

USING WHITENESS TO THINK THROUGH THE DE/COLONIALITY OF FEMINIST SEX ACTIVISM

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I joined the New View in 2008. While by that time I had been living in New York City for a year and familiar with the campaign, I was too shy to be in touch until Nicola Gavey – my mentor from Aotearoa – was in town and invited me to an upcoming meeting that just happened to be a call to action regarding the then emerging industry of ‘cosmetogynecology’. I had no idea what this was and so looked it up: it was terrifying. Combined with meeting the infamous Leonore Tiefer, going to a meeting of bad-arse feminists to talk about this assault on our genitals was an intimidating prospect. Too intimidating: at the last minute Nicola couldn't go to the meeting, and I emailed Leonore with a vague excuse as to why I also couldn't make it.

She replied with a task. I was to go around the city's female genital cosmetic surgeons' offices and document security, scaffolding, waiting rooms, buildings, hallways, sidewalks, speak with receptionists, take photos and promotional materials and anything else I could find lying around. I was scoping for a rally to draw critical attention to these doctors' procedures. And so, I grabbed a camera and a conveniently-over-sized lady-bag, donned my best Upper East Side heteronormative outfit, took on the persona of an eager young medical sociology student from Columbia University interested in “how medical technologies contributed to women's sexual liberation”, and turned up at the next (my first) New View meeting with packets of photos, pamphlets, some lovely spreadsheets, and no idea how much my life had just been affected.

Eight years later and I've helped to create not just this street rally but a guerilla theater piece with giant vulva puppets; an international vulva knitting circle; a grassroots exhibition celebrating female genital diversity in Brooklyn; an interactive multimedia installation (with Amber Hui) show-casing the disease-mongering of the cosmeto-gynecology industry; a counter-conference down the road from the surgeons' annual business meeting in Las Vegas; creative workshops and study-guides; a spoof in-house training video (Dr Vajayjay); and – most recently – this capstone event. The campaign has witnessed my getting a divorce, a doctorate, and a disability. And given me not only a close relationship with Leonore, but one of my best friends (Amber) and my current partner (Tehseen Noorani).

The New View, then, has been huge for me. And yet, at the same time, I've had a small but lingering discomfort with my involvement. While, even without knowing my connection to the New View, people have often assumed that I do work on gender and sexuality – an assumption that I have tended to put down to my being a white woman committed to critical praxis. Yet, these have never actually been at the center of my work. Instead, I have been more attuned to madness and, in particular, how it collides with questions of race and nation. In New York I have mapped the circulation of psy diagnoses within politics of terror – collaborating with black communities against racist policing; engaging in a variety of struggles for educational justice; undertaking writing and public art about what I have come to term 'psycurity'; and, most recently, engaging the ignorance, violence, and response-ability of whiteness as part of my ever-increasing commitment to practices and politics of decolonization.

During this time, I have thought of the New View in part as an opportunity to tangentially examine some of the processes of medicalization and privatization that also move through my 'other' work, but in particular as an opportunity to experiment with and strengthen my activist

and creative practice – I describe Leonore as my activist mentor. However I have recently come to realize that ultimately I’ve thought of these two scholar-activist threads – one overtly feminist, the other overtly decolonial – as happening in parallel. Moreover, while I was and am enormously supportive of the New View’s critiques, visions, and tactics, at times I have found it difficult to reconcile my ongoing involvement with an ongoing discomfort in the seeming ignorance of race in our analyses and projects, particularly given that the vast majority of people directly involved in this campaign seem to me to be white.

The word ‘ignorance’ might sound harsh but recall that its root is ‘ignore’. ‘White ignorance’ is a concept used within critical race and decolonial theory to articulate the ways in which structures of racism depend on white folks not knowing about the non-inferiority of people of color (as was a driving force for colonization) and not knowing about the circulation of privilege and racism (as is a driving force for present-day white supremacy). However, such *not knowing* – as Nancy Tuana, Sandra Harding, and other feminist philosophers tell us – is not simply the passive outcome of missing knowledge; it is produced and situated. Discursive and affective mechanisms of ignorance block us from hearing, seeing, knowing, *feeling* outside of our – in the case of whiteness – colonial episteme, thereby naturalizing the racist status quo. As Aime Cesaire wrote over five decades ago, colonization depended on a “forgetting machine”, including (he emphasizes) a forgetting that fascism is a citation of colonialism. Ignorance, then, is a useful framework for thinking through the contemporary response-ability of whiteness in the US, with the far Right campaigning on fascist rhetoric and policies that promise to ‘Make America Great Again’ – forgetting, *ignoring* that “America” was never “great” for people of color in the first place.

And so I have decided that for this, my final project with the New View, I will try to reclaim my ability to respond to the circulation of race in our projects. It's a sensitive topic, and certainly naming it makes me vulnerable to people's defenses and critiques. Not the least a tendency for liberal white folks to disown – indeed, ignore – our own whiteness. However it's urgent. Political parties in the global North are using our bodies to make countries increasingly hostile for people of different ancestries; climate change and war are demanding a readiness for global migration in the midst of this rampant xenophobia; the ongoing anti-racist struggles collectively known as Black Lives Matter are calling for white folks – especially white women – to step up and speak to whiteness.

One route to engage with race in the New View could be to focus on the experiences of people of color as a means to pursue 'inclusion'. Yet to do so can paternalistically assume: 1) access to these experiences; 2) some sort of permission to 'give voice'; and 3) that people of color necessarily want to be more directly included in our activism in the first place. They they need us. Groups led by cis and trans women of color have been engaging sex and sexuality and medicalization and criminalization for decades. Such flattening of people's experiences and agency, repeats – as Chandra Mohanty and Gayatri Spivak have shown us – colonial violence. Moreover, projects of inclusion can too easily slide into projects of *assimilation* – forcing, in this case, non-white lives into our New View.

And so, rather than talk of inclusion, I am going to enter the circulation of *whiteness* in the New View. And I wonder if we might turn to witches to do so. While witches have taken many shapes across time and space, I am referring here to that diverse collective of female heretics, healers, beggars, disobedient wives, sex workers that lived in western Europe from the 12th to 18th centuries. My reason for turning to them is inspired in part by Linda Alcoff's suggestion that

acknowledging that we are implicated in mechanisms of domination and oppression can not only expose ourselves to violence from other whites, but also create feelings of shame, self-loathing, and (I would add) fear of continued collusion. Such psychic threat reveals itself in a sense of immobility if not backlash – as, for example, can be seen in the aggressive responses of Donald Trump and his supporters to Black Lives Matter activists. It follows, as Alcoff borrows from W.E.B. DuBois, that whites need to pursue a ‘double consciousness’: an everpresent acknowledgment of our participation in racist structures, *alongside* an “awakened memory of the many white traitors to white privilege who have struggled to contribute to the building of an inclusive human community”.

As white women leading and living revolutions that challenged both heteronormative and capitalist logics, the witches’ radical legacy is in our flesh. They are our activist, perhaps even our biological, ancestors. Moreover, they could be considered “white traitors to white privilege” as their extermination was a requisite of white supremacy. As Silvia Federici documents, the rollout of capitalism in Europe demanded a “genocidal attack on women”; the very same capitalism that then demanded the violent appropriation of land, resources, and bodies of colonization; the very same colonization that then demanded the categorizations and hierarchies of race that enable the white supremacy we see today. Perhaps, then, the herstory of witches contains traces for how contemporary white feminist struggles, like the New View, can and do connect to today’s anti-racist and decolonial movements.

According to Federici, the first grassroots women’s movement in Europe was against feudalism during the thirteenth century – opposing the land-owning, Christian establishment by building communal alternatives, challenging sexual norms, and equalizing the genders. Capitalism was launched as a *counter-revolution*, explicitly destroying the collective power and experimental

spirit of this growing female proletariat. Resources were increasingly privatized through individual contracts and the seizure of land, leading to urban migration, gendered class divisions, and social problems that were particularly shouldered by people who were poor, older, and/or female. From the fourteenth century, the tentacles of this impending capitalism started to reach outside of Europe through the exploitation, violence, and extermination of indigenous populations. Justified by the clergy as God's punishment for peoples 'bestial' behavior, the main concern of the European elite was how this genocide, combined with a continuing decline of the European poor, resulted in a global labor crisis.

Meanwhile, the creative activism of women became more prominent, as recorded in court records of prostitution, in sermons that scolded them, in trial documents against abusive males, in their anti-war resistance. A misogynist backlash began. The *heretics* – what Federici describes as “undoubtedly the most important opposition movement in the Middle Ages” – best articulates these times. It is difficult to find out much about the heretics as they were fiercely hunted by the Church and evidence of them destroyed – both flesh and artifact targeted in the service of white ignorance. Inspired by Eastern philosophies but less a deviation from the Church orthodoxy than “a protest movement, aspiring to a radical democratization of social life”, heresy “gave a frame to peoples demands for spiritual renewal and social justice” – denouncing social hierarchies and the accumulation of wealth and private property, while disseminating a revolutionary conception of society that redefined daily life, offered a higher status to women, and provided an alternative community structure. It challenged the idea that god spoke through a corrupt clergy – thereby being politically threatening as the Church was the ideological pillar of feudal power, the biggest landowner in Europe, and the institution that most exploited the poor. The Church, in turn, used the charge of heresy to attack every form of social and political subordination.

Perhaps most relevant for us in this room, however, is that the heretics also did not prioritize procreation and thus practiced a diverse range of sexual practices (including abstinence). It follows that they were especially threatening during times when there were concerns about access to labor – most obviously the Black Death of the 14th century, when a closeness to death made people less concerned with work and less accepting of domination, and population decline meant the workforce needed to be reproduced. During these times, heretics were accused of reproductive crimes including infanticide, sodomy, abortion, and contraception – or what were then called, “sterility potions”. Descriptions of these practices became increasingly prominent and distorted – including accusations of animal worship, orgiastic rituals, night flights, and child sacrifices.

This, then, is the political and social context of the witch-hunts, a state initiative to subjugate women and restore the reproduction of labor. Charges of witchcraft centered around the killing of children and other violations of reproductive norms. Witches were midwives or *sage femmes* “wise women”, women who avoided motherhood, who begged, who had sex outside of marriage and procreation. There was a constant association between female sexuality and bestiality, and homosexuality was driven out through the use of queer bodies as kindling for the stakes. Women who worked in public spheres, including as sex workers, were also witches.

And midwives came under particular suspicion – either surveilled or recruited as spies. Relatives and neighbors were also required to collaborate in this way with the state – a history that slithers through contemporary times with the Department of Homeland Security’s, “If you see something, say something” – mainstreamed as a means for good citizens to participate in America’s ‘war on terror’. As Federici writes, “The very vagueness of the charge [of witchcraft] – the fact that it

was impossible to prove it, while at the same time it evoked the maximum of horror – meant that it could be used to punish any form of protest and to generate suspicion even towards the most ordinary aspects of daily life”.

Misogyny increased as women were harassed or assaulted in public; discouraged from having female friends (then called “gossips”...); punished for their insubordination to men; muzzled and paraded down the street; whipped or caged and subjected to fake drownings; legally infantilized and gang-raped; and subjected to sexual sadism in court trials; hanged and burned.

All during the Age of Reason. At its peak, most of the witch trials were conducted in secular courts with the full cooperation of the state.

In less than two centuries, by some accounts, as many as *8 million* people died in this way – further connecting the destinies of women in western Europe with indigenous peoples. Witch-hunting and charges of devil worshipping were also used to break the resistance of local populations in the colonies, and to justify the slave trade and colonization more broadly. In turn, according to Luciana Parinetto, this was used to persuade European authorities of the existence of entire populations of witches, encouraging them to apply in Europe the same techniques of mass extermination developed in America. There was also a growing exchange between the ideology of witchcraft and the racist ideology of the colonies; the devil was portrayed as a black man and black people were increasingly treated like devils with brutish sexual practices and inordinate fondness for music and dancing. Indeed, the hostility and estrangement of women in western Europe mirrored that accorded to the “savage” in the popular literature at that time. And so capitalism created its misogynist, racist, and (seemingly) all-encompassing self.

By the 18th century, after portraying women as savage, mentally weak, insatiably lusty, rebellious, insubordinate, incapable of self control, “a new model of femininity emerged: the ideal woman and wife – passive, obedient, thrifty, of few words, always busy at work, and chaste”. And – as attested by the patient advocates of Sprout Pharmaceuticals arriving in a shiny tinted bus wearing matching teal scarves at a 2014 FDA hearing – our sexualities have been funneled by capitalist, colonialist interests ever since. And – as attested by the “14 word” slogan of the KKK and that which was spoken by Dylan Roof as he gunned down nine black parishioners in Charleston six months after that FDA hearing – this ‘protecting’ of white women and therefore white wombs is a requirement of white supremacy - whether with out tacit consent, our permission, or our help. For white women have also become agents of the very colonialism and racism that killed then created us.

Contemporary white feminism would do well, then, to learn from the black feminist conception of their’s as a “long women’s movement” existing in anti-slavery and anti-racist forms well before and outside of the standard history of feminist ‘waves’ that we are fed in our mainstream women’s studies courses. Like black women, we too have long engaged in intersectional, anti-capitalist efforts for revolution. Like our witch-y foremothers, our struggles, including those undertaken by the New View, have the potential to join with today’s anti-racist and decolonial movements. A potential that, I believe, has now become an obligation given conditions of increasing fascism.

I want to finish, however, with something else. Something that may be even riskier to talk about than whiteness for those of us who also share a Social Scientist identity. There is more to this herstory than a fight for sexual freedom versus reproductive labor. During the witch-hunts, it was women’s capacity as healers, sorcerers, and performers of incantations and divinations that was

persecuted. In order to dominate it, capitalism required that the world be disenchanted, and that the capacities of the body to tune into this vitality – capacities embraced by witches – be... ignored. The above changes in social life were interwoven with a changing conception of the person in western Europe as a battlefield between Reason and the Passion of the Body: the flesh must not corrupt the mind. Alienated, the body became conceived as a machine, as brute matter divorced from knowing, wanting, feeling – making its operations intelligible and controllable, thereby subordinate. The torture chambers for witches thus became laboratories for social discipline – homogenizing social behavior, constructing a prototypical individual, launching the social sciences. Paving the way, for example, for sex to be seen as more like digestion, than dancing.

Perhaps then it is here that we might re-turn – to use Karen Barad's phrase – the spirit of New View; where we might find the ancient seeds for the future, explicitly anti-racist and decolonial, shapes of this campaign. Unlike in Europe, the witch-hunts in the Americas did not destroy the resistance of the colonized. The struggle of women and strength of people's connection to the land meant that pagan spiritualities withstood five centuries of violence; indeed they provided a source of anti-colonial and anti-capitalist struggle. As scholar-activists in the social sciences, maybe we could learn from these indigenous stories, take response-ability regarding the ignorance of our intellectual ancestors, and engage in work that reclaims the vitality of our biologies, non-humans, the cosmos. That incredible witch-y white feminist legacy of magic. Remembering, embracing that perhaps the New View isn't so new after all.