

A queer whatever: political figures of non-identity

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ABSTRACT: The essay proposes a journey through whateverness, in an attempt to rethink difference through a desire for a ‘whatever difference’ – a difference that is not specifically different – and a desire for a being with no specific name. The essay maps out the whateverness at work in queer theory and politics, and consists of six texts: Text 1 is “Whatever!” On exasperation”; Text 2 is “A trip to the death zone” (on Queer Nation); Text 3 is “Queer demos. Plunging into the whatever of democracy” (on Jacques Rancière); Text 4 is “The force of emptiness” (on Judith Butler and Ernesto Laclau); Text 5 is “Agamben in the disco: pausal politics” (on Agamben and disco dancers); Text 6 is “Becoming whatever” (on Paul B. Preciado *Testo Junkie*).

KEYWORDS: whateverness; identity politics; difference; empty signifier; becoming-common.

COMPANION PLAYLIST: The six texts of “A Queer Whatever” feature a companion playlist, consisting of six tracks. There is no exact pairing between texts and tracks. The playlist is suggested as a different way to tune in to whateverness, at least as I have sensed it while writing the essay. The tracks can be used as pauses in the reading, or in any other temporal tangle with the texts. They can be listened to in any order. Or not listened to at all. However, here is the title listing anyway:

Emptyset, “Speak” (from *Borders*)

Respect, “I am what I am - Mary Brazzle vocal mix” (from *I am what I am*)

Terre Thaemlitz, “Elevatorium – Sub Dub Remix” (from *Ambient Intermix*)

Rrose, Lucy, “Inner membrane” (from *The Lotus Eaters II*)

Carl Craig, Francesco Tristano, “Darkness – Beatrice Dillon Remix” (from *Versus Remixes vol. 1*)

David Wojnarowicz & Ben Neill, “The Attempts at Formation of an Illusory Tribe – Intermezzo” (from *Itsofomo*)

To listen to the playlist click [on this link](#).

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PRELUDE

What follows is a journey through whateverness. It is a dangerous one, because through a politics of difference(s) queer subjectivities have learnt, and are still learning, to affirm their right to the world and negotiate the terms of what they potentially share. What follows does not deny the power

of difference to shatter the illusion of equality, to bring new subjects into being, to resist normalization and the violent imposition of the same. However, what follows is against a politics of identity that rests upon an obligatory identification of what any difference consists of. It is an attempt to rethink difference through a different desire that fully belongs to it: namely, the desire for a whatever difference, for a difference that is not specifically different, but is on the contrary so generic that it can be translated, and does translate, into other differences. If “whatever” is such a degraded word – signaled in Italian by the feminized phrase “la qualunque” – maybe it is because it bears no respect to the differences we value and in which we invest so much. Or maybe because its obtuse power flows like an undercurrent below and across the differences we are struggling for, and against. Therefore, the desire for whatever is also a desire for a being with no specific name. Such a desire is as political as the opposite desire to be named exactly as we want. Even while fighting for our differences, our politics has also silently harboured a resistance to a difference that is only *ours*: this is the conjunction that I call whatever. In what follows I attempt to bring out the whateverness at work in queer theory and politics by intersecting high and low theory, mundane praxis and activist practice. By no means do I claim to be exhaustive. Indeed, I could have included, for instance, Karen Barad’s quantum queer theory, which takes its starting point from quantum theory’s principle of indeterminacy (BARAD 2012), as well as François Laruelle’s non-philosophy, whose radical flat ontology has been translated into queer and gender terms by Katerina Kolozova (see O’ROURKE 2013), or the queer critics assembled by Noreen Giffney and Myra Hird, working on the human/non human divide (GIFFNEY and HIRD 2008). Whateverness is seeping everywhere. What I am concerned with here is showing how this need not mark a return to universalism; there is a wealth of unexplored politics hidden in the folds of whatever. What is more, it has always been there.

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TEXT 1

“Whatever!” On exasperation.

Uttering “Whatever!” irritates and unsettles. It is an exclamation that gives no grounds for its indifference. It can take on any meaning, while refusing to be tied to the very necessity of meaning. It refuses to name, to specify,

to pin down, using language not only to defer any referentiality, but also to deny its ultimate import. By its refusal to ascribe meaning, and to acknowledge the importance of the meanings already assigned, it functions as a magic wand, a way to disavow and make disappear the meanings by which we are made to exist socially, that is, dependently from others. Saying “Whatever!” in a conversation disengages one from the need to respond properly, to care for the continuity of social interaction. It signals a breakdown and is often used in order to bring an exchange (not unfrequently a painful one) to a close. Furthermore, being a non-argumentative reply and eschewing any reasons, it does far more than end, one-sidedly, a conversation: its aspiration is to erase its ever having happened, its consequences, its ‘mattering’.

Seen as an easy way out from both rationality and relationality, there is no wonder that the “Whatever!” speech act sounds highly suspect and unproductive. Politically, “Whatever!” is usually interpreted as a ground for inaction. At least in its Italian equivalent, the semantically neutral term *qualunque* has given rise to a noun, *qualunquismo*, which is virtually synonymous with political apathy, with conformism to commonly held beliefs, not necessarily because one believes in them but because they are safe common places, generic truths to live by.¹ *Qualunquismo* is inimical to critique, to resistance, to activism, as well as to politics in general. Since it avoids strife, the utterance “Whatever!” is easily driven by, or drives to, resignation. On the other hand, while seeming to affect unaffectedness (hence, its purported apathy), its acquired passivity is a kind of response, even though couched as a refusal: a refusal to take part. Such a refusal is not only unpromising and destructive, though: its wilful resistance to ‘mattering’ is also expansive and alluring. Once you find yourself saying “Whatever!” to something, you also find that more and more things fall under the spell of “Whatever!”. Whateverness is contagious, it is world-making. “Whatever!” stalls any further hope and sees no promise in the future. Not only does it deflate any meaningful value in the current context, it also projects its unappealing pall over any following reprise. In this sense, its vector is powerful and its temporality timeless, flattening, and profoundly a-historical.

¹ On Italian *qualunquismo* as a historical anti-political movement after WWII see SETTA 2005.

It would be incorrect, however, to say that “Whatever!” shuns any affect.² As we see political apathy gaining ground, enveloping us in its numbing and slightly depressive folds, we need to grasp all the variations that compose whateverness as a complex and far from unified strategy of non-involvement. The variations that define the tonal performance of any “Whatever!” speech act are, in fact, multiple. It is true that the indifference of “Whatever!” subtracts energy to action – to antagonism rather – because the general equivalence asserted by it not only paralyses the choice between action and inaction, but also between any alternative actions (they are all the same). Nevertheless, there is a hidden multiplicity in such generic passivity, a becoming-passive that is already a form of being affected, as the exclamation mark shows. After all, “Whatever!” can hardly be pronounced neutrally. There may be a “Whatever!”, for instance, that is enraged and exasperated, born in the middle of strife and conflict, especially as a result of the impossibility to sustain one’s own position, or identity. If the vague indefiniteness of “Whatever!” is clearly insufficient as a response because of its rather too easy vanishing act, its pointed nihilism can in fact adequately function as a *parody*³ of the arbitrary nature of the discursive conditions determining the experience of subjection and defeat for the “Whatever!” speaker.

In one of its mundane, conversational uses I hear this exasperation, for instance, ringing (in English) in the voice of Lauren Cooper, the

² In *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai covers a range of ‘minor emotions’ that share a kind of affective indeterminacy mediating between aesthetics and politics (NGAI 2005). See in particular her chapter on irritation, the feeling that comes closer to the exasperation I am commenting upon here. As she observes, irritation is mostly interpreted as affective opacity, a mood that lacks any definite object. Therefore, it is thought “least likely to play a significant role in any oppositional praxis or ideological struggle” (181). Rather than playing on disaffection, I wish to look at whateverness as a mode of temporary detachment, politically suspended and in search for any subsequently ‘proper’ attachment. The “Whatever!” speech-act I choose to investigate is also more expressive than the “underperformative” mode so acutely examined by Lauren Berlant in “Structures of Unfeeling” (BERLANT 2015). However, her serious analysis of reticent aesthetic, of withholding and withdrawal shows how fruitful an engagement may be with “structures of unfeeling” that may be too diffuse and low-intensity to register as political performance, but are no less sensitive to historical becoming: “a mode of presence that can lead to things but often presents initially as a drag on the production of an event” (199). Berlant also comments on the varied resonances of “Whatever” as a reticent performance, as a form of slackness (206). I wish to thank Roberto Filippello for drawing my attention to the abovementioned works.

³ A parody is always a performance at the same time of detachment and debasement: a counter-performance (or ‘singing’, ᾄδῆ) carried out beside (παρὰ) a more powerful and authoritative ‘song’. You sidestep and point at the performance going on without you. This causes in itself a deflation of its totality.

loud-mouthed teenager created by the English comedian Catherine Tate, whose main speech act seems to be summed up by repeated bursts of “I ain’t bovvered!” (I am not bothered), as her own equivalent of “Whatever!”. This “Whatever!” stands for an iterative strategy of disengagement, as if to say, “Whatever you say – or have said, or will say – I don’t care”. Of course, as Lauren vents her indifference by pretending not to be hurt, it is precisely the hurtful nature of social interaction that she performs upon by her claim of indifference. Her exasperation clearly shows that her careless “Whatever!” is a performative way to interrupt a discursive chain that has pushed her into a corner, a way to cease supporting it, and therefore disqualify it. While acknowledging her own subjection – saying “Whatever!” is tantamount to saying you have lost the game by default – Lauren performs her own way to escape the social effect of defeat by negating the validity of the game itself. Interestingly, the utterance “I ain’t bovvered!” provides most of the comic endings of her sketches. As a comic character, she performs her own escape act and comes out winning. Her comic “whatever”, in other words, far from being unaffected and non-relational, marks by its own interruption an affected and relational stance towards a specific performance of power/discourse. It is a strategy by which the defeated enjoy a come-uppance, thanks to a trump card that *always works*, by way of a renunciation. On abandoning the contested ground you avoid witnessing your own defeat, which is of course another way to concede defeat. Or it would be so, if “Whatever!” did not also perform its own sovereign indifference to dominance and subjection: indifference as a powerful leveller of sorts. Of course, just because it always works (in the fantasy of the “Whatever!” speaker, anyway), this is a politics that defeats politics. However, it is also an affirmative instance (in the case of Lauren, a rebellious one) of disengagement and disidentification from the terms that are causing subordination.

There *is* an informal politics (a micropolitics, a swarm of politics) in the childish and unreasonable outburst of careless whateverness. By this, I do not mean a politics that is just implied, unformed, or at best uneducated (as Lauren’s ‘chav’ stereotype of the ignorant and disrespectful working-class teenage schoolgirl would suggest). I mean a politics that, on the contrary, exposes politics as fundamentally unjustifiable and non-argumentative, despite the staged performances of speech (of rhetorics) in which it revels. Such exposure is in fact so explicit as to belie an open secret, that is, a

secret that no one is supposed to tell, not just because everybody already knows it, but because, if told, it would also consign discursive exchange to hopelessness: “Whatever I say, I will always lose out given the discursive conditions in which I am forced to play”. Or, conversely, “Whatever *you* say, you will always win given the discursive conditions...”. The pretended not-mattering of the rhetorical argument (“whatever!”, “whatever you say...”) serves to shift the attention to the grounds of any discursive exchange: it is *those grounds* that matter so much as to inflect differentially the access to power/meaning (let us say, the weight) inherent in whatever one says. Because of the biased weight in any power/discourse, the indifferent charge of “Whatever!” marks a scandal and performs its own useless truthfulness: by its levelling and calmly destructive annihilation of surface rhetorical divergences, a more radical, until then unexposed, power differential shows up through the cracks.

When this happens, a certain unsustainable weight of speech emerges, so that what matters is now the possibility of address itself, rather than what is being said. This is why the indifference of “Whatever!” points to the bare ground of that *Ur*-difference, a throw-back to constitutive differentiation in the access to meaning. This is why listening to “Whatever!”, and sometimes even succumbing to it, means to partake in a strategy of indifference that sees through the constitutive limits of representation. It also marks the moment when we come up against the pure contingency and lack of justification that underscore our enunciative positions. It is the moment that marks our being subdued, as well as the moment in which we step aside in order to decry it and effectively – impolitically – suspend it.⁴ By stepping aside, we become a different anyone, a singularity that refuses to be named by the terms of a certain engagement. Having uttered “Whatever!” we freefall and drop out into an unnamed territory, politically uncharted. Blank, un-differentiated, asocial, a kind of hopeless, yet also hopeful, emptiness. To some it means disappearance, to others it may signal the beginning of heterotopia, hence another form of appearance. As

⁴ As Roberto Esposito argues, the impolitical has nothing to do with depoliticization; it is, on the contrary, “the extreme outcome, the ‘ulterior’ outcome, in the strong sense of the word, reached by a political critique of depoliticization; and for that reason its relationship to it is one of intrinsic opposition” (ESPOSITO 2015: 82). More pointedly still, “This absence *in* the present, this decoupling from the present, this disjuncture between that which merely exists and yet is *all* that exists, bears the title ‘impolitical’ (80). Despite its blank opacity, “Whatever!” enacts such a disjuncture, a decoupling that undermines a specific arrangement of differences.

we will see, this *terrain vague* is of crucial importance for much of queer theory. Despite all appearances, queer subjectivation has a lot to do with the notion of whateverness. My aim in what follows is to trace some of the passages that make queerness consistent with a politics that falls under the rubric of whatever. In other words, mine will be an attempt that seeks to ground politics precisely in the space that falls outside the political, i.e. the ungrounded.

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TEXT 2

A trip to the death zone.

“Queer” – it is often argued – marks a redeployment of a homophobic term, an instance of reverse discourse by which the negative interpellation is taken up again and repeated, this time with a crucial difference. Instead of singling out as queer – that is, as non-belonging, cast out – the target to which it is addressed, the term of abjection is appropriated as one that might, on the contrary, hold a promise for a new subjectivity – a subjectivity defined precisely by such a performative self-naming. According to this ‘myth of origin’, then, queer turns essentially around the politics of naming and self-naming through which a political subject is potentially born. As Sedgwick hypothetically suggests: “‘queer’ can signify only *when attached to the first person*” (SEDGWICK 1994: 8). This kind of attachment takes place through language, both the attachment *of* the term that ‘sticks’ to the one so named, and the attachment *to* the term that can be effected only by overcoming shame’s individualizing affect. Only by repeatedly turning against itself the hate speech term, one can learn to own it, survive its blow and install a reparative meaning within the term itself. However, by focusing so much on linguistic strategy and pinning all our political hopes on reframing the way we are called and call ourselves, we may well miss, or marginalize, an alternative account of queer subjectivity that is far less rooted in linguistic agency as such. After all, what if one has never been addressed as “queer” *in the first person*? What if one is not, by chance, anglophone or has been addressed by other terms, each casting a different burden than “queer”? What if, finally, the queer subject is already figured as dead, beyond interpellation?

One of the first uses of “queer” as a term of political resistance, in fact, sees

it coupled with another that somehow runs counter to the first-person street scene scenario of interpellation that is evoked by Judith Butler's revision of Althusser (BUTLER 1997): "nation". It seems that queer subjectivity emerged already collectivized, without the necessary time for the preliminary development of queer subjects, each one of them pondering in the first person the chances of reverse discourse and then coming together on the strength of a shared identity. When "queer" erupted on the American streets in the late '80s and early 90's it was as a lumpen group or mass, defined biopolitically by its being discounted as part of the (American) nation.⁵ It was death by AIDS, or better death by State negligence, moral panic and securization, that created the queer as the nation of those who suddenly found they were disposable, or even dangerous to the "Nation". Thus, "queer" served to name the "nation" that was no longer of the Nation, despite the illusion of inclusion that the latter term conjures up. This spelled out a far more threatening prospect than 'just' getting AIDS: it was social death preceding or even replacing biological death, a doubling of death one of whose effects was the blurring of the distinction between the living and the dead. In particular, the AIDS crisis at its height marked the time and site where the notion of Nation split up into that of a 'general public' – its healthy (heterosexual) core – whose immunity had to be preserved at all costs, and that of a 'risk group' whose health (whose life) had already been foregone.

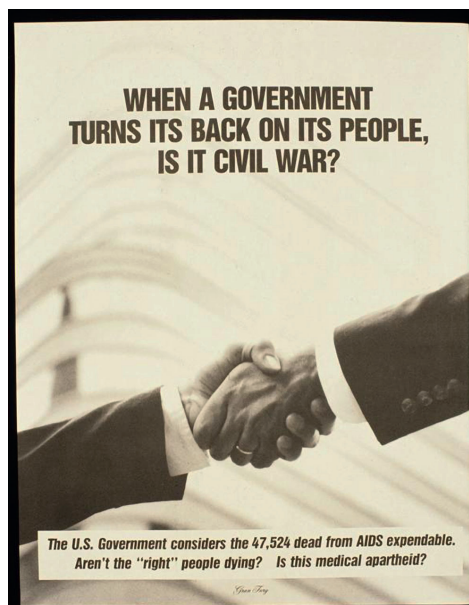
It is not identity, then, but 'bare' survival that provided the common ground to those who literally insisted on coming back from the dead zone, like veritable zombies.⁶ As Samuel Chambers has pointed out, the slogan "We're here, we're queer, get used to it" does not attach any particularized meaning to "queer" (CHAMBERS 2009). It only marks the spectral insistence of those who refuse to be dead, as well as the persistent occupation of public space through the performance of one's own uncounted presence. There is nothing specific that the queer subject wants or demands from anyone, then, except asserting its own visibility, weight and body, pitted against the visibility, weight and body of the 'general public' that has come to hijack the Nation. As a matter of fact, in this original context queerness has no meaning outside the biopolitical emergence that marks the struggle around the concept of the Nation and the eugenic ideology barely masking its own exclusionary

⁵ ACT UP was founded in 1987, Queer Nation started in 1990.

⁶ I would like to refer the reader to the chapter on queer zombies in BERNINI 2017, titled "Resurrections", for a different take on queer zombification through a reading of B-movies.

character. It is neither as gay nor lesbian, nor as any other sexually identified subject, that the queer body takes shape on this eventual horizon. If anything, queer signals the moment when sexuality ceases to operate as a potentially autonomous and differentiating force and allows itself to be legible as a dispositif, that is, an arrangement of heterogeneous planes of bodily existence capable of social meaning. The ‘public body’ that is the productive outcome of such a will to health is the only body that will bear reproduction as the “Nation”. It is this ‘knowledge’, gained at the expense of one’s own body – a body that can never be made ‘public’ –, that materializes the queer subject beyond any of its previous sexual (and/or gender) identities.

What can we say of this nation? Whereas the term “community” speaks of a positive social bond forged through everyday common practices of belonging, a “nation” is a generality that is altogether more abstract and, above all, unchosen. Claiming a queer nationhood marks a certain insufficiency in the positive communitarian identities that are no longer sustainable, faced with a crisis that far surpasses sexuality *as such*. Survival now entails the radical claim to generality at the precise historical moment when that generality is found working for the survival of only ‘some’. How can a generality fail so tragically to acknowledge anyone, whomever? How can a generality still maintain its name after being proved so fatally particularizing? The lesson that we can draw from this ground zero of politics is that a generality is a biopolitical dispenser of life and death, dealing with division, partition and distribution, in this case of health and life-chances. As one ACT-UP poster by the Gran Fury collective tentatively wonders: “When a government turns its back on its people, is it civil war?”.



The visual image starkly refers to the (male) social contract that has been broken by the AIDS crisis, thus not only suggesting that the “medical apartheid” racializes those subjects whose lives are expendable (like today, black lives do not matter) but also daring to posit the “queer nation” as the general stand-in for all the “people”. Once the ‘general public’ betrays the universality that it should uphold, it is only as “queer” that the nation must forcibly occupy that role: the nation of those betrayed and fraudulently denied access to the ‘general public’. Therefore, it is neither a totality nor a specific sexual identity that turns the queer into a nation; it is the what-everness of its constituent members, temporarily identified through their negative equality (the equality of what they do *not* partake).

Although I am stressing the national element in the queerness of this specific historical “Queer Nation”, I do not wish to suggest a necessarily specific link with *American* national discourse.⁷ On the contrary, the traumatic emergence of a queer nation is far from being limited to the USA in the late ‘80s and early 90’s. Queer “nation” marks the limit, or threshold, at which a certain discourse around the Nation’s body dramatically collapses under the failure to sustain its own fantasy of inclusion. AIDS and the queer nation produced by it are not in this sense a state of exception at all. The AIDS crisis only inscribed the earliest instance of a neoliberal paradigm that has multiplied the production of biopolitical thresholds ever since. Queer is the non-specific name for the people when it comes under the threat of elision through the loss of generality. It is at the deathbed of the subject that the people’s “rightfulness” must be defended. Rightfulness is not a demand for rights: this would make it specific to each subject requesting them. Rightfulness is a call to generality produced by a specific erasure: democracy must extend up to the limit of death and within its folds, or it is nothing. “Aren’t the ‘right’ people dying?”. This statement, couched in the form of an interrogation, reclaims death to politics, which is in itself one of the most shattering biopolitical contributions that a queer nation can lay claim to.

⁷ For a reading that embeds Queer Nation’s strategies of camp nationalism in the specific American context see BERLANT and FREEMAN 1993. They emphasize the transgression of the categorical distinctions between sexuality and politics carried out by QN and privilege an “*erotic* description” of the political (196); I, on the other hand, follow another route, which serves to link this section to the next on Rancière’s *demos*. In doing so, I am aware that I am pushing an AIDS-inflected reading of QN, which is only part of the story.

TEXT 3

Queer demos. Plunging into the whatever of democracy.

If the queer nation lays a radical claim to generality insofar as it is disallowed to represent it, what is at stake is the identity, or non-identity, of the *demos* that is the source of rule in a *democratic* nation. According to this myth of origin, queer was born as a nation even before we could speak of a queer subject: it is a we that is not made up of any preceding I's, and its name is a common name that already names a nation without really caring whether it is appropriate as a name for each of its singularities. Whatever! Referring back to Sedgwick's hypothesis, we might venture to add the following: "‘queer’ can signify only when attached to the first person *plural*", as long as we think of this plural as a *pluralia tantum*, a plural without a singular person. Thinking queerly as a nation means taking on board the roots of democracy, the extent of the claims to generality, the exclusions that drive its representational agenda and the materialization, or dematerialization, of embodied subjects as belonging or not-belonging to the people. This will mean tackling queerness in its generalizable whateverness, rather than specifying all the staggeringly multiple differences that compose it. The materialization of a queer nation is of a different scale and nature than the materialization of any singular body: the articulation between the two is hardly a matter of individual agency. This is why the body of the queer nation cannot be anatomized by looking at the bodies of each of its own members. Such indifference, however, is a measure of its democratic weight. The name "queer" is not able to name all the differences it contains, or will contain, because it does not know them. As a consequence, it cannot even be asked to acknowledge them one by one, singularly, according to their own specific right.

Maybe this is part of that "critical distance" that separates "queer" (and queer theory) from terms such as "gay" and "lesbian" (DE LAURETIS 1991, iv). The discursive horizon opened up by the queer name is less about the articulation of, and between, each difference than a radical enquiry on what difference those differences make so that they cannot ever be generalizable. What disables them from functioning as the generality? It is their disability that turns them into a nation, rather than what each of them is able to do

for themselves. In other words, it is their non-identity that makes them political, over against what singularizes them. This also means re-centering democracy around its excluded core, of which the queer nation is one of the critical figures. Rather than figuring queer subjects as the abjected beyond its margins, queer theory may enjoin us to rethink democracy through the *return* of the abjected, that is, through the possibility – inevitable indeed for democracy – of generalizing what has been abjected. We need a queer theory to account not for queer subjects, but for a queer *demos*.⁸

Demos is not in itself a name for a specific group with specific qualities. In Rancière's reading democracy is different from any other criteria of rule essentially because it neither requires nor presupposes a quality that only some groups or classes might have. It is not the rule of the richest, or of the eldest, or of the best. In this sense the rule of power is arbitrary, i.e., is not justified by a superior quality from which it could be said to derive. It is, literally, an-archic, without an external source. It also presupposes a radical equality, which is itself ungrounded, as there can be no superior foundation or principle to which it can make an appeal. *Demos* is just the name for the embodiment of such a radical equality, not a name at all, then, but the anonymity at the heart of democracy (the "capacity of the anonymous people", RANCIÈRE 2009: 17). Unlike a liberal politics of rights, in which an oppressed subject seeks justice by claiming a specific right that has been denied and by providing the necessary proofs for one's own entitlement, radical equality presupposes a foundational rightfulness that is both unjustified and unjustifiable. Politics, accordingly, can only be a matter of verification, a making-true of the principle of radical equality, which extends to all kinds of human capacities: a capacity to do, to be whatever. Whenever this is not verified, there ensues the political moment of disagreement (discord, dissensus), which disrupts an ordered "distribution of

⁸ This is why the thinking of Jacques Rancière can be fruitful in grafting the notion of queer nation onto our decrepit democracies. What follows is my own concise attempt at such a demotic re-orientation of queer founded on Rancière's *Dis-agreement* (1999). In editing the *Borderlands* issue on Rancière and queer theory, Samuel Chambers and Michael O'Rourke propose a borrowing, or rather a theft and appropriation, that goes beyond Rancière's stated intentions, much in the same way as a host of non-queer thinkers have been made queer by a queer performance of their thought, of some detachable elements of their thought. As there is no question of asking Rancière's permission to inflect his *demos* so as to accommodate our own contingencies, so there is no question of being faithful to a queer canon: the latter, as I see it, is a chosen, asystematic affiliation, not a lineage. The same proviso will hold true for my readings of whateverness in Butler, Laclau, Agamben, Gaynor and Preciado in the following sections.

the sensible”, where, on the contrary, a distribution prevails according to a certain allotment of capacities, properties and rightful places. This regime is called “police” by Rancière, not because it necessarily resorts to force, but because it is invested in policing the boundaries of what is common, so that its force has become *the common*.

Here, indeed, is the crux of the matter, capable of determining the future of democracy: what is posited as common, so that it is shareable among the countable subjects that partake in any distribution? By deviating from the premise that what is common must be returned to the people, the true scandal of politics, according to Rancière, shows that what is common is already the effect of a certain partition, that it has already been alienated from those assumed to have nothing in common with that common. In other words, in the police order there is always a remainder, an uncounted whatever, which is “the part of those who have no part” (RANCIÈRE 1999: 30-ff.). This “part” should not be identified altogether with the marginalized, or the minorities. Insofar as they can hope for a better distribution, those groups will consent to the prevailing logic of countability, which insists on the fantasy of total inclusion. The part that has no part, however, only partakes in the nothing, because it lacks a place in the existing, tangible configuration. As a consequence, no name is able to identify it, or specify exactly who or what it is: it is imperceptible, unperceived and inexistent. Its heterogeneous non-identity affords it the only name that is ‘proper’ to the non-specific: *demos*.

In its non-being *demos* not only ‘names’ the remainder uncounted and disavowed by the police order; it also names the only locus for the emergence of politics, its source. The subject of politics can only come from the uncounted and uncountable remainder that is not part of the common, as it is the only subject capable of undoing the perceptible divisions of the police order and, by doing so, of demonstrating the contingency of that order (what Rancière calls its originary “wrong”). Its political subjectivation does not precede its own emergent action: there is no subject waiting for recognition with a name already speaking to what s/h/it is. This activist subjectivation does not accrue from the recognition of a shared identity, but from the impulse to verify radical equality in the site of its own negation. Taking action and claiming speech from where no action or speech is expected to hail is a wager that politicizes a subject in its event, an event in which it produces and discovers its new-found ‘name’. Political subjects

are contingent to this event, and their own naming – including “queer” – is none other than the name for their own action.

Whenever a subject becomes increasingly identified, it becomes a part that has a part, however marginal or minoritarian. For these subjects something will always be better than nothing, once they are accounted for. Therefore, the impulse towards identification marking the transition into the police order has at least two effects: a progressive desubjectivation⁹ and an increased investment in identity (that is, the part of their identity taken into account by the police order). Both processes also mark a decisive distancing from the queer moment of their political insurgence, in which they were driven to action as the uncounted by nothing less than the whateverness of their human potential. Thus, the queer whatever suddenly leaves room to a discrete negotiation that is dependent on a subtle discrimination of differences. Each will claim its own name, its own distinct right pertaining to a specific visibility in the distribution of the sensible (RANCIÈRE 2004). There is a difference between a name that specifies and identifies (i.e. produces a homogeneous class) and one that is taken up in the event of a subjectivation: the latter declassifies (names its non-belonging) and acts as a tool for the inscription of a subject “as being different from any identified part of the community” (RANCIÈRE 1999: 37). This is reflected in the whateverness of its naming: in order for this subject to come into existence its name does not have to refer to a shared positive property necessary to form a coherent group, one that can be counted, and counted upon, to repeatedly appear in a certain recognisable way.

On the other hand, it would seem that a politics based on identities must also be able to specify the exact nature of their relational difference from the other identities that make up the police order. The specification of properties goes along with a tendency for these identities to compete for the participation in the common, binding them to a consensual definition of politics that is, for Rancière, a far cry from the disruptive and dissociative aspect of a dissensual politics. Yet, this does not mean that politics is always recuperated. It just means that it can never be stabilized and embodied by the same subject. Above all, the insurgent politics of the *demos* points to a

⁹ It should be remembered that subjectivation is defined by Rancière as “the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience, whose identification is thus part of the reconfiguration of the field of experience” (RANCIÈRE 1999: 35).

paradox that is well worth attending to: although subjectivation is grounded on the principle of radical equality, on whateverness, its own performative appearance on the stage of politics can only be enacted by an embodied particularity, whose declassifying pull is already wavering under the logic of countability. If we had to translate this logic in order to assess yet again the critical distance between queer and other names that have invested in specific subjectivities, we could say that the queer *demos* exceeds counting, whereas the other require some counting. That is also why a queer nation can never be a minority. Radically equal to all other anonyms, it calls for the verification, in history, of an apriori that is both generic and generalizing.

However, we need not be melancholic about the transience of any queer political moment, or be in mourning if queer is soon captured into the web of a specific distribution of the sensible. Although the name *demos* could lead us into thinking of a unitary revolutionary subject that is dormant and ready to wake up, there is no such master narrative and no such master subject. *Demos* does not name a subject, not even a hidden one: it names the capacity of a subject. History is the punctuation of any number of these eruptions, each one with its own minor name, particularizing in specific, contingent sites and times the absent reach of radical equality. *Demos* is never about totality: it is about the return of equality as a figure of totality. Since this equality is never present, whateverness may adequately represent its equal capacity to be embodied by whatever collective subject. It is not about us, individually. Ultimately, the queer name is not an offer to be taken up by the individual in order to better express its own truer self (or singularity), but a potential for coming back as a democratic subject in order to disrupt the counting. In any case, we are not even required to feel attached to the name, only to the politics that can erupt under that name. Or under whatever name that catches up with ‘us’.

TEXT 4

The force of emptiness.

By exceeding any positive naming, queer’s democratic force brings trouble not only to identity, but also to difference itself. In the short paragraph of *Bodies That Matter* titled “Queer Trouble” Judith Butler recasts the term

queer as a particular articulation of difference within identity (BUTLER 1993: 226-30). In doing so, she uses it to rework identity politics through a specific version of historicism. Identity is founded on repetition and citation, producing effects of stability and normativity; in other words, identity is performative in that it is an effect of interpellations that accrue a force of authority through their own iteration. As a consequence, discursive practices, such as naming oneself, never have their origin where they seem to take root: in the subject. As part of a discursive chain, the subject can be held in place only by the temporality of a repetition, which also marks its historicity. Historicity is not just the mark of a past, but its ongoing being-repeated. Therefore, it cannot work as the foundation for a subject; on the contrary, it produces and decenters the subject at the same time. Historicity also decenters history by always binding it to a present: this bond is repetition itself, the one sure sign that something is not over, that it needs re-enacting. Identity is thus an active repetition of the conditions that ensure its recognition and self-knowledge, a repetition that is not in the hands of the subject, but happens in its site. The subject is a locus, temporally repeated (hence, terms like “subject position”).

Because the subject always depends on a performance of iteration that never originates from it, its resonant emptiness manifests a knot where convergent and divergent relations of power hinder any sense of self-identity. The impossibility of self-identity introduces difference at the heart of the subject; repetition binds it to difference as constitutive for its possibility: there is no repetition without difference. The problem is how to bridge the gap between the subject’s ongoing performativity and a ‘positive’ political subjectivity, that is, a subjectivity that latches on to the production of a subject as an originating locus of identity politics. This was arguably what the women’s movement and the gay and lesbian movement had done: using the fiction of a collective subject as a source of emancipatory action. The blindspots these movements had produced, however, were by the 1980’s already too evident as a consequence of the exclusionary nature of identity politics. Such exclusions do not only produce the otherness of ‘Others’; they also falsely attribute a figment of unity to the subject claiming its own autonomous identity as a source of radical politics. It seems that in order to produce oneself as political subjects, a certain degree of self-misrecognition is needed: a suspension of one’s own contingency and of one’s own failure to be one.

In “Queer Trouble” queer theory seems to name the self-reflexive locus where this double-bind becomes visible and gets articulated through a genealogical critique of identity, thus supplementing the “necessary error” of identity politics (Spivak) with its own ‘unnecessary’ difference. This difference is of a different order when compared to the difference already domesticated by identity. I’d like to dwell on the brief passage where Spivak’s “necessary error” leads Butler to articulate a paradoxical relationship between democratization and politics. On the one hand, she writes, “the critique of the queer subject is crucial to the continuing *democratization* of queer politics” (BUTLER 1993: 227); on the other, the same move lays itself open to charges of “depoliticizing”. In what sense can democratization be felt as a weakening of politics, even as its negation? Indeed, from the point of view of identity politics perhaps it must, if it is true, as Butler contends, that this politics seems to “demand a turn *against* [...] constitutive historicity”. Why “demand”? Why a politics that must turn against its own constitutive terms in order to perform politically? One possible answer is that identity politics needs to suspend historicity in order to produce the fiction of an absolute present, a temporal rupture that also stages a positive presence, above all a presence to itself: this is what Butler calls its “presentist assumptions”. Such assumptions work towards the identification of a specific subject with the politics that bears its name, and call for the prescribed repetition of that particular identification in order to sustain its own political identity. Here is the paradox: identity politics requires repetition to forestall its own demise, yet it also requires the misrecognition of the nature of repetition.

By requiring an absolute faithfulness to the present conditions of its self-identification, ‘political’ agency must be proactively blind to the work of difference, namely to the work that has enabled its own specific identity, different from any other. In this sense, it also works against democratization within itself, i.e. against the insurgence of unnamed subject positions queering its own constituency. This is where queer theory comes in as a critical agency both within and without identity politics. From within, as it speaks for the necessary queer differential that harbours in every identity, from without because in order to see it, it must also carve out a critical positionality that is able to name the blindspot. Taking the perspective of an internal difference that is as yet unnamed and is always failed by a naming, the agency instituted by queer theory

acts as a politics that exceeds one's own politics. No wonder it can appear as parasitical, devious or even traitorous. On the other hand, according to Butler, it is necessary in order to dislocate any presentist assumptions of identity politics and insert another temporal horizon: futurity. Futurity is not the future: it is the future that is already inside the present, gnawing away at its own orderly constitution. It is the present viewed from the perspective of its dispossession, its own historicity. It is the present becoming different.

As a political strategy embedded within LGBT politics, Butler's theorizing of queerness makes up for the necessary error of identity by opening up identity politics to a future that is bound to change it. Partly, queer agency is about placing one's own bet in what cannot be known in advance. It can work, for instance, towards "new possibilities for coalitional alliances that do not presume that these [existing] constituencies are radically distinct from one another" (BUTLER 1993: 229). Queer's refusal to presume those differences underlines the extent to which the opening up of the future can only be enabled by a different assumption than the one acknowledged as political in the present, that is, by the assumption that the differences held as different are not substantially so. This would imply that the error of identity is only "necessary" on behalf of the now, and that holding to its necessity might be inimical to the "continuing" democratization heralded by the term "queer agency": a paradoxical agency that does not belong to any *substantially different* subject, only to a subject that is insurgently so. Queer agency is democratizing not because it is more inclusive, in short, because it adds more subjects within a more expansive set or category; it is so because it weakens the radical, or substantive, distinctions that are held as constitutive of political subjectivities. Such agency is queer by questioning the specificity and temporal coherence of existing differences. Forcing Butler's thinking to its improper limits, we might say that working through de-specification, the futurity of whateverness is the breeding ground of queerness in its opening up time and identity beyond presentness. This is embodied in the figure of queer: a 'subject' (an agency) whose time is never exactly of the now and whose differential effect can be measured only as an unspecified, open potential. This is why Butler's queer agency can be interpreted also as whatever agency. It is the agency best able to stand for the futural drive that is at work in Butler's thinking. In this sense, queer agency is

more historical than political *per se*. It recasts subjectivity as historicity, even working against its present/ness.

The reference to historical dialectics and to queerness as an agent of continuing democratization may sound peripheral to the more general arguments of *Bodies That Matter*. They are less marginal, however, in the light of 1990's post-Marxist anti-foundationalist politics, as it grappled with the issues of multiculturalism and the question of the relationship between identity and difference, universalism and particularism after the fall of the Berlin Wall. This is why I propose to read the futural drive of Butler's improper queerness in conjunction with Ernesto Laclau's "Subject of Politics, Politics of the Subject" (LACLAU 2007). Laclau's stance frames the question of the relationship between particularism and universalism within the context of cultural relativism and post-identity politics, when it becomes increasingly hard to envisage a political subject capable of uniting several struggles – an issue that is also shadowed by the conflicts around "queer": should it function as an inclusive umbrella term, or as a term that multiplies difference? In bringing up Laclau my goal is also to hint at a 'universality' that remains unthought in queer theory. Its function is to reveal a general equivalence that underscores the political reliance on affirmative difference(s). Whereas in Butler whateverness appears through the tropes of futural opening and lack of ownership, Laclau theorizes it as the "empty place" of the universal (LACLAU 2007: 56-60).

According to Laclau, the site of universality is empty because it has no content, or at least no content that belongs to it. Moreover, it is not a physical or empirical space, but a postulated outside, transcending the system of differences that make up the political terrain. By acting in this way it provides a boundary defining the social field. Social differences are inherently relational, that is, they depend for their identity on the identity of others and on their mutual stability. In this relational context with no transcendent foundation, any claim to a right or any struggle against discrimination can only rely in its demand on a logic of equivalence located outside the system. Although such an outside does not materially exist, it needs to exist as a political function, an empty repository from which any new claimant can borrow the source of its own affirmative right. In this sense, particularism and difference can only be affirmed in their contingency through some kind of shared commonality, which refers to nothing that is inherent in them. Particularism needs to rest on some

relative universalization, a logic of equivalence that must be indifferent to the content over which the struggle is being fought. This indifference is the source of politics.¹⁰

Literally nowhere (“empty place” is equivalent to non-place, or Utopia), this universality, blind to whoever resorts to it, has no content, a non-foundational premise to which any political subject can lay claim. Without this empty outside, there would just be an endless array of differences in a flat space of immanence, with no capability for change, according to Laclau. Thus, political change is activated when a particular subject appropriates the function of equivalence in order to resist the existing regime of differences (the status quo). By doing so, universality is temporarily embodied in a political subject. This explains why universality is always enacted by way of a *particular* demand. The latter is both particular and universal: a double articulation that Laclau adapts from the Gramscian notion of hegemonic relationship. Since the emptiness of equivalence can only be translated into political content by a particularized subject, universality is always (mis) represented through particularity. At the same time, through hegemony a particular struggle also advances the principle of relative equivalence.

In the guise of emptiness and indifference the whateverness of universality acts in Laclau as a political premise for any hegemonic articulation. It is the empty ground that allows for the intertwining of the particular and the universal. Because of its non-propositional content, emptiness has the endless capacity to keep the chain of equivalence open. In this sense we can also call it queer, as long as we understand queer not as a name among others in the chain of equivalence LGBTQIA tending to infinity, but as the empty name ensuring the equivalence and incompleteness of the terms in the chain. Thus, through abstract equivalence history and politics may be joined again: by supplementing the logic of difference, which would only lead to a dead end if left to itself, empty universality is able to introduce historical change through its contingent hegemonic articulations.¹¹

¹⁰ Recently, William Watkin has investigated Alain Badiou’s thinking (in particular *Being and Event*) and brought to light its core of “indifferent being” (WATKIN 2017). This is only part of a more general tendency to reinscribe what I have called whateverness within our thinking about difference, particularity, specificity and singularity. I believe this is what queer theory has always envisaged, at least implicitly, by its embodied focus on the event of its multiple, in(de)finite singularities.

¹¹ My interest in Laclau’s universality lies in its double aspect of: general availability (a ‘whatever generality’) and particular hegemonic articulation. The latter, however, does not dispel the former. The specificity of any hegemonic articulation can be at any moment contested, because

Universality without content, thus, should not be confused with any of its previous totalitarian incarnations, white, Western and masculine: it can be redeemed as the foundation for all transformative political change in an era that has rejected all transcendent foundationalism. The fantasy of totality embodied by the latter is radically rejected: “Precisely because it is a constitutive lack, there is no content which is a priori destined to fill it, and it is open to the most diverse articulations.” (LACLAU 2007: 67). Politics exists because no difference can be shown to resolve and unify the social field; by the same token, it can only exist historically by positing a universal that is equally lacking in resolution. Figuring whateverness as another name for this empty universality, it can be argued that its resourceful lack is necessary in order to think the social field as un-totalizable, therefore politicizable. Politicization needs a site that is not coincident with the one that is given; this is why its subject – the political subject – cannot be the given, either. Whateverness would name the site and condition of this non-givenness.

TEXT 5

Agamben in the disco: pausal politics.

Through tropes such as remainder, surplus, excess, or supplement, the queer whatever ensures the becoming of the social field through its own particular kind of *work*; it is a productivity without a name that can easily be turned into an ethical task: a correction, a making-just, a restitution of sorts. This is what continuing democratization means, a never-ending work embodied by whoever embraces the task of imputing a failure, of carrying one of democracy’s endless names. Appearing on the scene of history through the event of its own (coming to) being – its visible appearance – the queer subject is always the bearer of a burden. Historicity *is* burdensome, after all. The scene of exasperation with which this essay has opened out grasps the moment when the work of sustaining one’s own

it is a specificity that is impurely so, marred – so to speak – by the generic nature of its ordinary occurrence. This would be one way to make universality count as a potential for any – whatever – subject. The politics of difference and the struggle for universality are not alien to one another. Particularity, according to Laclau, should keep “open, and constantly redefine[s], its relation to the universal” (LACLAU 2007: 65).

dialectical role – whether in history or in discourse – ceases to pay the ethical dividends of activism. Why ought *being* to be like work? Can whateverness, for once, not figure the relentless indeterminacy that still needs to be produced, but rather the indeterminacy that is already there? Let’s step out into a disco to search for a wholly different cup of politics.

Circa 1984, having survived the disco backlash of the late 70’s in the USA¹² and now under the spell of the HIV virus which had just been ‘identified’, thousands of anonymous dancing bodies started moving at the sound and rhythm of Gloria Gaynor’s “I am what I am”. Despite soon becoming a ‘gay’ anthem, due to its clear references to “pride” and opening up “your closet”, the politics of the song is a far cry from any kind of identity politics. In the disco, an anonymous assemblage of bodies, technologically linked via the sound system, embraces an I that is both/neither individual and/nor collective, whose politics takes place in a space of self-exposure, rather than one of public exhibition, appearance or event directed at others. This space is home to a special kind of politics, one that feeds itself on effortless existence, that is, a being that neither needs to be made just nor has to convene in the space proper to politics in order to be recognized. On the contrary, by seeming to reproduce insulation and in shutting out what keeps one out, the separatist politics of the disco would seem to perform the perfect suspension of politics, or at least the temporary fantasy of its abolition.¹³

The seeming disappearance of politics in this space stems from the relative illegibility of the disco dancers in relation to the categories underpinning the identity of politics. If there must be some visible work, productivity, or rupture in order for the event of politics to take place, then the ostentation of play, the improductivity and the emphasis on flow will

¹² Famously exemplified by the burning of disco records at the Disco Demolition Night, Comiskey Park, Chicago (July 12th, 1979).

¹³ There is still a lot to be done to investigate the politics of the dancefloor from a queer theoretical perspective, joining cultural studies with studies of affect, queer body politics with sound studies. Compared to the activism of political movements, the moving-together of dancing bodies has often been devalued as non-political: escapist, hedonistic and improductive. I call it ‘pausal’ politics not only because it is a pause from politics, but also because it is a politics of the spare time, a ‘nightly’ politics. Paraphrasing Rancière, dancing the night away is a “night of labor”, a time where a different kind of work is produced, i.e. a work that will not count as work. This bodily movement may not be the ‘alliance of bodies’ on the streets visibly reclaiming a public space, but is nonetheless a collective technology of space production, intensely sexualized. See, among others, NYONG’O 2008; ECHOLS 2010. On Gloria Gaynor’s “I will survive”, cf. HUBBS 2007.

pose an obstacle to the amount of negativity necessary for the political return of the whatever subject. Dancing is a dangerously liminal activity, bordering on inaction, on letting go: you move to the music in a way that is akin to some sort of ‘animatedness’, rather than agency.¹⁴ The dancers are “slaves” to the rhythm (Grace Jones), caught in the repetition of the groove. The dancers may well form a collective assemblage moving in unison, but the very activity they indulge in and the non-dialectical space in which they expose themselves paradoxically re-privatize their coming out of the “closet”: they are the perfect parody of the political collective body. This is why dancing threatens politics, by offering an *ersatz* to proper activism, thereby postponing, or bracketing, a ‘higher’ form of mobilization. In order to imagine a politics accounting for the movement of these dancers, we need to conceive a different form of whateverness and a politics that knows otherwise than the positionality of antagonism, one that is not dependent on negation as a causal motive for one’s own staged comeback: something like an existence (a pure exteriority) that needs no outside emptiness as a motor of change. This whateverness will appear machinic, self-moving, without lack: a Deleuzian body-without-organs, if you will. Or a “whatever singularity”, such as Agamben’s *quodlibet*, which is – I would argue – the perfect figure to read the pausal, or suspensive, politics of the disco dancer.

“I am what I am”: isn’t this a refusal to say what one is, while representing at the same time the most explicit affirmation of self-ownership, indeed of ‘self-production’ (“I am my own special creation”)? At first sight, this refusal is hard to reconcile with a politics of pride, with coming out as a ‘coming out *as X*’? However, the dancers’ refusal to specify through language does not mean a lack of forwardness in *showing* what one is: it simply privileges exposure to representation. Disregarding the latter, the dancer to “I am what I am” does not shy away from claiming an unnamed subjectivity that, while ignoring the requirements of acknowledgment and/or acceptance (the “excuses”, the “praise”, the “pity”), is worthy no matter what. There is a core of indifference and irrelevance to the worth that accrues to the subject, which is neither seen as a reward for oppression nor

¹⁴ Ngai discusses animatedness as the heightened disposition to be moved, often racialized, but especially connected to modes of directed or automated agency in the post-Fordist era (NGAI 2005: 89-125). This would also suggest a connection between disco dancing and automated motion, a kind of agency that is only partly attributable to the dancer. The politics of disco dancing, and even more so of later techno, plays with ‘animated movement’ rather than with activist movement.

as a prize in exchange for some dutiful action. This worth no-matter-what exists as such and, unsurprisingly, is felt as an ecstasy, a rapture that is embodied and unconditional. This ecstatic whateverness neither trades in emptiness nor is driven towards the future: on the contrary, it consists in the fulness of all the attributes that might legitimately follow “I am”. As Agamben would say, the only condition that they share is that they are “lovable” (AGAMBEN 1993: 2). It is a whateverness held and sustained by self-desire, an indifference that is democratic to all its possibilities: “Quodlibet ens is not ‘being, it does not matter which’, but rather ‘being such that it always matters. [...] Whatever being has an original relation to desire” (AGAMBEN 1993: 1, “Whatever”).

Agamben names this subject a “whatever being”, or “whatever singularity”. It is a singularity, “such as it is”, claiming the same kind of superfluous predication found in the song: “such-and-such being is reclaimed from its having this or that property, which identifies it as belonging to this or that set, to this or that class [...] and it is reclaimed not for another class nor for the simple generic absence of any belonging, but for its being-*such*, for belonging itself” (AGAMBEN 1993: 1-2).¹⁵ Dancers in the disco have their own way of belonging, though not belonging *to*: the missing attachment would refer them to a class or a set, ready-made to harvest what is shared among its members. For the ‘coming community’ of the dancers, though, there is nothing that is shared except whatever is lovable in each one of them. Love is sustained as an immanent and therefore concrete capacity, forgetful of how politics needs you to be the unloved in order to make you react to this. Theirs is a collective capacity: the dancers need to be dancing together in order to turn their singularity into something sufficiently generic as to become, in Agamben’s terms, “exemplary” (AGAMBEN 1993: 8-10) and “special”, that is, adhering to their qualities “generically and indifferently [...] without allowing any of them to identify” the whatever being (AGAMBEN 2007: 58). They thus become the irredeemable, waiting for nobody or nothing in order to be saved, or to acquire worth.

As the amount of energy spent (wasted?) in the disco manifestly shows,

¹⁵ The reference to whatever-being as not belonging to this or that set confirms the relevance of set theory to Agamben’s work, which he had already developed in the pages of *Homo Sacer* dealing with the relation between example and exception (AGAMBEN 1998: 24ff.). See WATKIN 2013, especially ch. 4, for a comparison between Agamben and Badiou on this account. For a useful overview of Agamben’s *quodlibet* see SALZANI 2012.

the ‘self-creation’ that goes on in the dancing together is indeed a kind of ‘work’, provided we take such work to be unproductive, a ‘means without ends’. It is also the work of a community: this should not be confused with the production of individuality, that is, a set of specific qualities making up the unrepeatable, self-sufficient and unique agentive subject. Indeed, Agamben’s thinking pushes the ‘indistinction’ of whatever being so far as to make its community illegible, a pure ‘anything’ appearing as such, with all the qualifications that make it so, but without any one of them becoming hegemonic, or installing a discrete regime of differences. Created in what Agamben calls “limbo” (AGAMBEN 1993: 5-7) – we might as well call it a disco – the whateverness sustained by the abolition of differences is ceaselessly emerging. Rather than poised between an I and a we, the dancers are oscillating between the two, indifferent to the choice between generalization and individuation. Outside the logic of representation, whateverness ceases to be the empty repository whose function is to articulate a universal equivalence onto a contingent particularity. In other words, whateverness is not the expedient emptiness that must always be filled: it becomes the interface that allows the passage and endless conversion of equivalence into particularity, indeed their suspension. Any singularity straddles the two slopes: its own way of doing so is the particular manner in which each one opens out to the world. This ‘ethical’ stance, then, has no future in mind: it is the ‘ethos’ (bearing or comportment) through which life manifests itself as extension, out there and in the present (AGAMBEN 1993: 19). Such whateverness is a way to conceive difference as generic and inessential, a common property of what Agamben calls “form-of-life”,¹⁶ communicable especially through blank gestures of refusal. Its mode of action lies in the refusal to adhere to the demands made by any politics that knows better. Being outside salvation (and liberation), no external positivity is allowed to touch it.

Back to 1984, there is a sense in which thousands of ‘gay’ dancers (and lesbians, Latin*s, blacks...) could be both out and proud of their own self-created identity, and yet shout out “I am what I am” in a refusal to specify their identity. This need not be contradictory. Partly this has to do

¹⁶ For a definition of “form-of-life” in Agamben see the concise entry by Alex Murray in *Agamben Dictionary*: “form-of-life cannot be given any attributes or qualities, existing in opposition to the biopolitical capture of life. To give it attributes would be to isolate forms, splitting life from itself as one attempted to capture it” (MURRAY and WHYTE 2011: 71-73).

with the creation of a special place – the disco as ‘limbic’ space – that does not demand identity in order to ‘work’. More importantly, there is no need to assume that whateverness cannot also be found within the very heart of identity politics. Instead of the term “gay” meaning a *specific* identity, differentially produced, the same term might be taken up (loved) as a temporary stand-in for all the other attributes and ways of being in the world that are equally lovable. In fact, who would want to be loved only for their gayness without wanting to be loved also no-matter-what? Love of difference and indifferent love: Agamben’s impolitic community is steeped in the everyday practices that make both possible.

TEXT 6

Becoming whatever.

In the context of the changes brought about by 21st century capitalist economy, whateverness mutates, too. On the one hand, it takes on the mask of global neo-liberism with its relentless erasure of differences. Above all, capitalism embraces whateverness as endless capacity for differentiation, all the while managing discontinuity through modulation. Thus, whateverness becomes the raw material of a new biopolitical economy, its inherent availability grabbed hold of and actualized, with an apparent disregard for the need to produce stable subjectivities. In this light, whateverness should not be approached as an ontological property, but primarily as a mode of production and control. Biocapitalism produces it in order to extract value from the actualization of some (as many as possible) of its potentialities.¹⁷ As biocapitalism knows well enough, whateverness is a becoming different whose promise lies in the endless self-transformation of the system, envisaged as an all-encompassing global ecology producing all the change it needs *from within*. Turned into a biopolitical product, whateverness is liable to be analyzed and critiqued as an apparatus of governmentality by Foucauldian and post-Foucauldian queer feminist and anti-capitalist critical theories.

On the ‘other’ hand, whateverness also produces life effects. No amount

¹⁷ On biocapitalism see for instance CODELUPPI 2008; MARAZZI 2010. On affective biocapitalism and the shifting meaning of the body at the crossroads of “a never-ending modulation” beyond sex and gender, see TICINETO CLOUGH 2003.

of critique will alter the fact that nobody can enjoy an exteriority in regard to it, or a vantage point that is outside this ‘life’. This is why whateverness can never be just critiqued without also being experienced as a *biopolitical* event, i.e. an event constituting its own reality. The systemic disregard for stability mentioned above enhances, if anything, its liveness. Being felt as life, whateverness produces also a different range of promises from the ones that would advance biocapitalism. For instance, whateverness fails to stabilize the system of differences holding in place hierarchical binaries (subject/object, life/matter, male/female, and so on): a horizon opens up with all the potential of a flat horizontality – a whatever plane of general equivalence –, which is accelerated by the expanding connectivity fueled by contemporary biocapitalism. To be sure, even such a term as *life* fails to convey the whatever convergence that makes up its uncanny materiality. Although the global network of biocapitalism mimics the organicity of a complex living machine, it would be hard to define its ever-expanding reach as a unified totality, on account of its fundamental heterogeneity. Its ‘life’, then, is no longer mainly human or organic. Cutting indifferently across species, lifeforms, body parts, machines, texts, frequencies, pixels, data, this systemic whateverness produces entropy and turbulence, collapsing control and chaos to the point of indistinction. Such non-teleological autopoiesis constitutes the uncanny superposition of life and capital in the 21st century. Mutually convertible into one another, both appear to share the same logic.

In order to investigate the possibilities of political production in the biocapitalist plane of immanence, I propose to turn to the experimental praxis of transitioning testified by Paul B. Preciado (hereafter PB) in *Testo Junkie. Sex, Drugs and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era* (PRECIADO 2013), one of the contemporary classics of queer transfeminism: a “record of physiological and political micromutations” (PRECIADO 2013: 11). PB, assigned to the female gender at birth and socially programmed as ‘woman’, takes the decision to undergo a self-managed treatment of gel testosterone in order to hack ‘her’ own gender by chemical means. Significantly, PB calls this process “becoming T”, since this is neither a becoming male nor a becoming female: T stands for the unmarked continuum between M and F, a hovering between the two. T stands, in fact, for transition itself, having no end and bearing no proper name. Unlike ordinary autobiographies, where the knowing subject narrativizes the

life-story that has already produced the self that is now writing, this is an auto-techno-biography whose writing undoes subjectivity, or at least “the psychopolitical neoliberal modeling of subjectivity” (PRECIADO 2013: 117). It is a writing *within* transition, not the writing *of* a transition.

The challenge faced by PB is to produce a political gesture out of ‘her’ transition, through the body and by means of a body that is radically immersed in the immanent plane of what s/he calls the pharmacopornographical regime (hereafter PPR). Indebted to Foucauldian micropolitics, to feminist materialism and to Deleuzian deterritorialization, PB’s desire to salvage a political fiction in the midst of a becoming where life and capital mirror one another deserves a closer look. Defined in the text as a practice devoted to the “invention of subjectivity” (PRECIADO 2013: 93), it is also an invention of politics as groundless practice: a recoding of the heterogeneous material that flows and circulates in the immanent plane of PPR. The topology of immanence dumps the would-be political subject in a sprawling ‘middle ground’, where the term “middle” stands both for pure instrumentality (means without ends) and for mediation (the general condition of being-in-relation). Its subjectivities are actually *interfaces*, a medial condition that transfigures the body, too. This has crucial consequences especially for feminist and queer politics, because both are usually meant to be agencies of *body* politics. Turned into a material-semiotic interface, can this body afford anything resembling a critical leverage? In PPR what makes the body crucial is its capacity to be captured, engaged in material relations and affected by the forces that traverse it. Its liveness depends on interference, not on autonomy. Therefore, body politics no longer consists in claiming one’s own body, but in claiming a share in its ‘alienation’, namely, the positive property of becoming other. Agency becomes uncanny: it is a ‘minor’ agency, a distributed one. The political claim can only refer to an agency that is nobody’s – nobody owns it – and anyone’s – the agency of one that is already becoming other, whatever one is becoming.

This body politics is necessarily post-human. The body-as-interface is always an assemblage. In *Testo Junkie* PB dives into the bio-technological machine that composes the contemporary ‘human’ body through networks of sex, gender, chemicals, plastics, drugs, beauty products, prostheses, fuel resources, which in turn produce hybrid assemblages that cross the economic, ecological, military and somatic planes. Lacking a

discrete source, agency is not only diffuse but also multidirectional – a co-agency irreducible to an ethics of collaboration. Shaped in its becoming by performative feedback loops, causes and effects are also temporally dislocated, making it impossible to say “which comes first” (PRECIADO 2013: 34). This renders opaque the traditional notion of action, defined as a production of an effect as a result of a discernible agency. Agency itself becomes enmeshed in passivity, in affect: the capacity to affect and *be affected*. As PB affirms, “I personify a dyke-transgender condition made up of numerous biocodes, *certain of which are normative and others spaces of resistance and still others potential places for the invention of subjectivity*” (PRECIADO 2013: 93, italics mine). Mastering the mesh in which normativity, resistance and invention are overlaid seems out of the question. Politics is no longer master of its own signifiers. We may ask: is there a way to know for certain *which* biocodes are normative, *which* are resisting, *which* are ushering in new subjectivities?

One way to differentiate between the normative and the resisting is to introduce a qualification in the rule of immanence and deterritorialization. If PPR could be shown to be stratified into temporally asynchronous planes, some would appear to be engaged in the endless production of whateverness, while others, perhaps a trace of ‘previous’ disciplinary stages, would still be concerned in management and control. The overlapping of these planes would allow for effects of asynchronicity and re-territorialization. As PB underlines, the body is the last hiding place of the biopolitical systems of control (PRECIADO 2013: 78-79). Even though the productive logic of PPR is driven by a desire for expenditure and transformation, its ‘other’ privatizing logic, bound to accumulation, reinstalls prohibitions and enclosures. One case in point is the gender norm, a system of enclosure that creates and maintains a hierarchy within the (human) species via the control over the binary codes of male and female. Only the persistence of enclosures barring or limiting whateverness allows for the chance of a political subject, whose politics, in fact, would appear to share the logic of PPR: the freedom to engage in the invention of whateverness through a differentiation that escapes the control of socio-semiotic gatekeepers. Its antagonism, radically different from previous forms of oppositionality, upholds the generalization of the means of producing whateverness, fighting for their “becoming common” (PRECIADO 2013: 127). Emancipation is not for the subject, it is for the network: a liberation of its general potential and

desire for transformation. The political figure for this copyleft embodiment is the pirate, the freeloader, or, in more contemporary discourse, the hacker. In such a mode, politics gets reconfigured as a struggle for open access to the unlimited and unknowable potential of differentiation. It surfaces in the nodes where access is denied, where territorialization safeguards the enclosures known to accumulate profit.¹⁸

Becoming T, however, is not just about getting hold of the means of production: it is, above all, about a ‘politics of invention’. On the other hand, because this invention merges with an undifferentiated desire for becoming, its political drive is also absorbed into the whatever life of the plane of immanence. In a regime of positive production politics becomes opaque, so that even the desire for politics becomes suspect. Where to draw a line between biopolitics and life itself, and why? The former would as soon disappear as it is affirmed. Once becoming becomes a generic mode of producing life, politics becomes illegible. Can this illegibility become politicized in turn? PB argues in the affirmative. As s/he transitions – ‘her’ hormonal composition modulated as an effect of the variations in testosterone – ‘her’ body acquires a certain degree of unrecognisability; by hacking the body’s material flows, the socio-semiotic gender codes F and M get blurred and tend to become illegible. This relative illegibility can certainly be recoded as political, once it is identified as the wilful desire for any embodiment that is not captured by the return of signification. Without this notion of capture, producing whateverness would not be sufficient to produce, let alone sustain, the fiction of politics. What is capture, however, if not the condition of becoming attached? Is it possible to neatly split capture into capture in the passive mode (a form of dispossession) and capture as affordance (a form of activation reliant on being available)? Only a notion of ‘negative’ capture would allow for the positive politicization of whateverness, defined by the resisting subject as the production of ever new differentials that elude the possibility of capture by a territorializing semiosis. This politics of endless escape refigures the political subject as a runaway, foiling the captors. Indeed, without fictionalizing oneself as always on the brink of capture, as PB candidly observes, “taking testosterone would never be *anything but a molecular becoming*” (PRECIADO 2013: 143, italics mine). “Anything but”?

¹⁸ Of course, it is also a fictional effect upheld by a certain theoretical critique, which parses the logic of the system and brings out the internal ‘contradictions’ (that is, the differences to itself) that may then enable a fiction of politics.

Why is the yearning for unrecognition, opacity and disidentification (PRECIADO 2013: 397-398) not satisfied by a becoming that is just becoming, without the need of an impediment to acquire activist worth? In passages like these, the desire for becoming and the desire for politics tend to part ways. Politics is recoded as the fear of absorption. Ironically, as long as the political runaway is haunted by the dominant codes of legibility, not even scrambling the gender signal will stop the latter from being parsed, albeit uncertainly, as either F or M. Runaway politics retroactively reproduces the binary codes that stalk its own whateverness. The plot of eternal pursuit is a gothic plot. With a difference, though: here the haunted crypt *has no outside*.

If I have overstressed the anxious element of PB's politics of becoming whatever, one should not fail to be excited, too, by *Testo Junkie's* abandonment to the orgasmic force of General Sex – an empowering loss of self already set in motion by transitioning. Through sexual connectivity PB yields to a force that is anonymous, beyond possession and dispossession. Its euphoric indifference to individuation is experienced as an overwhelming flux, fucking the whole history of bodies in all their unbounded materiality. Becoming T seems to authorize an eroticized gender politics that is multitudinous, a virtual joining with the anonymous swarm of “transgender, mutating bodies all over the planet”, forming “microcommunities” (PRECIADO 2013: 21). Although it is easy to think of them as made up of purely human bonds, they are also, indistinguishably, chemical ones. In any case, while being traversed by the “orgasmic force”, they face a becoming that is indifferent to their ‘nature’, to any attempt at determination. The more indifferent it is, the more powerful:

[Its] strength is of indeterminate capacity; it has no gender; it is neither male nor female, neither human nor animal, neither animated nor inanimate. Its orientation emphasizes neither the feminine nor the masculine and creates no boundary between heterosexuality nor homosexuality, or between object or subject; neither does it know the difference between being excited, being exciting, or being-excited-with. It favors no organ over any other [...]. Orgasmic force [...] aspires only to its own extension in space and time, toward everything and everyone, in every place and at every moment. It is a force of transformation for the world in pleasure – “in pleasure-with” (PRECIADO 2013: 41-42).

There is no scandal if this indeterminate *jouissance* fuels both PPR's bodily production and PB's transfeminist, non-capitalist protocol of bodily

excitation. Through other fictions it would sustain any number of other contingent productions and ecologies of affect. This is how whateverness queers politics itself beyond recognition. In its own becoming, it approximates another fiction that is no less queer: the “Real” plane of non-identity (O’ROURKE 2013). PB has a name for it: “becoming common”, which is a becoming common not just of whateverness, but also of politics itself – a politics so common that it escapes us.

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