusal to subscribe to, embody, and reproduce the promises of the modern nation-state; that is, we must create from our excess a political practice of dissidences. Like other social movements, transfeminism is a dissident movement; however, it is grounded in the conviction of engaging in dialogues with other transformational movements rather than restricting itself or dialoguing with the state.

One of the goals of transfeminism or transfeminisms is to show transversally the need to articulate profound critiques of the notions of identity and the

systematic, “naturalized” reproduction of different discriminations against bodies because of gender, ethnicity, class, sexual preference, or functional diversity, so that the various dissident struggles can completely deconstruct the political fictions of modernity and the nation-state, based on racist, sexist, ageist, classist, homophobic, and ableist segmentation.

Transfeminism’s fundamental aim is to dissent radically and construct a new collective subjectivity that confronts contemporary capitalist subjectivity, for, as Rossana Reguillo notes, “Dissidence necessarily requires a form of de-subjectification, a pulling away from oneself, in order to construct a new subjectivity. Resistance, seduction, imagination, the advent of the other, in order to configure a different space standing apart in which another subjectivity becomes possible.”³⁶ Thus, from the vantage point of transfeminisms, we no longer want to be citizen-consumers but rather to move through other circuits, where the agendas of the various feminisms as political projects and minoritarian becomings enable us to share practices of dissidence, survival, care, and interdependence.

Depatriarchize, Decolonize, De-Neoliberalize in Order to Build a Life in Common

Gore capitalist heteropatriarchy grants few opportunities to live, to be considered a political citizen, and when it does so, it is a perk for those in harmony with binary visual epistemologies, namely, those that represent the powerful side of sexual, racial, and gender differences. Consequently, from

a transfeminist perspective, the response to this precarity lived by the contradictory multitudes is an invitation to gamble together on the creation of a commons based on disobeying gender and consumption, and on the renewal of solidarities among classes-ethnicities-races-genders-(dis)abilities. It is a disobedience of the multitudes that founds a glocal community in which strategic alliances exist.

In the Mexican context, transfeminist movements have the political responsibility to de-necropoliticize our daily context, for which a radical critique of the structures of violence, misogyny, and homophobia as foundational categories of masculinity and *machista* femininity in our country is necessary. In order to de-necropoliticize ourselves, we must engage in a collective labor of de-patriarchalization and decolonization, as well as an intensive labor of de-neoliberalization³⁷ in which we may share other practices and perspectives that are already being carried out in different corners of the planet, that wager on the sustainability of life without engaging in regressive, sectarian discourses that base their struggles on segmented identities or on the biological or geopolitical essentialization of certain subjects above others.

Thus, transfeminisms are part of a tidal wave of political and social movements that convey to us that feminisms go beyond both the traditional left and the voices of women who dedicate themselves to the management and institutional administration of gender. Transfeminism does not seek dialogue with the sovereign, nor does it participate in the apparatus of truth verification based on

the binarisms of feminine/masculine, hetero/homosexual, white/non-white. Rather, it articulates itself in networks of insurrectional, a-citizen bodies that no longer reproduce submissively the neoliberal, heteropatriarchal project disguised as a national project, and instead construct a civic *we*, namely, a possible alliance for what I term a *cuir-dadanía* (queer-izenship).³⁸

1

Marcos Muedano, "Imparable, el crimen contra las mujeres; cifras del Inegi," *Excélsior*, October 22, 2017, <http://www.excelsior.com.mx/nacional/2017/10/22/1196308>.

2

I am arguing this on the basis of the constant criminalization to which women affected by sexual violence are subjected. An example of this is the judgment handed down in Spain during November 2017, which subjected to fresh violence the victim of a gang rape by five individuals belonging to a group that called itself "La Manada" (The Wolfpack). The judgment aroused many criticisms from feminist and human rights organizations, since the prosecutors and judges that brought the case forward decided not to admit into evidence the video that literally showed the woman's collective rape by the accused and in which their faces were shown and recognizable.

3

Transrespect Versus Transphobia Worldwide, "Trans Day of Remembrance (TDoR) 2017" [press release], *Transrespect*, November 14, 2017, <https://transrespect.org/en/tmm-update-tdor-2017/>.

4

María Lugones, "Colonialidad y género," *Tabula Rasa*, no. 9 (July–December 2008): 75–101.

5

Ibid., 94.

6

This concept is inspired by a cross-reading between what Zillah Eisenstein terms "fascist democracies" (see "La administración Bush utiliza mujeres para hacer la guerra," *Feministas Tramando* (2012), <https://feministastramando.wordpress.com/2012/10/24/entrevista-con-zillah-eisenstein-la-administraci-n/>) and the capitalistic order as proposed by Félix Guattari and Suely Rolnik in *Molecular Revolution in Brazil*, trans. Karel Clapshow and Brian Holmes (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2008). In this regard, by "fascistic democracies" we understand a neoliberal regime of governance in which may be identified fascist ideology and its techniques of destruction and violence, concealed through aestheticized forms of perception that iconize violence and make it profitable by presenting it as innocuous and cosmetic.

7

Judith Butler, "Contingent Foundations: Feminism and the Question of 'Postmodernism,'" in *The Postmodern Turn: New Perspectives on Social Theory*, ed. Steven Seidman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 153–70.

8

By "necro-neoliberalismo," I refer to the use of necropolitical techniques applied by the capitalist regime in order to generate economic, political, and social capital through violence and death.

9

Valeria Flores, *Tropismos de la disidencia* (Santiago de Chile: Editorial Palinodia, 2017), 36.

10

Víctor Lenore, "Del pornoburka al purplewashing, los trucos más sucios contra el feminismo," interview with Brigitte Vasallo, *El Confidencial*, April 3, 2016, https://www.elconfidencial.com/cultura/2016-04-03/del-pornoburka-al-purplewashing-los-trucos-mas-sucios-contra-el-feminismo_1170764/.

11

Sayak Valencia, *Capitalismo Gore* (Barcelona: Editorial Melusina, 2010), 50; translated to English as *Gore Capitalism*, trans. John Pluecker (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e) / Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2018), 71.

12

Sayak Valencia and Katia Sepúlveda, "Del fascinante fascismo a la fascinante violencia. Psico/bio/necro/política y mercado gore," *Mitologías hoy* 14 (2016): 75–91.

13

Alejandra Castillo, *Disensos feministas* (Santiago de Chile: Editorial Palinodia, 2016), 89.

14

Guattari and Rolnik, *Molecular Revolution*.

15

Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table Press, 1983), 99.

16

Ibid.

17

Ibid.

18

Virginia Villaplana and Berta Sichel, *Cárcel de amor. Relatos culturales sobre la violencia de género* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2005), 269.

19

Flores, *Tropismos*, 37.

20

Examples of this intractable violence are the European "witch hunts" and the colonial construction of women as a minority gender and a common, subaltern body in the service of two masters: the men of their families and the colonizers.

21

Villaplana and Sichel, *Cárcel de amor*, 270.

22

Here I establish a parallel between the expansionist policies of the United States, linked to the conquest of territory by divine patriarchal will, and the occupation/oppression/destruction of women and their activities, like a conquered territory belonging to the patriarchy.

23

Valencia, *Gore Capitalism*.

24

Barbara Cameron, "Gee, You Don't Seem Like an Indian from the Reservation," in *This Bridge Called My Back*, ed. Moraga and Anzaldúa, 49.

25

Guattari and Rolnik, *Molecular Revolution*, 113.

26

Ibid, 112.

27

Julieta Paredes, *Hilando fino desde el feminismo comunitario* (Mexico City: Cooperativa El Rebozo; Zapateándole; Lente Flotante; En cortito que's pa largo; AliFem AC, 2013).

28

Ochy Curiel, *La nación heterosexual. Análisis del discurso jurídico y el régimen heterosexual desde la antropología de la dominación* (Bogotá: Editorial Brecha Lésbica; En la Frontera, 2013).

29

Lorde, "The Master's Tools," 100.

30

Virginie Despentes, *King Kong Theory*, trans. Stephanie Benson (New York: The Feminist Press, 2010), 17.

31

Ibid, 17.

32

Ibid, 14.

33

Ibid, 18.

34

Amaia Pérez Orozco, "¿Qué es la economía feminista?," *Mujerícolas. Personas que Habitan un Cuerpo de Mujer* (blog), October 22, 2015, <http://mujericolas.blogspot.com/2015/10/que-es-la-economia-feminista.html>.

35

Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004).

36

Rosanna Reguillo, "Disidencia: frente al desorden de las cajas abiertas – México, breve y precario mapa de lo imposible," *E-misférica* 10, no. 2 (2013), <http://archive.hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/es/e-misferica-102/reguillo>.

37

In this regard, we are inspired by the ideas of the theorist-artivists of the Bolivian Indigenous Nations: María Galindo, Julieta Paredes, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui.

38

My Spanish neologism proposes a crossing of meanings and trajectories between the words *cuir* (a Hispanicized, decolonially inflected phonetic deviation from "queer" movements) and *ciudadanía* ("citizenship"; understood from the perspective of feminist economy as a politics of care [*cuidado*] and sustainability of life).



Film still from *If I Could Wish for Something*, by Dora García, digital film, 68', 2021. Original footage by Gisela Castillo, documenting the demonstrations during the National Day for the Decriminalization of Abortion, September 28, 2020, Mexico City

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Paloma Contreras Lomas

Señor Sotomayor, commander and commissioner, showed up with orders from the chief of police to have the girls with communist affiliations leave the meeting hall, because they have expressed concepts that some authorities find inconvenient.¹

—Ana Victoria Jiménez and Francisca Reyes,
*Sembradoras de futuros. Memoria de la Unión
Nacional de Mujeres Mexicanas*

Part I

Thalía and the Spirit of the Cosmic Race

The first time I heard of Alexandra Kollontai was several years ago. I found out about her through Sofía, a classmate affiliated with the Communist Party of Mexico. I never imagined that somebody so young would be a militant. I had trouble imagining her in an old house, filled with sour-smelling, half-ghostly old men, relics of a communism that never was achieved in Mexico. I invited Sofia to a session of a seminar on Marxist feminism I was coordinating at Biquini Wax,² the collective I'm part of. In the session Sofia proposed for the seminar, we read a few extracts from Kollontai's *The Social Basis of the Woman Question*. I was surprised at her corporeal-economic reading and her search for a female liberation that would dispense with bourgeois feminism.

Kollontai thought about how social class is a complicated knife in the unliberated body of the proletarian woman, or, as she calls her, the “younger sister.”³ Perhaps today, in a superficial way, we may compare her ideas with the intersectional thought that has been incorporated into feminism. What is surprising about reading Kollontai at the present

moment are her prophecies that have taken shape in the neoliberal logic of the future (and of our present) and their impacts on the most vulnerable bodies. Little did I imagine that, after this seminar, I would again invoke this Soviet woman, ahead of her time and something of a sorceress, at that moment in the patio of my collective, where I read her while fantasizing about her possible parallel to the present situation in Mexico.

Kollontai argues:

In other words, women can become truly free and equal only in a world organised along new social and productive lines.... Proletarian women have a different attitude. They do not see men as the enemy and the oppressor; on the contrary, they think of men as their comrades, who share with them the drudgery of the daily round and fight with them for a better future. The woman and her male comrade are enslaved by the same social conditions; the same hated chains of capitalism oppress their will and deprive them of the joys and charms of life. It is true that several specific aspects of the contemporary system lie with double weight upon women, as it is also true that the conditions of hired labour sometimes turn working women into competitors and rivals to men. But in these unfavorable situations, the working class knows who is guilty.... The proletarian woman bravely starts out on the thorny path of labor. Her legs sag; her body is torn. There are dangerous precipices along the way, and cruel beasts of prey are close at hand.... It is she, fighting in the ranks of the proletariat, who wins for women the right to work; it is she, the “younger sister,”

who prepares the ground for the “free” and “equal” woman of the future.⁴

I cannot write otherwise than from personal experience. I suppose it's always like that; I suppose there's always an autobiographical part of ourselves undergirding everything we do. Personal projections float as productive material that sometimes can be disguised as theory and always as fiction or experience. You could say that this essay is where the hands of so many others I've read for this text end and mine begin: a chain of research or thoughts that sustain us. When I confronted the challenge of imagining an essay on Alexandra Kollontai, I learned that in Mexico her thought found an echo and influenced different women's and socialist-oriented feminist organizations from the beginning of the twentieth century. I read some scholarly studies, books, and articles by my predecessors about Kollontai. This essay is not an exercise in voluntary paraphrasing; perhaps it is more an exercise in post-socialist-Kollontaist imagination in the present.

I am thinking of this as a reminder, because I feel that Mexico is crashing down on me. Yes, Mexico, a Latin American country that announces daily that it is about to collapse. A place where our *violent* nationalism, our identity politics, is reaffirmed daily. I have the sensation that we survive on the basis of a simulated collapse, as a daily reminder that we're still alive. Mexico is—or at least I want to believe it is—emotionally closer to the South than the North.

As I write this, in my northern sadness, I repost on my Facebook wall the excellent news that abortion has finally been decriminalized in the state of

Oaxaca. I felt satisfied with my political act as an indomitable activist of the networks, in the eternal media loop of virtual manifestation. I reflected on how recent its legalization was. Abortion is still not legal in all of Mexico; there are women in the country who continue to die: *#Lasricasabortanlas pobres mueren*. Rich women abort, poor women die. Once again, the basic right to existence and its infrastructure is subsumed to a class issue. For Kollontai, writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, the decriminalization of abortion meant the emancipation of the working woman. It was economically suited to the family as a whole and its growth, as well as halting the death rate of women of the lower classes who self-administered that procedure, along with the complete incorporation of state support for working mothers, a Body-State-Mother transformation able to give complete, communal support for working women. That was the way of thinking in the Soviet Union, the first nation to decriminalize abortion.

Abortion exists and flourishes everywhere, and no laws or punitive measures have succeeded in rooting it out.... Soviet power realizes that the need for abortion will only disappear on the one hand when Russia has a broad and developed network of institutions protecting motherhood and providing social education, and on the other hand when women understand that *childbirth is a social obligation*; Soviet power has therefore allowed abortion to be performed openly and in clinical conditions.

Besides the large-scale development of motherhood protection, the task of labour in Russia is to strengthen in women the healthy

instinct of motherhood, to make motherhood and labour for the collective compatible and thus do away with the need for abortion.⁵

But what happens to the body of a mother in a country with a murderous state?

In 2013, a Mazatec woman gave birth in a flower bed outside the Ayutla hospital, since the personnel in that health center decided to ignore her when she asked to be attended. According to what they said later, they did not *understand* her because she didn't speak "correct" Spanish. Once again, the colonial regime was imposed in a country with a diversity of languages other than Spanish, which the government has wished to eradicate. Any body that is out of place is massacred, rendered invisible, or ignored. Even in the shadows, the phantasmagorical governmental presence continues to systematically oppress the *younger sister*.

The government has normalized the humiliating situation in which the bodies of Mestiza and Indigenous women appear, because they are not important enough to seek them out or name them. Mexico is a state that conceals bodies underneath the earth, stones, and monuments.

Women disappear within the abyss of the absence of infrastructure, a void that encompasses everything from the most primary elements (transport, streetlights, sidewalks) to the support for and pursuit of complaints and the designation of gender-based killings. I always think the same when I say something about feminism in Mexico and the condition of the *younger sister*, which has been rendered completely

invisible by the state and often by white feminism and academia. The state is a criminal one, politics died long ago, and a country like Mexico is a place where the state responds to the economic logic of transnational pressure, that is, through the privatization of territory, where bodies are pierced through after the plunder. The revolution never happened and the land does not belong to those who work it. And then I start thinking about my own authoritarianism in dissolving the state and erasing the Mexican Revolution, and I take it all back. As if Emiliano Zapata's mustaches had been a fantasy of the national guerrillero.

With the plundering of territory, not only does an ecosystem—a body, a living being—die, but beliefs the landscape possesses are also being extinguished. The mountain keeps secrets that do not belong to the obedient body of present-day capitalist logic. In the abyss of the Mexican landscape are hidden not only potentially exploitable natural resources but also places where the female body, invisible because of racial, economic, and state-nostalgic logic, can live outside the *master's* gaze and capital. In Mexican history, there are several examples of subjects, men and women, who have resisted beneath the foliage: Emiliano Zapata at the outbreak of the Mexican Revolution; Lucio Cabañas, the guerrilla who demanded the right to the jungle in the state of Guerrero; and the group of women who rose up against the tree-fellers in CheránK'eri, the largest town on the Purépecha plateau, the Zapatistxs. In recent years, the latter have taken on the role of protagonist as critical elements of the patriarchy within the movement itself, showing the problems of capitalist oppression that assaults with particular

vehemence the bodies unrecognized by the so-called Mexican state. Territory and the body of the Mestiza and Indigenous woman are connected, as are the landscape and anti-colonial resistance. Skin color and socioeconomic position and their possible aspirations form part of a system in which people are oppressed and categorized as in the oldest system of *castas*. "Prieto" ("Darkie"), "Indio," "Negro," and "Naco" ("Greaser") continue to be some of the insulting contemporary ways of designating the non-white in Mexico. To understand how class difference functions, we will have to refer to the complicated racial network in Mexico because it appeals to a certain colonial specificity and inheritance different from those of Europe and the United States.

The writer Susana Vargas defines the Mexican racial system accurately, in economic and racial terms. She calls it the "perfect Mexican pigmentocracy":

In an analogous manner, I propose to think of pigmentocracy in Mexico as a system in which the tonalities of skin are perceived on the basis of social and cultural interventions, as if linked to a certain socioeconomic level. In this system, class and skin tonality, though not the same, function as self-reproducing, interdependent mechanisms of power. In pigmentocracy, skin tonalities exist in a relational and contextual form: the social meaning of each "color" is molded on the basis of a human intervention on a biological raw material. Within this system, whoever is "white" is also "rich"; that is, whiteness functions as a longed-for space of privilege, an aspiration to social belonging. Whiteness only

exists in relation to other social categories, such as class and the cultural conjunctions that make it possible. To be “white” in Mexico is not just a question of a specific color, but also of social relations and cultural context.⁶

For me, there exist two Mexicos, the one that is and the one I’m telling of. The racial abyss in Mexico, traversed by class and gender, is rarely talked about by those who suffer from it.

This makes me think of a possible race and class performativity in the country. I think of the example of the anachronistic Mexican national television, one of the most important and influential apparatuses in the country. This ideological entertainment apparatus provided racial and aspirational models for decades. What I term the Mexican National Melodrama (MNM), inspired by Mexican telenovelas, is and has been one of the most effective ways to do politics in our country. Not forgetting our previous President, Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–18), after having been governor of the State of Mexico, won the presidency amidst the cries of his fans: “Peña, you’re gorgeous, I want you on my mattress!” Peña Nieto, the prince of Mexican politics, got married thanks to the favorable deal he received from the Mexican Church, which annulled his bride’s previous religious marriage, and so he could tie the knot in a decent and Catholic way with Angélica Rivera, “La Gaviota” (The Seagull), protagonist and star of several Mexican telenovelas.

The MNM aided one of the most important producers of aspirational identity in Mexico, with a deep impact on racial and class differences that clashed with the country’s Mestiza, Indigenous, and impoverished

reality. In *María la del Barrio* (Televisa, 1995), starring the actress and singer Thalía, a beautiful poor white woman lives in the city’s garbage dumps, with romantic sincerity and a smile always on her face. María la del Barrio, along with possessing a charismatic personality, an attribute conferred by her humble economic status, imitates the accent of what Televisa imagined as belonging to the poor. Thalía/María la del Barrio becomes one of the servants in a wealthy household, falls in love with the handsome feudal lord, marries him, and finally transforms herself into a white woman.

It could be said that this aspiration has defined the Mexicanity of the twentieth century in a country that has been transformed in the last decade; thanks to the infiltration of gender ideologies into the mainstream, racial differences and dissidences have become commodified, creating a simulation of inclusion. The perfect example of this is *Roma*, the film by Alfonso Cuarón, the global-Mexican director par excellence. In it, we see Cleo as interpreted by Yalitza Aparicio, chosen for her surprising resemblance to Cuarón’s own nanny and who after the film’s release won the heart and sympathy of the entire country. When I saw the film, I never saw Cleo. I always saw her through Cuarón’s eyes. This means that I never saw her speak, see, or have a will of her own. In the racial and economic system of the “woman who helps us with the housework,” she is the same person incapable of managing her own feelings. In one of the film’s most memorable scenes, when Cleo has just had sex with Fermín, she appears half-dressed, covering herself with a blanket, very modestly, while her lover engages in a big choreographic display of his double-edged sword, his martial-arts saber, and

his penis, which in this case are one and the same. The film, shot in romantic black and white, tells the story of a nanny who at the end of the film “fulfills” herself when she is able to symbolically access what has been denied her in her triple condition of mother, Indigenous woman, and poor woman in Mexico: a family and a home. The private home will not be run by her, but by the *mistress* who, though dependent on Cleo, will always condescend to her.

One of the strongest arguments of the national approval for the figure of Cleo-Yalitza—inseparable at this moment—was that we could finally see a woman *like her* in the most commercial type of cinema, although the representation of Cleo/Yalitza never ceases to be a construct of capital, since when *inclusion* is incorporated as a commodity, condescension does not vanish and resistance is commodified. It is important to compare the Cleo phenomenon with María de Jesús Patricio—“Marichuy”—the Nahua healer and the candidate of the Consejo Nacional Indígena (Indigenous National Council) in the 2018 presidential elections. Marichuy’s potentially pop figure did not take hold like Cleo/Yalitza’s, nor like the EZLN’s Mestizo pop figure Subcomandante Marcos—because in Mexico we do not listen to the voice of an Indigenous woman, far less permit a historically invisibilized woman to take power. We can tolerate and appropriate her only through Cuarón’s corny masculine gaze, which reduces Cleo once again to submission, making us believe that she is speaking just because she appears on the screen, deluding us into thinking that we are an inclusive country.

* * *

Alexandra Kollontai notes that the liberation of the *younger sister* is not born from feminism or the “help” of bourgeois women. It is necessary to tear down an economic regime, which in our country’s case is one that oppresses women whom the state has rendered invisible. What is needed is the voice of the *younger sister* herself, without intermediaries or condescending interests, in order, as Kollontai writes, to realize a transformation and dissolution of class hierarchy:

For what reason, then, should the woman worker seek a union with the bourgeois feminists? Who, in actual fact, would stand to gain in the event of such an alliance? Certainly not the woman worker. She is her own savior; her future is in her own hands. The working woman guards her class interests and is not deceived by great speeches about the “world all women share.” The working woman must not and does not forget that while the aim of bourgeois women is to secure their own welfare in the framework of a society antagonistic to us, our aim is to build, in the place of the old, outdated world, a bright temple of universal labor, comradely solidarity and joyful freedom.⁷

How beautiful class difference looks when seen in black and white, and how beautiful are Cuarón’s bourgeois and democratic eyes in the fantasy of a new Mestizo nation. *Roma* is the inaugural film of the Mexican national discourse of the present regime, Andrés Manuel López Obrador’s Fourth Transformation (4T), a nostalgic regime that, though claiming the national, never ceases, nor will it ever

cease, being neoliberal populism, a token that perhaps could bring us closer to the North's inclusive feeling...

... Mexico, perhaps, is essentially more to the North than the South.

Part II The Mexican Beyond

Women aren't violent, women don't do such things, nor do they hide behind a piece of cloth that means death. Women love life and respect the family, and this will be heard throughout Mexico.

—Elsa Méndez, PAN lawmaker, August 19, 2019

Can the subaltern (as woman) speak?...
She writes with her body.

—Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

Last August 17, the statue of the Angel of Independence woke up surrounded. Above the wooden barricades could still be read a spray-painted "Femicide Mexico." The newspaper *Excelsior*, one of the country's most important print and digital media sources, published the following a few days before the march: "In the march called 'They don't protect me, they rape me,' several radical feminists vandalized different spots in Mexico City. As a protest against police accused of rape, some women also damaged the Angel of Independence. They set fire to it, painted the column, and destroyed the lawn, taking advantage of the lack of intervention by any element of the Secretariat of Citizen Security." In the days following the August 15 demonstration, the media and public opinion were very concerned about the *vandalized body* of the Angel of Independence, which had suddenly become the only female body the country wept over: the bronze body that paradoxically preserves in its interior the remains of several male heroes of Independence and only one woman, Leona Vicario.

We mourn and celebrate it and demand a mausoleum

The Angel of Independence is customarily a meeting point to celebrate whenever the Mexican soccer team wins, or some important team sport or other. There, men celebrate their team's victory, party, piss, and get drunk. The crowd leaves behind its trash and fluids, but that does not appear sufficiently important for public opinion. In the end, the macho football fan *is allowed to* vandalize the female body of the Angel of Independence. Thus, the bronze body, once coming alive or becoming animated—read according to the offense taken by the most conservative sector of public opinion—is continually transgressed and violated. It is only considered a crime when such actions are committed by women, since the penalty is far greater when a woman *violently* trespasses on the terrain of the patriarchy. The body of this statue, to which we have given the meaning of life, value, and security, the sacrosanct monument which has become a female essence which we can weep over and demand that all aggressions stop. In the end, it is a corpse/monument that we are allowed to see or weep over, unlike the majority of female bodies in Mexico that are disappeared on a daily basis.

What set off this march was the rape of a young girl by a group of police in the Azcapotzalco district of Mexico City, and the general disgust with corruption and the occlusion and neglect of the thousands of femicides taking place throughout the country. The first results a Google search turns up on the Colonia San Sebastián, where the crime occurred, shows the real-estate sales and prospects in the area, along with various images of murdered bodies—mostly male ones. To find what

I am feeling, I must make a more specific search: “Azcapotzalco femicides.” A crude combination of terms that lands me thousands of results, far more graphic than the murders contained within the criminal norm of the male body that appeared in the previous search. It seems that Google is playing a crooked game with me, since it doesn't show me what's been alarming the country for decades, and conceals from me the female body, which for quite some time has been under everyone's eyes.

The San Sebastián victim returned from the *Mexican Beyond* to tell her story, and fortunately her testimony could be leaked to the media. The majority do not return or are unable to tell their stories. It seems that a formula exists for creating the testimony/narrative of women in Mexico, the vulnerability of public space, the lack of infrastructure, the night defined as a state, which more than a phenomenological night is a *political* night. In Mexico, the political night facilitates the definitive disappearance of female bodies, which fogs the gaze of authorities that never were, a night that occurs any time of day and which is the faithful companion of the woman invisible to the Mexican state, the Mestiza and Indigenous woman. And finally, what I venture to define as the *Mexican Beyond*, a dimension that vulnerable women know to be an inherited concept, inherent to our condition. Our bodies develop knowing and at times hoping for something or someone to come from the *Mexican Beyond* who can eat us if things are going well for us, or else we return permanently damaged.

I believe I have the answer as to where our bodies are. I believe they are in that dimension of the

Mexican Beyond, an *obscurana*, which in this country, is suicide. Here, where under capital's cover thousands of bodies disappear, and if they reappear, or are *retaken back*, appear as phantasmagorias of normalization, of a ghost turned into a body: the body of the commodity/woman within the statist fog.

I am thinking of the warnings about capital and its multiple effects on bodies: the capital that inhabits the *Mexican Beyond* and which I might think created the gateway to that dimension. I am thinking of the economic-affective premonitions of Alexandra Kollontai, medium of the International, and I am able to read in these admonitions the effects that the regime that devolved into neoliberalism has had on female bodies. A fungus, a virus that has long sickened us and inserted itself like a master in sexual, family, and gender morality—all of which is traversed by an economic logic. I am also thinking, in parallel, of the declarations of the Zapatistxs; in their rhetoric, traversed by the landscape/body, which is one and the same, they are *the night and the mountain*. And I cannot stop thinking in parallelisms, and not necessarily because both texts hurl execrations. This comparison could be forced, or it could signify an entry into far too swampy terrain: a Western theory applied to female bodies, to which the translation of the center cannot be applied. And yet I am interested in exploring certain parallelisms—hopefully thinking them without verticality, even if this is impossible.

The participation of Zapatista women in daily struggles and in a collective system is fundamental to the construction of a communitarian life *outside* the economic regulation of capital's bodies and desires.

This means that the Zapatista women, as invisible subjects for the state, constructed their own control over machismo, sometimes as a group separate from men and other times together with them: a kind of opacity that protects and articulates another way of self-defense against patriarchy, without losing sight of the common goal. In February 2019, the Zapatista women issued their “Letter from Zapatista Women to Women in Struggle Around the World.” In their communiqués, the Zapatista women wrote as a group, as a single entity along with the landscape, the earth, and the night. This communiqué forms part of an activity that the Zapatistas have been conducting for a long time; writing as a “we” not only to continue wearing the mask that can be inhabited by any one of them, but to make their positions public to the world in their own voice.

The new bad governments have said clearly that they are going to carry forward the megaprojects of the big capitalists, including their Mayan Train, their plan for the Tehuantepec Isthmus, and their massive commercial tree farms. They have also said that they'll allow the mining companies to come in, as well as agribusiness. On top of that, their agrarian plan is wholly oriented toward destroying us as originary peoples by converting our lands into commodities and thus picking up what Carlos Salinas de Gortari started but couldn't finish because we stopped him with our uprising.

All of these are projects of destruction, no matter how they try to disguise them with lies, no matter how many times they multiply

their 30 million votes. The truth is that they are coming for everything now, coming full force against the originary peoples, their communities, lands, mountains, rivers, animals, plants, even their rocks. And they are not just going to try to destroy us Zapatista women, but all indigenous women—and all men for that matter, but here we're talking as and about women.⁸

A few weeks ago, I exited Metro Insurgentes and could see on the floor and on the walls the graffiti from that march that ended at the mausoleum of Avenida Reforma. However hard the government tried to erase them, the slogans remain, silently demanding justice. This essay aims to sketch a reading of Alexandra Kollontai's thought in present-day Mexico, a transhistorical game that, beyond comparison, seeks an empathy of thought.

1

Excerpted from Ana Victoria Jiménez and Francisca Reyes, *Sembradoras de futuros. Memoria de la Unión Nacional de Mujeres Mexicanas* (Mexico City: Editorial Unión Nacional de Mujeres Mexicanas, 2000), 13.

2

Biquini Wax EPS is an independent lab space located in Mexico City that holds exhibitions of contemporary art, poetry readings, and discussions about economics, philosophy, aesthetics, politics, art history, and other bio-alchemical invocations. Four hundred people, a turtle, and an extraterrestrial work as a team without being a collective, welcoming anyone who wishes to participate in our activities or propose a pata-historical sacrifice. <https://latinamericancaribbean.duke.edu/mexican-contemporary-and-interdependent-art-scene-biquini-wax-eps-temple-sub-critique-studies>.

3

A term Kollontai coined to refer to the position of the working-class woman with respect to the bourgeois woman.

4

Alexandra Kollontai, *The Social Basis of the Woman Question* (1909; pamphlet), in *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai*, trans. Alix Holt (London: Allison and Busby, 1977), available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollontai/1909/social-basis.htm>.

5

Alexandra Kollontai, "The Labour of Women in the Evolution of the Economy" (1921), in *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai*, trans. Alix Holt, available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollontai/1921/evolution.htm>.

6

Susana Vargas, "México: la pigmentocracia perfecta," *Horizontal*, June 2, 2015, <https://hr.adigital.mx/mexico-la-pigmentocracia-perfecta/>.

7

Kollontai, *The Social Basis of the Woman Question*.

8

Zapatista Women, "Letter from the Zapatista Women to Women Struggling Around the World," February 2019, <https://enlacezapatista.ezln.org.mx/2019/02/13/letter-from-the-zapatista-women-to-women-in-struggle-around-the-world>.



Film still from *If I Could Wish for Something*, by Dora García, digital film, 68', 2021. Original footage by Gisela Castillo, documenting the demonstrations during the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, November 25, 2020, Mexico City

Reconstructing feminist genealogies is a political gesture entailing the task of searching for the doubly dispersed traces of our ancestors, some of them transgressive women, others feminists.

—Alejandra Ciriza, *Constructing Feminist Genealogies from the South: Crossroads and Tensions*

One

Mexico City is a huge monster in which more than twenty million people live and move among its disorderly streets and avenues. Walking through it is not always a pleasant experience. You have to avoid potholes, dog shit, garbage, food stalls, dodge angry drivers who don't respect the traffic lights, and possess a sixth sense and an infinite memory in order to navigate its streets. But for women, the level of difficulty is even greater, because the public space we inhabit is not the same one men inhabit.

Our life in the city is accompanied by a feeling of unease and permanent vulnerability, caused by the fear of being assaulted and even murdered at any moment. In this regard, we Mexican women are accustomed to adapt our lives and the ways in which we move about the city on the basis of this fear, whether by changing the clothes we wear in order to board public transportation, calling "safe" taxis at night, or always avoiding walking alone in isolated spots. For us, going out into the public space is a risk, a risk that increases the lower our socioeconomic level is. Every day, when we read the news and testimonies on social networks, it seems there is no security for us anywhere, that those few spaces where we thought we had it are shrinking,

160 If You Touch One of Us, We Women Will All Respond

(Si tocan a una,
respondemos todas)

Carla Lamoyi

and the state and its institutions are prevented from providing it to us. They are complicit in their inaction, or worse, they are the ones perpetrating violence. I was unaware of the fear I was living under until I moved to Buenos Aires. I arrived in this city in 2017, shortly after the march on the 8th of March, International Women's Day. In the place I went to study, my classmates talked of a "women's strike," a march that had brought together women workers and students from various sectors under the following slogan: "Women will halt our consumption, domestic labor, and caring work, paid labor and our studies, to show that without us nothing is produced, and without us nothing is reproduced."¹ Until that moment, the 8th of March was for me a date on the level of Mother's Day, on which you were congratulated for having been born a woman and given flowers in restaurants. The following year, after familiarizing myself with the political demands of the feminist movement "Ni Una Menos" (Not One Woman Less) and the beginning of the debates over legal abortion in Argentina, I went for the first time to a march on the 8th of March. The yells, the drums, the thousands of angry and joyous girls, wearing pink brilliantine makeup and green scarves, dancing and occupying the streets, profoundly impacted and moved me. This was no meaningless celebration, but a moment to demonstrate politically for our rights.

I returned to Mexico at the end of 2018, with my confidence in the sisterhood of women renewed, a decision never to return to a fearful life and to seek out ways of finding different personal and collective strategies to do this. Indifference was no longer an option in a country where in the last ten years more than 23,000 women have been murdered, and my

wish was to participate in the actions of the feminist movement that had in recent years developed with strength in Mexico and all of Latin America.

Through friends and through coincidences, in March of this year I was invited to take part in an investigation of the socialist, feminist, and diplomat Alexandra Kollontai (1872–1952), who from 1899 onward was involved in the struggle for women's rights in Russia, and was the USSR Ambassador to Mexico from 1926 to 1927.² I was charged with tracking down her possible influences on the Mexican feminist movement. It was a perfect pretext to explore the ground beneath my feet, to understand which mobilizations of the past had permeated the struggles of the present.

Two

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Alexandra Kollontai expressed the need for a socialist feminism. Thanks to her participation in the workers' movement and her contact with feminist thought—which she considered to be bourgeois, since it sought equality between men and women, without questioning class privileges—Kollontai proposed to the Russian Social Democratic Workers Party the "need for agitational work among women workers to attract them to socialism, offering answers to their gendered problems from a class perspective."³ For her, work and political participation in the public sphere were fundamental issues in women's emancipation. Reading various articles and texts, I realized that Alexandra Kollontai's ideas on celebrating the 8th of March, and how it inspired her to introduce a

series of democratic measures to improve the living conditions of women in the newly-formed USSR, such as the legalization of abortion, were the precursors to the “women’s strike” and “green tide” I had lived through in Argentina.

In March 1920, Alexandra Kollontai wrote a text for a pamphlet celebrating International Working Women’s Day, currently celebrated on March 8. It originated as a socialist celebration promoted by the German Marxist theorist Clara Zetkin at the Second International Conference of Socialist Women (Copenhagen, 1910), and was first realized on March 19, 1911, in Germany and Austria, and in Russia on March 3, 1913. It aimed to include women in political participation, and the right to vote, along with promoting the solidarity of socialist women on a global level. Kollontai wrote about the date: “This was certainly the first show of militancy by the working woman. Men stayed at home with their children for a change, and their wives, the captive housewives, went to meetings.”⁴

In this pamphlet, she states that during the 1917 February Revolution (which coincided with the commemoration of the Day of the Working Woman, because of the discrepancy between the Gregorian and the Julian calendar, used during the czarist era), thousands of women went into the streets. According to the text, this demonstration contributed to Czar Nicholas II’s abdication and the end of the Russian empire. This revolt had a precursor in the participation of women in the January 22, 1905 march to the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg, during which there was a confrontation with the Czarist Imperial Guard where many women lost their lives.⁵ Both protests

were watersheds, as much for the socialist struggle as for the emancipation of women, occupying public space as a platform for demanding rights.

Following the triumph of the socialist revolution in October 1917, Kollontai was named People’s Commissar for Social Welfare, as the only woman in Lenin’s cabinet, a position from which she proposed a series of democratic measures that were implemented by the Bolshevik government to improve women’s working conditions. These improvements included the woman worker’s removal from any labor that could affect her health during pregnancy, maternity leave of eight weeks before and after giving birth, breastfeeding breaks at work, rest spaces inside the factory, as well as the creation of nurseries and crèches.⁶ Another such initiative was the November 10, 1920 approval by the Soviet of People’s Commissars of the decree of “interruption of pregnancy,”⁷ which made the USSR the first nation to legalize abortion and provide it free of charge to any woman who wanted it, in state hospitals.

One of the reasons for promulgating this decree was the immense danger for health that clandestine abortions entailed. Criminalizing abortion increased this risk and represented a social and public-health problem; therefore, the state was obliged to offer the service in a safe manner.

As a whole, the aforementioned laws for the creation of better working and living conditions for women workers were motivated by a paternalist and protectionist state perception of women’s bodies, not by a belief in women’s bodily autonomy: “The decree refers to abortion as an ‘evil’ ... and to the

need to fight this even through massive propaganda against abortion. Thus, although this law agreed to ‘allow this type of operation to be practiced freely and without charge in Soviet hospitals,’ it also expressed the government’s intention to struggle against this phenomenon by means of family planning.”⁸ Despite this contradiction, this law represented an advance in civil rights, marking a watershed in women’s and feminists’ movements in various places in the world. Since 2017 in Latin America and the Caribbean, the 8th of March has recovered its political dimension. Once again, it is a moment to cry out our sense of urgency everywhere, particularly where control over our bodies is concerned, and along with that, legal, free, and safe abortion on demand.

Three

Both Alexandra Kollontai and these significant experiences marked the point of departure for investigating feminist movements in Mexico. The goal was to tease out the influence of her thought on the genealogy of some Mexican women’s groups, thinkers, and activists. Kollontai’s texts began to be published in Spanish at the end of the 1920s (Argentina, Spain) and were reprinted with great success during the 1960s, when they achieved a larger circulation in Mexico. That was when many feminist and/or communist women had access to these writings, debating them in their meetings.

I began with the easiest part: contacting through e-mail the artist Mónica Mayer, whom I had met years before while I was doing my social service in the Museo Ex Teresa Arte Actual, and where I had

the opportunity to assist her in archival research on feminist performance in Mexico. She was my point of reference for the local feminism of the 1980s, since at university I had seen video recordings of the performance of Polvo de Gallina Negra (Black Hen Powder), Mexico’s first feminist art group, formed in 1983 by Mónica Mayer and Maris Bustamante.

I met with her one April morning in 2019, when I got to know her house, where she has the archive of *Pinto mi Raya* (I Draw My Line)⁹ and her library. We spoke about her brief passage through the 1970s-feminist movement. Mónica had read only one book by Kollontai during that period, *Love of Worker Bees*, which beyond having a direct impact on her thought along with many other feminist readings of the period, acted as a sediment for her artistic practice. Then she put me in touch with Ana Victoria Jiménez, a feminist and a very good friend of hers who was an editor, activist, photographer, and creator of the Archivo del Movimiento Feminista de 1964 a 1990, an archive that was donated to the Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavigero of the Universidad Iberoamericana in 2011, where it currently can be consulted. Mónica was sure that Ana Victoria could shed some light on Kollontai’s possible influence in Mexico, since she had been part of a Mexican communist organization and had traveled to Russia on several occasions during the socialist era.

I went home, stirred by this new lead, and sent a letter to Ana Victoria, who answered a few days later. We agreed to see each other on April 20, 2019, in her house located in Mexico City’s Colonia Moderna. I went to the street and number indicated: blue walls and black gate. I rang the bell and a

diminutive woman old enough to be my grandmother opened. She was friendly and warm, and from the start she inspired confidence. My letter had piqued her interest, so she began to search her archive to see if there was any document about Kollontai in her archive. She then found the *International Women's Day* pamphlet written by Kollontai and published in English in the United States in 1974.

When I asked Ana Victoria if she had read Kollontai when she was young, she told me that she had only read *The New Woman and Sexual Morality*, where Kollontai theorized about sexuality, and that she had been more interested in the work of Anaïs Nin, Clara Zetkin, Simone de Beauvoir, and Emma Goldman, anarchist and pioneer in the struggle for birth control. After this first chat, we agreed to go together to the Universidad Iberoamericana and visit her archives.

Ana Victoria Jiménez was born in Mexico City in 1941 and studied graphic arts in the Sindicato de Pintores, Escultores y Artistas Gráficos de México and photography in a technical school. Her first job was as a typesetter in a print shop, and later as an editor and photographer. The events that marked the beginning of her militancy were the triumph of the Cuban Revolution in 1959 and the formation of the Unión Nacional de Mujeres Mexicanas (UNMM; National Union of Mexican Women) on October 11, 1964, an organization itself inspired by the Cuban Women's Federation. The goals of the Unión, an openly communist group, was to forge a coalition among the broadest sectors of women, to promote their rights, and to solve urgent problems like affordable housing and child protection.¹⁰ The young Ana Victoria, who belonged to the

Juventud Comunista (Communist Youth), was invited to participate in this organization from the beginning, and was part of its directorship with the founders Adelina Zendejas, Marta Bojórquez, Eulalia Guzmán, and its first president, Clementina Batalla de Bassols. Many of the Unión's members were wives, girlfriends, sisters, or mothers of the men of the Partido Comunista Mexicano (PCM; Mexican Communist Party), formed in 1919. Like Alexandra Kollontai, la UNMM distanced itself from feminist ideas, since it seemed to them that such ideas retained a bourgeois character, emphasized the struggle between genders, and did not recognize that the "woman problem" was also a class problem.

The UNMM identified itself as a movement of women that aimed to create solidarity campaigns and solutions to the daily lives of Mexican women. In this respect, the organization's work was very similar to what Kollontai proposed to achieve during her short term as People's Commissar for Social Welfare. Within its first four years as an organization, the Unión put forth the project of a Federal Labor Law regarding childcare centers, contributed to the construction of the Frente Nacional por la Infancia (National Front for Childhood), and convened an Asamblea Nacional de Mujeres Campesinas (National Assembly of Peasant Women). It also demanded landholdings for women and just wages for members of rural working families."¹¹

As part of the UNMM, Ana Victoria was in charge of the committee for press and propaganda. Thanks to this and her fascination with photography, she began documenting hundreds of marches and events related to the struggle for women's rights, kept notes,

posters, leaflets, and a bibliography, which made up a large part of her immense archive, where there is an entire section dedicated to the UNMM. In this section, I found photographs of her participation in the Reunión de Mujeres, México, Centroamérica y el Caribe (Women's Meeting, Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean) in 1961 (FIG. 1), a precursor to other women's organizations, at which were discussed topics like women's tasks, the participation of women in the Agrarian Reform and the development of agriculture, the defense and extension of the rights of mothers and children, national independence, and the sovereignty of our peoples.¹² I also found images from the Congress of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) held in Helsinki, Finland, in 1969 (FIG. 2); the International Meeting of Communist and Workers Parties in Moscow organized by the Communist Workers Party in 1966, where the critic and art historian Raquel Tibol represented the UNMM (FIG. 3); and a gathering of women from the WIDF in 1970 (FIG. 4), as well as the posters of the 1963 World Congress of Women in Moscow (FIG. 5), and the declaration issued for March 8, 1964 (FIG. 6).



FIG. 1. Reunión de Mujeres, México, Centroamérica y el Caribe, 1961. AVJ - 1449; figs. 1-12 reproduced with the kind permission of the Archivo del Movimiento Feminista de 1964 a 1990 by Ana Victoria Jiménez, Biblioteca Francisco Xavier Clavigero, Universidad Iberoamericana, Mexico City



FIG. 2. The Congress of the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF), Helsinki, 1969. AVJ - 0001



FIG. 3. The International Meeting of the Communist and Workers Parties, organized by the Communist Workers Party, in Moscow, 1966. AVJ - 0004

FIG. 4. A gathering of women from the Women's International Democratic Federation (WIDF) in 1970. AVJ - 0017





FIG. 5. Poster of the 1963 World Congress of Women in Moscow. AVJ - 4562

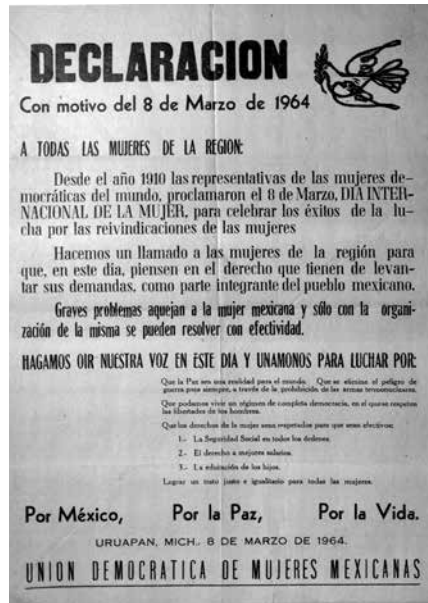


FIG. 6. A declaration issued for March 8, 1964. Poster. AVJ - 4555

Notwithstanding that initially the women's movement went hand in hand with communism in Mexico, it separated in the 1970s and followed an independent path, due to tensions and exasperation with machismo, dismissiveness, and ridicule on the part of their male colleagues; just as occurred with Kollontai in the first years of the USSR, especially where her ideas about the new sexual morality were concerned. From that moment on, Ana Victoria drew closer to recently formed feminist organizations, abandoned the Communist Party, and distanced herself from the UNMM.

In 1970, Martha Acevedo wrote "Las mujeres luchan por su liberación. Nuestro sueño está en escarpado lugar" (Women Fighting for Their Liberation: Our Dream Is in a Steep Place), a text that marked the second wave of the feminist movement in Mexico, which had begun with the twentieth century. A year later, she, along with Antonieta Rascón, Elena Poniatowska, and Antonieta Zapiain, founded the first self-identified feminist group: Mujeres en Acción Solidaria (MAS; Women in Solidary Action). In its first action, MAS carried out a demonstration on May 10 in front of the Monument to the Mother in Mexico City, protesting the patriarchal imaginary created in Mexico around the figure of the mother. The Mexican Mother's Day was promoted by the newspaper *Excelsior* (as a copy of the US holiday) and formalized in 1922 as a counter to feminism and advances in contraceptive methods, which destabilized the traditional family structure and questioned state and Catholic Church control over women's bodies.¹³

Within the archive, I was able to see photographs of this first march and several others carried out for legalized abortion and protection of women, like the protests

organized by the Coalición de Mujeres Feministas: one for the decriminalization of abortion held in front of the former Chamber of Deputies in 1977 (FIG. 7), and another against the Miss Universe competition in July 1978 (FIG. 8). There also appeared images of the pro-abortion demonstration at the Monument to the Mother and in the Hemiciclo a Juárez on May 10, 1981, carried out by the Frente Nacional por la Liberación y Derechos de la Mujer (FNALIDM; the National Front for the Liberation and Rights of Women), which was the first unified coalition of feminist groups, unions and groups of lesbians, and left-wing parties (FIG. 9). The archive also contained the project of the Law of Voluntary Maternity, presented on December 29, 1979, by the FNALIDM and the Coalición Feminista de Mujeres (Feminist Women's Coalition) to the group of Federal deputies that made up the Left Coalition (FIG. 10, FIG. 11). Finally, I found photographs from the march "Yo he abortado" (I Had an Abortion), called for January 13, 1991, by the Frente Nacional por la Maternidad Voluntaria y la Despenalización del Aborto (FNMVDA; National Front for Voluntary Maternity and the Decriminalization of Abortion), where I recognized Mónica Mayer and Maris Bustamante protesting with puppets and disguises (FIG. 12).



FIG. 7. A protest for the decriminalization of abortion in front of the former Chamber of Deputies in Mexico City, 1977.

AVJ - 0625



FIG. 8. A protest against the Miss Universe competition, outside of Mexico City's National Auditorium in July 1978. AVJ - 0161



FIG. 9. A pro-abortion demonstration at the Monumento a la Madre (Monument to the Mother) and at the Hemiciclo a Juárez, May 10, 1981; carried out by the Frente Nacional de la Liberación y Derechos de la Mujer (FNALIDM). AVJ - 1264

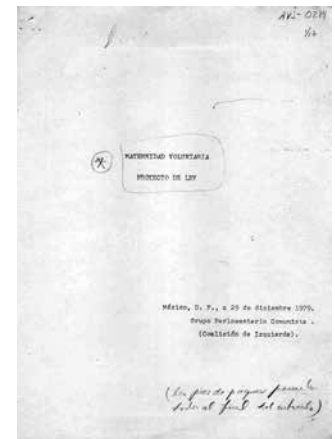


FIG. 10. Front page of a folder holding documents of the legislative proposal entitled Maternidad Voluntaria (Voluntary Maternity), presented on December 29, 1979 by the FNALIDM and the Coalición Feminista de Mujeres. AVJ - 0214 (1-17)

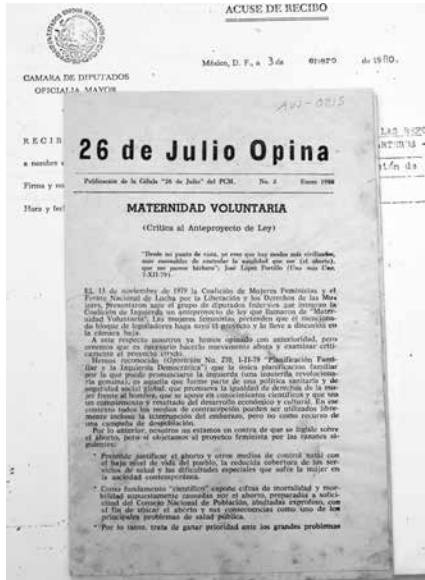


FIG. 11. Official confirmation of the reception by the Chamber of Deputies of a criticism (because of class issues) to the legislative proposal on Voluntary Maternity, January 1980, presented by the "July 26th" cell of the Mexican Communist Party. AVJ - 0215



FIG. 12. A protest themed "Yo he abortado" (I Had an Abortion), summoned by the Frente Nacional por la Maternidad Voluntaria y la Despenalización del Aborto (FNMVDA), January 13, 1991. Activists Mónica Mayer and Maris Bustamante can be seen in this image. AVJ n/n

When one observes photographs of the past, one tends to compare them visually with the present, looking for the similarities and transformations that have occurred with the passage of time. In 2007, the decriminalization of abortion was achieved in Mexico City, after more than seventy years of struggle and thanks to the political alliance of several feminists with the left-wing government of the Partido de la Revolución Democrática (PRD; Party of the Democratic Revolution). What is surprising is that the slogans in the marches of that time were the same ones I chant now: "Free abortion on demand"; "Contraceptives so as not to abort, abortion on demand so as not to die"; "We are not a commodity"; "Neither a decorative object nor a suffering self-denying mother"; "We're fed up with sexist manipulation that denies us as thinking beings"; "Woman, nobody has the right to mistreat you. Denounce him!"; "No more violence against women." The photographs connected me by a transparent thread to all those women who had demonstrated in the streets in other times. A story that was my own.

When the visit was over, on the way back to the city from Santa Fe, I asked Ana Victoria why she had in 1990 ceased documenting feminist marches and events, to which she responded that it was because of exhaustion, the feeling that her resources were exhausted. Currently, she continues to edit books about women, working with the Universidad Iberoamericana on cataloging her archive and collaborating with some women students interested in these documents. Recently, on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of Suzanne Lacy's performance *International Dinner Party*,¹⁴ the young art historian Mónica Lindsay-Pérez organized during February

and March 2019, in the Wadham College antechapel in Oxford, England, an exhibition that sought to call attention to the feminist struggle in Mexico through a selection from Ana Victoria Jiménez's archive. This exhibition puts these photos into circulation and makes visible the antecedents of the continuing fight.

Four

It was also thanks to Mónica Mayer that I went to the Archivo Histórico del Movimiento de Lesbianas-Feministas en México 1976–2020, created by Yan María Yaoyólotl. In Mayer's 1999 text "De la vida y el arte como feminista" ("On Life and Art as a Feminist"), she relates that in 1996 Yan was part of Coyolxauhqui Articulada, the first group of lesbian feminist artists in Mexico. While searching the Internet, I found Yan's blog, which in one of its entries spoke about the actions carried out during the 1980s by socialist lesbian feminists. I contacted her immediately.

The day I went to interview her, along with the artist Paloma Contreras Lomas, we arrived half an hour late, which in Mexico is common, indeed normal. We knocked on the door and a woman opened who seemed to have lived many lives. She was angry, with good reason. She let us in, but not before she had told us, "No revolutionary should arrive late, because if you arrive late, they kill you." Frightened, we entered her apartment, which was crammed with shelves of files. Yan María was literally living in her archive; domesticity had become secondary, diluted by the classification of the different lesbian feminist movements in Mexico. At the entrance, a

sword was hanging from the wall, and a manual of daily tasks, displaying the activist's discipline. Before interviewing her, she made us pray to a Buddhist image and ask the archive's permission. We were very nervous and didn't dare say anything, but little by little, Yan María began to relax, and so did we.

Yan María Yaoyólotl Castro, born in Mexico City in 1952, is a militant and important activist in the lesbian feminist movement that began in the mid-1970s in Mexico within the framework of the Mexican left, the feminist movement, and the Movimiento Amplio de Mujeres (MAM; Large Movement of Women).

Throughout her life, Yaoyólotl has been part of different artistic and activist collectives, and co-founded the first lesbian groups to exist in Mexico: Ácratas (1976), Lesbos (1977), and Oikabeth (1978). Although each of these groups had a different origin and character, the aim of the lesbian feminist movement was and remains the abolition of the patriarchal system in order to construct a non-oppressive society. Along with questioning class privileges and involving themselves in the struggle of other oppressed groups (movements of workers, peasants, migrants, Indigenous people, popular sectors, the unemployed, etc.), these activists began debating sexuality within the feminist movement, questioning traditional family structures like marriage, monogamy, and compulsory heterosexuality. In this regard, the position of the lesbian feminists can be understood as a radicalization of Kollontai's feminist thought and the idea of the "new woman" in which she would be sentimentally and economically independent and would therefore be in the vanguard of society.

For Yan María, one of the most significant groups she participated in was Oikabeth: the socialist-oriented lesbian organization she founded in 1978 with Luz María Medina y Adrianita R. The name “Oikabeth” is an acronym for *Olin Ikispan Katuntah Bebezah Thoth*, which according to her understanding means in Maya “Movement of warrior women who open the path and scatter flowers.” Yan María told us that the members read and discussed a series of books and authors important for socialist thought, among them Marx’s *Capital*, Rosa Luxemburg’s *Reform or Revolution*, Wilhelm Reich’s *The Sexual Revolution*, Eva Figes’s *Patriarchal Attitudes*, and Alexandra Kollontai’s *The New Woman and Sexual Morality*, along with authors who were part of the feminism of the second half of the 1960s in the United States, like Kate Millett, Zillah Eisenstein, Margaret Randall, and Evelyn Reed. These texts reached them in Mexico through photocopies of translations from Spain and by North American Chicanas with whom the lesbian feminists maintained a network of communication and support.

Oikabeth participated in the first Gay Pride marches in Mexico, held in 1979 and 1980, a moment when lesbians publicly demonstrated for the first time as a political movement in the context of a Catholic country where homosexuality was considered a sickness, and where many of them were rejected by their families, forced to marry, or subjected to psychiatric treatment. During these marches, political and symbolic actions were carried out, like the burning of the United States flag. In the archive, I was able to read a pamphlet distributed during the protests by Oikabeth in which the organization’s political and identity-based principles were expressed, explaining

their understanding of lesbianism and how they fit within the socialist struggle.

The group dissolved in 1982, but Yan María continued to participate as an individual with various organizations in demonstrations for the social rights of groups of workers, collaborating with publications and gatherings of lesbian feminists in Latin America and the Caribbean. As part of her political participation, Yan María believes in the importance of carrying out “grassroots work” or agitation, with working women from different sectors and classes, in order to tackle violence-related problems and make them aware of their rights, just as Kollontai had done with washerwomen and other working women in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century.

In 1985, Yan María Yaoyólotl was part of a group called the Seminario Marxista-Leninista Feminista de Lesbianas (Seminar of Marxist-Leninist Lesbian Feminists). On September 19 of that year, an earthquake in Mexico City measuring 8.1 on the Richter scale destroyed more than two thousand buildings, among them several clothing and costume factories located near the city center. More than 4,000 seamstresses were left without work, and it is estimated that between 600 and 1,600 women workers died.¹⁵ Many of these women were subcontracted and exploited by the factory owners, who began removing the machines with no concern for the death of their employees, without compensating them or paying them for what they had earned during the work week.

The lesbian feminist group approached sixty seamstresses from the Dimensión Welds factory

to help them organize and discuss the possibilities of occupying one of the demolished factories and thereby getting the wages owed to them, along with the machinery that was still in the workshops.¹⁶ Thanks to this support, the Sindicato Nacional de trabajadoras de la industria de la Costura, Confección, Vestido, Similares y Conexos “19 de Septiembre” (National Union of Women Workers in the Industry of Sewing, Dressmaking, Clothing, Knockoffs, and Samples “September 19th”), was formed, which fought for the rights of the seamstresses affected by the earthquake. Despite this, little is known of the participation and impact of the lesbian feminists’ work on this issue and its contributions to the union’s struggle.

Yan María thinks there is a tendency to negate history, changing it into petrified historical data without any relevance to the present. For her, the construction of her archive is a way of resisting and constructing another version of history. Throughout the years, Yan has looked for different ways of socializing her archive and disseminating her political ideals through exhibitions and the continuous contact with young feminists like the group Rosas Rojas (Red Roses).

Rosas Rojas is a socialist feminist collective of young university students that emerged in 2009 as a space for women belonging to the Grupo de Acción Revolucionaria (Revolutionary Action Group), formed in 2006. In its first meetings, it was decided to call the group Rosas Rojas in homage to the thirteen young socialists murdered in Madrid in 1939 during the Francoist dictatorship. Currently, the group’s principal leaders are Shajin Corona (b. 1990,

Mexico City), Magalí Terraza (b. 1995, State of Mexico), and Atzin Balderas (b. 1989, Oaxaca), and its membership consists of around twenty women. It organizes study circles, mobilizations, assemblies, open meetings, forums on different topics, and cultural festivals within the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), but also elsewhere, with trade unions and different communities in the state of Guerrero.

Some months following this first visit, Yan María invited us to the screening of the short film *Un Amor en Rebeldía* (A Rebellious Love) by the director Tania Castillo, organized by Rosas Rojas, and later put us in contact with the group. On Tuesday, August 26, Paloma and I met with Shajin, Magalí, and Atzin.

For Rosas Rojas, it was in the 1990s and 2000s that feminism became institutionalized and deprived of its social, militant character, through the promotion of the perspective and diversity of gender on the part of the state and the creation of programs of gender studies in different universities, to which workers, housewives, and Indigenous women did not have access. They have been criticized for these positions, since they can be considered biologist or transphobic. They believe that socialist feminism is necessary in the present moment, since on the personal level it enables the questioning of macho, classist perspectives that have been introjected into us. And on a social level, they demand the construction of a new economic, political, and cultural system in Mexico that would end oppression and transform the condition of working-class women and men, which now not only includes salaried employees of state and private enterprises, but all

the forms of work and exploitation that continue capitalist logic. They also argue that at present there exists a patriarchy/capitalism binomial, which on the one hand promotes the sexual freedom and empowerment of women and greater consumption, but which, on the other, has increased violence toward women, with phenomena like sex trafficking and prostitution.

In September 2018, Rosas Rojas presented a citizens' legislative initiative to obtain legal, safe, and free abortion throughout Mexico. Its goal is to promote the law from below and seek a process of socialization and discussion of this topic.

For a woman in Mexico, occupying public space is a political position. The important thing is to go out in the streets and not to fear doing so because "fear of risk does not lessen the risk." To seize hold of the spaces that are denied us, through marches, occupations, and artistic and symbolic actions, is a way of disrupting society and the state to make visible the fact that the situation of violence against women in this country is unbearable, and to demand control over our bodies. In Kollontai's words, as paraphrased by Magali, "every social construct can be transformed, raising our level of consciousness and our organized collective strength, educating ourselves politically and going into the streets together to change this reality."

In March 2019, I went to the International Women's Day march in Mexico City. Recalling the first women's march I attended in Argentina, it was very moving for me to feel that the struggle was one and the same. Perhaps the best example of this was

the sign on the green scarf repurposed by Mexican women for this march; it now depicts two clasped hands, symbolizing that this question, like many others, unites us as women and crosses classes, borders, and nationalities.

This internationalization, supported by Latin American women uniting their different struggles, is, I believe, the great contribution of Alexandra Kollontai and socialist feminists: the Marxist belief that in order for genuine change to happen, all societies must be shaken up, and that the liberation of women in one latitude is a step toward the liberation of all women.

1

"Paro Internacional de Mujeres: cuándo surgió y por qué Argentina tiene un rol central," *El Clarín*, March 3, 2018, https://www.clarin.com/entremujeres/genero/paro-mujeres-paro-internacional-mujeres-8m_0_H1MEblPuz.html.

2

Rina Ortiz, *Alexandra Kollontai en México. Diario y otros documentos* (Xalapa, Mexico: Universidad Veracruzana, 2012).

3

Rina Ortiz, "Del ensayo sociopolítico al relato literario: 'la cuestión femenina' en los trabajos de Alexandra Kollontai (1908–1923)," in *La osadía se viste de mujer*, ed. Fernanda Núñez and Rina Ortiz (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2019), 3.

4

Alexandra Kollontai, *International Women's Day*, originally published as a pamphlet in March 1920, trans. Alix Holt; available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1920/womens-day.htm>.

5

Vashna Jagarnath, "The Russian Revolution: A Reflection on the Role of Women Revolutionaries," *The Conversation*, October 8, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/the-russian-revolution-a-reflection-on-the-role-of-women-revolutionaries-85118>.

6

Cintia Frencia and Daniel Gaido, "Los orígenes del decreto soviético de legalización del aborto (1920)," *Anuario de la Escuela de Historia Virtual*, year 9, no. 14 (2018): 26–52.

7

The push for this law is one of the initiatives that has also been credited to Kollontai and her work in working-class women's organizations, despite her resignation from her political post when this decree was approved. In June 1920, along with other notable Bolshevik leaders like Vera Lebedeva, Inessa Armand, Nadezhda Krupskaya, Olga Kameneva, and Vera Golubeva, Kollontai had participated in a series of meetings organized to discuss the question of abortion. [Note by Dora García: During our trip to Moscow in October 2019, we found a handwritten note in one of the files requested from RGASPI, the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, in which Kollontai speaks of the joy with which the decriminalization of abortion was received by the women comrades, and that Lenin shared this joy. See Dora García, *Love with Obstacles*, 60, 2020, at 55'40'']

8

Frenia and Gaido, "Los orígenes del decreto soviético," 36.

9

A project preserving various notes and articles on Mexican art since 1991, created by Mónica Mayer and her partner Víctor Lerma.

10

Ana Lau Jaiven, "La Unión Nacional de Mujeres Mexicanas entre el comunismo y el feminismo: una difícil relación," *Revista de Estudios de Género, La Ventana*, no. 40 (2014): 165–85, <http://scielo.org.mx/pdf/laven/v5n40/v5n40a7.pdf>.

11

Delia Selene de Dios Vallejo and María Esther Navarro Lara, "El feminismo como movimiento social," in *Perspectiva de género*, ed. Julia del Carmen Chávez Carapia (Mexico City: UNAM/Plaza Valdés, 2004), 38.

12

Mónica Lindsay-Pérez, *Mexican Feminism in Protest: The Photography of Ana Victoria Jiménez* (Mexico, 2019), video, 23 min., available at <https://youtu.be/l4JCDZkgMcg>.

13

Amor Teresa Gutiérrez Sánchez, "El 10 de Mayo 'Día de la Madre' en México o de Cómo Imponer un Modelo de Maternidad," *Revista Xihmai*, no. 23 (January–June 2017): 45–60.

14

On March 14, 1969, *International Dinner Party* was held, consisting of a performance created by Suzanne Lacy, in the framework of an exhibition of the artist Judy Chicago's *Dinner Party*. The goal of the performance was to invite groups of women in different parts of the world to hold dinners on that day and send the photographic documentation of these events via telegrams. Ana Victoria Jiménez put together the Mexican Dinner Party and took the photograph that was sent as part of the performance and that can also be found in the archive.

15

Marta Lamas, "El movimiento de las costureras: Notas para una reflexión feminista," *Revista Fem* 10, no. 45 (May 1986): 4–10.

16

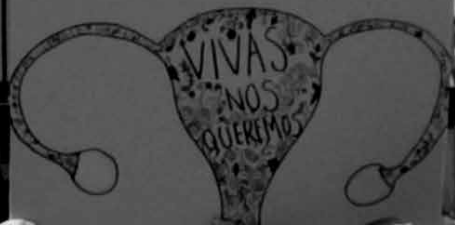
"Una expresión lésbica en el movimiento proletario" (1985), Yan María Yaoyólotl (blog), Saturday, January 4, 2014, <http://yanmaria-yaoyolotl.blogspot.com/2014/01/ahdmdlfemex-19762013.html>.



ESTE CUERPO ES MIO

Y

NO SE TOCA
NO SE VIOLA
NO SE MATA



¡Eduquemos
A NO
violar
No a cómo
protegerse
de una violación
Ni una menos

¡No hay Marchamos porque:

- Mujeres sin derechos
- Necesitamos mejores leyes para proteger
- Nos acosan, nos juegan, nos colorean, nos incitan.

¡QUEREMOS RESPETO!

JUDITH
ERIKA
DANIELA

Film still from *If I Could Wish for Something*, by Dora García, digital film, 68', 2021. Original footage by Esthel Vogrig, documenting the demonstrations during International Women's Day, March 8, 2019, Mexico City

190 **Flagrant Testimonies**

Andrea Valdés

... because a woman who writes has power.
And a woman with power is feared.

—Gloria Anzaldúa

I have in front of me a portrait of the Italian writer Carla Lonzi, who appears in full figure, seated and in profile before a rectangular apparatus: a reel-to-reel tape recorder that takes up a lot of space, like much of the portable technology at that time. Everything in the image indicates that she is listening to it because she appears quite absorbed. Indeed, her gesture reminds me of a student in the middle of a dictation: while she holds a pen in one hand, she leans her head on the other, distant from the portraitist, who in this case was her partner, the sculptor Pietro Consagra. This photo is among those appearing in *Autoritratto*, a book that marked her farewell to the art world, having been a curator and critic for several years, during which she made extremely creative use of transcription. Let us say that in reproducing what other artists said, she was dedicated to depicting her own voice. At a given moment, she even alludes to this process, as if she were painting on a canvas:

What personally attracts me to recording?
It is a simple elementary fact: the ability to transform sounds into markings, into writing, to find a page that isn't a written page, but it's a page that ... In the end, it's like a chemical process, when there's condensation ... that from the sound it condenses into a sign, just like gas turns into liquid. I like this very much, I couldn't tell you why ... and I like to be able to read something that's different from the usual

things you read that are always products of cerebral efforts, which by now are so tiring just to think of.¹

Note that Lonzi herself is transcribing this statement: she listens to herself in the act of conversing with others. She spoke of her book as a “maieutic banquet,” and we may say something similar about the meetings of Rivolta Femminile, a collective she founded in 1970 with the artist Carla Accardi and the journalist Elvira Banotti, and which spread across Italy through consciousness-raising groups. The word “maieutic” stems from the Greek *μαιευτικός*, which means “to attend a birth,” but also designated the Socratic method, which as we know involves directing interlocutors by means of a series of questions to lead them to knowledge, to give birth. Analogously, in Rivolta Femminile the hope was for women to open themselves up, surrendering and taking the floor, without having to identify themselves or seek anyone’s approval. Lonzi is speaking in terms of resonance.

Unfortunately, there is no extant recording of these meetings. If we know about Rivolta Femminile today, it is thanks to its publishing arm Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, which was created to confer unity on and consolidate the project, though at the beginning this generated tensions, because not everyone saw themselves as capable of recording their experiences. For some it was tortuous to write them down in first-person format, or they preferred to do this with more visual languages like photography and video. This was not the case with Lonzi, who was always in favor of naming things—or at least to try—when she understood that this difficulty was part of

the evolution of each. In this regard, it is interesting to learn of her reaction to Carla Accardi when the latter spoke of the possibility of recording herself on video. According to her diary:

In front of the movie camera, I had the same complex as when I was in front of a still camera or a car. They are expensive mechanical objects whose use, as distinct from paper and pen, costs money. In the past, I was disappointed when my father refused to buy me a piano, and more unjustifiably, a spindle I’d been dreaming of. I wanted to spin the wool that the sheep left on the bushes, when we moved to the countryside during the evacuation, so I could make a pair of slippers. I never wanted to have a bicycle, never mind a car. I got my first typewriter from a friend who worked at Olivetti. A few years ago, to my complete indifference, Simone bought a good still camera and an excellent movie camera and more recently a stereo multitrack tape recorder... But I bought nothing; I remained tied to the media I was used to using when I was poor and those other tools gave me a complex. Sara got me out of this predicament, explaining to me how much color film cost, using it with moderation but without fear, and making me understand that she would love me to film her on several occasions. Immediately I unblocked myself and felt that since I was new to this medium, I could likewise express new sensations. I’d been doing it forever through writing when none of this was on my horizon, and now, in full flowering, I’m beginning to understand the attention I paid to

the hundreds of images, of myself and artists, I added to *Autoritratto*.²

What interests me most about this fragment is her initial resistance, that is, the way she captures a woman's insecurity with specific tools that have been considered the domain of men, like cars or any minimally sophisticated machine. Most of the time, their operation requires of us an apprenticeship, but also a negotiation with the context in which it is inserted. And what is a theoretical problem when you are working in a medium to which you have not been invited and where you are considered foreign? As we know, video cameras helped to change this in that they were a flexible, low-cost technology, thus within reach of many, and circulated in less conventional circuits than television or film. Concretely, it impelled feminists to explore other languages and acquire greater agency than with a typewriter, a tool that has played a more ambiguous role in women's liberation. If on the one hand it facilitated their incorporation into the workforce outside the domestic sphere, they were almost exclusively used as typists, a task that came to be an extension of their reproductive labor and which even carried over into left-wing militancy by the "angels of the mimeograph."³ This is how she met the women who participated in the revolutionary committees, distributing pamphlets and making clean copies of the meeting minutes, half-eclipsed by the Marxist logorrhea of their comrades, who tended to monopolize the floor until some women began meeting on their own. Such was the case with Rivolta Femminile, whose members ended up earning a very bad reputation because they only talked to women, and in their own way: "We were labeled with an image of being the non plus ultra of radical feminism, bold

and aggressive. A hateful caricature that even today keeps frightening many women. Not only did this feed into our misgivings toward the press; it reaffirmed our intention not to talk to it. We wanted to express our revolt without being labeled, a permanent state of mind.... That's why we felt the need to write and publish our own material; we did this immediately and we continue in that direction, seeking our liberation, which now has no fixed modalities, nor is it obvious or uniform, edifying or revolutionary."⁴

This aversion of Lonzi's to the media made me think of a work shown in the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía (MNCARS) as part of the magnificent exhibition *Musas insumisas / Defiant Muses* dedicated to Delphine Seyrig and the feminist video collectives in France during the 1970s and 1980s. It involves the *SCUM Manifesto* (1976), and in it we see Seyrig freely translating excerpts of a written text, while her friend Carole Roussopoulos pecks them out on a typewriter. Again, what is on display is a transcription, in this case of Valerie Solanas's polemical pamphlet in which she called for the extermination of the white man, proposing an unusual alliance of women and technology, as can be observed in the scene in which both women reproduce the text, after explaining that in France the book had immediately sold out.

In truth, it's hard to recognize Seyrig, famous for her role in *Last Year at Marienbad*, where she played a vaporous, befeathered presence with an unreal femininity, a role she repeated on different occasions, as a vampire or sorceress, and which she progressively deconstructed by opting for another type of project. Her transformation reminds me of

what Carla Lonzi undertook. If the latter questioned art criticism, attempting other forms of writing with the tape recorder to remove the artist from her or his pedestal, Delphine Seyrig abandoned her initial roles, reinventing herself in turn as a video activist. Obviously, she did not do this alone. Her friendships with Marguerite Duras, Agnès Varda, and Chantal Akerman, with whom she worked, was decisive in terms of testing out new ways of being in front of a camera, narrating, and directing, as well as her collaboration with Ioana Wieder and the aforementioned Carole Roussopoulos, with whom she founded the video collective Les Insoumuses. Through this platform, they documented various struggles, challenging power in its different forms of representation, as a way of learning and enjoying themselves.



Carole Roussopoulos and Delphine Seyrig – Les Insoumuses, *SCUM Manifesto*, 1976. © Centre audiovisuel Simone de Beauvoir, Paris

In the end, what is seen in *SCUM Manifesto* (1976) are two friends, seated across from each other, facing a table and sharing a moment, in a highly relaxed posture, which collides with the violence of the text they are reading and pecking out on the typewriter. They do this without looking at the camera, which in this case films them from a single angle, in contrast to the images visible in the background, where a TV set is reporting on the war in Lebanon and other events in Ireland and Argentina, which are broadcast with multiple cuts. This code, specific to televised language, is again suggested on the cover of the book Seyrig is reading, where Solanas's face is reproduced frontally and in the foreground.

When the *SCUM Manifesto* was published by Olympia Press, after having circulated a couple of years earlier in a self-published and hand-distributed version, its author had already appeared on all the news outlets because she had shot Andy Warhol. It was a highly mediatized attack, which obviously conditioned the reception of this text. Instead of being read as a sardonic reconsideration of virility or the expression of a collective rage, the manifesto became the reflection of a disturbed mind. It lost all its sarcasm. The alterations introduced by its first publisher, Maurice Girodias, didn't help. The most notable one involved breaking up the word "scum" with full stops, turning it into an acronym of the "Society for Cutting Up Men" (S.C.U.M.), which accentuated the pamphlet's programmatic character, linking it to the attempted homicide. In the video *SCUM Manifesto* (1976), Les Insoumuses eliminated these periods and added a date. I wonder if this was not a wink at the year when Solanas wrote

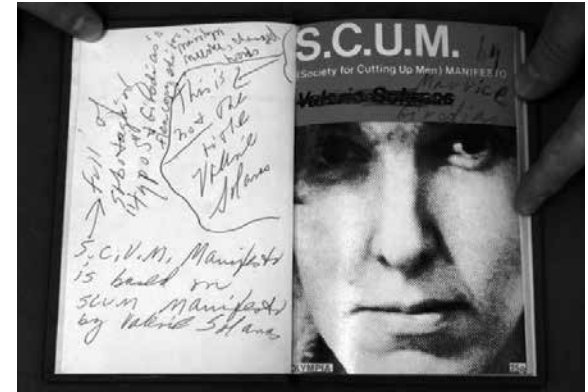
her text—1967—and at the rhetoric inaugurated therein, since in *SCUM* everything is inverted. Its author not only went back to Freud's theory of penis envy but turned it inside out, in such a way that the defect attributed to the female—that docile, passive, weak being—is transferred to the male, whose only success has been to convince the world of the complete opposite.⁵ Such a discursive turn reminds me of Penelope's unraveling what she had woven during the day, and which in an Internet meme someone reformulated with a terse "Fuck Off, I'm Crafting," which suggests that Penelope is not waiting. She weaves for the pleasure of doing so and for another use of time. Or for undoing by rewriting, like Lonzi with her recordings and Les Insoumuses by staging their reading.

In this case they used as many as four technological devices: a book, a typewriter, a television, and a video camera, which allowed them to cross voices, sounds, and images, setting Solanas's words in relief, but also—and this is an important detail—visually re-elaborating them: the way in which they provide an exit or happy ending for a work that, without being utopian, wagers on the end of oppression. For the duration of the tape, no language imposes itself on another; rather, they complement themselves; the televised images echo phrases from the text and somehow make them truer, while the noise of the keyboard serves as counterpoint to the voice dictating them. And something similar is happening with the actions, where there is no clear hierarchy either. Sometimes, Seyrig is speaking but without substituting for Solanas, whose face is also visible on the cover of the book she is reading, as if through her body she were acting as a loudspeaker.

Other times, the speaker can be heard, when in a pause they turn up the volume on the television to listen to a report about a peaceful women's march in Belfast, in one of the rare moments when they are interested in the news. No less important is the noise of the typewriter, an artifact that has several functions in the video. Just as Roussopoulos declares, they thought that by typing the manifesto they could "go more slowly and better articulate its sentences, give them a rhythm." And indeed, there is a choreographic element in this double translation, the one operating in Seyrig's head as she dictates, and the more mechanical one, in the hands of Roussopoulos. So much for the formal dimension. Then there is another aspect that has to do with the typewriter as an extension of the secretary and the values it represents, and which here have been clearly discarded. Far from being discreet, Roussopoulos takes her time and, when she tires of typing, interrupts her gestures and begins to smoke. At every moment, she does what she likes. Her attitude is in tune with Solanas's, who speaks of the boredom that goes along with being part of this society, in which nothing concerns women. In fact, this is the message transmitted by the video, in a less visceral, cutting tone. Its domesticity affects even the quality of the images, which are somewhat poor, and it gives me a strange feeling to see it displayed in the MNCARS, with its corresponding label and meticulous presentation. It is therefore not, a priori, "a great work of art." Its fate is to go unnoticed, since it requires another kind of public than that constructed by classic museography and media, which have historically been in the hands of men, along with publishing houses, and here I am thinking about Solanas's negative reaction as soon

as *S.C.U.M.* began to be widely distributed. She, who was a highly meticulous typist, felt it was out of her hands, that it had been stolen from her.

The New York Public Library holds a copy of the Olympia Press edition with her deletions and words in large handwriting interspersed with exclamations like “fraud,” “lie,” and “never, never.” There is also a commentary in which she warns that this version is an attempt to sabotage her writing, filling it with typographical errors. I wonder if by “errors” she isn’t referring precisely to the corrections and alterations made without her consent. Through one of the copies she typed herself and that has been preserved, we know that in the original version Solanas, aiming at greater plasticity, intentionally distorted some passages, whether by playfully altering word spellings or changing punctuation and adding jokes in the margins—distortions that were smoothed over or completely omitted when the book was published, compromising its literary dimension. In *SCUM* it is not just *what* is said that counts, but *how* it is said. That is, with a razor-sharp humor that for me is the best of all forms of intelligence, though I understand that some readers would lose flexibility when invited into the heat of those bullets that almost left us without Warhol. What percentage of the text was affected by the aforementioned changes remains to be known, because I don’t exclude the possibility that Solanas exaggerated them. Not in vain; she only marked up the first pages, the ones corresponding to the paratext, which is the section most geared toward commercial considerations: on the front and back cover, in the explanatory preface, and in the biographical notes, which, of course, did not omit her unsuccessful assassination attempt.



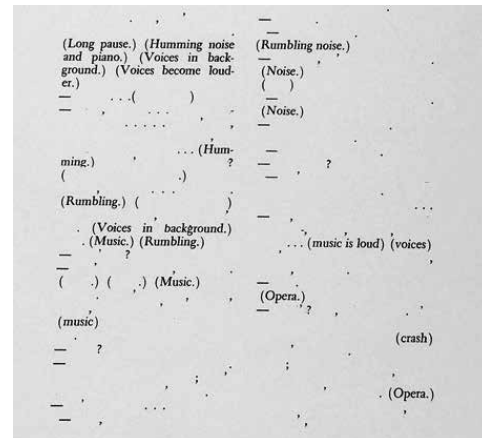
Valerie Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, Olympia Press, London, 1971. Solanas's annotated copy in the Manuscripts and Archives Division of the New York Public Library. Photo: Andrea Valdés

Although this edition was released just after she had shot Andy Warhol, her fear that her talent would be taken advantage of and improper use made of her work had long preceded that act. In fact, Solanas expressed this to Warhol after she had found out that in one of his films (*Women in Revolt*), he placed her ideas in the mouth of another actress without consulting her. The tension between both increased when Warhol began to distance himself from her, after receiving and losing the script of a theatrical work she had written, *Up Your Ass*, for which she had considered him as a producer. Solanas never got the script back. At that time, she was already regretting signing a contract with Olympia Press. The *SCUM Manifesto* was still not on the horizon, and what Girodias had committed to was to publish a novel of hers, for which she had received an advance according to the stipulations of a document both had signed, and with which Solanas had become obsessed, particularly because of a clause

that apparently gave him the first right of refusal or preferential publishing rights for her next two books. This makes me think of the precision with which certain texts are put together, where one leaves certain things in abeyance that are open to interpretation or clumsily formulated, which become grist for the lawyerly mill, like a gap emerging from the text that compels a new interpretation. As the writer and lawyer M. NourbeSe Philip says, the law and poetry are not too different:⁶ both measure language and its lacunae, something to which Solanas must have been very sensitive, to the extent that her paranoia was utterly linked to the written word. And here I am thinking of scripts that disappear, contracts whose extent she overinterprets, and editions she doesn't control. It took her ten years to publish her corrected version of *SCUM*, but by then her health had greatly deteriorated. What is fascinating is that while she was fighting for her work's integrity, she was losing her body's. She even came to believe that the mafia had implanted a chip in her uterus to control her words and movements at every moment.

The fact is, she was unbalanced, which does not prevent us from linking her madness to the precariousness in which she lived and forged a career, obsessed that what she had written should be respected up to the last comma. For her, an erratum was already an attentat. Perhaps her extreme zeal was a refuge from the meager credit we women have received as authors, which contrasts with the freedom with which Andy Warhol himself imposed his standards by publishing *a, A Novel* with Grove Press, in the same year she tried to kill him (1968). In this case, Warhol had up to six typists at his disposal, whose task it was to transcribe the tapes

of twenty-four hours'7 worth of conversations with his friend and fetish actor Ondine, and the actor's occasional prolonged monologue. In these, he can be heard gossiping, speaking, or arguing with different characters under the effect of amphetamines, something that conditioned the final text, which, because of his demands, was typed at high speed. If in *Autoritratto* technology (the tape recorder) was at the service of Lonzi's intentions in recreating a meeting of several voices that never occurred in reality, in Warhol's book this is its central theme. Long sections were recorded over the telephone, and many of the conversations discuss the act of communication: they refer to the quality of the connection, to the cost of the call, and the interferences. There is even a recording of a receptionist at the Factory being taught how to answer the telephone. The instructions she receives is one of the few minimally intelligible passages, because if anything characterizes the book, it is the instability of language, expressed in signs, stammers, and lapsus.



Derek Beaulieu, *a, A Novel*, Jean Boite Éditions, Paris, 2017. Beaulieu's version preserves only the typographical markings of the original book, as if to foreground female labor, so often invisibilized.

Lozano, and in it we see a penis caught in the jaws of a typewriter, whose keyboard has undergone a mutation. Its letters are English monosyllables that correspond to sexual organs—CUNT, COCK, BALLS, TITS—and to very basic verbs—EAT, DRINK, THINK, SMOKE, SLEEP, FUCK. What interests me is that, in this case, the distortions are no longer in the text but in the machine that reproduces it. Lozano has customized it by giving it a new use, which is reinforced by a dirty, anti-technological coloring, which spills over the area of some keys, as if it had been excessively “made up,” or as if we were looking at a grotesque, clownish artifact. For me, this is sweet revenge and how I interpret the gesture of Carla Lonzi, Les Insoumuses, and Valerie Solanas in making transcription into a form of authorship and struggling for the control of their works so that other women could underline them— which in reality is another way of beginning to write and to construct legacies, genealogies.

1

Carla Lonzi, *Autoritratto* (Bari: De Donato; repr. Milan: Et al., 2010), 29; translated by Allison Grimaldi Donahue, “A Sense of Exclusion: An Excerpt from Carla Lonzi’s ‘Autoritratto (Self-Portrait),’” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, March 13, 2020, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/a-sense-of-exclusion-an-excerpt-from-carla-lonzis-autoritratto-self-portrait/> (book forthcoming from Divided Publishing).

2

Carla Lonzi, *Tazi, anzi parla* (Milan: Scritti di Rivolta Femminile, 1978), 356. Translated excerpt from her diary.

3

This expression is itself quite symptomatic, being a variant of “the angel of the household,” which was how women of the nineteenth century were sublimated, namely, as a function of her capacity for sacrifice in domestic chores.

4

Notes on Rivolta Femminile. Archive of La Galleria Nazionale, Rome.

5

Solanas admits masculine superiority in one aspect alone: public relations.

6

In fact, this analogy is thoroughly developed in *Zong!*, a poem based on two juridical texts on the massacre of 142 African slaves who had been thrown overboard into the water, an event she creates in a kind of textual shipwreck.

7

Warhol thought of *a, A Novel* as his response to James Joyce’s *Ulysses*.



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Film still from *If I Could Wish for Something*, by Dora García, digital film, 68', 2021. Original footage by Gisela Castillo, documenting the demonstrations during the National Day for the Decriminalization of Abortion, September 28, 2020, Mexico City

210 Biographies

Neal Cahoon is a Northern Irish writer based in Kirkenes, northern Norway. He holds a PhD in Poetics from the University of Roehampton, and he is a member of the Mustarinda Association in Finland, a group of artists and researchers whose goal is to promote the ecological rebuilding of society, the diversity of culture and nature, and the connection between art and science. Neal Cahoon is currently working as a curator within Pikene på Broen, a collective of curators and producers based in the northeastern Norwegian town of Kirkenes.

Am I the only one who is like me? is a question characteristic of **Saddie Choua**'s life and work. It problematizes the position of the solitary I that is also never disconnected from the other. The power order that conditions the solitary "I" is another central subject. Where does this otherness sit in the hierarchy of power? Where is her oppression and exploitation concealed or exoticized? Saddie Choua asks us to think about how we consume images and dialogues about the other and how they affect our self-image and historical consciousness. How can we intervene in the images that write our history and conceal social struggle? Do we first have to refute memory to tell another story? Or is the removal or recombining of certain associations and references already sufficient to create a different history and self-image?

Saddie Choua is a visual artist. She lives and works in Brussels and Ostend. She teaches Visual Arts at RITCS School of Arts (Brussels), where she is also doing a PhD in the Arts. She is a guest lecturer and tutor at various art schools. She is a member of artist collective ROBIN, WMNS Parliament, Kill Joy Pen Club, and Pecola Productions.

Paloma Contreras Lomas is a "phantom" writer and artist born in Mexico City in 1991. She began her visual arts career at the Escuela Nacional de Pintura, Escultura y Grabado, La Esmeralda, Mexico City (2011–15). Shortly after, she joined the multidisciplinary collective Biquini Wax EPS (ongoing since 2016). In the same year, she also began her participation in the SOMA educational program in Mexico City (2016–18). Paloma is an accredited diver in the Latin American subcritical studies group "Los Yacusi," with whom she has performed different curatorships in a promising role of artist-curator, as well as being the coordinator of the Museo Comunitario Sierra Hermosa, a project located in the desert of Zacatecas, Mexico. Her work extends to different media such as video, writing, drawing, and performance, as well as collective production in parallel to her personal research. Her work has been shown at institutions including Palais de Tokyo, Paris; FRAC Centre, Orléans; Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC), Mexico City; Museo de Arte Moderno (MAM), Mexico City; and Lodos Gallery, Mexico City. She has been a recipient of national scholarships such as, in 2018–19, a Young Creators Grant from the National Fund for Culture and Arts (FONCA) and, in 2020, a Cisneros Fontanals Art Foundation (CIFO) grant for emerging artists. She lives and works in Mexico City.

Dora García is an artist, teacher, and researcher who draws on interactivity and performance in her work, using the exhibition as a platform to investigate the relationship between artwork, audience, and place. García transforms spaces into sensory experiences by altering perceptions and creating situations of interaction, often using intermediaries (professional actors, amateurs, or people she meets by chance) to enhance a critical look at things. By engaging with the binary of reality vs. fiction and dwelling in questions of time (real, historical, cyclical, fictional), visitors become implicated (knowingly or not) as protagonists, either in the construction of a collective fiction, or in the deconstruction of conventions. In this context, she has also always been interested in anti-heroic and marginal personae as a prototype to study the social status of the artist, and in narratives of resistance and counterculture. Dora García has participated in numerous international art exhibitions, including Münster Sculpture Projects (2007), Venice Biennial (2011, 2013, 2015), Sydney Biennial (2008), São Paulo Biennial (2010), dOCUMENTA 13 (2012), and Gwangju Biennial (2016). She has published various books over the years, and directed a number of films, the most recent one being *If I Could Wish for Something* (68', 2021). She is a professor at the Oslo National Academy of the Arts and lives in Oslo.

Alex Gifreu is a graphic designer. Before founding his current studio, Bureau, he was a co-founder of Bisdixit. Since the creation of his first studio he has specialized in graphics for culture, working for public and private, national and international institutions. In 2000 he created a publishing house, CRU, with fifty-eight artist publications published to date, where he has published monographs of artists such as Dora García, Ignasi Aballí, Mabel Palacín, Jakob Kolding, Oriol Vilanova, Iñaki Bonillas, Carlos Pazos, Pepo Salazar, Carlos Bunga, Alicia Framis, and Patricia Dauder. Clients such as Thyssen-Bornemisza Art Contemporary, Manifesta 8, FRAC Bourgogne, Tate Liverpool, dOCUMENTA 13, Centre Pompidou Metz, Fundació Tapies, Fundació Joan Miró, Venice Biennial, Fundació "la Caixa", São Paulo Biennial, Fundació Dalí, osloBIENNALEN, Fundación Mapfre, and the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía have entrusted him their graphic identity, editorial design, promotional elements, web design, or exhibition design. Some of his projects have been awarded with more than 100 national and international awards (Art Directors Club of Europe, One Show New York, Type Directors Club of Tokyo, European Design Awards, Laus, Art Directors Club of New York...).

Agnieszka Gratza is writer, art critic, and editor based in Rome. Her writings about art, performance, and film have appeared in various contemporary art magazines and newspapers, including *Artforum.com*, *Frieze*, *Flash Art International*, *Art Monthly*, *Kunstforum*, the *Guardian*, and the *Financial Times*. She comes to art criticism from an academic background that favored comparative and interdisciplinary approaches. After completing a doctoral thesis on paradoxes in the late Renaissance disciplines—theology, medicine, law, natural and “practical” philosophy—in Oxford, she was a research fellow at Magdalen College and lecturer in French at the University of Edinburgh and Queen Mary University of London. Her more creative writing often stems from live art and performance: in the context of various residencies, she has experimented with dream recall and sustained attention exercises, hosted reading-drinking salons, made edible artworks using saffron, and explored swimming as a species of meditation and an aesthetic pursuit.

Carla Lamoyi is an artist and editor born in Mexico City in 1990. She studied at the UTDT Artists' Program, Universidad Torcuato Di Tella, Buenos Aires; the Escuela Nacional de Pintura, Escultura y Grabado, La Esmeralda, Mexico City; and at the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Bogotá. She has received funding through a Young Creators Grant from the National Fund for Culture and Arts (FONCA); the National Council for Culture and Arts, Mexico (2014–15); and was beneficiary of the fourth edition of the Adidas/Border Grant, Mexico City (2014–15). She also received residency grants in Marseille (Dos Mares); Honduras (Proyecto Rayuela); and the Fundación INBA in Mexico City as well as in Bolivia (KIOSKO Galería). As an artist, she has had the following solo exhibitions: *Una cabeza enloquecida* (in collaboration with Victoria Núñez), Salón Silicón, Mexico City (2019); *El capricho*, Centro Cultural General San Martín, Buenos Aires (2018); *La novela está ubicada en el lugar dónde vamos a estar*, Espacio Qubo3, Quimera Galería, Buenos Aires, (2018); *Las uvas y la ventana*, Ladrón Galería, Mexico City (2017). She is a co-founder and editor of FIEBRE ediciones, an editorial project that seeks to disseminate the creative work carried out in Latin America since 1980, a decade in which the emergence of a new wave of authoritarian and murderous governments forced the reinvention of traditional means of protest and social organization.

Hilde Methi is an independent curator based in Kirkenes, in northeastern Norway. She builds up long-term collaborative projects infusing artistic ideas in local contexts. Recently, she co-curated the biannual Lofoten International Art Festival – LIAF 2019, including *The Kelp Congress* in Svolvær and four fishing villages in the Lofoten archipelago (2018–19). She conceived “Dark Ecology” (2014–15) with Sonic Acts (NL), which over three years commissioned and presented temporary site-responsive installations and performances in the Norwegian-Russian border zone. Several of these works were later presented elsewhere in Norway and Russia and in the Netherlands (2017–18). She curated *Håbmet Håmi / Making Form* at the Sámi Centre for Contemporary Art (2018) and co-edited *The Kelp Congress* book published in 2020.

Saffina Rana is a British journalist, storyteller, and lateral thinker with a scientific background who has spent much of her adult life at the intersections of research, society, culture, and diversity. She monitors EU policies on new technologies, health, culture, governance, gender equality, and discrimination; and platforms culture in Belgium for various newspapers, journals, and governmental and nongovernmental organizations. Her work includes a focus on the ramifications of these policies on the othering of minority groups in Europe, particularly those structurally considered to be racialized. Saffina Rana was part of the Elles Tournent collective and in 2009 co-conceived the Elles Tournent – Dames Draaien film festival in Brussels, with a focus on the projection and discussion of films made by those identifying as women, which she subsequently programmed for two years as part of a team.

Andrea Valdés is a former bookseller, journalist, and writer. Graduate in Political Sciences (Universitat Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona). She has published an essay called *Distraídos venceremos: Usos y derivas en la escritura autobiográfica* (Jekyll & Jill, 2019), a series of fanzines written together with David Bestué (*La línea sin fin*, 2013), and the play *Astronaut* performed by the British company Theatre O (BITE, 2005). She regularly works with artists and contributes to catalogues and exhibitions. Her articles and interviews have been published in *El País*, *La Vanguardia*, *El Estado Mental*, *2G*. She is currently working as an editor at the independent publisher Cielo Eléctrico.

Sayak Valencia is Professor in the Department of Cultural Studies of the Colegio de la Frontera Norte, CONACYT research center (Tijuana). Also known as Margarita Valencia Triana. Doctor in Feminist Philosophy, Theory and Criticism from the Universidad Complutense de Madrid. She is a member of the National System of Researchers, Level 1. Poet, essayist, and performance exhibitionist. She has given conferences and seminars on gore capitalism, transfeminisms, Chicano feminism, postcolonial feminism, art, and queer theory at various universities in Europe and America. Her recent works include: *Gore Capitalism* (Semiotext(e) / MIT Press, 2018), *Capitalismo Gore* (Paidós, 2016; Melusina, 2010), *Adrift's Book* (Aristas Martínez, 2012), *El reverso exacto del texto* (Centaurea Nigra Ediciones, 2007), *Jueves Fausto* (Ediciones de la Esquina / Anortecer, 2004), as well as various academic articles, essays, and poems in magazines in Spain, Germany, France, Poland, Mexico, Argentina, the United States, and Colombia.

Christopher Winks is Associate Professor and Chair of Comparative Literature at Queens College/CUNY. He is the author of *Symbolic Cities in Caribbean Literature* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), and he has published articles, reviews, and translations (from French and Spanish) in many journals and edited collections. He is the editor and co-translator, with Adriana González Mateos, of *Los danzantes del tiempo*, a bilingual English-Spanish anthology of Kamau Brathwaite's poems that received the 2011 Casa de las Américas prize. Current translation projects include *Labyrinth*, a bilingual English-Spanish anthology of the selected writings of Cuban poet Lorenzo García Vega (Junction Press, forthcoming), and the poetry of Haitian Surrealist Magloire Saint-Aude.

IF I COULD WISH FOR SOMETHING

A Book of Visual and Text Essays

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FINDING GENDER IN THE ARCTIC: A CALL TO INTERSECTIONALITY

HILDE METHI



Film still from *If I Could Wish for Something*, by Dora García,
digital film, 68', 2021, featuring La Bruja de Texcoco

