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The Gender Rift in Communisation

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are static – in fact their policing also involves a constant manipulation of the boundaries. We understand 'proletariat' as the category describing those who do not own the means of production, and are forced to either sell their labour to those who do (the 'capitalists') or are cast out to waste away. How are we to understand the category of 'racialised', or perhaps of 'black,' or perhaps 'ethnicised'? It seems possible that these categories are necessarily related to capital's necessary overproduction of humans within the necessary movement of capitalist development, and its consequent need to kill, obliterate, remove and dispossess such bodies.²⁷ But how do we structure this theory, and how does it relate to waged exploitation and to the two 'spheres'?

For now, despite our revulsion at relegating the race question to so brief a moment within this conversation, we merely note, especially for our European comrades (who continue to be more resistant to these questions than any other comrades we've encountered around the world, in our experience), the obvious fact that the reproduction of racial and ethnic hierarchies affect, form and constitute every moment and place of capital's reproduction. A range of feminists, from African-American feminists like Patricia Hill Collins to eco-feminists like Maria Mies, have noted and argued that gender is produced through racialisation, and that racialisation is produced through gender. Communisation has now been able to say, there is never a proletarian who is not gendered, so we must also be able to say there is never a proletarian or a 'woman' or 'man' who is not raced. There is never a 'woman' or a 'man' who is not also a woman who is raced. Communisationists can't afford to turn a blind eye to these necessary processes of the capitalist totality.

²⁷See Endnotes #2, 2011.

tal to civil society's political economy: s/he kick-starts capital at its genesis and rescues it from its over-accumulation crisis at its end. Black death is its condition of possibility. Civil society's subaltern, the worker, is coded as waged, and wages are White. But Marxism has no account of this phenomenal birth and life-saving role played by the Black subject.²⁵

Similar to Miram's phenomenological and hermeneutic account of the sex-right, this language is not yet legible to existing communist or Marxist conversations. The limits of such conversations are threatening to their strength, for these theories of sex-right and black death reveal a truth that, if ignored or dismissed, leaves an account of the totality not only incomplete but a potential tool of capitalist violence.

We believe that capital is a totality which is 'classed', 'gendered' and 'raced' by virtue of its own internal logic. These are not three contradictions which sit on three thrones in the centre of the capitalist totality, homologous with one another, dictating its logic. We must reveal exactly how race and gender are necessary social relations based on particular material processes within the capitalist mode of production.²⁶ Through the recent work of communismist gender theory, we have come to understand 'women' as the category describing those whose activity, unwaged and waged, is appropriated in their totality by society ('men'). This relation inscribes two distinct 'spheres' that ground the gender binary. The fact that the boundaries around these spheres are violently policed does not mean they

²⁵Frank Wilderson, 'Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?', *We Write*, Vol.2, Number 1, January, 2005, p.9. and p.15.

²⁶There are some inchoate formations that we know of in the US which are beginning to take on this task. See <http://escalatingidentity.wordpress.com> and <http://liesjournal.info>. We are sure there are many more we do not know of.

In a contested 'swerve' in debates around communism, issues of gender, class and race are coming to the fore. Reviewing key texts in this debate, P. Valentine discusses the material basis of the gender distinction in capitalism, and its centrality to class exploitation

Communism theory is primed to do what only a minority of Marxist-feminists have attempted to do over the last 50 years of inquiry: re-articulate the capitalist mode of production as being constituted no less by the man/woman relation than by the class relation.¹ What would ideally emerge from such a project is a 'single system' in which the gender relation and the class relation are equally necessary elements within a totality, rather than the subsumption of one to the other, or the erection of a 'dual system' of two different and autonomous systems of patriarchy and capitalism. We say communism is 'primed' for this project because one of the major interventions of communism theory has been to theorise communism as the abolition not only of capitalists, but also of workers; of work itself and thus of value; of the wage labor relation itself and thus of the distinction between 'work' and 'life'. This distinction is cast in a variety of terms including the conceptual dyads public/private; social/nonsocial; public/domestic, and is almost unequivocally understood by gender theorists as a grounding element in the production of gender.

Communism's very starting point is a demand for the abolition of fundamental material elements of the reproduction of gender – the division of social life into two 'spheres'. This implies an analysis of the system of gender and class as a unity, and because it focuses on the gender binary as a material relation of exploitation or oppression in which the two sides are produced rather than given, it also articulates the patriarchy

¹Examples are: I. M. Young; Silvia Federici; Katherine Mackinnon; Fulvia Carnevale; and others. Others, e.g. Gloria Joseph, Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Maria Mies and Angela Davis, demand a theory which also articulates race as a necessary structural element.

in a way which, opens avenues of new and more rigorous theories of gender oppression that are able to link the exploitation and oppression of women with violence and oppression based on hetero-normativity and cis-normativity. However, until the work of *Théorie Communiste* (TC) and recently Maya Andrea Gonzalez, conversations around communisation had completely ignored gender, or had merely added gender to the list of things to be abolished through communisation, amounting to little more than buttering the toast of communisation with radical cultural gender theory.² A critique of the gender binary, of the essentialist identities of 'woman' and 'man', which could lead equally to their destruction or proliferation, is attached to a theory of communisation without affecting the concept of what constitutes the capitalist totality. The mere shift from women's liberation to gender abolition cast in these basic terms represents little advance in theory over the well-trodden 'postmodern' shift to de-essentialise identity (an important move, but not particularly new or rare). As TC have written,

If the abolition of the gender distinction is necessary from the point of view of the 'success' of communization, it is not in the name of the abolition of all the mediations of society. It is in its concrete and immediate character that the contradiction between men and women imposes itself on the 'success' of communization, against what that relation implies in terms of violence, invisibilisation, the ascription to a subordinate position.³

²Maya Andrea Gonzalez, 'Communisation and the Abolition of Gender' in Benjamin Noys (Ed.), *Communisation and its Discontents: Contestation, Critique, and Contemporary Struggles*, New York: Minor Compositions/Autonomea, 2011.

³*Théorie Communiste*, 'Response to the American Comrades on Gender', <http://libcom.org/library/response-americans-gende...>

distinction between the spheres of activity. Abolishing gender while retaining the waged/unwaged division is like abolishing class while retaining the split between the owners of the means of production and those who are forced to work for a wage in order to survive.

The very same manoeuvres are used to make similarly deflationary arguments about what is usually called 'race' or 'ethnicity'. Even the more militant theorists of race often claim that, at base, race and ethnicity are historical leftovers of past violences that capital has picked up, found useful, and mobilised to its advantage. Even some of the theorists most intent on elevating and integrating a theory of racial and ethnic oppression into the analysis of capitalism – from autonomists like Harry Cleaver and Selma James to canonical theorists of white supremacist, capitalist society like Stuart Hall – continue to insist that race is in some sense subordinate to or an inflection of (or in Hall's terms, an articulation of) class.

The race question has yet to be put on the table for communisation theory. Theorists who analyse race and racialisation as a fundamental social relation that grounds and reproduces capitalist society, (from Cedric Robinson's epic *Black Marxism* to the recent 'afro-pessimists' like Frank Wilderson and Jared Sexton) have not been addressed within communisation. This is a testament to the persistent Eurocentrism of current communisation theory, even as it is drawn into the American context.²⁴

Frank Wilderson claims that white supremacy: 'kills the Black subject that the concept, civil society, may live...' and later,

We live in this world, but exist outside of civil society. This structurally impossible position is a paradox because the Black subject, the slave, is vi-

²⁴Communists have certainly not dealt with race well elsewhere, but European ultra-left and communisationist theory remains somewhat uniquely unconcerned with race – as does its American counterparts.

Understanding sexual violence as a structuring element of gender also helps us to understand how patriarchy reproduces itself upon and through gay and queer men, trans people, gender nonconforming people and bodies, and children of any gender. Gendered divisions of labour within the waged sphere, in conjunction with baby-bearing, do not account for the particular patterns in which, e.g., trans people are economically exploited within capitalist economies, which differs dramatically from cis-women, as well as the endemic murder of trans women of colour which amounts to a sort of geographically diffused genocide.²³ It cannot account for the widespread rape of children by male family members. But if we consider sexual violence as an essential material ground in the production of hierarchised gender relations, then we can begin to see how such patterns relate to the production of the categories women and man and the distinction between the spheres of waged/unwaged; social/non-social; public/private.

Abolition of Race?

Many have argued that the category 'women' is not required for the social functions currently performed by women to 'get done' – that is to say, capitalism could rid itself of gender, and still maintain the necessary distinction between 'spheres' of social/non-social or waged/unwaged. The emerging communist gender theory, on the other hand, argues generally that the categories 'women' and 'men' are nothing other than the

²³The visibility of this genocide, as with most, is almost totally nil. Its invisibility is only emphasised when social movements recognize some isolated incidents, which makes it only more important to mention, for example, in the United States the recent somewhat more publicly recognised murder of Brandy Martell in Oakland, as well as the severe sentencing of CeCe MacDonald, who merely defended herself from a violent transphobic attack. These types of transphobic murders and victim-blaming punishment happen every day worldwide with no notice.

Only a substantive theory of the production and reproduction of gender in capitalism can give real non-idealist content to the abolition of gender. The important questions are: what is 'woman' and 'man', what is the gender relation, and what is its relation to class? The nascent forays into gender theory from the communising tendency have tended towards two major elisions: avoiding the problematic of race and its relation to class and gender, and displacing an analysis of sexual violence to the sidelines of the production of the gender distinction. We will here attempt a brief overview and assessment of existing communist gender theory and point towards some obvious gaps.

The Communising Current on Gender

TC's initial texts on gender claimed: 'it's immediately apparent that all societies hinge on a twofold distinction: between genders and between classes' and 'The evidence of the abolition of genders will be a revolution in the revolution'. The initial texts – 'Gender distinction, programmatism and communism' and the two supplements, 'Gender – Class – Dynamic' and 'Comrades, but Women', published in *Théorie Communiste* Issue 23, were still filled with inner conflict and tension around how exactly to describe the material basis of the gender distinction and the way in which it is related to the class relation.⁴ Their stronger, and more provocative analysis (which are not often referenced by other male-dominated theory collectives) addressed women's role and experience in working class struggle. TC understands that women experience an entirely different realm of oppression and exploitation than men, so that whenever they rise up, this rising up calls into question the differential positions of men and women – namely, that

⁴These two supplements are translated into English and made available at <http://petroleusepress.com>

men do the appropriating of women and women are those who are appropriated by men (even and especially the men who are supposed to be their 'comrades'). When women call this relation of appropriation into question, men will fight back, fight against the women, in an attempt to put the women 'back in their place'.⁵ As Lyon, a member of TC, says in the recently published SIC journal: 'The defence of the male condition is the defence of male domination. It is the defence of the existence of two separated spheres of activity.'⁶

However, the real material ground of the gender distinction is not fully formed in these early texts. The concept of separate 'spheres' or 'realms' was concretely raised, but the material genesis and reproduction of the distinction between these spheres, as well as the consistent description of 'women' as loosely but not systematically associated with 'biological' traits such as childbearing, XX chromosomes, breasts, vaginas and so forth, was not explained. In particular, they attributed the production of 'women' (which they generally equate with the production of the gender distinction) with the fact that the increase in the population is the primary productive force in classed societies.

When queried further TC wrote 'Response to the American Comrades on Gender', a dense and lengthy text that left many important questions unresolved.⁷ They do argue that class societies are defined by surplus being expropriated by some por-

⁵When women fight, whether in the private or public sphere, when they attack the very existence of those spheres which is constituted by their separation into public and private, they must confront their male comrades, insofar as they are men and insofar as they are their comrades. And they (the women) are the men's comrades, but women.' (Théorie Communiste, 'Comrades, But Women', originally published in *Théorie Communiste*, Issue 23, English pamphlet (2011) available here: <http://petroleuse-press.com/>)

⁶Bernard Lyon, 'The Suspended Step of Communisation' in *Sic: International Journal for Communisation*, Issue 1, 2012, p.163.

⁷TC were posed the following questions: 1. Why do all class societies de-

gender, nor in the entirety of SIC, nor Communisation and its Discontents. The neglect of rape and sexual violence as structural elements of the gender distinction, and thus of the capitalist totality, leads to an account of gender that cannot make sense of an enormous amount of gendered social relations. Some have argued correctly that some strains of feminist emphasis on rape have served a racist or classist function within struggles and analysis, but it is also true that the neglect of rape and sexual violence is just as easily used in racist or classist attacks.²¹ If it is not a systematic structural relation, rape and sexual violence are 'bad things' that some 'bad people' do, and on these accounts, those bad people blamed by law, media and white supremacist popular opinion, are more often than not poor and of an ethnic or racial minority. We observe some beginnings of structural theories of rape and sexual violence in Kathy Miriam's elaboration of Adrienne Rich's concept of 'sex right', which she articulates as 'the assumption that men have a right of sexual access to women and girls [which] allows for specific acts of coercion and aggression to take place.'²² This theory also grounds Miriam's expanded theory of compulsory heterosexuality. Although too philosophical and non-material/historical to immediately cohere with a structural communist theory of capitalist social relations, Miriam describes processes which must be included in our accounts. To ignore sexual violence and compulsory heterosexuality in an account of structurally gendered capitalist social relations is equivalent to ignoring the way in which the threat of unemployment and the growth of unemployed populations structures the relation between labour and capital.

²¹For a critique of Susan Brownmiller see: Alison Edwards, 'Rape, Racism, and the White Woman's Movement: An Answer to Susan Brownmiller', <http://www.sojournertruth.net/rrwwm.html>

²²Kathy Miriam, 'Towards a phenomenology of Sex-Right', *Hypatia*, Vol.22, Issue 1, February 2007, p.225 and Adrienne Rich 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', *Signs*, vol. 5, no.

In the 'Response...' TC make several references to violence and to sexual violence, and even to rape, as mechanisms of the gender relation,¹⁹ but in their formally published texts on gender, in *Théorie Communiste* Issue 24 and SIC, TC do not mention rape or sexual violence. They do put a strong emphasis on the direct physical violence that proletarian men inflict upon proletarian women, when those women attempt to struggle in a way that problematises the separation of the spheres. They draw from accounts of Argentina's piquetero movement:

There are female comrades who declare in the assembly: 'I couldn't come to the 'piquete' (road blockade) because my husband beat me, because he locked me down.' For that, the women-question helped us quite a bit... because you've seen that it was us, the women, who were the first to go out for food, job positions, and health... And it brought very difficult situations – even death. There were husbands who did not tolerate their wives attending a meeting, a 'piquete'.²⁰

It is meaningful that rape and systematic sexual violence make no appearance in the formally published texts of TC on

¹⁹Domestic labor, positioned within the division of labor, forms of integration/interpellation in the immediate process of production, 'atypical' forms of the wage system, everyday violence of marriage, family, negation and appropriation of female sexuality, rape and/or the threat of rape, all these are the frontlines where the contradiction between men and women plays out, a contradiction whose content is the definition of men and women and the ascription and confinement of individuals to these definitions (none of these elements is accidental). These frontlines are the loci of a permanent struggle between two categories of society constructed as natural and deconstructed by women in their struggle. The frontlines are never stable. The public-private distinction is constantly redefined: the present "parity" is a redefinition of its boundaries but also a redefinition of what is private.' *Théorie Communiste*, 'Comrades, but Women'.

²⁰*Théorie Communiste*, op. cit.

tion of society, and that 'up until capital [...] the principal source of surplus labor is the work of increasing the population.'⁸ We might cast this in more concrete terms by saying: the way to increase surplus labour in classed society is to produce more people, and this is made difficult by high infant death rates and/or vulnerability to death from the environment, war and attack. In many places the way to ensure the continued production of surplus at all was to ensure that women produce as many babies as possible, to avoid a decrease of the population.⁹ TC write,

Population can be called the principal productive force only insofar as it becomes the productive force of labor (rather than science or the means of production, etc). It becomes this [...] insofar as a specific social arrangement has population as its object.[10]

This begins to answer the question of 'what is woman', and the inchoate answer is woman is she who is appropriated by society for the purpose of increasing the population. It is easy to see also that severe gender distinctions, will necessarily arise in places where there are intense pressures on population stability, and thus intense conscription of women to constant child-bearing.

pend on the increase in population as principal productive force? 2. What does it mean for the increase in population to be the main productive force? 3. TC often write that 'labour is a problem for capital'. Does this mean the falling rate of profit? Or does it mean the increasing surplus populations pose a problem of revolt? Or both? 4. TC say that women/the family are a problem for capital. Is this merely because labor is a problem for capital, and women/the family reproduces labor?

⁸*Théorie Communiste*, 'Comrades, but Women', op. cit.

⁹Gonzalez mentions this also, Maya Gonzalez, op. cit., p.226. 10 *Théorie Communiste*, 'Response to the Americans on Gender', op. cit.

Both Gonzalez and TC correctly articulate the way this ontologically negligible feature (child-bearing) comes to ground a hierarchised social relation:

The possession of a uterus is an anatomical feature, and not immediately a distinction, but 'baby maker' is a social distinction which makes the anatomical feature a natural distinction. Within the nature of this social construction, of this system of constraint, that which is socially constructed – women – are always sent back to biology.¹⁰

[...] sexual difference is given a particular social relevance that it would not otherwise possess. Sexual difference is given this fixed significance within class societies, when the category woman comes to be defined by the function that most (but not all) human females perform, for a period of their lives, in the sexual reproduction of the species. Class society thus gives a social purpose to bodies: because some women 'have' babies, all bodies that could conceivably 'produce' babies are subject to social regulation.¹¹

But the questions remain: why and how? While countless activities slip easily between the boundaries dividing the two gendered 'spheres', why is baby-bearing not only confined to the female/domestic/private/non-social/non-waged sphere, but constitutive of it? Why, then, is baby-bearing so pernicious a domestic activity, if others (cleaning, laundry, emotional labour) traverse the spheres more easily? Why haven't we started making babies in test tubes? Why hasn't surrogate motherhood become more popular (though its popularity is

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Maya Gonzalez, op. cit., p.224.

[...] violence against women, sometimes carried out by women themselves, has always been necessary to keep them firmly tied to their role in the sexual reproduction of the species.¹⁷

Here, 'violence against women' refers to the amount of women who die in childbirth and the taxing experience of bearing upwards of eight children in a lifetime. This violence has no immediate perpetrator. The only thing to blame is the whole system. Even though violence against women is almost always at the hands of men, Gonzalez immediately reminds us that it may be carried out even 'by women themselves.' Here, she distances violence on women's bodies from the structural relation between men and women, effectively sanitising the relation between men and women by shifting violence to the abstract social totality. Globally, including in the US, women are more likely to be raped by a man than to have high levels of literacy. Women in the military are more likely to be raped by a man than to die in combat. Women are raped at home and at the workplace by men. Rape and sexual assault functions, among other things, to keep women confined to their duties which either benefit men of their own class or a higher one (their unpaid work – be it sex, emotional labour, cleaning, etc.) or capitalists who employ them (under threat of rape and assault, women are coerced into working longer, harder and to not complain or organise in the workplace). For Gonzalez, sexual violence is more or less dismissed as an 'ahistorical' ground for a theory of gender.¹⁸

¹⁷Maya Gonzalez, op. cit., footnote 192.

¹⁸Radical feminism followed a curious trajectory in the second half of the 20th century, taking first childbearing, then domestic work, and finally sexual violence (or the male orgasm) as the ground of women's oppression. The problem was that in each case, these feminists sought an ahistorical ground for what had become an historical phenomenon.' Maya Gonzalez, op. cit., footnote 203.

of past material relations of oppression, and this is the reason for persistent patriarchy.

Whither Sexual Violence

It is important to note also that sexual violence and rape are consistently displaced or left out of a schematic account of the gender relation within TC and Gonzalez's accounts. Gonzalez effectively draws the notion of separate 'spheres' of activity into more concrete terms, where we are able to talk about the real patterns of employment women experience, and the real concrete ramifications of pregnancy and childrearing on the appropriation of women inside and outside the wage relation, but she ends up treating the relation between actual men and actual women of similar classes in an abstract space where violence does not occur. It is impossible to accurately theorise the feminised 'sphere' without referring to sexual violence, and so this represents a serious oversight in the existing theory. Women's subordination in the home; women's experience in waged labor; baby-bearing – all these things are produced directly through sexual violence as a mechanism of control over women's bodies. Sexual violence is not an unfortunate side effect in the appropriation of women – it is a necessary element of that appropriation. Sexual and domestic violence ('private' violence within intimate family or friend relations) are the types of violence that are constitutive of the gender relation.

Gonzalez' mention of violence against women in general is confined to two footnotes, and only one mentions sexual violence. The first reads

to childbirth as its content, that by which women exist as such.' and 'The public/private distinction shows that, in the capitalist mode of production, the definition of women is globally constrained to their role as child-bearers.' Bernard Lyon, 'The Suspended Step of Communisation', p.164.

dramatically rising)? Why aren't women paid to bear children? These questions must be answered in order to explain why and how baby-making can be understood as the essential activity which constitutes the female, non-waged sphere.

Further, and more fundamentally, how does this appropriation of women, on whatever basis (baby-making or no) begin? In other words, what is the origin of the gender distinction and how is it reproduced?¹² These questions are outside the scope of this article, but we do believe that the answers both involve gendered physical violence and sexual violence, which we will address cursorily below. These questions are displaced and de-emphasised within communism, currently.

Gender in Capital

TC and Gonzalez both agree that, once capital comes on the scene, there is a shift in the material basis for the appropriation of women, because 'In the capitalist mode of production, the principal 'productive force' is the working class itself.'¹³ If the production of woman emerges from a situation in which the increase in the population is the principal productive force, this means that the production of woman fundamentally changes in capitalism. They argue that 'the determination of a public sphere' is actually the 'source' of the sex difference, and we may infer that this is because the public sphere formalises the appropriation of women in/as the private sphere. Due to capitalism's absolute distinction of labour as separate from 'reproductive activities in the private sphere', we find that 'The cleavage between production and reproduction, of home and work-

¹²TC disavow a serious discussion of the origins of the gender distinction, which seems disingenuous considering the important role that the theory of the origin of capitalism (in primitive accumulation) plays for the theory of class exploitation.

¹³Théorie Communiste, op. cit.

place, is perfect, structural, definitive of the mode of production.¹⁴ TC write:

The sexed character of all categories of capital signifies a general distinction in society between men and women. This general distinction 'acquires as its social content' that which is the synthesis of all the sexualities of the categories: the creation of the division between public and private [...] the capitalist mode of production, because it rests on the sale of the labor power and a social production that does not exist as such on the market, rejects as 'non-social' the moments of its own reproduction which escape direct submission to the market or to the immediate process of production: the private. The private is the private of the public, always in a hierarchical relation of definition and submission to the public. As general division and given its content [...] it is naturalized and it actually exists in the framework of this society as natural division: all women, all men. It is not enough to say that all the categories of the capitalist mode of production are intrinsically sexed. It is necessary also that this general sexualization is given a particular form: the distinction between public and private where the categories men and women appear as general, more general even than the differences of class which are produced as 'social' and 'natural.' The distinction between men and women acquires its own content at its level, specific to the level produced, which is to say, specific to the distinction between public and private: nature (that which the social has produced at the interior of it-

¹⁴Ibid.

self as non-social and which actually comes to appear as obvious, natural, because of the anatomical distinction).¹⁵

We agree that the categories of the capitalist totality are sexed; that this sexualization arises from a distinction between the realm of wage labour and that of something else. But is the distinction that grounds the hierarchical gender binary that between 'public' and 'private', or between 'production' and 'reproduction', or between the 'social' and the 'non-social'? This ambiguity of the real, material and historical nature of the separate spheres betrays a further ambiguity concerning the real material construction and reproduction of the gender distinction, before and during capitalism. How are women produced and kept in such a relation of hyper exploitation and appropriation? What are the material mechanisms that enable men to reproduce themselves as men, the appropriators?

Because capital does not consistently face dwindling populations (and in fact, the opposite is often true) both TC and Gonzalez agree that we cannot maintain the same theory of gender when capital comes on the scene. Baby-bearing can no longer be the functional reason for appropriating women in their totality, because it is no longer the principal productive force. Here, Gonzalez and TC part ways, Gonzalez positing that baby-bearing remains the ground of gender but, because it no longer plays the same social function, it is 'more or less ideological', while TC defer primarily to the ever more materially distinct separation of spheres necessitated by the wage-relation as the material ground for gender in capital.¹⁶ Gonzalez' relegation of gender in capitalism to ideology ends up drawing her argument closer to those Marxist-feminists who have argued that capitalism more or less mobilises an historical echo

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Though TC also sometimes lean towards Gonzalez' point: Lyon writes that gendered domination 'would always have had the allocation of women