Reading Literature and Theory at the Intersections of Queer and Class

Class Notes and Queer-ies

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1 "And They Would Scream *Revolution!*"

Radical Lesbian Class Action in 1970s Feminist Manifestos and Michelle Tea's *Valencia*

Maria Alexopoulos, Krystyna Mazur, and Tijana Ristic Kern

Introduction

In the 1960s and 1970s, lesbians began to articulate and contest their exclusion from the mainstream women's liberation and gay liberation movements.[1] In both contexts, although lesbians were active and heavily represented, their issues and interests were often marginalized or outright denied. Discouraged by the sexism of both leftist circles and the male-dominated gay liberation groups, as well as the disavowal of lesbians by members of the mainstream women's movement (who feared that a conflation of lesbianism and feminism would hurt their cause), lesbian feminists contended that lesbians should occupy a central position in feminist politics. Influential publications of the time, such as the Radicalesbians' manifesto "The Woman-Identified Woman" (1970), Charlotte Bunch's "Lesbians in Revolt" (1972), and "The Combahee River Collective Statement" (1973), argued that lesbian women and political lesbianism are uniquely positioned to challenge patriarchal domination.

Many of these demands were voiced by women of color, who criticized the fragmentation of mainstream feminism along the lines of race, class, and sexuality. This has not always been recognized, and as Clare Hemmings points out, the progress narrative of Western feminism often positions feminists of color outside of or in opposition to lesbian feminists, erasing the participation and contributions of lesbian women of color (53). Within both feminism and queer theory then, lesbian feminism has often been characterized as racist and essentialist, as well as redundant, unfashionable, or "anachronistic" (Freeman 8). In foregrounding lesbian feminist contributions – particularly those of women of color – to feminist and queer politics, we recognize that Western feminism has been shown to prioritize the interest of white, cisgendered women, and attempt to intervene in the erasure of the interventions of lesbian women of color within the feminist movement.

In this chapter, we center radical lesbian activism and writing of the 1970s, which we view as antecedents to contemporary queer and feminist

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theorizations of class. We begin with a discussion of three manifestos which were at the center of lesbian feminist activism in the U.S. in the 1970s: "The Woman-Identified Woman," "Lesbians in Revolt," and "The Combahee River Collective Statement." Then, we turn to contemporary lesbian feminist literary writing, specifically *Valencia* (2000), by Michelle Tea, which we read for echoes not only of the manifestos' queer and class critique but also of their affective strategies. Through our reading, we argue that radical lesbian manifestos should be seen as important models for contemporary queer and feminist engagements with the questions of class. However, our reading strategies resist an overly simplified linear narrative of the "progress" and "development" of queer theory; instead, we follow Carolyn Dinshaw's concept of "queer historical touches" between past and present which "form communities across time" (178).

For lesbian feminists in the 1970s, "lesbian" and "homosexual" were often understood not as essentialist expressions of gender identity or sexual orientation but rather as categories constructed in response to patriarchal heterosexuality, "possible only in a sexist society characterized by rigid sex roles and dominated by male supremacy" (Radicalesbians 40). Lesbian feminists contended that "[i]n a society in which men do not oppress women, and sexual expression is allowed to follow feelings, the categories of homosexuality and heterosexuality would disappear" (Radicalesbians 40). Anticipating Adrienne Rich's later theorizing of "lesbian existence" in "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (1980), many lesbian feminists did not articulate lesbian identity as determined exclusively by sexual desire but rather insisted on a practice of political lesbianism, on women withdrawing sexual energy from men and refocusing it on their own lives and on the larger women's movement. For lesbian feminists, then, women's liberation could only be achieved via a critique of heterosexuality as a fundamental mechanism of patriarchy, and a commitment to resisting male domination in both the public and private spheres.

Feminist writing of the 1970s represents a vast scope of different genres and positions addressing the intersection of gender, sexuality, class, and race. In our chapter, we focus on radical lesbian feminist writing, specifically political manifestos. These works insisted that abolishing structures of racism and classism was inextricable from the project of transforming heteropatriarchy. Breanne Fahs writes:

> The sort of feminism found in early manifestos featured a starkly different brand of feminism from the more likeable, friendly, and benign one we have come to know today in institutions like education, government, and corporate leadership. Second-wave feminist manifestos honoured a sweaty, frothing, high-stakes feminist anger that swept through the writing. Their words burn and simmer even today, giving them an unexpected freshness.
>
> (3)

The manifesto's bold and adamant style amplified the radical propositions of second-wave lesbian feminists, but these texts and voices were largely excluded from the more "mainstream" white middle-class feminist theorizing, and later from queer theory (Moraga 177; Katz 288).

To make our claim for the presence and persistence of a lesbian feminist politics of sexuality and class, we identify and follow three threads central to their articulation: prefigurative politics, anti-respectability politics, and a critique of heterosexuality as an exploitative economic relation. By prefigurative, we mean a political orientation and practice in which "[a]ctivists model or prefigure the future society at a micro-level that they hope to realize at a societal level, thereby instantiating radical institutional transformation in and through practice" (Reinecke 1300). By anti-respectability politics, we mean the ways radical lesbian feminist communities embraced and advocated for living outside of heteropatriarchal capitalism's structures and its attendant economic and social determinants of success. Finally, by a critique of heterosexuality as an exploitative economic relation, we refer to an understanding of heterosexuality as grounded in economic exploitation, and to the theorization of "women" as a separate economic class (Bunch 9). The fight against heteronormativity thus becomes a class fight whose central strategy is, as Bunch writes in "Lesbians in Revolt," rejecting participation in the "nuclear family as the basic unit of production and consumption in capitalist society," and its gendered labor division and relations of domination and dependence (9).

Radicalesbians, "The Woman-Identified Woman" (1970)

Radicalesbians formed in New York in 1970, first calling themselves "The Lavender Menace." Their original name referenced a remark made by U.S. American second-wave feminist Betty Friedan, author of *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). In 1969, Friedan, then-president of the National Organization for Women (NOW), warned members that lesbians – who she referred to as the "lavender menace" – were a threat to the progress of the women's rights movement. As a response, Radicalesbians manifesto – "The Woman-Identified Woman" – was written to be distributed at the opening session of the *Second Congress to Unite Women*, on May 1, 1970. Members of the group distributed copies of the manifesto to the audience, and in a dramatic intervention, shut off the lights while 17 women formed a line in front of the stage wearing t-shirts printed with the words "LAVENDER MENACE." They invited the women of the conference to discuss lesbian issues and the two-hour session extended into numerous debates and workshops on the topic. They demanded that feminists acknowledge heterosexuality and homosexuality as constructed by patriarchal culture, and the importance of lesbians to the women's liberation movement. At the final assembly, a series of pro-lesbian resolutions was adopted by the Congress (Rapp).

"The Woman-Identified Woman" opens with a flamboyant and theatrical definition of "lesbian": "A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion" (Radicalesbians 39). The work claims that to be a lesbian is to be in painful conflict with the world; the lesbian finds it impossible to "accept the limitations and oppression laid on her by the most basic role of her society – the female role" (39). The lesbian desires to not only set herself free but also share "the liberation of self, the inner peace, the real love of self and of all women" (40).

Radicalesbians theorize heterosexuality as an oppressive institution, which along with homosexuality and lesbianism are socially constructed categories within a society characterized by sexism and male supremacy. Within this system, they claim, "the essence of being a 'woman' is to get fucked by men" and the denigrating connotations of the label "lesbian" function to discipline women who desire equality (41). Radicalesbians anticipate Victoria Hesford's theorization of the feminist-as-lesbian (2005) in their claim that accusing all those active in the Women's Liberation Movement of lesbianism is a strategy meant to discredit feminism and feminists, and to cause division among women. For Radicalesbians, life within male-identified society is psychically damaging, producing intense self-alienation and "a reservoir of self-hate" (43). They recognize that it is not only women but also men, who are harmed by heteropatriarchy, describing men as "emotionally crippled" by gender roles, "alienated from their own bodies and emotions" (40). The radical lesbian vision for achieving liberation is prefigurative and proposes creating new consciousness through women forging communities with one another, separate from men. Here, liberation via separatism is a psychic as well as material project. Women must "withdraw emotional and sexual energies from men and work out various alternatives for those energies in their own lives" (42). Only then, they claim, can transformation be achieved; through "the primacy of women relating to women, of women creating a new consciousness of and with each other" (44).

Radicalesbians explicitly refer to heterosexuality as a "caste" system which gives women "second-class status" (42). Heterosexuality, they claim, maintains women's economic dependence on men and "binds us in one-one relationships with our oppressors" (43). This figuration of heterosexuality as an exploitative economic system is taken up and expanded upon in the manifestos of both the Furies and The Combahee River Collective.

Charlotte Bunch for the Furies Collective, "Lesbians in Revolt" (1972)

Founded in 1971 in Washington, DC, the Furies Collective was a separatist lesbian commune invested in activism and theory. Although short-lived, the Furies had a significant impact on feminist activism of the 1970s and on feminist theorizing of sexuality as a social construct and heterosexuality as

a political institution. The Furies shared communal living space, organized consciousness-raising groups, and established community-based educational and practical training for women. They also published a newspaper, *The Furies* (1972–1973), which disseminated their proposition of lesbianism as a political choice and lesbian separatism as an anti-capitalist, anti-racist, and anti-sexist practice (Valk 221). The politics of *The Furies* reflect those of Radicalesbians (these two groups also had several members in common), critiquing the homophobic attitudes in the 1960s- and 1970s-women's movement, the sexism of the leftist movement, and the reformist masculinist agendas of the male gay movement. The collective went beyond embracing lesbianism as a private matter of sexuality, positioning lesbianism as a challenge to the patriarchal, white-supremacist, capitalist social order. As Charlotte Bunch, one of the founding members, writes on behalf of the collective in the manifesto "Lesbians in Revolt" published in the first issue of *The Furies*: "Lesbianism threatens male supremacy at its core. When politically conscious and organized, it is central to destroying our sexist, racist, capitalist, imperialist system" (8–9).

While they were not the first lesbian feminist group founded in the U.S., the Furies stood out in their practice of collective living and implementing feminist politics within their commune as a way of developing strategies for future activism, and as a source of theorizing from lived practice. The collective's focus on bringing together theory and practice embodies the radical feminist slogan of the period, "the personal is political" and prefigures the feminist social and political system that lesbian feminists were striving toward (Valk 223). The Furies' prefigurative politics were expressed not only through their own model of communal living and sharing of resources but also in their work to motivate women to reject heterosexual patriarchal structures and join the lesbian separatist movement. They also developed experientially and theoretically supported transformative politics and agenda for a feminist social order. In their theorizing, they decidedly rejected reformist politics and advocacy for equality and tolerance, because these "encourage . . . individual solutions, apolitical attitudes" and keep women from "political revolt and out of power" (Bunch 8). Lesbianism is theorized not only as a "sexual preference" but also as a subversive "choice," which is "political because relationships between men and women are essentially political, they involve power and dominance. Since the Lesbian actively rejects that relationship and chooses women, she defies the established political system" (9). The very act of identifying and living openly as a lesbian becomes a political act, one that threatens the hegemonic heteronormativity.

The Furies were conscious of the heterogeneity in the lesbian feminist movements and the women's movement and emphasized that lesbian identity does not constitute a radical feminist position without an awareness of the intersections of oppression and privilege and without an investment in politics beyond the individual. In their theoretical work, the Furies attended

to the intersections of gender and sexuality with race and class, and their politics specifically foregrounded anti-racist and anti-capitalist strategies. "Lesbians in Revolt" states that "sexism is the root of all oppression" by the white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, and that compulsory heterosexuality is the main tool of oppression and exploitation; however, racial and class oppression, though "secondary," are seen as inseparable in the analysis of patriarchal power relations. Intersectional analysis of heteronormativity is thus centered as crucial for the success of the politics of the radical lesbian movement, which, according to the Furies, must "face class and race as *real* differences in women's behavior and political needs" (emphasis ours, 9).

The 12 founding members of the collective came from different class backgrounds but were all white women; thus, class takes a more prominent place in the writing of the Furies than race. Their focus on heterosexuality as intrinsically economically exploitative, and the view of "women" as an economic class constituted in the relations of domination, anticipates Monique Wittig's undoubtedly queer "material lesbianism" which theorizes sex as a "political category" that submits women to a "heterosexual economy," and argues that the sexual difference and the "opposition of men and women" should be analyzed "in terms of class conflict" (xiii). The Furies' queer class critique also pays attention to material, embodied existence, for example, by foregrounding the role of the nuclear family and heterosexuality in producing and enforcing a gendered division of labor and by insisting that, by refusing the unpaid labor of reproduction and childcare, lesbians constitute an inherent threat to capitalism (9). The fight against heteronormativity thus becomes a class fight, and "Lesbians in Revolt" argues that lesbians reject the exploitative economics of heterosexuality by denouncing the partial privilege that comes from familial structures, such as safety, financial security, and social status, and accepting economic precarity as a political position instead. As Bunch writes, these radical lesbian feminist practices work toward expanding the Marxist critique of capitalism to account for gender and sexuality, by actively foregrounding women's and lesbians' roles in the fight for workers' rights (9).

The Furies further developed their class politics in the collection *Class and Feminism: A Collection of Essays from the Furies*, published in 1974. The critique of class in the collection is based on the experiences of the collective itself, and on the belief that "understanding class behavior among women is a useful, and perhaps essential, way to begin to understand class as a political mechanism for maintaining not only capitalism but also patriarchy and white supremacy. More simply, class, sexism and racism" (Bunch and Myron 7). The Furies identify middle-class respectability as a hegemonic tool of oppression. They argue that sex/gender are socially produced through class hierarchies, and that feminists need to denounce their class privilege and fight class division (Bunch and Myron 10–11). Their focus is on class relations *within* the feminist movement and in the essay "The Last Straw,"

Rita Mae Brown argues that white middle-class lesbians, though they lose most of their economic privileges, can still act as class oppressors by perpetuating middle-class values. Brown calls for abolishing middle-class attitudes that oppress working-class women, such as seeing institutionalized education as a marker of class belonging and mobility, using education to diminish working-class women, and practicing "downward mobility" as a political strategy. The Furies' critique of the middle class as embodying and perpetuating oppression based on class, sex, and race, alongside their dismissal of reformist politics, constitutes a radical rejection of politics of respectability and assimilation. Their anti-respectability politics are, however, nuanced, and highly critical of the "de-classing" practices of middle-class activists widely spread within social movements of the 1960s and 1970s. As Coletta Reid and Charlotte Bunch write in "Revolution Begins at Home," addressing the class privilege of middle-class women is crucial to ending the "male supremacist system"; however, this is not achieved by practicing "voluntary poverty," but rather by sharing the resources, skills, and privileges obtained through class affiliations while actively rejecting middle-class attitudes and values (80–81). Reid and Bunch emphasize that fighting class oppression is the responsibility of middle-class feminists and they lay out an extensive list of suggestions for fighting middle-class privilege. In this way, the collection represents not only the collective's theoretical reflections on the intersections of sex, race, and class oppression but a guide to a radical lesbian feminist ideology and political practice.

The Combahee River Collective Statement (1977)

The Combahee River Collective (CRC) (1974–1980) was a Boston-based, black, lesbian, feminist, socialist grassroots organization. Their manifesto begins by tracing the diverse heritage of the group and thus foregrounding the intersectionality that defined their politics. The CRC was formed as the most recent alternative to various manifestations of political organizing over time: their immediate precursor, the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), had been created as a reaction to 1970s white feminist organizations, which in turn had redefined, in feminist terms, the ideology of the U.S. Left, shown to be as patriarchal as it was radical in its class and economic politics (265). The NBFO had ties to the black liberation movement, which also influenced the strategies of both second-wave feminism and LGBTQ+ movements (265). This leftist, feminist, black heritage was redefined by the CRC in specifically nonheteronormative terms.

In 1977, the "Combahee River Collective Statement" introduced the term "interlocking oppression": "The most general statement of our politics at the present time," they say,

> would be that we are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the

> development of *integrated analysis and practice* based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking.
>
> (our italics, 264)

This was an important precedent for the theory of intersectionality developed by the legal scholar and critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. Today, intersectionality is one of the key frameworks demonstrating the necessity of moving beyond single-issue perspectives.

The specific issues women of color faced at the time – for example, "sterilization and sexual assault or . . . low-wage labor and workplace rights" – were not foregrounded in the feminist struggles of the 1970s (Taylor 5). Unlike white middle-class women from the suburbs, struggling with the "problem that has no name" and desirous of having professional lives, the majority of black women had to work to support themselves, often providing services to the middle-class, depressed subjects of Friedan's *Feminine Mystique*.

At the time of the writing of the manifesto, the CRC had been meeting for three years, "involved in the process of defining and clarifying [their] politics, while at the same time doing political work within [their] own group and in coalition with other progressive organizations and movements" (CRC 264). Particularly important among those, says Barbara Smith in conversation with Keeanga Yamahtta Taylor, were socialist feminists who, unlike other feminist groups, "thought that addressing race and class were important" (Smith 50). With a double focus on "analysis and practice," the CRC project grew directly out of, and fed back into, their political activism. Their strategy, as defined in the Statement, emphasizes their prefigurative methodology:

> We believe in collective process and a nonhierarchical distribution of power within our own group. . . . We are committed to a continual examination of our politics as they develop through criticism and self-criticism as an essential aspect of our practice.
>
> (273)

The writers of the Statement redefine what may appear to be discrete, personal experiences in collective and political terms. They argue: "There is also undeniably a personal genesis for Black Feminism, that is, the *political* realization that comes from the *seemingly* personal experiences of individual Black women's lives" (265–66). The original impulse for the creation of the CRC was anti-racist and anti-sexist. With black women "at the very bottom of the American capitalistic economy," however, the Collective recognized the need to address economic oppression under capitalism (266). It is this complex political positionality that defines their class politics:

> We realize that the liberation of all oppressed peoples necessitates the destruction of the political-economic systems of capitalism and imperialism as well as patriarchy. We need to articulate the real class situation

> of persons who are not merely raceless, sexless workers, but for whom racial and sexual oppression are significant determinants in their working/economic lives.
>
> (268)

The CRC Statement's queer feminist politics of class recognizes the need for solidarity with men of color, both out of recognition of their shared oppression and in order not to weaken the movements for black rights. The statement posits whiteness as a form of oppression that impacts all people of color, and that is inextricable from class privilege. However, the CRC perspective on anti-respectability politics deviates somewhat from the previous two manifestos. For black women in the U.S., anti-respectability politics were readable as a sign of privilege. In an economy constructed through race-based exploitation – first as chattel slavery, then as indentured servitude and segregation, and later, via the prison industrial complex – to be black meant to suffer "social death," to be consigned to the space of negativity, and to be denied humanity (Wilderson III 16–17, 40–41). Because so little value is given to the bodies, emotions, lives, experiences, and perspectives of black women, it may be more radical to claim *respect* (agency, voice, space, the inviolability of one's body, and the legitimacy of one's point of view) than to engage in politics of anti-respectability.

Michelle Tea, *Valencia* (2000)

Thirty years later, at the turn of the millennium, in the afterglow of capitalism's "end of history" victory, we see in Michelle Tea's autobiographical novel *Valencia* a recapitulation of feminist-lesbian queerness and class-consciousness. *Valencia* relates Tea's adventures in the 1990s queer community in San Francisco's Mission District. Told from a diaristic first-person perspective, the novel takes us through the gritty, radical, and exciting world of dyke drama, bar-hopping, dancing, mushroom trips, sex work, radical safe sex in latex gloves, quick make-outs and, above all, love affair and heartbreak. While the "ironic, detached, even jaundiced" (Felski 109) tone of the novel's narrator stands in opposition to both the Pollyanna neoliberalism of the 1990s LGBT movement and the radical utopianism of 1970s lesbian feminism, the novel is also an obvious heir to lesbian feminism's radical postulates about the intersectionality of sexuality and class, if not race.

Valencia is a picaresque, a novelistic genre which originated in Spain in the sixteenth century. A tale of adventures, the picaresque typically features a lower-class, wandering hero. An uprooted newcomer to San Francisco, Michelle shares the fate of other Picaros, who are often without a home and drift somewhat aimlessly from one social milieu to another, from one employer (or "master") to the next. Her precarious economic position, with irregular gigs as her only source of income, reflects the precarity which defines the lives

of other Picaros, who also rely on their (often criminal) craftiness to get by. Difficult to pin down, ever-moving, wearing masks, the Picaro's status as outsider facilitates for Tea a privileged vantage point from which to observe the social reality of her age. And she is an uncommonly good observer: restrained neither by the social norms of propriety nor by the current ideological frames, the Picara is free to enjoy a distanced, critical position.

The picaresque allows Tea to write an unsentimental, realist text with a narrator who is a social outsider and who occupies a radical, anti-assimilationist position. The genre's affinity with satire and the instability of the protagonist persona make it particularly suitable to the post-second-wave, post-AIDS-activism queer landscape of the 1990s. While the chivalric romance tended to be didactic *and* politically conservative – supporting the existing social hierarchies and norms, and reproducing the values of the ruling class – the picaresque constituted a reaction to both the reigning literary genres and the dominant ideology. The reaction against the chivalric romance materializes in the lesbian picaresque as a reaction to not only gay and lesbian romance but also realist coming out narratives (Felski 114), and the heroic accounts of the early lesbian and gay movement (so often told from the unreflective white, cis, middle-class perspective).

A class critique is embedded in the performance of the picaresque genre. The picaresque tales are first-person narratives (often autobiographical) which tend to adopt episodic structure and follow accidental turns of plot. Indeed, in terms of its structure, *Valencia* works with parataxis rather than linearity and logic of cause and effect. Neither the book's chapters nor the protagonist's narrative advances in a linear way. The fate of the novel's narrator, Michelle, seems to be determined by chance (as when her detour to Arizona is decided by the flip of a coin) (20). Decisions seem to play little role in the unfolding of events: "[M]aybe I should leave for good," she muses at some point, "I never meant to stay in San Francisco" (23). The precarity of life in late capitalism is therefore inscribed in *Valencia*'s structure.

Like all picaresque characters, Michelle is a social other, identifying with "hideaways and outcasts," "outlaws," and "fugitives" (23, 100, 103). She has left her family behind in Boston and consistently fails to be "a productive member of the society"; her "entire history of employment" is "full of horribly precarious arrangements" (43). "I wasn't cut out for it, employment," she admits (43). At some point, like the proto-picara of the English language, Moll Flanders, she finds employment as a sex worker. Other than that, she takes up temporary jobs or engages in scams. Like the Furies and Radicalesbians before her, Michelle embraces anti-respectability politics and rejects the futuristic logics of reproduction and material investment. The implicit critique of the normative ideologies of late capitalism takes the form of a resolute refusal to participate in their logics, to speak their language (of accomplishment, acquisition, and upward mobility). In *Valencia*, this refusal is in fact a necessary component of queerness.

Michelle feels she belongs to an "in-between place," "always on [her] way, never arriving" (24). This undetermined, elusive status places her between various life options and between clashing discourses, a situation which often results in humor; in this rather carnivalesque world, she becomes a variety of Michelles, depending on where and with whom her successive adventures land her. The novel's protagonist can be read as an embodiment of the Butlerian critique of identity categories – a condition taken up with gusto by the directors of the book's film adaptation (*Valencia: the Movie/s*, 2013), where each of the novel's chapters, adapted by a different director, also has a different person perform as Michelle. The film's character of "Michelle" unfolds in ways that allow for a truly intersectional representation of the queer community – across gender, race, and time.

Michelle's own time is governed by her crushes, yet unlike heteronormative, monogamous love stories, instead of the clear, single, well-defined line of development, with a period of wooing, followed by the phase of obstacles, crises, and inevitable climax, in *Valencia* the love objects and consequently the narrative lines are multiple and, in fact, each of the stories is realized according to a different dynamic. In that sense, a queer love story is a perfect fit for the picaresque, as the proper heterosexual romance obviously precludes the heroine's multiple adventures. Arguably, classic fictional genres grant multiple adventures only to male heroes, or, at best to girl children and "loose" women. Michelle inhabits what has come to be defined as "queer time," governed by its own (il)logic. In Jack Halberstam's words:

> For people who either stay outside of reproductive logics or refuse the futuristic logics of investment, insurance, and retirement and for those who live outside of the workforce or in vexed relations to money, work, and family, other temporal schemes exist, and other temporal schemes guide the life narrative.
>
> (53)

Michelle, neither interested in reproduction nor making plans for the future, lives for the passion of the day; instead of focused on progress and driven by aspirations for success, her life trajectory is, rather, paratactic.

An ad hoc zine party organized by Michelle in the office of an anarchist labor union illustrates well this temporal logic and gives a relatively direct comment on the class politics of Tea's novel. Michelle, who was fired from her employment with the labor union, is still in possession of the keys to the office and often sneaks in to use the office equipment. From the window she has a view of "her" San Francisco: the strip club, the peep show, the check-cashing place, sex workers, drunken brawls. One night she begins inviting others in:

> [T]he kids I invited would stand on the street six stories down, the lively corner of 7th and Market, and they would scream *Revolution!* and I would take the elevator downstairs and let them scurry in. . . . [E]veryone who

> came would have to write something and it would get printed on the computer and I would stick it all together with a gummy yellow glue stick and crank it out on the xerox machine.
>
> (44)

"Crank it out," the term left over from the times of mimeograph, suggests a continuity of the revolutionary spirit of the trade unions. However, that spirit seems to have left the anarchist labor union itself, together with its "grand martyr" Joe Hill, whose ashes are kept in the office, the union now no more than "a historical society of irritating gray-haired bureaucrats" (62).

The short-lived zine collective works by breaking into the system, stealing its resources, and creating spontaneous political art, with neither a prior program nor leader to determine the shape of their activity. It does not provide a blueprint for potential future activism; the zine parties may continue to happen but in an unplanned, spontaneous, unreproducible manner. A group accidentally brought together around one common task, without a past or a future, the zine party is the form of activity that supplants activism spurred by the AIDS epidemic, as well as old-school leftist organizing. The zine's contents include an "anti-capitalist tirade" against one of the girls' grandfather; "a bitch about the O.J. Simpson thing"; "a love manifesto"; a tongue xerox; a story about stealing from one's job; and a story about waiting in line for food stamps. While common threads may be discerned in this list of disjointed topics, as with the lesbian feminist manifestos, it is not necessarily coherence, nor quality that constitutes its politics, but the very energy generated by the common task and produced by the form. Like the manifesto, which, as Fahs points out, was "ephemeral, hurled off balconies and out of speeding automobiles," so is the zine "perhaps never meant for careful study or careful curation" (6). Thus, the manifesto and the zine share an affective valence. An unlikely coupling in many ways, Michelle Tea's *Valencia* and the 1970s feminist manifestos thus "touch," queerly, forming a community "across time" (Dinshaw 178).

Writing from the post-*Valencia* (post-queer-1990s) perspective, Matilda Bernstein Sycamore is openly nostalgic for the lost queer community of the Mission District. Acknowledging that the community around Valencia Street was pushed out by the forces of gentrification, she points out that the LGBT community was itself partly responsible for the loss of radically queer San Francisco, which today, argues Bernstein Sycamore,

> [m]ore than any other US city, is the place where a privileged gay (and lesbian) elite has actually succeeded at its goal of becoming part of the power structure. Unfortunately (but not surprisingly), members of the gaysbian elite use their newfound influence to oppress less privileged queers in order to secure their status. . . . This pattern occurs nationwide, But San Francisco is the place where the violence of this assimilation is most palpable.
>
> (par. 1)

Be it gay bar owners calling "for the arrest of homeless people (many of them queer youth)," "a gay-owned real estate company advis[ing] its clients how best to evict long-term tenants, many of them seniors, people with HIV/AIDS and disabled people," or "wealthy Castro residents . . . [fighting] against a queer youth shelter, because . . . it would get in the way of 'property values'," the affluent gay faction of San Francisco residents is shown to drive a wedge within queer community (par. 5–6). For Bernstein Sycamore, queerness is also a class-consciousness, which makes her critical of the neoliberal economy and aware of the need for an alliance with other threatened communities.

Conclusion

Michelle Tea's *Valencia* is but one example of lesbian feminist prose that takes up the class-conscious heritage of the feminist second-wave manifestos. Seminal works such as Leslie Feinberg's *Stone Butch Blues* (1993) and Eileen Myles's *Chelsea Girls* (1994), but also the collection of spoken-word queer performance transcripts, *Sister Spit: Writing, Rants & Reminiscence from the Road* (edited by Tea in 2012), and Tea's own *Against Memoir: Complaints, Confessions and Criticism* (2018), often autobiographically inflected, all represent an intergenerational engagement with the history and politics of class, gender, and sexuality in the U.S. These authors consciously claim the radical lesbian feminist heritage of the "previous generations" and write themselves into the interstices of the period's queer and feminist thinking. In doing so, they defy the linear progress narrative of feminist and queer theorizing and establish a space of radical queer/class politics that is enabled by multiple and multiplying queer touches. In *Against Memoir*, Tea considers the central position of class struggle in the radical queer politics of the Sister Spit collective, of which she was a founding member:

> You know how earlier eras of feminism sort of forgot that there were poor women? Or, the lavender menace of queer women butting in with their own experiences, messing up the hetero sisters' stab at media acceptance? I think that the people who made up Sister Spit, the all-girl performance tour that tore up the United States at the end of the last century, were the living, breathing, writing responses to those particular overlooked patches of feminist experience. We were the lavender menace and the broke-ass menace, we were the never-been-to-college menace and the drunken menace, we were the shove-your-dogma menace and the my-poetry-can-beat-up-your-theory menace.
>
> (271)

With this "we," Tea invokes a contemporary queer feminist collective that haunts and is haunted by earlier eras of feminism – one that destabilizes generational thinking. Eileen Myles, over twenty years Tea's senior, articulates

this poignantly in "My Intergeneration," when she writes about joining the younger Sister Spit artists: "I can't believe I've found my generation at last" (par. 10). In the work of writers such as Tea, Myles, Feinberg, and activist collectives such as Sister Spit, we read echoes of the early lesbian feminist manifestos. In dialogue across generations, these works insist on the centrality of anti-normativity and anti-respectability to queer artistic creativity, foreground and acknowledge both the failures and the life-saving importance of feminism, and remind us why class-invested feminist politics need to be (re) centered in queer politics.

Note

1 This chapter focuses on lesbian feminist and queer feminist work produced within the Anglo-American, particularly the U.S.-American context. However, these political and theoretical impulses emerged alongside and in dialogue with feminist theorizing and activism in multiple national contexts (e.g., French material feminism).

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