Unnatural Feelings
The affective life of 'anti-gender' mobilisations

We had already clocked him pacing at the back. A latecomer, ill fitting in the book-lined library: white man in his forties, baggy clothes, shaved hair and prominent facial scar jarring with the 120 groomed young people in the room, all facing forward, rapt by Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw's invocations to think and act intersectionally.[1] He moves to lean on a pillar. My hackles rise, prickling down my spine. I tell myself that I have been working in an elite institution for too long and need to check my judgment; those hackles go down a bit. I am about to go and ask him if he would like to sit down and join us, when he starts to speak over Kimberlé. Both she and I know he is not going to stop; it's hardly our first encounter with attempted silencing. The man speaks louder and so does Kimberlé. His diatribe in Italian shows he isn't interested in dialogue; her American tones echo behind me. I walk straight up the aisle to about a foot away from him and raise my hands. *Please stop talking over our guest; please sit down*. Then, when he doesn't stop: *please leave*. He backs me up the way I have just come, and I keep the same distance – the two speakers now in discordant unison. *Please stop talking over our guest, please leave this workshop, please be respectful, please leave*. I manoeuvre him back up the aisle and he is shouting invective now, *dirty ugly feminist, shut up ugly bitch*. I don't really need the translation from Italian provided by students later. He is by the door he came in now, and as I back him up through the door, he grabs and twists my arm in a last ditch effort, then turns and shouts his way out, to be met by the security guards the PhD student stewards have already called. They wrestle him out of the building, and we can hear his echoes for minutes after we can no longer see him.

I am shaking. Kimberlé is shaking, students are shaking, some crying. Kimberlé breathes in her experience of decades and breathes out the last ninety minutes of an extraordinary workshop. She opens herself to the students' shock and anger and knits their experience back together with the intersectional theory they have read and thought they would simply be asked to say something clever about. One student tells us about her fear: that she would lose the hearing in her other ear, having lost it in one after being beaten by Hindu nationalists. Another whispers that she was looking for a table to hide under, as she had when that man came into the classroom and started shooting. We talk about our own privilege and this man's likely mental health issues, as well as the ways in which anti-feminism has always exploited subjective as well as collective vulnerabilities. We make the transnational connections across forms of anti-feminist, racist, homophobic and transphobic violence, and feel enraged at the possibility of our silence. We express feeling shame too, that we could not effectively interrupt this man without passing him over to security. What were we waiting for? An institutional response, perhaps, despite our collective schooling in the misogyny, classism and racism of institutions.

This article addresses the attacks on feminism and Gender Studies by an increasingly virulent anti-'gender ideology' movement, and asks after the best

[1] Crenshaw gave this cross-departmental workshop on 'Intersectionality and Politics: An Interactive Workshop with Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw', on Monday 21st January 2019 hosted by the Gender Studies Department at the LSE.

ways of grappling with the violence of these mobilisations at political, epistemic and collective levels. As is well documented, attacks on the concept of 'gender' and on feminist, anti-homophobic and intersectional social movements are a central part of how a right-wing populist agenda generates its appeal and furthers its aims.[2] 'Gender Ideology', or the concept of 'gender' itself, has been consistently set up as eroding family values, challenging the natural status of heterosexual gender roles, and promoting perversion. Sonia Corrêa, David Patternote and Roman Kuhar describe these right-wing movements as operating at a transnational level, but focusing on a national or local scale,[3] bringing together homophobic campaigns in France, Germany and Brazil,[4] the defence of sovereignty in Poland, Serbia and Hungary, and religious reintrenchments in Costa Rica, Chile and Uganda.[5] While the demonisation of feminism by the Right is hardly new, I agree with Kuhar and Patternote's suggestion that there is an increased fervour within these national as well as transnational movements that targets 'gender ideology' as a particular threat to national and local security, providing the perfect confluence of misogyny, homophobia and racism.[6]

There have been consistent attacks on Gender Studies as a field in recent years, with the closure of the degree at Central European University (CEU) in Budapest,[7] the attempted bombing at the National Secretariat for Gender Research at the University of Göteborg,[8] and most recently the June 2020 legislative move to ban 'gender identity studies in schools and universities' in Romania.[9] It is not that such campaigns have a central architecture (or architects), but more that their reliance on anti-'gender ideology' is precisely what allows for a transnational response to bring together otherwise disparate interests. As Andrea Pető notes in her protest at the closure of Gender Studies at CEU, 'the concept of "gender" is used to mobilize very different political forces to

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[2] Elizabeth S. Corredor, 'Unpacking "Gender Ideology" and the Global Right's Antigender Countermovement', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 44: 3 (Spring 2019)
.[3] Sonia Corrêa, David Patternote and Roman Kuhar, 'The Globalisation of Anti-Gender Campaigns: Transnational Anti-Gender Movements in Europe and Latin America Create Unlikely Alliances', *International Politics and Society,* 31 May 2018, https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/human-rights/article/show/the-globalisation-of-anti-gender-campaigns-2761/

[4] See Eva von Redecker, 'Anti-Genderismus and Right-wing Hegemony', *Radical Philosophy* 198 (Jul/Aug 2016) and Joseph Jay Sosa, 'Subversive, Mother, Killjoy: Sexism Against Dilma Rousseff and the Social Imaginary of Brazil's Rightward Turn', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 44: 3 (Spring 2019).

[5] A 2019 special issue in *Signs* provides a useful collection of articles from different locations that make the argument for both national and transnational right-wing attacks on 'gender ideology': Agnieszka Graff, Ratna Kapur and Suzanne Walters, 'Introduction: Gender and the Rise of the Global Right', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 44: 3 (Spring 2019).

[6] Roman Kuhar and David Patternote, eds, *Anti-Gender Campaigns in Europe: Mobilizing Against Equality* (London: Roman and Littlefield, 2017).

[7] Andrea Pető, 'Attack on Freedom of Education in Hungary: the Case of Gender Studies', *Engenderings,* 24 September 2018, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2018/09/24/attack-on-freedom-of-education-in-hungary-the-case-of-gender-studies/

[8] Jennifer Evands, 'The New War on Gender Studies', *The Conversation*, 6 Jan 2019, https://theconversation.com/the-new-war-on-gender-studies-109109

[9] https://www.euronews.com/2020/06/17/romania-gender-studies-ban-students-slam-new-law-as-going-back-to-the-middle-ages. The case is now awaiting constitutional review, after President Iohannis submitted an appeal after pressure from within and outside of Romania: https://eua.eu/news/536:romanian-president-moves-to-reject-ban-on-gender-studies.html

construct one, united enemy to hate'.[10] Attempts to control the curriculum also characterised the mobilisation of divergent political strands in the Manif Pour Tous movement in France, which claimed that recognition of gay marriage would undermine complementary roles as the natural basis of marriage, and that the teaching of 'gender' to children was a politically motivated absurdity.[11] Efforts to stop teaching 'genderism' in Germany similarly drew on what Eva von Redecker describes as 'the resentful mobilization against pluralism and "political correctness", which are perceived as instituted by "gender ideologues".'[12] The aggression that characterises this hostility is not only directed at legislative or institutional contexts; the derision towards 'gender' as a category is also directed towards its proponents. In Germany, for example, complaints seeking to remove Gender Studies teachers from the university were and remain vitriolic. In Hungary, Pető was subject to extensive harassment. In Brazil, feminists on university campuses endure consistent personal abuse, accused not only of violating nature, but exhibiting national betrayal in their adopting of 'foreign' terms of reference. In November 2017, while she was visiting Rio, right-wing activists burned Judith Butler in effigy, marking 'gender', '(homo)sexuality' and 'Americanness' as equally vile (and subject to violence).[13]

Anti-'gender ideology' proponents frame their own project as a moderate, commonsense one that protects natural sex roles and the relationship between family and nation. It is always others who are the aggressors: feminists who want to pervert the course of natural childhood and adult roles; queers who relish the destruction of the family and have no allegiances or ties; and 'outsiders' who cannot be trusted and are the agents rather than objects of inequality. It is the 'gender ideologues' and the perverse foreigners who are the hysterics, the ones who always go too far, the ones who have no core values. These framings are important as a way of deflecting or projecting aggression onto the targets of violence, of course, and are essential to both inflame anti-'gender' feeling as legitimate, and its affective aggression as belonging to someone else. This article explores the spatio-temporal tricks that present gender equality as needing to be tempered by that common sense in the face of the destructiveness of both feminism gone too far, and reactionary cultural patriarchalism of the interloper. The focus throughout is on the affective life of anti-'gender ideology' claims, precisely as a way of trying to short-circuit that displacement effort. I explore its logic of the privileging of 'sex' as natural and complementary as precisely the locus of aggression, and make a claim for the importance of rooting feminist, queer and transnational approaches in anti-white supremacist affect. Overall, I am interested in exploring feminist methods for undoing the misogynist, homophobic and racist fantasies of annihilation – their own and ours – as an urgent task for our troubled present.

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[10] Pető, 'Attack on Freedom of Education in Hungary'.

[11] Ilana Eloit, 'American Lesbians are not French Women: Heterosexual French Feminism and the Americanisation of Lesbianism in the 1970s', *Feminist Theory* 20: 4 (2019), 381-404. See also: Éric Fassin, 'Gender Is/In French', *Differences: a Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 27: 2 (2016), 178-97.

[12] Von Redecker, 'Anti-Genderismus and Right-wing Hegemony'.

[13] Sonia Corrêa, 'Gender Ideology: Tracking Its Origins and Meanings in Current Gender Politics', *Engenderings,* 11 December 2019, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2017/12/11/gender-ideology-tracking-its-origins-and-meanings-in-current-gender-politics/

Spatio-temporal logics

'Gender ideology' is described by feminist commentators as a convenient 'empty signifier' that constitutes a useful trope to unite resistance to a range of rights and equality claims, an insistence on closed borders, and a feeling of dissatisfaction as the global order shifts on its austere axis. Yet that emptiness should not mislead us into thinking that these attacks are only casually linked, or that the presence of anti-feminism at their heart is in any way accidental. Writing of anti-'gender ideology' in Brazil, Joseph Souza highlights ways in which 'sexism [provides] a framework to connect right-wing ideologies of corruption, subversion and family values' that form a 'cognitive and affective glue' between accusations against feminism that would otherwise not make sense.[14]

For a range of commentators, the anti-feminism that campaigns against the invented phenomenon of a global 'gender ideology' is a backlash against equality gains and a political mechanism to safeguard privilege or lament its perceived loss.[15] It trades in what the editors of the *Signs* special issue on 'Gender and the Rise of the Right' describe as a 'hostility to feminism' that masks and contributes to the 'very real inequalities and fears produced by neoliberalism and globalization'.[16] Yet this anti-feminism is not entirely straightforward. In both its religious and political versions, anti-'gender ideology' activists cast themselves as on the side of women's equality, and only antagonistic to a feminism that takes things too far, is too aggressively anti-family or imposes itself on specific (often global south) contexts.[17] In making 'gender ideology' into the enemy of ordinary men and women, who want reasonable access to opportunity, relationships free from violence, or other improved conditions within conventional family frameworks, anti-'gender ideology' proponents claim the very ground feminism has called its own. Once it has been established that 'gender ideology' is what unites a range of challenges to the heteronormative modern family, claims for same-sex marriage, reproductive rights, sex education, trans* recognition or equal pay, being against it can be cast as a defence rather than an attack. In challenging the excesses of 'gender ideology' (the term itself casts 'gender' as form of political, propagandistic posturing), then, anti-feminists can be reassured that they are resisting affronts to natural sex roles, rather than refusing women's equality *per se*.[18]

Anti-gender discourse hinges on a utopian fantasy of a bankrupt present and future, one that can only be remedied by a return to the integrity of

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[14] Sosa, 'Subversive, Mother, Killjoy', 738, 724.

[15] Corredor, 'Unpacking "Gender Ideology"' 614,

[16] Graff, Kapur and Walters, 'Introduction: Gender and the Rise of the Global Right', 550.

[17] Sara Garbagnoli and Massimo Prearo, *La Croisade Anti-Genre: du Vatican au Manif Pour Tous* [The Anti-Gender Crusade] (Paris, Textuel: 2017); Weronica Grzebalska, Eszter Kováts and Andrea Pető, 'Gender as Symbolic Glue: How "Gender" Became an Umbrella Term for the Rejection of the (Neo)liberal Order', *Krytyka Polityczna [Political Critique] and European Alternatives*, 13 January 2017, http://politicalcritique.org/long-read/2017/gender-as-symbolic-glue-how-gender-became-an-umbrella-term-for-the-rejection-of-the-neoliberal-order/

[18] Erica Millar makes a related argument concerning anti-abortion activists' claims to be the real feminists, on the side of women's happiness and well-being. Millar, *Happy Abortions: Our Bodies in the Era of Choice*, (London: Zed Books, 2017). Thanks to Victoria Browne for pointing to this important intervention.

naturalised and complementary sexual difference as the conventional bedrock of the local and the national, but with a twist. If women's subordination can be framed as something that has already been addressed, then a return to sex difference within a heteronormative, nationalist imaginary can be framed as opening up a future that occupies a *sane middle ground*.[19] As Kapya Kaoma notes, the very 'future of the human family' relies on this complementarity.[20] A return to sex complementarity is thus cast as the foundation of a local, regional or national future at direct odds with the bankruptcy of current global hegemony. Those who continue to insist on *excessive denaturing* can be positioned as part of an apocalyptic drive to a non-reproductive, barren future, and can be belittled and discarded. Feminism joins anti-racism and anti-disablism in the bin marked 'political correctness', and thus can be dismissed as absurd even as it is framed as a serious threat.

There is a spatial dimension to this claiming of the modern ground of equality by anti-'gender-ideology' advocates which is overlaid on its temporality, and that contributes to the ability to align the ills of feminists, queer subjects and migrants. Anti-'gender ideology' positions 'gender' as a kind of import-export commodity and its misguided adherents as its cosmopolitan brokers. Key to the contrast made between the safety of heterosexual family and a corrupting 'gender ideology', is *where* these come from and settle, as well as *when* they can be said to be appropriate. Anti-'gender ideology' arguments consistently construct 'gender' itself as an import, a foreign interloper that challenges the *time and place* of family and nation. In France, 'gender' is at once the 'enemy within' that tears at the very fabric of the sexual-democratic contract, and an exterior threat to 'national security' in the form of transnational politics and language. Thus, as Eric Fassin argues, 'gender' is problematic both for its challenge to the sovereignty of heterosexual sex difference, *and because* it is perceived as coming from America rather than being 'home grown'.[21] It is foreign in the sense of both origin and its untranslatability. That 'foreignness' does not have to come from a specific national context, however. It can also be positioned precisely as that 'empty signifier' of the unreasonable demands of a transnational elite, and the institutions that protect their interests.[22] Thus in Eastern Europe, 'gender' is constructed as an imposed transnational EU or neoliberal threat to national sovereignty, a threat that true Poles, Hungarians or Romanians can resist being subject to. In this respect anti-'gender ideology' arguments suture naturalised (hetero)sexual difference to nation both as a return to the sanity of pre-'political correctness' and as a way of resisting global forces in a post-industrial, post-welfare, securitised world.

To go back to the French context for a moment, if 'gender' and homosexuality are imports that threaten family and nation, then care must be

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[19] Gabriele Dietze and Julia Roth, eds, *Right-Wing Populism and Gender: European Perspectives and Beyond* (Verlag: Bielefeld, 2020). See also Lynn Berg, 'Between Anti-Feminism and Ethnicized Sexism: Far-Right Gender Politics in Germany', in *Post-Digital Cultures of the Far Right*, eds. Mark Fielitz and Nick Thurston (Verlag: Bielefeld, 2020), 79-91, on the links between anti-feminism and anti-migration arguments in contemporary Germany.

[20] Kapya Kaoma, 'The Vatican Anti-Gender Theory and Sexual Politics: an African Response', *Religion & Gender* 6: 2 (2016), 282-292.

[21] Fassin, 'Gender Is/In French'.

[22] Eszter Kováts, 'Questioning Consensuses: Right-Wing Populism, Anti-Populism, and the Threat of "Gender Ideology"', *Sociological Research Online* 23: 2 (2018), 528-38.

taken to ensure that 'other' threat to Frenchness - Muslim religion or identity - is also kept on the outside. This is where the sane temporality of equality is so important, and why anti-'gender ideology' proponents need to claim a moderate ground. While 'gender ideology' goes too far on the one hand, the *patriarchal control* of Islam threatens to pull us back into an excessive past. Here of course, 'Frenchness' is always already neither Muslim, nor queer (and certainly not both). [23] The externalisation of 'gender' in this European context, then, ensures that heterosexual difference is always 'secular' and white, as well as quintessentially moderate within what Fassin terms 'sexual nationalism'.[24] For Kováts too, it is precisely the focus on *authentic womanhood* that ties anti-gender to anti-immigrant narratives of the national modern.[25] This modern woman is neither alienated from her true sex, nor patriarchally subordinated to perverse Muslim maleness, and thus she is free to take up her natural role as her (white, heterosexual, male) partner's democratic complement. Importantly, then, what we see consistently in right-wing anti-'gender ideology' arguments is an interweaving of naturalised gender with naturalised racial and religious difference. That right wing populist appeal to a newly 'modern woman' is not confined to the West, of course, as the Hindu framing of Muslims as pre-modern, excessive, and closely aligned with homosexuality also suggests.[26]

The claim that 'gender' is a foreign import or the preserve of a transnational elite class is a tactic that follows the time-honoured trick of blaming individuals or groups already viewed with suspicion or hostility for home grown ills and the economic and social difficulties that attend globalisation. And so it is perhaps not so surprising that it is the queer, the feminist, and the migrant that become over-associated with transnational elites and protection in anti 'gender ideology' discourse, while maleness, whiteness and heterosexuality are increasingly figured as bound to the local or the deflated national. So it is that white men emerge as under threat from progressive elites rather than imbued with power in their own right; they are the besieged, rather that the routine agents of misogynist, homophobic or racist violence.

A final externalising tactic that overlays space and time in anti-'gender ideology' discourse is the positioning of 'gender' as a colonial term, and its use as a continuation of lamentable imperialism. Citing Kováts, Corredor affirms that the 'language equating gender ideology with colonization, imperialism, and unwarranted cultural imposition has been another prevalent strategy for the Global Right (Kováts 2017)'.[27] Kaoma writes that 'anti-gender arguments circulate in sub-Saharan Africa within a frame that portrays 'gender' and homosexuality as neo-colonial imports', *and as* the contemporary imposition of

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[23] See Fatima El-Tayeb for an analysis of the construction of Europeanness more broadly against both Muslim and queer subjectivities: El-Tayeb, '"Gays Who Cannot Properly be Gay": Queer Muslims in the Neo-liberal European City', *European Journal of Women's Studies 19*: 1 (2012), 79-95.

[24] Éric Fassin, 'Sexual Democracy and the New Racialization of Europe', *Journal of Civil Society* 8: 3 (2012), 285-88. And in my own work on this context, I focus on the ways in which French anxiety about 'Americanness' allows for the promulgation of a nationalism stripped of its (displaced) racism. Clare Hemmings, 'Is "Gender Studies" Singular? Stories of Queer/Feminist Difference and Displacement', *Differences: a Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 27: 2 (2016), 79-102.

[25] Kováts, 'Questioning Consensuses', 531.

[26] Graff, Kapur and Walters, 'Introduction', 554.

[27] Corredor, 'Unpacking "Gender Ideology"', 628.

transnational elites.[28] And in a rather different frame, 'gender ideology' is cast as 'Western European' in Poland or Turkey and thus corrupt or a-religious.[29] On this broader scale, then, sexual and gendered challenges to heterosexual family are positioned as a malign import expressly designed to prevent 'the nation' from reproducing itself, whether that nation is a Western one that struggles to retain its history, or a postcolonial one that struggles to assert its freedom.

As Corrêa points out, the harnessing of a decolonial discourse by anti-'gender-ideology' commentators who remain otherwise resolutely uninterested in anti-racist or decolonial politics is cynical at best.[30] We might also want to point to the particular irony of critiquing feminists for their imposition of 'gender ideology' by those who seek to re-entrench those naturalised categories of sex and gender that are the hallmark of a colonial endeavour. It is precisely those naturalised forms that are presented as the future, in other words, that have a violent and colonial past linked to colonial administrations and the suturing of sexed and gendered difference to whiteness. That future can only be rhetorically assured through displacement of its history onto contemporary feminist and queer subjects rather than the white heterosexual men and women who continue to benefit from its legacy.[31] Disingenuous though it may be, this discursive framing of 'gender equality movements [as] powerful and foreign colonizers' does important political work.[32] As Elzbieta Korolczuk and Agnieszka Graff highlight, it enables anti-'gender ideology' advocates to position themselves as 'protectors of the world's col/onized peoples, the disenfranchised and the economically disadvantaged.[33] That mirroring of a colonial past with a global present thus allows for anti-'gender ideology' activists to link their nationalism and populism with decolonial resistance movements and anti-austerity activism rather than imperial projects in a profoundly ironic trick of the light.[34]

It is more straightforward to counter the argument that authentic national identity is rooted in heterosexual sex difference, than the one that positions 'gender' and 'homosexuality' as colonial impositions, however. That colonial history is very real and present. The violence of 'gender' as a binary colonial imposition that regulates sexed and sexual behaviour in moral and

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[28] Kaoma, 'The Vatican Anti-Gender Theory'. The term 'sub-Saharan Africa' is Kaoma's, and while general, is intended to link the significant gains of anti-'gender ideology' mobilisations in a range of countries.

[29] Michelle Gallo, *Anti-Gender Movements: Comparing Poland and Colombia*, Gender Centre Research Brief, Geneva Centre, Graduate Institute of International Development Studies (2020); Selin Çağatay, 'Varieties of Anti-Gender Mobilisation: Is Turkey a Case?' *Engenderings*, 2 April 2019, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2019/01/09/varieties-of-anti-gender-mobilizations-is-turkey-a-case/

[30] Corrêa, 'Gender Ideology'.

[31] See Catherine Hall, Nicholas Draper, Keith McClelland, Katie Donington and Rachel Lang, *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership: Colonial Slavery and the Formation of Victorian Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), for examples of these material and economic legacies.

[32] Elżbieta Korolczuk and Agnieszka Graff, 'Gender as "Ebola from Brussels:" the Anticolonial Frame and the Rise of Illiberal Populism', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 43: 4 (Summer 2018), 799.

[33] Korolczuk and Graff, 'Gender as "Ebola from Brussels"', 807-8.

[34] Alyosxa Tudor, *Transgender Studies Quarterly* (2021) 'Decolonising Trans/Gender Studies: Teaching Race, Sexuality and Migration in Times of the Rise of the Global Right', *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 8: 2.

religious frames, and that marks 'womanhood' as white and either Christian or (later) secular, is a legacy that feminists need to continue to pay close attention to.[35] Indeed, the violence of Western concepts of 'gender' continues to delimit identity and perpetuate the epistemic violence of exclusion and inclusion.[36] It is a sober truth that this accusation (that 'gender' is colonial) is all the more available to the Right precisely because of that history, and indeed precisely because of the continued claims by some strands of feminism that women's freedom and equality are most compromised outside of 'the West', or by queer scholars that gay and lesbian rights in their familiar Western form are a sign of 'the modern' that others must play catch-up to emulate.[37]

It is feminist, queer and post- or decolonial thinkers who have pointed out how the flames of the fantasies of a specifically Western gendered and sexual 'modern' as guiding global progress narratives are fanned by national elites committed to maintaining established power relations. I am thinking here of the important work by Rahul Rao on the citation of colonial imposition of gender binaries as both an important part of the history and present of power relations, and as a way in which contemporary investments in national gender and sexual inequalities are managed.[38] Rao's work is exemplary, precisely because it weaves a complex picture of those in power always working with the resources that they have at their disposal.[39] In her intervention on anti-'gender ideology' and the Gulf region, Nour Almazidi writes in a similar vein of the ways in which national sovereignty is consistently imagined at the expense of sexual and gendered minorities within those contexts.[40] For Almazidi, to back away from supporting gendered and sexual rights in those contexts because of the anxiety of reimposing colonial or Western frames is to cede the terrain. For these theorists, as for Uma Narayan writing about India over twenty years ago, the externalisation of gendered and sexual equality as a perverse imperial effect is one of the key ways in which progressive politics are foreclosed.[41] We need then to wrestle gendered and sexual complexity back from right-wing anti-'gender ideology' advocates, insisting on the duplicity at the heart of their co-optation on

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[35] See María Lugones, 'Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System', *Hypatia: a Journal of Feminist Philosophy* 22: 1 (February 2007), 186-219, on the colonial history of modern oppositional 'gender'.

[36] Hortense Spillers and Gail Lewis write beautifully of the consequences of this imposition and history on black women in the US and the UK respectively. Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book', *Diacritics* 17: 2 (1987), 64-81; Lewis, 'Questions of Presence.' *Feminist Review* 117 (2017,: 1-19.

[37] This critique has been very firmly established by writers including: Jin Haritaworn, 'Women's Rights, Gay Rights and Anti-Muslim Racism in Europe', *European Journal of Women's Studies* 19: 1 (2012), 73-78; Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Jasbir Puar, 'Mapping US Homonormativities', *Gender, Place & Culture* 13: 1 (2006), 67–88; Mitra Rastegar, 'Emotional Attachments and Secular Imaginings: Western LGBTQ Activism on Iran', *GLQ* 19: 1 (2013): 1-29.

[38] Rahul Rao, 'The Locations of Homophobia', *London Review of International Law* 2: 2 (September 2014), 169-99.

[39] See Rahul Rao, *Out of Time: The Queer Politics of Postcolonality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[40] Nour Almazidi, 'The Institutional and Epistemic Marginality of Gender Studies in the Gulf Region', *Engenderings*, 14 January 2019, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2019/01/14/the-institutional-and-epistemic-marginality-of-gender-studies-in-the-gulf-region/

[41] Uma Narayan, *Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions and Third Word Feminism* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

the one hand, yet paying close attention to the multiple ways in which 'gender' travels with its historical and contemporary baggage of epistemological and deadly violence on the other.

Affective fictions

As we have seen, anti-'gender ideology' mobilisations are suffused with violence and a sense of entitlement, and yet their aggression is deflected through the logic of naturalised sex difference as under threat, as about to disappear without immediate action. That negative affect (and its deflection or re-routing) is central to how anti-'gender ideology' arguments work, and here I want to spend more time on how this works narratively. I refer to these political and intersubjective techniques as the 'affective fictions' of anti-'gender ideology' logics as a way of making clear that feelings do not need to be 'true' to be powerful. In fact, as Eve Sedgwick and Lauren Berlant both make abundantly clear in their work on the draw of heteronormativity, affective investments in a structure that promises more than it will deliver are the very motor of contemporary life.[42] Berlant brilliantly proposes 'cruel optimism' as the best way of explaining the hyperbolic investments in the futurity of naturalised kinship in the face of increased global austerity.[43] For her, this optimism is 'cruel' because it invests in the very promises that kinship cannot deliver on, and indeed is part of the way in which neoliberalism reproduces itself. Reading anti-'gender ideology' movements as 'cruel' is to emphasise how investment in heterosexual kinship and its related gender roles as reliable, appealing and (most of all) natural, works to offer what Gabriela Arguedes-Ramirez characterises as 'some sort of ontological certainty' in the face of global uncertainty of a wide range of kinds.[44]

Yet if that optimism resides in the hyper-investment in sex difference and naturalised familial authority as a counter to the disappointments of austerity, its cruelty does not rest there. In anti-'gender ideology' discourse it locates the blame (and therefore the rage) firmly with those who are perceived to have gained from contemporary global shifts: the feminists, gay men and lesbians, whose rights seem to trump those of ordinary families; and migrants whose claims on a failing welfare state have produced economic insecurity for genuine citizens. The excavation of that terrible wound, which as discussed above centres a normative family as the subject of the future even as it laments its imagined displacement in the present, allows the Right to depict 'religious conservatives as a embattled minority'.[45] That loss, that heart-felt cry of pain by white heterosexual men at the perceived rolling back of their privileges: these are affects that only intensify with empirical information that counters the basis of that misery. It matters little, then, whether one can point to the ways in which racial, sexual and gendered minorities precisely do not experience austerity as a

[42] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990); Lauren Berlant, 'Cruel Optimism', *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 17: 3 (2006), 20-36.
[43] Berlant, 'Cruel Optimism'.
[44] Gabriela Arguedas-Ramirez, 'Gender Ideology, Religious Fundamentalism and the Electoral Campaign (2017-2018) in Costa Rica', *Engenderings,* 7 November 2018, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2018/11/07/gender-ideology-religious-fundamentalism-and-the-electoral-campaign-2017-2018-in-costa-rica/
[45] Korolczuk and Graff, 'Gender as "Ebola from Brussels"', 798.

boon. Starting from affect and narrative requires an uncomfortable encounter with the aggression at the heart of attempts to recentre an authoritative (usually white) masculine subject, one *fantastically positioned* as though he had lost his place at the heart of power. Kimberlé Crenshaw and I both instinctively knew that when encountering the anti-feminism of the man who interrupted the workshop at LSE, we had to get him out of the room, not try to persuade him into our way of thinking. It is unlikely this was a privileged subject in respects other than gender and race, but of course this is precisely Berlant's point: his 'cruel optimism' requires an hyperbolic (aggressive) affirmation of gendered authority as an affective panacea.

That 'ontological certainty' relies on a further powerful affective fiction: that authenticity is always already sutured to sex difference and cannot be claimed otherwise or elsewhere. That is why in anti-'gender ideology' rhetoric, 'gender' itself is considered a fabrication, a foreign import or colonial imposition that has nothing to do with natural difference. Thus not only is 'gender' a disruptive force within and outside the family and nation, it is a lie that is peddled to distract ordinary men and women from the business of present and future citizenship and entitlement. 'Gender' is an abstraction, a *pure fiction* rather than a serious proposition: that is why it can be both dangerous and laughable. For Joni Cohen, this contrast between the naturalness of 'sex' and the abstraction of 'gender' lies at the heart of the ability to dismiss its politicisation of the family and nation: it can be mocked, even while it is constructed as all powerful.[46] Indeed, in her perceptive transfeminist analysis, Cohen theorises 'gender' itself not as 'empty signifier' but as a *sign* of a 'rootless cosmopolitanism' that precludes the possibility of a stable society. 'Gender ideology' is thus available to be linked to a range of other suspect ideologies and identities, through the casting of oppositions between rootedness and flux. For Cohen this is what links anti-'gender ideology' campaigns to anti-Semitism and nationalism. For Sarah Bracke and Patternotte, too, 'gender ideology' is 'separated from the sphere of reality' leaving only the truth of 'rooted' heterosexual gender roles, with their investment in that other 'real' of 'race' as national inheritance.[47]

In pitting 'real sex' against 'fake gender', anti-'gender ideology' advocates position feminists, queers and foreigners not only as misguided about intimacy and the importance of family as national bedrock, but also – and perhaps more importantly - as *inauthentic*. They represent everything that is bankrupt within the current social order, and thus their claims for rights are not only dangerous but also fundamentally false. Feminists not only peddle lies about 'gender', they actively deny women (and men) access to 'authentic' womanhood. Homosexuality is not only 'less' than heterosexuality, it makes a mockery of it, and is at heart a violent failure to embrace the real intimacy of heterosexual complementarity, as we have seen in the French case. In this sense, 'gender' itself is given the status of a *con*, one that tricks its proponents and others into devaluing their own bodies, stripping themselves of the possibility of real

[46] Joni Alizah Cohen, 'The Eradication of "Talmudic Abstractions": Anti-Semitism, Transmisogyny and the National Socialist Project', *Verso Blog*, 19 December 2018, https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4188-the-eradication-of-talmudic-abstractions-anti-semitism-transmisogyny-and-the-national-socialist-project

[47] Sarah Bracke and David Paternotte, 'Unpacking the Sin of Gender', *Religion and Gender* 6: 2 (2016), 143-54.

reciprocity, of masculinity and femininity. 'Gender ideology' is undignified and miserable, but it is also selfish and individualist – the opposite of communal social investment in kinship and locale. It trades in sad shadows of relationships, providing no stable affective ties; resisting it is thus a national duty based in love and care rather than aggression.[48]

There is a similar logic at play in transphobic narratives that the reader will no doubt recognise. Anti-trans* arguments have long relied on the opposition between 'real sex' and 'fake gender' in order to underwrite the hostility towards trans* subjects as legitimate, and as you might expect, anti-'gender ideology' advocates are profoundly transphobic as well as homophobic, misogynist and racist. Self-identified feminists too can be virulently transphobic, reaffirming 'sex' as real and 'gender' as a duplicitous fiction in ways that echo the aggression of anti-'gender ideology' arguments. Indeed, the work of trans-exclusionary radical feminists (TERFS) always fails to take seriously trans* claims to dignity and self-determination, rendering trans* subjects similarly both unreal (and predatory) but also a joke.[49] Alyosxa Tudor's work intervenes here by linking the anti-'gender ideology' arguments of the Right, feminist transphobia and racism, stressing the importance of a decolonial perspective as a counter to the dehumanisation that recentres authentic binary 'sex' common to all three.[50] Their work is also important in its refusal to reduce feminist history to transphobic history, however, insisting that where feminism takes seriously the colonial history of 'sex', it will also see the links between lesbian feminism and transfeminisms as deeply resonant and value laden.[51]

Because 'gender ideology' is both unreal and a palpable threat, a mimic and mocker of authentic ties, the people who are its subjects do not have to be respected. And to continue to think of fictions, that inauthentic unreality of 'gender' is precisely how centuries of feminist, queer and anti-racist political work are established as a chimeras, figments, ghosts. Even its grammar is elusive in this right-wing discourse: 'gender ideology' appears to have both agency and no firm ground; its subjects are deluded and absurd yet powerful; it is everywhere and nowhere, and its advocates are mere proponents of a dangerous

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[48] Sara Ahmed, 'Affective Economies', *Social Text* 22:2 (2004), 117-39.

[49] Most recently JK Rowling has used this familiar mockery, positioning trans* claims to authentic womanhood or manhood as a farce any sensible man or woman would laugh at. This has a long history, with Germaine Greer famously mocking transwomen's failed attempts to pass as women, echoing Janice Raymond's similarly dismissive tone. I am not keen to provide citations to these three interventions, because it gives more authority to them than I would like. So let me point you to Tudor's acerbic riposte to Rowling that turns this mockery right around: 'Terfism is White Distraction: On BLM, Decolonising the Curriculum, Anti Gender Attacks and Feminist Transphobia', *Engenderings*, 19 June 2020, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2020/06/19/terfism-is-white-distraction-on-blm-decolonising the-curriculum-anti-gender-attacks-and-feminist-transphobia/

[50] Tudor, 'Decolonising Trans/Gender Studies'.

[51] Alyosxa Tudor, 'Im/possibilities of Refusing and Choosing Gender', *Feminist Theory* 20: 4 (2019), 361-80. I take my cue from Tudor's work here, in that it offers a transfeminist perspective that reclaims decolonial approaches from the disingenuous right-wing claim that 'gender ideology' trades (exclusively) in colonial categories. See also D-M Withers' article on the overlapping histories of lesbian and transfeminist critiques of 'gender': Withers, 'Laboratories of Gender: Women's Liberation and the Transfeminist Present', *Radical Philosophy* 2: 4 (Spring 2019).

pseudo-science.[52] The 'affective fictions' of anti-'gender ideology' discourse thereby provide the rationale and alibi for what Elsa Dorlin (following Marilyn Frye) describes as its 'epistemics of obliteration'.[53] Dorlin positions anti-'gender ideology' movements as governed by the logic of 'semiotic extermination'. Once understood as inauthentic, Dorlin argues, queer lives can be understood as permanently assault-able as well as immoral: they will always be fair game. These 'epistemics of obliteration' mean that anti-'gender ideology' mobilisations can be framed as responses to violence rather than its agents, and it means that aggression itself is attributed to those who are in fact its targets. Only those who are real, are human, in the first place can be assaulted. For Dorlin, the attribution of violence to those on the margins means they are steeped in it, and also that they can never escape being accused of it, with the result that any violence done to them is inevitably understood as self defence.[54]

In her recent book *Imperial Intimacies*, Hazel Carby represents the destructive modes of white supremacy that form these 'affective fictions' with searing accuracy, shifting the analytic and political direction from the history of 'blackness' to the question of the lived violence of whiteness.[55] Two examples strike me as particularly helpful for the discussion thus far. In the first, Carby tells us of her teacher who insists that the RAF does not have any black people in it. Carby knows for a fact that it does (her black father was in the RAF), but this is irrelevant to her teacher's ignorant certainty. The teacher's knowledge that *it does not* trumps 'the girl's' that *it does*; evidence is neither here nor there. In the second, Carby's white poor family embrace superiority over the enslaved black people of the Jamaican plantation as 'white entitlement', enjoying vicious pleasure at the horror others have to endure. Carby's point here is that the affective life of white supremacy is key to its appeal;[56] it provides a 'cruel' investment in the hierarchies that ultimately also diminish its white working class participants. As Carby's bewildered childhood encounter with her ignorant teacher makes plain, white supremacy cannot be argued with or defeated at the level of logic: it has already identified her as outside of an epistemic frame of intelligibility. Her girlhood knowledge is at once untrustworthy, aggressive and absurd.

Affective reckonings

[52] There are echoes of this idea of pseudo science in the 'culture wars' mocking of what are perceived to be fake disciplines (including media studies, cultural studies, and of course ethnic, queer and gender studies) through 'hoaxes'. See Emma Spruce, Jacob Breslow and Tomás Ojeda, 'Study Your Grievances', *Engenderings,* 29 October 2018, https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2018/10/29/study-your-grievances/

[53] Elsa Dorlin, 'Unreal: Catholic Ideology as Epistemological War', *Religion and Gender* 6: 2 (2016), 264-67.

[54] In her more recent work, Dorlin further contends that 'self defence' as a political and epistemic possibility is denied those on the margins; the are always primary agents of violence, never its mistreated objects. Dorlin, 'What a Body Can Do', *Radical Philosophy* 2: 5 (Autumn 2019).

[55] Hazel Carby, *Imperial Intimacies: a Tale of Two Islands* (London: Verso, 2020).

[56] In related vein, Sharon P. Holland explores the ordinary life of racism as a sequence of investments and affective ties one can never be distant from. Holland, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

To conclude, I want to take forward Dorlin's and Carby's understandings of the 'epistemics of obliteration' and the affects of white supremacy to think through how to challenge the personal and political violence of anti-'gender ideology'.[57] How might I do justice to these authors' understanding that histories of gender and race are a battle for survival not an exchange of views, are a struggle to outlive the murderous gaze that imagines itself vulnerable, not a desire for recognition? And finally, how might the question of 'affective fictions' be helpful for a political response that does not cede the terrain of sex/gender, race and sexuality to the Right? To do so I reconsider Gayle Rubin's analysis of the 'sex/gender' system, reading it as an early analysis of the violent effects of naturalising 'sex' and 'gender', but also as an unfinished account of affect and violence.[58] Rubin's 1975 intervention, 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex' establishes 'sex/gender' not as a relationship between the body and the social, or between origin and endpoint, but as a coupling designed to obscure power relations within a patriarchal system.[59] For Rubin, it is the collapse of 'gender' into 'sex', the naturalisation of their relationship *as no relationship at all*, that secures inequality as a fact of life rather than as a regime that systematically benefits men over women. In 'Traffic', Rubin is concerned both with that naturalisation mechanism (the collapse of 'gender' into 'sex') and with its impact on those who fall outside of its norms or refuse them. While 'sex/gender' as a system is universal for Rubin, so too are the ruptures and fissures in its logic that mean 'oppression is not inevitable'.[60] We have to make visible that 'sex/gender system', Rubin says, if we are to challenge the naturalisation process that reduces human life to 'exchange' and if we are to value the lives of those who cannot (or refuse) to be thus contained.[61]

I read Rubin as an early theorist of the relationship between 'sex' and 'gender' as a *pernicious fiction*, one that all gendered subjects must accept in order to be legible as 'men' or 'women' within patriarchal regimes. This is an affective regime too, of course, precisely because of that naturalisation as the central technique of power. If 'sex' is understood as pure and unadulterated, as without the corrupting presence of 'gender', its violence is obscured and can no longer be rationalised as violence. Following Rubin, this is one reason that anti-'gender ideology' is so central to the Right: to admit to 'gender' is to disrupt the relationship between family and nation so crucial to anti-immigration and racist agendas that underpin it. Instead, as we have seen, violence 'sticks' to those who appear disruptive of a system whose workings have already been smoothed over. It is a 'sex/gender system', in other words, that allows for the aggression of anti-'gender ideology' mobilisations to be displaced, and for *vulnerability* to remain the preserve of the privileged. This is also an 'affective fiction', then, in that the cloaking of the mechanisms of authority enable anger at its exposure to be righteous, and disgust at those who refuse its terms to be justified. Rubin's

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[57] Dorlin, 'Unreal'; Carby, *Imperial Intimacies*.
[58] Gayle Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the "Political Economy" of Sex', in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157-210.
[59] Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women'.
[60] Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women', 168.
[61] It is that impetus to value the bravery of lives and choices deemed 'perverse' that underwrites Rubin's second major intervention some ten years later: Gayle Rubin, 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality [1984]', in *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2012).

account also goes some way to explaining why both agency and abjection stick to those at the margins: within a 'sex/gender system', legitimate affect can only belong to those who occupy its naturalised positions. Challenging the contemporary Right's campaign to renaturalise power, then, has to start from both debunking that legitimacy, and insisting on the value of those lives whose affects bubble up in excess of that regime.

Rubin has been critiqued for privileging 'sex/gender' over 'race/gender' as the determining system of patriarchal societies,[62] and thereby naturalising colonial or imperial regimes in turn rather than opening them up to scrutiny. And indeed, as Spillers and Lewis have laid out, in Western contexts only white women can historically and contemporarily lay claim to womanhood and its affects without ambivalence at best and often deadly violence.[63] Not only are black women and women of color more likely to be understood as aggressive than white women (*because of* rather than *despite* being more likely to be the targets of violence, this analysis has shown), they are also denied access to womanhood within a 'sex/gender system'. For Carby, however, the racialization of a 'sex/gender system' is part of how it works. If 'womanhood' is naturalised through rather than in parallel to whiteness, then its impact is to demonise all those who 'fail' to allow that naturalisation to remain invisible, and punish all those who refuse that demonisation.[64] In 'White Woman Listen!', Carby provides a generous reading of Rubin's 'Traffic' as an important spur to denaturalising the 'sex/gender system' as one that pushes all those who would challenge its obscuring logic to the edges of 'the human'. Here Carby not only provides a useful extension of Rubin's analysis of a 'sex/gender system' to centre the colonial logics of racism, she also provides a basis for thinking about the political and affective marginalisation of black people, people of color, queer, trans* and feminist subjects together (and those who might be all the above). Thinking with Rubin via Carby, then, allows us to explore the affective as well as political and social work that naturalisation does, but it also cracks open the links between different political responses as part of how we might imagine solidarity across different denaturalising positions.

In an interview for the 'Haunting Feminism' special issue of *Feminist Theory*, Lewis reflects on her decades of political work as a black feminist in the UK.[65] Echoing Dorlin's insistence on understanding right-wing anti-'gender ideology' as a confrontation with 'epistemic obliteration', Lewis is clear that the Right has her and others in its deadly sights. 'They're going to kill us. They are killing us' she says as a matter of fact.[66] For Lewis, the violence of white male supremacy is not only an external force, but also one that shapes what it means to be oneself in the world. Lewis tells us that 'it was hard for me to come out as a black woman as a lesbian', remarking wryly that 'I suppose when you're excised

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[62] Donna Haraway proposes this alternative conceptualisation in Haraway, '"Gender" for a Marxist Dictionary: the Sexual Politics of a Word', *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: the Reinvention of Nature* (London, Free Association Books: 1991), 127-48.

[63] See footnote 35.

[64] Hazel Carby, 'White Woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood', in Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, eds. *The Empire Strikes back: Race and Racism in 70s Britain* (London: Hutchinson, 1982), 212-235.

[65] Lewis and Hemmings, '"Where Might We Go if We Dare"'.

[66] Lewis and Hemmings, '"Where Might We Go if We Dare"', 419.

from full humanity that's one of its consequences.'[67] Lewis is not making a case for being 'recognised' or granted entry to womanhood on authoritarian terms, though. She sees the problem as precisely rooted in the binary oppositions that anti-'gender ideology' movements propose as the basis of a rosy future, insisting that it 'kills us to occupy these position as "men" and "women"'.[68] Here Lewis connects black, trans*, queer and feminist exclusions through their continuous failure to be counted as full women or men, but importantly sees the costs of seeking entry into those as just as damaging.

In an extended discussion of the racial dynamics that shape feminism, Lewis continues to explore the affective costs of occupying or being excluded from womanhood. Starting from her own experience on feminist collectives, Lewis describes 'how unbearable it is… when you're with some white women and the question of race comes up and the white women will collapse into tears, like a classic performance of the fey little woman, who's not strong enough, like a little bird … she might faint.'[69] In her trenchant analysis, Lewis points precisely to the 'sex/gender system' as always already racialised. As a black woman she is not able to retreat into femininity, and is marked instead and predictably as the aggressor. White femininity for Lewis is constituted through the 'threat of an assault' whether by (white or black) men or by black women; it is constituted by the displacement of racist violence and exclusion onto the other and as a black feminist that is simply 'unbearable'. For Lewis, the confrontation with fantasies of victimhood as part of how a 'sex/gender system' maintains itself must be the first thing we undo as part of a creative politics of freedom (though this will be a different project for white and black feminists). Otherwise, one continues to see oneself through the eyes of the white male supremacist. A refusal to accept the 'affective fictions' that underpin anti-'gender ideology' requires a leap of affective faith in its own right. Yet of course we are not starting from scratch. There is, and always has been excess and resistance and 'our lives are never fully encompassed and limited by all of these processes and structures.'[70] As Lewis notes, it '*is* frightening', but 'that's the project. Isn't it? We have to.'[71] Here Lewis joins Rubin and Carby in returning us to the scene of 'sex/gender' as both an important political focus with respect to structures of violence, and as a way of understanding affective lives that separate and connect those it excludes. Her call is to refuse the empty ('cruel' perhaps) promises of sex/gender, refuse it as a devastating fiction, and align with affects rooted in histories of political action and affirmation.

At the end of the interrupted 'Intersectionality and Politics' workshop, Kimberlé Crenshaw asks us to breathe, to pause, to feel our bodies. To inhabit that space and no other space. To be real. She asks us to go back and to remember what happened step by step and to finish it, leave it alone, pay it no more mind. And then to imagine something else. To replay the scene of being silenced, rewriting it as we would have liked it to unfold, and to take that with us into the world. We know authentic intimacy because it is hard won; we can feel it in our encounters with others. We know the sham in which violence is passed off

[67] Lewis and Hemmings, '"Where Might We Go if We Dare"', 419.
[68] Lewis and Hemmings, '"Where Might We Go if We Dare"', 416.
[69] Lewis and Hemmings, '"Where Might We Go if We Dare"', 412.
[70] Lewis and Hemmings, '"Where Might We Go if We Dare"', 415.
[71] Lewis and Hemmings, '"Where Might We Go if We Dare"', 416, 419.

as kinship, and we do not accept its terms. We see each other, and we already bask in the pleasure of a new world.

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