ERIC STANLEY ON ***STRUCTURING ANTAGONISM AND THE TRANS/QUEER UNGOVERNABLE***

The Final Straw Radio

Nov 11, 2021

This week, Scott spoke with Eric A Stanley about their new book, *Atmospheres of Violence: Structuring Antagonism and the Trans/Queer Ungovernable,* which was just published by Duke University Press. Eric A. Stanley is an associate professor in the Department of Gender and Women's Studies at the University of California, Berkeley. In collaboration with Chris Vargas, they directed the films Homotopia (2006) and Criminal Queers (2019). Eric is also an editor, along with Tourmaline and Johanna Burton, of *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility* (MIT Press 2017) and with Nat Smith, *Captive Genders: Trans Embodiment and the Prison Industrial Complex* (AK Press, 2015/11).

Search for this interview title at **https://thefinalstrawradio.noblogs.org/** to find links to further resources on this topic, featured music, the audio version, and files for printing copies of this episode.

Eric Stanley: My name is Eric Stanley. I use they/them pronouns. I live, work, and organize and in various capacities and San Francisco, California.

TFSR: I'm super excited to get to talk to you. And specifically we're talking about your recently published book *Atmospheres of Violence*. And before getting into the argument specifically, I just wanted to acknowledge and appreciate that you publish a book with an academic press, Duke University Press, that's very explicitly anti-state and anarchistic aligned, and that find unique, remarkable, exciting. So I was just wondering if you wanted to talk at all about your experience as someone working within academia taking an anti-state position, because I've had a lot of push-back. I've been in and out of universities, and it's not always a very safe place to be explicitly radical, or there's a limited amount of symbolic radicalism that you can do. So I just was wondering if you had any ideas on how you take that position up.

ES: I mean, that's a really interesting question, one that people usually don't ask me. So it made me think a lot. So as you might know, I published my first book that I edited *Capture Genders* on AK Press. So I've worked with them a lot over the years. And I published this one on Duke, because you know, one of the little secrets about having an academic job, if you don't publish on an academic press, you get fired. And then you can never work in the University of California system for the rest of your life. So there's that part of it, the materiality of you know, this is what you have to do. But that being said, my editor at Duke, Elizabeth Ault has been incredibly supportive since the beginning of the project. There's never been any push-back from her. And I feel like she's done a really good job protecting the project in terms of my vision and my politics and my theoretical commitments. So I appreciate that.

And then in the larger question of the academy... and I think, for me, I somewhat fly below the radar. I'm just this small person in this huge institution. And luckily they generally are not paying a lot of attention to me. So that is definitely to my benefit. When the introduction of the book did come out, though, the alt-right started doing all these screen-caps of it and it got very big in this weird alt-right way. They started emailing me and emailing my job and trying to get me fired and all that kind of stuff. But that being said, I think you're exactly right. The university itself is fundamentally right-wing institution. There are some people that can do

okay stuff. I always think about it in terms of it's the place that steals my labor. It's not a thing that I heavily identify with. It's my job that I go to. Sometimes I can do interesting things there.

I really like working with students, and I get to learn from interesting colleagues, but it's not a central part of my understanding of myself. And I think that that allows me to be like "Okay, it's just that thing over there. And then I leave there." My organizing oftentimes hasn't actually crossed over. My organizing life is pretty separate. I think that that has been important to me as well. All that being said, I'm sure it's coming for me any moment. I think it's always a matter of time. It's not really if, it's always when.

TFSR: Well I hope you can continue to use the resources that it gives you to do the work you're doing. And you do, in the book bring, distinct from your personal organizing, bringing that perspective into a theoretical academic work, which I think is really important. Because a lot of the time the theory is so far away from any kind of street level, grassroots movement. So I guess one of the things that I thought was really important in your argument is that it's specifically taking a stance against the state. And so, given that, and then we're talking within an anarchist radio show and podcast, I was wondering how you define the state in its workings of power, but also as an object of our countering our political movements. Also if you want to talk a little bit about one of the things that I found really important in your book is how you highlight the incoherence of the state, and also the way that we reproduce this logic. So yeah, just if you want to talk a little bit about the state.

ES: Yeah, another incredibly big question, but it also is really important. So for me, the way that I think about the state is I think I call it something like a collective projection, meaning that the state is not something fundamentally external to us. It's the collective 'we.' That's both good news and bad news. We have the ability to radically transform it, the way it transforms us, perhaps end it. But we also must be accountable to the ways that we allow it to continue. So that also seems really important to me. There is a certain kind of critique within anarchist thought or anti-statism, or whatever you might want to call it, that always assumes that the state is something external, that we have no accountability for its violence. And I actually think we have to make ourselves account to that continuing

violence under the name of stopping it. So I think that that's why that configuration is really important.

Then I also think about the collective projection of the state being its totality, is useful, because it also helps us understand the way that we're constantly reproducing it. It's not only the cops in our heads, but the state itself is in our head. This is not to say that the murderous institution of the state is not real. And that we don't all equally have to be accountable for its violence. But I am interested in why and how we continue to allow it to exist.

So on the question of the incoherence of the state form, there's this other kind of simplistic story that oftentimes gets told that the state has some kind of external force that just bears down upon us. If that were true it actually be much easier to fight. So that's why argue about argue that we must understand its radical incoherence as indeed, its vicious fortitude that allows, which is also to say, mandates, that we have a much more nuanced understanding of the relationship between the collective 'we' and something that we imagined to be external, like the state.

TFSR: Yeah, that's really helpfully laid out. I'm thinking about what you're saying now in terms of the way us and anti-authoritarian anti-state movements relate to the state as something where fighting. Because on the one hand you talk about how we reproduce the state everyday, just in our relationships. I am going to refer to a tweet that I saw you made recently, which is 'it's not that our demands are too little, that we need to demand more.' I really thought that was an important point, because when we temper our demands, we give the state too much power in some way. That's how I was understanding it. If you want to jump off there. I'm thinking about how we can fight the state in a way that's not just always on the back foot, reacting to its incoherence and then narrowing our horizons because it feels so impossible.

ES: Yeah, this is obviously deeply in conversation with prison abolitionist thought and organizing as well. I actually see them as fundamentally the same project, even though people definitely disagree with that. But for me, one of the forms of violence that the state takes is this radical narrowing of our dreams, our demands, our wants our desires. It always forces us to ask for less and be happy with nothing. That's why I think the internalization of the state, that kind of analysis is so important, because that's actually something that we're doing for the state. Even before they say 'no',

if we're gonna think of it as something external, we're already saying 'no' to ourselves and to each other.

TFSR: Yeah. So also, the thing that you fit within the scope of your analysis is democracy. Which, again, I think is something that is an under analyzed, over suggested answer to all the problems. I know, in an anarchist milieu it's often something that we're critical of. But I wonder if you had any thoughts about how we can let go of democracy as this ubiquitous solution to our problems. Like more democracy is gonna solve the problem?

ES: Yeah, so the code of the book really thinks about this question. And I end with a bunch of open ideas, so it's not incredibly definitive. And but something that led me there was thinking about what is democracy? If it's something that both allegedly the left and the right argues over, then what is it substance? And oftentimes the argument is, like you're saying, the left will say 'Oh, the state's not democratic enough' and the right is saying 'Oh, it's too democratic.' So one of the things that I'm interested in asking throughout the text is 'what is this idea of democracy? How is it enabling our more radical dreams for freedom or liberation? How is this thing that we're holding on to also holding us down?' And of course, I'm not drifting toward some sort of totalitarian dream. Just to be clear, that's not that's not the direction I'm going. Democracy is so open, right? It's a placeholder that collects up a lot of different things. And so some formations of it, yes, definitely. But other formations of it are in and of itself already a kind of totalitarian regime.

So I'm interested in pulling apart the kind of steady understanding that we have of it, that we think that we have of it, that we're all thinking about the same ideas and the same concept. Also how that is one of the ways that the state disciplines us. Through the demand of democracy and as a kind of future-oriented process or project that we can never quite achieve. It's always the democracy to come and it's never here. And one of the things I ask is 'what if it's already here?' And what if, instead of an imperfect democracy, what if imperfection is indeed the system itself?

TFSR: Yeah. I guess that really ties into the sort of central argument as it relates to trans and queer life. I'm going to kind of try to encapsulate it: that racialized anti trans and queer violence is a necessary expression of the liberal state, not a fault that will be reformed away. Or the

violence that trans and queer people experience is a fundamental part of the atmosphere that we live in, using your term. Could you elaborate a little bit on this sort of understanding of how queerness and transness relate to the State and violence, and also where you see transness and queerness opening a horizon for liberatory struggle?

ES: Sure, so the book, as you just articulated, is an extended meditation or grappling with what I understand to be the fact of violence. Which is to say that it's not an aberration of the state form, but indeed, is one of its foundations. And so to me, what that means is that the way that we commonly are taught to think about violence, is that especially violence directed at specific populations for example here, trans and queer and gender non conforming people, is that it's just the work of a few bad apples or a few bad actors, or whatever metaphor you want to use, directed at specific people. And what I do by paying close attention to the scenes of violence, which are really horrible, is I tried to build an analysis that understands that those specific actions are an ambassador for a larger murderous culture.

For me, that is incredibly important, because, in the final instance, the book is deeply invested in ending the scenes of violence. But, I don't allow myself or the theoretical tools that I use to rely on the State, something like the police or any other facet of the state as remedy to that violence. And so then the question is 'what what is to be done?' "What can we do?" There's many other ways to think about this. But I think centering the question of the state itself is necessary. Otherwise we're caught in this feedback loop where we just keep at best, addressing specific instances without radically destroying the world that mandates them. And I think that that is the necessary move that we have to make.

TFSR: Yeah. In the book, you really pull from Fanon and his theorizing of anti-colonial struggle. And so I'm wondering about violence to on the part of liberation. I want to quote you, you talk about 'violence as a generalized field of knowledge that maintains this collective undoing lived as personal tragedy of those lost to modernity', speaking specifically about racialized trans and queer people who are subjected to this kind of violence, but you also place violence as a tactic within our struggle. So I was wondering where you see it on our side as a way of like getting free.

ES: Sure. So, the primary figure that I think with throughout the book is probably Frantz Fanon. He allows for many things and among them is a re-conceptualization of the time of violence. When does it end? When does it begin? And I argue that the scene does not begin or end with an individual attack, but constitutes the very possibility of that altercation in the first instance. Right. And so we've already kind of re-positioned the temporality of violence. I think that that's where we have to begin.

Fanon, of course, argued that revolutionary violence was a necessary precondition under the state of total war, that was racialized, colonial occupation, right. So that's something that a lot of people know about Fanon. And so for him in the first instance, we could not 'reject violence' when it is already here. And so it's repositioning our relationship to the very question. And so, I'm interested in thinking about how we might respond to not escalate that harm, but also under a commitment to ending it in a much more structural way, than the way that we're thinking about it now. That's why I'm always thinking with and sometimes beside Fanon on this question, because it's so incredibly fruitful the way that he articulates it.

TFSR: Yeah, that's a really helpful way of thinking about kind of the method of analysis that you bring to the book. The book is difficult to read for multiple reasons. One of the main ones being that it's involved in this archive of anti-trans-and-queer-'violence. And then each chapter is structured around specific events that you talk about. And, you talk about what it means to describe the violence and trying not to reproduce the power operations that are under girding it, even while trying to use your analysis to end it. So I wonder if you want to talk a little bit about how you feel you're able to engage with this horrific, genocidal archive of daily, trans and queer violence in the United states while not feeding into that, but also like what you say, kind of 'reading from the perspective of struggle' because this would be an intervention into that time of violence from the point of view of ending it.

ES: Yeah, so I think that this is another open question that I sit with throughout the text. I think that place of ambivalence is not a place of knowing or not knowing, but indeed, is a kind of theoretical commitment to being in the time of antagonism. I never know in advance how should I narrate this. How can I be as careful as possible? How can I be as precise as possible? Without a kind of empty re-traumatization, just for the

sake of re-traumatization. We all know that that's not useful for anybody. And related, not engaging with the archive is another form of violence. Looking and looking away are both equally tied up in the totality of its scene. None of us can assume to be pure subjects outside of it. Then what I attempt to do is go slowly. Think with people that are both survivors, and not pay really close attention to the language that they're using. How they're experiencing their own life, how they're theorizing their own life. For me, it's about not using people's really horrific events as simple analogies or as examples. But I argue that they're theorizing all the time. And does it work? Does it not work? I don't know. But that's as close as I could get. Again, for example, I don't show graphic pictures in the book. When I do narrate things, I try to go slowly through it, and I try to talk about why I'm doing it and why I'm making certain choices and I'm not making other choices, right? Sometimes survivors say this is what happened to me and I want everyone to know. And so in a certain sense that allows us a little bit more space. But I actually think in the larger scheme of things, it doesn't really. We're still in that scene, even if a survivor wants something specific. I think I'm just trying to hold all those contradictions at the same time and push them to the front as opposed to hiding them.

TFSR: Yeah, it really comes through to me as you were talking about the people who are involved in these experiences theorizing them themselves. You don't have a hierarchy of who produces knowledge in your book, which is also I think unique from an academic perspective, which really does separate the people that are being described from the people doing the analysis. So you locate trans theory in the lived lives of trans people no matter what their educational backgrounds are. One thought I had is that this so called 'trans tipping point' that we're past now, brought into representation, specifically, I think Black trans women in a different way than had been before. But I really feel like it goes hand in hand both on like the reactionary right, and on the left spectacularization of the violence that Black trans women experience that feels like at best useless at worse harmful. And I'm wondering if you have thoughts beyond this about how to work to keep Black trans women alive and not relating to Black trans women as victims. What kind of work we can do right now to support them?

ES: I mean, obviously always asking people what they want and need is where we always start. But I think to your point is incredibly important,

because in the beginning of the book I think a lot about Marsha P. Johnson in the way that she was exiled from mainstream or even radical leftist lesbian and gay culture in the 1970s through the time of her death. Now she's kind of been brought back in as a trans of color, Black trans woman activist ideal. And I make an argument that both of those are violent in and of themselves. So like one of them is not the remedy for the other one, because the way in which she is brought into the archive doesn't disturb the coloniality of the archive itself. All it is, is a kind of accommodation, not for the politics that Marsha was invested in throughout her life, but indeed, to actually support a white supremacist state. And so that is really important, because what I'm also hearing in this question is the ways in which trans women of color get emptied out of content or of politics, and they just become a screen upon which all kinds of people just project a whole lot of things onto them. And so I think that it is all of our tasks, to understand Marsha as a theorist and to read what she wrote and to listen to the words that she said. As opposed to just projecting our contemporary analysis on top of her as an empty subject of history.

TFSR: Yeah, that really gels it for me. In the way that even leftist or radicals or whatever can reproduce the sort of anti-Blackness, I feel like often Black trans women are brought into a conversation as if they're already victims, and not included in the conversation as the theoreticians that you're showing them to be. In certain spaces, obviously, it's not everywhere. Since you mentioned Marsha P. Johnson, one thing that I see you doing in this book is intervening in the history of gay liberation, trans liberation, queer liberation movements, and the way that relates to queer theory. I think early on what was really exciting about the movement, and what still I think resonates with people today is this thought that trans and queer people in themselves are revolutionary in the ways that they live and love and fuck. But that didn't really stop from the assimilationist arm being the main focus of a gay rights movement. I see in the university with queer theory how queerness gets theorized away through power, but then divorced from the actual work, and even the living, I think this is particularly true after the heyday of Act Up. But now I'm seeing more crossover of movement work and academic knowledge production. So I was wondering if you had anything to say about the inheritance of a radical queer legacy, but also where you see your works situated within that inheritance and the location of knowledge production of the academy?

ES: I think that for me... a number of things. I'm always interested in the ways that politics or post-political regimes of intelligibility congeal, more so than identities. I say this all the time, identity is not a politic. San Francisco has many, many trans police officers. I also always say that San Francisco is the laboratory of neoliberalism and any awful thing will always to be developed here in terms of multicultural white supremacy. I study it, because I live it. And that is also to say that all of that analysis... all that comes from organizing. Street-based organizing. One thing that I'm always careful to say is that anything that I have to say that might be useful in this text comes from those worlds. Comes from the worlds that have taught me so much in collective anti-authoritarian or anarchist spaces. So I want to foreground that. And in terms of the specific moment that we're in with scholarship in the academy, I think that there is this kind of turned back towards the kinds of political questions that were not as readily apparent as they were before.

That can be both good and bad. Because I'm also interested in what gets constituted as political and what doesn't, and oftentimes the things that I think are most useful are things that are not on the surface 'political' and then they're really messy problematic ones are the 'political' texts. So, you never know what you're going to get. But I do think that this book in particular, it's kind of interesting. It hasn't been out that long, but it is interesting where it gets taken up and where it doesn't. I don't know if LGBT Studies stuff will really engage with it. I don't know. I mean, I hope so. I hope people look at it, I guess. But I'm not sure what forms that will take yet. I have a whole bunch of open questions. But, towards the point of identity again, I think I explicitly say this in the book is that I don't have anything definitive to say about LGBT or otherwise trans or queer people. I'm not actually making an argument about people. I'm making an argument about formations of vitality or generativity or something like that.

TFSR: That makes sense to me. Maybe a way to rephrase what I was trying to get at is that, the early gay liberation, if you read a lot of the texts, there's this, like, imagination that the revolution is at hand, and part of it has to do with gay life. Like, cruising is revolutionary, or whatever. And then that doesn't happen. That revolution doesn't happen. But then you see this certain kind of... you get to Lee Edelman's version of queer theory in No Future where he's like 'queerness is the death drives of society.' Taking up that same view that queerness is disruptive in some kind of inherent way. Although it's different at this

point, what he's talking about than the Gay Liberation Front or the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries.

How do you understand queer and trans? There's one thing that you describe that I don't think I've ever seen anyone write about this way and I thought it was so important is that we can get slurred at in the wrong way... and yet it's still correct in some manner. Because there's some way that you say we signify differently. So that's a specific kind of visibility that can be wrong and right at the same time. So I don't know if you have a way of talking about how you define trans and queer or the location that we live in?

ES: Yeah, I see what you're getting at. I can only think about it through negation, because I can't think of any kind of prescriptive identity because it's always gonna fail. And so for me, trans and queerness is a retroactive reading practice that can only be known after an identity or an event unfolds. But like you're saying, one of the things that I find really interesting is that, I'm not deeply tethered to the idea of identity itself and yet the world is constituted through identity. At the same time we have these radical critiques of the impossibility to know trans and queerness as a totalizing or generalizing force, nonetheless, I walk down the street and someone knows that better than I know myself. And so that is really interesting. What is it then? To me is why I think about anti trans and queer violence as a kind of general field of knowledge or an epistemology of violence. Because of that everywhere and nowhere-ness that it simultaneously inhabits.

TFSR: Yeah, I guess building on that, do you want to talk a little bit about how you see this disruption, this projection, this negation that gender and sexuality does it goes hand in hand with the process of racialization that has occurred, specifically in the US context through the capture and enslavement of Africans? How does race, gender, sexuality get forged historically as these systems of domination? Because that's a huge part of what you're talking about in the book.

ES: Yeah. It is what the book is about, so sometimes I forget to make it so explicit. So just to be clear, I'm never talking about everyone that 'might identify as LGBT.' That's a useless category for me. And indeed, I also make explicit that many people that identify under those terms that have access to normative power, visa vis white supremacy, ableism, class,

other axises of difference, know very little in the materiality of their life about the forces of violence. So, I'm not making this equal distribution argument. That being said, my book takes as a kind of axiomatic that chattel slavery and settler colonialism are at least in this nightmare of the United States, the primary scenes of gender normativities concretization. And so I don't believe that we can ever do 'queer trans theory' without a deep engagement with both of those as ongoing practices, and indeed not simply facts of history. So I'm not interested in how gender and sexuality took form in slavery as if it's something that happened then and isn't constantly happening now. Right. And so then in attention to the settler state, and its anti-Black idiom is fundamental, if we are ever going to attempt to begin to open up to questions of gender, sexuality, transness, queerness, etc, right? So they can never be separated.

TFSR: I wonder if the way that you talk about this in the lineages of Black feminism that you pull on, specifically of how Hortense Spillers talks about the kind of ungendering of Black female flesh as a site of a potential insurgent ground. To me that always rings in a certain like trans way. And C Riley Snorton builds off that too. A lot of people do. How do you see this situation that often gets narrated as a place of complete domination and violence, also as a place for destroying the world that we live in now and reshaping it in a way that would let people live?

ES: I mean, definitely. I always include Hortense Spillers work as fundamental to whatever might constitute itself as trans theory. And like you are saying people like Riley and many others do this as well. And I think that it's definitely the right move. At least for me, she opened up so many of these questions and continues to do that work. So thinking with her theorization of insurgent ground, we also know that along with the structuring horrors that in their epistemological force, that were, and are chattel slavery, there are always moments of people fighting back. So one of the arguments that I make is that even within a totality, there's still possibility. That might seem kind of contradictory and it is. It's structurally contradictory, because a totality can't have that. But I still think that that's actually how the world works. And it's also the version of the world that I want to hold on to under the name of ending it so that we might build one that we can survive. I don't see that as a kind of linear teleological process, but a kind of simultaneity of action, theorization, revolt, revision, all hap-

pening at one time. I think that that is already happening. So then one of our goals is to hold up those moments where we can see it so that it might open up possibility for others.

TFSR: Yeah. Could we tie this in a positive way to the incoherence that you're talking about -that power works through and the state? Because on the one hand, that makes it so that it's hard to know how to react or we get caught just reacting, but also it means that it isn't coherent, and therefore already over, right?

ES: Yeah, without a doubt, I mean, I think about this all the time just in just in like actual organizing terms, or whatever. We never know what's going to set something off. We just have no idea. We can make all these strategies and theorizations and think we have a plan for it. And then it goes so sideways and it can either open up radical possibility or shut down everything. And we just don't know. And I think that is because of the state's radical incoherence. And it's not a kind of prescriptive politic, but a way of a way of thinking about that, that, of course, there's always a plan for action in relation to it, but also beyond it. So it's not a simple, constant reaction to the state, which is oftentimes what we're tied up in. And that's one of the ways that the state disciplines us. And that we're accepting that discipline through the constant reaction. I understand sometimes we have to do that. And that just as the materiality of living in this awful world. But that being said that's not all of it. And that's also not all of what we're doing. I'm always looking towards those spaces of hyper-marginality, where things that don't look explicitly political, but to me are actually giving me life, giving me possibility, the things that actually helped me go on in the world are these really small moments that oftentimes gets passed over.

TFSR: Yeah, my mind went to something that was very explicitly political. Something, I keep thinking about it and maybe you have some thoughts on this. Last year the pandemic hits, and I'm like 'Okay, we're going to be met with the incoherence of our lives.' The contradictions of being forced to work or not to work and pay your bills or whatever. And, and that was like 'some kind of revolt will happen'. And it didn't happen until George Floyd uprising. I don't want to take away the specificity of the George Floyd uprising, but I think that something is connected between the way that that was generalized outside of Minneapolis and the work that people were doing in response to COVID

even though that maybe wasn't as visible in the moment as a riot. I'm just kind of going off the cuff here. But I feel like that also points to sort of the underpinning racial components of COVID that don't get talked about very often. I don't know if you have any thoughts on that. That was just sort of me thinking about what you're saying.

ES: Yeah, definitely. Of course we're in a settler state, so COVID is going to be explicitly anti-Black and otherwise racist in terms of its impact. So I do think that that's always important to say. I would like to pretend like I'm an accelerationist, but I just have no evidence that that's ever true. Because it actually is a kind of safe place to be. You're like "oh, all we have to do is like... everything will get so bad, it will just go" No, it just gets worse. That's one thing I learned with getting older. And I think it's interesting in thinking about the incoherence of the state because then you're always longing for things you never wanted in the first place. And that's a trip, right? When you're like 'Oh, the good old days when whatever bad thing....' I think about that with gentrification too. When you start longing the things that you used to hate, because at least they're not as bad as the things that are now.

I think that the conditions, retroactively we can maybe think about why things pop off in certain times but we also can't prefigure that because sometimes all the same conditions are there and it just doesn't happen. And I think there's something about the generalized spontaneity of the social world that can't be predicted and can't be corralled. And I think that that's actually really good and beautiful. But that said, we also shouldn't live in a world that has to constantly respond to the unmitigated, unending, anti-Black violence that is leveled against Black people all the time everywhere.

TFSR: Yeah. Well, to return more specifically to the book, in that light we're talking about racialized gender, but also you pull from a Sylvia Wynter-influenced idea that all the violence that we see, that's gendered, sexualized, racialized is tied completely to the ideas of humanity and modernity. And you say that 'the racialized trans queer person rests at the limit of the modern and of the human and is necessary to maintain the lie of those projects sort of through being endlessly disciplined and killed.' This one comes out really clearly in your analysis of suicide. And I don't know if you want to talk about that. But I really love this line that you say trans queer suicide reads the world for

the filth it is because it puts it pretty boldly to me what you're talking about here. So I wonder if you want to talk about how the concepts of modernity and humanity come in to your analysis of the regulation of and killing of trans queer life?

ES: Sure. So throughout the text I kind of intentionally slip between the settler state modernity and enlightenment humanism. And again, I'm not saying that they're all the same thing. But I think together they gather up and they also help name these tendencies of recurrence that we inherit in our contemporary moment. So they're all doing something a little bit differently, but they all help me name something. So, if the human is that which can stand before the law and make claims as its proper subject... that's like the kind of traditional understanding of the figure of the human, then it also needs its double, its Constituent Outside to maintain its stability. So this is a very common figure in Black feminist thought and also and critical theory. The constituent of outside is that which constitutes the human. And then those that are subjugated to the limit, then become limit concepts, and they kind of police the border, the inside/outside, and they're necessary. They're actually the major figures in terms of the schema. Fanon as the same thing, essentially. And so, I think that that is so compelling because of the specific forms of violence that I'm thinking about. It's not just about exiling people. But it's about a kind of incorporated inclusion where people are both forced out and brought in at the same time.

We can think about this with TERFS. TERFS are so fascinated. They spend way more time thinking about gender than I do, a gender professor. It's fascinating. I'm like 'you are obsessed!' I think that that same formation is actually incredibly useful, right? Because that's the form of phobic attachment that I'm interested in. So, it's a kind of inclusive incorporation, where it's both pushing things out and bringing things in and that's actually a really horrifically violent formation to be caught in. It's way worse than just exile, because you're shuttled in between the inside outside, in a scene of total war. And so for me, that ties into this figure of the human as, again, the subject of modernity. And so then the contingent of outside is that structure is what I'm naming as the limit concept. And that's a very like theoretical way of saying it.

Thinking about that in relationship to the chapter that I have on suicide... that chapter is important to me because one of the things that I tried to do in it is depathologize people that are pushed to the limit,

while also wanting to keep people alive. So ,it's not like a kind of nihilistic where I'm like 'this is jouissance' or something like that. I'm like 'this is actually horrific, and I want it to stop.' But I also know that we have to stop gas-lighting people into recreating this narrative that this is an individual choice and that this person alone was pushed to the limit, when indeed the world is pushing people to the limit. The everydayness of racist, transphobic, homophobic, ableist violence is indeed the force that's pushing them there. It's not a kind of self what Fanon calls 'auto destruction' is never really about the person themselves. It's about the way in which they're positioned in a deadly world.

TFSR: Right. I'm sort of like at a loss. I think that's really important the way that you talk about that because you can get so lost in the individual situation to sort of erase the commonplace experience that precedes it for someone who's been harassed their whole life for just being. I wanted to ask you about representation and aesthetics because you have this really interesting analysis of surveillance film. And in that you're kind of going through the filmic image itself and talking about how dominant aesthetics are grounded in anti-Blackness and anti-queerness not even just how its represented, but in the structure of representation. And in your arguments about the specific acts of violence that you are reading, the violence goes beyond the immediate moment. But then you also importantly, I think make room for queer, trans radical art and life as a kind of aesthetic. So, I wonder if you could talk a little bit about anti-Blackness, anti-queerness in aesthetic production, but also the rooms for alternative visions and use of different media?

ES: Yeah, so that chapter I'm thinking a lot with people like David Marriot and his work on racial fetishism, anti-Blackness and the moving image itself. Also, Fanon helps us think about this question, Sylvia Wynter, and a bunch of other people.

But for me, representation is always a double bind. So it's that which brings us into the world. And that which brings us out of the world. I also am a filmmaker. I like films. I understand the way that they literally build a world, and they don't just represent one. So it's not as if I'm arguing for a representational austerity or something like that as the revolutionary possibility of the world. Like, that sounds horrible. No to that. And on the other hand, I know that 'positive representation' is the thing that is most

easily given to us by the Settler State. We demand free housing, free health care, free education, free, whatever it is, and they're like 'Oh, here's a trans side kick on a TGIF show.' Alright. So, one of the things that I always say is that whatever is the thing that they're most ready to give us is the thing that we actually don't need.

And so it's again, holding that contradiction, because I know that representation constitutes the world. And yet it doesn't only do that. That chapter in particular thinks about formalism. Conversations around transness and Blackness sometimes are more interested in the kind of narrative depiction of the image. And I'm interested in that as well but something that's more interesting to me is the formalism of the image itself, because one of the arguments that I make is that you actually don't need a kind of scene of anti-Black anti-transness on on the image for both of those kind of twinned ideologies to be operative. Right. It's kind of ironic, I turned back to a bunch of 1970s film theory, because they're actually thinking about formalism and structural film and things like that, that we don't do as much of now. But that seems really important to me, because I'm trying to get at why changing towards 'positive representation' alone does not change material conditions. That's actually the question. I'm trying to get at.

TFSR: Yeah, I was interested that you were quoting Christian Metz, because that was something from my early grad school days. When you're talking about Fanon's idea that violence precedes and comes after that specific moment, you talk about him in the theater, just sitting in the theater is an anti-Black situation, regardless of what the film is representing. And that makes me think post-George Floyd uprising, the way that all the media companies were doing Black voices and you could still present supposedly Black Lives Matter content in an anti Black environment.

I could nerd out with you a little bit more on the formalism but I kind of want to move to some of the stuff that you you get to at the ending, if that's okay? So, one of the words that comes up in the subtitle, that there's legacies of resistance you give this the name of ungovernable, becoming ungovernable. You take it from the classification that certain queer youth get for their perceived social disruption. And then you also use the word 'sedition' which I was really excited to see. So I take it in my reading of your book that some of the stuff that's happening as a kind of clandestine survival, and maybe this goes back

to being not within the archive and not being represented. But what do you what do you mean by ungovernable? What do you mean by like a queer sedition? How do we have this kind of survival? What kind of worlds does it build? Is it generalizable? Or does it need to be under wraps all the time?

ES: Yeah, I'm not sure if it's generalizable, and I'm not sure if it can be a prescriptive project, it might be something that can only be noticeable in the aftermath of it, or something like that. I'm not totally sure. Ungovernability are big becoming ungovernable is useful for me, because it names that kind of non-space of being both a subject and an object simultaneously. And I think that it's actually how many people are forced to inhabit the world. So, I think that it's generalizable in that reality. But I also think that because many of the practices are clandestine, I'm not interested in bringing them into representation outside of their specificity. I'm not trying to narc people out.

I think about that a lot, our relationship.. like what am I doing? I can only nod towards things. Again, I don't want to be hyper specific about them. But that being said those are some of the moments that are so deeply generative to trans and queer world making. I think it can be so incredibly small, to something really large. It can be like when another trans person's working at the cafe and they give you your food for free. It's actually on those basic levels and how that changes the molecular structure of your body. I actually think about that a lot. And unfortunately, that's becoming increasingly uncommon, it used to be more common, and like the 90s when there weren't security cameras and all that kind of stuff everywhere, and you could just like, give someone a free coffee. Now that person will get taken to jail. I think that there's that.

The examples that I use in the book, are Tourmaline has this really great film called The Personal Things which is this really short stop motion animation film about Miss Major, and it kind of narrates how she changed all of her gender markers. Then she changed them back again because she wanted to be recognized not as a cis woman, but indeed as a transgender person, and they wanted people to love her for that and to fuck all this other stuff. And to me, that moment is.... changing state issued identification was actually much easier in a clandestine way, 25 years ago, because there weren't really massive computer systems. And they were just paper with a picture glued on it. And so I think about that as another way of resisting the biometric drive of the contemporary Settler State. There's

all these movements towards more gender options, which I think are fine. And different forms of biometric technology that are not predicated on gender. But I actually don't think that any of those are going to necessarily get us any closer to freedom in a generalizable way. I understand that yes, they're things that people need to stay alive right now and I always will support that. Especially for people that are in hyper-institutionalized situation. So I always will support that. But that being said, I don't think that that can be the end of as Tourmaline puts it 'our freedom dream'. I think that's the way that we're caught in the cycle of asking for something really small when what we want and need is actually something much bigger.

TFSR: I talked recently with a person who does the organizing with a trans woman inside. The beginning of the campaign was to get her moved to a woman's facility. And it turned out, in retrospect that being in a women's facility wasn't safer than being a men's facility. And now they're denying other forms of support that she needs in there. So maybe that's also a form of the incoherence. That sort of validation doesn't necessarily lead to our survival. But you talked about Tourmaline and Miss Major, and you have this line from Tourmaline that I think is really important too. 'It's easy to be free' which I think becomes irresistible. And you say about this line, 'radical dreaming affords us the space of ease, which is how we might learn to feel freedom.' Then you bring this to Miss Major's life practice as an 'organized yet improvisational practice in common that revels in pleasure and expropriation whose aim is to collectivize exposure toward the exposures abolition.' That again is a quote from you.

Listening to you, in those like minor moments, I've been interested in certain radical trans theory lately that's trying to think about the process of transition, also materially and collectively, not as this individualized gender journey, or whatever. I guess, to frame this as a question, you talk a lot about shared tactics of survival and beloved networks of care. I'm just wondering what you see in terms of trans, queer interdependence moving forward. It's something obviously, that those of us who are here have benefited from in some way.

Sorry, I'm spinning out here about how do we make this a question. A lot of it's just very inspiring to me and I find it very beautiful. So I wonder if you have more thoughts on on these ideas that I'm bringing up from your book?

ES: Sure. I mean, I think, for me, exactly what you're saying... we've all benefited and helped produce these kinds of underground networks of care, that have been the materiality of survival for so many people. And I mean that in an actual way. I know that the other side of that is that not everyone has access to that. And so that's also the reality as well. I'm always thinking about how we can expropriate resources from institutions that have them to support those networks, so that more of that kind of care can proliferate. So that doesn't just become on one individual person to have to do a whole lot of labor for for many people. And that can look like a lot of different things. I think that a lot of the mutual aid projects that have popped up, not all of them, but many of them are really great and interesting, and I think have hopefully helped us all relearn what it means to be in radical relationality with each other. You know, that's my more optimistic take.

But even on the more personal, more intimate level, I'm also interested in how these incredibly personal, hyper local, very specific moments string together to actually build the materiality of the world after the end of the world. And that's why it's already here and already possible. Again, turning to Tourmaline's incredibly evocative and precise statement that 'it's easy to be free.' What does it mean to sit with that statement? And to let that actually wash over you? Because we oftentimes don't have the space or the time or the ability to do that.

TFSR: I find that really important. And one way that you put it in the book that I think is really helpful is calling for a collective life without universalism's commitments, which I guess also goes back to my question 'is this generalizable?" No. It's maybe collective, you can collectivize it, but it's not generalizable because it can't be claimed universally. I just think that's so important. And maybe it's also where you get another limit of that representation, because either being careful, like you were saying, to not snitch on these moments of survival, but also the fear of losing them to the generality.

That's the questions that I had prepared. I did have one thing just come up from the last thing you were saying. I was thinking about how people are afraid of the 'Gay Agenda.' That gay people, queer people, trans people are out to convert. I'm thinking about how you talk about the violence that gets it right and wrong at the same time. Because through these mutual practices of care, we do help each other become gay, or queer, trans. So we are doing that work, but it's not the

way that they think we're doing it. We're not like evangelical Christians. And I wonder if you have any thought about that kind of gay agenda logic?

ES: That's funny, I was just talking about something kind of similar with a friend recently. Hmm. I guess how I would phrase it is that, hopefully we're opening up the possibility for people to live. And so that can look like a lot of different things. And that can look like a lot of different things over time. And that's something that I think we need a lot more of and sometimes that looks like recruitment. I think that's fine, too. I'm from the 90's. So we used to say that.

I think that when you are in the social worlds that allow you to rub up with other people living in such fierce beauty against the drives of the normative state, of course that that's going to be contagious. Because you see all kinds of possibilities that have been substantially foreclosed to you your entire life. So you can feel that on a molecular level, and it's terrifying and beautiful and invigorating and scary and all these things at once. But again, I think it radically opens up life worlds for us and new forms of relationality between us and others.

TFSR: That's a really beautiful way to end our conversation.

The Final Straw is a weekly anarchist and anti-authoritarian radio show bringing you voices and ideas from struggle around the world. Since 2010, we've been broadcasting from occupied Tsalagi land in Southern Appalachia (Asheville, NC).

We also frequently feature commentary (serious and humorous) by anarchist prisoner, Sean Swain.

You can send us letters at:
The Final Straw Radio
PO Box 6004
Asheville, NC 28816
USA

Email us at:

thefinalstrawradio@riseup.net
or **thefinalstrawradio@protonmail.com**

To hear our past shows for free, visit:
https://thefinalstrawradio.noblogs.org