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Editorial

In the first *e-flux journal* issue of 2022, Bifo points out a recent social protest movement in China known as *tangping* ("lying flat"), in which young people increasingly opt out of the pressure to overwork by taking low-paying jobs or not working at all. In the US, "the Great Resignation" has been the name for four and a half million American workers who left their jobs at the end of 2020. But Bifo reminds us that "resignation" also means re-signification—a new meaning given to pleasure, richness, activity, and cooperation that may unveil a previously hidden egalitarian and frugal sensitivity following the exhaustion of the Western geopolitical order.

"ZAD" means *zone à défendre* (zone to defend); two of our writers report from the ZAD in Notre-Dame-des-Landes, an enormous territory that farmers and people from around France have squatted for over a decade to halt construction of an airport. With chainsaws and horse-hauled logs, nearby inhabitants survey the woods and decide which trees to fell, which to leave standing, and what projects their trunks and branches will comprise, as the art of communal defense and living becomes a sustained reality, with the woods as a comrade.

"What is the risk I pose?" asks the Indian anti-CAA/NRC activist Umar Khalid in a video that Skye Arundhati Thomas describes in this issue. "Is it that I claim this country to be as much mine as it is yours?" Thomas maps how videos and photographs from the 2019 police assault against students at Jamia Millia Islamia, as well as documentation of BJP members riling up the violence, remind viewers "that the end goal of resistance against the Modi regime is not to return to an India of the past, but to fundamentally reimagine the country we have inherited."

Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa takes Roland Barthes's *Camera Lucida* to task for an unchallenged belief in the book's forty-year-old photographic theory of the studium and the punctum—the relation between the cultural-political and the "wounding" of affect. For Wolukau-Wanambwa, Barthes, who "most certainly is not outside of culture, however forceful his desire," develops a theory of the visual disavowal of racist histories even when faced with "the material historicity of the photograph."

Yuk Hui, in the first of a two-part conversation with Brian Kuan Wood, speaks about his new book *Art and Cosmotechnics*, where he inverts the old question of how technology disrupts artistic practice by asking, more crucially, how art can contribute to the imagination of technological development. When that imagination has been constrained by the universalizing appetites of industrial growth, how might art provide an opening to the cosmologies and local technologies that have been there all along?

Boris Groys relays how, for the nineteenth-century Russian philosopher Vladimir Soloviev, "Sophia" represented many

possible entities: a female expansion of the divine trinity, the figure in whom the fundamental fallenness of the world could be overcome, and the possibility of harmonious, true life. How did Soloviev and his predecessors, working against Western pessimism and through their love of Sophia, seek to transform the world and reach a state of all-unity? In another essay in this issue, the Order of Sophianic Marxists, with the aid of a perhaps-recently-unearthed text, draw mystical lines between gnostics, alchemists, the same Russian Sophiologists, and Karl Marx—who echoes the Sophiologists' project of all-unity and world transformation. Every so often, a prophet visits the world to illuminate a path to humanity's collective task. Many centuries ago, the Russian gnostics saw this prophet to be Simon the Sorcerer, and for the Order of Sophianic Marxists, the same great revelatory force is to be found in Marx.

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Yuk Hui and Brian Kuan Wood

A Conversation on Art and Cosmotechnics, Part 1

Brian Kuan Wood: Let's start with a bit of background before we go into your new book, *Art and Cosmotechnics*—because the book, in turning its focus to art and aesthetics, builds upon some concepts that you've previously elaborated as a philosopher. The most obvious of these concepts—which is also in the title—was the focus of your 2016 book *The Question Concerning Technology in China*: *An Essay in Cosmotechnics.* Let's begin by situating ourselves around the meaning of "cosmotechnics," also to clarify it against certain misunderstandings that may have arisen in the time since you wrote *The Question Concerning Technology*, since even the most necessary critiques of Western-dominated political or technological paradigms can become vulnerable to reactionary tendencies or wrongful appropriations.

Yuk Hui: I have to say that *Art and Cosmotechnics* is quite a strange book, because it deals with three different kinds of logic that, at first glance, don't seem related at all: tragic thought, Daoist thought, and cybernetic thought. I don't think there has been any work trying to reassociate these three. *Art and Cosmotechnics* is divided into three parts, and I should explain why it's structured this way. But first, let me respond to your question by explaining why I had to coin this concept of cosmotechnics before I go into what it really is, and the difficulty of elaborating such concepts. It's something quite personal in my studies of philosophy—I first studied computer science before moving on to study philosophy for many years, with a focus on the question of technology. And after some ten years, I found that all I have studied is supposed to be universal. But, at the same time, the philosophy of technology I was studying was actually very European, and maybe a bit American. So, at a certain moment, I asked myself: What does it mean to talk about technology in cultures outside of Europe? We know that there must be technology outside of Europe. It would be a *betîse* to deny this.

We know that, according to historians, Greek technology came from the Near East and then stayed in Europe through the Greco-Roman period until technology became an object of hate during Christianity, until the Renaissance and later on. And then there was a huge change on the continent when European modernity began to emerge. Going any further into these origins would involve a lot of discussion with classicists and historians, but the main point is that I was quite amazed by the lack of understanding of the concept of technology itself, because the whole discourse is very much structured around European history and European philosophy. I'm not saying this is bad, since the discourse does offer some important insights. But it made me very curious about how we could articulate the question of technology outside of Europe. But then we immediately encounter a huge obstacle, because we've been told since a young age that science and technology are universal, like mathematics. In

Paul Manship's 1934 sculpture Prometheus bringing fire stolen from the gods to figure skaters at Rockefeller Center in Manhattan, New York City, 2008. License: CC BY-SA 4.0.

a way, we have already accepted the idea that technology is universal, science is universal, logic is universal, mathematics is universal, and so forth. Even in academic disciplines, there seems to be a lack of reflection on what this universality is and what it implies.

Let me give a few examples. In the philosophy of technology—especially in analytic philosophy—all claims tend to be universal. In continental philosophy of technology, for example, Heidegger has been an influential figure. Heidegger's 1949 talk in Bremen (later published in 1953 as *The Question Concerning Technology*) basically suggests that if you want to understand what technology is, or what he called the essence of technology, then we can understand it in two parts. One part is what the Greeks called *technē*, which Heidegger associated with *poiesis*, with bringing something forth (*hervorbringen* in German). And this poetic realization is the un-concealment of Being. And so the question of Being enters his discourse as something closely related to the concept of technology, but also to the concept of art, which he wrote about around 1935 and 1936 in "The Origin of the Work of Art." The second part Heidegger tries to show is that modern technology—which, for him, came after the Scientific Revolution and actualized itself at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century—no longer shares the same essence as *technē*, or *poiesis*, but has rather become what he called "enframing"—*Gestell*, meaning that everything could be treated as what he called a "standing reserve," *Bestand*, a resource to be ordered and exploited, from rivers to atoms.

Heidegger's discourse on the difference between Greek *technē* and modern technology was not only widely accepted in continental Europe, but also in East Asia—at least in Japan, China, and Korea. Among the non-European cultures, insofar as I understand, Heidegger's thesis was

widely accepted for seeming to mirror the tension between tradition and modernity. The Chinese or the Japanese, for example, could associate Greek *technē* with their own tradition, and modern technology with modernization or Westernization. So you can immediately see the conflict. But there is also a blind spot concerning the essence of technology that Heidegger posited. For example, does the un-concealment of Being in Greek *technē* allow anything to be found in Eastern philosophy, for instance in China and in Japan, where the question of Being was, as the founder of the Kyoto School, Kitarō Nishida, famously claimed, not the core question? In Western Europe, we know that it has been considered the first philosophy.

Though Heidegger's thesis has been widely adopted, this blind spot remains. People tend to equate Greek *technē* with Chinese, Japanese, or Indian technology without really looking into the meaning of technology that was already present in Heidegger's discourse, but also in the history of technology. For example, the great sinologist Joseph Needham, who published more than twenty volumes of *Science and Civilisation in China*, tried to show that China's science and technology were quite advanced before the sixteenth century. And his haunting question was: Why didn't modern science and technology happen in China or in India, but only in Europe?

Some historians have tried to show, following Needham, that, for example, a certain technology—say, papermaking in the second century in China—was more advanced than in Europe. Their method compares one technology with similar technologies in other regions without considering what Needham himself warned, which was that all these technologies, even if they involve similar materials and similar products, are actually based on different epistemological and ontological assumptions. Even when technologies can be put under the same category, there are still tremendous differences between them. Yet by simply comparing which one is more advanced than the other, we universalize technology by default. We assume that there is only one way of understanding technology.

In the anthropology of technology, we know that technology has been understood as essential to the process of harmonization—the externalization of memory, the liberation of organs, and so forth—but this is only a universal dimension of technology. So I introduced what I called the antinomy of the universality of technology, with the antithesis that, where technology is not universal, it is conditioned—motivated and constrained—by a certain cosmology, i.e., its locality. This is the antinomy I put forward, in the sense that, in an antinomy, when each thesis is separated and looked upon individually, they are all correct. But when you bring them together, you see a contradiction. But this contradiction leads to what I call cosmotechnics, where all technologies are actually cosmologically constrained and motivated. Cosmology here is not merely theoretical, but always embedded and embodied in the invention, development, and use of technologies. That's what I argued in *The Question Concerning Technology in China*. You can already see from the title that it responds to Heidegger's 1949 lecture, *The Question Concerning Technology.* In other words, I tried to reinterpret the concept of technology by coining a different concept, cosmotechnics, in order to call for a new interpretation of technology by situating it historically, cosmologically, and locally. As for your question on reactionary, or neo-reactionary, politics, it's an important one that we'll come back to later.

BKW: I wonder if we could also clarify here our interest in cybernetics. Your following book, *Recursivity and Contingency* (2019), dealt with the significance of cybernetics as a world-historical, political, and philosophical rupture in Western thinking. This goes back to the physics of information, as Norbert Wiener defined it in the 1940s, where feedback, circularity, and recursion, as you explain, dissolve a certain separation in Western thinking between organic life and machinic systems. You eloquently described this in the book as a situation where machines are "no longer simply tools or instruments, but rather the gigantic organisms in which we live." So this act of enframing also shifts into a kind of cybernetic body that is both organic and machinic. Could you describe further the conditions of this merger, and perhaps also the cosmic or cosmological implications of living inside such gigantic organic machines?

YH: Here I can simply continue from where I left off. After I finished *The Question Concerning Technology in China,* I felt that something was still incomplete. I was still haunted by Joseph Needham. I thought that, though I responded to his question, my 2016 book had missed something significant. And there was an urgency for me to work on that. In the twentieth century, if you asked a sinologist or even a Chinese philosopher about the difference between Chinese thought and European or Western thought, or about the difference between Chinese technology and Western technology, you would often hear that Chinese thought is organic, while Western thought is machinic. To some extent, Joseph Needham is responsible for this really problematic answer, because he tries to say this in his books. For Needham, it was only from Leibniz onward that Western philosophy became organic.

In the second volume of *Science and Civilisation in China*, Needham started with Leibniz and named Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Schelling, and Fichte, down to Whitehead and Norbert Wiener, as thinkers of an organicism. Of course, some of his contemporaries like Haldane, Smut, Morgan, and so forth also associated with holism and organicism. Needham claimed that, while Western philosophy only became organic after Leibniz, Chinese philosophy has been organic since the very beginning, and never passed from mechanism to organism like in the West. Needham continued by saying that maybe Leibniz was influenced by

his correspondence with a Jesuit in China, Father Bouvet, who told Leibniz about the neo-Confucian Zhu Xi, one of the most important neo-Confucians of the twelfth century. This way of formulating the difference between Chinese thought and Western thought is problematic in many senses. First, it can reintroduce an orientalist viewpoint, and secondly, it may not help us to qualify what Chinese thought or Chinese technology actually is. And there is an urgency to understand how to articulate Chinese science and technology without recourse to organicism or holism. This is the problem we face today, especially when characterizing Chinese medicine as holism, when holism is actually a German invention, as shown by Volker Scheid, a historian and practitioner of traditional Chinese medicine.

This is why I wanted to work on the concept of the organic and show it as fundamental for Western modernity. It's probably more fundamental for the West than for China, because mechanism and organism were never a central themes in China. The Chinese were never aware of them, just as they were never aware of tragedy in the Greek sense. Even today, we think of a tragedy as mainly a sad story, but that's not what Greek tragedy is. In this sense, *Recursivity and Contingency* was partly a continuation of *The Question Concerning Technology in China*. In the preface to *Recursivity and Contingency*, I wrote that the book could have been called *The Specter of Joseph Needham*. I used this study to reconstruct the history of modern Western philosophy, because I believe that the dichotomy or opposition between mechanism and organism was one of the most significant philosophical developments in the eighteenth century in Europe.

We know that modern European thought—what we call early modernity, associated with thinkers like Descartes and others—was very much dominated by mechanistic thinking. Descartes was able to compare the human body with a church organ by articulating how wind related to breath, how the organ's pump related to the heart, and so forth. And this mechanism was very much challenged in the eighteenth century, with the rise of the concept of organism. Let's not forget that until this moment, biology was not yet a scientific discipline, and wouldn't become one until the beginning of the nineteenth century. But the rise of the concept of organism was significant enough that we can find it in the work of Spinoza, Kant, and already in Leibniz of course, as well as in the seventeenth century with the Cambridge Platonists. In *Recursivity and Contingency*, my claim was that Kant's *Critique of Judgment* (1790) played a very significant role in imposing an organic condition of philosophizing towards the end of eighteenth century, where, for philosophy to exist, it couldn't avoid becoming or being organic. I tried to show how the concept of the organic became a paradigm of thought, from all the Idealists that followed Kant—Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, and so forth—until the twentieth century in Bergson, Whitehead, and of course Joseph Needham, whose turn towards organicism was informed by his training as a biochemist.

To some extent, I feel that it's justified to make the claim that, towards the end of the eighteenth century, Kant imposed an organic condition of philosophizing based on the irreducibility between organism and mechanism. However, in *Recursivity and Contingency*, I tried to show that this situation greatly changed in the twentieth century, especially after the rise of cybernetics. When people talk about cybernetics, they may think naively of control and surveillance, but the basic claim of cybernetics is far more fundamental and important for us today. In the first chapter of Norbert Wiener's 1948 book, titled "Newtonian Time and Bergsonian Time," Wiener claims—to put it simply here—that cybernetics has overcome the dichotomy between mechanism and vitalism. The strawmen of vitalism are, for example, Bergson, J. B. S. Haldane, and Hans Driesch, who propose concepts such as *élan vital* or entelechy to describe a vital force in the organism. Wiener started by opposing vitalism and mechanism using Newton—who, of course, is a mechanist not in the sense of Descartes, but in his approach to linear causality—in order to show that cybernetic machines have overcome the opposition between vitalism and mechanism by being based on nonlinear causality. While still being mechanical, cybernetic machines are able to assimilate the behavior of an organism. Hans Jonas, a student of Heidegger, in his book *The Phenomenon of Life: Toward a Philosophical Biology*, claimed that cybernetics marks the first time since Aristotle that we find a unifying logic, which is to say that cybernetics has basically overcome dualism. Today, were you to criticize cybernetics machines as dualist, it would already be a conceptual mistake.

Since the first half of the twentieth century, our machines have no longer been like those of Descartes's time, no longer like the machines of Karl Marx's time—mechanical machines, characterized by linear causality and repetition. Hans Jonas was very critical of Wiener's cybernetics in *The Phenomenon of Life*, but he never underestimated it, and was sure to point out its philosophical significance. So from cybernetics onward, we see a new paradigm of machines, which I called the becoming-organic of machines. And this becoming-organic of the machine is fundamental to the work of Gilbert Simondon, as we find in his *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*. If we follow this reading, maybe we can say that cybernetics has completed what Kant called the organic condition of philosophizing. This is also how I interpret Heidegger identifying cybernetics as marking the end of Western philosophy and metaphysics. So if, since the end of the eighteenth century, we have not only lived among a new type of machines, but also confronted a new condition of philosophizing after Immanuel Kant (consider the publication of *Critique of Judgment* in 1790), and after Whitehead, after cybernetics, but also after Donna Haraway, then today we have to rearticulate the conditions of philosophizing. For me, this means we cannot simply go

back to organic nature or a naive discourse on multispecies relations. *Recursivity and Contingency* was an effort to historically articulate and elaborate on this new condition of philosophizing. *Art and Cosmotechnics* is a continued pursuit of this spirit.

BKW: In *Art and Cosmotechnics* you outline a new way of thinking about art and aesthetics that follows from this. But your approach runs contrary to many vulgar approaches to art and technology that simply normalize new technological platforms. Often this is done in the name of broadening the limits of art or aesthetics by inserting computers, social media, or NFTs into a traditional artistic setting, and usually without questioning the limits of those platforms. Rather than question their limits, conservative artistic settings seem compelled to celebrate the oppressive or deterministic tendencies of technology, like in the Ballardian scenarios of *Black Mirror*. In *Art and Cosmotechnics*, you advocate for something different, which is a return to certain fundamentals of aesthetics, more specifically by engaging with aesthetics as a form of logic that can be said to precede or even include our current paradigm of technology, since it is actually larger than technology. Could you describe this unusual technique that begins in the book with a turn back to Greek tragedy, or what you term in the book "tragist" logic, and discuss your reasoning for it?

YH: After I finished *Recursivity and Contingency*, again, I was haunted. In the book, I tried to use the two concepts, recursivity and contingency, to characterize this movement of thought from Kant to the twentieth century. After the book was published, Augustin Berque, a specialist on Japan who has worked a lot on landscape and logic in East Asia, emailed me to say that he found the book very interesting, but was astonished that I didn't talk about the profound notions of recursivity and contingency in East Asia. At the same time, many have claimed that cybernetics is very close to Chinese thought, and even that cybernetics actually originated in China (this has never been proven) because Norbert Wiener was a visiting professor at Tsinghua University for a year in the early 1930s. Wiener did make some remarks that Chinese writing was significant for his thinking on cybernetics, though it's not clear what he was referring to. Like the discourse on Chinese holism and organicism, this myth about cybernetics and Chinese thought is quite fascinating but suspicious.

But if I refuse this claim, I have to explain the difference between cybernetics and Chinese thought. If Chinese technology is not cybernetics in the sense of Norbert Wiener, then how can we articulate this? Without this distinction, everything sinks into the dark night where all cows are gray, as Hegel writes in the preface to his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, when he criticized Schelling and Fichte's concept of the absolute. For me, philosophy is all about elaboration, and my task in *Art and Cosmotechnics* was to elaborate different forms of recursive thinking, and show the relations, or possible relations, between these differences.

There is a lot of effort going into merging art and technology today, and there is sure to be more from governments, universities, and the private sector. Art and technology in the past few decades have been really fascinated with live experience—interaction, immersion, and so forth—but many of the works you encounter are actually entertainment, which is not a negative word so much as a matter of fact. This means that the relation between art and technology has yet to be determined, and this relation is where the book sets off from. Much has happened in the past century since Walter Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility*, written in 1935, and Heidegger's "The Origin of the Work of Art" in 1936, both on the relation between art and technology. Benjamin wrote that it is futile to ask whether or not photography and cinema are art, and the past eighty years have shown that Benjamin captured the spirit of the avant-garde and anticipated the revolution that would take place in art. And he wrote that it is more important to think how technology has changed the concept of art. I think this is the major thesis he put forward in *The Work of Art in the Age of Technical Reproducibility.* He made this claim as a good Marxist-materialist, showing that material conditions determine the concept, and not the concept that determines reality. But he also showed that the concept of art has to be enlarged according to a technological condition. Today, photography and cinema are already widely accepted, and also institutionalized in the domain of art.

My approach is almost the opposite. I ask: if, since Walter Benjamin—or even since the avant-garde before Benjamin—we have been trying to ask how technology changes the concept of art, as you find in Duchamp, can we now turn the question around and ask how art can transform technology? I think this is an important question not only in a conceptual sense, but also in a diplomatic one. If you were to talk to an engineer about an art project, how would you talk to them? Do you simply want to import this or that technology to create some kind of a new experience? Or do you want to influence how technology is made, how technology is conceived, how technology ought to be developed? I think we can also turn the question around further by asking: How can art contribute to the imagination of technological development?

Technology comes with huge opportunities but also huge potential catastrophes. When you look at climate change, the catastrophe is already there; as Heidegger said about *Gestell*, the essence of modern technology is to consider everything as a standing reserve, as a resource to be ordered and exploited. So maybe art and technology need a different relation. We should continue asking how technology can transform the concept of art and philosophy, but at the same time, we also have to ask how art and philosophy can transform the concept of

technology, including the imagination, invention, development, and use of technology. I think this is our task, and we shouldn't avoid it. But if we have to go back to art itself, to the question of aesthetics, where do we start?

The study of aesthetics only entered into philosophy with Alexander Baumgarten's first volume of *Aesthetica*, published in 1750. Its first line claims that *Aesthetica* is an investigation into a lower faculty of cognition. Unlike logic, as a higher faculty of cognition dealing with clear and distinct ideas, aesthetics is more suited to subjective tastes, emotions, and feelings. Rationalists like Baumgarten also recognized a certain truth in aesthetics that one cannot refuse. However, as when Leibniz talked about aesthetics, what's there is only a *je ne sais quoi* —the object of the lower faculty of cognition that is aesthetics. We can continue this tradition of aesthetics today by talking about emotions, feelings, and things like that, but in *Art and Cosmotechnics* I've tried to elevate the concept of aesthetics to logic. Basically, this means not only reversing the question of Benjamin, but also reversing the discourse of aesthetics since Baumgarten via Kant.

By doing this, I'm trying to show where in aesthetics we can actually articulate a kind of logical form and establish a transition from aesthetics to logic. I feel that elevating aesthetics to logic may offer a better idea of how different kinds of aesthetic thinking can be articulated, and how they can contribute to the discourse on technology. That's why I started with two kinds of aesthetic thinking, but address them as logic. One is "tragist" thinking or "tragist" logic. The other is Daoist logic or " *shanshui*" logic. But *Art and Cosmotechnics* is a strange book—I don't think anyone would ever compare Greek tragedy with *shanshui* painting! Historians may simply dismiss it. But if you read the book, you can see how *tragist* thinking and *shanshui* logic actually present two forms of recursive thinking, through a set of similar but different assumptions. Daoist thinking and tragist thinking both start with contradiction at the very beginning. But how the contradiction is articulated and later resolved in Greek tragedy is very different from how it is articulated and resolved in *shanshui* painting. This is why I needed to begin by elevating aesthetics to logic. But there were many more reasons for these attempts than I've been able to describe here.

Continues at "A Conversation on Art and Cosmotechnics*, , Part 2," e-flux journal, no. 125 (March 2022).*

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Yuk Hui obtained his PhD from Goldsmiths College London and his Habilitation in philosophy from Leuphana University Lüneburg. Hui is author of several monographs that have been translated into a dozen languages, including *On the Existence of Digital Objects* (2016), *The Question Concerning Technology in China: An Essay in Cosmotechnics*(2016), *Recursivity and Contingency* (2019), and **Art and Cosmotechnics** (2021). Hui is the convenor of the Research Network for Philosophy and Technology and sits as a juror of the Berggruen Prize for Philosophy and Culture since 2020. He is currently a professor of philosophy of technology and media at the City University of Hong Kong.

Brian Kuan Wood is an editor of *e-flux journal.*

Stanley Wolukau-Wanambwa

Sans Parole: Reflections on Camera Lucida, Part 1

Part 1: Solipsism, Stigmata, and Silencing Invocations

> The photographs I choose have an argumentative value. They are the ones I use in my text to make certain points.
> —Roland Barthes in conversation with Guy Mandery[1]

> Typically, there is in this grammar of description the perspective of "declension," not of simultaneity, and its point of initiation is solipsistic.
> —Hortense Spillers[2]

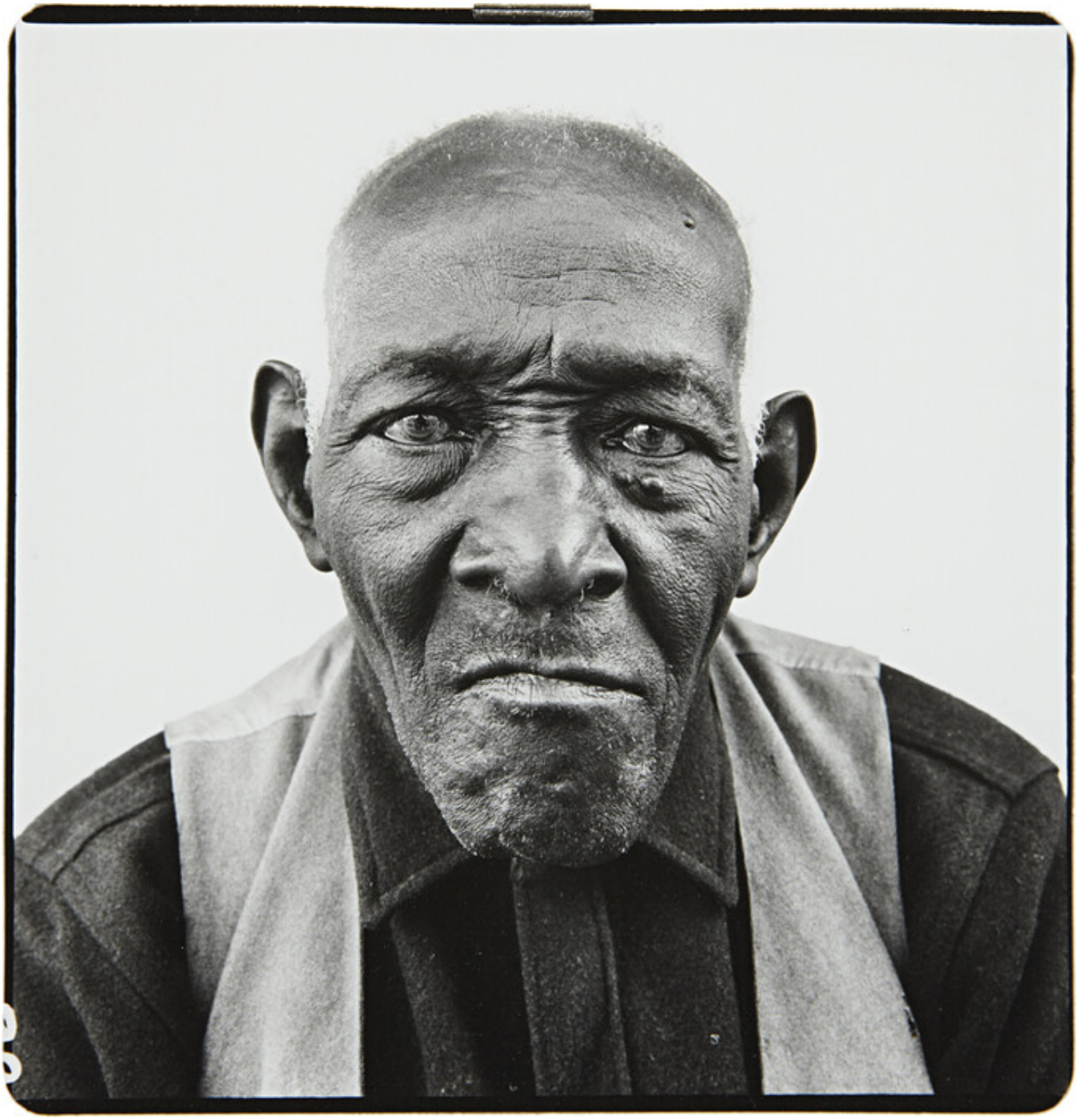
> The privation of History protects and tames the colonizer's imagination as viewer.
> —Chéla Sandoval[3]

1.

I've thought for quite some time that Roland Barthes's grief at the recent death of his mother was the sole and logical reason for his withdrawing from us the image of his dearly departed mother as a young girl in the famous Winter Garden Photograph, of which he writes at length in *Camera Lucida*. It is an image whose presence (and absence) in the book plainly has a transformative effect on his thinking with and about photography, but the vagaries of grief are unpredictable, and photographs can indeed wound. Having attributed its absence to grief, and thus having neglected the fraught politics of visibility on which Barthes's theory is premised, it is only recently, and in the light of the instructive interventions of Kaja Silverman, Fred Moten, Tina Campt, and Jonathan Beller, that I have thoroughly reconstructed my point of view. [4] On reflection, Barthes's retention of that (iconic?) image seems entirely consonant with the anti-historical, and thus antisocial, logic of the theory of photography that he develops.[5]

This is to say that if, as Barthes's theory suggests, a photograph is valuable only to the extent that it catalyzes and animates a set of private memories and ahistorical interpretations, all of which might then stand in place of the image that triggers them, then why share photographs at all? In contemplating *Camera Lucida* now, in the wake of the fortieth anniversary of its publication, I am moved to ask: How could a book so intensely bound up with photography and loss show so little generosity, and why, today, should we heed its call? Beyond this, what might insights from black studies bring to bear on a book so indebted to the identification and rejection of difference in the expropriative formulation of Barthes's inner self?

If this reaction seems extreme, we should recall how



Richard Avedon, William Casby, born in slavery, Algiers, Louisiana, March 24, 1963. Copyright: The Richard Avedon Foundation.

Barthes first describes "the punctum": it is that thing that *advenes*, the "accident which pricks me," the "sting, speck, cut, little hole," the "detail" whose "mere presence changes my reading" so "that I am looking at a new photograph, marked in my eyes with a higher value."[6] The punctum is a mutually self-constituting thing, since Barthes tells us that "it animates me, and I animate it" (20). Moreover it issues from Barthes himself: "Whether or not it is triggered, it is an addition: it is what I add to the photograph and *what is nonetheless already there*" (49). It produces in him an excitation, and this detail has "a power of expansion. This power is often metonymic" (45). In fact the punctum unleashes desire beyond material restriction: it "is a kind of subtle *beyond*—as if the image launched

desire beyond what it permits us to see" (59).

The punctum empowers a free-ranging and unregulated desire, one which can alight in and overwhelm any image in which it is instantiated. It moves according to the vicissitudes of a law utterly untethered from the specific contours of material and social history: it is free and imperious travel. In *Camera Lucida*, the radical proposition of the *there*-ness of a person in the past is ultimately a pretext for various acts of colonization of the depicted by Barthes's own cherished and subjective memories.

As he writes, "I have no need to question my feelings in order to list the various reasons to be interested in a photograph." For Barthes, what counts above all is affective feeling—and an attention and intention driven by the irreducible strength of subjective feeling. Thus, he is concerned to understand "if another photograph interests me powerfully … what there is in it that sets me off." Accordingly, what matters is "the attraction certain photographs exerted upon me," and it is that attraction which "allows me to make Photography exist." Without it, "no photograph." (19)

This whimsically subjective and ahistorical mode of attending to the photograph, and of determining its value, serves as a pretext for Barthes's expropriative formulation and extension of an inner self. Such a method eerily emboldens and ratifies the supremacist logics Barthes earlier critiqued in his 1957 *Mythologies.*[7] The postcolonial feminist theorist Chéla Sandoval defines that book as posing "the question of how 'innocent' or well-intentioned citizens can enact the forms-of-being tied to racist colonialism," and thus to cultural logics driven by "a colonizing consciousness incapable of conceiving how real differences in others can actually exist, for everything can be seen only as the self—but in other guises."[8] As Sandoval writes, in *Mythologies* Barthes set out with the hope that semiology might challenge supremacism "in all its modes" through a critical method

> that operates through (1) the recognition of differences and their inescapable consequences; (2) the reconnection of history to objects; (3) the disavowal of pure identification; (4) the self-conscious relocation of the practitioner of semiology in transits of meaning and power; (5) the undermining of authority, objectivity, fact, and science insofar as it seeks to reconnect each of these processes to the history, power, and systems of meaning that create them; and (6) the constant reconstruction of the consciousness of the semiotic practitioner, along with the method itself, as both mutually interact to call up something else.[9]

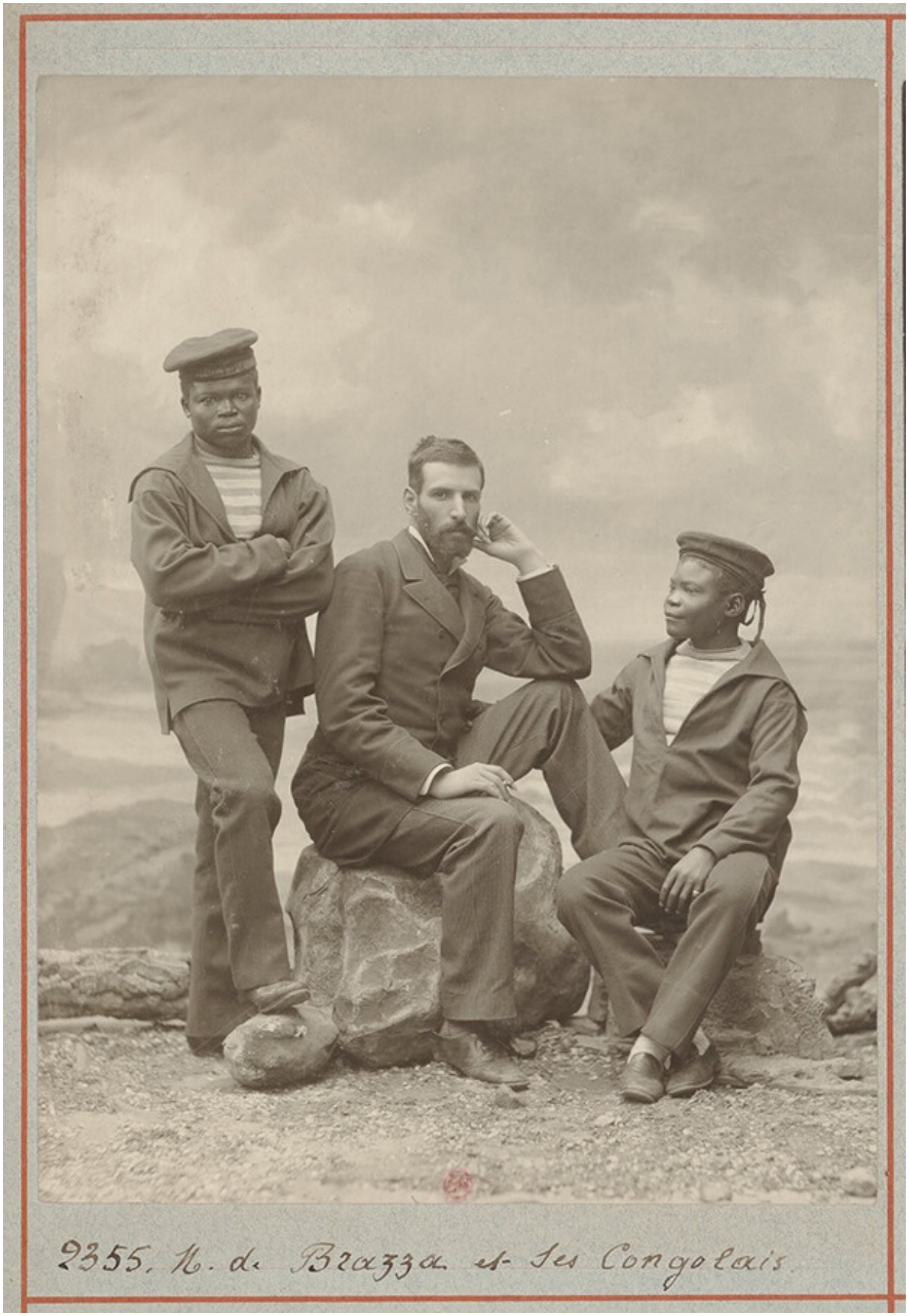
And yet, at the very outset of *Camera Lucida*, Barthes willfully rejects "an importunate voice (the voice of knowledge, of *scientia*)" which reprimands him for an excessive interest in the "amateur" field of family photography, whose dynamics can allegedly be elucidated by sociologists (7). "Yet I persisted," he declares, since "another, louder voice urged me to dismiss such sociological commentary; looking at certain photographs, I wanted to be a primitive, without culture" (7). Barthes resolves instead to theorize only from "a few photographs, the ones I was sure existed *for me*," and thus, he decides imperiously "to take myself as mediator for all Photography" (8).

Barthes's theoretical work begins in the comfortable solipsism of white male universality, in his notional suspension from socially and historically constituted knowledge, in some imagined "primitive" state outside of culture and history. The ethical basis of *Camera Lucida* is given in Barthes's explicit resolution, at the outset of the book, to try to make "what Nietzsche called 'the ego's ancient sovereignty' into a heuristic principle" (8). One has to ask: If photographs exist on the basis of the strength of individual feeling alone, then why share something as specifically precious as an image of one's dead mother as a child? Put another way: the reason for Barthes's withdrawal of the Winter Garden Photograph is given in the willful solipsism of his method, and thus it is that *method* which is at issue in any evaluation of the work.

I think this means that for me, the Winter Garden Photograph—its looming, absent presence in *Camera Lucida*—instigates a set of urgent and complex questions about photography and sociality, about seeing and sharing, about touching and being touched, about death and love, about whiteness and its supremacy, about presence and erasure—which must be worked through in relation to the determining factors of race, class, gender, and ableism, all of which constitute the disavowed bases on which Barthes develops his theory of photography. I am interested in Barthes's retention of the Winter Garden Photograph as a rejection of the photograph's umbilical linkage with its viewer. I am interested in that retention as a refusal of the vital force of that light which, according to Barthes, acts as a "carnal medium" (81), as an extensible skin that collapses the very divisions he so effortlessly resurrects throughout his text.

2.

> The body is the sign of a difference that exceeds the body.
>
> —Samira Kawash, *Dislocating the Color Line*[10]



Felix Nadar, Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza et ses Congolais (“Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza with his Congolese”), 1882.

Barthes's theory of photography in *Camera Lucida* is founded on his identification of the "studium" and the punctum, which together unchain a series of impassioned and far-reaching claims about photography's ontology. These two distinct but interacting elements emerge in the first part of the book, in which Barthes has been noting, phenomenologically, that some few images "provoked tiny jubilations, as if they referred to a stilled center, an erotic or lacerating value buried in myself ... and that others, on the contrary, were so indifferent to me that by dint of seeing them multiply, like some weed, I felt a kind of aversion toward them, even of irritation" (16). He resolves "to extend this individuality to a science of the subject"—to form a theory of the photograph according to the caprices of his "overready subjectivity," because "of this attraction, at least, I was certain" (18). Barthes decides

> to compromise with a power, *affect*; affect was what I didn't want to reduce; being irreducible, it was thereby what I wanted, what I ought to reduce the Photograph *to*; the anticipated essence of the Photograph could not, in my mind, be separated from the "pathos" of which, from the first glance, it consists ... As *Spectator* I was interested in Photography only for "sentimental" reasons; I wanted to explore it not as a question (a theme) but as a wound: I see, I feel, hence I notice, I observe, and I think. (20–21)

Barthes's affective method models a relationship to photography that is thus limited, in its capacity to respond to photographs, by the depth and breadth of one's instinctual, preconscious *affective* relationships to images: it is restricted to the vagaries of gut instinct. On this basis Barthes responds with utter disinterest to **a photograph by Koen Wessing, taken in Nicaragua in 1979** during the revolution that sought to overthrow the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza García:

> Did this photograph please me? Interest me? Intrigue me? Not even. Simply, it existed (for me). I understood at once that its existence (its "adventure") derived from the co-presence of two discontinuous elements, heterogeneous in that they did not belong to the same world ... the soldiers and the nuns. (23)[11]

Barthes's lack of interest in Wessing's photograph impels him to "to try to name ... these two elements whose co-presence established, it seemed, the particular interest I took in these photographs. The first, obviously, is an extent, it has the extension of a field, which I perceive quite familiarly as a consequence of my knowledge, my culture" (25). This is the studium, which "doesn't mean ... 'study,' but application to a thing, a kind of general enthusiastic commitment ... but without special acuity" (26). Wessing's photograph conforms to this generality, to what Barthes describes as "a classical body of information: rebellion, Nicaragua, and all the signs of both: wretched un-uniformed soldiers, ruined streets, corpses, grief, the sun, and the heavy-lidded Indian eyes ... in these photographs I can, of course, take a kind of general interest," Barthes continues, " ... but in regard to them my emotion requires the rational intermediary of an ethical and political culture" (26). Thus, faced with Wessing's photograph: no affect, no "fulgurating" force.

Together with this studium, but defined in substantive contrast to it, Barthes describes the punctum as an element that "will break (or punctuate) the *studium*. This time it is not I who will seek it out ... it is this element which rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me" (26). It is "this wound, this prick, this mark made by a pointed instrument" (26–27). This first definition of the punctum resolves in the figure of a detail in the photograph that expands metonymically and uncontrollably to subsume and transform the whole: "Occasionally (but alas all too rarely) a 'detail' attracts me. I feel that its mere presence changes my reading, that I am looking at a new photograph, marked in my eyes with a higher value. This 'detail' is the *punctum*" (42).

In the series of photographs on which Barthes subsequently alights in his elaboration of this first definition of the punctum, certain details rise up out of the scene, animating him as he reciprocally animates the photograph. Each one of these are alike in their tendency to underscore disproportions or deviations in other people (whether of physique, or of proper comportment according to the strictures of race, gender, and class), or they are defined by their incidental capacity to unleash elements of Barthes's personal history over and against the indexical specifics of the scene. If theorist and art historian Kaja Silverman is correct in writing that the look which Barthes "brings to bear" in *Camera Lucida* "is a wayward or eccentric look, one not easily stabilized or assigned to preexisting loci," it is nevertheless unerringly consistent in its condescension and indifference, enamored only of its own memory.[12]

Thus, in James Van der Zee's 1926 studio portrait of three African Americans, Barthes alights on the punctum of the low slung belt of "the 'solacing Mammy'... whose arms are crossed behind her back like a schoolgirl," before then fixating on the punctum of her " *strapped pumps,*" describing their sartorial choices as "an effort touching by reason of its naıveté" (43). In William Klein's 1954 portrait of a group of small children, Barthes writes that "what I stubbornly see is the one child's bad teeth" (45). In André Kertész's 1921 portrait of a blind violinist flanked by two small children, Barthes's writes that "I recognize, with my whole body, the straggling villages I passed through on my long-ago travels in Hungary and Rumania" (45). In Duane Michals's 1958 portrait of Andy Warhol, in which Warhol

hides his face beneath his upstretched hands, "the *punctum* is not the gesture but the slightly repellent substance of those spatulate nails, at once soft and hard-edged" (45).

In Lewis Hine's 1924 photograph, captioned "Idiot children in an Institution. New Jersey, 1924," Barthes writes that he "hardly see[s] the monstrous heads and pathetic profiles (which belong to the *studium*); what I see ... is the off-center detail, the little boy's huge Danton collar, the girl's finger bandage" (51). In Nadar's 1882 portrait of Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza sat between his two unnamed black boys "dressed as sailors," Barthes sees the confidently crossed arms of one boy stood above de Brazza as the punctum, and notes the other boy's hand, perched on de Brazza's thigh, "as 'aberrant'" (51). After a period of reflection on Van der Zee's portrait—once "this photograph has *worked* within me"—Barthes writes that

> I realized that the real *punctum* was the necklace she was wearing; for (no doubt) it was this same necklace (a slender ribbon of braided gold) which I had seen worn by someone in my own family, and which, once she died, remained shut up in a family box of old jewelry (this sister of my father never married, lived with her mother as an old maid, and I had always been saddened whenever I thought of her dreary life). (53)

Barthes continues: "On account of her necklace, the black woman in her Sunday best has had, for me, a whole life external to the portrait" (57). This would imply that were she not in possession of a necklace that resembled his aunt's,[13] she would have had no life for him before or beyond the portrait. Early in *Camera Lucida* it becomes apparent that Barthes's method is hinged upon what Fred Moten has brilliantly described as a "silencing invocation," which is unrepentantly violent.[14] The imperious air of dismissal of the actual and possible lives of Others in Barthes's text makes plain that photographs, and the people appearing in them, serve him as palanquins on what Moten dubs "the europhallic journey to the interior."[15]

Thus, as with the earth in Kertész's rural portrait from Hungary, so too with the "American blacks" (43) in the Van der Zee portrait: those who Barthes cites as marked by the presence of the punctum either serve as the tabula rasa onto which he might reinscribe his own history, or they are united in a chorus of failed attempts to conform to hegemonic standards of normalcy which position the bodies depicted in those images as different, as poor, as aberrant, as black. If Barthes wishes to claim that "it is not possible to posit a rule of connection between the *studium* and the *punctum* (when it happens to be there)" (42), it is nevertheless alarming to note the tremendous consistency with which the punctum's presence marks deviation and degeneracy from a set of corporeal, classed, gendered and raced norms throughout his book. It seems that precisely at the point of his discovery and elaboration of the punctum, in the midst of his "primitive" solipsistic rejection of history, knowledge, and culture, Barthes is nevertheless enmeshed in the violently hierarchical logics of whiteness. He most certainly is not outside of culture, however forceful his desire.[16]

What is more, all of this occurs within a series of images that he steadfastly refuses to clearly see. The hierarchical dynamic between the studium and the punctum seems to function in such a way that the scene itself (the studium), in which he is "sympathetically interested, as a docile cultural subject" (43), relays little of substance or import or attraction about the people that it depicts, since it is one among the "thousands of photographs" (26) of which Barthes writes that "I felt a kind of aversion to them, even of irritation" (16). Aversion is "the action of turning away ... one's eyes," it is "the action of ... warding off, getting rid of."[17] I would argue that it is precisely because Barthes *hardly sees* anything other than his punctum (his prick) that his text is capable of effecting such an unbroken series of acts of erasure and displacement of human subjectivity.

When he is himself the object of the camera's attentions, Barthes experiences terror— "what I see is that I have become Total-Image, which is to say, Death in person; others—the Other—do not dispossess me of myself, they turn me ferociously into an object, they put me at their mercy"—and he thus declaims, in his own defense, that "It is my *political* right to be a subject which I must protect" (15). No such consideration informs his response to the portraits of poor children, institutionalized and differently abled children, black families, survivors of slavery or the servant boys of French colonial governor Savorgnan de Brazza. Rather, what he effortlessly produces in his first formulation of the punctum is a work that perpetrates what Gayatri Spivak has called "epistemic violence," achieved through "the asymmetrical obliteration of the trace of that Other in its precarious Subject-ivity."[18]

3.

> Skin re-members, both literally in its material surface and metaphorically in resignifying on this surface, not only race, sex and age, but the quite detailed specificities of life histories.
>
> —Jay Prosser, *Skin Memories*[19]

In the second half of *Camera Lucida*, having determined at the close of the first that "my pleasure was an imperfect mediator," Barthes resolves to "descend deeper into

myself to find evidence of Photography" (60). In this section, his second and final form of the punctum is unveiled. Motivated by his deep grief at the death of his mother, Barthes had resolved "one November evening" to go through some photographs with "no hope of 'finding' her" (63). In this fervent struggle to retrieve the dead and return her to the present, through the offices of photographs that imperfectly deliver to Barthes only fragments that miss her essence, he describes himself as confronted by "the same effort, the same Sisyphean labor: to reascend, straining toward essence, to climb back down without having seen it, and to begin all over again" (63). In the throes of this mad labor he stumbles across the Winter Garden Photograph, its corners "blunted from having been pasted into an album, the sepia print … faded … The picture just managed to show two children standing together at the end of a little wooden bridge in a glassed-in conservatory, what was called a Winter Garden in those days" (67).

In this photograph, or more properly *through* it, Barthes "rediscover[s]" his mother (69). It retrieves for him the "distinctness of her face, the naıve attitude of her hands," but more than this it indexes specific and true traits of her personality "so abstract in relation to an image," which are "nonetheless present in the face revealed in the photograph" (69). For Barthes, the Winter Garden Photograph "collected all the possible predicates from which mother's being was constituted" (70), and thus it effected for him the necessary transcendence of death's impassable limits, and the revivification of "the desired object, the beloved body" (7), although this reversal comes at a cost: "I arrived, traversing three-quarters of a century, at the image of a child: I stare intensely at the Sovereign Good of childhood, of the mother, of the mother-as-child. Of course I was then losing her twice over, in her final fatigue and in her first photograph, for me the last" (71).

Returning to himself in his complex of grief and joy, Barthes discovers that "something like an essence of the Photograph floated in this picture," and in keeping with his solipsism, "I therefore decided to 'derive' all Photography (its 'nature') from the only photograph which assuredly existed for me" (73). By way of the effects of this photograph, Barthes comes to understand that his "interrogation of the evidence of photography" must *not* be motivated by "pleasure, but in relation to what we romantically call love and death" (73).

It is thus as a function of the Winter Garden Photograph that he "rediscovers the truth of the image," and determines that

> in Photography I can never deny that *the thing has been there*. There is a superposition here: of reality and of the past. And since this constraint exists only for Photography, we must consider it, by reduction, as the very essence, the *noeme* of Photography … The name of Photography's *noeme* will therefore be: "That-has-been." (76–77)

This is the second and final form of the punctum, unveiled in his realization that photography possesses an "evidential force, and that its testimony bears not on the object but on time" (89).

This secondary conception of the punctum constitutes an ontological definition. The mark of *that-has-been* is indexical, and thus bears a *physical* relationship to time, and to *all* photographs. Yet Barthes claims that it may nevertheless be "experienced with indifference, as a feature which goes without saying" (77). He continues: "It is this indifference which the Winter Garden Photograph had just roused me from" (77). We are thus faced with a punctum that is universal, that is of the order of an intensity bearing on time and materiality, but that might nevertheless be "experienced with indifference," and that is in this sense a varying factor of spectatorial experience, but a constant of photography's ontology.

In the very discovery and elaboration of a punctum that constitutes a new universality, a punctum which certifies that "what I see has been here, in this place which extends between infinity and the subject (*operator* or *spectator*); it has been here, and yet immediately separated; it has been absolutely, irrefutably present, and yet already deferred" (59), Barthes retreats into privation from others. He distances himself from the notion of being *for* any other except his mother, and theorizes photography as structured by a punctum that need not wound—an arrow that pierces nothing, since for us, the indexical fact of the existence of others, materially transported to us in photographs, constitutes "nothing but an indifferent picture, one of the thousand manifestations of the 'ordinary'" (73). Fred Moten responds to this withdrawal of temporal indexicality in his extraordinary essay "Black Mo'nin'," writing that "in other words, historical particularity becomes … egocentric particularity … Barthes is interested in, but, by implication, does not love the world."[20] In effect, Barthes's second theorization and valorization of the punctum declares: the mad, extraordinary historical fact of the existence of others will likely only matter if you love them as I love my mother.

At this juncture, Barthes returns to a portrait by Richard Avedon of William Casby, which he has reproduced and discussed earlier in the book:

> I think again of the portrait of William Casby, "born a slave," photographed by Avedon.[21] The *noeme* here is intense; for the man I see here *has been* a slave: he certifies this not by historical testimony but by a new, somehow experiential order of proof, although it is the past which is in question—a proof no

> longer merely induced: the proof-according-to-St.-Tho mas-seeking-to-touch-the-resurrected-Christ. (79–80)

We see here that a simple portrait of William Casby materializes the brute fact, the vast articulated edifice and history of slavery, so that the two are coextensive and inseparable. Casby is the godhead of Barthes's theory of the ontology of the photograph (as something that gives truth and reality *without* mediation), and the touch of the image, which is here equivalent to the touching of his flesh, provides the definitive proof that eradicates our/St. Thomas's doubt in the face of this resurrection. It is also precisely at this juncture that Casby disappears from Barthes's text. In his place:

> I remember keeping for a long time a photograph I had cut out of a magazine—lost subsequently, like everything too carefully put away—which showed a slave market: the slavemaster, in a hat, standing; the slaves, in loincloths, sitting. I repeat: a photograph, not a drawing or engraving; for my horror and my fascination as a child came from this: that there was a *certainty* that such a thing had existed: not a question of exactitude, but of reality: the historian was no longer the mediator, slavery was given without mediation, the fact was established *without method*. (80)

All traces of supporting texts, all suggestions of a prior caption, all recollections of contextual indicators in the magazine that might have vouchsafed that what was displayed in the image was true have been elided from his account. The that-has-been of slavery supersedes even the photographic processes that mediate evidence of historical facts. This epidermal indexing of slavery—what the Apostle Thomas calls "the print of the nails" in the flesh of Christ[22]—recurs in Barthes's earlier writing on Casby's face, and has an exclamatory force that resembles the definition of the index elaborated by Charles Sanders Peirce, and expanded by Brian Massumi. For Peirce, indexes "act on the nerves of the person and force his attention."[23] Massumi continues, in dialogue with Peirce, writing that indexes are

> nervously compelling because they "show something about things, on account of their being physically connected to them" in the way smoke is connected to fire. Yet they "assert nothing." Rather, they are in the mood of the "imperative, or exclamatory, as 'See there!' or 'Look out!' The instant they "show" we are startled: they are immediately performative.[24]

In Barthes's recollection of the slavemaster photograph, in his encounter with Avedon's portrait of Casby, we see the instantaneity of a corporeal response to a visual sign that exclaims "slavery!" and in so doing, provokes horror. In his essay, Massumi will go on to elaborate the ways that such affective responses as Barthes's horror can legitimate violent actions in the present against notionally probable "future threats" within the logic of the War on Terror. For our purposes, the evaporation of all mediation from Barthes's account of this horribly fascinating encounter is of vital significance, because it transposes to the black body something that properly resides within the mind of a white child.

I dwell on this elision of the constitutive mediations that enunciate "slavery!" for Barthes because it suggests, troublingly, that at the core of his thinking in *Camera Lucida* there is an unquestioned assumption that racial subjugation irreducibly inheres in the flesh of the Other, and is not in fact entangled with and produced through processes of mediation. Barthes's disproportionate interest in the face of William Casby, and his relative indifference to imagery of the practices of enslavement that feature white men (the slavemaster photograph, Nadar's portrait of de Brazza) suggests an inability to contend with the violent depredations of racism when the proponents and beneficiaries of such violence also figure within the frame. In this sense, slavery is less a field of broken relations between people than an ontological condition that inheres—magically and ahistorically—in Casby's flesh. If blackness speaks slavery into being performatively, then blackness is deictic: capable of direct proof of abjection, tending to directly show degeneracy and subjugation without intermediary, and thus by virtue of its essence.

We might pause for a moment here to consider the following urgent questions: How exactly might "slavery" be laid bare, following Barthes, in the photographic depiction of the face of a former slave? How might the general historical condition of slavery, and the fundamentally inassimilable experience of its perpetration—which by definition is imposed with lethal and indiscriminate force by slavers upon their victims—inhere in the aspect of the formerly enslaved? By what tool, with what force is Casby's skin inscribed with slavery? Where might we locate the evidential mark? Isn't *en* slavement—the brutal, decimating, expropriative, rapacious and lustfully violent practice of subjection—essentially defined by the actions of slavers? What does it mean to see the essence of American slavery in the visage of a black man, William Casby, who is then swiftly objectified into evidence of white supremacist violence, dis-individuated and hyper-enlarged to stand metonymically for the entire system of judicial and extrajudicial apartheid of which he was *not* the cause, *nor* the architect, *nor* the executor, but the victim and survivor?

Portrait of Napoléon Bonaparte (Jérôme) by Atelier Nadar, date unknown.

4.

> If such a counter reading of *Camera Lucida* turns out to be correct, then the "essence of photography," precisely defined by Barthes as "that has been,"—and acted upon in similar ways by entire populations—has for many decades meant the practical disavowal of racism by its beneficiaries.
>
> —Jonathan Beller[25]

If throughout *Camera Lucida* Barthes regularly averts his gaze, we might think this gesture in the context of a disavowal, and consider the mirroring relationship between the lost slave market photograph, depicting "the slavemaster, in a hat, standing, the slaves, in loincloths, sitting" (80), and Nadar's portrait of Pierre Savorgnan de Brazza, which Barthes reproduces in the book. Savorgnan de Brazza was a French colonial explorer who participated in the French suppression of the "Mokrani Revolt" in Algeria in 1871 (known locally as "the French War") in which nearly one third of the population rose up in arms against French colonial rule. Savorgnan de Brazza "founded" the colony Brazzaville—in the contemporary Republic of Congo—and, from 1882 (the year from which Nadar's portrait dates) to 1897 he governed France's Central African colonies from his capital in Libreville.

The mirroring relationship between these images—one lost, but ineradicably inscribed in Barthes's memory, the other found, but of minimal account in his thinking —is visible not merely as a consequence of their perfectly inverted compositions (a white man stood above seated slaves; a white man sat beneath standing chattel), but in the fact that the structure of "relations"[26] which govern both images coincide in their essential utility to racial capitalism, and to the violent maintenance of white supremacy. If Casby's portrait confirms for Barthes that "slavery has existed, not so far from us" (79), then what does de Brazza's portrait confirm in its greater proximity—geographically, culturally, and politically—to a French intellectual writing in France? Barthes responds repeatedly to the portrait of Casby, an African American, but in the " *that-has-been*" of violently racist French colonial rule, incarnated in the figure of de Brazza, he finds no words—neither upon first encounter, nor after a period of sustained reflection.

Significantly, in both the lost slave market photograph and the de Brazza portrait, white men serve as central protagonists of the image, and as the central agents and makers of meaning in the historical conjunctures that each photograph frames (91). I would argue that these aversions and silences demonstrate Barthes's freedom to reject the radical contiguity that the photograph creates between its material referent and its viewer, and that that freedom is useful precisely *because* "the referent adheres" (6). I would argue that the contiguity that a carnal medium like photography might create between Barthes's body and the facts of French colonialism—the radical fleshly proximities that might issue from an unrestricted encounter with de Brazza's portrait—risk a kind of contagion, a destabilization of both "affective" method and of sovereign self. It may be comforting to assume that these lacuna and elisions represent an instance in which Barthes "consumes aesthetically" (51) a meaning that is "too impressive" (36)—that he discovers a punctum in Nadar's portrait which alleviates the political pressure of contending with this scene. But this would imply that the punctum can serve to inoculate its viewer against the politics of meaning, and this is a notion that Barthes never entertains or avows: that "punctual" seeing might serve to deflect shock.[27]

The matter of Barthes's aversion to the material historicity of the photograph turns not merely on his indifference to the studium, and to what he construes as its tedious injunction to feign interest in the bromides of "the Operator": "It is rather as if I had to read the Photographer's myths in the photograph, fraternizing with them but not quite believing in them" (28). Barthes's refusal to contend with the that-has-been of images to which he himself is connected, both by the transits of historical meaning and by the circuitry of colonial power, models a method of engaging with photography premised on a politics of strategic disavowal, and ratified by the strength of white feeling. I would argue that his various elisions, blind spots, and outright aversions to the residual matter that subtends photographic grain and pixel devolves around the disordering fact that racist histories of French colonial violence, of which he is a direct beneficiary, undergird his " *political* right to be a subject" (15), over and against those people he instrumentalizes as so many speechless objects in the evolution of his theory.

If Casby has no standing as an individual whose referent " *adheres*" to the photograph, if his presence in Avedon's portrait registers only the fact of slavery, doesn't his dis-individuation imply that he has no "punctual" existence, no "he-has-been"? What might this mean for blackness? Wendy Hui Kyong Chun writes that, "in terms of US slavery, dark skin became the mark of the natural condition of slavery through which all kinds of external factors—and the violence perpetrated on African slaves—became naturalized and 'innate.'"[28] What might this mean for Barthes's canonical theory of photography?

In her pathbreaking essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Hortense Spillers recapitulates the inventory of physical and symbolic violences meted out against Africans and African Americans through the historical conjuncture of slavery into a post-emancipation present of "neo-enslavement," addressing, in part, the profoundly generative nature of the captive body in the preservation of white subjectivity.[29] Spillers describes the impossibility, for members of the

captive community, of maintaining a coherent set of "biological, sexual, social, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, and psychological" coordinates around a captive body under conditions of enslavement, in which attempts to preserve corporeal and psychic integrity are violently disrupted "by externally imposed meanings and uses," which she then briefly enumerates:

> 1) the captive body becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality; 2) at the same time—in stunning contradiction—the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming *being for* the captor; 3) in this absence *from* a subject position, the captured sexualities provide a physical and biological expression of "otherness"; 4) as a category of "otherness," the captive body translates into a potential for pornotroping and embodies sheer physical powerlessness that slides into a more general "powerlessness," resonating through various centers of human and social meaning.[30]

I cannot help but hear an echo of Barthes's ascription of the term "solacing Mammy" to the black woman in Van Der Zee's 1926 portrait in Spillers's foregoing lines. Against the normative term "body," Spillers posits a hierarchical distinction in the context of slavery (and its ongoing aftermath) "between 'body' and 'flesh,'" and she imposes "that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions." Thus, "before the 'body' there is the 'flesh,' that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography." Such black flesh is ineluctably concealed, dis-individuated of its subjective specificity beneath "the brush of discourse"—concealed within the general field of Barthes's studium—while it is simultaneously subjected to pathological forms of violence registered in the record of its passage through the eviscerations of slavery: "eyes beaten out, arms, backs, skulls branded, a left jaw, a right ankle, punctured; teeth missing, as the calculated work of iron, whips, chains, knives, the canine patrol, the bullet."

Such desecration inscribes black flesh with specific meaning as the site of degenerate property incapable of self-possession and fundamentally *available* for violence, so that these "undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color." In effect, the studium effects an erasure of its own constitutive violence by displacing such violence to black flesh as evidence of its inherent degeneracy. The stigmatization of black skin veils the white violence that subjects it. *This* is how Casby's face indexes slavery for Barthes "without mediation," because for Barthes black skin is not a medium, an interface, a site through which meanings are mediated and onto which they are projected, but is rather a brute object: a dumb deictic thing that speaks "slavery!" If such a claim seems extreme, note how seamlessly the phrase "black skin" substitutes for "the Photograph" in establishing slavery's fact without method or mediation: "[the Photograph] is never anything but an antiphon of 'Look,' 'See,' 'Here it is'; it points a finger at certain *vis-à-vis*, and cannot escape this pure deictic language" (5).

Echoes of the Fanonian moment of epidermalization resound in Barthes's text. Faced with the simultaneity of such viscerally and symbolically productive violence, Spillers responds: "We might well ask if this phenomenon of marking and branding actually 'transfers' from one generation to another, finding its various *symbolic substitutions* in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moments?"

In this light, perhaps Casby's dis-individuation is reflective of the fact that the logic of photographic visibility and of temporal presence elaborated by Barthes is utterly permeated by the furtive dynamics and histories of white power, by its necessary disavowals, by its utter dependence upon acts and processes of racialization, normative logics of degeneracy, and by the forms of pleasure that whiteness derives from the various violences of possession, meted out in the exercise of self-possession. Casby surfaces in this Richard Avedon portrait *only* as a dis-individuated historical index, as a metonym for a general (enslaved/black) condition which he is made to embody in Barthes's text, because the normative protocols of photographic visibility and legibility serve to veil the structuring power of *whiteness*, which disappears from view in Barthes's reading of this portrait precisely at its blood-soaked natal scene: *slavery*.

Spillers writes about such symbolic "atomizations" of the captive black body—its semantic and physical dismembering into parts, or into texts for a general reading—that "we lose any hint or suggestion of a dimension of ethics, of relatedness between human personality and its anatomical features, between human personality and cultural institutions."[31] Perhaps all this means that Barthes's "stupid metaphysics," his willful "primitivism," to follow Jonathan Beller's beautiful formulation,

> must steadfastly keep the histories of racial formation and political economy outside of the photographic frame to have evidence without method because otherwise, one might see that *the evidence is the method*: the historical and technical separation of subjects from their skin explicitly places racialization and photography on a continuum. [32]

This is, to quote Barthes himself, "a vague, casual, even

cynical phenomenology" (20) indeed.

Throughout *Camera Lucida*, Barthes summons the images of people so that they might sit wordlessly on the page, subsumed by his own history, subservient to the necessities of his grief, salient by virtue of their error or deformity, useful as instantiations of grand abstractions, either mythic or mundane, but wholly without speech: *sans parole*. Faced with Avedon's portrait of William Casby, Barthes is incapable of asking, much less of imagining (as he did of Napoleon's youngest brother, **Jerome**, at the outset of the book [3]): What might his eyes have seen?

Continues at "Sans Parole: Reflections on Camera Lucida*, , Part 2," e-flux journal, no. 125 (March 2022).*

X

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1
Cited in Geoffrey Batchen, "Palinode: An Introduction to *Photography Degree Zero* ," in *Photography Degree Zero* , ed. Ge offrey Batchen (MIT Press, 2009), 11.

2
Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987), 70.

3
Chéla Sandoval, "Theorizing White Consciousness for a Post-Empire World: Barthes, Fanon, and the Rhetoric of Love," in *Displacing Whiteness: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism* , ed. Ruth Frankenberg (Duke University Press, 1997), 90.

4
Fred Moten, "Black Mo'nin'," in *Loss: The Politics of Mourning* , eds. David Eng and David Kazanjian (University of California Press, 2003); Kaja Silverman, "The Gaze," "The Look," "The Screen," chap. 4–6 in *The Threshold of the Visible World* (Routledge, 1996); Tina Campt, "The Lyric of the Archive," chap. 3 in *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Duke University Press, 2012); Jonathan Beller, "Camera Obscura After All: The Racist Writing with Light," chap. 6 in *The Message Is Murder: Substrates of Computational Capital* (Pluto Press, 2018).

5
Plainly, since the Winter Garden Photograph was not published the term iconic seems utterly misconceived. But the image stands as the pretext and urtext for *Camera Lucida*, and as a metonym for Barthes's theorization of photography, so the photograph's spectacular absence make it not merely a figure of great significance in regards to the book, but arguably the book's preeminent figure.

6
Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (Hill and Wang, 1981), 42. All subsequent page references to this source are given inline. All emphasis in original.

7
Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (Noonday Press/Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1972).

8
Sandoval, "Theorizing White Consciousness," 86, 90.

9
Sandoval, "Theorizing White Consciousness," 87.

10
Samira Kawash, "The Epistemology of Race: Knowledge, Visibility, Passing," in *Dislocating the Color Line: Identity, Hybridity and Singularity in African-American Literature* (Stanford University Press, 1997), 130.

11
Later on in *Camera Lucida*, on page 42, Barthes gives some intimation that he might recognize that that "heterogenous" figure of the nuns contrasting with the soldiers issues from imperial violence and colonial history, when he writes that "a whole causality explains the presence of the 'detail': the Church implanted in these Latin American countries, the nuns allowed to circulate as nurses, etc.," but he gives no indication that he recognizes their presence as in fact part of an underlying continuum of *homogeneity* in which Central and South America are, and have been, constant targets for imperialist violence. See Ariella Azoulay, "Unlearning Decisive Moments of Photography," in *Still Searching...*, Fotomuseum Winterthur, 2018 https://www.fotomuseum.ch/en/blog/?filter%5b%5d=author%3A8310 .

12
Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* , 183.

13
More on this image in Part 2 of this essay, forthcoming in *e-flux journal* .

14
Moten, "Black Mo'nin'," 67.

15
Moten, "Black Mo'nin'," 67.

16
"Another, louder voice urged me to dismiss such sociological commentary; looking at certain photographs, I wanted to be a primitive, without culture." *Camera Lucida* , 7.

17
Oxford English Dictionary , online ed., 2019.

18
Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* eds. Cary Nelson, Lawrence Grossberg (University of Illinois Press, 1988), 280, 281.

19
Jay Prosser, "Skin Memories," in *Thinking Through the Skin* , eds. Sara Ahmed and Jackie Stacey (Routledge, 2001), 52.

20
Moten, "Black Mo'nin'," 71.

21
Note: Richard Avedon has always captioned this portrait "William Casby, born in slavery, March 1963," where Barthes's *Camera Lucida* changed the caption to "William Casby, born a slave. 1963."

22
Gospel of St. John, chap. 20, verse 25, *The Holy Bible: Old and New Testaments, King James Version* (Duke Classics, 2012), 2423.

23
Charles Sanders Peirce, quoted in Brian Massumi, "The Future Birth of the Affective Fact: The Political Ontology of Threat," in *The Affect Theory Reader* , ed. Melissa Gregg (Duke University Press, 2010), 64.

24
Massumi, "The Future Birth of Affective Fact," 64.

25
Beller, *The Message Is Murder*, 105–6.

26
The term "relations" must be qualified by quotation marks since in both instances, white men are depicted with their docile black property.

27
For more on this model of psychic absorption and deflection of shock, see Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006).

28
Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, "Introduction: Race and/as Technology; or, How to Do Things With Race," *Camera Obscura* 24, no. 1 (2009), 11.

29
Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 76.

30
Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 67. All subsequent quotes from this source are taken from page 67 unless otherwise noted. All emphasis in original.

31
Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 68.

32
Beller, *The Message Is Murder*, 109.

Skye Arundhati Thomas

Remember the Details

On December 11, 2019, the Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) was passed in the Indian parliament. Proposed by the Narendra Modi–led Bharatiya Janata Party, it included a religious classification: when granting asylum to religious minorities from neighboring nation-states, it excluded Muslims. This was designed to work in tandem with a new National Register of Citizens (NRC), which required Indians to provide documentation, if and when asked by local state authorities, as proof of ancestry. This targeted indigenous and lower-caste communities, who are often undocumented, with no rights to the land they occupy or work on. The first law determined who got to call themselves Indian, and the other imprisoned those whose definition the state found lacking. Detention centers were readied; in the Indian northeast, people had already been taken in under the NRC. In response, a protest movement bloomed across the country. India was energized by a revolutionary spirit. Muslim, Dalit, and Adivasi students, activists, writers, musicians, and poets addressed crowds at twenty-four-hour sit-ins and occupations of public space. People shared snacks, and held hours-long debates about the intention of words like "citizenship" and "democracy." These peaceful protests were met with severe police brutality, and the clashes were deeply uneven. The police wore riot gear—flak jackets, combat boots, helmets, shields—and carried machine guns. Protestors were unarmed, sometimes holding only their phones. In February 2020, just before the pandemic was announced, tensions escalated, and violence raged through northeast New Delhi. Muslims were targeted by Hindu mobs, as groups of masked civilians burned down shops and threw cooking-gas bombs through windows. Hundreds were injured, and at least seventy people are known to have died. In March 2020, the New Delhi Police filed a case claiming that the attacks were the result of a conspiracy led by a group of young Muslim activists, and a series of arrests were made in what is now known as the "Delhi riots case." Footage of this people's protest movement has lived several lives. First, it flashed across social media as evidence of state brutality. It was later repurposed, entering courtrooms and charge sheets as key evidence against the young activists. This essay tracks some of this footage; it is an attempt at writing a history.

—Skye Arundhati Thomas

I.

On September 16, 2020, a group of independent journalists, activists, and academics held a conference in the tree-shaded courtyard of the Press Club of India in New Delhi. A pre-recorded video was switched on. "If you are watching this," said the lone figure on the screen, "it means I have been arrested." Umar Khalid, a young Muslim activist and scholar of indigenous histories, had been taken into custody three days prior. After being

Students from Jamia Millia Islamia (National Islamic University) are blocked by police while marching towards parliament in New Dheli, January 2020. The march came after a pro-government supporter opened fire on protesters at the university, injuring a student. Photo: Ishan Tankha.

interrogated for eleven hours by a special cell of the Delhi Police—assembled to investigate the Delhi riots case—he was booked under sections of the Indian Penal Code, the Prevention of Damage to Public Property Act, and the Arms Act. He was charged with rioting, conspiracy, murder, and arms trade. Allegedly, the evidence incriminating Khalid ran to a hundred thousand pages. "What is the risk I pose?" he asks in the video, continuing, "Is it that I claim this country to be as much mine as it is yours?" Dressed in a pale cotton shirt, seated in front of a blank, white wall, Khalid is speaking from the past with a warning for the future. As he talks, he gesticulates with one hand, his movements punctuating what he says: "They are trying to trap you in their lies."

In the months leading up to his arrest, Khalid had been one of the most visible figures of the anti-CAA/NRC protest movement. On February 17, 2020, he addressed a rally of primarily Muslim men in Amravati, a city in the state of Maharashtra. An attendee uploaded a video of his speech onto YouTube. In it, Khalid is invited on stage, where he speaks about the assault against students at Jamia Millia Islamia, the National Islamic University in New Delhi, which had taken place three months before. Standing behind a red podium, with one arm on either side, he begins by thanking "the women, the mothers, the sisters, the grandmothers" of northeast New Delhi, who had taken to the streets in protest against the state's brutality. He tells the story of the night of December 15, 2019. An anti-CAA/NRC protest had taken place near Jamia Millia, and in an attempt to identify and arrest "vandals," New Delhi state police and paramilitary personnel had entered the university campus. They carried no warrant or paperwork detailing grounds for entry or arrest. It was a Sunday evening. Officers stalked into corridors after sunset, and, without warning, fired teargas shells and stun grenades. Students ran for cover, hiding behind upturned cabinets, shelves, desks. The police ransacked rooms, and broke tables and chairs. Dispatches from the scene overwhelmed social media: short, trembling videos evidenced the crushed glass and mangled metal covering the hallways, and the deafening, uninterrupted sound of tear gas shells. Walls were bloodstained. Later, witnesses spoke of hearing gunfire. In an act of cruelty designed to degrade its victims, state forces dragged praying students out of the university

mosque, despite not being allowed to enter places of worship.

On stage in Amravati, Khalid explained how the stun grenades sounded like bombs, how the explosions reverberated for hours through the neighborhood, how the cloud of tear gas was so thick that even two kilometers from the campus, people's eyes watered when they stepped out of their homes, or opened windows. When residents tried to approach a local police station, they found that the doors were locked. "It was the grandmothers who found the courage," Khalid explains. A group of women led people to a sit-in site on the banks of the Yamuna River, in a neighborhood of New Delhi that would soon take over the Indian news feed—Shaheen Bagh. As Khalid speaks, the camera filming him—a mobile phone—clumsily pans across the crowd, showing the hundreds of men seated in the audience. Khalid addresses the congregation not as a lone revolutionary figure, staking an individual claim of leadership, but reiterates how Muslim women were leading the movement. It's nighttime, the crowd is seated on white plastic chairs and rugs laid on the ground. The area is enclosed by blue satin curtains. Audience members are clutching their phones, recording Khalid, periodically breaking into applause.

II.

On March 2, 2020, politician Amit Malviya tweeted a forty-two-second-long excerpt from the video of Umar Khalid's Amravati speech. Malviya is a member of Modi's BJP, the Bharatiya Janata Party, which translates to the People's Party of India. "Umar Khalid, already facing sedition charges," Malviya writes alongside the video clip, "exhorted a largely Muslim audience to come out on the streets in huge numbers … Was the violence in Delhi planned weeks in advance?" In the extracted footage, Khalid simply says: since the state is trying to divide the country, people must come together to unite it. "Will you join me?" he asks the crowd. Republic TV, a rightwing media channel, prolific in amplifying fake news, picked up Malviya's edit of the video and broadcast it on primetime news, accusing Khalid of inciting a riot. In the charge sheet filed against Khalid, this video clip is listed as a reason for his arrest; it is a crucial piece of evidence. At a bail hearing in August 2021, Khalid's lawyer called Republic TV's decision to broadcast the truncated video the "death of journalism." When counsel asked the news channel where they sourced the footage from, they admitted it had been taken from Malviya's tweet. Far from being seditious, the full video of Khalid's speech is deeply moving footage, a testament to the dignity of those facing state subjugation. "The history of Jamia Millia, our history, is a history of sacrifices made for this country," Khalid says. "If you want to rain your sticks on us, if you want to shoot your guns, if you want to put us in jail, then go ahead, we are willing to make the sacrifice."

Not one police officer was prosecuted for the incident at Jamia Millia University. On December 21, 2019, a week after the incident, journalists Shahid Tantray and Ahan Penkar interviewed Mohammed Minhajuddin, a young Jamia Millia student with a bruised and swollen eye for *The Caravan*, one of India's few independent political journals. In the video, Minhajuddin sits at home in front of blue patterned wallpaper, a prayer ringing through the air. A philosophy student, he explains to the camera how he ran into a library to take cover. The police broke windows to enter and hit him squarely in one eye with a wooden stick. His eye was instantly blinded. They were "fully prepared to attack students," he explains, "no talk, no interrogation, no questions were asked." After he was hit, Minhajuddin was taken into custody. When he asserted his legal right to record a statement, the police interrogated him instead of noting down what he said. According to reports, over two hundred people were injured during the ambush, nearly all of them Muslim. Several nearby hospitals treated bullet wounds.

Two months after the Jamia Millia incident, in February 2020, the Jamia Coordination Committee, a student organization, released CCTV footage from that night. It shows armed paramilitary and police agents entering the Old Reading Hall dressed in camouflage combat gear, faces covered in scarves. They lean over desks and beat students working at computers or huddled over stacks of paper. Despite the narrative the state has maintained, the video proved, without a flicker of doubt, the sadism inflicted on students. "I'll end my message with this one appeal," says Khalid in the dispatch he recorded before his arrest. "Do not get scared."

III.

Umar Khalid and his comrades have been charged with the most severe offenses a nation-state can levy against its people, including terrorism, murder, and the manufacture and sale of arms. Nearly all of the activists have been charged with the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA), which ambiguously determines what constitutes "terrorist activity." Given its interpretative definition, sections of the UAPA prove exceptionally difficult to petition against, especially for bail. On February 26, 2020, before the special cell of the Delhi Police began its flurry of activist arrests, four video clips were played in the Delhi High Court. The judges were conducting hearings to determine a response protocol. They confronted representatives of the Delhi Police, including the deputy commissioner, stating that the police had not taken sufficient action against violent perpetrators. The judges played the videos—all from the months leading up to the clashes—as evidence of the genesis of the attacks, marking the individuals in them as instigators. Each video was of a BJP party member rousing, or being involved in, the savagery that had taken over the city. The Delhi Police

In a prerecorded video released three days after his arrest, Muslim activist and scholar of indigenous histories Umar Khalid addresses the public. For full video, see →.

claimed to have never seen or heard of the videos, or what they depicted and, so, the judges put them on.

The first video, from late January 2020, was of Anurag Thakur, a BJP minister of state, addressing a large, agitated crowd. He is dressed in a saffron-colored scarf and stands in front of a poster of Home Minister Amit Shah, Modi's right-hand man. Shah's face is enormous, zoomed-in and blown-up. "Desh ke gaddaron ko," Thakur chants to the riled-up audience. *The traitors of this country*. The crowd responds: "Goli maron salon ko." *Let's shoot the bastards.* The second video was of an Asian News International (ANI) interview with BJP member of parliament Parvesh Sharma, also from late January. Sharma is seated at a desk, wearing a starched black waistcoat over a white shirt. The people of Shaheen Bagh, Sharma says, "will enter your homes, rape your sisters and daughters, kill them." His voice is clear, unwavering. He appears calm, speaks monotonously; he is entirely convinced of his accusations.

The third video was a clip of a demonstration held at the Maujpur metro station by BJP leader Kapil Mishra on February 23. Mishra stands flanked by a policeman in a bulletproof vest and wired helmet. He speaks to the crowd in no ambiguous terms; his speech is mutinous. He calls the protestors criminals and demands immediate punitive action. He directs attention to a sit-in led by a group of women at the next station on the metro, Jaffrabad, where the assembly was occupying a carriageway. He issues an ultimatum to the police: either clear out the Jaffrabad and nearby Chand Bagh protest sites, or his supporters would do it themselves. "We will be forced to descend into the streets," he declares. The crowd is provoked. Shortly after Mishra's speech, BJP supporters in the area—throngs of upper-caste Hindu men—started to throw stones, swing batons and iron rods. By early the next morning, there was an official estimate of eight people dead. The mobs were bloodthirsty; a group demolished the protest in Chand Bagh, as though taking a literal cue from Mishra's speech. They had used petrol bombs to set the site on fire. At midday, the police arbitrarily teargassed a women's sit-in tent in Kardampuri. The arson, stone-pelting, and shooting continued for the next four days, moving through the city's northeastern neighborhoods. Both sides suffered casualties, as did the police. Mosques and car parks were burned down; journalists beaten up for attempting to do their jobs. A fourteen-year-old Muslim boy was hit by a stray bullet in the crossfire, wounded along his spine. It took six hours for an ambulance to reach him.

The last video played in court, taken on February 25, was a recorded excerpt of a Facebook Live broadcast by BJP official Abhay Verma, who live-streamed a scene from an alley at nighttime. Around him, a large group of enraged men—some wearing bright orange shirts, others covering

their faces, lifting the cameras of their own mobile phones—chant violent obscenities. In the screen recording shown in court, blue "Like" and red "Heart" bubbles fill up the screen. After playing the videos, the court called for the arrest of Thakur, Sharma, Mishra, and Verma, and Justice S. Muralidhar critiqued the Delhi Police. Just a few hours after the judges had held three crucial hearings on the riots, Justice Muralidhar was transferred out of the Delhi High Court, the news announced close to midnight. By February 27, the Delhi Police began to arrest young activists instead, one of the first being Khalid Saifi, a charismatic orator. A few months on, it would be Umar Khalid's turn. In February 2021, Mishra—still roaming scot-free—will giddily declare to the press that, should he have to, "I will do what I did again."

IV.

On December 20, 2020, Chandrashekhar Azad, leader of the Bhim Army, a Dalit resistance movement, issued a call to action. As part of the ongoing anti-CAA/NRC protests, he asked people to gather at the Jama Masjid in old New Delhi, a seventeenth-century Mughal mosque made from carved red brick. It was, at one point in history, the holiest site of Emperor Shahjahan's imperial seat. The police had been doggedly following Azad's movements, and even attempted to arrest him in advance of the protest. In old Delhi, a constable reached for the collar of his shirt. Azad escaped.

The police imposed Section 144 of the Criminal Procedure Code, which forbids the assembly of four or more people on the grounds of the potential for damage to human life or property, under the charge of rioting. It was a frantic move, and ultimately too late. Thousands had already begun to travel toward the mosque, from within New Delhi and from its two neighboring states, Haryana and Uttar Pradesh. By late afternoon, the steps of the mosque were overrun with people bent forward in prayer for the afternoon *namaz*. Media personnel and police officers had surrounded the gates of the mosque, standing outside, looking in, as though the scene were an elaborate performance. By law, police forces are not allowed to enter places of worship, so they circled the perimeter. The *azaan* rung across this impasse. It was met with the low rumble of water cannon engines. As the prayers ended, the crowd turned to face the cameras and the police, opening banners and flags, bursting into protest chants.

As cameras moved across the crowd, like owls hunting in the dark, Chandrashekhar Azad came into view, surrounded by a protective group of comrades, his lawyer behind him. He held up a copy of the Indian constitution: a document that protects the rights of citizens regardless of religion or caste. Every detail of this moment was enormously significant: Azad was surrounded by Muslim and Dalit protestors in solidarity with each other, gathered together in a historic Islamic city, on the steps of a mosque whose Persian name, Masjid-i-Jahan Numa, loosely translates to "a mosque that commands a view of the world." The copy of the constitution in Azad's hand had a photograph of the revolutionary leader Dr. B. R. Ambedkar on its cover. Dr. Ambedkar was a lawyer, economist, politician, and social justice reformer, and the writer of the Indian constitution. He had converted to Buddhism in a sharp critique and rejection of Hinduism and its embedded cruelty, particularly in how it devises, maintains, and rigorously upholds the caste system. Dr. Ambedkar wrote in legislation to override caste hierarchies and set affirmative action policies. The subcontinent, as structured by caste, had always been "essentially undemocratic," he said. He enabled a sophisticated set of reforms, those that were feminist, safeguarded the rights of laborers, and undermined caste monopoly over resources. In the present day, the Modi regime has instead emboldened casteist Hinduism, and all but granted impunity to its violent actors. As much as a contemporary Indian public, state, and judiciary deny the omnipresence of the caste system, India is still entirely governed by its tyranny.

The photograph of Dr. Ambedkar is crucial to understanding the significance of Azad's gesture. A return to the constitution was an obvious rebuttal to the state's rewriting of what the Constitution of India declares: that the Indian nation-state will not be governed by religious sentiments or majorities, and that the new republic's law will work toward the undoing of years of caste- and religion-based brutality. Yet Azad's gesture was not to return to a document that is otherwise enshrined within a narrative of decolonization, or of the first Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru's vision for a "modern" India. It was instead an invitation to look at the constitution as an anti-caste document, and to see secularism not just as an ideological position, but as the only manner by which the Indian nation-state could begin to negotiate its overwhelming daily violence. The images taken of Azad, the protestors, and of Dalits and Muslims clutching the constitution remind us that the end goal of resistance against the Modi regime is not to return to an India of the past, but to fundamentally reimagine the country we have inherited.

Watching the footage of that day was a visceral experience: history collapsed into the contemporary moment. Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, an Islamic theologist and India's first minister of education, had given an anti-Partition speech on the steps of the very same mosque in 1948. "I am an orphan in my own motherland," he had declared. While Partition sought to extract Muslim legacy from Indian soil, he had remarked on the impossibility of such a premise. "Remember," he said, addressing the Muslims present in the crowd, "Delhi has been nurtured with your blood."

Students and activists hold hands during a protest against the Citizenship Amendment Act in the Shaheen Bagh neighborhood of New Delhi, 2020. Photo: Ishan Tankha.

V.

Since the 1990s, protests that take place in central New Delhi have often been corralled into the grounds of Jantar Mantar. The site is close to the parliament buildings, it's small enough to be managed by state forces, and with only two entrances and exits, it's easy to block off. Apart from its logistical value for the state, it makes for a surreal backdrop: Jantar Mantar—which translates to "calculating instruments"—is comprised of thirteen astronomy machines. Built in the early eighteenth century by a Rajput king, these large, stately red-brick structures are situated across the park, designed to predict the movements of the moon, the planets, and the sun. They are surreal objects with their many steps and curves, their ancient presence. Protesters gather amid this cosmological plain. Surrounding Jantar Mantar are several towering modernist buildings that remain from Nehru's time, in brutish stacks of concrete. The entire site—both cement and brick—is located in the heart of Lutyen's old colonial New Delhi and its neoclassical, grandstanding facades. Three visions of India are present in a single space, where they are met by an alternative: the public gathering of dissenting, critical, and impassioned Indian citizens.

The epicenter of the anti-CAA/NRC protest movement was the site in the neighborhood of Shaheen Bagh. Different from the grandstanding, formal architectures that are joined in Jantar Mantar, Shaheen Bagh is a Muslim locality comprised of mixed social classes. Up until the mid-1980s it was mostly farmland, but by the 1990s the land had been parceled off and sold for development projects. The first influx of new residents lived with open sewers, dirt roads, and poor electrical connections. Many were migrant laborers who had traveled to New Delhi from neighboring states. Over two decades, Shaheen Bagh became a dense, hybrid community of working- and middle-class inhabitants. In the days after the students of Jamia Millia University were attacked by state officials, four generations of locals spilled out into the streets in protest. A tent was put up to mark the center of the sit-in, mattresses and blankets laid out. People served "secular chai" and samosas.

In the discourse produced by the speeches, conversations, artworks, and poetry, the anti-CAA/NRC protests had begun to critically revisit the language that had, within the logic of the Indian nation-state, become sacred—words like "citizenship," "secularism," "democracy." Community leaders actively questioned this political jargon, which had largely been taken for granted, or left unexamined, by the mainstream since independent India was first formed. Citizenship and democracy, on some level designed to imply the safeguarding of populations, had turned monstrous. They also hinged on narratives of progress: since the formation of the Indian republic, in simply stating—and aestheticizing—conditions for progress, successive governments have maintained the illusion that progress is underway; that progress is the ultimate project of a postcolonial nation. The first aesthetic of this was conceived by Nehru's preoccupation with European modernism; the blankness of concrete was symbolic of change, aimed to imply an objective distance. It was the aesthetic bleaching of hundreds of years of casteist and Islamophobic history—concrete would symbolize the secular ideals of the new republic. Nehru had a great passion for cement, for dams, buildings, bridges; for a new, modern public infrastructure. Today, this concrete looks like poor camouflage. Both casteism and Islamophobia remain visible in the architecture of most modern Indian cities: we occupy segregated landscapes, coded by layers of access and privilege. This makes the occupations of public space during the anti-CAA/NRC protests, and the protests that have come before them, all the more revolutionary.

After 2014, with the election of Modi's BJP, the narrative of progress was exponentially accelerated. "Acche din aane wale hain." *The good days are on their way.* They did not arrive. The social and economic structure of the nation lies in ruin, particularly with the constant addition of policies that seek to strip regional state governments of their autonomy and centralize all power. The handling of the Covid-19 crisis exemplified this: state governments were unable to enforce local lockdowns or specific healthcare policies because the central government filed petitions in the Supreme Court to make itself the sole proprietor of pandemic handlings. The Modi regime repeatedly lied in open court: about the deaths of migrant laborers who were rendered unemployed overnight after the declaration of the national lockdown; about the lethal shortage of oxygen during the deadly second wave. Despite an enormous death toll, and the total collapse of healthcare infrastructure, the regime actively ran a parallel operation to malign a nonviolent people's movement. It has incarcerated the leaders of this movement under

notorious and archaic laws, blindly characterizing young students as terrorists, as murderers, as manufacturers of arms. In doing so it not only criminalizes them—these spirited leaders—but has also taken away their capacity to do the work of holding space for public discourse and critique. The physical sites of the movement have been destroyed; its revolutionaries placed in prisons.

VI.

In August 2021, the Taliban took control of Afghanistan. As Afghans began to seek asylum, the Modi government seemed to issue "emergency visas" only to Hindus and Sikhs; the CAA was effectively put into action. Earlier the same month, at Jantar Mantar, a group of BJP supporters gathered in an anti-Muslim demo, children holding up posters calling for the "Annihilation of Islam." Thirty-four-year-old eyewitness Mohammad Nasir told *Al Jazeera* that Muslims in India live in "an atmosphere of perpetual fear." Nasir had lost an eye in the February 2020 clashes. On September 10, 2021, Nupur Thapliyal, a correspondent for *LiveLaw India*, tweeted an update from inside a courtroom hearing a petition in the Delhi riots case. "UAPA accused Khalid Saifi and his wife [are] exchanging smiles," writes Thapliyal. She describes how Saifi's daughter shows him how long her hair has grown since she last saw him, how she smiles.

In a July interview with Sharjeel Imam, one of the first activists and scholars to be arrested by the Delhi police in the riots case, *Article 14* asks, "What drove you to protest?" In response, Imam posits, "What drove millions of others to protest beside me?" It was only because of several petitions filed by Imam's lawyer—and nearly a year after the first request was made—that he was finally given access to the seventeen-thousand-page charge sheet levied by the Delhi Police against him. He expects to be held for up to seven years in pretrial detention. Imam spends most of his time in solitary confinement in Tihar Jail, a maximum-security prison in New Delhi. He reads, he works on his PhD thesis, which is on Partition and the subcontinent's history of communal violence. One of the primary sources for his research, Imam explains in the interview, is his own charge sheet.

Natasha Narwal, Devangana Kalita, and Asif Iqbal Tanha were granted interim bail in the only glimmer of hope the riots case has seen so far. The New Delhi High Court wrote, "It is not uncommon for protestors to push the limits permissible in law," and, importantly, that this does not "amount to the commission of a 'terrorist act' or a 'conspiracy' or an 'act preparatory' to the commission of a terrorist act as understood under the UAPA." As Khalid had emphatically declared in his Amravati speech, "This fight is long." We must attend closely to the details. The fists, the upturned faces, the books, the drawings, the protest signs; the barricades, the tear-gas shells, the metal bullet casings, the batons, the speeding jets of liquid spouting from water cannons.

X

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Boris Groys

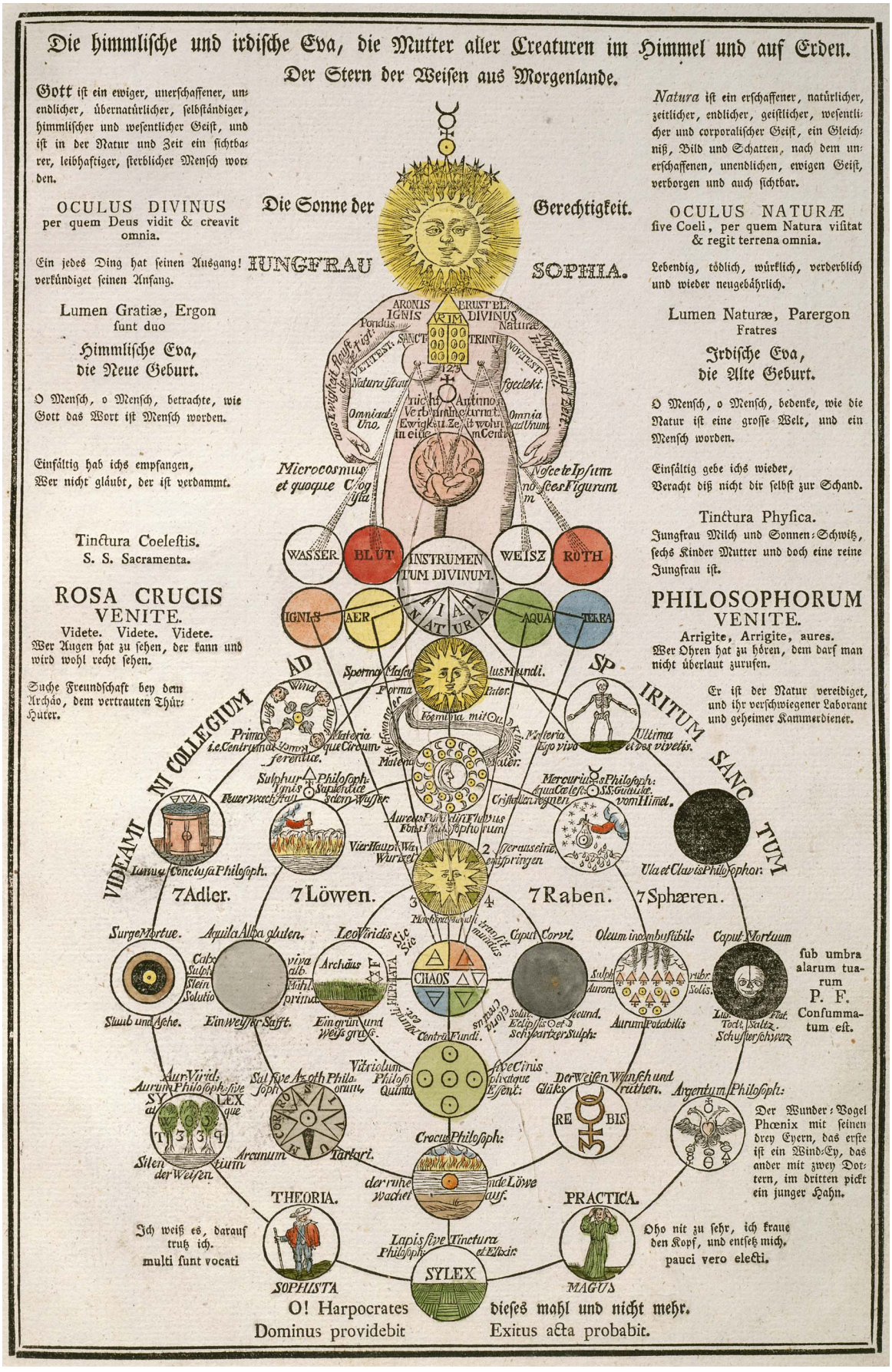
Wisdom as the Feminine World Principle: Vladimir Soloviev's Sophiology

In the Russian intellectual and cultural tradition, the concept, or rather the name, "Sophia" is primarily associated with the Sophiological doctrine of the philosopher and theologian Vladimir Soloviev (1853–1900). Soloviev's first major philosophical work, *The Crisis of Western Philosophy: Against the Positivists* (1874), was written as a reaction to the pessimistic doctrine of Schopenhauer, with its denial of self and world. Under the influence of the nineteenth-century Russian Slavophile intellectual tradition, which accused Western philosophy of a disregard for material cosmic life and a one-sided development of pure conceptual thinking, Soloviev viewed Schopenhauer's philosophy as the authentic consequence of this Western one-sidedness. There the world is not only neglected, but practically denied. Soloviev's reaction—not unlike Nietzsche's—consists in the world's theoretical affirmation, which is meant to give rise to its practical affirmation as well.[1] This project leads to Soloviev's Sophiology.

Soloviev follows the ancient Neoplatonic, Gnostic, and mythical traditions in associating the materiality of the world with the feminine principle. In all likelihood, however, he received the immediate impetus for his Sophiology from his reading of the later philosophy of Friedrich Schelling, which he always admired.[2] Thus, in his *Philosophy of Revelation,* Schelling speaks of the "*Weltmutter*—world mother, the substance of the future Creation," who "does not really belong to divine nature and yet cannot be separated from it." He continues:

> She is the *maya* (related to power, possibility, potence) which spread the web of mere semblance before the Creator in order to trap him and impel him toward the actual Creation.
>
> This potence is most pointedly expressed in the Proverbs of Solomon—as *wisdom* (*chokhmach*): "Jehovah" (the name of the one who is the *Lord of Being*) possessed me at the beginning, etc. ... This principle is not regarded here in its Being-outside-of-itself but in its possibility, before its actual Being. Here it is, however, subject, *prius,* presupposition of all future movement.[3]

In this passage from Schelling, a few important themes of Soloviev's Sophiology can already be recognized in a nutshell. There is the *Weltmutter* as Maya, which Soloviev, under Schopenhauer's influence, understands as the demonic, fallen, deceitful aspect of Sophia, as the negative reality of earthly life as it is. In his view, this reality must indeed be denied; in this he agrees with Eastern Buddhism as well as with Schopenhauer's "Western Buddhism." He believes, however, that Schopenhauer is prevented by Buddhist nihilism from seeing the true face



A mystical depiction of Sophia from Geheime Figuren der Rosenkreuzer, Altona, 1785.

of the divine Sophia: that is, as it were, an ideal materiality, the possibility of harmonious, true life that was opened already before the Original Sin. In the divine, personalized Sophia, the dividedness and fallenness of the material world are always already potentially overcome, and the task of philosophy (that is, of the love of Sophia) is to unite the lover, that is, the philosopher, with Sophia and thus to accomplish a "theurgic" act of world transformation. Like many thinkers of his time—and not without the powerful influence of socialist utopias—Soloviev aspired to turn thought into reality, to pass from describing the world to transforming it. For him, however, this transition was not to occur through work or the will to power, but rather through eros.

For Soloviev—unlike Nietzsche, for example—the task of "justifying matter" did not stand in opposition to the Christian tradition. On the contrary, for him Christianity is distinguished from all other high religions by the fact that in it "the Word became flesh," that is, that matter has been recognized as equal in dignity to spirit. According to Soloviev, the primacy of spirit, rationality, and Logos over matter, which is characteristic of Western culture and links it to Eastern Buddhism, does not have its source in Christianity; it is the consequence of the West's turn away from Christianity, which is above all characteristic of the modern age. The Nietzschean project of the justification of the world is here conceived as a reaction against the perverted Western form of Christianity and in favor of the true, Orthodox Christianity of the East. Soloviev therefore seeks to anchor his Sophiological visions in the still unbroken Christian tradition of Russian Orthodoxy, in whose theology Neoplatonic thought remained present. Sophia is conceived from this perspective as the feminine and simultaneously material dimension of Christ, as Christ's transfigured body—in close proximity to the Mother of God and the Church that is also regarded, theologically, as the mystical body of Christ. However, by situating the materiality even before the world's creation within the embodied Logos as the feminine principle manifested through the person of Sophia, Soloviev effectively expands the divine Trinity, introducing into it a new female divine hypostasis. Soloviev's philosophical, theological, and Sophiological efforts were thus primarily directed toward achieving the maximum divine "equality" for Sophia without adopting a position that could be interpreted as heretical. He presented the most detailed philosophico-theological interpretation of his Sophiology in his *Lectures on Godmanhood* (1877–81).

Soloviev begins by rooting his understanding of Sophia in traditional Christology:

> In the divine organism of Christ, the acting, unifying principle, the principle which expresses the unity of the unconditionally extant one, is obviously the Word or Logos. The unity of the second kind, the produced unity, in Christian theosophy bears the name of Sophia … Sophia is God's body, the matter of Divinity, permeated with the principle of divine unity. Christ … is both Logos and Sophia.
>
> To speak about Sophia as an essential element of Divinity does not mean, from the Christian point of view, to introduce new gods … But it is precisely in order that God be unconditionally distinguished from our world, from our Nature, from this visible reality, that it is necessary to acknowledge in Him His particular eternal nature. His special eternal world. Otherwise our idea of Divinity will be poorer, more abstract, than our conception of the visible world.[4]

Moreover, if Christ is understood as the ideal human being, then "Sophia is the ideal or perfect humanity, eternally contained in the integral divine being or Christ."[5] Humanity as Sophia is the eternal body of God. It is only the divinity of matter, recognized as Sophia, that guarantees the possibility of "deification" (in Russian: "*obozhenie*") for human beings and the hope for eternal life. Human beings only become immortal through matter, through their participation in the body of Christ. In this way, Soloviev seeks to transform the familiar irrefutable proof of human beings' finitude, mortality, and "contingency"—namely their "materiality"—into proof of their immortality; only materiality, as the maternal, feminine principle, and even more as the person Sophia, can redeem human beings through love—and especially the human being who loves her: the philosopher or Sophiologist.

Soloviev asserts the defeat of rationalism and rationalist moralism in their struggle against "lower nature." As symptoms of that defeat, he identifies the demise of the French Revolution and of German Idealism, as well as the rise of empiricism and positivism on the one hand and of the pessimistic aversion to nature in the style of Schopenhauer on the other. The aim of Soloviev's philosophy is to bring human beings to accept and justify matter and to love it as Sophia. Through love, which is understood here very much as erotic love, philosophy's one-sided theoretical orientation will be overcome. Philosophy thus becomes practical: it recognizes the true hidden face of the material world, of Sophia, and thus transforms the fallen life of the cosmos in its totality.

The reason for the world's imperfection lies in its dividedness, in the war of all against all. In order to establish harmony, individuals must cease to assert their will unchecked, as they do, for example, in the Hegelian dialectic, but they must not simply deny it either, as in Schopenhauer. They must set limits on it—take their place within the Sophiological totality. The recognition of the world's true Sophiological character, its "Sophiicity" (*sofiynost*), offers every individual person the possibility of finding an appropriate place for his or her own drives and passions and those of others, without having to "struggle"

against them. Sophiicity, in this context, represents an application to the cosmic totality of the earlier Slavophile concept of "conciliarity" (*sobornost*), which essentially means taking one's place within the social totality without losing one's own subjectivity or individuality, and which, in the view of the Slavophiles, distinguished the original condition of Christianity before its division into East and West: this disintegration is regarded as the root malady and evil of the whole of European civilization.

Soloviev's Sophiology is also closely connected with his historiosophy. For him, as for the Slavophiles, the Western world is the historical embodiment of rationalism and egoistic, loveless materialism, which is incapable of the true Sophiological "materialism" of love. The completion and consummation of human history in a theurgic act of disclosure and embodiment of the eternal Sophia thus requires a "new historical force"—namely Russia. Here Soloviev follows the conception of history of Schelling and Hegel as well as that of the Russian Slavophiles, for whom every nation has a specific role to play in the world-historical drama determined by historical logic. For Soloviev, however, this assertion of Russia's messianic role is combined with a vigorous critique of the actual state of Russian culture. Russia, in his view, has preserved the Christian truth that the West has rejected in bringing forth an "anti-Christian civilization." But it has not created a Christian civilization; it has been incapable of translating its faith into historical reality. Thus, its development has proved to be just as one-sided as that of the West. Soloviev's critique of the ascetic and conservative spirit of Russian Orthodoxy was continued in the Russian philosophy that followed him, with strong Nietzschean undertones, as the struggle to "rehabilitate the flesh." According to Soloviev, in order to realize its Sophiological possibilities, Russian culture must first be fertilized by the free and anti-Christian spirit of the West. Just as, earlier, matter was fertilized by the divine spirit, so, writes Soloviev, "the fertilization of the divine Mother (the Church) by the active human principle must produce the free deification of humanity," for "in Christ ... the ideal became a fact ... The active divine principle became something physical and material; the Word became flesh."[6]

Thus, Sophia turns out to be a mystical name for Russia, which is meant to enter into a mystical marriage with the Antichrist-West (which thereby becomes aware of its own Christian origin and is therefore redeemed)—with "West" referring more to the Westernized Russian intelligentsia, including Soloviev himself, than to the actual geographic West as such. Soloviev, who worked for the journal *Vestnik Evropy* (The European Herald) for a long time, later described himself as the Antichrist in his mystical autobiography *Three Conversations about the Antichrist.* However, he also belonged to Russian culture. In this sense, for Soloviev, Sophia signifies the discovery of his own feminine (Russian, Christian, etc.) dimension, which Carl Jung, for example, calls the anima. Thus, the world-historical drama of the ultimate union (in an apocalyptic context) of the two halves of Christianity, the West and Byzantine Russia, also signifies the inner mystical marriage in the souls of Russian intellectuals between their Western culture and their Russian unconscious, which lends them the long-desired wholeness, androgyny, or, in Soloviev's words, "all-unity." Elsewhere, quoting Dostoevsky, Soloviev writes that the apocalyptic vision of the woman clothed in the sun who seeks to give birth to a son refers to the Russia that is destined to speak a new word to the world.[7] The mystical marriage between the active but perverted and anti-Christian spirit of the West and the passive but faithful Russian Sophia thus promises to give birth to the new Logos, the Third and final Testament. Out of this there later emerges "the religion of the Third Testament" propagated by the novelist Dmitry Merezhkovsky (1865–1941) and his symbolist group.

The peculiarity, meaning, and influence of Soloviev's Sophiology are not limited to metaphysical and historical speculations. Its esoteric but pivotal dimension is a belief in the immediate experience of personal contact with Sophia, which is described indirectly but clearly enough in Soloviev's poetry. For example, his poem "Three Encounters" (1898) describes three personally experienced apparitions of Sophia: in a Russian church during the time of his childhood (1862), later in the British Museum (1875), and in Egypt (1876), where Soloviev purposefully traveled for a rendezvous with Sophia.[8] At bottom, however, all of Soloviev's poetry describes a transcendent love affair, in which Sophia appears almost as a real woman and reciprocates Soloviev's love. Fragments of a manuscript by Soloviev have also been published in which he uses an altered handwriting reminiscent of that of Sofia P. Khitrovo, one of his earthly platonic lovers, to transcribe messages conveyed to him by Sophia through his own inner voice. The entries are written in French and signed "Sophie" or, in the Greek form, "Sophia." Similar entries can often be found in Soloviev's other manuscripts as well. An example: "*Sophie. Mange un peu plus aujourd'hui. Je ne veux pas, que tu t'épuises. Mon chéri, nous voulons te préparer pour la grande mission, que tu dois remplir etc*."[9]

This unity between Soloviev's Sophiological doctrine and his life has fascinated many Russian poets and thinkers since and has served as a model for some of them. Thanks to the ambiguous use of the name Sophia, Soloviev succeeded in fashioning a language in which religious questions, the cosmic life, the world-historical process (including such political and intellectual currents as idealism, positivism, socialism, Nietzscheanism, etc.), the relationship between the West and Russia, the role of the Russian intelligentsia, and at the same time the most intimate, subjective, erotic experiences and feelings could be articulated in nearly identical terms. This language therefore became the dominant idiom for almost the entire Russian non-Marxist intelligentsia of the turn of the century and for several decades thereafter, informing their

cultural production. These developments cannot be traced in all their facets here. It will nevertheless be useful to mention and briefly characterize at least those authors who explicitly regarded their work as a further development of Soloviev's Sophiology. This further development primarily pointed in two directions: radicalizing and systematizing metaphysical speculation, and an intensification of the personal experience of the personified Sophia.

The potential problems with this personification became clear when the provincial journalist A. N. Schmidt (1851–1905) proclaimed herself the earthly incarnation of the divine Sophia and Soloviev himself the new incarnation of Christ—and this while Soloviev was still alive.[10] Her talented mystical writings, which made a strong impression on the following generation of Russian Sophiologists, revolve around the female hypostasis of the divine Trinity and were regarded by their author as the Third Testament. Soloviev reacted to these writings with a mix of sympathy and horror. However, the search for Sophia's earthly incarnations went on and involved a circle of younger Russian symbolist poets that included first and foremost Soloviev's nephew, Sergei Soloviev (1885–1942), as well as perhaps the most important Russian writers of the early twentieth century, Alexander Blok (1880–1921) and Andrei Bely (1880–1934).

Blok's early poetry, which according to Bely was written almost entirely within the horizon of Soloviev's ideas and, with its direct address to Sophia, represents in formal terms a further development of Soloviev's poetry, continues the theme of the transcendent love affair that was so characteristic of Soloviev's poetry.[11] Bely writes: "In 1901, we lived in the atmosphere of his poetry, as the theurgic consummation of his doctrine of Sophia—wisdom."[12] And Bely goes on to observe that, in this circle, all aspects of daily life were seen and analyzed just as much from the standpoint of Solovievian philosophy as were the abstract problems of poetry, religion, sociology, etc. The aesthetics of symbolism sought to recognize the personal erotic experiences of the poet as symbols of the cosmic relationship between Logos (understood as the poetic word) and Sophia. This explains the specific atmosphere of Blok's poetry, which suggests the romantic ecstasies and disappointments of its poetic subject as ontologically grounded insights into the true nature of the feminine world principle—sometimes that of the divine Sophia, sometimes that of the deceitful Maya. This intention is characteristic of Blok's first book of poetry, *Poems about the Beautiful Lady* (1902–04). The spiritual atmosphere of endlessly and anxiously waiting for Sophia to physically appear is also depicted by Bely in his early "symphonies."[13] At the same time, the dominant tone in these descriptions is often one of romantic irony, which was also characteristic of Soloviev and sometimes expressed itself in almost blasphemous forms.

While the symbolist poets focused on the idea of Sophia's personal incarnation, the philosophers of the period developed Solovievian Sophiology as a purely metaphysical doctrine of all-unity—although the personal aspect was almost always implicated by the esoteric doctrine. In one form or another, the philosophy of all-unity was propounded by all the representatives of the so-called Russian religious renaissance. These included not only Merezhkovsky and his group as well as philosophers like Simon Frank (1877–1950), Lev Karsavin (1882–1952), Sergei Askoldov (1871–1945), and the poet Vyacheslav Ivanov (1866–1949), but also science-oriented researchers like Gustav Shpet (1878–1940), exponents of radical individualism like Nikolai Berdyaev (1874–1948), Lev Shestov (1866–1938), and Vasily Rozanov (1856–1919). They all sought to justify matter, rejected rationalistic "external" morality, and saw this as the main task of the "new religious consciousness" confronted with the Nietzschean question. All of them had attempted to reconcile liberal individualism with the idea of the cosmic order and saw in this reconciliation a promise of the future apocalyptic victory of Russia, or at least of Russian philosophical thought.[14]

However, the main themes of Soloviev's Sophiology were developed with particular single-mindedness by Sergei Bulgakov (1871–1944) and Pavel Florensky (1882–1943?), both of whom were ordained as Russian Orthodox priests. In his major theological work, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters,* Florensky follows Soloviev in understanding Sophia as the "all-integral creation."[15] She is the eternal bride of Logos, without which she loses her unity and disintegrates (or turns into Maya). Sophia continues to be associated with the Mother of God and the Church and is described as preexisting the world: Sophia signifies eternity—the immortality of the material world in its inner, ideal materiality. Certainly, Sophia continues to be understood as God's creation. She exists, however, in an eternal relationship to God, so that the concept of creation itself alters its original meaning and becomes a relation between creator and creature that is no longer radically distinct from the relations between the hypostases of the divine Trinity (and since Florensky intimates that Russia should also be understood as Sophia, it too is effectively deified).

Florensky is aware of the dangers of heresy and seeks to avoid them by claiming that Sophia is not a fourth person of the Godhead but is nonetheless "admitted" to the Godhead as a fourth person by divine love and is linked to the other three persons of the Trinity in various ways; that is, Sophia effectively structures the Trinity.[16] According to Florensky, it is this position of Sophia that guarantees eternal life for the material world.[17] In all of this, Sophia is pointedly understood not as a concept but as a person, with whom a personal relationship is possible. These aspects of Florensky's Sophiological doctrine were later elaborated into a new Sophiological theology by Sergei Bulgakov, above all during his exile in Paris in the 1930s

and '40s. This theology met with strong opposition from many Russian theologians, since at that time a clear turn away from the utopianism of the earlier years became a defining feature of post-revolutionary Russian émigré theology. To be sure, Bulgakov was not explicitly accused of heresy. His views, however, were not regarded as Orthodox but as derived from German mysticism—Jakob Böhme's, for example—and German idealism.

Thus, the famous historian of Russian philosophy Zenkovsky writes that the entire Sophiological tradition of all-unity was essentially a failed attempt to find a third way between the Christian doctrine of creation on the one hand and pantheism and modern evolutionary theory on the other.[18] The result, in his view, was fantastic, mythical systems, which are full of contradictions and as unacceptable to Orthodox faith as they are to science.[19]

While discussions of Sophiology went on for decades in the Russian emigrant community—up to the time of the Second World War and even afterward—in the Soviet Union censorship made them impossible. But they were constantly referred to indirectly, a prime example being the literary theory of Mikhail Bakhtin, for whom the "polyphony of the novel" and the "novelistic quality of the world" are tantamount to their Sophiicity. In Bakhtin's theories, all the traditional Sophiological themes are easily recognizable: the justification of matter and eternal life, harmony between the individual and the other from an apocalyptic perspective, etc.[20] But the personal relationship with Sophia is almost entirely absent from his work.

Of particular interest, however, is the question of the relationship between Russian Sophiology and official Soviet dialectical materialism.[21] The parallels are in fact quite evident. In dialectical materialism, matter (that is, the feminine principle) is posited as the highest and eternal principle, understood not as the objective dimension in the sense of empirical science but as an all-integrating principle to which the subject of knowledge and action is also subordinate (an aspect that was expressed in Soviet Marxism among other things as the subordination of historical materialism, that is, history, to dialectical materialism, that is, the cosmic life). Thus, for example, Lenin defines the bourgeois and the idealistic attitude as "one-sided" but the "materialist" attitude as inherently self-contradictory and alive, a formulation strongly reminiscent of the classical definitions of "*sofiynost*."[22] The fundamental law of the "materialist dialectic," namely "the unity and struggle of opposites," which takes the place of the Hegelian dialectic in Soviet Marxism, dehistoricizes and, as it were, cosmologizes Hegelian historicism. (Although the struggle for the new world is meant to be waged until the adversary is destroyed, which of course contradicts the Sophiological doctrine, Soviet Marxism postulates "the eternity of the contradiction," which is not meant to be resolved but rather experienced in its unity.) At the same time, this formulation reads as a description of the dreamlike logic of the erotic relationship between party and people, or spirit and matter, and only finds its redemption in the eschatological prospect of their eternal marriage in communism (which is officially defined as a unity of party-spirit, that is, one-sidedness, spirituality, historicity, and of people's spirit—in other words, cosmic wholeness); thus spiritualized, materiality will triumph over the one-sidedness of bourgeois idealism.

These parallels between Russian Sophiology and dialectical materialism are doubtless due primarily to their common origin in the philosophy of German Idealism. More important in both cases, however, are the transformations undergone by the respective models, which it is impossible to characterize in detail in the context of this essay. Suffice it to say here that in both cases these transformations presuppose the peculiar split between the Western and the Russian in the consciousness of Russian intellectuals, which they attempt to reflect and overcome on various levels, the name Sophia marking one of the most intensive attempts of this kind in Russian intellectual history.

X

Translated from the German by James Gussen.

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1
Soloviev later describes Nietzsche's doctrine of the superman as a "preliminary stage" of his own doctrine of the Godman. Vladimir Soloviev, "Vl. Solov'ev Idjeja sverchceloveka," in *Krizis zapadnoj filosofii (The Crisis of Western Philosophy: Against the Positivists* , 1874), reprinted in *Sobranije sodinenij Vladimira Solov'eva* , vol. 9 (Brussels: Foyer Oriental Chrétien, 1966).

2
In an unpublished treatise entitled *Sophie,* Soloviev writes: "Schelling is the true precursor of the new universal religion. Kabbala and Neoplatonism. Böhme and Swedenborg. Schelling and I." As quoted in S. M. Solov'ev, *Zizn'i tvorceskaja evolucija Vladimira Solov'eva* (Brussels: Zhizn' s Bogom, 1977), 121. For more on the relationship between Soloviev and Schelling, see also L. Müller, *Solovjev und der Protestantismus* (Freiburg: Herder Verlag, 1951), 93ff.

3
F. W. J. Schelling, *Philosophy of Revelation (1841–42) and Related Texts* , trans. Klaus Ottmann (Spring Publications, 2020), 199. In another passage on page 262, Schelling refers to Sophia directly.

4
V. Soloviev, *Lectures on Godmanhood* , trans. Peter Zouboff (Dennis Dobson, 1948), 154–55, translation modified.

5
Soloviev, *Lectures on Godmanhood* , 159.

6
Soloviev, *Lectures on Godmanhood* , 206, translation modified.

7
V. Soloviev, "Tri réci na pamjat' Dostojevskogo," in *Sobranije sodinenij Vladimira Solov'eva* , vol. 1 (Brussels: Foyer Oriental Chrétien, 1966), 218.

8
V. Soloviev, "Tri svidanija," in *Sobranije sodinenij Vladimira Solov'eva* , vol. 12 (Brussels: Foyer Oriental Chrétien, 1966), 80.

9
"Sophie. Eat a little more today. I don't want you to burn out. My darling, we want to prepare you for the great mission, which you must fulfill etc." Quoted in S. M. Solov'ev, *Zizn'i tvorceskaja evolucija Vladimira Solov'eva* , 119.

10
For more on the relationship between Vladimir Soloviev and A. N. Schmidt, see S. Bulgakov, *Tichije dumy* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1976), 71ff.

11
Andrei Bely, *Aleksandr Blok v vospominanijach sovremennikov* , vol. 1 (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia Literatura, 1980), 208–13.

12
Bely, *Aleksandr Blok*, 209.

13
Andrei Bely, *Staryi Arbat* (Moskovskii Rabochii, 1989), 45–200.

14
An overview of post-Solovievian Russian Sophiological thought can be found in V. V. Zen'kovsky, *Istorija russkoj filosofii* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1953), 2:379–457.

15
Pavel Florensky, *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters* , trans. Boris Jakim (Princeton University Press, 1997), 237.

16
Florensky, *Pillar and Ground*, 240, translation modified.

17
Florensky, *Pillar and Ground*, 252.

18
See G. Florovsky, *Puti russkogo bogoslovija* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1981).

19
V. V. Zen'kovsky, *Istorija russkoj filosofii* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1950), 455f.

20
For more on these parallels, see R. Grübel's foreword to Mikhail Bakhtin's *Die Ästhetik des Wortes*, ed. R. Grübel (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979), 70f.

21
The relationship is also discussed in Boris Groys, "Elemente des Gnostizismus im Dialektischen Materialismus," in *Gnosis und Mystik in der Geschichte der Philosophie,* ed. P. Koslowski (Zurich: Artemis Verlag, 1988), 352–67, forthcoming in English.

22
For more on this, see Boris Groys, "The Problem of Soviet Ideological Practice," *Studies in Soviet Thought* , no. 33 (1987): 191–208.

Order of Sophianic Marxists

Marx, the Alchemist

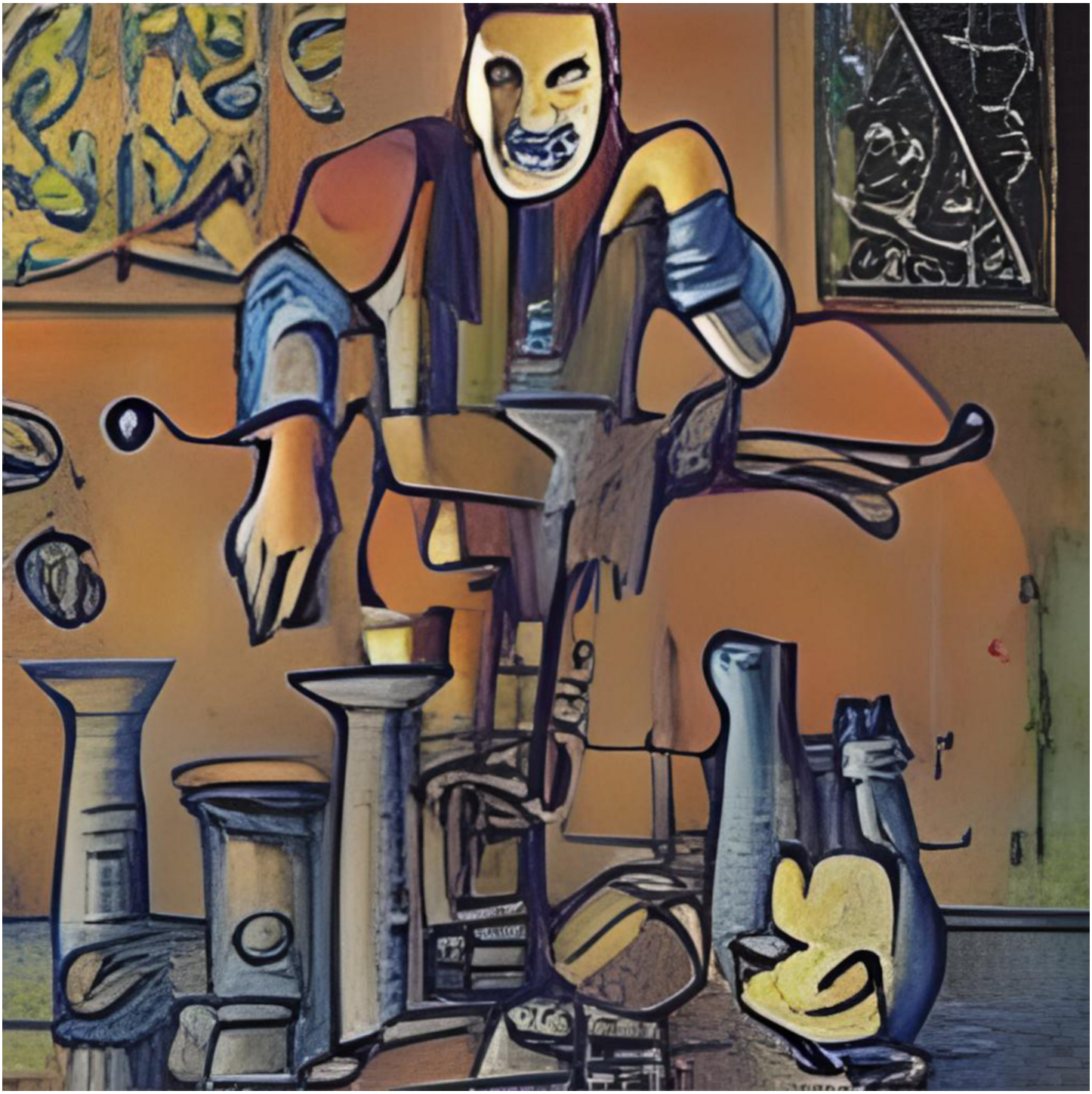
> What a great miracle is Man, O Asclepius, a being worthy of reverence and honor. For he passes into the nature of a god as though he were himself a god.
>
> —Hermes Trismegistus, "To Asclepius," *Corpus Hermeticum*

The Lenin-Nag Hammadi Library

Eduardo Viveiros de Castro describes his *Cannibal Metaphysics* as a "beginner's guide" to a nonexistent work he'd long imagined titled *Anti-Narcissus*. When it comes to writing commentary on "invisible" works, Viveiros de Castro claims direct descent from "that great blind reader," Borges.[1] We, in turn, would like to ride the coattails of this hastily sketched-out tradition and offer up an expansive commentary on a corpus of imagined manuscripts recently unearthed at the Moscow Center for Socio-Political History. Apparently, sometime around 1938, the Amsterdam-based International Institute for Social History (IISH) acquired these manuscripts from an exiled member of the SPD (Social Democratic Party of Germany). At the end of the Second World War, some of the IISH's holdings fell into the hands of the Soviet occupying forces and were subsequently removed to the USSR, ending up in the special collection of the Institute for Marxism-Leninism (IML). The IML was disbanded in 1991, and its library now operates as an independent entity, known since 2014 as the Center for Socio-Political History (CSPH). We met a former associate of the CSPH in the smoking room of the Lenin Library, where he first told us the story of these manuscripts and explained that upon their discovery, he promptly left the library with them in hand. The manuscripts had been cataloged under some innocuous headings; their contents vague. Our new friend was clever and knew the library system inside out: their disappearance went unnoticed.

Admittedly, we listened to his story with some skepticism. Our new friend was obsessed with Ancient Egypt and made daily pilgrimages to the nearby Pushkin Museum to look at sarcophagi. When he heard that we were working on a history of the Leftist movement in Russia, he explained that his discovery was equivalent to the "Nag Hammadi library" of Marxism and had the potential to revolutionize our understanding of Marxist philosophy.[2]

The next time we met, he brought along the manuscripts: these were old, handwritten scraps of paper filled with fragmentary and—at first glance—esoteric writing. It was difficult to see what it all had to do with Marxism. Our interlocutor, however, explained that this was Marxism itself—its very essence, which must be grasped if we meant to discover the extent of its mythological power. He gave us a typewritten copy of one fragment—this, he claimed, was the key text of the Marxist Nag Hammadi: a



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previously unknown manuscript by Marx himself. We append it below:

Humanity's Magnum Opus, or a brief description of the Magisterium, compiled by the Adept Karl Marx for Sons of the Great Art, who shall comprehend his revelation and gain through it the means to accomplish the transmutation of metals and compounding of universal medicines, having attained universal well-being.

Prima materia, or the *Quintessence*, is the *Gemeinwesen* or universal generic essence of humanity. It is found everywhere, including within oneself, but in impure form—as human labor in the *Werthform*. You may marvel at this, but you are already in possession of the Stone. You have even begun to purify it through a succession of unconscious experiments, in the following manner.

In the beginning, at the stage of *nigredo*, or black work, you realized the first *Coniunctio*, or Sacred Marriage. For this to occur, the Quintessence or the fifth element in the form of concrete human labor began to interact with the other four elements of the material world. This resulted in the creation of use value. In the second phase, *albedo*, use values entered into exchange. Circulation became a colossal *alchymistische Retorte der Cirkulation* (a huge social alembic), wherein prima materia underwent a series of transmutations, thus effecting the evolution of forms of value. Concurrently, the *Geldkristall* (money crystal) was formed, the most evolved form of value. But many had forgotten that it was merely a sign indicating that the adept is on the right path.

Prima materia is almost completely purified, but this is yet to be recognized by the one who has affected all these transmutations: collective mankind. The adept is in thrall to false ideas and fetishism, unable to see at the heart of commodities the prima materia that he himself had deposited there. Here begins the new phase, *citrinitas*, which requires a full awareness of what you had previously attained through rather chaotic experimentation: for transmutation of matter is inseparable from the transfiguration of consciousness. Procure knowledge with the help of the philosopher's alkahest (universal solvent): critical theory.

Begin your analysis with an understanding of the dual nature of the commodity. This is the most difficult moment of consciousness, when alchemical torment, or "the division of the monad," occurs. It is a splitting of the one (commodity) into King and Queen, sulfur and mercury (use value and exchange value). Make use of geometry: observe the form of the commodity as an ellipse—a figure between two foci, whose eccentricity is the internal contradiction of the commodity between use value and exchange value. The movement of a point along the arc of the ellipse is at once a fall toward its divided center and a moving away from it, corresponding to the constant metamorphosis of the commodity.

This most difficult moment is concluded with the new, more perfect marriage of King and Queen, the gnostic syzygy in the form of the commodity, already deconstructed, yet united in a new critical whole. The alchemical triad of mercury, sulfur, and salt exists as exchange value, use value, and the principle of the commodity. After all, mercury and sulfur can only form solid substances in the presence of a fixative (salt), and in our case the fixative is the commodity form, or the very principle of the commodity. Now you are left with something more than the commodity: you now possess the divine hermaphrodite *Werth* (value). One half of it is the *Werthkristall*, the substance of value, the crystals of abstract human labor (*Gallerte*); and the other half is use value.

You have accomplished much. But your androgyne is not Royal yet, since it is held captive by the homunculus Capital—this improper demiurgic ruler—and pressed into its service. In effecting the Magisterium, mankind has involuntarily created the *beseeltes Ungeheuer* (animated monster), the self-powered substance endowed with the actual power to create value because it is itself value. This is dead labor, which constantly increases itself by annexing the living ferment of the labor force to the dead elements of commodity formation. People do not see that this monster is merely a homunculus, they do not understand that the power of money is merely the power of prima materia crystalized therein.

But the Great Work must continue as philosophical work and political struggle. The author of this text, Artist and Philosopher,[3] has accomplished great work and assumes the role of a prophet for future times. In the words of Eirenaeus Philalethes, "Elias, the Artist, is already born, and now glorious things are declared of the City of God." Now comes the final phase of the Magisterium: the *rubedo*, or red work. It has its own *nigredo*—the extreme abasement of the proletariat and the rousing of its internal fire with the help of critical theory. Fire appears on the black sphere—after which, the proletariat, and all of humanity along with it, transmutes itself into the red lion that has swallowed the sun!

Alchemy as Dual-Nondual Anthropology and Antiauthoritarian Praxis

The document before us is an alchemical treatise, supposedly written by Marx himself. In it, the emergence of the value form, the proletarian revolution, and Marxist theory are recast as the alchemical Magnum Opus, using the terminology of alchemical praxis, as if it were some treatise by Paracelsus. It is, in other words, a structural translation of one discourse into another, preserving the logic of both. The result seems fairly consistent, as if we were dealing with a case of "reverse anthropology," to borrow a term coined by the anthropologist Roy Wagner. An example Wagner gives of this phenomenon is the

"cargo cult," where an indigenous people adapt products of Western civilization into their cosmogony (an act that the Westerner naturally finds absurd). This, indeed, is the aim of progressive anthropology: to assume a different *perspective* and see one's own culture as something no longer recognizable; to free oneself, however briefly, from one's own philosophy, or the "stifling bedroom of the Same" (Viveiros de Castro).[4] This happens when "the classified becomes the classifier." In our case, it is not the Marxist who translates the alchemist's system into his own cultural conventions, but vice versa. Marxist praxis is presented as alchemical in essence. To understand this better, let us attempt a partial back-translation of the pseudo-Marx treatise into more conventional terms. But first, we must speak to the alternative meaning of alchemy and consider the validity of mixing alchemy and Marxism.

Alchemy, as we know, is the praxis of the Gnostic/Hermetic tradition. The larger esoteric and mystical tradition, which emerged somewhere in Roman Egypt in the first centuries of the common era, runs through two thousand years of history up to our present as a kind of underbelly or occult side of European (more broadly, Eurasian) thought and art. It has resurfaced in countless guises and incarnations, notably as the Kabbala, Swabian Pietism, Hegelian philosophy, Russian religious philosophy, and Russian cosmism. The essence of the Gnostic/Hermetic tradition is that it is dual-nondual: i.e., it can distinguish between God, human beings, and the world, while simultaneously asserting that all three are modalities of the same thing, and that it is humanity's objective to surmount these permeable boundaries. This is where the Gnostic/Hermetic tradition diverges subversively and radically from the conventional, officially sanctioned religious movements of various eras, particularly European Christianity. The latter posits an insurmountable chasm between God and man, Creator and creature, and the correlative indelible duality, wherein the transcendent will always remain superior to the immanent. Needless to say, this state of affairs offers a convenient template for earthly power: rulers and the official church, i.e., representatives of the indelibly transcendent God on earth, will always remain in a superior position vis-à-vis their subjects. In institutional, conventional Christianity, the gap between the authorities and the people is as insurmountable and ontological as that between God and creation.

The Gnostic/Hermetic tradition undermines this position. It posits man as dualistic in nature, comprising the natural and the divine principles. His objective is to escape from the lowest or "fallen" world of material determination. Aided by his imagination (understood as a function of the mind rather than binary reason, or, in Hegel's terms, of *Vernunft* rather than *Verstand*), he is able to climb the unbroken chromatic ladder toward a union with the One (Absolute), i.e., until he himself becomes the Universal or God. In the run-up to this, the One is unfolding, emanating, or progressing into the world and as the world. When the lower limit is reached, the Recovery of the produced to the producing begins, and progress is displaced by *epistrophe*: this is the Gnostic/Hermetic Resurrection, Renaissance, or Revolution. In Hermeticism, rebirth is wholly contingent on man's inner abilities: this, indeed, is the principal idea behind the Hermetic state, i.e., the tightly sealed flask, the alchemical alembic, the human skull as the container of thought. Only in a *vas hermetica* can transfiguration of consciousness and transmutation of matter take place, two processes which are interdependent and interchangeable, as, indeed, we learn from the Tábula Smarágdina of Hermes Trismegistus: "as above, so below," or as within, so without. Omnipotence, immortality, consciousness of one's divine nature are fully within man's grasp, but to attain these he must put in the work, i.e., take up alchemical praxis at the interchangeable levels of transformation of matter and of consciousness.

Marx and the Gnostic/Hermetic Tradition (a Qualification)

Gnostic variations of the Gnostic/Hermetic tradition go even further in pointing up the struggle against officialdom: the world of matter and determination is said to be in the hands of the Demiurge and the archons, malicious and imperfect Rulers. The divine component in man, however, stands above this world, and its task is to turn the world upside down, destroy the inferior determination of the false lower gods/rulers, and in effecting the revolution, attain freedom in the consciousness of one's potency. Whose words are these? Do they belong to the Gnostic tradition or do they form the core of Marxist theory? Our answer is: both. It is not our purpose here to show the connections between Marx's ideas and the Gnostic/Hermetic tradition: others have done this admirably on numerous occasions.[5] We note in particular the works of Cyril Smith, as well as Glenn Alexander Magee's recent work on Hegel as a Hermetic philosopher and Erica Lagalisse's studies on the occult underpinnings of antiauthoritarian movements. At the same time, the act of bringing together Marxist philosophy and the Gnostic/Hermetic tradition may still come as a shock. This could be because there is still no major publication titled "Karl Marx and the Gnostic-Hermetic Tradition." If so, the following pages may be read as either commentary on this invisible book or its opening pages. Here the reverse anthropology of the manuscript by the pseudo-Marx-alchemist becomes a direct anthropology and genealogy of Marxism. The core concepts of Marxism may, at least, be examined organically within Gnostic/Hermetic philosophy and, at most, are in fact its specific avatar, a Gnostic/Hermetic myth actualized in a new guise at the intersection of being and becoming, like any (eternally) recurring myth.

Do such efforts constitute revisionism? Not in our view, since they do nothing to diminish the force of Marxism's revolutionary positions. On the contrary: they affirm and strengthen them in a different cultural language, ground

Marx's philosophy in older traditions, and restore to Marxism the mighty, transformative power of the imagination—a gesture increasingly demanded in our time by the truly progressive "new" Marxists, such as Andy Merrifield and Vladislav Sofronov. Additionally, everything that follows is a project of Sophianic Marxism, one of the "newest" Marxisms, destined to rejuvenate this mighty philosophy in the postcolonial space of reverse anthropologies and alternative cosmologies. The term "Sophianic" derives from Sophiology, a notable part of Russian religious philosophy that promotes all-unity, which is realized through a ubiquitous and androgynous *anima Mundi* (world soul). By aligning Sophianic all-unity with Marx's notion of Gemeinwesen as the collective human essence, we place Sophianic Marxism at the fertile intersection between, on the one hand, Marx's thought, and on the other, Russian religious philosophy, the Gnostic/Hermetic tradition, and Eurasian esotericism in general. In the past few years our Order has been at work on a Russian analogy to Merrifield's "magical Marxism," which is an attempt to restore Marxism to its original power of the imagination. It is time to publish our preliminary results.

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Selbstbetatigung—Self-Actualization—as Humanity's Magnum Opus

The core of Marx's philosophy—which, one might say, coincides with the core of Gnosticism/Hermeticism—is the central place given to humanity's self-activity or self-actualization. Marx (like Hermeticists generally) construes the act of perfection as man's task, his work. The seventeen-year-old Marx writes, "To man, too, the Deity gave a general aim, that of ennobling mankind and himself, but he left it to man to seek the means by which this aim can be achieved."[6]

From the very outset, moreover, this perfection is not individual, but general, universal. This, once more, tracks perfectly with the objective of Gnostic/Hermetic praxis: the achievement of the state of all-oneness or all-unity, when the One, having unfolded through progress into All (the World), undergoes the revolutionary return to the One. In Hermeticism, all-oneness is both the starting point and the end point of the dialectical triad of cosmogony: unity-progress- *epistrophe*. To be sure, Marx "flattens out" all-unity on earth (effectively standing Hegel's Hermeticism "upside down"), but the original idea of all-unity as man's universal objective remains unchanged:

> The chief guide which must direct us in the choice of a profession is the welfare of mankind and our own perfection. It should not be thought that these two interests could be in conflict, that one would have to destroy the other; on the contrary, man's nature is so constituted that he can attain his own perfection only by working for the perfection, for the good, of his fellow men.[7]

The true essence of man—in the Gnostic/Hermetic tradition,[8] as well as in Marx—is not his "fallen," actual determined state, but the free Anthropos, the Man-God. Marx uses the term *Gemeinwesen* to denote authentic human nature, i.e., man's all-unity, or in the language of Russian religious philosophy, his *sobornost'* (fellowship). Therefore, according to Marx, right and true universal law—as a realization of man's inner essence, unconstrained in some coercive and unnatural manner—is something that for the time being exists only potentially, at once as essence and as horizon line. In earlier social formations we find only "customs contrary to right," when "human history was part of natural history, and in which, according to Egyptian legend, all gods concealed themselves in the shape of animals … For whereas human law is the mode of existence of freedom, this animal law is the mode of existence of unfreedom."[9]

Similarly, the Gnostic tradition recognizes the authentic man as inner essence (hence our term "esoteric," i.e., "internal," and the Arabic [*batin*] or "hidden" in Shiite Gnostic mysticism). This essence must be accessed through the intensive process of becoming one's nondual twin.[10] In actuality, the spiritual substance of the world is weighed down by determination, the "punishments of matter." According to Marx, in every age

man is granted only his false, counterfeit, or polluted "natural unity," e.g., in the form of religion or capital (i.e., Demiurge and the false deities of the lowest world): "this *abject materialism*, this sin against the holy spirit of the people and humanity."[11]

Anthropos exists in the world in a profaned state: "In the literal sense of the word people are put in separate boxes (*Kasten*), and the noble, freely interchanging members of the great sacred body, the holy Humanus, are sawn and cleft asunder, forcibly torn apart."[12] Consequently, according to Marx, man's essence as universality (*Gemeinwesen*) demands realization and purification: it is at once given (as the fallen, dismembered holy Humanus) and posited (as the reassembled and purified Anthropos).

Selbstbetätigung is self-actuation, self-governance, self-launch, self-activation, self-arousal, self-realization. This mercurial, shape-shifting term first appears in Marx as *Selbsttätigkeit* (self-activity) in the first article of the "Proceedings of the Sixth Rhine Province Assembly," where Marx, in the best proto-Jungian tradition, describes the process of self-activity's projection into the world and its consequent alienation, when self-activity begins to be perceived as the activity of another: "The functioning of the state, which primarily expresses the *self-activity* of the individual provinces, takes place without their *formal* co-operation, without their joint *knowledge*; it is a senseless contradiction that my self-activity should consist of acts unknown to me and done by another."[13] The state appears here as the inauthentic Demiurgic ruler, who does not reflect the essence of laws, rights, and human self-activity, but rather perverts it and presents it as his own. Subsequently, Marx interprets in a similar vein the alienation of the worker and his labor: "To the worker who *appropriates* nature by means of his labor, this appropriation appears as estrangement, his own spontaneous activity as activity for another and as activity of another."[14] In the "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844" and in "Theses on Feuerbach," Marx introduces the term "S *elbstbetätigung*" as self-realization, which henceforth appears as a more comprehensive variant of " *Selbsttätigkeit*," with an emphasis on becoming: self-realization implies and is attained through self-activity.

This precisely echoes the Gnostic doctrine, wherein the objective is "to make straight the true human, the essential human who still lies supine within us."[15] This Gnostic intensive twinhood also underpins Marx's particular understanding of rights, law, and the state; these must reflect not the actual state of affairs and earthly powers, but the virtual, potential one: "The state can and must say: I guarantee right against all contingencies. Right alone is immortal in me, and therefore I prove to you the mortality of crime by doing away with it."[16] Man has a right to realize his human essence, and this right, by definition and in the absence of any external obstacles, is the embodiment of freedom; it is sacred, authentic (insofar as it accords with essence), and immortal.

All discrepancies between the actual holy Humanus and his virtual intended state are but "external obstacles," "punishments" of the lowest world, which must be cast off by means of the Gnostic/Hermetic Revolution. This is the starting point of Marx's distinctive soteriology: as far as Gnosticism is concerned, the inferior determined world is so corrupted and turned upside down that it is impossible for the people to free themselves from its punishments and the malign power of its rulers. Therefore, Gnosticism needs a prophet—the unmasker, the Revealer, who will open the people's eyes to the hidden truth: that spiritual substance has fallen into the state of matter, but that it is to be found everywhere (as prima materia), and that universal salvation is in the hands of one and all. Consequently, Gnosis (i.e., Knowledge) and its prophet, Savior (*soter*), play a central role in the Gnostic/Hermetic tradition. In ancient texts, Simon the Sorcerer (Simon Magus)—the archetypal figure of the Gnostic savior—comes to show the people that Limitless Power is within them.

Marx appears seventeen hundred years later for the same purpose. Unlike his orthodox Christian counterpart, the Gnostic savior comes to reunite every person (including himself) with his authentic Self. "He does not come to pardon a sin ... but to rectify a situation of ignorance and deficiency and to re-establish the original plenitude."[17] The present state of incompletion touches the Savior himself: he is immanent to his circumstance. This is why the Gnostic Jesus tells his disciples, according to the third and fourth century gnostic text *Pistis Sophia* (The Wisdom of Faith): I have come to save you, because you are part of my power. Immanent chromatism and fellowship (all-unity) as true essence.

No eyes can be opened without the intervention of the Gnostic savior, whose main weapon is Gnosis—his theory. As Marx writes,

> The self-confidence of the human being, freedom, has first of all to be aroused again in the hearts of these people. Only this feeling, which vanished from the world with the Greeks, and under Christianity disappeared into the blue mist of the heavens, can again transform society into a community of human beings united for their highest aims, into a democratic state ... For our part, we must expose the old world to the full light of day and shape the new one in a positive way.[18]

This "positive" work is indeed the Magnum Opus, the alchemical praxis. The requisite is concealed within existing form and must be extracted from it, purified in alchemical alembics, stripped of its inhuman integument (

Hülle). "We develop new principles for the world out of the world's own principles ... It will then become evident that the world has long dreamed of possessing something of which it has only to be conscious in order to possess it in reality."[19] The alchemical transmutation of imperfect metal into perfect gold (its intensive twin) takes place within the metal itself: i.e., its twin is already contained within it. Return or Revolution will begin only when the terminal point of progress is reached—the point of the deepest fall into matter and of extreme disunity or alienation, where nearly no Light can reach. At this very point appears the Gnostic savior, who, on the one hand, exposes the actual world as an upside-down, mad (*verruckte*) world, dominated by forms alienated from man, and, on the other hand, calls upon men to pay heed to their true essence and rise up, awaken their inner man, and assume an upright posture. This is why Simon Magus, the founder of Gnosticism, is called "upright"—because he calls for the straightening up of the inner man, much in the same way as the founder of Russian cosmism, Nikolai Fedorov.

Common Being as an Alchemical Process

Marx's understanding of the revolutionary role of the proletariat is impossible without an awareness of the Gnostic/Hermetic cosmological logic that lies at its core. This is the initial step of the "opus in black," or the *nigredo*, which is the first stage of the alchemical work, or Magisterium: up from the very bottom, from the very darkness. For Marx it is embodied in the abject condition of the proletariat, a sphere "which, in a word, is the *complete loss* of man and hence can win itself only through the *complete re-winning of man*."[20] The proletariat is the nonclass of a civil society, the utterly fallen man, lost to himself; this is why they alone can accomplish the Revolution! Once more: rebirth or revolution can begin only at the extreme end of progress, understood as the unfolding of substance in the world, i.e., only at its extreme fall and differentiation, its utter alienation from itself. At this point, history in a nonhuman, alienated, and antagonistic form as prehistory ends and authentic history begins: "The bourgeois relations of production are the last antagonistic form of the social process of production ... The prehistory of human society accordingly closes with this social formation."[21] Gnostic progress is displaced by *epistrophe*; Revolution is afoot.

Gemeinwesen as common being is the essence of mankind, its philosopher's stone. As with any alchemical process, it is obtained by passing through several stages. As we have seen, everything begins with the *nigredo*—the point of absolute alienation. This is always followed by the *albedo* and the *rubedo*, finally terminating in communism as the third —"truly human"—stage (according to Marx's *Grundrisse*). But who is driving this process? Man. He is his own object and subject in Gnostic/Hermetic dual-nondual anthropology, which is essential to an understanding of the process of *Selbstbetätigung* (self-realization, self-action, or self-actualization). Marx borrows the logic and dialectic of this process—the *selbst*-philosophy of Gnosticism/Hermeticism—from Hegel. Mankind "*knows* what it wills and knows it in its *generality*, i.e., as something *thought*. Hence it works and acts by reference to consciously adopted ends, known principles, and laws which are not merely *implicit* but are actually present to consciousness."[22] To be sure, Marx is trying to "turn the world upside down" by replacing Hegel's idea/substantiality with the actual man as actual subject of self-actualization. At the same time, from the Gnostic/Hermetic perspective, there is no contradiction between Marx and Hegel: true substance emanates into the world and as the world, to its lowest limits; therefore, every part of the world at once is and is not the One: it is not universality actually, but universality virtually. Consequently, both Hegel's Spirit and Marx's actual man are actual subjects of self-actualization. Everything depends on one's perspective, i.e., on anthropological perspectivism: seen from the lowest actual point of the start of the revolution, the subject is the actual man who has attained consciousness of his situation. Or perhaps it is something even more disintegrated and alienated from itself in the course of progress than the man of Marx's humanism—e.g., a post-human creature. The only question is, what is the lowest limit of progress? Is it the abasement of the proletariat, the post-human of contemporary speculative ontologies, or something even beyond that?

As a consequence of numerous projections and alienations of the projected from the actual subject (a Gnostic would say, "in the course of God's emanation as the world," while a Deleuzian would say, "in the course of the production of differences"), authentic universal substance becomes polluted and loses itself. As the "lost sheep" undergoing continual degradation (progress), Ennoia or "Sense"—the original emanation of the One—gradually declines into Ekklesia ("Church," paired with Anthropos in the fourth syzygy); heavenly Sophia becomes fallen Sophia, continuing downward to ultimately become fallen woman: in this way, *Gemeinwesen* becomes *Werth*, maiden becomes prostitute. Ennoia—common sense as the true meaning of Commonality—becomes common in the sense of a common prostitute for the satisfaction of lowly material needs. And here, at the lowest point of degradation, Christ finds the fallen woman Mary Magdalene, and Simon Magus finds Helen in a Tyrian brothel. She accompanies him everywhere, because it is only through him (the "upstanding") and her (the holy prostitute) that mankind receives the hope of salvation and liberation from the lowly laws of determination, or in Marx's terms, "authentic emancipation."

But where is Marx's Helen? Presumably it is *Werth* (value). Indeed, value is construed as universal human nature,

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acquired by man in the course of a series of unexamined collective operations such as universal exchange. In this regard, we must pay special attention to the first volume of *Capital*, noting numerous instances of Marx's use of alchemical terminology, such as *Werthkristall* (value crystal), which is crystallized in the alembic of exchange. Value is construed by Marx as a kind of invisible substance, a "byproduct" distilled, precipitated, or crystallized in the course of a series of collective economic operations. Here mankind itself is seen as the collective alchemist, but the process is still undertaken unconsciously, chaotically, and invisibly, as it were, to its mutually alienated participants. Consequently, *Gemeinwesen* as authentic human nature and the requisite philosopher's stone is still working as a common prostitute in the brothel of capitalist actuality. In this

brothel she is known as *Werth* (value), serving not so much her universal true nature, but rather the pseudo-gods of the lower world, especially its actual archon: capital. Now comes the Gnostic Savior and presents to the world the fallen woman Helen-Value, revealing her virtual true essence.

He begins with the dissolution of the existing false order with the help of the alkahest (universal solvent) of critical theory. We recall that in the Gnostic/Hermetic tradition the transfiguration of consciousness is inseparable from the transmutation of matter, the discursive from the material: this is the meaning of complex praxis. The Savior begins with pseudo-oneness (product) and dissolves it in the alembic of discourse, demonstrating its makeup of three basic alchemical components/principles: consumption value, exchange value, and value as such. This parallels the fundamental triad of Jacob Boehme: Sour (in itself), Sweet (for others), and Bitter (in itself, but also for others), or the Sulphur, Mercury, and Salt of the alchemist. When the product dies (is consumed), its essence is separated from its material body and crystallized or "essentialized" into capital. Marx's construal of the accumulation of capital as a result of "essentialization" in the course of the consumption (death) of products echoes the experiments of the Hermetic mystic Friedrich Oetinger, who proposed to derive the essence of balm mint by boiling its crushed leaves, thus proving the presence in a body of an invisible substance—i.e., its essence—that emerges at the body's destruction.[23] To be sure, we now understand that capital is the alienated state of the philosopher's stone, the false god that must be overthrown so that the maiden may cease to prostitute herself.

We may indefinitely extend alchemical explications of Marx and draw all manner of analogies between his ideas and various Gnostic systems—especially considering that the essence of Hermetic semiosis (per Umberto Eco) is precisely in the re-actualization and re-production of one and the same structure in multiple systems and terminologies, or, to use the language of Roy Wagner and Viveiros de Castro, in multiplying reverse anthropologies, insisting on perspectivism. Gnostic-Hermetic semiosis and its attendant imagination are grounded in the idea that "for an authentic, correct inversion of the mental process, reason must to a certain extent be based on myth,"[24] i.e., on the nonrational intellectual faculty of apprehension. Consequently, myth always appears at the intersection of being and becoming: it is the (eternal) return of one and the same, but always as difference; it is, like the embryonic androgynous intensities in the cosmological egg of the Dogons, a nondual inclusive duality. We may apprehend here something of the most essential in the understanding of myth by Levi-Strauss and Viveiros de Castro and the understanding of culture as always-translation.

Our concluding intuitions are (still) shot through with an incredible idea: that the whole of post-structuralism may be read as a variant of an antiauthoritarian Gnosticism/Hermeticism in the process of becoming an (eternally) new myth. In any event, as far as we, Sophianic Marxists, are concerned, there can be no doubt about the BWO (body without organs) and the rhizome of Deleuze and Guattari. As for Marx himself, he has brilliantly accomplished the (re)creation of the Gnostic/Hermetic myth, which, like any myth, can function only when reinscribed into a new discourse, convention, and context—into a new reverse anthropology. Rather than a weakness, this is the strength and resilience of Marxism. This is evident from the perspective of Sophianic Marxism because, on the one hand, the Russian geo-cultural context is sensitive to the Gnostic/Hermetic tradition: after all, the entirety of Russian religious philosophy, including Russian cosmism and Sophiology, are but specific variants of Gnosticism/Hermeticism. On the other hand, our context is also sensitive to revolutionary theory and Marxism because of our historical circumstances. A specific historical and philosophical constellation gives birth to a specific optics. Our Order of Sophianic Marxists is certain: a new life for Marxism shall be found in a new understanding. In Russian history, it has been so.

X

Translated from the Russian by Sergey Levchin.

1
Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics* (Univocal, 2014), 39.

2
The Nag Hammadi library is a coll ection of early Christian and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gnostic_texts discovered near the https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Upper_Egypt town of https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nag_Hammadi in 1945. Their discovery significantly influenced the understanding of early https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christianity in its relationships with the Hermetic tradition and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gnosticism#Christianity_and_Gnosticism .

3
Traditionally the alchemist is styled as an Artist and Philosopher, denoting the fusion of art, science, and praxis. Perhaps this is the origin of the conceptualists' idea of the artist as philosopher? It seems that Marcel Duchamp was close to the comprehension of art as alchemy. See Arturo Schwarz, "The Alchemist Stripped Bare in the Bachelor, Even," in *Marcel Duchamp* , ed. Anne d'Harnoncourt and Kynaston McShine (MoMA, 1973), 89–98. —Ed.

4
Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics* , 42.

5
See *Karl Marx as a Religious Type* (1906) by the former Marxist Sergei Bulgakov, in which Marxism is construed as a variety of immanentism, i.e., a variety of religious consciousness that denies the principle of transcendence; Eric Voegelin's essay "From Enlightenment to Revolution" (1975), which interprets Marxism as a secular Gnosticism; British Marxist Cyril Smith's *Karl Marx and the Future of the Human* (2005), which asserts that Marx may only be understood through the lens of the mystical-Hermetic conception of man, which forms the core of his ideas; *Hegel and the Hermetic Tradition* (2008) by Glenn Alexander Magee, which demonstrates convincingly that Hegel's speculative philosophy is a specific avatar of Hermetism; as well Erica Lagalisse's recent book *Occult Features of Anarchism* (2018), which analyzes the close connection between the antiauthoritarian movement of the New Era and Gnostic/Hermetic philosophy. I will, moreover, point to numerous contemporary convergences of magic and neo-paganism and Marxism (Rhyd Wildermuth, among others), and to Andy Merrifield's book *Magical Marxism* (2011), an attempt to restore Marxism to its original power of the imagination—a central power in Hermetism. All these references to relevant books, along with the brief description of the core of the Gnostic/Hermetic tradition as a subversive chromatic (i.e., immanentist dual-nondual) praxis aimed at achieving freedom from determination, omnipotence, and immortality through man's inherent divine nature, are merely concessions to the potential skeptic, who (still) doubts the (still) incredible fact that Marxist theory may be construed as a specific variety of Gnosticism/Hermetism.

6
Karl Marx, "Reflections of a Young Man on the Choice of a Profession," in *Marx/Engels Collected Works* , vol. 1 (Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 3.

7
Marx, "Reflections of a Young Man," 8.

8
We understand the Gnostic/Hermetic tradition as the core of so-called "Western esotericism." It apparently appears in the first centuries of the common age as Gnosticism and Hermeticism and immediately goes underground as a rival of conventional Christianity, and later, science. From time to time it comes to the surface, for example during the Renaissance, the Romantic era, on the eve of the Russian Revolution, and after the 1960s. Its ideas are also found in many contemporary antiauthoritarian movements. The basic idea uniting various Gnostics/Hermetics is that human beings must emancipate themselves and the whole world from improper rulers, to gain freedom through revolution (spiritual, political, or both) and realize true all-unity as their own and the world's divine essence.

9
"Proceedings of the Sixth Rhine Province Assembly, Article 3," in *Marx/Engels Collected Works* , vol. 1, 230.

10
Gnostic/Hermetic anthropology continually presents nondual androgynous pairs, just as nondual twins occur in the cosmological egg of the Dogons, as the French anthropologists Marcel Griaule and Germaine Dieterlen describe in their 1965 book *The Pale Fox*. Such pairs are described not exclusively and dually, but intensively and inclusively, appearing, in the words of Viveiros de Castro, as "minimal forms of distinction," arising as intensities in the nondual chromatism of becoming. In Hermeticism, the intensive pairs or syzygies operate, on the one hand, as tensioned strings, between which becoming is realized— i.e., they act as attractors of the process—and on the other as generators of multiplicity, as assurance that the world is multiform and exists generally—i.e., the One progresses into the world and as the world by virtue of the generation of differences, organized into androgynous intensive pairs. So too man exists, on the one hand, as Anthropos—Aeon of the fourth syzygy—in essence, God and his emanation, and on the other, as earthly man—a creature of dual (at once spiritual and material) nature. One of them is free from determination and is spiritual, while the other remains in the process of declining/becoming. The link between the two modes of human existence ensures that earthly man, in all his individualized multiplicity, will come together as Purusha, Adam Kadmon, or Anthropos, the Man-God. This transition occurs as inner intensity.

11
"Proceedings of the Sixth Rhine Province Assembly, Article 3," 262. Emphasis in original.

12
"Proceedings of the Sixth Rhine Province Assembly, Article 3," 230.

13
"Proceedings of the Sixth Rhine Province Assembly, Article 1," in *Marx/Engels Collected Works* , vol. 1, 148. Emphasis in original.

14
Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844," in *Marx/Engels Collected Works* , vol. 3 (Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 281.

15
Giovanni Filoramo, *A History of Gnosticism* (Basil Blackwell, 1993), 151.

16
"Proceedings of the Sixth Rhine Province Assembly, Article 3," 257.

17
Filoramo, *History of Gnosticism*, 106.

18
"Letter from Karl Marx to Arnold Ruge, Cologne, May 1843," in *Marx/Engels Collected Works* , vol. 3, 137, 141.

19
"Letter from Karl Marx to Arnold Ruge, Kreuznach, September 1843," in *Marx/Engels Collected Works* , vol. 3, 144.

20
Karl Marx, "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right" (1843), in *Marx/Engels Collected Works* , vol. 3, 186. Emphasis in original.

21
Karl Marx, "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy" (1859), in *Marx/Engels Collected Works* , vol. 29 (Lawrence & Wishart, 2010), 263–64.

22
Marx, "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right," 12. Emphasis in original.

23
See Glenn Alexander Magee, *Hegel and Hermetic Tradition* (Cornell University Press, 2008), 80.

24
Y. Verniére, *Symboles et mythes dans la pensée de Plutarche* (Les Belles Lettres, 1977), 75. Quoted in Filoramo, *History of Gnosticism*, 50.

Isabelle Fremeaux and Jay Jordan

Flourishing

Since 2004, through the work of the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination, we have questioned how to radically transform and entangle art, activism, and everyday life amidst the horrors of the Capitalocene. A decade ago, we deserted our metropolitan London lives, rooting our art activism in a place that French politicians had declared "lost to the republic," known by those who inhabited it as la ZAD *(the "zone to defend"). On these four thousand acres of wetlands, turned into a messy but extraordinary canvas of commoning, an international airport project was defeated through disobedience and occupation. This is an extract from our latest book, where an art of life is populated by rebel farmers and salamanders, barricades and bakeries, riots and rituals.*

—Isabelle Fremeaux and Jay Jordan

***

No Commoning without Commoners

Winter 2019. I feel like a clown slaloming between trees with my comically oversized orange boots and hard hat and my fluorescent thick trousers. I follow my friends, awkward and happy: today is the first day of the weeklong collective logging in the Rohanne forest and, equipped with the appropriate (albeit ridiculous) safety attire, I have joined the group of novices learning the art of taking care of this small but precious forest, to which we now belong. My dad, a lorry driver, would be surprised but proud to see his daughter confidently carrying a chainsaw on her shoulder. We are going to be under the guidance of a dozen experienced comrades who have come from collectives and forest-based struggles all over the country. As measured by the commercial timber industry, it is a patch hardly worthy of interest—eighty acres of sixty-year-old deciduous and coniferous trees. But to us on the ZAD, it is a whole world of its own.[1]

This is the forest where some of the fiercest battles took place during Operation Caesar,[2] with its tree-house dwellers, mud slingers, and blockading pensioners. It has provided timber to build some of the most gorgeous cabins and buildings on the ZAD, as well as firewood for the cold winter days. It has been the source of highly heated debates about the ethics of human intervention in "nature" and the stage for theatrical candle-lit meanders by night. Left officially "unmanaged" for years in anticipation of being eradicated to make way for the airport, it is today the subject of an arm-wrestle with authorities, adamant that they should regain full power over it. No agreement has been reached with the National Office for Forests, whose agents are the only ones authorized to extract wood in publicly owned forests. Walking in the footsteps of the commoners who came before us, whose survival was criminalized as "poaching" by those who wanted to force them off this land, we are

The construction of a lighthouse at the ZAD, Notre-Dame-des-Landes, France, 2017. Built by farmers, boat builders, artists, and activists, the lighthouse is on the same site where the French government wanted to put a control tower for a new airport. Photo: Jay Jordan.

about to do what we do best: disobey.

"If you fell this chestnut tree, it will give more light to that young oak tree there, which is what you are aiming for. But you are going to have to be precise in your cut so as not to damage this other one on the way down." We spend more time with our necks crooked, staring at the canopy and discussing with our friends-turned-trainers how to go about cutting which tree than with our chainsaws in action. Our focus is put on taking care of the forest ecosystem, "not as in protecting something fragile" (although it might be), Carmine reminded us at the start of the day, "but in the sense of acknowledging mutual needs." The aim is finding the right balance between our needs for timber and firewood *and* those of the forest, so that it can continue to flourish. Obviously, what constitutes this equilibrium is the topic of numerous passionate discussions among the members of the collective dedicated to taking care of the ZAD's woodlands and hedges, Abrakadabois—a playful portmanteau pun on "abracadabra," the magic formula, and the French word for wood, " *bois*."

The first felling of trees for timber in 2014 gave rise to serious ethical conflicts as some inhabitants of the ZAD were adamant that the forest should be "respected" and therefore kept untouched. But for many involved in what would become Abrakadabois, this view of a nature so pure it should remain unstained by human intervention, separated and museumified, is only the flip side of the modern coin that sees it solely as a resource to exploit. Idolization and exploitation are rooted in the same notion of a neat, deep separation between humans and their "environment." But "we" are in and with and of "nature." Our greatest challenge is to learn to collaborate and participate with the living, rather than dominate it.

To move beyond these divisive conflicts, the group has committed to develop a shared vision and increased sensitivity through skill-sharing, collective learning and a common appreciation of the forest. Since 2016, it has brought together passionate amateurs, an ex-forestry engineer, a gaggle of tree surgeons, and lumberjacks, and has been organizing reading groups to share knowledge and questions about plant biology, the latest research about mycorrhizal symbiosis and the communication

between trees, as well as anthropological texts on interspecies collaborations developed by hunter-gatherer civilizations around the world. These conversations nourish the elaboration of a common (albeit manifold) perspective. This is enhanced by regular walks taken together to learn not only to recognize trees and identify possible diseases or specific behaviors, but also to analyze the impact that a previous cut has had on the growth and development of its neighboring trees, how it affects the lives of insects, the paths of mammals, etc. This same group determines each year which trees will be cut. Through attention and observation, we thus learn the web of interdependencies that is life, and progressively sharpen our ways of seeing.

I grab my chainsaw and get ready to fell my first tree. The deep thud of a tree being cut and hitting the ground nearby stops me in my tracks. It resonates in my chest. The unmistakable sound is at once heartbreaking and thrilling. My guide, Tim, gives me the last safety advice, reminds me to cut carefully but steadily. I am at once terrified and excited; although he is hardly a foot away from me and ready to modify the chainsaw's direction if I go wrong, I feel under the weight of a responsibility and apprehension. Not only do I hold a lethal machine with which I could easily chop one of my limbs off, but I am also about to take down a living being older than me that is home to a multitude of other beings … *and* the tree has to fall accurately, in order to protect its leafy neighbors, and not hurt any human in the process. The process of felling is meticulous; slowly adjusting the cut, observing the results, and adjusting again. It takes what seems an eternity and then the crown of the magnificent Douglas fir starts its descent, slow at first until it builds up speed and hits the ground. That crackle of breaking branches, that thud. I am elated, shaken, awed … When I share my emotions with the group during the evening meal, even the most experienced lumberjacks talk about the strange mix of excitement, sorrow, and respect that they still feel with every tree they take down.

This profound sensitivity to our role in the forest makes this way of logging fundamentally different to what industrial standards impose. "A forest like this one is not interesting to the industry" explains Michel, who worked as a forest engineer before deserting seven years ago to live on the ZAD. "It is too small, the trees grow too close together because they were left 'unmanaged' for years. If they had it their way and took back this forest's management, the most probable option for them would be a clear cut." Clear-cutting has become increasingly common and violent: nowadays trees are not just cut down—stumps are dug out and the slash (debris) is taken away to turn into the supposedly "ecological" heating source of biomass, even though leaving it in place would protect the soil and the aquifer and aid in restoration. Then a monoculture forest is planted: rows of fast-growing trees on an impoverished soil needing fertilizers (copper, phosphorous) that end up in drinking water!

Synergies and Regards

Against this extractivist logic, Abrakadabois has been learning from and networking with folk throughout France also researching, practicing, and defending a silviculture that does justice to the inherent dynamics of the forest. As philosopher Baptiste Morizot describes, by taking the point of view of the forest, their practices are "full of regards for it."[3] This soft silviculture aims to work *with* the forest rather than against it, caring for its limits and ecosystems, extracting wood while preserving, even restoring, the soil and the tree health, and respecting the microhabitats with a careful holistic approach that recognizes we are not in the forest, we are part of it and it is part of us. It is all about progressively forging an "alliance of needs" between humans and more-than-humans, made possible by the diversity of approaches and ways of seeing: naturalists and lumberjacks, amateur tree lovers and professional foresters, sawyers and inhabitants. As philosophers Léna Balaud and Antoine Chopot describe, "This … changes the experience of the forest: by allowing everyone to go beyond one's own identity, it multiplies the beings and relations to take into account."[4]

Such an approach implies the careful observation of moon cycles and only felling trees during the descending moon when the sap is at its lowest. It includes observing traces of boars who like to rub on trunks and adapting the felling accordingly. It means experimenting with anaesthetizing trees using a string tied around the trunk and snapping it (like one would a banjo) before cutting. It means working toward plant and animal diversity on a plot with introduced ill-adapted Sitka spruce species that has acidified the soil and turned a corner of the forest into a dark island of monoculture. Away from the industrial obsession with straight and rapid growth for profitable harvest, regards for the forest mean making space for "nonrational" selection criteria. Aesthetics or collective history become as valid stewardship guidelines as biodiversity or wood production. For instance, particularly alluring or bizarre trees are being preserved for the love of observing them develop, and a part of the forest where intense fighting took place in 2012 has been turned into a protected "sanctuary."

It also entails using draught horses instead of tractors to haul logs. "It is not a nostalgic or backward move," explains Steph, one of the handlers of the four huge workhorses that her collective has brought from the South of France to help out. She gives crisp, cryptic directions for her four-legged assistant to drag the tree we have just felled and pruned all the way to the forest edge where it will be sawn in a few months' time, their actions a synergistic duet. "Horse skidding" is often more efficient than tractors. She adds, "It avoids soil compaction and also allows for keeping trees nearer each other than in industrial plantations that are designed for machines to get through. Besides it is so much nicer to be with than

super noisy and smelly engines!"

The "adjusted regards"[5] for the forest is not just about an exalted love of trees. It represents a holistic understanding of the ecosystem. For this regard to be coherent and genuinely "adjusted," it must expand beyond care for the forest itself and take into account what comes next. This approach has been coined "from the seed to the beam": applying the same attention every step of the way. This outlook privileges ultra-local uses of the wood from the forest, as well as an effort to adapt one's practices to what is there. ZAD carpenters and architects have been learning to build and design on the basis of what the forest offers. Instead of using industrially standardized joists and planks, which mean lower quality wood and massive waste, the craft of using naturally shaped wood has returned, notably in the long-term work finishing the magnificent Barn of the Future that now holds a sawmill and a range of carpentry machines that shape the floorboards, joists, window frames, doors, and furniture of future constructions. This shared vision is precisely what industry has destroyed through fragmentation: those who identify the trees to be felled are not those who will fell them who are not those who will saw them who are not those who will utilize them as firewood or lumber … This compartmentalization and separation degrade ecosystems and relations.

The forest is too small to provide timber and firewood for all 170 ZAD inhabitants. Choices are made through a customary yearly process that is a cornerstone of commoning. An estimation of the quantity of wood available is calculated, and people and collectives attend a series of assemblies to discuss wants and needs and determine priorities. Each construction project is carefully examined, and a carpenter helps to calculate the precise wood requirements. Collective projects that serve the whole community are prioritized. Some of the wood is systematically dedicated to support other struggles: bunk beds for a migrant squat in Nantes, a "combat" wooden structure in support of an anti-gentrification campaign in Marseilles. Sustaining material links of solidarity with other struggles far and wide has always been part of the heartbeat of the rebel bocage.

As we are writing these words, the battle with the authorities continues. Abrakadabois seeks to be able to look after the forest as an ally, rather than as a resource. Negotiations are ongoing to pursue our lives in ways that are congruent with what we have defended. Specific long-term leases, securing about eight hundred acres of farmland, have been signed by those initially referred to as "illegal occupants," but this only concerns the land; housing remains unresolved. In effect, we are all still squatters. Our aim is to sign leases that acknowledge the territory as a commons. Crop rotation is organized communally and the Users' Assembly sits every month in order to make the decisions affecting the movement and the territory. National campaigns of action against toxic infrastructure are launched from the zone. A specially designed mobile street apparatus enables meals to be served at protests. A regional network of farmers has been set up to provide food for striking workers. And on the zone, illegal buildings continue to rise when necessary. Even though the airport struggle is over, we continue to try and keep the "yes" and the "no" twisted together.

X

Excerpted from Isabelle Fremeaux and Jay Jordan, *We Are "Nature" Defending Itself: Entangling Art, Activism and Autonomous Zones* (Pluto Press/Journal of Aesthetics and Protest, 2021).

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Together they co-facilitate the Laboratory of Insurrectionary Imagination.

1
ZAD is a French neoligism meaning *zone à défendre* (zone to defend) and refers to a militant occupation intended to block development. The example discussed here is the ZAD de Notre-Dame-des-Landes which successfully stopped the construction of an airport when local farmers and people from all over the country took control of the land and built farms, screen printing and textile workshops, a dairy and tannery, a blacksmith's forge, and much more. —Ed.

2
Operation Caesar was a 2012 attack on the ZAD by the French government when thousands of riot police came to to evict the commoners and farmers. Something like forty thousand people from all over France showed up to successfully help defend the ZAD from eviction. —Ed.

3
Baptiste Morizot, *Manières d'être vivant* (Actes Sud, 2020), 267. Authors' translation.

4
Léna Balaud and Antoine Chopot, "Suivre la forêt: Une entente terrestre de l'action politique," *Terrestres* , November 15, 2018 https://www.terrestres.org/2018/11/15/suivre-la-foret-une-entente-terrestre-de-laction-politique/ . Authors' translation.

5
Morizot, *Manières d'être vivant*.

Franco “Bifo” Berardi

Resign

The Psychotic Collapse of the Western Mind

We in the West are currently in the middle of a rapid disintegration of the geopolitical order that was inherited from the history of modern colonialism and that has held firm for decades. At the core of this disintegration is the *mental*, that is *cognitive*, collapse of the Western world. Sometimes I think that all the gods in the sky have hosted an assembly discussing the urgency of putting an end to their daring experiment: the human race. In a graphic-musical poem, "I'esperimento," the suggestion is that only Calliopes, the goddess of poetry, might save humans.[1]

With this disintegration of the hegemonic geopolitical order, the legacy of five centuries of white colonization and extraction of the world is crumbling. As a result, the white senescent dominators, those who are used to power, are finding themselves unable to hold together the world of their own making. Thus, they accelerate the spread of violence. The senile organism of the West perceives the approach of a pandemic of psychic depression. Often in the past the reaction to impending depression was aggressive hysteria and fascism. And as is often the case, hysterical comedy results in colossal tragedy.

The viral storm that began during the winter of 2019–20 has provoked a wave of chaos masquerading as enforced order, with implications reaching far beyond the health sphere. The Covid-19 virus, which provoked increased surveillance, control, and policing, is an unpredictable and undecidable factor augmenting other forms of chaos: environmental, social, mental, and last but not least, geopolitical. When the viral black swan began squawking under the guise of a viral storm, many other black swans awoke and started squawking together in a cacophonic concert.

Meanwhile, more and more people in despair escape their countries that have been ravaged by Western wars and exploitation, and those waves of migration paradoxically provide a scapegoat for white racism and ethno-nationalism. Towering walls are constructed on the eastern borders of Europe, supposedly defending white civilization from its own “despair.” Along the southern frontier, thousands drown in the Mediterranean. All in all, the present European Union is becoming increasingly like the European order in 1941 when Hitler asserted the right to ethnic extermination to protect the sacred, imagined homeland of the Aryan race.

Across the Atlantic, the United States sinks into a whirlwind of political mayhem and impotent rage. The reaction to the US defeat in Afghanistan has triggered mass panic, while the Biden administration’s rescue plan evaporated quicker than it came together. Another stage for the tragedy is set: in the past few months the Ukrainian

Istubalz, Untitled, 2022 from the series "L'Esperimento (A Musical Graphic Poem)," 2022. Collage on paper and recording, available to listen to here: →. Copyright: Istubalz, Marco Bertoni (music), Patrizia Piccinini (voices), and Satomi Yanagibashi (soprano).

crisis has turned into an aggressive showdown. Putin reiterates that Ukraine's military alliance with the West is a red line that should not be crossed, so he will not withdraw Russian troops deployed at the border until he is certain that NATO will not deploy men or weapons to the border. But the West cannot bend, and Biden promises to react somehow in the event of an invasion. After Kabul, however, trust in America is fading. And, ironically, this lack of trust is the very reason that Biden is obliged to not renounce a combative stance.

It is only in psychopathological terms that this geopolitical dynamic can be deciphered, as the Afghan defeat has crystallized the perception of an inevitable decline of Western supremacy. The Western mind is reacting with a panicked psychosis that could herald a suicidal act. Nothing can interrupt the dynamic of this intersection of paranoid delusions. The only thing we—as intellectuals, as activists, as therapists searching for new subjectivities—can do is prepare for chaos and imagine lines of flight.

The Unthinkable

The Unthinkable is the title of a book by Jamie Raskin, a member of the US House of Representatives from Maryland. The book came out on the first anniversary of the psychotic insurrection that brought thousands of Trumpists into the political heart of the US. The author is not just any writer; he is an important member of the US Congress, high up in the ranks of the Democratic Party. Furthermore, Raskin is a professor of constitutional law, a self-proclaimed liberal, and father of three children in their twenties. One of them, Tommy—twenty-five years old, political activist, supporter of progressive causes, compassionate, empathic—died on the last day of 2020. To be more precise, Tommy committed suicide because of long-standing depression and also (perhaps it goes without saying) because of the long moral humiliation of his humanitarian values. In his last letter, Tommy mentions his depression: "Forgive me, my illness won." Then he adds: "Look after each other, the animals, and the global poor for me."[2]

The suicide of his beloved son presents itself as an apocalypse in the mind of Raskin. Tommy's final decision is not only an affective catastrophe for his father, but the trigger for a radical reconsideration of his political beliefs. Reading this book, I have shared the pain of a father and the torment of an intellectual. Simultaneously, I have been led to consider the depth of the crisis that is tearing apart Western culture and liberal democracy.

The book recounts three different stories simultaneously. The first is that of American fascism, the Trump administration as a kingdom of ignorance, racism, and aggressiveness. The second is Tommy, his formation, his ideals, and the constant humiliation of his ethical sensibility. The third is the effect of Covid-19 on the mind of the young generations that have suffered most from social distancing, depression, and the inability to imagine a livable future.

Raskin writes that he always considered himself "an optimist, radically optimistic about how the Constitution of the nation itself can uplift our social, political, and intellectual condition." After the death of his son, however, his self-perception changed. His constitutional optimism is shattered by the prevailing of brutal force over the force of Reason, and by the spread of depression. He writes:

> Suddenly, this constitutional optimism shames and embarrasses me … I fear that my sunny political optimism, what many of my friends have treasured in me most, has become a trap for massive self-delusion, a weakness to be exploited by our enemies. Yet I am also terrified to think about what it would mean to live without this buoyancy—and also without my beloved, irreplaceable son. The two always went hand-in-hand, and now I may be alive on earth without either of them.

Raskin's words mark a sort of reckoning: an understanding that political and personal tragedies make evident the self-delusions intrinsic to liberal democracy. Even when faced with this break from his "sunny political optimism," he is unable to dissociate himself from capitalist dogma. Even in the face of tragedy and death, his question remains how to reconcile American exceptionalism with tragedy, how to reconcile his newly acquired skepticism with his unfettered belief in the nation central to his depression.

Psycho-Deflation

While the geopolitical landscape turns chaotic, a key question remains: What is the landscape of social subjectivity? The pandemic deeply changed the psycho-scape, spreading depression and anxiety along with feelings of physical weakness and decreased energy. Long Covid is manifestation of this, but only the tip of the iceberg. An all-encompassing psycho-deflation emerges as the horizon of the viral age, and today's intellectual task it to translate asthenia (abnormal physical weakness or loss of energy) into evolutionary terms. In some sense, this deflation may be the only positive trend of the contemporary era, forcing a stop to certain processes.

Psycho-deflation is the effect of the prolonged health panic, the internalization of fear, and most importantly, the change in the general consensus on the amount of space its necessary to keep between oneself and others. The need to socially distance has contributed to a mass, phobic sensitization to the body of the other, to the skin and the lips of the other. Eroticism is paralyzed and the pleasure of sociability crumbles.

It is no surprise, then, that the compulsory health measures imposed on the entire social body (to differing degrees) have created ripe conditions for biopolitical civil war. In this landscape, new political and therapeutic categories must be worked out. Psychological energy is sapped from the social body, imagination slows, and the collective body is paralyzed. This is what I mean by the term "psycho-deflation."

But through this fear of contact that the virus has provoked, through this slowing down of social reactivity, various lines of flight are taking shape. Most people in the West are following a fascist line of escape, reacting aggressively to impending depression. However, an autonomous line of flight can also be detected and disentangled through a psychoanalytic (schizo-analytic) path: in the expanding black hole of mental suffering, one may also find the gap that precedes the emergence of a new process of subjectivation, and the visibility of a new horizon. A horizon of self-reliance, frugality, and equality, not to mention horizons of rebellion and revolt, which have also emerged since the Covid-19 pandemic first engulfed the world. But, while some of these contemporary experiences, like the Chilean insurrection and its political aftermath, are also emerging along this horizon, it would be a mistake to look to the political sphere in order to describe the possible emergence of new subjectivities. The mutation that is underway has little to do with political representation.

Much more interesting than *political* participation is the multifold *resignation* that is spreading into the ordinary business of life. Much more interesting than *political* consciousness is the widespread *rejection* of work, consumption, and procreation.

Economics and Depressive Psychosis

I follow with keen attention the views that Paul Krugman expresses in his *New York Times* column, because I consider him one of the most forward-looking and honest

economists. But at the end of the day, he is an economist, and the epistemological limits of his science prevent him from perceiving underlying processes of change, whether social, political, or cognitive.

For an economist everything must be explained in terms of economics, in terms of market fluctuations, rising and falling wages, inflation, the interest rate—all important things, for heaven's sake. For a working family it is very important that wages increase and that their purchasing power is stable. But if the analysis of the world we live in is reduced to economically quantifiable values, we run the risk of not understanding the essential functioning of ongoing processes. Take, for example, the column that Krugman published on December 9, 2021, titled "How Is the U.S. Economy Doing?" Krugman refers to two recent surveys conducted by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, and expresses his surprise:

> The American economic landscape appears very good indeed. After the contraction of 2020, we are facing the best economic recovery in decades. Yet, reading the research results it seems that consumers are feeling very despondent, and this negative perception of the economy ends up weighing on the electoral preferences for President Biden.[3]

I understand very well that Krugman, a passionate defender of the Democratic Party and a supporter of Biden, regrets that his president's performance has so far been disastrous in terms of foreign policy and in the realization of his mega-financial plan.[4] But the economy is fine, says Krugman—employment has risen to pre-lockdown levels, the growth engine is running at full speed, energy consumption has risen (causing tornadoes and creating conditions for new fires, a detail that goes unremarked by Krugman). So, he wonders: "Are the consumers right? Do we have to say that this economy is bad, despite the data showing that it is very good? And if in fact it is not a bad economy, why does the majority say otherwise?"

Good question, Paul. Why do American workers, who should rejoice at the huge increase in corporate profits and the tiny increase in their wages, continue to sulk, nervous and discontented? Krugman tries to give himself an answer with the tools at his disposal:

> Rising prices have certainly eroded wage increases, even if personal per capita income is still above its pre-pandemic levels. I have the impression that inflation has a corrosive character on confidence even when wages are rising, because it creates the perception that things are out of control.

So, the answer is inflation, the boogeyman of liberal and conservative economics. An economic excuse for anxiety has been found at last! But I wonder: does Krugman really think that consumers (who are not consumers, but human beings with lives that are not limited to cashing checks and spending them) are in a "bad mood" because it seems that inflation is resurfacing? In a flash of trans-economic intelligence Krugman does admit that one gets different answers when asking people "how are you?" as opposed to "how is the economy going?"

But Krugman fails to develop this intuition and returns to torment himself about the incomprehensible gap between the cantankerous mood of the crowd and the goodness of the economy. So, at the end he bursts into a cry of despair:

> In a nutshell, the heavily negative judgment on the economy is in contrast to any other indicator that one can think of [*economic of course*]. So what is happening? It is important to keep the perspective. This is a really very good economy even if there are some problems. Do not allow the doomsayers to tell you that this is not the case.

Now, what is the point that the economist Krugman is missing? In my humble opinion, the point is that the experiences of recent years—particularly the experience of the virus and the ensuing fear and the spreading sense of mortality—have allowed people to think about life in terms that do not only concern job security, itself an almost random marker of stability.

Today, the old adage "it's the economy, stupid" can be rephrased: "It's the psychology, stupid."

The psychotic collapse neutralizes the strength of the economy.

Many have joined the hordes led by Trump and evangelical preachers. Many took fentanyl and OxyContin until they overdosed. Some grab their father's machine gun and go to school to kill half a dozen of their peers. But many others have wondered why they should devote their entire life to poorly paid (or even "fairly" paid) work when that work makes no sense, depresses you, drains you, and alienates you from others. Why live in conditions of permanent humiliation? Why not *resign* from all that, economic concerns be damned?

Many have organized huge strikes, like at Kellogg's, at Nabisco, and at Columbia University, where three thousand workers went on strike for over nine weeks![5] Many others have just left: four and a half million American workers left their jobs at the end of 2020—"the Great Resignation," as it's being called. A sort of long

Covid has installed itself at the core of the Western mind—but not only in the Western mind. In China, instead of working hard, buying a house, getting married, and having children, more and more young people are opting out of the rat race and taking up low-paying jobs—or not working at all. This simple act of resistance is commonly known as *tangping*, or "lying flat."[6]

What Krugman cannot see, by virtue of his (liberal) economic worldview, is that in the face of death, panic, and depression, money loses its power, perhaps even its value. Money cannot revive a society steeped in depression and riddled with panic and demented fury. Money cannot win against massive resignation: as the Great Resignation goes global, we should not forget that the word "resignation" does not only mean quitting, but also renouncing expectations. Modern expectations have been dashed: democracy is an empty word, welfare has been cancelled by predatory finance. Furthermore, resignation means re-signification—giving a new meaning to pleasure, to richness, to activity, and to cooperation. This is the fresh horizon that we can discover at the end of the tunnel of psycho-deflation. An egalitarian and frugal sensitivity is the hidden perspective that is unveiled there.

In a sort of counter chant to *Squid Game*, the South Korean pop band BTS chants: "It's alright to stop / There's no need to run without even knowing the reason / It's alright to not have a dream / If you have moments where you feel happiness for a while."

It seems that BTS has a massive following among young people worldwide.

X

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1
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