Letter to the Editors

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LETTER TO THE EDITORS

Hostis,

We read your cruel little journal in a single sitting, deriving a great deal of enjoyment from the sandpaper-bound pages. While the journal generated much discussion in our private reading of it, we'd like to decrypt a few points to share with you at this time. In particular, we'd like to address your engagement with the anthology *Queer Ultraviolence* wherein a sampling of our writing appears.

Shortly after the publication of the anthology, a rather opaque and short debate played out within the anarchist milieu around the question of vengeance. If we are dissatisfied with the depth of the appraisal of the question, we are all the more grateful for your effort to raise it again. Some critics of the anthology were concerned with the emergence of a 'politics of vengeance' and saw in it a repackaging of the old ideas of 'justice' and 'accountability.' We tend to see this reading as overly simplistic, willfully conflating vengeance with that which would mediate it. Perhaps much of

this misreading might have to do with the shift from a 'praxis of vengeance' (as gestured toward by the texts in *Queer Ultraviolence*) and the 'politics of vengeance' feared by its critics. If we conceive of vengeance, like you, as the destruction of what destroys us, then in what way is this conception undermined by the subtle shift from 'praxis' to 'politics'? How could a praxis of vengeance evade the traps of accounting or the specter of justice? Could we enact it otherwise?

We suspect that much of the problem in this misreading lies in the attempts at visibility that you (rightfully) criticized in the introduction to volume one of *Hostis*. The tendency toward visibility politics and representation in the Bash Back! communiques betrays a subterranean conflict between these actions (or at least the representations of them) and the moral order toward which they feign opposition. Your critique resonates with us because it highlights some of what was at stake in our own choice to disappear from that milieu. We, ourselves, always had more interest in the silence opened up by Bash Back!: the stolen feasts, shared weapons, and long nights of conspiracy. We could dwell in this forever, but we'd like to instead pose a question: why is the desire for visibility so omnipresent? What underlies the will to recognition?

We might contend that the strength of recognition's appeal directly correlates with the feelings of isolation and powerlessness felt by its object. No one yearns for recognition more than when they feel alone, when they fear their pains and joys might go unacknowledged by their friends, when they need co-conspirators the most. We understand these motivations all too well, but understanding isn't enough. To really grasp the dilemma of representations, we need to assess the tools we turn to when these anxieties rear their ugly heads. If we may, we'd like to contend that at our worst, we pursue a series of machines of recognition: *political machines, juridical machines, and moral machines.*

The juridical and political machines of recognition manifest themselves variously within our milieus, but they are perhaps

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Our proposal: direct, forceful, unmediated conflict; conflict outside of language, opaque to would-be spectators; conflict which eschews the machines of recognition; attack our enemies, but also undermine any who'd try to build political capital from those attacks. This means baseball bats to the skulls of our rapists, but without the subsequent communiques, programs, and diffuse social games.

We'll end with a story: A black trans woman was murdered in our neighborhood. Her name was Chanel, and she was turning a $20 trick before a putrid John shot her three times in the head. He was shortly thereafter arrested, but our affective responses and desires for vengeance don't square with juridical process. A call went out for a march, we answered, and a mob set out. Torches were lit, a masked individual announced the location of his house. Silently, without slogans – not out of somberness but seething rage – the torch-lit procession moved through the cold night. Upon reaching his house, windows fell away to hammer blows and the fire was thrown inside. We can scarcely describe the feeling of seeing this all this transpire. It was cruel, cathartic, redemptive, and sublimely indifferent to the managerial solutions offered by this word. While some wild ones were still attacking we could hear the distant wail of enemy sirens and made our way home through the night. While departing, we overheard some teenagers excitedly ask – *do you think this was Bash Back!?* – unaware that such a formation hadn't existed in that town for years. We laughed and hurried off. No communique was ever written, only whispers of this action remain. We may never know the brilliant ones who brought fire that night, but our worlds briefly opened onto one another in that moment and we carry that warm glimpse with us still.

best,
   Mary Nardini Gang

most readily recognized in their archetypal forms: respectively, the accountability process and the call-out/communique. These machines call upon those they encounter to present evidence for analysis, to cast judgement that elicits apologies, to opine without necessarily taking sides, to condemn and/or condone. Why? To gain power, extract apologies, or maintain social cohesion. The result is that some are lionized and others banished. Regardless of the side in which anyone falls, what remains is a toxic social world that feeds the machines with an unending supply of traumatized bodies.

Further, we could say that both these machines are expressions of a meta-machine: the moral one. The moral machine is a monster set in motion and offered to us by Christianity. While secularly coded in Western society as 'crime' or 'terrorism,' the rhetorical structure of sin – integral to the moral machine – has remained relatively untouched by progress and enlightenment. Far from rebelling against this structure, the anarchist milieu might be the most zealous enemy of 'the bad stuff' – sin. While certainly too self-aware to name the bad stuff as sin or crime or terrorism, the anarchists call it by different names: sexual assault, white supremacy, snitching, 'fucked up shit,' etc. We've even developed a word to describe *all the intertwining bad stuff*: kyriarchy. Whatever it's called, the structure of the machine stays consistent. The invariant component is the Category – the psychic space of the bad stuff which must be cast out. From here, the analogy follows: certain activities (sin) fall within the categories, these activities are evidence of specific subjects (sinners), and we are born into this original sin that requires us to do penance for it. Much of the ideological basis of contemporary identity politics is rooted in the concomitant moral schema that those most oppressed and victimized by these categories are inversely the most righteous, namely that "the meek shall inherit the earth."

This shouldn't be read as an apology for any of the noxious signifiers of the category, the trauma and misery caused in our lives

(and the lives of our friends) by these. State collaboration, sexual violence, white supremacy is beyond reprieve. These acts are the genesis of our thirst for vengeance. We hate them; they are what destroys us and what we'd wish to destroy in turn. And yet, we must insist that the moral machine offers us nothing in the way of realizing this destruction. We implore you to recall the details of any of the numerous social dramas playing out around us. In each, assuredly, the terms and stakes of the debates are limited by this machine. Only one question is ever posed: to what extent does an action or individual fall within the bad category, the space of sin? (*Is this or isn't this transphobic? Was that sexual assault? Do we consider this snitching? Is he a fascist?*) Only in the most rare cases does a discussion of a particular action or individual move beyond a flat contest over where the lines of the category are drawn, which side one is on, and who is on the other. The implication smuggled into our lives by this drama is that if something crosses the line into the category, it is bad, and that which do not cross it are good (a choir of angels until proven otherwise). We wish we could tease out the implications of these designations of good and bad, but there is nothing there to discover. The call-out always follows something like this:

Evidence → Inscription into Category (call it what you will) → [therefore, bad] → ???

{even the critique of morality rarely breaks this formula, posing 'Moralism' as the name for the Category, the *bad* to be excised.}

Because the "therefore, bad" is bracketed – rarely spoken – the consequences of an act are never provided, let alone discussed. This is how anarchists keep morality intact. Instead of conflict or resolution, we are left with an endlessly diffusing social drama marked by resentment, guilt-by-association, distancing, desperate attempts at proving purity; in short, mediation upon mediation. While the boundaries of the category are negotiated and policed *ad nauseum*,

we are left without the ability to handle anything. The whole process evades the more interesting questions: Why did this happen? How did it affect us? How can we ensure it doesn't happen again? How do we get vengeance? What do we want from all this? In the will to recognition, the moral machinery obscures our actual experiences and the power we might draw from them. By attempting to render our vengeful desires legible, we sublimate them into the very moral order which we'd prefer to destroy.

To address an altogether different point: you pose 'burnout' as one of the possible consequences of a praxis of vengeance. We respectfully disagree. Vengeance, in its unmediated form is nourishing. It is the machinery – *juridical, political, moral* – which burns out, tears apart, and breaks us down. Even still, the question remains as to how to sustain a praxis of vengeance in spite of these traps. Years ago we wrote:

> *Our dirty talk and our nighttime whispers comprise a secret language. Our language of thieves and lovers is foreign to this social order, yet carries the sweetest notes in the ears of rebels. This language reveals our potential for world making. Our conflict is space for our possible otherselves to blossom. By organizing our secret universe of shared plenty and collective-explosive possibility, we are building a world of riot, orgy and decadence.*

While committing this sentiment to page may have been a youthful mistake, we still hold it to be true. If we are to sustain a project of vengeance and enjoyment, we need to build a world in which we share and nourish that praxis. That world needs to be hidden, encrypted, ineffable, and hostile to the schemes by which others would represent it, surveil it, or render it visible. There will be betrayals and conflict in this world; how could there not be? The point is to deal with these situations without activating the machines we've detailed above.