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Our bodies are their language

When I was 5 or 6 years old, I watched as my grandfather pulled my grandmother up from her place at the kitchen table and slammed her onto the ground. He then proceeded to kick her in the stomach, screaming at her, calling her a worthless bitch or something like that. He was accusing her of sleeping with her friend Clifford. He always accused her of that. There were other men in the room, but I believe she was the only woman. My grandmother did not really have any women friends, and this was one of her biggest regrets in life as she got older. I do not remember what the other men in the room did. I remember only what I did, and what my grandmother did.

She yelled at me to go to the living room. And she yelled at her friend Clifford, and maybe another man, to leave. I had to stay and watch. The living room was really only 5 feet away from the kitchen, and I could see her lying on the ground as I sat on a green rocking chair. The same chair that is now in my parent's living room since her death this past spring. Everything that happened that night after I got into that chair is beyond my memory.

Over the past two years or so, I have become really obsessed with Andrea Dworkin -- as feminist killjoy, writer, and cultural figure. She has this saying, or this feeling, that is "Our bodies are their language," which I have been fixated on for a while. I first read it in INTERCOURSE. She writes:

"Our bodies speak their language. Our minds think in it. The men are inside us through and through. We hear something, a dim whisper, barely audible, somewhere at the back of the brain; there is some other word, and we think, some of us, sometimes, that once it belonged to us." It also pops up again in a number of her speeches on pornography as violence, "Pornographers use our bodies as their language. Anything they say, they have to use us to say it." Andrea was a poet; her play with language, and Freud, and literary history, and personal experience is so incredibly beautiful. I respect that.

I have a lot of hangups with Andrea, but I question this imperative I feel to voice my disagreement with her. Like I have to prove that I am a good feminist and a good queer who doesn't actually agree with all of her critiques of sex work and porn. But then I'm like, what did she actually say and then what did other people say she said? If that makes sense.

When are my memories of her words really just mediated by other's disdain for her, for her body?

I think people hated Andrea because she wasn't afraid of the rage within her own body. And people called that rage "anger". Even she said she was angry. She was always angry. But her

anger was something different, different from my grandfather's. They did not share a common affect. I also think that people hated Andrea because she was fat. Am I really supposed to believe that feminists don't hate Andrea for being fat? Am I really supposed to believe that a fat woman with rage is not a problem for everyone? Most critique of Andrea Dworkin is always suspect to me. "I don't like her. She hated porn. She was anti-sex." Even if this was true -- so what? who cares? What does Anti-sex even mean? Furthermore, what does pro-sex even mean? And why does sexual desire carry so much importance and sacredness? Or why is desire and pleasure about sex? Did Andrea not have pleasure?

"Our bodies speak their language." / "Pornographers use our bodies as their language."

She is talking about more than just men or men using women. She is talking about the language we live with, the metaleptic effect of language that is gender with a capital G, of Woman and Man, and how shitty it is. "Our bodies speak their language." -- 'Women's bodies are men's language' is a call for resistance, a big fuck you to daddy, and a pretty good synopsis of what a rape culture means.

So what was being said when my grandfather dragged my grandmother to the ground?

Claude Cahun wrote one of the most beautiful and painful things I have ever read: "I want to change skin / tear the old one from me." Perhaps Cahun wanted a new body. Maybe they wanted their body read differently. OR maybe they wanted someone to actually see them and the statement is a demand, coming from intense confidence and rage, and not a polite question rooted in shame. I think, at the very least, the statement is about self care.

Maybe I am making this up, but there seems to be this common idea that having rage is like experiencing yourself outside of your body. Well, fuck that. I think rage is very much an experience of the body -- and a belief that it is somehow disconnected seems very patriarchal to me. Patriarchal. A word so ubiquitous, that I think it even garners eye rolls from a lot of feminists. I am sure it is often an empty signifier for people. And I understand that, because anything that is ubiquitous is suspicious, a potential tool or effect of the gender binary.

One more time: Rage is not an experience outside of the body.

And another thing: Rapists do not get to own rage. Rage does not belong to rape.

Am I wrong, or have a lot of male rapists said that when they have raped that they experience themselves outside of their body? That their anger, their act, their violence, was not themselves? This is patriarchal thought in action, and it is claustrophobic. This is what we are taught to know. This is more than just rape apology, it is the disavowal of the ways in which a rape culture shapes the way we think about bodies. Andrea is ringing in my ear right now. In PORNOGRAPHY: MEN POSSESSING WOMEN, she writes:

"Men develop a strong loyalty to violence. Men must come to terms with violence because it is

the prime component of male identity.”

Men’s violence is so ubiquitous. One more time: anything that is ubiquitous is suspicious, a potential tool or effect of the gender binary.

If we say that we experience ourselves outside of ourselves then we get to disown our own actions as men. And if we tell women that their rage is not themselves, that it is not theirs, then we really do get to speak as their bodies. Their bodies really do become our language.

Rage is not violence. I am over that sentiment, that idea. Rage is knowledge-making. Rage is language. Rage is poetry. Rage is resistance. Rage is living with a body under constraint -- because having a body, for a lot of people, is to live as the mirror of others’ own cognitive dissonance. Audre Lorde taught us this. Andrea Dworkin taught us this. Adrienne Rich taught us this. Valerie Solanas taught us this. Mark Aguhar taught us this. bell hooks is still teaching this.

I am going to end with a section from Andrea’s novel Mercy:

"I am writing a plan for revenge, a justice plan, a justice poem, a justice map, a geography of justice; I am martial in my heart and military in my mind; I think in strategy and in poems, a daughter of Guevara and Whitman, ready to take to the hills with a cosmic vision of what's crawling around down on the ground; a daughter with an overview; the big view; a daughter with a new practice of righteous rage, against what ain't named and ain't spoken so it can't be prosecuted except by the one it was done to who knows it, knows him; I'm inventing a new practice of random self-defense; I take their habits and characteristics seriously, as enemy, and I plan to outsmart them and win; they want to stay anonymous, monster shadows, brutes, king pricks, they want to strike like lightning, any time, any place, they want to be sadistic ghosts in the dark with penises that slice us open, they want us dumb and mute and vacant, robbed of words, nothing has a name, not anything they do to us, there's nothing because we're nothing; then they must mean they want us to strike them down, indiscriminate, in the night; we require a sign language of rebellion; it's the only chance they left us. You may find me one who ain't guilty but you can't find me two. I have a vision, far into the future, a plan for an army for justice, a girls' army, subversive, on the ground, down and dirty, no uniforms, no rank, no orders from on high, a martial spirit, a cadre of honor, an army of girls spreading out over the terrain, I see them moving through the streets, thick formations of them in anarchy and freedom on cement. I keep practicing horse position and sit-ups and I kick good; I can kick to the knee and I can kick to the cock but I can't kick to the solar plexus and I can't kick his fucking head off but I can compensate with my intelligence and with my right thinking if I can isolate it, in other words, rescue it from the nightmares; liberate it; deep liberation. I practice on my wall to get my kick higher, never touching the wall, Zen karate, a new dimension in control and a new level of aggression, a new arena of attack as if I am walking up the wall without touching it; and I will do the same to them; Zen killing. My fist ain't good enough but my thighs needless to say are superb, possibly even sublime, it's been noted many times. Many a man's died his little death there and I made the mistake of not burying him when he was exactly ripe for it, not putting him, whole, under the ground, but I

soaked up his soul, I took it like they always fear, I stole his essence to in me, it's protein, I got his molecules; and I never died. It is more than relevant; it is the point. I never died. I am not dead. If you use us up and use us up and use us up but don't kill us we ain't dead, boys.”