

“They would plant the rose garden themselves”: Femme, Complicity, Solidarity and the rewiring of the sensuous¹

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Amid a backdrop of patriarchy and racial capitalism, femininity gets a bad rap, and comes with continued expectations to perform gender, care labour/social reproduction, sexuality and labour more broadly to detrimental normative standards.² Whether one is trans or receives their gendered pressures otherwise, brown or black or white, we find ourselves amid these expectations, although these standards vary across specific differences. Yet, the supposedly-neutral worlds of masculinity – which may code themselves as *the world* in the singular, and which may incorporate queer and trans worlds – do not cut it for all of us. In this article, we discuss how femme as a mode of politicised trans and queer femininity offers methods of making worlds, without relying on tropes of innocence or neutrality. Innocence and neutrality have long been structural components of levying duress, common within white femininity and feminism. Rather than reclaiming a space where we might find ourselves untouched, here we discuss how we embrace complicity within modes of sociality that can lead to social and sensorial transformation. Queer and trans femme lives hold space for openness through solidarity, friendship and political action, under conditions of duress. In this sense, we theorise femme as anti-institutional and as embodied institutional critique. We propose femmeness as an anchor for broader solidarities, providing a practical ethics that encourages openness to various methods of worlding, encouraging agency, embracing and throwing ourselves into possibilities while supporting each other to do so. Instead of reforming the structures of oppression, femme encourages us to unlearn and uproot demands that reproduce social and material oppressions, to attend to one’s sensual tuning, and to take agency over (re)constructing and nourishing our own worlds – to plant the rose garden of struggle for liberation ourselves.

Femme solidarities, in the collective

¹ The authors thank Zia Álmos Joshua X for their take on Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* (and Michael Cunningham’s adaptation, *The Hours*), “Ze would buy the flowers theirself”.

² For discussions on feminisation of labour by gender non-conforming queers, see Rosemary Hennessy, *Fires on the Border* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013); Nat Raha, ‘Transfeminine Brokenness, Radical Transfeminism’, *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 116:1, 2017, 632-646.

We build femme worlds and lives through our friendships in the everyday, the projects and collectives we forge, join and establish. At a social level, we check in on each other, on bodies and feelings, chemicals and processes, activities and relationships. We compare notes, experiences. We encourage self expression in others, to experiment and try out looks, lives, desires. Through this, queer and trans and non-binary femmes forge and reaffirm bonds, friendships, relations, reaching out to hold differences and commonalities together. We hold space to share, to eat together and cry with each other; to support and feel through the denigration and harm we (have) experience(d). Femme agency emerges both at the level of one's individual body and in a communal/collective context, but these are interlinked, the individual inextricable from the collective. We begin to scheme, to plot together, to organise on the smallest of levels (making art or food or clothes or zines) to the largest (building infrastructure and collectives). We lift each other up, celebrate victories in making life in spite of racial capitalism, such as minor gains from institutions that bear power over us or that have harmed us. We hold up the joys of bodies, even if bodies are also sometimes hard to bear. We check in on healing; we build care teams to aid recoveries.

But femme life is not *just* about material transformation writ large in our local, personal, collective worlds. For us – the authors of this article – it's also about deepening the affects and the aesthetics of femininity and of gendering, understanding the interplay/influence of material conditions upon them. In the face of both economic *and* cultural austerity - the latter represented in austerity-chic and spartan purity and moralising³ – femmes [femmes of colour in particular] pursue/embrace/make play with opulence and luxury, and embellish the worlds we've made together. The variations in our aesthetics of self-presentation draw eyes towards us, showing what it is possible to embody otherwise.

Together, femmes shape space and relations for joy, fun, desire, sexuality. We work through difficult emotions around our sense of self, our bodies, our genders, our desires, casting off shame or turning it into an aspect of sexual agency. We bear, broach and hold space for the knowledges and perspectives of each other as survivors, coming to terms with the violence, trials and harms that we've lived through and lived through our bodies. We find means to move through difficult affects (dysphoria, neglect, trauma, injury, etc), identifying their sources from medical, familial, therapeutic, and institutional contexts – situating these in the context of an environment where resources belong and are allocated to a privileged few, while making real the need for professional support to work through these affects at times. We learn to navigate the boxes that we are relegated to, and also play with the effects of these manipulations.⁴ We learn from the femmes who've come and written before us, comparing *persistent* and *dangerous* desires,

³ Austerity-chic is exemplified in remodeling of public and commercial spaces for an 'industrial' vibe, assuming one has never worked in an industrial space; has comfortable furnishings at home or at work; or *has* a home and workplace. These formerly industrial zones house the mocking commercialisation of what used to be squat culture.

⁴ Marquis Bey *Black Trans Feminism* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2022): 17.

experiences troubles and passions. The emotional work we undertake opens up possibilities in our bodies, and also in the social worlds we forge and share. We crack open spaces to flourish, prepare the ground on which to sow flora and link with fauna.

In the context of the epistemic and social closure, which is fundamental to the history and dominating functions of Europe, femme fronts relationality as attentiveness, as care, as way to openness. Femmes labour for openness, while tending to refuse the demands of institutions that would close our worlds, and sitting with what can seem like the impossibility of immediate and direct relationality. In these contexts, we try to refuse the abandonment and disposability of other marginalised people, as both an abolitionist praxis, and given our own experiences of abandonment and disposability. In a political climate that is structured by xenophobia and rights discourses, with disposability clearly visible on a national level in the UK through austerity and the coronavirus pandemic, the foundational operations of institutions are laid bare, closing out some while closing others into their ranks.⁵ Our labour and active practices towards open forms of life make us hesitant to give up the sociality that we forged in these contexts, including the context of minimal rights. Entering institutions as full citizens demands complying with abstractions that work against the solidarities that emerge in social space. So we hesitate at the threshold of the institution, on which we are dependent for income, for work, for hiding in. We learn to recognize the problems and patterns that occur in institutional contexts (which include the family, workplaces, where we study, and receive medical attention - not to be easily equated with care) and also in communities and in our social relations, problems that may reinforce the denigration of femmes or of our work or of our love, which might exploit us.⁶ But we also trace our own complicities in the dynamics of the contexts we find ourselves in: where do we slip into closing off, where do we exalt the forms that we live in over the insights that other logics bring. In this essay, we bring this into focus and elaborate how femme's (from trans femme) attentiveness aids the observation and analysis of such dynamics of complicity, and how femme practices encourage us take action, face frictions, and work through problems in a way that opens up worlds to the rest of us who may need them.

We think through complicity because it allows us to link contextual understanding with actions. Typically, complicity is understood to mean “participation in evil action”, and indeed it has been

⁵ Nat Raha argues that the economic policies and practices of austerity undermine life chances of marginalised and minoritised LGBTQ people, while LGBTQ Rights are proffered as the solution to our social problems. *Queer Capital: Marxism in Queer Theory and Post-1950 Poetics* (PhD Dissertation, University of Sussex, 2018), <http://sro.sussex.ac.uk/id/eprint/86259/>.

⁶ Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* (Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018), 136-148

discussed like that in its complexities.⁷ Yet, when looking at complicity from a nonnormative perspective, the actions deemed evil, morally wrong, socially transgressive or legally objectionable, are partly what we might want to participate in. Oscillating between both meanings - that of objectionable action as well as activities objected to by going norms - give us a way to evade the traps of liberal ethics. A focus on complicity counters the social technologies of liberalism (which at times structure critical theory) that demand innocence, offer inclusion, and rely on empowered intervention. Rather than the modernist focus on limiting conditions that can lead to disembedding, to focus on complicity offers *technes* that allow to embrace embedded indeterminacy, sensuousness, making and holding space for difference.

Speaking of complicity, Fred Moten writes:

I long for complicity. I don't want to stand out from the general complicity as if I were a bell, or a free and perfect moral agent, as if there were some space outside this shit where only special folks ungather one by one. That place in the sun was always *the* political fantasy, and now they say, to the folks to whom they refuse membership, that if you don't *want* to join, you ain't shit.⁸

Femmes are at the heart of such a situation, but not as disembedded critics. The free and perfect moral agent is the mirror of the objective thinker, which we can recognise as the scholar around whom the academic institution is built. As Isabelle Stengers reminds us, this is the position that instigated the witch hunts.⁹ The space of moral and epistemological perfection is untouchable, and always elsewhere; its lack of relation makes it prone to indifference, because it is fundamentally unsocial. Femmes evade the elevation and sit with our entanglements, as the everyday mess that we wade through. We think through complicity, rather than for instance implication, as Michael Rothberg proposes, for its emphasis on action, to replace the focus on subjectivity or understanding. Action is important because – against innocence – we underline that there is no form of action that allows for a frictionless space and that friction is not stemming from misunderstanding or lack of (proper) knowledge *per se*. The claim to frictionless space is the foundation for modern Eurocentric politics and ethics and, as we argue in this article, it is only by claiming our complicity that we can hold space for what we don't understand, for forms we do not participate in, and for indeterminacy in our own ethical relations to the world. We are not proposing that a focus on complicity can solve problems, but it can support holding friction without demanding subjugation or claiming misunderstanding of one party. Friction can, for instance, stem from difference,

⁷ Michael Rothberg *The Implicated Subject* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019): 13. Debarati Sanyal *Memory and Complicity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), Mark Sanders *Complicities: the Intellectual and Apartheid* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002).

⁸ Fred Moten, 'Is Alone Together How It Feels to Be Free? Ummm.', *Interim* 38, no. 2 (2020): np

⁹ Isabelle Stengers, 'Experimenting with Refrains: Subjectivity and the Challenge of Escaping Modern Dualism', *Subjectivity* 22, no. 1 (2008): 38–59, <https://doi.org/10.1057/sub.2008.6>.

from being implicated in the world, and from non-compatible needs and the contradictions that inform our socialities.

Femme entails the uprooting of structures that denigrate femininity. Femmeness makes a break with the problematic demands on normative (that is white, cis- and heteronormative, abled, and skinny) femininity, which include demands of certain forms of service, sexualisation, objectification and also consumption. These normative demands are made by patriarchal agents, often husbands or fathers, bosses or managers, even the government; women and LGBT people can dish out these demands by being guardians of the norm, which may be the price for inclusion – policing other women, queers, femmes and other feminised people, especially when complying with white european norms. Writing of the ‘Rogue Femininity’ of femme, Elizabeth Marston proposes “that femme is dispossessed femininity”.¹⁰ To be in the flow of the norms of gender may literally mean you are property (of a husband or family) or that your femininity might be being sold with your labour power (one might be good at this because one’s learned that it’s expected with patriarchal work discipline, or because one chooses to play the norm for cash). You may have to sell your labour power to reproduce the world of the norm, cleaning it, feeding its children, caring for it, especially as a migrant, Black or brown, feminised person.¹¹ To be dispossessed, in this case, is to be locked out of the capitalist relations that cohere in and through gender norms. You might be locked out of the family or the labour market, locked out of the gender binary or literally incarcerated through it,¹² locked out of your house or the place you were born, or all of these.

Femme is the turn around when one didn’t get broken into the norm, or maybe got broken by the norm, and claims conscious non-alignment with it. This means that most of the time you cannot bring these norms with you anymore, in part because you’ve been disqualified by the norm. In this split from the norm, femme femininities become unrecognisable and illegitimate, as they no longer draw on the tropes of servitude and objectification in a manner that is recognisable to the norm. On the one hand is ‘femme invisibility’, but on the other hand femme femininities are not *for* the norm, but in defiance of it. But as Marston writes, in acts of passing one might choose to play the norm,¹³ for whatever reasons we may have – be it for safety, for money, for a roof or for fun. At best, playing the norm is an act of agency, and one where we know our complicity in a norm that limits us. And yet, we are with friends, colleagues, frenemies, who consciously or unconsciously draw upon hegemonic empowerment, who get carried away on undesired social possibilities because they can, and claim space without checking their responsibility

¹⁰ Elizabeth Marston, ‘Rogue Femininity’. In: Ivan E. Coyote and Zena Sharman, eds., *Persistence: All Ways Butch and Femme* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2011), 203-208, 205.

¹¹ Françoise Vergés, *A Decolonial Feminism* (Trans. Ashley Bohrer, London: Pluto Press, 2021).

¹² Cece MacDonald, Eric Stanley, Nat Smith *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex* (Edinburgh, Baltimore, Oakland: Ak Press 2015)

¹³ Marston, ‘Rogue Femininity’, 206-7.

or responsiveness. We acknowledge that resisting the norm also gives space for power grabs, which require their own careful engagements.

In breaking out of servitude, one ends up in a context where servitude is no longer *service industry*, but similar acts and work might be transformed into a form of care. Caring for other dispossessed people – other queer and trans folks, other marginalised people, the people that we build friendship and life without outside of the norm, is hopefully a more agential position, although it may also be in the form of undervalued, waged labour. Care is about supporting each other's survival, towards flourishing. Defiance of the norm can take the highly pleasurable form of having worked through a lot of one's complicities because giving up was not on the table. We didn't want to give up care, even though care showed itself first as servitude.

This emotional work forms an underground sociality that contrasts the demands of the public realm. As Moten and Harney propose, the political space of citizenship and participation in institutions is the space of anti-sociality and counter-relationality.¹⁴ Sociality is submerged under the perfecting demands of production. The standards of perfection and purification that structure the public realm of the citizen by means of institutions strip away blossoming varieties of life. Institutions are not just regulated to close out outsiders, they are the contemporary city walls against the unruly relationalities that are not subject to the forces that have constituted the citizens inside(s). Institutions can monopolise social relations, presenting a limited, seemingly desirable set of relational modes, which are enclosed within them. Institutions are made to keep citizens in, to participate in the order that is sustained by violence. Fortress Europe, and its escalation Brexit Britain, are not interventions in a political situation — closure is a foundation of European hegemony. This closure is partly structured by epistemologies that cannot see an outside to the institutional frame. Such dominating epistemologies, whether normative or nonnormative claim to be constituted by the demarcation that cuts the nonnormative off from the possibility of relation.

Complicity and friction, in and between institutions and collectives

We think about complicity, because we live in worlds that link into us in many ways, not all of them voluntary, consensual or desired. On the one hand, we enter into worlds that are imposed on us, such as

¹⁴ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Brooklyn, NY: Minor Compositions, 2013).

the economically hostile environment forces us into jobs we might not want.¹⁵ In this world, we may meet demands that we display professional behaviour we might not consent to (for instance, to greet all customers, with courtesy and a smile, while one is mistreated by their boss, or to participate in the professionalisation of trans studies); or be instructed to align with institutional demands that we cannot always stop (we might resist Prevent screenings, or mandatory attendance monitoring for visas, but teachers still need to grade students even if from a pedagogical perspective we find it irrelevant or even harmful). When we work on uprooting structures that enclose us in harmful ways, we need to attend to the way these structures also find form within us and in our collectives. Uprooting is not only reviewing situations from a critical distance, but entails and occurs through making different forms of life. In these forms of life otherwise, we find pleasure and joy, where we meet, love, have sex, organise, and make sense of what matters.

These different worlds – the hegemonic and those we fabricate with each other – are not separated cleanly, nor are the worlds we make for ourselves free from friction. In the worlds we create collectively, we might find ourselves in situations where we are part of a problem, or are the problem for someone else; and sometimes we may be the problem for ourselves. While resisting imposed worlds, we may find ourselves walked over by the bravado of comrades; or we might escape into a collective in which we are enjoying ourselves, but hear that others find the collective cliquy, unreachable or out of touch. The issue of complicity presents itself both in institutional settings, and in situations where we act collectively.

When dealing with problems in institutions, organisations and in organising, dominant approaches – often led by white liberals – have us ask *how* we transgressed a (perhaps imaginary) law, to admit to our guilt, and promise that we will do better in the future. Dominant approaches figure that there is, or can be, a space of frictionless meeting, if only the rules are worked out well, which may take the form of norms. White liberal approaches come with the belief that the navigation of organised spaces can be translated into norms, which can be scrutinised and critically engaged, and that critical scrutiny is the method to make these worlds ‘fair’. Scrutiny is the means by which the norm reforms towards inclusivity.¹⁶ Surveillance is at the heart of criticality. To be included means you are right, not wrong (anymore).

The pursuit of a frictionless environment finds its nexus in claims to ‘innocence’, in a context where the institutions of racial capitalism are key to (re)producing duress. As Gloria Wekker importantly articulates in the Dutch context, white Dutch national, public appeals to innocence are based on the erasure of Dutch

¹⁵ To create and maintain a ‘Hostile Environment’ is the current UK Government policy towards migrants, ‘illegal’ immigrants in particular. See Nadine el-Enany, *(B)ordering Britain: Law, race and empire* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2020).

¹⁶ Cf. Joseph Raz, ‘Moral Change and Social Relativism’, *Social Philosophy and Policy* 11, no. 1 (1994): 139–58.

colonial history and the violence perpetrated by the Dutch empire well into the twentieth century.¹⁷ Wekker identifies innocence as a social, cultural, and historical affective response to the challenges to ignorance of this history. This ignorance turns to smug ignorance, as Philomena Essed and Isabel Hoving identify, when available social power is used to (aggressively) deny claims that challenge dominant perceptions.¹⁸ Innocence is thus “strongly connected to privilege, entitlement and violence that are deeply disavowed”.¹⁹ Relatedly, Jackie Wang underlines the importance to anti-racist and abolitionist movements to not get caught up in appeals to innocence in resisting anti-black police and state violence.²⁰ Such claims unhelpfully lead to appeals of virtuousness, that avoid addressing conditions of duress. Wang emphasises the role of innocence to reaffirm systemic anti-blackness, within which black men (in particular) are assumed to be already guilty by the state, the police, and a racist public. Other men, women, queer and trans, and disabled people of colour may also face an assumption of guilt. Through these structural assumptions of guilt, it can be discerned that the state of innocence is not an internal sense expressing virtuous behaviour, but a structural condition that indicates hegemonic positionality. One is assumed innocent, because one is bestowed with social power.

This leads us to formulate that in institutional contexts innocence may also emerge as the bourgeois feminine complement to masculine transgressions. The gendered dynamics of innocence and transgression tend towards a refusal of accountability to those (set up to be) closed out from the normative space that binary whiteness protects. Innocence coheres heteronormative feminine virtues, because a claim to innocence signals the willingness to guard dominant norms, by showing that the claimant is willing to subject to them. In these contexts, masculine transgressions of dominant norms signal who is relieved from scrutiny, and thus hold the space for nonconsensual change of organisational forms by other means of violence. Deviation from the norm, by those that are not empowered by heteronormative masculinity, ‘invites’ punishment to keep the normative space closed. When there is public awareness of these dynamics, liberal approaches hope that there can be an institutional space structured by norms that can be inclusive enough to allow for internal accountability. In this restructure, institutions endeavour to be free from having to consider different, outside perspectives.²¹ Liberal spaces protect and contain a single order that refuses to engage with different ways of being in the world, other than their own.²²

¹⁷ Gloria Wekker, *White Innocence: Paradoxes of Colonialism and Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

¹⁸ Philomena Essed and Isabel Hoving, ‘Innocence, Smug Ignorance, Resentment: An Introduction to Dutch Racism’, in *Dutch Racism*, vol. 27, Thamyris/ Intersecting: Place, Sex and Race (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2014).

¹⁹ Wekker, 2016: 18.

²⁰ Jackie Wang, *Carceral Capitalism* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2018)

²¹ Asma Abbas, ‘Voice Lessons: Suffering and the Liberal Sensorium’, *Theory and Event* 13, no. 2 (2010), <https://doi.org/10.1353/tae.0.0137>.

²² Mijke van der Drift, ‘Management and Rights amidst Plural Worlds’, *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 35, no. 1 (2021): 93–115, <https://doi.org/10.5325/jspecphil.35.1.0093>.

Inclusion, therefore, requires that marginalised people adhere to norms and the logics of the existing space, and in this manner inclusion protects the functioning of white patriarchal capitalism.²³ This is why requests for inclusion on the basis of innocence and unjust victimisation backfire by enforcing the power of dominant norms and narratives, which cannot adapt to alternative experiences and insights. Inclusion does not function as a *disciplinary* genre of patriarchy, but instead leaves content (of literature, films, seminars) open for patriarchy to retreat into a control of structure, which keeps content immobilised in inflexible organisational forms. Authority in these structures works through fragmentation rather than command, and dealing with the fall out of this fragmentation is relegated to the shop floor. The content-free approach of organisations works to ignore duress, while at the same supporting claims towards diversity. It is in such moments that a claim to innocence by the white heteronormative feminine signals its defense of dominant norms, while challenges to these aggressive statements of innocence are seen as violent and in need of policing.²⁴

However, we might also face the reproduction of norms and the activation of white innocence in queer and trans — and femme — spaces.²⁵ This may occur from drawing on pre-existing social networks (perhaps built on pre-existing exclusions such as whiteness, or made within institutional contexts), or through organising exclusively online (reproducing inaccessibility and cliqueness, ignoring the situatedness of groups). The unchallenged emergence of certain norms may lead institutional logics into a collective — such as when there is an impetus to rush into actions, declaring a ‘crisis’ (when those facing the brunt of the problem have long since known of it), throwing only money at it; or acting in a way that betrays the desire to be the person or people who ‘fix’ the problem or ‘solve’ the identified crisis, that is, to be a white saviour.

We experience how liberalism’s single order works to hedge against what – from their perspective – seems to be chaos and an overwhelming variety of ways of worlding. This takes the form of hedging against a presumed failure of sitting with the materiality of our lives by striving for the elevated perfection of criticality. Liberal defences by denial and purification have been used against us, our lives, friends, and spaces where we gather. Thinking with complicity – rather than being framed in an affective binary of guilt/innocence, especially when situating ourselves within an understanding and narration grounded in decoloniality – allows for a conversation that gauges and works with frictions and engages seriously with the need to redistribute resources and power from their enclosures in institutions. Even if

²³ Nat Raha, ‘The Limits of Trans Liberalism’, *Verso Blog*, 2015, online at <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2245-the-limits-of-trans-liberalism-by-nat-raha>.

²⁴ See, for instance, Vergès’ analysis of white feminism’s complicity in colonial projects and the institution of slavery, and the defence of these positions by governmental feminists (*A Decolonial Feminism*, 16-42).

²⁵ Transmisogyny is one particular dynamic of constricted norms that is often addressed in transfeminist writing, and that the authors have challenged and working to undo in queer and trans organising. See Raha, 2017 for a detailed discussion.

we are marginally positioned within these spaces, this allows for us to engage with how we might practise solidarity, as a mode of undercommoning from the inside. Therefore, when we have to go to work in institutions, and when we make social organisations and life together, we start by holding space for openness, holding the socialities within, by claiming to be part of the problem – part of the conflicts against duress and domination. We are not better than anyone, we are simply the rest. As Mariama Kaba and Kai Cheng Thom discuss, claiming complicity and participation may lead towards a set of abolitionist practices that do not rely on the victim-perpetrator schema.²⁶ Similarly, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten propose that embracing complicity disrupts the individuation imposed by organisations and allows a collective mode of approaching duress.²⁷

Claiming to be part of the problem, wherever you might find yourself in the context, keeps the problem collective and demands collective involvement – rather than to divest the problem into an individualist scheme where friction is simultaneously general (your actions as expression of your positionality in relation to my actions as translation of my positionality) and individualised, as if friction is a direct expression of the interrelation between two people. Claiming to be part of the problem disallows liberal innocence, because, to invoke Miss Major and Arthur Rimbaud, we're still here. The liberal scheme draws on the elevation of social positions, claiming structures are general and actions are direct expressions of structures. In moralist inversions of the structures of duress, it is claimed that the general position, the signifier, offers a space of privileged insight. Both perspectives understand social positions through a categorical lens. However, while Blackness and transness can show the way to liberation, as Bey, Moten and Snorton contend, it is not because of the inclusion in a generalised category, but because of sociality and resistance that has survived and formed under duress.²⁸ In contrast, when friction is individualised, it returns us to the mechanics of the institution: the institution exists to individualise and empower those up the hierarchy. To use individualisation in moments of friction as the tool to disarm socialities is a way to hedge the institution against critique. The well-known trope of claiming it is a 'bad apple' that is harassing, for example, students (or arrestees, or incarcerated people or femmes on the street), ensures that structures of duress, precarity, overwork, and power imbalance do not need to be addressed. Complicity reminds us to acknowledge interrelations as already contextual, and that they lean on social forms that are either tolerated, endorsed, or developed in a collective. This tolerance or

²⁶ Mariama Kaba, *We Do This 'Till We Free Us: Abolitionist Organizing and Transformative Justice* (Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2021), 44ff; Kai Cheng Thom, *I Hope We Choose Love: A Trans Girl's Notes from the End of the World* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2019)

²⁷ Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *All Incomplete* (Colchester, New York, Port Watson: Minor Compositions, 2021), 133.

²⁸ A conversation with Fred Moten, 12/02/2008 Woodbine NYC, online. Bey, *Black Trans Feminism*; Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*.

endorsement might have provided the structure for the actions of the bad apple.²⁹ This is not to say that nonnormative forms are free from hegemonic social structures, but a collective responsibility for the practices that are present in a group, including the responsibility to change them, might spotlight another way of engaging friction, rather than forms of accountability that are oftentimes individualised. This shift from individual accountability, with its resonance of calculable and individualised wrongs, to collective responsibility is made possible by the eager claim to complicity.³⁰ Gloria Anzaldúa maps out how she entered an argument about whiteness/normativity in a feminist conference with all of her knowledge and politics. While trying to engage, the situation shifted in such a way that she found herself to be the problem.³¹ By trying to mediate and hold space for dialogue between hegemonically operating white women and women of colour with accomplices, Anzaldúa became implicated in structures that she's been organising against. These pressures are a recurring problem in certain feminist conferences that Anzaldúa describes.³² Anzaldúa has the courage to admit that her efforts to sustain dialogue lead to becoming implicated in the problem - even if she didn't feel like she had another choice. From within whiteness, this step is often evaded, or translated into guilt, claims to innocence or self-centeredness.

Such a conference is but an example of how pervasively duress shows up uninvited through forbidding structures, a logic that is recognisable in trans and queer lives. There is no withdrawing into a form of life which allows avoiding structural problems. The kind of problems faced in trans life – from the interwoven pressures of racism, xenophobia, ableism, misogyny to mutual frictions caused by structural stress, precarity – inhibit clear and collective ways of coping, which in itself defies the frictionless and problem free policy-based hopes of liberalism. To embrace complicity is a way to interrupt the space making practices that are required by the normative dynamics of binary gendering. In these spaces, transgression and agency go hand in hand, as well as victimisation and passivity. Due to the passive nature of the 'victim', or so the story goes, an external force is required to intervene and protect.

²⁹ The very popular *Ghostbusters* (1984) starts off with the 'humorous' character of Dr. Peter Venkman, played by Bill Murray, who is harassing students as a textbook example of this problem.

³⁰ We wish to thank Loyal Ftouni for proposing to think through responsibility rather than accountability alone.

³¹ Gloria Anzaldúa, *Light in the Dark / Luz En Lo Oscuro: Rewriting Identity, Spirituality, Reality*, ed. AnaLouise Keating (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 143ff

³² This is a similar dynamic to one that we've witnessed in European trans studies: well-intended call for papers, sometimes but also often not led by trans scholars, encourage contributions addressing trans politics emerging from grassroots, left, radical, or community perspectives, acknowledging their significance for trans life, practices and theory. However, a conference may unfold with immediate problems: for instance, a lack of accessibility or breaks between sessions; cis researchers studying trans subjects failing to situate themselves, meanwhile objectifying trans people's experiences and knowledge and presenting this to a trans audience; institutions hosting the conferences demanding identity documents from participants; or explicit incidences of racism. Positive responses from such incidents — which are exhausting and detrimental to scholars who are harmed, or who need to make call-outs during these conferences — include organisers learning, reflecting and shifting their orientations within their complicities; less positive responses include organisers continuing to use their institutional privileges to further their careers, capitalising on supposedly successful conferences. Such incidents have actively harmed the development of trans studies in Europe. For one example is discussed here: <https://sommovimentonazionale.noblogs.org/post/2017/05/26/strike-a-statement-from-the-transfeminist-strikers-of-the-cirque-conference-laquila-march-31st-april-2nd-2017/> accessed: 7 April 2022.

Innocence introduces force, and force demands allegiance: which is why the performance of innocence as harmlessness is necessary. It is the renewal of the bond with the institutionalised force. The entire model of individualisation retains the structure that requires perpetrators, police, and judgements. Centring complicity as sociality, as conspiracy,³³ dashes the liberal hope for a normatively clear, frictionless space. For liberals, such a frictionless space promotes adherence to a single order and jobs for management: hierarchy and control are required elements, which introduce duress for some, and a smooth ride for those in charge.

At this stage, we want to remind ourselves that there is a difference between people who are closed out by nonnormative collectives, for instance by racism, and the hurt this causes and people that find themselves at the heart of collective and (perhaps inadvertently) close themselves off to certain perspectives, experiences of duress, or modes of solidarity. The claim to complicity from either side of the break functions very differently – complicity in practices that make people leave invites a different manner of reflection than complicity with those same practices when one is closed out. Evoking Thom, this does not mean that we side with a liberal vision, which claims a truth that lies in the middle.³⁴ Rather, we sit with the point that, in social justice work, we are collectively responsible for the way we interact, even if it means that we cannot always solve the problems emerging directly in specific interactions. The hurt of being closed out by what was assumed to be a place where one could perhaps flourish and find companionship is real after all. Stepping away from single orders and into the fray of social life requires embracing that we act, and that actions make patterns, and that these patterns might not be all open and free. To face that is to face how we can show up for each other, in the way we make and hold space.

Tensions threading fabrics of worlds – complicity and solidarity

In layered and complex communities — where we are faced with the problem that contradictions do not lead to a capitalist breakdown, and that with a lack of skills contradictions can lead to breakdowns of communities — the sensuous is one of the spaces for subtending direct contradictions and frictions (we expand on this below). Friction is not so much the lack of smooth pathways, but indicates the points where worlds do not overlap, where, as María Lugones phrases it, thickness meets transparency.³⁵

³³ Harney and Moten, *All Incomplete*.

³⁴ Kai Cheng Thom, *I Hope We Choose Love: A Trans Girl's Notes from the End of the World* (Vancouver: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2019)

³⁵ María Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003): 140.

Transparent members group together and articulate the interests, needs, and directions *as if* these emerge from the group as a whole. The idea that individual needs match general needs subtends the structure of in-group indifference. This idea results from similar categorical epistemology as discussed above, which relies on a generalised claim of incorporation of social pressures and regulative normativity: a gay man has the same logical form as gay men, because pressures and norms shape the pattern that is lived out.³⁶ This claim relies on an Enlightenment metaphysics that proposes knowledge (and thus structure) is ahead of action, that action is therefore submissive to knowledge, and that knowledge is contained in a single order from which there is no escape. For a theory of oppression, a totalising account might be impressive. However, such a conflation of the social with the general leads to a demobilisation, rather than activation, of one's agency, because it does not support resistance, as María Lugones reminds us. Meanwhile, 'thick' members of the group may be aware that their needs are deviating from this particular group – sometimes because of their overlaps with other groups, or since they come with different histories and needs.³⁷ The sensuous complexity of the multiple worlds highlights that needs are neither particular nor translatable as commensurable group requirements.

In these circumstances, complicity leads the way in which we can understand solidarity. We want to discuss how (trans) femmeness approaches collectivity and its attendant problems. This partly means thinking about how to deal with finding oneself the problem, but without lapsing into guilt, defending ignorance, or hoping for a world in which innocence is an option.

We therefore sit with two sides of thinking through complicity. First, it is about finding the right relation to what your position is in the world. In white responses to structures of duress, one's relation to one's position in the world is often interrelated with guilt, but it is more interesting than that. It entails attending to where one is, and what one can do from that place. From that contextualisation, one can find when one is responsible for stepping in, for creating/supporting collective resistance, or contributing ideas to the collective domain. The right relation is not quite the same as positionality. Where positionality refers to a structural situatedness, the right relation is directed and a direction, and applying agency from where one is. From here, femme relational approaches work to hold space open, to try not to conflate various layers of life with a general structure, in part by being attentive. Such attentiveness aims at finding the right relation to one's surroundings.

Finding the right relation entails questioning roles and practices in a communal context. Focusing on practices connects embodied action with (liberating) imaginaries, rather than hiding actions under

³⁶ Mijke van der Drift, 'Management and Rights'.

³⁷ Lugones, *Pilgrimages*, 140

structuring rules, pretending that the rule is the problem and denying translation of rules into actions. An embodied approach that links action, knowledge and forms has been termed a somatechnical approach.³⁸ Somatechnics stems partly from *techne*: a reliance on ways of relating that are held communally. In this context that means placing one's being amidst the modes of relating that support the collective. While rules rely on general and generalising terms that remain constant across different contexts or situations, relations in flux and keep differences situated. Norms as rules of interaction evade non-generalised differences. *Techne*, instead, require contextual translation, whereby differences not only remain intact but can even flourish. Attention to context, and to structural and generalised pressures enables thinking about complicity, delineating power relations that might be constraining or troubling for collectives. This discussion is sometimes known through its focal point of positional privilege, but it is wider – it comes with dominating imaginaries, sensorial disconnection, and misreadings of actions. Finding the right relation might mean letting go of certain commitments and extending generosity to different approaches and views, rather than aiming to contain the collective in a single form. Understanding complicity here underlines how one can be part of a general sense of impeded agency, whether it is one's own limited perspective or holding space for another's experience of being limited. Questioning modes of relation reframes limitations with a perspective toward action, rather than assuming that one's actions are the expression of a general structure of duress. This means that the elevation of criticality, that comes with an attitude of attendant hierarchy, is transposed into an emphasis on context with an anarchic tendency. In this context, generosity is a mode of solidarity that is mindful of difference. Here lies the key difference to normative inclusion, which scrutinises the margins and subsequently demands adaptation.

From this contextual approach, an understanding of non-hierarchical complicity centres on being open to alliances, friction and arguments because one is ready to question the organisation of practices. The imaginary that can be associated with such ways of being in collectives is a readiness to say: I stand here and I'm open to the tension that goes on. Tension does not need to be denied, because it is part of the current structure of relation. From this point on there is the possibility of enhancing openness either within the collectives or between collectives. The advantage of embracing such complicity without guilt is that it gives room for experiment, play, embellishment and new senses of joy. Friction in these instances highlights not so much the tension between hegemony or normativity and nonnormativity but the points where collectives close off from certain connections. Working with and through such tensions, as in instances of queer, trans and/or femme world-making, is less a set of critical actions that clears up misunderstandings in the existing order (eg. rushing into organising to 'solve' a crisis), as it is a sensuous opening to ways of worlding. Working through tensions is not a miracle cure that clears up every friction,

³⁸ Nikki Sullivan, 'Somatechnics', *Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 1–2 (2014): 187–90.

but it leaves space for stepping back and letting go, as well as finding new forms of relationality. Complicity lends the perspective that one does not need to aim to be holding the ‘true’ analysis, but that mutual understanding is partial, practical, and situated.

Thinking and living through trans femme entails embracing new forms of life, that are not absorbed into the norm per se. However, there are practices (including nonnormative ones) we are involved in that still may create problems, practices that sometimes still feel good to us. Such practices may need to be retuned without a total overthrow – certainly some elements and tones must become conscious. This is about how one *does* practice, including how practices become embodied and how that embodiment serves to shield closedness and duress from view (for instance, in dominant bodies coming together to constitute social groups). The practice of reflection is equally situated in this view. This can create the conditions of embodied disconnection or separation for those marginalised by these practices, by reifying emotional and sensorial differences, epistemic differences, experiential differences, or different histories.³⁹ Sometimes, the disconnect in marginalised bodies occurs from being out of sync with, or overwhelmed by, one’s context or surroundings. In complex collectives, these differences cannot necessarily be ‘solved’, but such disconnection leads to friction. However, such disconnect may open towards how – to invoke Denise Ferreira da Silva – we can be different without reproducing separability, the problem in ethics that is open to be solved hopefully by our generations.⁴⁰ Sometimes, such friction can be extra hurtful, for instance, because the collective was a ‘first home’, or the collective that made things possible, or it was a space of safety that feels shattered. Being open to acknowledging such complicities in these moments is a starting point for addressing difficult tensions – they are not solved simply by an analysis of social hierarchy (even if that can play a role) or by attributions of innocence and guilt. The latter are unhelpful elements in the emotional sensorium. *Connection* across social differences can be exhilarating and inspiring, grow understanding and complexity, and keep spaces open when a logic of homogeneity would close them.

Care in the collective worlds – receiving labour, offering generosity

And yet to focus on agency alone in remaking ways of worlding misses that there are also other tensions at stake: a lot of people want to give care, but don’t want to receive. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarsinha

³⁹ Raha, ‘Transfeminine Brokenness’, 632-633.

⁴⁰ Denise Ferreira da Silva, ‘On Difference Without Separability’. *32nd Bienal De São Paulo Art Biennial: Incerteza viva* (2016) 57-65.

draws attention to this problem.⁴¹ People join collectives – for instance, mutual aid groups early in Spring 2020 during the coronavirus pandemic – because they are ready to be supportive, but while joining they rely either on a private structure of care or will never ask. This can reassure the racial and gendered divisions of labour under capitalism that structure care – where marginalised Black, Indigenous, brown, feminised, disabled, trans, queer and/or migrant people bear the burden of much of the world’s care work in waged and institutional relations, and also in social relations.⁴² Those who are less marginalised amid these relations will also need less care. Self-sufficiency is a myth⁴³ of racial capitalism – which itself depends on material relations that are interrelated across the globe, relations that reproduce unequal divisions of labour, the exploitation of people, labour, land, ‘natural resources’ and more, all of which are rooted in colonial dispossession.⁴⁴ The drive to support others, while either refusing or seemingly not needing to receive care, reproduces a dynamic of philanthropy – ‘I am ‘generous’ with the wealth/capital/labour/skills I have accumulated (or hoarded) and will do good or fund activities to reproduce the world as I see it (from my colonial bourgeois imperialist position)’.⁴⁵ Affluent white people (those who have resources) in organisations or collectives run with immediacy to ‘solve’ the problems (that is, throw money/time at these problems while not addressing their structural causes) that are visible from their world, reproducing this dynamic of white supremacy. Meanwhile, marginalised folks find ourselves dislocated and disconnected in the world that works for the privileged, while fighting and struggling to maintain our worlds, our bodies, our lives. Building relations, creating and supporting resistance from one’s context, entails acknowledging our interdependency, unlearning the neoliberal expectations of self-sufficiency while learning to extend our lives outwards.

Similarly, working in large groups with a communal structure is not always for everybody. A lot of time is spent talking to create space for decision making – to make such spaces work as a whole, relies on femme labour in the background. The space of talking is purportedly about decisions, but the collective that can hold such decisions is made in the “little work” of femme labour. As Piepzna-Samarasinha writes, “Our organizing skills [...] are incredible, and often not respected as much as masculine leaders’,

⁴¹ Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work*; see also AJ Withers, ‘Cracks in my Universe’. In *Rebellious Mourning: The Collective Work of Grief*, Cindy Milstein (Ed.)(Chico, AZ & Edinburgh: AK Press, 2017), 161-181. Both of these authors are addressing their experiences of collective care among disabled people, who in turn struggle with internalised ableism.

⁴² Vergés, *A Decolonial Feminism*; Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work*, 32-68; Nat Raha, ‘A Queer Marxist [Trans]feminism: Queer & Trans Social Reproduction’. In *Transgender Marxism*, Jules Joanne Gleeson & Elle O’Rourke (eds), (London: Pluto Press, 2021), 85-115.

⁴³ At the time of writing - Summer 2021 - the myth of self-sufficiency is alive and well in the UK, where staying free from contracting coronavirus has been deemed a ‘personal responsibility’, detached from government failures to prevent mass infection alongside decades of underfunding the National Health Service.

⁴⁴ Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume 1, (London: Penguin Books, 1990); Gaye Theresa Johnson and Alex Lubin (eds), *Futures of Black Radicalism* (London: Verso Books, 2017); Vergés, *A Decolonial Feminism*.

⁴⁵ Chris Chapman and A.J. Withers, *A violent history of benevolence : interlocking oppression in the moral economies of social working* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019); Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid* (London: Verso, 2020), 21-29.

or indeed seen as skills”.⁴⁶ When that disappears, communal structures tend not to hold up, letting go of the bodies they support.⁴⁷ Collectives focus on exchanging information or insights, but they work together to make relations hold. To arrive with opinions about decisions is not how everybody works, and definitely not how groups work. Giving can be about giving attention, rather than sharing insights, and receiving is equally about receiving words, as it is about receiving a listening ear.

If femme labour or care is not present or driven out, organisations become a different kind of structure: they may cohere into a centralised structure. This can be frustrating because it is *the* classic thing, and it is sometimes better if a group disbands and ceases to be. Sociality helps to band together and to disband collectives. A femme sociality can support unlearning hegemony, while opening ourselves up to the other forms that surround us. Unlearning indicates two different things that are grouped under one term. The first unlearning is a preparation of being ready against the pushy demands of hegemony, of whiteness, of patriarchy. The second unlearning leans on knowing what we know from where we are - even if we know it will not guide us now in an opening up, it is the curiosity to mingle what we know to do with what we didn't experience (yet). This opening up makes sociality happen and it doesn't lean on the demands of unity as similarity that structures hegemony and which pushed us out in the first place. María Lugones explains this working of hegemony as being in a world where “his sense is the only sense”, which we step away from.⁴⁸ Moving away from this logic of purity, which is always a logic of control, we step into a sense of losing what we bring, stalling it, to pick it up later perhaps. We are not looking for a replacement of what we know, but allowing the holes in our experience to support sociality. It is not about having the ‘right kind of knowledge’ instead of ignorance, but about supplying the right kind of openness to let in what we don't know. Sometimes knowing what we don't know is a longitudinal problem: we have to walk into it a few times, and that means we need some support from people to make sense of these issues. Embracing that is an act of resistance, as Lugones has laid out, when she names it a “social commentary”.⁴⁹ Such commentary is only possible in a sociality that is open to a different sense. Solving everything from where one is, lacks a certain span both in its combining of collective knowledges and longitudinal experiences.

The practices that can emerge from femme do not lean on a single order of being in the world: it is neither singly logical, sensorial, or affective. This allows for different connections to be made and to grow into sets of practices, even if one is just learning the ropes. The refusal to reduce worlding to a single sense (eg. the visual or the logical) allows worlding to become ‘luxurious’. Maintaining a singular emphasis in

⁴⁶ Piepzna-Samarasinha, *Care Work*, 139.

⁴⁷ Raha, ‘Transfeminine Brokenness’, 636-646; ‘Queer & Trans Social Reproduction’.

⁴⁸ Lugones, *Pilgrimages*: 143

⁴⁹ Lugones, *Pilgrimages*: 146

connecting to the world may embrace a scarcity frame, because purifying practices restrict the crosspollination of worlds, creating competition between explanations, understanding and points of view. When one's world consists of a single logic, one is asked to give up all one has; but in a world saturated with an abundance of connections, such generosity is merely a way to renew one's sense of connection. In preparing to give up a way of knowing, or not, it (almost) doesn't matter what logic I bring – in the moment I start to impose it, I become the problem. The moment one is ready to dissolve a single order, complicity becomes complexity and the space can be held differently.

Retuning intuitions and rewiring the sensuous

Neoliberalism emerged as a politics of indifference⁵⁰ that relies on increasing authoritarian structures that reinforce commodifying institutional logics. Care shows itself in this 'hostile environment' (xenophobic politics are always a mirror of how states treat residents and citizens) as an attentiveness to differences and different ways of worlding. Breaking out of the singular logics that structure complicities in exclusion lays open the complexity of the pluriverse. In a sensuous materialism (informed by José Esteban Muñoz), Joshua Chambers-Letson writes “commensurability, necessary for market exchange, flattens the sensuous and detailed nature of life as it is actually lived.”⁵¹ Writing about the sensuous awareness of world-making in their serious and playful forms, Chambers-Letson reminds us that knowledge concerns both risk and play, and is not limited to the articulable. Femme embellishment taps into these playful and serious sensuous sets of awareness to nudge one to reopen oneself to the world.

In part, whiteness is reproduced because white people do not often think that they need to learn a different structure in which to be, and thus an idea of 'common sense' leads to actions that reproduce dominant structures. The responsibility that comes with sensitising towards various ways of worlding requires the difficult acknowledgement that one's intuition about how to do things is perhaps the wrong intuition. This brings the discussion to the rewiring of the sensory, which entails a retuning of the intuitive. This rewiring is (in part) conscious, involving presence and gentleness – and it undoes the essentialist idea of intuition, that intuition is a singular thing. Yet intuition is an important part of not being alienated from oneself too. One does not 'have' an intuition, but intuition emerges from one's connection to environments,

⁵⁰ The Care Collective, *The Care Manifesto: The Politics of Interdependence* (London: Verso, 2020): 18.

⁵¹ Joshua Chambers-Letson, *After the Party: A Manifesto for Queer of Colour Life* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 145.

connecting with sociality to how one reaches out and interplays with the surrounding world.⁵² Even when operating within hegemony, one can make material differences: how and who one reaches out to and supports, addressing if a relation is closing or opening, and being attentive to who one loses in the process.

Thus when one feels that one's intuition says something is wrong, something is wrong but sometimes it is one's intuition – our sensing is not indifferent to duress and at times aligns with it, even if it is not the only thing it does. Sometimes this alignment is direct and brings institutional practices or the institution itself into spaces where people have tried to keep it out or to work against it. This happens for instance in the demand that relations are mapped out on the terms of institutions. Such moments can be countered intuitively – such as knowing when there is no place to go. In a drive that emerges as hunger⁵³ – which shows up in spaces where relationality is stripped away – intuition works to pull one through and bring one to another place. This hunger can also show in spaces where one is absent in the presence of others, where one is unseen. This can be a hunger to be alive, a hunger for a different life, for a different sociality that opens up another sense of the world, which is what transness is, lived in and through the body and the world(s). Transness is not the rebellion against what is pre-ordained by god or nature (as if we are restaging the Enlightenment), but transness is a different hunger, as A. Sivanandan would perhaps agree, a hunger for a life perhaps not lived yet, that we are rehearsing in the underground.⁵⁴ As Stuart Hall reminds us of this strategy of “principled, militant, intransigent in opposition: yet gentle in personal relationship – is reserved for comrades and friends with whom [one] has become linked and bound in struggle, ‘below ground’”.⁵⁵ The openness that senses the world in a different way is where complicity kicks in, where we are with each other, where we do not abandon each other to the demands of the institution, but intuitively feel our way out.

To retune one's intuition may be conceived as one aspect of a rewiring of the sensuous that femme inaugurates, in and through the worlds femmes create and remake. Through institutional critique and decoloniality; embracing the lines of attention and flight that come with queer and trans femme desires – from one's gaydar, to the desire to be strapped up and fucked or to fuck in certain ways, to finding new ways to hold friendships, to the drive to abolish patriarchal and racist conservative institutions such as the

⁵² Drift, 'Management and Rights', 102. Conversely, one's intuition may be attenuated by one's environment, especially when confronted with repressive institutions or oppressive material conditions (Raha, *Queer Capital*, 197-237).

⁵³ Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014).

⁵⁴ Addressing the experience of second generation Black and brown migrants, facing repressive material and social conditions maintained by the state in 1980s Britain, Ambalaver Sivanandan calls a different hunger “the hunger to retain the freedom, the life-style, the dignity which they have carved out from the stone of their lives”. *A Different Hunger* (London: Pluto Press, 1982), ##.

⁵⁵ Stuart Hall in: A. Sivanandan, *A Different Hunger*, x.

nuclear family or gender clinic; through the worlds and ways of life we forge and hold together; to the ways we collectivise our care labour for the remaking of our ensouled bodyminds and somatechnics, refusing the disposability of marginalised bodyminds; to the politicised aesthetics and joy we derive from our deep recognition and embrace of rogue, abject and/or high femininity. We come to know the politics in our queer desires that draw out attentions otherwise.⁵⁶ We mobilise all of these to dethrone racial capitalism in our everyday lives, on the streets, and sometimes in our labour relations. As we learn from Sean Bonney and Kirsten Ross, during the height of the 1871 Paris Commune, Rimbaud proposed the necessity for poets to “cultivate” one’s soul through “a long, immense, and logical derangement of all the senses. All forms of love, suffering, and madness”.⁵⁷ Rimbaud endeavoured in this historical moment to undo the grip of empire on souls through the senses. In this spirit, we propose that anticolonial femmes are in the work of rewiring our senses anew – rewired in and through our ensouled bodyminds (unlearning allegiances to the Cartesian body/mind separation), situated and in relation to the worlds we make together and that we need and desire.⁵⁸ This rewiring can be supported by hormones, as Eva Hayward, speaking of taking Premarin, describes how one’s “*proprioceptive sense is as radically changed as external presentation.*”⁵⁹ While a change of soma under medicalised and Cartesian frames is conceived as the only cure for the transsexual mind, Hayward underlines how the “expressive potential of the body, its capacity to respond to the world, is substantively modified, transforming the sensuous exchange of self and environment.”⁶⁰ Undoing and unfeeling an assigned body and (cisnormative) ways of bodying, which were perhaps never intuitive, comes through body-conscious and chemical transformation, provided one finds presence in a world that understands these implications for material relations and exchange with one’s surroundings. Femme is a mode of relational solidarity, that doesn’t claiming possession – questioning that sense of having, that enlightenment desire to possess.⁶¹ Decolonisation undermines the orders and material relations of capitalism as we were taught to know them.⁶²

⁵⁶ Rosza Daniel Lang/Levitsky, ‘Our Own Words; Fem & Trans, Past & Future’, *e-flux* (117, April 2021). <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/117/387257/our-own-words-fem-trans-past-future/>.

⁵⁷ Arthur Rimbaud, ‘Letter to Paul Demeny, May 15, 1871’, translation Sean Bonney, ‘Comets & Barricades: Insurrectionary Imagination in Exile’, *Mute*, January 2014. <https://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/comets-barricades-insurrectionary-imagination-exile>; Kristin Ross, *The Emergence of Social Space: Rimbaud and the Paris Commune* (London: Verso, 2007); Raha, *Queer Capital*, 55-59.

⁵⁸ Mijke van der Drift, ‘Nonnormative Ethics: The Ensouled Formation of Trans Bodies’, in *The Emergence of Trans*, ed. Ruth Pearce, Igi Moon, and Kat Gupta (London: Routledge, 2020), 179–91.

⁵⁹ Eva Hayward, ‘Spider city sex’, *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, 20:3 (2010), 225-251, 229, emphasis added.

⁶⁰ Hayward, *ibid*, 229.

⁶¹ Joshua Chambers-Letson, *After the Party*, 21.

⁶² Priyamvada Gopal, *Literary Radicalism in India* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005).

With multi-layered openings to ways of worlding, from the intellectual to the intuitive and sensorial, it is not about what to claim, but how to relate and how to be/make that are stake. We desire luxuriousness and abundance, good food, to embellish ever-opening relationality and embrace world-travelling (à la Lugones) – in the face of organised scarcity and dispossession under racial capitalism, that only understands luxuriousness and abundance as the accumulation and hoarding of material wealth. We modify the demand from the 2018 Women’s Strike – ‘Bread and Roses for All, and Hormones too’⁶³ – planting new shoots for food and flowers, even if our gardens grow on top of concrete, or amid high rise buildings. We grow into lives we were warded off, we make gardens with the friends we were once taught to avoid. Indeed, we desire and love each other, other queers and other trans people, in the face of our denigration and abjection from norms and institutions, we love amid the refusal of their logics of value (and social capital). Hard is this love and we love hard.

Participants in nonnormative forms of life become skilled in holding different worlds simultaneously. Lugones termed this ‘world-travelling’ and rested this idea on the building and moving between different worlds to elaborate sense-making. Femmeness holds spaces where sensing can be opened up to different layers in that world and between worlds, without claiming a singular way to make sense. Trans femme worlding is a collective practice that does not claim a stable world – we reach out beyond the myre of the present, the “prison house” of the “here and now”,⁶⁴ proposing the future *is* now. “That is,” in recent words of Lola Olufemi, “the future is not in front of us, it is everywhere simultaneously.”⁶⁵ Why wait for inclusion in a neoliberal form that one doesn’t really want, when it is possible and *necessary* to shape forms of living in the present that reflect life in a way one wants to live it. Here, in practice, we try out forms of life that enhance solidarity and that may bring some worlds closer, if not together. Sometimes practices, or collectives, fail and we learn from their mistakes. The emphasis on practice means that it is not a way of knowing that is at stake, but a way of making worlds that in turn support changes in ensouled bodyminds, where reflection follows the action; we learn through moving across worlds with care and attentiveness to different positions and histories.

The practices of embracing complicity and complexity as generous, attentive care, link to the abolition of structures of duress in their punitive form. Carceral technologies function to keep a single order in its place, through their suppression of rebellion and redistribution, and expansion of racial criminalisation. We see hegemony as the impetus to dominate through practices that disconnect; we understand social justice work as relating to undoing structures of separation - which does not mean we have to form a

⁶³ <https://womenstrike.org.uk/2018/02/01/event-4-bread-and-roses-for-all-and-hormones-too/>

⁶⁴ José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* (Durham: Duke UP, 2009), 1.

⁶⁵ “We only have to turn around”. Lola Olufemi, *Experiments in Imagining Otherwise* (London: Hajar Press, 2021), 35.

single collective in which everybody fits. Practices of holding space for different worlds, responses to each other that are not based in hierarchy, unity, or functionality, requires rethinking how forms of life can be held when they are not policed. A generous opening of forms embraces different manners of sense making, bringing a reprieve from the exhausting demands amid the divisions of labour and life, of land and bodies, under capital. Within femme worlds, solidarity holds out the possibility of rewiring the senses of our ensouled bodies, retuning our intuitions into the frequencies of our complicities; different flowers come into bloom.