Chapter 11

'Sadistic, grinning rifle-women': gender, emotions and politics in representations of militant leftist women

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Terrorist girls, wild furies, unnatural daughters, crazed outlaws, gun broads, megaeras, amazons, furies, viragoes, jackals, hecates, mad-women. Hybrid creatures, drunken Bacchantes, hysterical Messalinas, devils, infernal witches, unhuman creatures from the netherworld, whore proletarians, shameless slatterns, moral monstrosities. Erotic women, unfeeling women, vulgar women. These are just some of the terms I scrawled in my notebook while taking notes to write this essay.[1] This list, plucked from a range of texts written in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries pertaining to women associated with left-wing political move-ments, gives a sense of the often mythical and historical analogies that have been resorted to when describing forms of political violence commit-ted by modern women. Paradoxically, when political upheavals threaten to disturb the prevailing social order and the traditional gender relations associated with it, commentators hoping to uphold existing norms seem to reach for long-established, even ancient, archetypes of deviant womanhood. This tension between the historically specific and the transhistorical runs through my discussion.

   This chapter will explore representations not only of impassioned female subjects but also of impassioned and politicized female subjects. It will talk about the figure of the politically militant left-wing woman, both in reality and fantasy. And it will attempt to probe the critical implications

of the negative affects associated with such subjects. My approach is associative in form – ranging over time and space – and more interested in theoretical than historical claims. It is a tentative attempt to think about the gendered emotions associated with left-wing woman militants in different movements and moments in order to probe the relationships between gender, emotion and political violence.[2] Usually I work as a historian of the psy disciplines but although the question of pathologization is relevant to these discussions, it remains in the background. Instead, I'm going to experiment by trying to think about iconography, archetypes and stereotypes employed by the right and how right-wing anxieties about Communist revolution have taken the form of a militant woman.

Preamble: naming the world

In her 2017 essay 'On Liking Women', published in *n +1*, Angela Long Chu writes of first encountering and later teaching Valerie Solanas's excoriating attack on patriarchy, *The SCUM Manifesto*, published a year before Solanas infamously attempted to kill the artist Andy Warhol in 1968 (the acronym SCUM stands for Society for Cutting Up Men). Chu underlines that in Solanas's text 'politics begins with an aesthetic judgement'.[3] For Solanas, 'Life under male supremacy isn't oppressive, exploitative, or unjust: it's just fucking boring.'[4] Chu contends that

> male and female are essentially *styles* for [Solanas], rival aesthetic schools distinguishable by their respective adjectival palettes. Men are timid, guilty, dependent, mindless, passive, animalistic, insecure, cowardly, envious, vain, frivolous, and weak. Women are strong, dynamic, decisive, assertive, cerebral, independent, self-confident, nasty, violent, selfish, freewheeling, thrill-seeking, and arrogant. Above all, women are cool and groovy.[5]

Solanas inverted the traditional adjectival ordering here and subverts not only the traditional gendering of emotions but also the gender binary itself in the process; the nouns 'woman' and 'man' come to take on new meanings.

Although I began by presenting a litany composed mostly of nouns, emotions and dispositions are often ascribed to people through adjectives, as Chu outlines in Solanas's text. And gendered emotions often appear in pairs, mimicking the gender binary, but even if the binary is being subverted as in *The SCUM Manifesto*, it is only very occasionally abandoned altogether. In *Autobiography of Red* (1998) Anne Carson asks:

> What is an adjective? Nouns name the world. Verbs activate the names. Adjectives come from somewhere else. The word adjective (*epitheton* in Greek) is itself an adjective meaning 'placed on top', 'added', 'appended', 'imported', 'foreign'. Adjectives seem fairly innocent additions but look again. These small imported mechanisms are in charge of attaching everything in the world to its place in particularity. They are the latches of being.

> ... In the world of the Homeric epic, for example, being is stable and particularity is set fast in tradition. When Homer mentions blood, blood is *black*. When women appear, women are *neat-ankled* or *glancing*. Gods' laughter is *unquenchable*. Human knees are *quick*. The sea is *unwearying* ... Homer's epithets are a fixed diction with which Homer fastens every substance in the world to its aptest attribute and holds them in place for epic consumption.[6]

How, Carson asks, would it be possible to release being so 'all the substances of the world float up'? This is more than a linguistic question. Carson claims that though Stesichoros was born into the code, into the stable constellation of descriptions established by Homer, he somehow managed to prise the world open. He undid, for example, the tradition of attaching adjectives of whoredom to Helen of Troy: 'When Stesichoros unlatched her epithet from Helen there flowed out such a light as may have blinded him for a moment.'[7]

I'm beginning with these digressive examples not because I'm particularly interested in the relationship between nouns and adjectives or even in language per se but because I'm interested in how language, as one among many social practices, participates in giving things the appearance of fixity. I'm interested in how the historical comes to appear natural, how diction and representations come to appear fixed and substance with it. Obviously this pertains to gender itself – not only to nouns but also to substances (i.e. to embodied subjects interpellated and interpellating in a social world). Ascribing and re-ascribing particular emotions to particular genders is part of the process whereby a distinction between men and women (and not only between the masculine and the feminine) is consolidated – ideas adhere to people but eventually seem to inhere in them and this can in turn participate in consolidating structural inequalities by making them appear as though they are grounded in nature. If, as Chu claims in her discussion of Solanas, 'politics begins with an aesthetic judgment', it is worth remembering that 'aesthetics was born ... as a discourse of the body'.[8] I will mostly be considering aesthetic judgements about gender in this essay, but although these judgements may not always have described actual acts of violence by actual women, they nonetheless had

actual violent effects, even if sometimes these were subtle, dispersed and difficult to trace. I wanted to try reading the relationship of adjective to noun, as Carson describes it, as somehow analogous to the relationship of emotion to gender; perhaps unlatching one might help unlatch the other. Would it be possible to unleash a light so blinding that it might not only illuminate the rigid historically established associations between emotions and genders but also burn them to the ground? Perhaps, but perhaps it would involve doing more than simply flipping the binary as Solanas does in *The SCUM Manifesto*.

Violent mutilations

On the night of 30 September 1965 six generals of the Indonesian army were killed by army officers in a coup attempt. Although the circumstances of the coup remain contested, the murders were blamed on the Communist Party of Indonesia (PKI) and this was used as a pretext for a brutal purge. Members of the PKI and trade unions, as well as ethnic Chinese people and many with tenuous rumoured connections to the left or their family members, were killed in massacres orchestrated by the military and carried out with the participation of various youth militia groups. It has been estimated that at least half a million people were killed and many more were brutally tortured and incarcerated without trial in prisons and camps. The coup brought Major-General Suharto to power, after which a constructed counter-narrative of the events circulated in propaganda and in schools, while discussions of the events that deviated from these official state-sanctioned accounts were forbidden. The killers were celebrated as heroes. The threat of reemergent Communism was kept discursively alive.[9] Even after Suharto's fall in 1998, the Indonesian state never officially acknowledged the atrocities. Crocodile Hole, the place from which the corpses of the generals were exhumed, is still today the site of a giant monument and accompanying museum memorializing their deaths and was the site for the Suharto regime's more significant state rituals. Built in 1969, the Sacred Pancasila Monument includes giant statues of the seven generals with nearby friezes depicting PKI activists committing the murders and dumping the bodies, while scantily clad women frolic around them.[10]

In the aftermath of the coup, lurid stories began to spread about the involvement of members of the Indonesian Women's Movement (Gerwani) – an organization that had been involved in campaigns to promote education and literacy, help improve women's working conditions, oppose polygamy and provide childcare – in the kidnapping and murder of

the generals. Gruesome sexualized images and narratives of torture, genital mutilation and orgies were circulated in the military-controlled media, described by historian John Roosa as an 'absurd fabrication by psychological warfare experts'.[11] Increasingly graphic depictions of sadistic acts allegedly performed by Communist women circulated via propaganda, emphasizing their rapacious prurience and lack of religious beliefs. These misogynistic demonizing myths of sexual excess among Communist women also contributed to the backlash against suspected Communists more generally, and specifically fuelled sexualized violence against women and girls on a huge scale, many of whom were raped or sexually assaulted during interrogation proceedings, which were described by their perpetrators as acts of vengeance.[12] Imaginary violence both concealed and begat concrete violence. The entanglement of gender and politics in the image of the Gerwani women indicates how naturalized assumptions about gender roles can entangle with naturalized assumptions about the organization of society. Fears relating to the denaturalization of the former can be mobilized to stir up fears relating to the destabilization of the latter. Fantasy can become a kind of weapon; wild imaginings with no counterpart in empirical reality can then lead to concrete actions.

The fantastical image of depraved Gerwani women, who functioned as a kind of metonym for the threat of Communism more broadly, recalls a historically and geographically distant example in which imaginary violent and licentious working-class women became a cipher for political anxieties: the *pétroleuses*, women rumoured to have lit fires across Paris during the last days of the Paris Commune of 1871.[13] As in Indonesia in the wake of the coup, soon after the bloody repression of the Paris Commune, the French state began to obliterate its popular memory through strict censorship; counter-revolutionary counter-narratives of recent history were soon established. The effacement of history involved not only obscuring the memory and shared experience of actual events but also constructed alternative accounts in their place to stir up and cement anti-Communard feeling. The figure of the *pétroleuse*, like the figure of the Gerwani woman, was a key protagonist in these fabricated accounts. The process of suppression was also a process of invention, with new versions of events emerging that were based not in fact but in fantasy. Public memory may depart from private memories but it also shapes how people perceive the world around them. Fantasy and imagination can have a utopian dimension, evincing the possibility of imagining things otherwise, but it can also be enlisted for repressive ends, erecting images that blot out real experiences. In these moments social movements composed of oppressed and exploited people sought to create a more equal society but were crushed by the right.

The imagined threat to the status quo in both cases took the form of a militant woman whose (non)existence was used to justify real violence. The militant, sexually rapacious left-wing woman seemed to represent the ultimate threat to the existing social order. Do the emotions associated with or experienced by militant leftist women conform to gender stereotypes or transgress them? Does the figure of the politically violent woman threaten to explode the gender binary altogether or does it entrench it? Is the image and reality of the politically violent woman itself a product of patriarchal violence?

Unruly women

My starting point for this essay and the main sources of the litany I began with were two secondary accounts of fantastical representations of militant proletarian left-wing women that I happened to read around the same time: Gay L. Gullickson's *Unruly Women of Paris: Images of the Commune* (1996) which discusses the figure of the *pétroleuses* and *Male Fantasies* by Klaus Theweleit (whose first volume was first published in German in 1977), a short sub-section of the first volume of which is devoted to fantastical descriptions of Communist women written by German Freikorps officers in the aftermath of the First World War. Both works concern images of women divorced from reality that reveal more about the right-wing masculine fantasies and anxieties of those who created them than they do about the experiences of actual women (left-wing or otherwise). These fantastical figures share some common tropes – the gendered emotions associated with them, the entanglement of the sexual and the political they embody, their relation to mythic or historical women and their relation to allegory.

From 18 March to 28 May 1871 a socialist and revolutionary government ruled Paris before being brutally defeated by the French army in what became known as 'bloody week'. Ordinary working women played a prominent role in the Paris Commune. Women from a range of professions – seamstresses, waistcoat makers, sewing machine operators, dressmakers, linen drapers, bootstitchers, hatmakers, laundresses, cardboard makers, embroiderers, braidmakers, tie makers, schoolteachers, perfume makers, jewellery makers, goldpolishers, bookbinders – joined the Union des Femmes and participated in campaigns for fairer wages and shorter working hours. Women also took an active role in defending the Commune – aside from the famous leaders and orators associated with it (including Elisabeth Dmitreff, Andre Leo, Louise Michel and Paule Mink), many women sewed sandbags for the barricades, assembled weapons,

distributed clothing and tended to the wounded. Some women took up arms, as Edith Thomas notes: 'With their chassepot rifles, their revolvers, their cartridge cases, their red sashes, and their fantastic Zouave, naval or infantry uniforms, they were a target of caricaturists; a woman wearing trousers was a scandal in itself.'[14]

The figure of the *pétroleuse*, however, seems to have been largely imaginary. She appears in caricatures in the bourgeois press, hair streaming, eyes blazing like the fires behind her – clutching a can of petrol – usually old and haggard and in tattered clothing. Gullickson notes that visual representations of the figure of the *pétroleuse* tended to picture her as older and less sexually alluring than in written accounts, where she tends to be younger and more seductive. If fires were deliberately lit in Paris just before the Commune's defeat, there is no evidence to suggest that the arsonists were primarily women – no women were convicted of arson in the Commune's aftermath – but 'Enemies of the Commune' accused women of setting fire to Paris. Eight thousand *pétroleuses* were said to exist – with a squad in every quarter, with its own female sergeants and commanders. Places were said to have been marked with an acronym to indicate that they were 'good for burning' (*bon pour bruler*). According to Gullickson: 'Every poor woman was a suspect. Even more so if she carried a shopping basket or a bottle: she was a pétroleuse, and [in some cases] was executed on the spot to the furious cries of the mob.'[15] Later she noted that wild rumours circulated 'about petroleum eggs equipped with nitroglycerine primers, and about balloons carrying incendiary material'.[16] Increasingly florid and hysterical newspaper stories were printed that were not only improbable but impossible – like one account of a charred skeleton still fully clothed with a pipe in her mouth.

Drunk, left-wing, working class, promiscuous – characteristics associated with the *pétroleuses* – are echoed in descriptions of militant leftist women encountered in Klaus Theweleit's *Male Fantasies*. Focusing on diaries and letters written by members of the Freikorps, German paramilitary groups of the First World War and veterans who fought against the newly created Weimar Republic between 1918 and 1923 (many of whom went on to become Nazis), Theweleit explores the relationship between sexuality and politics, asking 'why, under certain conditions, desiring-production can turn into murdering-production'.[17] The first chapter of the first volume focuses on the way these 'soldier males' spoke about women, investigating the relationship between misogyny and far-right ideology. The Freikorps officers, he discovers, don't talk much about their wives. 'Woman' is an ideal; actual wives or fiancées are 'objects of convenience', 'marginal figures ... child-bearers; silent supporters'.[18] A soldier's

'princess' is often forsaken for the sake of the Fatherland: 'Love of women and love of country are at opposite poles', he observes.[19]

The two short sections of volume 1 that I'm most interested in are called 'Woman as Aggressor' and 'Rifle-Women: The Castrating Woman', which discuss the Freikorps officers' often lurid and fantastical ideas about militant working-class women. As in the case of the real women of the Commune and of the actual Gerwani members in Indonesia, Theweleit emphasizes the stark contrast between the imaginary figure of militant sexualized leftist woman and the reality of Red Army nurses. Woman as aggressor is a sexualized but monstrous proletarian figure – 'a fantastic being who swears, shrieks, spits, scratches, farts, bites, pounces, tears to shreds; who is slovenly wind-whipped, hissing-red, indecent'.[20] Such women figure as 'agents of destruction'.[21] Violence, class and lasciviousness are linked, and proletarian women are also often assumed to be Communists, sex workers and Jews (though his tendency to view fascism as misogyny has ambiguous implications for his understanding of anti-semitism and racism, a point I will return to in my concluding section).

A racialized aspect was also, incidentally, present in representations of *pétroleuses*: Silvia Federici includes a caricature of a *pétroleuse* in her discussion of early modern witch trials in *Caliban and the Witch*, situating it in a tradition that 'Africanizes' the figure of the witch.[22] In an earlier passage Federici writes that long after the witch hunts had ceased

> the specter of the witches continued to haunt the imagination of the ruling class. In 1871, the Parisian bourgeoisie instinctively returned to it to demonize the female Communards, accusing them of wanting to set Paris aflame. There can be little doubt, in fact, that the models for the lurid tales and images used by the bourgeois press to create the myth of the pétroleuses were drawn from the repertoire of the witchhunt ... Hundreds of women were thus summarily executed, while the press vilified them in the papers. Like the witch, the pétroleuse was depicted as an older woman with a wild, savage look and uncombed hair.[23]

Theweleit's anachronistic use of illustration – the text is interspersed with an array of images including advertising from the Third Reich, election campaign posters from the German Democratic Republic in the 1970s, late nineteenth-century English paintings, movie stills from the Golden Age of Hollywood and medieval engravings – suggests that the figure he is describing is similarly not specific to the historical and cultural moment but a kind of archetype. However, as Federici discusses, archetypes can also be reclaimed and repurposed, referring to the WITCH network of feminist groups involved in the US Women's Liberation Movement, and citing

a flyer from New York in the late 1960s that declared: 'Witches have always been women who dared to be courageous, aggressive, intelligent, non-conformists, curious, independent, sexually liberated, revolutionary.'[24] A French socialist feminist journal from the same period called itself *Les Pétroleuses*.

Theweleit is clear that sexual and political anxieties are intertwined. 'The fantasized proletarian woman'[25] is often armed; she may be one of the 'sadistic, grinning rifle-women' of the Red Army'[26] or a 'bestial foe [who] has desecrated defenceless wounded men'.[27] 'Just like waitresses, bar-maids, cleaning women, prostitutes, dancers, and circus performers the rifle-women are given only first names.'[28] Theweleit cites a passage – almost dream-like in its vivid surrealism – in which a Sparticist woman is depicted 'hair flying, packing pistols, and riding shaggy horses [presenting] an image of terrifying sexual potency'.[29]

'The sexuality of the proletarian woman/gun slinging whore/commu-nist is out to castrate and shred men to pieces',[30] Theweleit declares. One account describes a woman who proclaims: 'we want guns, grenades, rev-olution!' and is represented as drunk and lascivious, her stained silk dressing gown a symbol of her seductive yet dangerous moral depravity. 'Shred them to pieces and pulverize them with dynamite', one of these threatening but wholly imaginary female revolutionaries declares, which Theweleit reads as an anxiety the author has about the leftist woman's desire to annihilate all men on the right.[31] In Nazi propaganda the image of the First World War Red Army rifle woman resurfaced and was presented as if it had posed a real threat – take this example from a 1935 primer:

> It is well-known that there were rifle-women behind the Red lines who were under orders to stop the troops from falling back, or if the retreat could not be stopped, to shoot at their own people. The rifle-women were the sort of cruel furies only Bolshevism could devise. While the heart of one of the men of the Red Guard might be moved to pity at the sight of suffering innocents, those women were bes-tialised and devoid of all human feeling.[32]

Here, the woman becomes not only a figure who transgresses traditional gender roles; she is situated outside humanity as such. She isn't simply masculine but becomes animalistic. Her emotions are not just 'wrong' or unnatural ones for women to express; they're not even recognizably human. Accusations of base animality were also hurled at Communard women. The judge at the trial of four women accused of incendiary behav-iour described their actions as an onslaught of civilization and called the women 'unworthy creatures who seem to have taken it on themselves to become an opprobrium to their sex, and to repudiate the great and

magnificent role of women in society'.[33] The judge also made an explicit link between criminality and the Commune's pursuit of education for women and calls for the emancipation of women. But how, Gullickson asks (and the questions could equally be applied to the context Theweleit discusses), 'did the political threat posed by the Commune [and by Communism] come to be represented by a hideous and fierce but sexually compelling female figure? ... Why was the political threat of the Commune [or Communism] represented as a fury, a hideous, powerful, avenging, mad, sexually compelling woman?'[34] Gullickson argues that various anxieties met in the figure of the *pétroleuse* which demonstrate the entanglement of political and gendered anxieties:

> The *pétroleuse* threatened to overturn the entire social order. She not only challenged male authority by leaving her home and acting in the public sphere, but she also attacked property, the source of the bourgeois male's sense of importance, burned down the home in which she was supposed to take care of her children, and corrupted her children by encouraging them to aid her in this deed. She was the evil mother, capable of killing her children, controlling men, and destroying their power base. This was what any man could expect to happen if women escaped the bonds of civilization and the home and were allowed to 'give rein to their very worst instincts.' They would 'desex' themselves and destroy society.[35]

To repeat what I have already observed about the function of images of Gerwani members in propaganda in the aftermath of the coup: the entanglement of gender and politics indicates how naturalized assumptions about gender were entangled with naturalized assumptions about the organization of society; denaturalizing one could thus call into question the legitimacy of the other.

Everything flows

Gullickson seems to read the relationship of the political and the gendered in the figure of the *pétroleuse* as running in parallel – the woman as a metaphor for revolution – but I would argue that they are more closely intertwined: the transgression of traditional gender roles the *pétroleuse* embodied was tied to the political claims of the Commune which included calls for the emancipation of women. Revolution was the ultimate social threat, and it took the form of an unruly, proletarian, sexualized and politicized woman who threatened to rupture the existing structures of the world. Although an exaggerated and extreme figure with no direct

counterpart in reality, I would nonetheless argue that the image of the *pétroleuse* exists as a metonym rather than a metaphor for revolution. This relationship between the imagined woman and the feared revolution, I would argue, also holds for the function of images of murderous and sexualized Gerwani women in Indonesia.

The *pétroleuse* could also be understood as an allegorical counterpart to Liberty, Justice, Marianne or various other female figures used to symbolized the French nation. Although similarly remote from actual women, who were unlikely to experience liberty or justice themselves, these virtuous, calm and beautiful figures of social harmony stand in stark contrast to the wild figure of the *pétroleuse*. As Marina Warner discusses in *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form* (1985):

> The allegorical female body either wears armour, emblematic of its wholeness and impregnability … or it proclaims its virtues by abandoning protective coverings, to announce it has no need of them. By exposing vulnerable flesh as if it were not so, and especially by uncovering the breast, softest and most womanly part of woman, as if it were invulnerable, the semi-clad female figure expresses strength and freedom.[36]

The Commune's own images explicitly employed this iconography. The allegorical figure of the Commune was often dressed in red, with a Phrygian cap and with her breast uncovered. Although both the allegorical Liberty and the fictional *pétroleuse* of the bourgeois imagination were often represented in a state of partial undress, and both were represented as strong and militant, the differences were stark. Gullickson discusses a reactionary caricature explicitly parodying the allegory of the Commune by rendering her as a *pétroleuse*. In this image her exposed flesh is explicitly fleshy rather than having an almost stone-like smoothness in the sense described by Warner – her figure is old and sagging, her nipple clearly visible, indicating she has been divested of the pure, desexualized quality identified by Warner. Far from whole and impregnable, the satirical image is of an unconfined, uncontrolled and uncontrollable body. The representation of emotion is key: the face is not serene, strong and impassive but wild-eyed and full of rage, not muscular and steady but saggy and out of control.

Warner's insistence on the whole and impregnable ideal allegorical figure is reminiscent of Theweleit's discussion of the ideal of nationalism to which Communism (and Communism-as-woman) posed a threat. Liquidity is central to Theweleit's argument. He sees flowing everywhere in the documents produced by the Freikorps officers. The Bolshevik masses flow and surge like 'floods, torrents, raging water'.[37] Here are some

characteristic verbs: inundate, engulf, pour, flow, swallow up, stream, gush, rage, flood, boil, bubble, seethe, whirl. The officers abhor everything that gushes and rushes, particularly the 'Red floods' of Bolshevism. Revolution figures as liquification. And the right-wing men want to dam it all up, to contain it, to bring it to a halt. They proclaim '[d]eath to all that flows'.[38] This leads Theweleit to Freud's limitless oceanic feeling and then to the surging qualities of libidinal desire (as described in Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, which was published shortly before his book and from which he drew much inspiration) and so to the experience of bound-lessness and release of tension associated with orgasm. Theweleit distinguishes his understanding of ego development from Freud's, rejecting an account focused on the Oedipus complex in favour of an argument emphasizing instead the discipline of the body associated with military drills and parades: a bounded, homogeneous, synchro-nized mass entity emerges. These Freikorps men are repressed, terrified of sexual abandon, and this fear is linked to their fear of women (which is in turn, as he discusses in detail in *Male Fantasies*' second volume, linked to a fear of the mass). The only time they let themselves dissipate is in a deathly confrontation with a male enemy with whom they identify: 'he melts into the blood of a man of his own kind. His ecstasy takes the form of a "blackout": perception of an end to the torment of existence as a man for whom some form of coupling is indispensable, yet who never experi-ences the flowing of pleasure'.[39] Death takes the place of sex.

Women in the sources Theweleit analyses are also associated with everything that flows; they have permeable boundaries and threaten the boundaries of others. He veers off from his historical documents towards the end of the first volume of *Male Fantasies* to discuss mythic and liter-ary representations of woman and takes a detour via ancient and early modern European history. The suggestion is that gender stereotypes are, if not exactly transhistorical, then at the very least extremely long-standing and resistant to change. The image that he is concerned with excavating is of

> woman-in-the-water; woman as water, as a stormy, cavorting, cool-ing ocean, a raging stream, a waterfall; as a limitless body of water that ships pass through, with tributaries, pools, surfs, and deltas; woman as the enticing (or perilous) deep, as a cup of bubbling body fluids; the vagina as a wave, as foam.[40]

The final sections of the chapter discuss dirt and contamination and it is here that he returns to his primary sources and to the explicitly anti-Communist political content with which the chapter began. Headings include: 'The Mire', 'The Morass', 'Slime', 'Pulp', 'Shit' and 'Rain'.

Images of national decay are linked to descriptions of menstruating sex workers.[41] Men of the right characterized the left as filthy and saw leftist bodies as insufficiently contained: they ooze excrement and pus and menstrual blood, weep 'secretions from the different orifices of the lower body'.[42] Freikorps men will only consent to transcend boundaries by blacking out or in death; they 'couple' with themselves in combat and their 'own struggle for survival [becomes] a direct onslaught on femininity'.[43] It is not only that militant leftist women were associated with particular mythological figures (which the list I began with made clear) but that these accounts reveal long-standing associations between women, liquidity and dirt more generally.

One or several women?

The weapon-wielding woman who threatens to shred men to pieces is simultaneously the antithesis and epitome of the feminine. Theweleit reads the woman as aggressor in terms of castration anxiety. The women in the narratives he discusses pull weapons from beneath their clothing and cut off protruding body parts. He insists that the imagined threat is not vaginal but phallic: 'we are dealing with the fantasy of a threatening penis'.[44] But these men only assign penises to certain types of women: violent leftist women. As such, he claims: 'The men experience "communism" as a *direct* assault on their *genitals*.'[45] The threat these women pose is more than just castration; it is total annihilation understood in political terms. Within the space of a few paragraphs, however, Theweleit connects the specific image of a politically violent woman with a phallic weapon with erotic woman in general; both figures are examples of 'nature perverted'[46] and both also seem to respond to anxieties about the changing social status of women understood as a transgression of the natural order. Women don't need to be Communists with a penis-gun to threaten men after all. Indeed, elsewhere Theweleit notes the preponderance of the trope in the Freikorps corpus that 'Women are all the same.'[47]

If the image of the militant leftist woman confounds nature, takes on masculine attributes and defies feminine norms, she is also then in some sense the epitome of the feminine. She both defies and defines womanhood; she is a kind of hyperbolic vision of woman. She is an abject woman, though in some sense all women are understood as abject. She is a madwoman, though in some sense all women are understood as mad. She is excessively 'woman', but women as such are excess. Amanda Third notes of the figure of the female terrorist in *Gender and the Political* that she is both '*hyperterrorist* (and therefore not properly feminine) and

simultaneously *hyperfeminine* (and therefore not properly terrorist but nonetheless highly dangerous)'.[48] She may violate nature by being violent, overtly sexual, non-reproductive or a bad mother, yet attributes understood as naturally feminine (even if viewed negatively) – such as excess, abjection, irrationality and heightened emotion – are also applied to her, while a man who commits an act of political violence tends to be viewed as a rational actor even by those who condemn his actions; he is understood as acting according to his principles or class interests. This was also evident in the Communard trials: men on trial were viewed as criminal, the women as simply pathological.

Violent women versus violence against women

In Theweleit's sources ideas of women are often paired with representations of violence. Women are rendered 'cold and dead' in these men's descriptions (and are sometimes literally murdered); they become 'inanimate objects'.[49] Women are both desired and feared; they might be asexual and nurturing (a maternal nurse) or erotic and threatening (a sex worker) but these two types of imagined woman must both be 'rendered lifeless';[50] the first through objectification, the second through physical violence: 'it is the aliveness of the real that threatens these men'.[51] Threatening women are killed and mutilated. In death they acquire an erotic aspect. He writes: 'The "red roses" of her sex *only* blossom from the wounds on her dead, deformed, opened-up body.'[52] These dead objects can then take on new forms:

> Reality, robbed of its independent life, is shaped anew, kneaded into large, englobing blocks that will serve as the building material for a larger vista, a monumental world of the future: the Third Reich. In constructions of this kind, with their massive exteriors and solid forms, everything has its proper place and determinate value.[53]

If the liquidity of sexualized woman threatens the solid structures and boundaries of the man and of the masculine nation, then here the suggestion is that if controlled and harnessed, those same liquids – blood and pus and vaginal discharge – can become the basis for a new solid world. It is all a question of power and domination.

Yet the critique levelled at Theweleit by West German critics and particularly by feminists when his book was published was that because he only examined male fantasies about women, he also reduced women to an image, thus excluding the experiences of real women from his

analysis. His strange image of 'englobing blocks'[54] says nothing about actual violence against actual women, neither direct physical nor sexual violence nor the numerous slow violences of patriarchal oppression. What is the relationship between a fantastical image of violent woman and the reality of violence against women? He castigates right-wing men for objectifying women but is only interested in how this phenomenon relates to fascistic ideology more generally. Here violence becomes strangely abstract: the objectification of woman is merely a stepping-stone on the way to a particular fascistic conception of the nation. He is not interested in restoring real women to their place in this history or in asking about their experiences and fantasies. As a generally sympathetic reviewer, Lutz Niethammer, noted (in a piece that was translated into English in the *History Workshop Journal* in the late 1970s): 'he says that men and women ought always to be considered in relation to each other – but then goes ahead and investigates only men, and their image of women. Women as people in their own right are barely present in his work; they are there as hypothetical constructs.'[55]

In *Sex after Fascism* (2007) Dagmar Herzog argues that Theweleit's book should be understood in relation to the historical context in which it was written. In the context, that is, of the aftermath of the 'sexual revolution' and during the women's liberation movement. Written in the disenchanted aftermath of the student and worker's movements of 1968, when many on the left began to question their previous insistence on the entanglement of the personal with the political, 'Theweleit's book', Herzog argues, 'was in its own way an effort to recapitulate and retrieve much of 1968's original impetus and to reestablish a strength of connection between sexuality, leftist politics, and the Nazi past that had started to become frayed'.[56] The book was a huge success, a 'blockbuster'. Despite criticisms by women at the time, Herzog claims that 'Theweleit's message to the heterosexual men of his own generation was that they should not resist feminism'.[57] Theweleit is constantly warning men on the left not to succumb to the misogynistic fear of sexual abandonment that he associated with proto-fascist masculinity. He is anxious that all men are proto-fascists or that being a misogynist might not be the preserve of men on the right at all. Although unlike Herzog, Niethammer made fun of Theweleit for insisting he was somehow immune to misogyny:

> he's a man himself – but of quite a different sort: he is concerned about *Berufsverbot* and doesn't give a damn about academic achievements. He looks out on romantic bourgeois house-tops (not a modern roof to be seen from his window), but he has a very trendy pin-board on his wall. He lives in comradely solidarity with a

working woman, he helps with the childcare, he's a man of the left, he admires the women's movement, he's gentle.[58]

Despite her insistence on reading Theweleit in historical context, absent from Herzog's account of *Male Fantasies* is any discussion of how his characterization of militant leftist women chimed with representations of West German woman militants at the very moment his book emerged in public (though she does discuss the Red Army Faction (RAF) earlier in the chapter). The year 1977, when Theweleit's books were first published, was also the year in which the militant activities of the RAF peaked in West Germany. Over 50 per cent of the group were women, a fact to which the mainstream press paid a lot of attention. Amanda Third claims that during the 1960s and 1970s the female terrorist was assumed to be a feminist, and the emphasis on the participation of women in militant activist groups and the demonization of those women was tied to a more general backlash against feminism: terrorism was defined as a symptom of excessive emancipation.

In the mainstream West German press, women's acts of political violence were framed as either self-motivated (performed to impress a dominant male lover) or pathological; the political motivations behind their actions could thus be dismissed. Patrizia Melzer, discussing left-wing feminist grassroots publications, argued that:

> The de-politicization of violent acts committed by women – the reduction of such acts to self-serving and pathological motives – reflects society's inability to conceptualize women as independent thinkers. It further allows those in power to deny that they are dealing with a political opponent by characterizing female militants as randomly crazy women ... The overall image that 'women who resist are crazy' results in a psycho-pathologizing of militant women that 'completely deflects from their political motives'.[59]

Women's motivations were assumed to be emotional rather than intellectual (two realms it was further assumed must be kept firmly apart) and their political actions could thus be dismissed.

Women in the RAF had a real existence apart from the press's representations of them and they mostly emerged from the same movements in which Theweleit had been involved. As was common among Western radicals of the period, the RAF drew inspiration from distant revolutionary movements across the world. They were allied with armed struggles in Palestine and had connections with Irish Republicans, but in some of their expressions of solidarity with oppressed racialized women in distant countries, such as Vietnam, China, Cuba and Guatemala, another gap between

image and reality opens up, as Quinn Slobodian discusses: 'West German feminists often lionized the multi-tasking "guerrilla mother" who could incorporate the multiple demands of political struggle effortlessly, including those coded both masculine and feminine.'[60]

In Western Europe and North America, the spirit of universalism and internationalism that underpinned emancipatory movements that erupted in 1968 also became central to the women's liberation movement and could tip into false equivalencies that ignored differences of race, nationality and class and that was often founded, particularly in the case of China, on ignorance about lived experiences of the women they sought to emulate. This could result in what Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, in her work on internationalist North American radicals, has termed 'radical orientalism'.[61] In contrast to the fantastical right-wing representations of militant left-wing women this essay has discussed thus far, these representations tended to romanticize and idealize rather than demonize, but they were similarly inaccurate projections based on essentializing assumptions. Like the right-wing representations of violent working-class women, West German militant women's ideas about 'Third World' woman revolutionaries reveal far more about the former than the latter. To cite Wu again, they produced 'projections to more clearly define themselves'.[62]

(Not) all men

Theweleit's thesis is premised on a connection between hatred of women and violent nationalism but he can't quite rid himself of the anxiety that there is nothing exceptional about the misogyny of the (proto-)fascist men he discusses. Just as the weapon-wielding Communist woman soon collapses into woman as such, so the right-wing ideologue collapses into all men. Theweleit poses an uneasy question: 'Is there a true *boundary* separating "fascists" from "nonfascist" men? ... Or is it true, as many feminists claim, that fascism is simply the norm for males living under capitalist-patriarchal conditions?'[63] He argues that current conditions are already a form of fascism, not latent or potential but actual:

> We need to understand and combat fascism not because so many fell victim to it, not because it stands in the way of the triumph of socialism, not even because it might return again; but primarily because, as a form of reality production that is constantly present and possible under determinate conditions, it can, and does, become our production. The crudest examples of this are to be seen in the relations that have been the focus of this first chapter, male–female relations, which are also relations of production.[64]

This is a clear echo of Deleuze and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus* again and of Michel Foucault's famous questions posed in the preface to that book:

> How does one keep from being fascist, even (especially) when one believes oneself to be a revolutionary militant? How do we rid our speech and our acts, our hearts and our pleasures, of fascism? How do we ferret out the fascism that is ingrained in our behaviour?[65]

Yet it seems a shortcoming in his analysis that different forms of hatred, violence and oppression all get collapsed into one another so easily. What exactly does he think fascism is?

Just because a man with professed 'progressive' views might also be a misogynist does not mean that his misogyny is identical to that expressed by someone on the far right, nor does the misogyny of either have a straightforward connection to racism or other forms of hatred (of which he makes no mention in the passage cited above). Is he saying that 'male–female relations' are analogous to fascism, are fascism or produce fascism? The possible implications are bemusing. Do fascist women simply not exist? Are all men white? Are all white men white supremacists? How can a different reality be produced? Is reality itself founded in fantasy? Despite their anti-fascist, anti-colonial and anti-racist commitments, white West German radical women themselves elided differences between themselves and women of colour from countries in the Global South, which risks downplaying forms of oppression that racialized women face. In Theweleit's case, conflating violent misogyny with fascism risks downplaying the specificities of *both* forms of violence and risks producing just another kind of 'englobing block' into which actual people (and actual struggles against interconnected but distinct forms of oppression) disappear. Perhaps this is also symptomatic of analyses that focus on images of people rather than their lived realities. Destroying the tropes and caricatures, unlatching the epithets, would involve beginning elsewhere.

Epilogue

Although in some ways it remains frustratingly stuck in a dichotomous understanding of gendered emotions and dispositions, and understands gender difference as being tied to particular activities traditionally performed by women, an anonymous text by a leftist woman proximate to the armed struggle in Italy in the 1970s called 'Pushed by the Violence of Our Desires ...' associates an approach to politics that begins from the concrete rather than the abstract with women. The author asks: 'Are men and women driven differently to take up arms in order to change the world?'[66]

The answer given is that women have a relationship to the 'concrete and fantastic' while men have a relationship to the 'abstract and rational'.[67] She argues that even if individuals resist these binaries, they are still shaped by them. She suggests that woman's relationship to politics is shaped through socially reproductive labour – 'at home we wash, iron, clean up, cook'[68] – arguing that through these small-scale ongoing indispensable daily actions performed by women their 'ant-like concreteness' is paired with a 'grasshopper-like imagination'[69] – the dimension of fantasy. Unlike men who operate with grand teleological visions of social transformation, women's relation to politics emerges from their concrete experiences. This can drive women to armed struggle – as they want to concretely transform their daily lives – we 'are driven by the violence of our dreams'.[70] Although it seems unhelpful to maintain the notion of distinctly and essentially feminine attributes this text insists on, perhaps an 'ant-like concreteness' paired with a 'grasshopper-like imagination' would be a useful alternative to an approach that attempts to understand the concrete by beginning from fantasy.[71] This would involve dispensing with an analysis of male fantasies and instead starting from women's lives and their attempts to imagine ways of transforming their lives.

Notes

1. This chapter is based on a paper given at the conference 'Gendered Emotions in History' held at Sheffield University in June 2018.

2. This essay continues some of the thoughts I tried to articulate in 'Ulrike Meinhof's Brain/Charlotte Corday's Skull: Gender, Matter and Meaning', in M. Timonen and J. Wilkstrom (eds.), *Objects of Feminism* (Helsinki: The Academy of Fine Arts Helsinki, 2017) and 'Woman on the Edge: History, Temporality, Sisterhood and Political Militancy in Marge Piercy's Vida and Margarethe von Trotta's *Die bleierne Zeit*', *Another Gaze*, 3 (2019).

3. A.L. Chu, 'On Liking Women', *n+1*, 30 (2017), https://nplusonemag.com/issue-30/essays/on-liking-women (accessed 27 June 2023).

4. Chu, 'On Liking Women'.

5. Chu, 'On Liking Women'.

6. A. Carson, *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse* (London: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998, 2010), p. 4.

7. Carson, *Autobiography of Red*, p. 5.

8. T. Eagleton, 'Aesthetics and Politics in Edmund Burke', *History Workshop Journal*, 28 (1989), 53–62 at p. 53.

9. See A. Vickers, 'Where Are the Bodies: The Haunting of Indonesia', *The Public Historian*, 32 (2010), 45–58 (which also provides a useful overview of the existing literature on the massacres of 1965–6) and M.S. Zurbuchen, 'History, Memory, and the "1965 Incident" in Indonesia', *Asian Survey*, 42 (2002), 564–81.

10. J. Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder: The September 30th Movement and Suharto's Coup d'état in Indonesia* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), p. 10.

11. Roosa, *Pretext for Mass Murder*, p. 40.

12. A. Pohlman, 'The Spectre of Communist Women, Sexual Violence and Citizenship in Indonesia', *Sexualities*, 20 (2017), 196–211. See also K.E. McGregor and V. Hearman, 'Challenges of Political Rehabilitation in Post-New Order Indonesia: The Case of Gerwani (the Indonesian Women's Movement)', *South East Asia Research*, 15 (2007), 355–84.

13. S. Wieringa, *Sexual Politics in Indonesia* (New York: Springer, 2002).

14. E. Thomas, *The Women Incendiaries*, trans. J. Atkinson (London: Secker & Warburg, 1967), p. 121.

15. G.L. Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris: Images of the Commune* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), pp. 135–6.

16. Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris*, p. 140.

17. K. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, vol. 1: Women, Floods, Bodies, History*, trans. S. Conway with E. Carter and C. Turner (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), p. 220.

18. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, pp. 16, 18.

19. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, p. 30.

20. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, p. 67.

21. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, p. 63.

22. Although the kinds of metaphors Federici discusses abounded in accounts by their political adversaries and Communards were likened in the press to 'savages'

and 'barbarians' when surviving Communards were sent into exile to the colonial archipelago New Caledonia, they were intended to act as a 'civilizing' influence on the indigenous Kanak population, reforming themselves through participation in the settler colonial project, and did often identify more strongly with the French state than with Kanak insurgents who they viewed as 'primitive'. See A. Bullard, *Exile to Paradise: Savagery and Civilization in Paris and the South Pacific, 1790–1900* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

23. S. Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, 2014), p. 206.

24. Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, p. 206.

25. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, p. 70.

26. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, p. 74.

27. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, p. 74.

28. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, p. 74.

29. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, p. 73.

30. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, p. 76.

31. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, p. 76.

32. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, p. 76.

33. Quoted in Thomas, *The Women Incendiaries*, p. 151.

34. Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris*, p. 260.

35. Gullickson, *Unruly Women of Paris*, p. 260.

36. M. Warner, *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form* (Oakley, CA: University of California Press, 2001), p. 277.

37. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, p. 230.

38. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, p. 230. However, the impulse to stop the flow paradoxically creates it in the form of blood: 'Red is female flesh wallowing in its blood; a reeking mass, severed from the man. Red is a mouth dripping blood – now beaten.' Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, vol. 2 Male Bodies: Psychoanalysing the White Terror*, trans. E. Carter and C. Turner (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), p. 283.

39. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, vol. 2*, p. 276.

40. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, p. 283.

41. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, p. 392.

42. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, p. 407.

43. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, vol. 2*, p. 279.

44. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, p. 72.

45. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, p. 74.

46. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, p. 79.

47. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies, vol. 2*, p. 274.

48. A. Third, *Gender and the Political: Deconstructing the Female Terrorist* (New York: Springer, 2014), p. 1.

49. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, pp. 35, 41 (and again on p. 51).

50. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, p. 183.

51. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, p. 217.

52. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, p. 196.

53. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, p. 218.

54. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, p. 218.

55. L. Niethammer, 'Male Fantasies: An Argument for and with an Important New Study in History and Psychoanalysis', *History Workshop Journal*, 7 (1979), 176–86 at p. 181.

56. D. Herzog, *Sex after Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 221.

57. Herzog, *Sex after Fascism*, p. 242.

58. Niethammer, 'Male Fantasies', p. 181.

59. P. Melzer, '"Death in the Shape of a Young Girl": Feminist Responses to Media Representations of Women Terrorists during the "German Autumn" of 1977', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 11 (2009), 35–62 at p. 49. See also C. Scribner, *After the Red Army Faction: Gender, Culture and Militancy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

60. Q. Slobodian, 'Guerilla Mothers and Distant Doubles: West German Feminists Look at China and Vietnam, 1968–1982', *Zeithistorische Forschungen/Studies in Contemporary History*, 12 (2015), 39–65 at p. 59. See also J.R. Hosek, 'Subaltern Nationalism and the West Berlin Anti-Authoritarians', *German Politics and Society*, 26, 1 (2008), 57–81.

61. J.T. Wu, *Radicals on the Road: Internationalism, Orientalism, and Feminism during the Vietnam Era* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), p. 4 (the term is introduced here but used throughout the book).

62. Wu, *Radicals on the Road*, p. 138.

63. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, p. 27.

64. Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, p. 221.

65. M. Foucault, 'Preface' to Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. R. Hurley, M. Seem and H.R. Lane (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), pp. xi–xiv, xiii.

66. Thanks to Sophie Jones for suggesting this text to me. Anonymous, 'Pushed by the Violence of Our Desires …', in P. Bono and S. Kemp (eds.), *Italian Feminist Thought: A Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), pp. 303–8, 303.

67. Anon., 'Pushed', p. 304.

68. Anon., 'Pushed', p. 304.

69. Anon., 'Pushed', p. 305.

70. Anon., 'Pushed', p. 307.

71. Anon., 'Pushed', p. 308.

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