

They Thought They Could Bury Me, But Ain't Know I was a Star Queen

Nsambu Za Suekama

July 7, 2023

Contents

Introduction	3
“Mind” Is Embodied: A Response to the Proletem Thesis	5
Dividing the Body: On the Nexus Hypothesis	7
Resolving The Principles: A Conclusion	9

Introduction

According to the blogger Zagria, a Pentecostal minister oversaw the ceremony by which Sylvia Rivera took on her name as such. Zagria also documents how spirituality showed up in Sylvia Rivera's revolutionary praxis:

“We'd all get together to pray to our saints before we'd go out hustling. A majority of the queens were Latin and we believe in an emotional, spiritualistic religion. We have our own saints: Saint Barbara, the patron saint of homosexuality, St. Michael, the Archangel; La Calidad de Cobre, the Madonna of gold; and Saint Martha, the saint of transformation. St. Martha had once transformed herself into a snake, so to her we'd pray: 'Please don't let them see through the mask. Let us pass as women and save us from harm.' And to the other three we'd kneel before our altar of candles and pray: 'St. Barbara, St. Michael, La Calidad de Cobre: We know we are doing wrong, but we got to live and we got to survive, so please help us, bring us money tonight, protect us, and keep evil away.' We kept the sword of St. Barbara at the front door and the sword of St. Michael at the back door to ward off evil. We were watched over.” (Cohen p134) — A Gender Variance Who's Who

I had just begun learning about African traditional religion myself when I started my social transition. As I was exposed to the life of Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P Johnson, and the STAR queens, to ball culture, and histories of queer/trans resistance, I can remember also deconstructing my own Pentecostal upbringing, the rigid gender norms I was taught, and retracing its mystical roots to the beliefs of my ancestors.

One influential document for this journey was reading the book *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. There's a conversation between two characters, one European, one Igbo, about religion. The exchange really opened my eyes to understand why or how African people had syncretised (combined) elements of Christianity with traditional cosmology prior to full on conversion. The exchange is written as follows:

“Your queen sends her messenger, the District Commissioner. He finds that he cannot do the work alone and so he appoints kotma to help him. It is the same with God, or Chukwu. He appoints the smaller gods to help Him because His work is too great for one person.”

“You should not think of Him as a person,” said Mr. Brown. “It is because you do so that you imagine He must need helpers. And the worst thing about it is that you give all the worship to the false gods you have created.”

“That is not so. We make sacrifices to the little gods, but when they fail and there is no one else to turn to we go to Chukwu. It is right to do so. We approach a great man through his servants. But when his servants fail to help us, then we go to the last source of hope. We appear to pay greater attention to the little gods but that is not so. We worry them more because we are afraid to worry their Master. Our fathers knew that Chukwu was the Overlord and that is why many of them gave their children the name Chukwuka—

“Chukwu is Supreme.”

“You said one interesting thing,” said Mr. Brown. “You are afraid of Chukwu. In my religion Chukwu is a loving Father and need not be feared by those who do His will.”

“But we must fear Him when we are not doing His will,” said Akunna. “And who is to tell His will? It is too great to be known.”

The Igbo traditional view of Deity, far less rigid than that of Pentecostalism, jumped out to me, because of how *relational* it was. God needed help as much as we needed help. Humans knew creator through a collaboration with divine emissaries, whose powers, tied to the one god, threaded together nature and social/cultural life. Humans could engage with said power, and thus those manifestations of divinity, as a way to more deeply understand the ultimate Source who transcended existence, and thereby we would govern our material lives.

Such an understanding resonated with me as I started to meet and engage with other queer/trans Black folk who were reclaiming African spirituality. During a process of about four years, tumultuous with its various health and housing crises — all exacerbated by my experiences of racism and cissexism— I would find myself learning about a deep connection between the cosmological “world-sense” (word to Oyeronke Oyewumi) of my ancestors, and a considerable degrees of gender non-dualism/fluidity in pre-colonial social relations. This led me to start declaring that slave folklore about the people who could fly could be interpreted not just as symbols of runaway and rebel slaves (as Toni Morrison suggested), nor of those who reclaim african magical power (as the book *Drums and Shadows* suggests), but specifically of gender expansive people who have engaged in these fugitive and spiritual acts (see: *To The Ones Who Can Fly — A Message from the Whirlwind*).

I call it my “fugiversary,” the anniversary of my own fugitivity. When I “flew” away “home” spiritually, to govern my body. I had started to wear flowers. And then, each August following that, I would come into a deeper understanding of myself, of what it meant to be African, and of the revolutionary struggle. A pronoun change, embracing what felt most comfortable for me in my clothes, speech patterns, mannerisms, and then when I decided that a social transition was not enough for me — that I would need a biophysical transition as well — this went down during my August fugiversary. I woke up, reflecting heavily on the Igbo landing story, and on folks like Area Scatter, Nne Uko, Ahebi Ugbabe, all Igbo gender expansive folks in their own right. Sitting with their memory, I knelt at my “hushing table” and I made the decision: placing a hormone patch against my belly. There was something about making the choice to negotiate exogenous hormone with endogenous hormone that felt aligned with how I had been negotiating the gender questions emerging for me re: African spirituality and those that had been emerging for me re: imperialism, slavery, and colonial religion. Thinking about this interplay started to deepen my understanding of Gender Self-Determination as a concept (which is *not* to say one must transition medically in order to arrive at such an understanding).

Whatever feels, lives; whatever lives, depends on nourishment; whatever lives and depends on nourishment grows; whatever is of this nature is in the end resolved into its basic principles; whatever comes to be resolved into its basic principles is a complex; every complex has its constituent parts; whatever this is true of is a divisible body. If therefore the human mind feels, it follows that it is a divisible body.

— On the Ἀπάθεια (Apatheia) of the Human Mind 2.1 by Antonius Guilelmus Amo Afer (an Akan philosopher)

“Mind” Is Embodied: A Response to the Proletem Thesis

When a well known proletarian feminist organizer’s response to the loss of *Roe v Wade* was that “womanhood is a political class,” I witnessed many Leftists pile onto a conservative line: that transness is imaginary. Or, more specifically, that it is an effluvium of sorts, a superfluity, something “metaphysical” or “idealist” as is claimed by groups like the International Marxist Tendency (IMT).

I lost my old twitter account for challenging such claims. I declared that as opposed to a “proletarian” feminism, there needed to be a *materialist transfeminism*. Many proletems and their radfem counterparts raced to describe me as silly, to misgender me, and to harrass me online, calling me delusional, and using these ableist construals to even paint me as dangerous to “women” (defined in cisnormative manner).

Their argument subsists on the claim that regardless of self-concept, presentation, etc, one’s gendered social being — that is, the social organization of their corporeal makeup — must always line up with sexual dualism. This is because of a longstanding Western preoccupation with a so-called “gendered division of labor,” assumed to have always been binary, existing from way in the past, though reconfigured in time. Any “variance” from such dimorphism is therefore inconsequential to the supposedly “material” basis of social life; it may exist, but has no objective relevance to the dialectical motion of labor. A movement focusing on these “outliers” is therefore subjective, undialectical, not in line with class struggle, and a symptom of bourgeois interests. One time, for example, Kwame Toure, great as he was in many ways, triangulated investments in transgender healthcare with a critique of how the Western bourgeoisie overlooks the interests of the African working class.

Some may take issue with me saying this, as Kwame Toure was known for his challenge to the idea that “homosexuality is unAfrican” — having asserted, instead, that “homophobia is unAfrican.” But, if we sit with the context and substance of Kwame Toure’s argument, he was responding to individuals asking him to *speak more clearly to concerns of the gay/lesbian movement*. Dodging this request, he emphasised instead: “I fight for my people’s culture.” His suggestion was that only a European culture of intolerance and homogeneity was the basis for homophobia/transphobia. As radical as that may sound, it can be used to suggest that there is no material basis for how these antagonisms appear in African cultures. Thereby, Afro-queer/Afro-trans folks will find ourselves accused of bringing an “immaterial” concern with LGBT rights into the African struggle, suggesting that we are focused on biases that are wholly colonial/bourgeois.

The distinction between what is materialist and what is idealist as it relates to the queer/trans liberation struggle, is not in line with what I understand of Marx. I am no Marxist (and neither was Marx for that matter), but his contributions to the “science” of revolution are important to me. I like to point to interpolations of Marx in texts like York and Mancus’ *Critical Human Ecology: Historical Materialism and Natural Laws*. Here, the authors make clear that

“... rather than embracing the alienated subject of Hegel’s phenomenology — where knowledge is produced in the successive movement from denotative utterance to universal signification to idea, and therefore alienation is inherently a problem of consciousness, a movement away from the body, and representations become the main object of analytical concern — Marx and Engels’s materialism can be seen as an attempt to come to terms with the human propensity to transform the world through

social labor, an activity in dialectical motion with thinking and representation (Frachia 1991). Mediation, in this view, is not primarily a relation by representations (Hegel's alienation), but through social labor (Timpanaro 1975). Emphasizing the bodily relations of labor highlights how embodiment prefigures the (anticipatory) aspect of consciousness, which in turn is an emergent property of the species-specific cognitive structure of historical human kind (Foster 2008)."

My understanding of this passage is that a Hegelian dialectic takes one's *alienation at face value*, and thereby defines knowledge thereof in a manner that prioritizes consciousness. By contrast, the Marxist dialectic should illuminate how knowledge/consciousness was impinged upon by embodied configurations of labor, the both of which Marx would eventually understand to be emergent properties within a socio-ecological network. Alienation was thereby reframed in terms of how capitalism had imposed a "metabolic rift" within human-environmental relations.

Through Fanon, however, we learn that Marx's analysis was only part of the picture. For, *embodiment itself (not just consciousness, not just labor) needed to be understood as an emergent property within a socio-ecological process*. Capitalism's metabolic rift, at least in the colonies, involved, as Fanon would put it, how much "what parcels out the world is to begin with the fact of belonging to or not belonging to a given race, a given species." Now, to be very clear, Fanon does not mean "race" in a biological sense. In his earlier text, *Black Skin, White Masks*, he was determined to challenge a bioreductive account of race, as it failed to explain the illnesses with which his patients were wrestling. Thus, Fanon grounded his observations in a scientific conception he termed "sociogeny." His patients' issues were reframed through a nature-nurture conception of social being. And his sociogenic view of how colonialism-capitalism ordered the world was aimed at going beyond the "materialist" and "idealist" divide in classical Marxism. Therefore, Fanon argued:

In the colonies the economic substructure is also a superstructure. The cause is the consequence; you are rich because you are white, you are white because you are rich. This is why Marxist analysis should always be slightly stretched every time we have to do with the colonial problem.

Everything up to and including the very nature of precapitalist society, so well explained by Marx, must here be thought out again. The serf is in essence different from the knight, but a reference to divine right is necessary to legitimize this statutory difference. In the colonies, the foreigner coming from another country imposed his rule by means of guns and machines. In defiance of his successful transplantation, in spite of his appropriation, the settler still remains a foreigner. It is neither the act of owning factories, nor estates, nor a bank balance which distinguishes the governing classes. The governing race is first and foremost those who come from elsewhere, those who are unlike the original inhabitants, "the others." (page 39, *The Wretched of the Earth*)

My understanding of this passage is that cultural "difference" (flattened as "race") is, for Fanon, simultaneously a metaphysical and material force, prior to and under capitalism, insofar as it *structurally re-articulates (in the colonial setting) the historical emergence of distinct embodiments within human socio-ecological relations*. The maintenance of that structure has objective relevance

to the dialectical motion of the Man's rule, of possession of property, of exploitation and theft, of the pollution. Therefore, if the body's configuration itself, alongside consciousness and labor, is part of emergent and socio-ecological processes within which a "rift" has been imposed, the Fanonian dialectic cannot attend to alienation in a *monovalent* fashion.

But what are the causal forces involved with such a *polyvalent* (dis)organization? Surely there must be a generalizable character to a problem that eludes simple material vs metaphysical and nature versus nurture dichotomies! This intervention is essential to a dialectical understanding of transphobia and homophobia. Especially because, after the colonial situation, comes the "sovereign" or "emancipated" (and "integrated" or "multicultural") era, where to be a citizen/denizen is to reproduce the nation/family; and to reproduce the nation/family is to be a citizen/denizen of the "sovereign" or "emancipated" (and "integrated" or "multicultural") era. Sylvia Wynter inspired me in thinking like this, for she took Fanon's application of his thought to the "alienation of the Black man," and used it to "stretch" Marxist feminist thought towards a universal account of both *gendered and non-gendered social being*.

It was on these grounds that I would propose a "transfeminist material analysis" in response to the claim that "womanhood is a political class." Womanhood, for me, describes several *spandrels of embodiment*, something I hope I have communicated in my previous articles "Dispatches from Among the Damned," "Against Sex Class Theory," "Why I am a Materialist Transfeminist," "Racial-Class Paternalism and the Trojan Horse of Anti-transmasculinity," and "Late Night Thoughts from a Dialectical Transfeminist." Whereas, the term "political class" is actually a conservative/liberal conception, focused on representation by a party/ruling elite in the State (see: Gaetano Mosca).

Dividing the Body: On the Nexus Hypothesis

Them proleffems didn't realize they had kicked the hornet's nest. By the time they had attempted to run me off twitter, I had already been approaching a new horizon in my thought, based on years of personal and collective study of Black anarchism, Marxist feminism, Third Worldism, and Black Ecology, as well as theories of disability and queerness/transness.

Though I lost my previous account, a summer away from twitter demonstrated itself to be a blessing in disguise (and lo, and behold, that is the sacred meaning of my name!). From then on, even to today, I began revisiting things I had already read and written, as well as diving into things I had never read while writing new theoretical projects. I started to question what I already knew and even to engage things I had formerly rejected.

In the midst of this, I've been able to connect with more and more comrades and within my own spirit around the power of a transfeminist material analytic. Community and communion, study and struggle, these have all encouraged me in further inquiry, and I want to touch on some things that have come up for me in this article here.

I do this not to sound egotistical, to overstate my brilliance, to frame myself as some pioneer of a novel theoretical tradition or anything of the sort. No, I write from a sense of urgency, of desperation, in a world that is increasingly demonstrating itself to be fascistic, even where claims of progressivism and radicalism reign supreme.

It is abhorrent that a response to fascistic legislation in the US would ever have relied on right-wing tropes among self-proclaimed Leftists. The utter depravity of the Left concerning to-

day's global transantagonistic counterrevolution is entirely too serious for me to just let skirt by without vocal opposition. And a theoretical depth (as well as other means if need be. IYKYK) to back up my words.

And so I propose: that there are certain hitherto misapprehended social forms, “nexed” between relations of production and reproduction. The Marxist movement might have demystified them, but could not. For the hitherto misapprehended social forms are “nexed” between not only those historical dynamics that are endogenous to the given societies under Marx’s consideration, but also how those dynamics are interpenetrated with the dynamics endogenous to the whole host of other societies throughout the world.

Therefore, the decolonization movement, on one hand unsettling a certain false universalist “code”¹ within the European Marxist tradition, and on the other hand responding to uneven development of the “level of productive forces and patterns of ownership”² across the world due to colonization and slavery, might have demystified the phenomena I’m speaking of, though it could not. For the hitherto misapprehended social forms are “nexed” within not just the historical and geography-specific dynamics of each society, but also the interpenetration — via the register of sociogeny and ecogeny — of such dynamics with the nature-nurture dynamics of each organism and population’s constructive development in the register of phylogeny and ontogeny³.

Hence, struggles for bodily autonomy, be these gender/sexual liberation (feminist, queer) movements or struggles against institutionalization and carceralization (disability, abolitionist). These are confronting different “interwoven” patterns of social reproduction that configured bodies within relations of production in consequence of a network of accumulation. We could very well speak of them as calling for an embodied materialism⁴, that synthesizes strengths from decolonial materialism and historical materialism. This is so as to grapple with not just the question of Capitalism and Imperialism, but also Ableism and Patriarchy, and ultimately, of the socio-ecological (metabolic) context of relations of domination and exploitation.

Still, there are “nexus” points that have come to connect the varied threads and dynamics of this web, which have not been adequately unveiled. These hitherto misapprehended social forms are those which “imbricate” material and power relations. Which is to say: at these *nexings*, material and power relations “overlap,” though in a manner which remains somewhat peripheral or limnal to our analysis, ie, “at the edges.” The consequence of these “nexing-forms” as I call them is a stabilization of how relations of production and reproduction are embodied, negotiated, reckoned, contested, and understood.

That last part is important. The Nexuses are relegated to the margins of our consciousness in no small part because of certain epistemic fallacies⁵, especially naturalistic fallacies, these being buttressed by the “grand distortion of reality”⁶ kick-started under authoritarian religions, and enshrined now under the modern secular-scientific Political *imaginaire*⁷.

¹ This is a term I borrow from Cedric Robinson. See *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*

² This is a phrase I borrow from Amilcar Cabral. See *The Weapon of Theory*

³ My coinage “ecogeny” builds on the concept of “modes of material provisioning” from Sylvia Wynter. See: *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human As Praxis*

⁴ This is a term I borrow from Ariel Salleh’s work

⁵ This is a term I borrow from Roy Bhaskar’s work

⁶ This is a term I borrow from Sanyika Shakur’s work. See *The Pathology of Patriarchy*

⁷ This is a term I borrow from Sylvia Wynter’s work. See *Beyond the Categories of the Master Conception*

Driving this: Political management of the trajectory of accumulation, to the benefit of the ruling few who constitute competing factions of Western bourgeois, neocolonial, and State capitalist leaders. This yields a theoretical and philosophical tendency to justify rulership over the ruled, by setting mind against matter, interior against exterior, base against superstructure, and other such dualisms.

Most troublingly, the dualisms make not just Nexuses of imbrication nearly imperceptible, but their attendant spandrels of embodiment — that is, how human persons and our traits are positioned and constructed in consequence of imbrication — become taken at face value (as a given, a priori), reduced to a supposed “biological imperative.” Thus, even the masses and folks along the margins may strive to reorganize along *one* path of constructive evolution⁸ all the complex metabolic life-activity that is “nexed” between relations of production and reproduction, and between such relations vis-a-vis different societies as they have been drawn together across the globe, and between such interwoven relations vis-a-vis the interpenetration of nature and nurture at the level of individual human organisms and of whole populations of human organisms.

To “transect” the biological potentiality⁹ for *other* pathways of evolutionary (self)construction, and the structural articulation thereof, a *transfeminist material analysis* is needed alongside embodied, decolonial, and historical materialist insights. This would build on struggles for Worker’s, National, and Gender Self-Determination, but challenge Statist limitations. For, transfeminism strains against the Sex Dualism that mystifies the dominant Nexus, allowing us to begin unveiling the numerous social forms that have come to imbricate the threads of State power and the modern web of accumulation.

This is my hypothesis: and if it proves itself to have scientific merit, then we might finally apprehend the *anthropogenic basis* of the mode of production and patterns of reproduction, and of relations within and between societies, and of the development of individual persons and groups of people. In this way, we might overcome viewing such evolutionary complexity as *overdetermined* by some kind of intrinsic feature, or something selected by nature, or some kinematic law, some ontology, some idea, some function, some “caste, class, or party,”¹⁰ or some genital configuration, some gene, some body part. In the end, we might even, through a transfeminist material analysis, happen upon a new science of revolution: the science of how the “magic hands are the hands of the people.”¹¹

Resolving The Principles: A Conclusion

If you found yourself lost when going through what I just shared, that is totally fine. These are all things I myself am still wrestling with. I have created a five-part series on prezi dot com called “Nexus Hypothesis: An Overview” which I hope would enable folks to think with and alongside me about these questions, and see the value of a transfeminist material analysis for today’s revolutionary struggles. Below, I give a summary of each installment in the series:

Nexus Hypothesis: An Introduction

⁸ This is a term I borrow from RC Lewontin and Richard Levins. See: *The Dialectical Biologist*

⁹ This is a term I borrow from Stephen Jay Gould’s work.

¹⁰ This is a reference to how Kuwasi Balagoon defines Anarchism. See: *Anarchy Cannot Fight Alone*

¹¹ This is a phrase from Frantz Fanon. See *The Wretched of the Earth*

In this prezi, we look at my assessment of the typical “sex-based” oppression understanding of feminism. I identify two versions of this outlook, the libfem and radfem approach. “Essentialist” views of gender come from the former, which I call the “Immanent Model.” Whereas “Socialization” views of gender come from the latter, which I call the “Sortition Model.” I interpret the first one through Lewontin/Levins’ notion of “transformational” evolutionary theory. I interpret the second one through Lewontin/Levins’ notion of “variational” evolutionary theory. We also bring in Sylvia Wynter’s decolonial critiques of the modern sciences, as well as Sanyika Shakur’s theories of “grand” versus “minor” patriarchy, in order to give a picture of the economic/political backdrop for the “sex-based” outlook. This installment is good for even those looking for basic understandings of evolution.

Nexus Hypothesis: An Overview, pt. 2

In this prezi, we look at my assessment of “sex class” theories. Proletarian and Marxist feminist thought is under consideration here, which I relate to so-called *unilineal* theories of evolution within the sciences, or a so-called “kinematic law” that is discussed by Lewontin/Levins. Here, we learn about Marx and Engels’ contributions to historical materialism, how they relate to anthropological literature on gender, and the strengths of “dialectics” as well as its weaknesses when looking at gender and societies outside the West. I present three case studies of non-Western “nexing-forms” and use these to make an argument for why State socialism, especially outside the West, runs into issues for gender/sexual liberation. Here, we also get a grasp of why I use the terms “endogenous” and “exogenous” when discussing gender expansivity. This installment is good for anyone looking for just a basic understanding of Marxism.

Nexus Hypothesis: An Overview, pt 3

In this prezi, we look at my assessment of a number of “unitive” theories, that synthesize analysis of class, race, and sex. I divide them into roughly three camps: those with somewhat more materialist emphases on labor, those with emphases on legal representation, and those which prioritize metaphysics and epistemology. Through this we get a better appreciation of how Black feminism has influenced Marxism, liberalism, and decolonial thought. But that is not all, with each theoretical offering I examine, I point to alternative frameworks, in hopes to build on strengths in Black feminism while overcoming gaps/weaknesses. This installment is a great primer for anyone unfamiliar with Black feminist thought or with my previous contributions to transfeminist analysis.

Nexus Hypothesis: Overview 4

In this prezi, we examine my assessment of “additive” approach to liberal analyses within Black/Third World feminism. I relate these to the “reductionist” method in the sciences, as defined by Stephen Jay Gould (and Lewontin + Levins). I look at the strengths and weaknesses of the reductionist method in the natural sciences, its

political/economic basis, and then apply it analysis of gender variance to illustrate for whom it is useful and for whom it is not. I draw on Oyeronke Oyewumi's idea of "new biologies" to understand how exclusionary rhetoric within queer/trans movement emerges from reductionist worldviews. I then turn towards what I deem the more robust contributions of Sanyika Shakur, the Street Trans* Action Revolutionaries, the Anarkata Turn, and the Third World People's Alliance. This installment is good for anyone looking for just a basic understanding

Nexus Hypothesis: An Overview 5

In this last and final prezi, we examine my "imbrication" theory. I relate it to "constructive evolutionism," as explained by Lewontin/Levins in *The Dialectical Biologist*. We examine treatments of the Pan-African struggle, whose emphasis on self-determination I see as resonant with the constructive evolutionary view in its focus on societal development. But, using Wynter, CLR James, and Sam Mbah, I look at how particular scientific and philosophical assumptions built into Statecraft, pose issues for self-determination struggle. Afterwards, I spend time connecting a more "autonomous" vision of liberation to a philosophical/scientific account of constructive evolution, through Fanon's sociogeny, spandrel theory, and my nexus hypothesis. I also expand on the notion of "grand vs minor" patriarchy, and provide a host of new terms like "valency" and "truncation" in order to explain limitations on both national and gender self-determination struggles. This installment is the most theoretically dense but is great for those seeking to understand what I mean by "roots-grasping science."

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Nsambu Za Suekama
They Thought They Could Bury Me, But Ain't Know I was a Star Queen
July 7, 2023

Retrieved on 3 November 2023 from medium.com/@riptide.1997/they-thought-they-could-bury-me-but-aint-know-i-was-a-star-queen-9080

usa.anarchistlibraries.net