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Between Hashtagging and Hashtrending: Counterculture, Dissent and Aesthetic Politics

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The year 2016 was marked by a number of major events, some fleeting, others still ongoing, but almost all underscoring the need for thinking about a very different way of being in the world; in other words, producing radically different kinds of subjectivity. These events – which included Brexit and the election of real estate mogul and reality TV celebrity, Donald Trump, as the president of the U.S. – can be seen as part of the ongoing rise of right-wing populism that has marked world politics for at least the past decade. The continuing European migrant and refugee crises, too, have been harnessed by politicians to create voter fear around personal security in terms of jobs and safety, and national security in terms of terrorism. Accordingly, these kinds of political strategies create a victim-perpetrator binary.

But Can We Hashtag Ourselves Out of the System?

The year 2016 was marked by a number of major events, some fleeting, others still ongoing, but almost all underscoring the need for thinking about a very different way of being in the world; in other words, *producing* radically different kinds of subjectivity. These events – which included Brexit and the election of real estate mogul and reality TV celebrity, Donald Trump, as the president of the U.S. – can be seen as part of the ongoing rise of right-wing populism that has marked world politics for at least the past decade. The continuing European migrant and refugee crises, too, have been harnessed by politicians to create voter fear around personal security in terms of jobs and safety, and national security in terms of terrorism. Accordingly, these kinds of political strategies create a victim-perpetrator binary.

Victimhood, it would seem then, is a first line defense tactic of far-right sentiment. Complementary to this tactic is an increase in violence, both in a bottom-up fashion and from the State and police in a top-down direction. An article in *The Washington Post* holds that the increase in violence on the right may be seen as a "signature quality" for achieving political goals, noting that in contrast it remains largely used as a defense tactic on the left (Fromer). Commenting on the bottom-up violence of the alt-right in the U.S., the anarchist collective, CrimethInc., describes this as the next stage in U.S. fascism because it in effect means that the Trump regime now has a "street cadre" doing its dirty work. As for top-down examples, we may recall the series of measures taken in France after the terrorist attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015, when the police were granted extended power to arrest people without warrants and demonstrations became increasingly prohibited and unjustly clamped down (Perolini). British Prime Minister, Theresa May, expressed the need for similar measures after the terrorist attack in Manchester on 22 May 2017, publicly pronouncing, '"And if our human rights laws stop us from doing it, we'll change the laws so we can do it".[1]

One of the political strategies that has arisen in the last decade and has been used extensively to protest the increased clampdowns and violence is hashtag politics and activism. Andrew Walker, co-founder of Tweetminster, stated in 2012 already that even though hashtags "started out as labels . . . to make it easier to search for messages that you were interested in, in this huge soup of messages that is out there on Twitter", the hashtag was no longer needed as Twitter enhanced their technology (Mason). This means that Twitter, like Google, can find what you are looking for without the hashtag, yet people have continued to use them, increasingly so in political protests. In South Africa, the #rhodesmustfall and #feesmustfall movements are cases in point. The former was initiated when Chumani Maxwele covered a bronze statue of colonialist Cecil John Rhodes with human faeces obtained from a portable flush toilet in Khayelitsha, a large "township" outside of Cape Town. This statue was located on the main campus of the most prestigious university in South Africa, namely the University of Cape Town (UCT). Chumani's actions were sparked by the ongoing institutional racism on campus – even after the disbandment of Apartheid – and a group of students and staff subsequently called for the removal of the statue because it was seen as a representation of the enduring legacy of colonialism and Apartheid. Although #rhodesmustfall was initially directed at the removal of the statue and institutional racism, it soon developed into more comprehensive discussions about decolonisation and white supremacy. This led to the eruption of a number of other but related protests on campuses throughout South Africa, notably #feesmustfall, a response to an increase in fees at South African universities. Public opinion has been divided on these student movements but, despite this, they led to a number of significant outcomes, such as the removal of the Rhodes statue and ongoing debates about racism, white supremacy, decolonisation and language policy. Importantly, there was also a suspension in university fee increases in 2016.

Hashtag politics and activism has been seen in other parts of the world too. We may think here of #blacklivesmatter, a movement "against police violence [that] was sparked by specific deaths of young black people", but which also extends to "state violence" (Smith) or what we might call structural violence. Then there is the #metoo campaign that shed light on sexual harassments. This movement "has already gained substantial momentum" and is now thinking about how to "translate demands into policies, legal frameworks, and action" (Kemp and Trunk). Another major hashtag social movement was #sayhername – an extension of the #blacklivesmatter movement. As activist Rachel Gilmer says: "When you bring women to the narrative, it very much complicates our understanding of what police violence is and actually builds a much more structural-based argument around the problem" (Workneh). These examples raise two questions I am interested in: 1) is it possible for such seemingly spontaneous movements to effectively challenge existing socio-economic structures?; and 2) can we think of hashtag politics in terms of aesthetics and counterculture?

To Break Open a New Field of Potentiality

The spontaneous eruption of events in France commonly referred to as May '68 greatly influenced the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. We see this especially in the detailed attention they pay to the political dimension of socio-cultural stratification. This is not to say that they were not already

politicised before the civil unrest of this period, but these events held a special interest for them. Deleuze writes:

> In historical phenomena such as the revolution of 1789, the Commune, the revolution of 1917, there is always one part of the event that is irreducible to any social determinism, or to causal chains. Historians are not very fond of this point: they restore causality after the fact. Yet the event itself is a splitting off from, a breaking with causality; it is a bifurcation, a lawless deviation, an unstable condition that opens up a new field of the possible. [...] An event can be turned around, repressed, co-opted, betrayed, but still something survives that cannot be outdated. [...] May 68 is of the order of pure event, free from all normal, or normative causalities. [...] When a social mutation appears, it is not enough to draw the consequences or effects according to lines of economic or political causality. Society must be capable of forming collective agencies of enunciation that match the new subjectivity, in such a way that it desires its own mutation (*Two Regimes* 32).

A number of aspects arise here that are important in the consideration of hashtag politics as an effective challenge to existing structural arrangements and in terms of countercultural political aesthetics. In addressing this, I want to avoid restoring causality, to simply think of hashtag politics and activism as a "natural" outflow condition of social media. It is certain that we cannot account for all the reasons that gave rise to this form of politics. I therefore want to concentrate instead on the ways in which political events become adept in developing what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as collective assemblages of enunciation (in other words, discursive practices and symbolic orders) that match the new subjectivity they seek to or have already begun to create. This is especially important as these assemblages of enunciation intersect with machinic assemblages of desire – or bodies and processes and the affects they produce.

In *Hatred of Democracy* (2005), Jacques Rancière contrasts what he refers to as "the political" with "politics". He argues that politics, in contrast with the political – which includes reified political, geographical, gender, economic, class and other hegemonic structural arrangements and relations – has the potential for actual or extensive (concretised) social transformation. To put it differently, the political is deeply mired in the State apparatus and capitalism. All of these structural forces, which have extensive political and ideological effects/affects, reinforce established relations of power through various mechanisms, such as binary overcoding and the capture of assemblages, as well as axiomatisation.[2] Already we have seen how hashtag politics have been recuperated by politicians. Ramsha Jahangir reports, for example, that "political figures as well as military officials have been using Twitter to make official statements" for some time now. Similarly, Alyssa LaFaro reports how "Facebook, Google, and Twitter focus on content creation, encouraging candidates to use their platforms for brand identity and digital advertising". British political commentator and alt-right supporter, Milo Yiannopoulos, emphasises the importance of these hashtag communications in creating binaries "to atomise the terms of the debate" (Mason). This relates to what I stated earlier about victimhood. But all of these uses have wider implications than mere politicking and taking part in the political or, conversely, *doing politics*, according to Rancière's distinction.

Deleuze, in his essay "Postscript on the Societies of Control" (1990), argues that we have moved from Michel Foucault's disciplinary societies aimed at enclosing spaces, as well as time-space within these spaces, to societies of control. Around the same time as we see the emergence of disciplinary societies, we also see the development of biopower and biopolitics – what Foucault calls anatamo-politics. Achille Mbembe takes this line of argumentation further, by intersecting Foucault's thought with that of racial politics. What Mbembe calls necropolitics is thus a consideration of the ways in which the sovereign power of the State apparatus dictates who lives and who dies, as well as how this became embedded in social institutions such as schools, prisons, hospitals and so on. Judith Butler rephrases the biopolitics of disposability by asking *when is life grievable*? She writes, "Without grievability, there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life. [. . .] The apprehension of grievability precedes and makes possible the apprehension of precarious life" (15). What she argues that, although there is an implicit understanding that life is grievable when a life has been led – that is, at the end of a life – we also have to, according to the future anterior, suppose grievability at the beginning of a life. This is, in fact, what the #blacklivesmatter and #sayhername campaigns address. Leigh Gilmore argues that #blacklivesmatter "provide an important counterweight to the political and market forces that render some lives "grievable" and others "salvage"" (307). In other words, hashtag politics have the potential to produce *new* collective assemblages of enunciation according to the new subjectivity they imagine and enact. In moving from disciplinary societies to societies of control – although these are not discreet and should not be thought of in terms of a sharp distinction –, Deleuze argues that the previously enclosed systems have been opened up so that we no longer have moulds but modulations ("Postscript" 4). In this sense, disciplinary societies actually provided some sense of stability, knowability and predictability. Societies of control, on the other hand, are the dawning of the era of the precariat. Anything can change – be modulated – at any time, and the individual has to adapt to these modulations by becoming modulateable. This makes *doing politics* very difficult, because attention is arrested by these constantly shifting landscapes and their demands on people's daily lives. This has been intensified by algorithmic control, and it is where a wider implication of hashtag communications comes to the fore. Thus, while platforms such as Twitter provide space for real political engagement – let us assume for a moment that we are talking about hashtag politics and activism not in terms of the political but in terms of politics – these communications are being 'monitored' by neural networks trained to recognise specific patterns. Government agencies have access to our communications and can, as such, use these against protesters far more easily than in the past. Despite this, do these platforms provide the means for doing politics?

I have already shown how #blacklivesmatter produced new collective assemblages of enunciation. But is this politics, or participation in the political? Rancière claims that the political is an inherently dual arrangement of power, or, as he writes, "a vicious circle located in the link between the political relationship and the political subject" ("Ten Theses"). The political therefore relies on a hierarchical distribution of power relations. So, what is politics? According to Rancière's explanation, to understand politics we first need to investigate the political, which he describes as follows:

> An interrogation into what is "proper" to politics must be carefully distinguished from current and widespread propositions regarding "the return of the political". In the past several years,

> and in the context of a state-consensus, we have seen the blossoming of affirmations proclaiming the end of the illusion of the social and a return to a 'pure' form of politics. […] On this basis, the frontier between the domestic and the political becomes the frontier between the social and the political; and to the idea of a city-state defined by its common good is opposed the sad reality of modern democracy as the rule of the masses and of necessity. In practice, this celebration of pure politics entrusts the virtue of the 'political good' to governmental oligarchies enlightened by "experts"; which is to say that the supposed purification of the political, freed from domestic and social necessity, comes down to nothing more (or less) than the reduction of the political to the state [*l'étatique*] ("Ten Theses").

As I stated before, we can deduce from this that the political is always based on a ranked diffusion of power relations, enforced by what Rancière refers to as "the police" – which includes algorithms in contemporary society. To put it differently, the political is always a structural organisation with a ruling party to whom power over the individual or the political subject is entrusted, decreed as "being for the good of all". Even what we think of as a "democracy" – which relies on rhetoric of "freedom" and "personal choice" – is situated in the political and is therefore not a form of doing politics. Politics, in contrast with the political, does not rely on hierarchical relations with political subjects and cannot be defined in terms of an *a priori* philosophy that assumes the existence of a "pre-existing subject". Instead, it must be considered from the point of view of the different political arrangements or relations that allow for the existence of this political subject (Rancière "The Theses").

The focus here shifts to the power relationships that are established when tiered political allocations or social strata are accepted as "normal" and participated in as if these are "natural" manifestations, rendering the political subject immobilised to varying degrees and subject to "the way things are" – which, furthermore, often depends on the political subject's social standing. Politics is thus:

> … a specific rupture in the logic of the arche. It does not simply presuppose the rupture of "normal" distributions of positions between the one who exercises power and the one subject to it. It also requires a rupture in the idea that there are dispositions "proper" to such classifications (Rancière "The Theses").

This idea is closely linked to Deleuze and Guattari's notion of lines of flight from accepted existing nomological[3] and normative territorialisations, and to Foucault's notions of the visible and the sayable. The implication is that, in order for anyone to move away from the political to politics – or to regain political agency – we need to start by acknowledging our complicity in creating and sustaining State and capitalist territorialisations, or what Mark Fisher refers to as the "pervasive atmosphere" of capitalist realism (16). If our complicity in these structural arrangements and relations is not acknowledged or remains unconscious, this "unreal real" state becomes normalised – sometimes so much so that an alternative becomes difficult to envision. As Fisher puts it, structural arrangements remain intact (even when content is significantly changed through policy, for example) because people are no longer "capable of producing surprises"; they become uninterested in *creating* because capitalist realism creates a very specific form or sense of reality, one which presents itself as "the one true reality". While there are endless choices (consumer choices) in this reality, the political subject is rendered scarcely

more than a "consumer-spectator, trudging through the ruins and relics" (4). Furthermore, argues Fisher, contemporary society is pervaded by a kind of "depressive hedonia", by which he means a listless seeking of constant "hits" of positive affect, such as Facebook "likes", because of the feeling that "something is missing" (21-22). To make matters worse, illnesses such as depression, anxiety, schizophrenia and so forth are increasingly pathologised and (overly) medicated, rather than viewed as symptoms of something deeper which "already forecloses any possibility of politicization" (21). The combination of all of these "symptoms" of capitalism pacify and debilitate people and, as a result, often veto the possibility of questioning the structural violence of capitalism and capitalist realism, or any other systemic interconnections. These ideas have been investigated by Foucault in much of his philosophy, as well as by Deleuze and Guattari. In their collective works, all of these philosophers investigate the effects of external surveillance that lead to internal surveillance and modifications in behaviour, resulting in different forms of "madness". In *A Thousand Plateaus* Deleuze and Guattari, in fact, argue that if schizophrenia indicates the surface boundaries of capitalism, then bipolar disorder designates the interior chaos thereof. This is why Rancière makes the distinction between the political and politics, since for him politics is opposed to the police, by which he means *all* forms of surveillance. He specifically explains the police "not as a social function but [as] a symbolic constitution of the social" (Rancière "The Theses"). At its core, the police is always in a structural relationship with the State, whereas politics is always a disengagement from the police, aimed at disrupting these toxic structural arrangements; *it is a bifurcation, a lawless deviation, an unstable condition that opens up a new field of the possible*. The importance of this has to do, again, with Deleuze and Guattari's social ontology, consisting of assemblages of enunciation and machinic assemblages of desire. Thus, while the political – the State and police – create specific collective assemblages enforced through machinic desire, it is the work of politics to rupture this desire, creating new desires, new discursive practices and symbolic orders, and new subjectivities. In this sense, #blacklivesmatter and #sayhername can be seen as *doing politics* rather than participating in the political. While co-optation by the State apparatus and recuperation by capitalism have already taken place to some degree, this does not detract from the capacity these movements of dissent have to produce affirmative power (*pouissance*) – the power to act. This has clearly been shown by #blacklivesmatter, #sayhername and #metoo. Whether or not these movements are capable of desiring their own mutation to become autopoietic systems remains to be seen. This is really the greatest challenge any counterculture faces.

Desire as Resistance, Resistance as Aesthetics

If, as Deleuze and Guattari argue, desire is not linked to a transcendent set of morals, will it not inevitably be reduced to subjectivism and relativism?[4] This indeed has been the question raised in regards to Baruch Spinoza and Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophies on ethics. Deleuze and Guattari, in continuation of Spinoza and Nietzsche's work, developed a philosophy of desire that contests the idea of desire in terms of repression (as in Sigmund Freud) or lack (as in Jacques Lacan). This immanent desire is no longer located within the individual as a closed-off entity, but is conceived of as a social force, inherently connective, flowing through and between assemblages, also known as desiring-machines. It implies an openness to experimentation or becoming; a continuous relation or assemblage of material flows on a plane of immanence. Here we reach an interesting point. If we agree with the

philosophy of desire as developed by Deleuze and Guattari, and agree that it allows for a redistribution of power in that it does not pit self against other but instead locates power as a social arrangement of intensive affect, we may deduce that desire is a form of resistance to State territorialisations. In other words, desire is at once linked to an immanent politics and ethics, and has the capacity to dislocate dominant power formations and the void (depressive hedonia) left by them. Rosi Braidotti writes:

> The vacuous nature of dominant power formations has been analysed by Foucault as the Panopticon; the void that lies at the heart of the system and which defines that contour of both social and symbolic visibility. Deleuze and Guattari also comment on the fact that any dominant notion such as masculinity or race has no positive definition. The prerogative of being dominant means that a concept gets defined oppositionally, by casting outwards upon others the mark of oppression or marginalization. The centre is dead and void; there is no becoming there. The action is at the city gates, where nomadic tribes of world-travelled polyglots are taking a short break (74).

A philosophy of desire – that is, an ethics of immanence – supports a conception of life as assemblages of material flows intent on finding new modes of becoming. Many of the hashtag movements exemplify this. However, #Blacklivesmatter has now "evolved well beyond a hashtag attached to sometimes-smart and often-snarky posts about policing, jailing and racial disparities" into a "social movement with political aims, policy demands and a disparate set of individuals motivated to push those issues" (Ross). This marks a recuperation by the political and is where hashtag politics may need to rethink its strategies and tactics. We saw a similar reversion from politics to the political in the #rhodesmustfall and #feesmustfall movements in South Africa. Furthermore, these movements often become marked by "internal fights" that are sometimes productive and other times not, while protest actions simultaneously become "the subject of government monitoring" (Ross). The question then becomes how this tension between the political and politics can be addressed – especially because policies often have real and immediate material consequences and may therefore be desired – and how eruptions such as hashtag politics and activism can remain truly countercultural.

In his final work, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm* (1992), Guattari refers to an "artistry" or "power of emergence" that traverses all spheres (102). However, he cautions that this powerful artistry or aesthetics does not in itself have any transformative power; it simply highlights the need to make "a choice for processuality, irreversibility and resingularisation" (29). Aesthetics, in its coupling with ethics, could thus be said to constitute the mapping of the new "in contact with the real" (Deleuze and Guattari 12). Whereas aesthetics is typically about a value judgment of beauty, Guattari sees aesthetic judgement as that which holds *potentiality*. Thus, in aesthetic judgement, "I am not asserting anything about what is, nor am I legislating what it ought to be" (Shaviro 4). Rather, it is "part of the process by which I *become* what I am" (Shaviro 4). In the same way, a political movement, such as hashtag politics, has the potential to disrupt normative arrangements, although it is never a foregone conclusion and never comes ready-made. Ethico-aesthetics is a form of prefigurative politics,[5] creating a disruption that allows for a potentiality that "has never existed in the universe in quite that way before" (35). For this to take place, Deleuze argues that the "conditions of experience in general must become conditions of real experience; in this case the work of art would really appear as experimentation" (*Logic*

of Sense 260). Similarly, to move from the political to politics and thus effectively challenge existing socio-economic structures, movements need to adopt and ethico-aesthetic paradigm which follows a praxis of experimentation, rather than forms of political resistance sanctioned by the State. As Rancière puts is, the "question of an aesthetic modernity, that of art after the death of art" can be "formulated in terms of an affirmation of the power of artistic presentation *against representative doxa*" ("Is There" 11; emphasis added). The question of politics as art or aesthetics from an ethico-aesthetic perspective is thus about immanent creativity and machinic potentiality that is not marked by representation, but by intensive becomings. In other words, there is no static representation but, rather, a dynamic space through which something *passes* on its way to another becoming-space, and during which it may be altered or intensified. As a result, there exists a continual production of singularities or, as Deleuze and Guattari explain, it is on this plane that one is "fully part of the crowd and at the same time completely outside of it" (29). It is here with Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* that we will never again say "I am this, I am that" (Woolf 11). While the "citational politics of #sayhername exemplify feminist collective autobiographical practice through which the power of naming offers a means to represent lives that lack security" (Gilmore 308), it is not merely a representational politics. Yes, it "memorializes victims of police violence: Mya Hall, Alexia Christian, Meagan Hockaday, Sandra Bland, Natasha McKenna, Tanisha Anderson, Michelle Cusseaux, and Aura Rosser" (Gilmore 308), but it also moves beyond representation that often relies on drawing analogies between stable subjects.

Whereas representationalism – or the Cartesian mind/body dualism – hypothesises that we cannot have first-hand knowledge of our ideas or interpretations about humans and objects in the world because there is a "veil of perception" between the mind and everything exterior to it, Deleuze and Guattari question the primacy of representation. Specifically, they show that linguistic representation or the symbolic order does not itself define personhood and argue instead that the mind/body is co-imbricated with material-discursive practices and machinic assemblages of desire. The #sayhername campaign is a good example of how collective enunciations are produced, but also how desire is fundamentally changed. No longer are Black women looking to the transcendent moralistic framework (as according to Kant's understanding) of the State apparatus; instead, their immanent desire has become a social force, open to experimentation and becoming. As Gilmore states,

> The body's circulation becomes potent as the online testimonial network hosts a citational economy of retweeting and sharing that creates value through repetition. Testimony in this context acknowledges that "what's next" is likely to be more violence, more names, more black deaths (308).

However, this "what's next" has to do more than just show the violence of the State apparatus; it has to point towards the conditions for creating the new, the future. This requires a creative power of practical and social struggle "capable of overturning all orders and representations in order to affirm Difference in the state of permanent revolution" (Deleuze *Difference and Repetition* 53). This permanent revolution indicates a movement's desire for its own mutation so that it becomes autopoietic. There is no mass production of subjectivities here. Guattari relates autopoiesis not only to the production of subjectivity, but articulates it in terms of "a more collective machinism without delimited unity, whose autonomy accommodates diverse mediums of alterity" (42). This is, perhaps, the best description of

counterculture and aesthetic politics. Whether hashtag or in another form, we have seen a new desire for politics beyond the political in recent years. Nevertheless, the choices we make to fuel these revolutions will determine whether or not we are able to move against and beyond representative doxa. As Guattari says,

> There is an ethical choice in favour of the richness of the possible, an ethics and politics of the virtual that decorporealizes and deterritorializes contingency, linear causality and the pressure of circumstances and significations which besiege us. It is a choice for processuality, irreversibility and resingularisation (29).

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[1] To watch Theresa May delivering this speech go to https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jun/06/theresa-may-rip-up-human-rights-laws-impede-new-terror-legislation.

[2] Typically, symbolic codes and values are produced by the State or other governing bodies to generate and reproduce centralised systems of meaning and ensuing norms and subjectivities. Capitalism, as a mode of social
production, bases its organisation on axiomatization, which does not require beliefs or norms, but simply sets up an equivalent relation between money and an amount of labour time or a product.

[3] Nomological denotes certain assumed ontological principles such as the "rules of reasoning" that may in fact not be theoretically sound but are accepted as such.

[4] Kant proposed that humans are shaped by universally applicable laws that are generalisable and unconditional. These are transcendent laws and exist outside of the autonomous, discreet human. One of Deleuze and Guattari's most important contributions to philosophy is the notion of *immanence* (rather than transcendence) so that there is a focus on processuality and the emergent properties of relations in and between assemblages (instead of the human). Hence, life is seen as a process sufficient unto itself, rather than beholden to an external or transcendent principle or cause. What is immanent is thus immediate, particular and always already within.

[5] Wini Breines defines prefigurative politics as an "antiorganisational politics" aimed at embodying "personal and antihierarchical values" and developing "seeds of liberation and the new society (prior to and in the process of revolution) through notions of participatory democracy grounded in counter-institutions" (421). Prefigurative politics thus bifurcates from present political conditions, constructing new political possibilities within and in conjunction with current configurations, but it also contains something additional so that it has the capacity to create something entirely novel which does not reproduce existing structures. It is aimed at form and content.

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