

DUST-GAG-PUKE-GOSSIP

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ABSTRACT

DUST-GAG-PUKE-GOSSIP worships the political potential of chosen family, affective comradeship and subterranean communities. It weaves different methods of knowledge-sharing through text into each other by formally distinguishing two voices: (1) *an embodied voice appealing to the imaginative* and (2) a theoretical voice.

The text's embodied voice uses 'dust', 'gagging' and 'puking' as central concepts. 'Dust' draws upon systems of exclusion and oppression: omnipresent structures that certain bodies fail to digest and to which convulsion might be a response. 'Gagging', then, is positioned as a physical and political obstruction as well as potentiality: an uncomfortable outcome of inhaling dust – the body resisting normative systems – possibly leading to puking, which can be relieving. 'Puking' or 'vomiting' here serves as a liberating act: producing liquid that is both the product of the world's toxic systems as well as an entirely new mush that contains alternate tastes and ingredients in respect to what had been taken in. In vomit thus resides the potential to transgress modes of negation and to produce entirely new 'blends', forms and relations. In their connectedness, the central concepts under the text's embodied voice aim to work through modes of disidentification toward embracing the failure to conform as strength, producing alternate and healing modes of being (together) in community.

The theoretical voice of **DUST-GAG-PUKE-GOSSIP** elaborates on historical and socio-political theories that position the silencing of certain bodies as oppressive tools. Moreover, the theoretical voice shows damaging influences of patriarchy and capitalism on the word 'gossip' and draws upon transgressive and powerful potentialities in speaking together under

oppressive systems. The theoretical voice synthesizes with the embodied voice in the concept of 'gossip'. Both voices offer causes to reclaim 'gossip's' caring potential. Both voices merge in 'gossip' as a political act of healing within chosen family-bonds, affective comradeship and subterranean communities.

CHAPTER ONE

Dusty Encounters

*The air is ghosted
and always already shadowed
from within*

*When we are together
we gossip about shadows, ghosts and pervasive dust
Ghosts and dust are everywhere
In some spaces they twirl more obscurely than others*

*If you are oblivious to dust
the chances are high
you shed galling, if not toxic
contaminated particles*

*Tainted dust is cast out by the most impervious,
bodies and machines, who are lucky
not to retch on their own parts*

We are allergic to haunted dust

As soon as we step outside our wiped-down house

we sense it all the time - our skin and intestines cramp

when we breathe

Our throat contracts when dust flakes whirl down and land

in open wounds, the dust sticks onto our soggy flesh

Your stomach squeezes harder than mine

CHAPTER TWO

Slitting Tongues – Muted Mouths

It is about five centimeters long and pushes the tongue downwards. At the end is a ball, into which a number of sharp iron pins are inserted: three on the upper surface, three on the lower, and two pointing backwards. The pins on the gag press into the moving flesh of the tongue. *I take two fingers and press my tongue down and backwards. Saliva accumulates, and I imagine the metallic taste to be bittersour and nauseating.* The tongue-plate is attached to a metal framework that traps the head, enclosing it as a kind of cage.

This specific scold's bridle, with its peculiar spiked tongue-plate, or gag, was used in Stockport, Britain, until the late nineteenth century. It was known as one of the more brutal of its kind. It would effectively "silence the noisiest brawler."¹ In Whitchurch, a scold's bridle was used that had a revolving wheel at the end of the gag.² *My throat squeezes together and I can feel my uvula. I can imagine it not only being the brank that traps the head and slits the tongue, but also the immaterial structure that fences words, suppresses sound, reduces voice and pushes one's agency – personhood – to the background. It seems to not only vanish speech but also subjectivity.*

Scold's bridles or branks came up in Europe in the Late Middle Ages and were used as an instrument for punishing 'shrews', that is, assertive and 'unruly' women. They were "to

¹ See Andrews, p. 282.

² See Andrews, p. 297.

curb the woman's tongues that talk too idle", which is the couplet uttered by a brank preserved in the vestry of Walton-on-Thames Parish Church.³ Scold's bridles were generally composed of metal and leather. They were made to fence a woman's head. In the Late Middle Ages, town's officials, local (church) authorities or husbands had the power to coerce a woman to wear a brank when she disobeyed. By the end of the sixteenth century, a European woman could be severely punished for any demonstration of independence and criticism against her husband. Obedience was a wife's primary duty, as Sylvia Federici mentions in *Witches, Witch-Hunting and Women*.⁴

There are also records of branks being used in Virginia, United States, to dominate and control enslaved people on American plantations⁵ during the same time period. In *Plantation Memories*, Grada Kilomba speaks about "the mask of speechlessness" as "a very concrete piece, a real instrument, which became part of the European colonial project for more than three hundred years."⁶ *When thinking about hegemonic knowledge production, political decision making, health care systems, labor markets, accessibility of structures that make life more livable, the Black subject has been and still is bridled. Be it not with a visible bridle, but an invisible one.* The mask had a bit which was placed inside the mouth of the enslaved Black person, clamped between the tongue and the jaw, and fastened behind the head with two strings, one around the chin and the other around the nose and forehead. Officially, the brank was used by white masters to keep enslaved Africans from eating cocoa beans and sugar cane while working on the plantations. However, its primary function was to silence and threaten enslaved people, "since the mouth was a place of muteness and torture."⁷

³ The brank preserved in the vestry of Walton-on-Thames Parish Church bears the following couplet: "Chester presents Walton with a bridle. To curb the women's tongues that talk too idle". See Andrews, p. 278.

⁴ See Federici, p. 39.

⁵ See Federici, pp. 40, 48; Mensah Adinkrah, p. 5.

⁶ See Kilomba, p. 16.

⁷ See Kilomba, p. 16.

Scold's bridles and branks thus took different shapes, were used to silence different groups of people, consisted of various obstructive elements and inflicted different degrees of pain, depending on the geographical location where they were used or the severity of punishment and control that was decided upon by the ones in power.

In Europe, scold's bridles were also forced upon women who were publicly shamed in the 'cucking stool' or 'ducking stool'. This served as a public punishment for assertive and rebellious women. The ducking stool was a chair to which a woman was tied and "seated to be ducked in a pond or river." This form of penalty was also enforced on sex workers and women partaking in anti-enclosure riots.⁸ Other types of European branks, such as the Leicester or Chesterfield brank,⁹ had a front-hook to which a chain could be attached. These specific branks would not only gag and prevent the wearer from speaking, but also allowed her to be led by the nose through town.¹⁰ *Her failure to swallow the world befell unvoiced.* With a scold's bridle on her head, she would be dragged through the streets by a town's official or magistrate. *My neck aches at the thought of being dragged by a rope chin-height. I would feel bad for other women in town watching me, as if it's me telling them to shut up. My body would function as a warning to people I feel for, people I wish to talk with.* As an object of contempt, the woman would be subjected to the jeers of the crowd. In some British towns, it was a practice to chain the 'scold' to the pillory, whipping-post or market-cross.¹¹ This public shaming would not only humiliate the body undergoing the punishment. It would also function as a cautionary tool to other women.¹²

The threat of being punished or controlled by means of a brank would not only hurt or limit the punished person but also warn and police others in similar oppressed positions. The

⁸ See Federici, p. 40; Underdown, pp. 123-125.

⁹ See Andrews, p. 293.

¹⁰ See Andrews, p. 295.

¹¹ See Andrews, p. 277.

¹² See Andrews, p. 281.

brank would thus also function as a form of soft power, inflicted by a form of hard-metal power. In other words, the brank had a disciplinary function. It was an instrument of control. It was not only the pain inflicted by the materiality of the brank, but also the power of its immateriality – the brank as an idea – that encouraged European women and enslaved people from African descent to shut up and to be submissive to their masters.

As Federici points out, despite the abolishment of witch hunting, the use of the scold's bridle and slavery, violence against women and Black people did not disappear. On the contrary, it was normalized and a necessary ingredient for capitalist accumulation: *one of the dustiest systems*. For instance, by the eighteenth century, the masters' sexual assaults on enslaved women had turned into a systematic politics of rape: "planters attempted to replace the importation of [enslaved people] from Africa with a local breeding industry centered in Virginia."¹³ After slavery was abolished, and people could no longer be treated legally as property, it was normal to sterilize women of color and poor women who practiced their sexuality outside of marriage, which continued until the 1960s. *This is not long ago*. According to Federici, violence against women and Black people, as a continuation from times of witch-hunting and slavery, thus standardized a specific patriarchal and racial order which is still at play today.

Federici argues that violence towards women is entrenched in the 'scold's-bridle-times' and has become an integral part of how state powers within capitalism operate today: "Capitalist development began with a war on women: the witch hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries [...] in Europe."¹⁴ In addition, capitalism is rooted in slavery and the exploitation of dehumanized bodies working for free under violent systems, and humanized bodies earning big chunks of that money. *Moreover, what about a disproportionate high*

¹³ See Federici, p. 48.

¹⁴ See Federici, p. 47.

number of Black bodies being locked up and put to work for exploitative businesses in the United States, right now? Federici also argues that new forms of capitalist accumulation are the root causes of a new surge of violence. This involves the absence of women in decision making processes,¹⁵ the dispossession of land, demolition of communitarian relations, and the increase in the exploitation of women's and Black people's labor.¹⁶

Kilomba also argues in *Plantation Memories* that forms of marginalization and oppression of Black people can be seen as a continuation of the 'mask of speechlessness' as used in the past. The mask namely relates to contemporary everyday racism as a psychological reality, that is part of a long history of imposed silence: "A history of tortured voices, disrupted languages, imposed idioms, interrupted speeches and the many places we could neither enter nor stay to speak our voices."¹⁷

Both Federici and Kilomba thus show how silencing, domination and control have moved from hard-metal powers to soft and more invisible but ubiquitous ways of silencing. They both draw upon the brick as a historical object that demonstrates material ways of today's less-material or material-less forms of silencing. They both show how forms of direct and extreme violence have been normalized throughout history and lead to a global capitalist and patriarchal order under which women's and Black people's bodies are silenced, exploited, objectified, controlled, dominated and violated.

¹⁵ See Federici, p. 42.

¹⁶ See Federici, p. 47.

¹⁷ See Kilomba, p. 12.

CHAPTER THREE

Failing to Swallow the World – Bitter Earth

Outside we are bridled – it's not wise to speak

Our eyes are tearing up from biting the gag

and inhaling the haunted dust

We are sweating and nauseous

Saliva accumulates and we try to swallow

as much as possible so the convulsion is prolonged

We gag in a failed attempt to swallow the world

We fail to ingest the present

If it gets too much, we gag in silence

and turn our faces away from the road

so passers-by cannot detect our allergies

Sometimes, when we go back inside our houses

after a long day of wandering on the streets

we take some haunted dust for closer inspection

Certain specks: fibers from business suits

traces of gunpowder

flakes that are shed when people rub

their skins against each other while

holding hands

As soon as we are inside

we can breathe freely

expose ourselves

take our time and look closely

at the distinctive particles the dust is composed of

Different organs contract more intensely when

exposed to certain kinds of dust

Inside, we call in gagging as a way to digest the world

We gag loudly and the bridle slowly disappears

It feels good not to withhold - It feels good to admit

that the ingestion of systems is not always successful

Scolding in alliance is what we need

to survive - so, we gag and gag

*on the dust we took inside until we need
to drag ourselves to the toilet to let it out*

Retching and vomiting will protect us

*Once the acidic fluids gush
out of our bodies we flush it
into the systems that connect
our houses to the outdoor worlds
Watery systems transport
our gossipy fluids and the soil
of the city gets more acidic*

*That's how we give our allergies back
to the dusty outside world
While being sheltered inside
the earth is soaked with our bitter yak*

CHAPTER FOUR

Gagging Gossips

The European scold's bridle is also sometimes referred to as the gossip's bridle.¹⁸ Federici shows how the word 'gossip' transitioned from an empowering to a derogatory term throughout the Middle Ages. Namely, 'gossip' was originally used as a noun and referred to a lower-class woman in strong attachments with other lower-class women. The word is derived from the Anglo-Saxon term '*God sib*', which was used to describe a relative or sibling in God's family.¹⁹ Thus, 'gossip' has its origins in 'godparent': a person who stands in a spiritual relation to a child to be baptized.²⁰ *The way Federici describes the earlier uses of 'gossip' sparks my feelings in relation to other queer people. When we are together in our differences, we become family in our failure to conform: we witness the birth of cis-heteronormativity everyday over and over again. We are the allergic children of the dust.* Before its gradual change in meaning, 'gossip' implied community power, cohesion and strong friendships.²¹

The allusion in gossip to women's collective strength vanished in the late sixteenth century along with the deterioration of women's social position. Along with developments such as the introduction of the scold's/gossip's bridle, the fact that European women could be

¹⁸ See Andrews, p. 276.

¹⁹ See McLaughlin & Herzer, p. 5.

²⁰ See Federici, p. 35.

²¹ See Federici, p. 35-43.

brought to court for ‘scolding,’ and the expectation of wives not to speak out against their husbands, the meaning of ‘gossip’ began to change. It was in this Late Medieval context that it turned from a word of friendship and affection into a word of denigration and ridicule, which resonates with its contemporary connotations.²²

When we gossip – retch – gag – vomit, we feel stronger together and embrace our failure to swallow the world. In ‘Gossips, Sirens, Hi-Fi Wives’, Marie Thompson takes a specific sonic historical approach to the oppression of women and femmes today. She outlines the pervasive fear of their sonic presence:

“It is not so much that her silence is virtuous but that her noise is dangerous to the ears of patriarchal orders. In turn, female, or feminine, speech has often been branded as unwanted noise; their ‘idle gossiping’, their squeals of excitement, and their conversations are cast out as abject distractions; their unpredictable outbursts are to be controlled and abated.”²³

Thompson argues that a nervousness around gossiping originates in the fact that it has the potential to expose the dominant powers to their disadvantage. *Branding an emancipatory practice as shameful and disgraceful is an act of disarming the oppressed.* According to Thompson, gossip can create strong human alliances and rupture dominant orders.

As previously discussed, the potential Thompson sees in gossiping corresponds to ‘gossip’s’ empowering meaning in the Early Middle Ages. *We gossip about dusty institutions: heteronormativity, art schools, family, banks, white straight cis men, relationship expectations, the nation state...* According to Thompson, gossip can reveal details of wrongdoings or illicit affairs that could overthrow the moral superiority of those who hold power. She observes: “To be sure, gossip carries with it the idea that ‘women talking together

²² See Federici, p. 40.

²³ See Thompson, p. 299.

make trouble for men [...] since men and their wrongdoings are often suspected to be the subject of women's 'idle chatter'.²⁴

In 'Solidarity/Susceptibility', Butler recounts the ways in which the late queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz used to speak of beloved ones: "If I remember correctly [...] it seemed to me that he was [...] gossiping."²⁵ She also shortly elaborates on her discovery of him spreading an exciting piece of gossip about her love life. The story was untrue, but, nevertheless, she reads this practice as a sign of "subterranean bonding."²⁶ The pleasure in speaking about each other's excitabilities, as a form of holding on to each other, is something that Butler seems to appreciate about Muñoz' gossiping. Butler values it as a caring practice, as a way to check in with each other via others, as a form of belonging together, since we live through one another all the time.²⁷ She says: "If bad attitudes depart from the proper attitudes that sustain belief in the way things are, they include cynicism, occasional grandstanding, depression, bitchiness – and also surely a love for gossip, which is, after all, nothing more than imagining in an excited way the exciting transgressions of another and so participating in transgression in the very imagining."²⁸ *What would it mean to reclaim 'gossip' and undo it from its shameful meaning? What would it mean to re-store community-meaning in the word and practice of gossip?*

In her lecture Butler links Muñoz' gossip practices, as I see it, to ways of queer world making. The value she attaches to gossip tastes like its empowering Early Medieval meanings, as discussed by Federici. She elaborates on Muñoz' personal and theoretical practices, which have been extremely important to queer theory, and draws upon the way in

²⁴ See Thompson, p. 301.

²⁵ See Butler, p. 1.

²⁶ Butler mentions the term "subterranean bonds" (5). She distills this term from *The Undercommons* by Fred Moten and Stefano Harney and refers to contemporary solidarities that harbor dissonance and disidentification.

²⁷ See Butler p. 2.

²⁸ See Butler, p. 12.

which nonconforming ways of life can be seen as modes of *identification* through *disidentification*:

“Over there, where the other person lives, is not here where I am, though I can perhaps bring others close by soliciting them to build a story with me and so seek to close the gaps separating all of us by letting excitement bridge distance.”²⁹

Building stories, and living them while we build them. That’s what we do when we gossip and gag together. Butler argues that collective story building might be conceptualized as *identification*, but she comments that this might miss the critical distance from the norm that this identification might build upon. *Gagging in a failed attempt to swallow the world is both obstructing and liberating. In our attempt to embrace convulsions, gaging movements become family ties, ways to protect ourselves.* In Butler’s words, “how otherwise do we explain the excitement of being bad, catching someone else being bad, or being bad by gossiping, and so being bad together?”³⁰ Butler argues that the status quo seeks to shame a wide range of desires and forecloses potential connections, or connections with potentiality.

In his book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Muñoz makes a significant differentiation between *potentiality* and *possibility*. He changed the course of queer theory by asking: “who can imagine a future, to whom does the future belong?” The dominant images for identification are those that seek to secure a future for people that are white, straight, wealthy and documented. Here, Muñoz reveals the role privilege takes in the ability to imagine a future. For Muñoz, those to whom the future unfolds as a reproduction of “the now”, are those that are gifted with the power to live the future as a future of *possibility*.³¹ Thus, living in the here and now with the future as a set of likelihoods, resides

²⁹ See Butler, p. 4.

³⁰ See Butler, p. 4.

³¹ See Muñoz, p. 9.

in the paths and structures that are laid out in the here and now. These structures work as an oiled machine for the privileged and might not even be noticed as such: *dust*.

For those to whom the future is unsure and unimaginable, these dusty structures are tangible and present, like a ghost that saturates all time and space. According to Muñoz, it is *potentiality*³² that unfolds when normative frames are overthrown in community and incisions into new pathways are being made.

Last week, when I was cooking dinner, my friend called me to tell how a stranger had asked about their genitalia during their exhibition opening. We gossiped, scolded and talked badly about this stranger. We gagged on the dust the stranger had stirred up in the gallery. While I was stirring the pasta sauce, we imagined over the telephone line what it would be like to live in a world in which my friend could enjoy their glass of wine in public without being asked whether they have already done ‘the’ surgery. When will we pull that horizon closer? That sphere in which the realness of your dress, your taste in music, makeup, movement, voice, and the people you love and fuck, aren’t questioned in response to the composition of your body and vice versa?

What seems an impossible life, which Muñoz calls the “not here”, emerges in the here and now. According to him, it emerges at the spatial edges of the present:

“Potentialities have a temporality that is not in the present but, more nearly, in the horizon, which we can understand as futurity. Potentiality is and is not presence, and its ontology cannot be reduced to presentness. [...] Reading for potentiality is scouting for a ‘not here’ or ‘not now’ in the performance that suggests a futurity.”³³

³² See Muñoz, p. 9: “Unlike a possibility, a thing that simply might happen, a potentiality is a certain mode of nonbeing that is eminent, a thing that is present but not actually existing in the present tense.”

³³ See Muñoz, p. 99.

So, for Muñoz, potentiality implies a world making in the here and now as a “not here” and “not now”, since these modes of life do not seem to be included in the trails laid out in the space stretching from the self to the horizon. “We may never touch queerness, but we can feel it as the warm illumination of a horizon imbued with potentiality.”³⁴

³⁴ See Muñoz, p. 1.

CHAPTER FIVE

Puking Worlds Beyond the Horizon

When we discuss

how spectral systems obstruct simple things

in our fugitive lives

we need to be alone together

When we speak off-street

we need to close the door

make sure it is locked

and dim the lights

So that we can gag and gossip on dusty

systems, structures

haunted paths and gateways

creating a momentary world

in which we hear each other

unbridled

*

We know how to gag and gossip on muted levels

We have learnt to speak silently

in different language, they don't understand

Specific jokes, community-brewed words

that whisper the ties between ourselves

and form an enclave of trust

In gagging togetherness

we not only puke worlds beyond the horizon

we also bathe in our own vomit

and there is nothing loathing or bitter about it

It is scary though

And you are wearing your makeup like never before

CHAPTER SIX

Well, Beloved Gossips

Let's go back to the early meanings of 'gossip' and re-imagine its potential in the present.

Longing for a gossipy future. What would it look like to reclaim gossip as a form of affective gagging, a loving response to each other that fail to swallow this dusty world? As a way of bonding on underground levels, reaching out to the horizon, bathing in potentialities?

When we look closer at the original meaning of the word 'gossip', that is godparent, we find relations of care rather than 'idle chattering', corruptive talk and sounds of betrayal.

Namely, a godparent used to be a spiritual educator, teaching their godchild about God.

"They went to great lengths and used extraordinary means to accomplish their task, believing completely that if they could just get their friend to Jesus, healing would follow."³⁵

In the first Book of Common Prayer (BCP), written in 1549, the priest addresses godparents and gives them specific instructions for the baptism liturgy.³⁶

"Well beloved friends, you have brought these children here to be Baptized, you have prayed that our Lord Jesus Christ would vouchsafe to receive them, to lay his hands

³⁵ See McLaughlin and Herzer, p. 1-6. The purpose of *Godparenting: Nurturing the Next Generation* by Nancy McLaughlin and Tracey Herzer is to introduce godparenting as, according to them: "one of the most special relationships two Christians can share". It offers a historical background of godparenting and offers practical suggestions for discussions of activities to share between a godparent and godchild. The book is organized around phrases from the service for Holy Baptism, found on pages 299-311 in the Episcopal Book of Common Prayer.

³⁶ See Nancy McLaughlin and Tracey Herzer, p. 7.

upon them, to bless them, to release them from their sins, to give them the kingdom of heaven, and everlasting life.”³⁷

So, skipping Jesus for now, godparenting, and thus also inherent to the initial meaning of ‘gossip’, was a practice directed towards healing amongst people not necessarily blood-related. It was a form of care for a better life in the extraterrestrial. *And we are godparents on subterranean levels, existing in subterranean bonds.*³⁸ *Healing each other’s wounds full of dust...*

...Well beloved gossips
we have brought ourselves here to gag
we have cried and wished that the world would hear us
to lay its hands upon us, to care
to release us from thinking we are failing
to give us the terrain of heaving
liberation
and a futurity-full life

To re-imagine gossip’s queering potential in the present is to position it as an act of care, like godparenting. To reclaim gossip means to speak unbridled, *not letting our mouths be muted*. To recover gossip’s potential as an act of subterranean bonding means undoing it from the connotations it gained under its *dusty encounters* with patriarchy, Christianity and capitalism. To reward gossip’s community-building potential is to strip it from its religious,

³⁷ See Book of Common Prayer, 1549, “Public Baptism”; Pusey, p. 256.

³⁸ See Judith Butler, p. 5.

sexist, misogynist, racialized and class-determined associations, whilst acknowledging that these very categories, amongst others, are worldly realities that obstruct, oppress and exclude. They might even be the reason people need and seek for a gossip-community. *We must be together and gag/gossip* about these dusty structures whilst simultaneously imagining/*puking* worlds beyond the horizon. *Comrades, in gagging togetherness, happily failing to swallow the world, we saturate the earth with bitter our yak that nourishes the soil, hoping for more lives to be able to live a life fully lived.*

CHAPTER SEVEN

Get Used to the Taste

We all go to one place

all are of dust

and all turn to dust again³⁹

*

If systems are dusty and we all turn to dust again,

we might as well work on our bodies not to re-breed

and not shed the dust-flakes that

we inhale with convulsion

If the world is dusty, and we fail to swallow the world,

we might as well retch, gag and vomit until the acid

dissolves the specks in the soil that are

letting us live a life half lived

³⁹ See Bible (King James) Ecclesiastes, 3:20: "All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again."

*If the dust is worldly and we can gossip, nurture
care form enclaves of defiance and trust
we might as well reach out to the horizon
since it is already lit*

*And if we are gagging gossips
and our yak is bitter
we might as well eat more chicory
soaked in tonic - to get used to the taste*

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