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Gender Liberation

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Much has been written in feminist and transgender theory of the necessity of gender abolition. This theoretical tradition sites patriarchy as the original source of the concept of gender, and asserts that the abolition of patriarchy will necessitate the abolition of gender altogether. While I believe there is much of value offered by gender abolitionist theory, I myself am not particularly interested in ceding the territory of gender to patriarchy in its entirety. My project, gender liberation, is a complete denial of patriarchy's private property claim over determining and defining gender and gender presentation.

This is not to assert that our understandings of our genders are completely separate from patriarchy. No part of our identity can be fully separated from the social systems in which it developed. What I resist is giving any authoritarian system total credit for crafting, developing, and disseminating anything as nuanced, culturally influenced, and endlessly diverse as gender. Let us not grant our enemies a level of competence and power they do not actually possess! There are and have always been endless trans experiences of gender that do not neatly (or at all) align with patriarchy's messages about the gender binary and gender roles. Countless are the ways

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that the general culture has been influenced by queer and trans subcultures; influence is not unidirectional — something that has been passively received by trans people from patriarchal society — it is a dynamic, ever shifting, *political conflict*. Patriarchy dominates so much of the gender narrative because it is an empowered hierarchical system capable of controlling access to resources and suppressing dissent, not because it actually is, or ever has been, the only voice.

Even *were* it true that patriarchy is the sole origin of our concepts of gender, it does not necessarily follow that we are incapable of creating genders that subvert the intent of that origin. Supposing gender is something that is only ever done to us, done to us irrevocably and unidirectionally, from the seats of patriarchal power. I still see no compelling reason not to co-opt that creation. We are, after all, not simply taking the master's tools and using them as intended. We're smashing the handles, fucking up the edges, melting down the metal, taking what pleases us and dancing around the burning remains of the parts we reject. We make a mockery of their projects! We defile their alters! We declare our scarred bodies and wild genders divine! Perhaps gender truly was initially inflicted upon us. But we are not passive recipients of its decrees, and we have had hundreds of years to play with, distort, and reinvent it. We have been present. We are political agents. We are undoubtedly shaped by existing frameworks of meaning but with our lives and our bodies we also shape it into a meaning of our own.

I understand our enemy to be not gender itself, but the patriarchal system of *gendering*: coercive gender assignment, bioessentialism, and gender roles. Capitalist colonial white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy has enclosed gender and gender expression, rendered it into private property to alternatively bestow on and entrap people in the service of hierarchical power. It is undeniably a system of coercive control and resource extraction. Yet it has its limits, and those limits do not encompass the totality of gender as it exists in our world. Transgender — transgressively

gendered: the act of transgressing the patriarchal system of gendering — is not simply a passive result of this system but an active challenge to it. A challenge patriarchy has acknowledged as a threat for the totality of its existence. Trans people live genders that defy patriarchy's system of social organization and undermine the very foundations its logic stands upon.

Every transgressive gender is a point of pressure and tension on the cissexual system. Living proof of the lie. Which is exactly why that system wants so badly to kill us. In my view, gender liberation has the potential to center the subversive possibilities of transness: bringing specific focus to the ways that trans people have always been and continue to be active combatants against the imposition of patriarchal gendering systems. Rather than framing us as unfortunate recipients of patriarchal gender we have little choice but to react to, it situates us as agents in a struggle against the patriarchal project to impose unity and essentialism over an endless, ever shifting multiplicity of experiences. Patriarchy does not sit at an equilibrium — calmly and authoritatively administering orders — it is, like all forms of hierarchical power, locked forever in a stance of precarious counterinsurgency. Counterinsurgents depend on the illusion of total control and power to maintain their authority: a unified, totalizing narrative intended to suppress resistance before it can even begin. This is apparent in patriarchy's attempts to suppress and erase trans people from social life. Trans people are *key* to its downfall, we are on the frontlines of the conflict. We are the insurgents, not passive victims (as if such a thing ever existed).

Core to my approach to gender liberation, however and *importantly* (I'm absolutely serious about this), is spite and defiance! Patriarchy makes cis men feel easy and comfortable over their private property relation to claiming masculinity and manhood, defining femininity and womanhood, and utterly erasing all other possibilities. I understand and respect the impulse to totally demolish all that they claim as theirs. However, for myself I can say that I have a much stronger impulse towards theft and sacrilege. I'm not inter-

ested in validating their original property claim even as I burn that property down. I want to put my dyke hands all over that which they find sacred. I don't want to simply tear down their empire, I want to reveal it for the farce it has always been. They've never had totality! Nothing was ever theirs! Masculinity, femininity, androgyny, and gender, mean whatever we want them to mean, whenever we want them to mean it. Liberated from the coercive gendering system we make gender a site of play, creativity, expression, and transcendence.

What I hope for the future is not a world where gender has been abolished, but a world in which *cisness* has been abolished. The right-wing's worst fears are correct: I think everyone should be trans! To clarify: as an anarchist, I understand revolution not as a singular event but a never-ending project. We do not "reach" anarchism, we strive *towards* anarchism. Incorporating anti-power values into our social systems demands constant maintenance, establishing shared values and practices oriented towards spotting, analyzing, and undermining nodes of centralized power as they crop up. For gender I imagine something similar, that there will likely never be an endpoint at which we have fully "undone" gender to such a degree that coercive gendering systems can never reemerge. Instead, we will do away with the process of coercive gendering (ex: assigning gender at birth, assuming gender, or associating masculinity, femininity, androgyny with specific genders, gender roles, or presentations, etc.), incorporate social practices of actively transgressing gender, constantly interrogate systems of gendering (not just at birth but throughout social life) as they form, and, through this, honor the true multiplicity of human experience.

I love my gender. I love butchness. I love womanhood. I love being trans and nonbinary. I recognize all of these identities as historically, socially, culturally, and materially contingent, and as such I situate them as identities that connect to a rich history of transgressively gendered people creating identity and making meaning that challenges and undermines that patriarchal status quo.

I do not claim them as completely unaffected by patriarchy, but rather shaped in active conflict *with* patriarchy, not simply accidental and passive symptoms of it. This, to me, implies that subversive gender can and does exist, even under patriarchal rule. The project becomes, then, expanding the agency and collective power of transgressively gendered people, encouraging more people to play with gender transgression, and utterly rejecting patriarchy's private property claim over defining and assigning gender.

It is likely that butchness as I understand it would never have come to be in a world without patriarchy, but it does not follow that butchness, or any gender, could not exist without it. My gender is not a symptom to be corrected, nor a mere response to an overpowering system. My gender is one formed in political conflict. It is not only the shape of my resistance, but an act of prefiguration: of imagining and living out (as much as is possible) a world after patriarchy. It is true that one can only engage in the act of imagining such a world if one has experienced what it is like to be affected by patriarchy, and yet that reality does not stop us from calling it a dream of liberation.