



Imagined Violence/Queer Violence: Representation, Rage, and Resistance

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Imagined Violence/Queer Violence

REPRESENTATION, RAGE,
AND RESISTANCE

**Judith
Halberstam**

Fear is the most elegant weapon . . .
It will be demonstrated that nothing is safe,
Sacred or sane. There is no respite
From Horror. Absolutes are
Quicksilver. Results are spectacular.
—Jenny Holzer

. . . and there's religious leaders and health-care officials that had better get bigger fucking dogs and higher fucking fences and more complex security alarms for their homes and queer-bashers better start doing their work from inside howitzer tanks because the thin line between the inside and the outside is beginning to erode and at the moment I'm a thirty-seven-foot-tall one-thousand-one-hundred-and-seventy-two-pound man inside this six-foot body and all I can feel is the pressure all I can feel is the pressure and the need for release.

—David Wojnarowicz

In “Do Not Doubt the Dangerousness of the 12-Inch Politician,” David Wojnarowicz asks “should people pick up guns to stop the casual murder of other people?”¹ In *Thelma and Louise*, a woman responds to a rapist who tells her to “suck my dick” by blowing him away and raises the question of what happens when rape victims retaliate. In “Poem about Police Violence,” June Jordan asks, “what you think would happen if/everytime they kill a black boy/then we kill a cop?”² These questions are all rhetorical, hypothetical, and unanswerable. They are powerful rhetorical strategies, however, because they present possibilities and they trouble the fine line that divides nonviolent resistance from rage and rage from expression and expression from violent political response. This essay does not advocate violence in any simple sense; but it does advocate an imagined violence, the violence that is native to what June Jordan calls, in a film of the same name by Prathiba Parma, “a place of rage.”

What is the exact location of “a place of rage”? I will argue that rage is a political space opened up by the representation in art, in poetry, in narrative, in popular film, of unsanctioned violences committed by subordinate groups upon powerful white men. The relationship between imagined violence and “real” violence is unclear, contested, negotiable, unstable, and radically unpredictable; and yet, imagined and real violence is not simply a binary formulation. Precisely because we cannot predict what action representations will give rise to, it is impossible to describe the bound-

ary that divides imagined violence from real violence in any detail. Jordan's place of rage is a strange and wonderful terrain, it is a location between and beyond thought, action, response, activism, protest, anger, terror, murder, and detestation. Jordan's place of rage is ground for resistance.

A recent controversy over the fragile line between the imagined and the real was the uproar over rap singer Ice-T's song "Cop Killer." In an election year and in the wake of the L.A. insurrection, Ice-T's song created a consensus between liberals and conservatives about the limits of representation and what constituted their violation. People who would otherwise be defending free speech demanded that Ice-T not perform the song live and that the tape/CD be pulled from the shelves. Ice-T, well aware of the line he had crossed, had this to say to the question, "Why do you think people take your song so literally?"

Lots of reasons. Politics mostly. People trying to get elected and all that. There's people out there with nuclear bombs and yet we've got all these politicians trying to make a political platform based on a record. Isn't it ridiculous?³

Ice-T goes on to say that the media has focused on the song as part of a problem genre: rap. But, he points out, the song is not even a rap song, it is a hard rock song. The significance of this error is glaring: any record by a black man is rap and rap music is a genre of music that must be contained. Genre, like racial categorizations, is supposed to essentialize and stabilize the form and content of Ice-T's cultural production. His protest, however, that the song is a hard rock song and that it should be heard as a fiction rather than as a direct provocation, emphasizes the ways in which censors refuse to grant the song any moral or narrative complexity. The song is taken literally—as a call to arms.

"Cop Killer" is a violent and rageful intervention into a stymied discussion about police brutality directed at minorities and especially at African-American young men. While the debate surrounding "Cop Killer" centered upon whether or not Ice-T was advocating violence against cops, Ice-T himself understood very well the power of representation. In response to the question, "Do you advocate the murder of law enforcement officials in your song 'Cop Killer'?" Ice-T responds:

No way . . . what I'm trying to tell people is that police brutality in the 'hood is nothing new. And the thing is that whether this guy, the cop killer in my song, is real or not, believe it, there are people at that point, OK?⁴

Later in the interview Ice-T suggests that cops should be scared by the song and he hopes that their fear will prevent further brutality. This is a

complicated argument about the uses of fear, about the selective deployment of terror, and about the relation of threat to change.

The Ice-T controversy revealed a crisis in the politics of representation: the censorship activity directed at “Cop Killer” made visible the space of the permissible. It also marked racial violence as a one-way street in America: white violence is not only permitted but legally condoned while the mere representation of black-on-white violence is the occasion for censorship and a paranoid retreat to a literal relation between representation and reality. While a white jury was to blur the line between representation and reality in the case of the video of police brutalizing Rodney King, a white media jury established the stability of this relation in the case of Ice-T. Obviously, the interpretation of the literal is an ideologically valenced act, and in this instance, literality is a traditional political streamlining of complex material.

The eruption of rebellion in the streets of L.A. and its representations in hip hop culture indicate very clearly that violent law demands violent resistance. Tactics of nonviolent resistance developed in the sixties and used nowadays seem to have become dangerously hegemonic rather than disruptive. In political demonstrations, indeed, outrage often takes a back seat to organized, formal, and decorous shows of disapproval. In San Diego, for example, shortly after the L.A. uprising of spring 1992 in the wake of the Rodney King decision, people filled the streets to sing, give speeches, and march upon the police station. What might have been an outpouring of rage and anger and frustration directed at the racist, violent tactics of the local police was transformed rather quickly into a passive and indifferent meeting.

The group of “protesters” actually followed a route laid out for them by a police escort and arrived finally at a deserted police building. After some chanting and shouting, the crowd quietly dispersed. Local newspapers indeed were able to report that in the case of San Diego, the city remained relatively calm in the aftermath of the King verdict.⁵ The failure of nonviolent resistance to register anything but the most polite disapproval, I suggest, is the effect of a glaring lack of imagination on the part of political organizers, and an overemphasis on “organization” itself, which often produces determined efforts to eradicate expressions of rage or anger from political protest. Such expressions, after all, might lead to something spontaneous, something that spills across the carefully drawn police lines, something threatening.

When and why and how did rage disappear from the vocabulary of organized political activism? In what follows, I will not attempt a historical or ethnographic answer to this question; rather, using literary and cinematic examples of imagined violence and articulated rage, I elaborate a theory of the production of counterrealities as a powerful strategy of revolt

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emanating from an increasingly queer postmodern political culture. I use the word "queer" here to denote a postmodern, postidentity politics focused on but not limited to sexual minorities.⁶

Postmodernism has been accused of not being political enough but in fact it is political activism that often fails to be postmodern in America in the 1990s. Power and conflict no longer only spring from the domain of politics, and resistance has become as much an effect of popular culture, of videos, films, and novels, as of direct action groups. Postmodernism invites new and different conceptions of violent resistance and its representations. As Michael Taussig writes, we live in a "nervous system," a system characterized as "illusions of order congealed by fear."⁷ The fear, the order, the nerves are all produced precisely as illusions, fantasies which govern and discipline the self. However, it is also in the realm of fantasy and representation that we make the system nervous, and that we can control and use our illusions. Imagination, in other words, goes both (or many) ways.

So, what if we imagine a new violence with a different object; a postmodern terror represented by another "monster" with quite other "victims" in mind? "What if" denotes a potentiality, a possible reality that may only ever exist in the realm of representation but one which creates an "imagined violence" with real consequences and which corresponds only roughly to real violence and its imagined consequences.

Recently, queer activism has revived an emphasis on loud and threatening political demonstration, and groups like Queer Nation and ACT UP regularly create havoc with their particular brand of postmodern terror tactics. ACT UP demonstrations, furthermore, regularly marshal renegade art forms to produce protest as an aesthetic object. As Douglas Crimp writes in *AIDS DEMO-GRAPHICS*:

AIDS activist art is grounded in the accumulated knowledge and political analysis of the AIDS crisis produced collectively by the entire movement. The graphics not only reflect that knowledge but actively contribute to its articulation as well.⁸

Protest in the age of AIDS, in other words, is not separate from representation; and "die-ins," "kiss-ins," posters, slogans, graphics, and queer propaganda create a new form of political response that is sensitive to and exploitive of the blurred boundaries between representations and realities.

Meanwhile in the arena of popular representation, in popular film and video, the lines between representation and reality continue to be starkly drawn. Liberals continue to complain about the violent subject matter that especially kids are exposed to on TV and in cinema. But, I suggest, represented violence takes many forms and some still have the

power to produce change. Conventional TV and movie violence, of course, consists of violence perpetrated by powerful white men usually against women or people of color. Such violence is a standard feature of the action genre, of the rock video, of almost every popular form of entertainment, and to a degree it is so expected that audiences may even be immune to it.

On the other hand, violence against white men perpetrated by women or people of color disrupts the logic of represented violence so thoroughly that (at least for a while) the emergence of such unsanctioned violence has an unpredictable power. In recent years, popular texts that prominently feature violence against white men have been thoroughly analyzed by the popular media. So, for example, Ridley Scott's *Thelma and Louise* created an unprecedented wave of discussions around the issue of violence and women.⁹ Suddenly, violence, and particularly female revenge fantasy violence, was tagged as "immoral," "extravagant," "excessive," or simply "toxic feminism."¹⁰ Debates raged about whether we really want to condone a kind of role reversal that now pits female aggressors against male victims.

But role reversal never simply replicates the terms of an equation. The depiction of women committing acts of violence against men does not simply use "male" tactics of aggression for other ends; in fact, female violence transforms the symbolic function of the feminine within popular narratives and it simultaneously challenges the hegemonic insistence upon the linking of might and right under the sign of masculinity. Women with guns confronting rapists has the potential to intervene in popular imaginings of violence and gender by resisting the moral imperative to not fight violence with violence. Films like *Thelma and Louise* suggest, therefore, not that we all pick up guns, but that we allow ourselves to imagine the possibilities of fighting violence with violence.

Women, in other words, long identified as victims rather than perpetrators of violence, have much to gain from new and different configurations of violence, terror, and fantasy. Within the "nervous system" women are taught to fear certain spaces and certain individuals because they threaten rape: how do we produce a fear of retaliation in the rapist? *Thelma and Louise* is an example of imagined violence that produces or may produce an unrealistic (given how few women carry and use guns) fear in potential rapists that their victims are armed and dangerous. Of course, there is no direct and simple relationship between imagined violence and real effects: just as it is impossible to judge the ways in which pornographic representation interacts with male sexual violence, it would only restabilize the relationship between the imagined and the real to claim that representing female violence quells male attacks.

The "place of rage" where expression threatens to become action is of course that tightly patrolled and highly ambiguous space that we call "fan-

tasy.” The power of fantasy in the realm of erotic desire has been theorized variously by feminist, psychoanalytic, and postmodern critics. In feminist theory, for example, fantasy constitutes a problematic site for various contests over representation and politics—the pornography debates have posed the question of whether rape and violence against women are in part produced by the objectifying dynamics of pornographic fantasy. Such questions about the relationship between desire and representation have proven to be unanswerable since this relationship is constantly being refigured. In an essay titled “The Force of Fantasy,” however, Judith Butler proposes that we rethink the relationship between the “real” and fantasy by refusing to grant the “real” an *a priori* stability. She suggests that the “real” is “a variable construction which is always and only determined in relation to its constitutive outside: fantasy, the unthinkable, the unreal.”¹¹

What happens when we make imagined violence—as opposed to erotic fantasy—the object of critical scrutiny? What is at stake in this question is the way that sexual fantasies might or might not intersect with violent fantasies to force into visibility the constructed nature of the real. If imagining violent women does nothing else for example, it might shift the responsibility for articulating the relationship between fantasy and reality from women to men. In other words, power lies in the luxury of not needing to know in advance what the relationship is between representations of violence or sexuality and acted violence or sexuality. The burden of stabilizing this relationship in the arena of sexuality has for too long fallen to women and to feminism and has, of course, produced unproductive alliances between antipornography feminists and the religious Right. Texts like *Thelma and Louise* create anxiety about fantasy and reality in a very different group of spectators.

“Imagined violence” is obviously an adaptation of Benedict Anderson’s well-known conception of the nation as “an imagined political community.”¹² Anderson explains that “communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.” While nationalism, like national identity, is one of the most powerful effects of imagining community, there are many other identities that are mobilized by the power of fantasy. Furthermore, imagined communities allow for powerful interventions: they allow for the transformation of imagined fear into imagined violence.

One example of such a transformation is the Queer Nation/Pink Panthers slogan “Bash Back.” In response to homophobic violence, this group mobilized around the menace of retaliation. In an essay on “Queer Nationality,” Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman explain the affectivity of this strategy:

“Bash Back” simply intends to mobilize the threat gay bashers use so effectively—strength not in numbers but in the presence of a few bodies who represent the potential for widespread violence—against the bashers themselves. In this way, the slogan turns the bodies of the Pink Panthers into a psychic counter threat, expanding their protective shield beyond the confines of their physical “beat.”¹³

The power of the slogan, in other words, is its ability to represent a violence that need not ever be actualized. There is no “real” violence necessary here, only the threat of real violence. The violence of Queer Nation in this example is the moment when what Foucault calls the “reverse discourse” becomes something else, something more than simply “homosexuality beginning to talk on its own behalf.”¹⁴ The reverse discourse gathers steam, acquires density until it is in excess of the category it purports to articulate. The excess is the disruption of identity and the violence of power and the power of representation; it is *dis-integrational*; the excess is QUEER.

Imagined violence disintegrates the power of what Audre Lorde calls “the mythic norm”¹⁵ and what David Wojnarowicz describes as the “ONE TRIBE NATION.” It challenges, in other words, hegemonic definition and even the definition of hegemony itself. In *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration*, Wojnarowicz writes about being queer in the age of AIDS: “We’re supposed to quietly and politely make house in this killing machine called america and pay taxes to support our own slow murder and I am amazed that we’re not running amok in the streets” (108). Wojnarowicz writes of murderous desires and desires for murder; he calls for bloody and violent change and he does so in what he calls “the language of disintegration.” For Wojnarowicz, language itself becomes a weapon, a tool, and a technology and the act of imagination becomes a violent act. In Wojnarowicz’s essays, he imagines a violence generated by HIV+ bodies and transforms the AIDS-stricken body into a symbol of postmodern politics. The Person With AIDS, the junkie, the homeless person, the queer in America have the power, as Wojnarowicz says, “to wake you up and welcome you to your bad dream” (82), or the power to completely and utterly alter the contours of the real and to reshape them into realized nightmares.

Wojnarowicz’s “memoir of disintegration” counters the slow decline of the body with speed, physical and mental speed. Life speeds up as time winds down and the car traveling across an open landscape becomes a symbol for Wojnarowicz of desire without an object and of a kind of masturbatory pleasure in self-propulsion or auto-mobility. The automobile here signifies precisely the movement of the self, the multiplicity of

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the self as it disintegrates within the realm of the bodily and proliferates in the realm of fantasy. Fantasy, the safest sex of all, avoids physical contamination but it contaminates nonetheless. It contaminates by making information viral; information, in other words, is transmitted via images which enter language and mutate.

“Americans can’t deal with death unless they own it” (35), says Wojnarowicz in reference to a museum of the atomic bomb. Death, in this memoir, is stasis, the banality of arriving at one’s destination; it is a full stop, an end to language and speed. Wojnarowicz’s heroes with AIDS attempt therefore to stave off death with technology, writing, or photography. In one scene, the hero films his friend’s dead body—here the video camera, like the King tape, like the Ice-T song, records a dangerous television of reality in the making. The “real” now is precisely a reel of tape, a memory that can be cut, edited, replayed, rewound, paused, or fast-forwarded. “There is no enlarged or glittering new view of the nature of things or existence,” writes Wojnarowicz. “No god or angels brushing my eyelids with their wings. Hell is a place on earth. Heaven is a place in your head” (28–29).

Wojnarowicz’s language of disintegration, his effort to rewind or fast-forward the real, destroys the America he calls the ONE TRIBE NATION and transforms it into the many tribes. Of course, the political tactics of ACT UP have involved the disintegration of discrete identities into the many identities united in coalition against the “virus which has no morals.” The ONE TRIBE NATION, Wojnarowicz shows us, is a particularly powerful imagined community, but it is one that cannot withstand the impact of a disease which, in the geography of its transmissions, maps out the limits of identity, the murderous effects of inadequate health care systems, the ideological investments of medical institutions, and the breakdown of even the unity of the Right. This transformation can be capitalized on through imagining a violence that shatters the complacency that prevents people from immediate and spontaneous revolution. “I’m amazed,” writes Wojnarowicz, “that we are not running amok in the streets.” Here Wojnarowicz echoes June Jordan’s poem titled “Poem about My Rights”: “We are the wrong people/of the wrong skin on the wrong continent and what/in the hell is everybody being so reasonable about.”¹⁶

Wojnarowicz’s answer to his frustration at what he sees as a passive nonresponse to the totalitarianism of the ONE TRIBE NATION is to imagine:

I’m beginning to believe that one of the last frontiers left for the radical gesture is the imagination. At least in my ungoverned imagination I can fuck somebody without a rubber, or I can, in the privacy of my own skull, douse Helms with a bucket of gasoline and set his putrid ass on fire. . . . (120)

Hell is a place on earth and heaven is a place in your head and I too believe that “one of the last frontiers left for the radical gesture is the imagination.” I believe that it is by imagining violence that we can harness the force of fantasy and transform it into productive fear. Wojnarowicz’s memoir participates in AIDS activism because it confronts the Jesse Helms of America with the possibility of violent retaliation; it threatens precisely in its potentiality.

It is with the potential for violent response from the so-called other that June Jordan ends her poem: “I am not wrong: wrong is not my name/My name is my own my own my own/and I can’t tell you who the hell set things up like this/but i can tell you that from now on my resistance/my simple and daily and nightly self-determination/may very well cost you your life.” This is the return of the gaze in cinematic terms, the threat of the return of the repressed, an always bloody and violent re-entry into the realm of signification. This is the articulation that smashes binarism by refusing the role of peaceful activism and demands to be heard as the voice that will violate—the damage, again, lies in the threat rather than in any specific action. *My* resistance may cost you *your* life; my answer may silence your question; my entry into representation may erase your control over how I am represented.

Jordan’s “self-determination” takes place within rage, not the rage that explodes mindlessly and carelessly, but a quiet rage, tightly reined, ever so precise and intent upon retribution. “Rights” in the poem signify not simply legal rights but the right to exist, the right to walk at night, the right to write, the right not to be raped, the right to reply, the right to be angry, the right to respond with violence, the right to lawfully inhabit and populate a place of rage:

Even tonight and I need to take a walk and clear
my head about this poem about why I can’t
go out without changing my clothes my shoes
my body posture my gender identity my age
my status as a woman alone in the evening . . .

“Poem about My Rights” turns legal rights into a fiction of power: rights do not change wrongs and Jordan is “the wrong sex the wrong age the wrong skin,” but the poem, her exquisitely tuned anger, threatens to transform wrongs into violent and powerful resistance.

Both Wojnarowicz’s and Jordan’s poetic threats constitute postmodern revolt—revolt in the arena of representation. This is the postmodern tactic of ACT UP—the burning of effigies, the carnival protests of art and images that drive the scientists and religious creeps into panic mode. ACT UP chooses symbolic weapons that reconstitute the shape and contours of

the real. The rage of David Wojnarowicz and June Jordan allows each artist to express fantasies of violence in ways that make queer and black rage palpable and terrifying. Perhaps more than any other recent writers, Wojnarowicz and Jordan use poetic expression as a scare tactic, as the enunciation of a threat. This is the poetics of rage, expression that suggests that retribution in some form is just around the corner. Of course, this sounds like catharsis, a purging of emotion afforded by drama or literary expression. Jordan and Wojnarowicz, however, give no such assurance that their expressions are safely channeled by finding expression in art. Like the activist art of ACT UP demonstrations, Jordan's and Wojnarowicz's writings are more like wake-up calls and active protest than cathartic outlets.

As the distinctions between the real and fantasy collapse upon each other, as representation seems already saturated with realism, as reality is reconstituted by acts of imagination, the effect, I have suggested, is to produce a crisis of spectatorship. We simply do not know how to read imagined violences: all too often representations of the pernicious effects of homophobia, racism, and sexism are collapsed by the viewer into homophobia, sexism, and racism themselves. So, for example, a film about a racist white character might be interpreted as a racist film that produces racial hatred. Or a film about a sexist and homophobic police department that is challenged by outlaw lesbians might be interpreted as a homophobic film about murderous dykes. It is not hard in my last example to find the plot of the controversial film *Basic Instinct* and it is this film that I want finally to concentrate on because *Basic Instinct* actually foregrounds the relationship between reality and representation, imagined violence and the maintenance of law and order as major themes.

Disagreements about *Basic Instinct* tore through queer communities. While the film seemed to some people to move female heroism and cinematic lesbianism to a new and exciting place, others viewed *Basic Instinct* as a dangerous vision of lesbianism as a network of lesbian murderers. The film therefore drew outraged responses from some members of the gay community who read it as homophobic and as part of a general smear campaign that Hollywood has long maintained against queers.¹⁷

Basic Instinct is indeed a film which weaves a tale of desire and destruction around a web of lesbian killers, but it is not at all clear that this makes it a homophobic film. It became clear rather quickly in the debates around *Basic Instinct* that not everyone had the same stakes in attacking the film. The protests were led by gay men, for example, and many lesbians involved in the protests changed their minds after actually viewing the film. Many of the gay protesters of *Basic Instinct* assumed or theorized that homophobia was intricately woven through any and all depictions of

gays and lesbians as killers. The psychopathic queer, they claimed, was a homophobic standby in Hollywood cinema and they tried to repress the film by “giving away” the ending of the film and distributing “Catherine Did It” buttons.

The buttons, however, merely underlined the miserable failure of this distinctly traditional and civil disobedience. Viewers of the film will know that there is no ending to give away—the film’s conclusion is precisely a question, a question about homophobia, heterosexism, and a question about the possibility that female violence will disrupt once and for all the compulsory heterosexual resolution of narrative. The ending, moreover, is mirrored by the film’s beginning scene, literally. The film opens with a shot of a couple having sex on a bed as seen in the mirror over the bed. The camera slowly moves down to fix upon the actual instead of the mirrored scene and as we enter the filmic “real” the sex play turns to murder and the male partner climaxes as his lover ice-picks him. This intricate scene introduces the viewer to both the vexed relationship between fantasy, image, and reality and to the narrative trajectory of the film: what begins in bed will end in bed and what begins in compulsory heterosexuality ends in murder.

The beginning of the film gives away the ending, but in case there is any doubt, Catherine herself destroys all narrative suspense. Catherine, we find out, writes novels that mirror perfectly her life and its violences. Her first book, *The First Time*, tells of a young boy who murders his parents by rigging a boating accident. Catherine’s parents were killed in a boating accident. Her second book, *Love Hurts*, tells of an aging rock ’n’ roll star who is ice-picked to death by his mistress. The book that she is working on when she meets Michael Douglas’s character, Nick, is called *Shooter* (Nick’s nickname, although there is obviously a pun here so maybe the film asks us to read “Shooter” as the “real” name and “Nick” as the nickname) and tells of a cop who falls for the wrong woman. “How does it end?” asks Douglas nervously. “She kills him,” answers Catherine. Catherine, indeed, did it, but to give away that fact about the film is to give away nothing because narrative resolution is not the focus of the film. Like any good detective mystery, this film is interested in interpretation and the twists and turns of the relationship between crime and punishment, criminal and detective, violence and order. The evidence, in this film, is always textual evidence—Catherine’s writing—and the work of detection is always the sorting of fact from fiction and the inevitable blurring of the two.

The gay protesters with their “Catherine Did It” buttons obviously failed to incorporate the kind of postmodern readings of culture that have invigorated many queer protests. As C. Carr wrote in the *Village Voice*:

Gay or straight, the critics were amazingly dense about the film. They saw date rape where there was mutual, exciting, rough sex. They saw “senseless thrill killings” triggered by lesbian sex when, in fact, the murder of a lover, husband, brother, or father is always overdetermined.¹⁸

Indeed, murder was no accidental or gratuitous subplot in this film; murder was central not only to the action but also to the character identifications. Every main character in the film is a murderer and murder comes to define relations between the characters and their jobs, their families, their lovers. The murderers however are differentiated by gender: the men in the film who kill do so professionally or in the line of duty; theirs are sanctioned murders. The women—Catherine, her lover Roxie, her ambiguous friend Hazel, the psychiatrist Beth—all kill, as C. Carr pointed out, husbands, lovers, brothers, or fathers: they kept their killing in the family, they disowned their families through violent outbreaks.

Roxie killed her brothers, Hazel her whole family, and the police are stumped as to why they would have done so. The police’s inability to find motives for female murder corresponds to their inability to figure out the relation between Catherine’s fiction and her life. Female aggression is defined therefore as unreadable, irrational, insane, motiveless, but it is clear that the film suggests a kind of sorority of empathy among the female murderers. They can read each other’s murders and the chances are that at least female audiences are all too willing to fill in the blanks when it comes to establishing a motive for the murder of brothers or husbands. But Catherine also knows what the relationship is between novels and reality—ambiguous, undecidable, negotiable.

The very fact that *Basic Instinct* thematizes the relationship between representation and reality should defend against linear readings of the film when it comes to the characters’ sexuality or their criminality. And furthermore, mirroring relationships are continually emphasized throughout the film: each female character is mistaken for every other, one dresses up as and impersonates another, one is killed when Douglas confuses her and Catherine. Also, Douglas is played as a distorted mirror image of Catherine: he slides ever more clearly into a criminal relation to the law and she masters and manipulates his movements as if he were simply a character in a scene she has scripted.

Catherine calls attempts to collapse life into art and art into life “stupid.” She knows the difference but is not beyond manipulating the blurred line between them for her own freedom of movement. Similarly, the critics of *Basic Instinct* who read it as homophobic and misogynist fall victim to the kind of facile reading of right and wrong, real and imagined that in this film only the police are prone to. Collapsing real and imagined is a totalizing activity, it refuses to read difference, it refuses the interpretabil-

ity of any given text, and it freezes meaning within a static dynamic of true or false. This, of course, is not to say that texts may never be read as sexist or racist or homophobic—of course they are and can be, but to read homophobia where homophobia and sexism are the targets of an elaborate and prolonged critique is to misread the power of an imagined violence and the violence of imagined power.

Imagined violence, as conceptualized in this paper, is the fantasy of unsanctioned eruptions of aggression from “the wrong people, of the wrong skin, the wrong sexuality, the wrong gender.” We have to be able to imagine violence and our violence needs to be imaginable because the power of fantasy is not to represent but to destabilize the real. Imagined violence does not stop men from raping women but it might make a man think twice about whether a woman is going to blow him away. Imagined violence does not advocate lesbian or female aggression but it might complicate an assumed relationship between women and passivity or feminism and pacifism. The imagined violence of lesbians against men in *Basic Instinct* also recasts the relationship between gay men and lesbians since gay men may well have been threatened by the representation of female violence that empowered lesbians. In this way, imagined violence fractured the fiction of an identity politics.

But unity is not necessarily to be desired, unity is Wojnarowicz’s one tribe, an imagined consensus that always covers up difference with platitudes. Let politics be postmodern and queer, postidentity and posthuman. Imagined violences create a potentiality, a utopic state in which consequences are imminent rather than actual, the threat is in the anticipation, not the act. From Ice-T’s controversial rock song “Cop Killer” to the feminist killing spree in *Thelma and Louise*, from the lesbian ice-picker in *Basic Instinct* to the AIDS-infected junkie in Wojnarowicz’s *Close to the Knives* and the self-determined black woman who talks back in June Jordan’s poem, imagined violences challenge white powerful heterosexual masculinity and create a cultural coalition of postmodern terror.

Notes

1. David Wojnarowicz, “Do Not Doubt the Dangerousness of the 12-Inch Politician,” in *Close to the Knives: A Memoir of Disintegration* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 160.

2. June Jordan, “Poem about Police Violence,” in *Naming Our Destiny: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Thunder’s Mouth, 1989), 84–85.

3. Chuck Philips, “A Q&A with Ice-T about Rock, Race, and the ‘Cop Killer’ Furor,” *Los Angeles Times/Calendar*, 19 July 1992), 7.

4. *Ibid.*, 7.

5. See *San Diego Union*, 2 May 1992.

6. For an excellent discussion of identity politics that points toward a post-identity politics, see Diana Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1989), 97–112. Fuss writes: “While I do believe that living as a gay or lesbian person in a post-industrial heterosexist society has certain political effects . . . I also believe that simply *being* gay or lesbian is not sufficient to constitute political activism” (101). See also Judith Butler, “Imitation and Gender Subordination,” in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*, ed. Diana Fuss (New York: Routledge, 1991), 13–31.

For a critique of identity politics in a different context, see Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Cartographies of Struggle: Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism,” in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991). Mohanty uses the idea of “imagined community” to build feminist political alliances: “The idea of imagined community is useful because it leads us away from essentialist notions of third world feminist struggles, suggesting political rather than biological or cultural bases for alliance. Thus, it is not color or sex which constructs the ground for these struggles. Rather, it is the *way* we think about race, class, and gender—the political links we choose to make among and between struggles” (4).

7. Michael Taussig, *The Nervous System* (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 2. Taussig asks, how do we “write the Nervous System that passes through us and makes us what we are”? He concludes: “. . . it calls for a mode of writing no less systematically nervous than the NS itself—of which, of course, it cannot but be the latest extension, the penultimate version, the one permanently before last” (10).

8. Douglas Crimp and Adam Rolston, eds., *AIDS DEMO-GRAPHICS* (Seattle: Bay, 1990), 20.

9. Several journals and magazines featured debates for and against the representation of female violence. *Film Quarterly* had a feature called “The Many Faces of *Thelma and Louise*,” which included mostly sympathetic responses to the film from critics like Linda Williams and Carol Clover. *Time* magazine had a more openly hostile forum called “Gender Bender: A White Hot Debate over *Thelma and Louise*.” See *Film Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (Fall 1991), 20–31; *Time*, 24 June 1991, 52.

10. See especially John Leo, “Toxic Feminism on the Big Screen,” *U.S. News and World Report*, 10 June 1991, 20. But see also Laura Shapiro, “Women Who Kill Too Much: Is *Thelma and Louise* Feminism or Fascism?” *Newsweek*, 17 June 1991, 63; Fred Bruning, “A Lousy Deal for Women—And Men,” *Maclean’s*, 12 August 1991, 9.

11. Judith Butler, “The Force of Fantasy: Feminism, Mapplethorpe, and Discursive Excess,” *differences* 2, no. 2 (1990), 106.

12. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 15.

13. Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman, “Queer Nationality,” *boundary 2* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1992), 162.

14. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1: *An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980), 101.

15. Audre Lorde, “Age, Race, Class, and Sex: Women Redefining Difference,” in *Sister Outsider* (Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing Press, 1984), 116.

16. June Jordan, "Poem about My Rights," in *Naming Our Destiny: New and Selected Poems* (New York: Thunder's Mouth, 1989), 102–5.

17. See Christopher Sharrett, "Hollywood Homophobia," *USA Today* (July 1992), 93; Janice C. Simpson, "Out of the Celluloid Closet," *Time*, 6 April 1992, 65; Michelangelo Signorile, "Hollywood Homophobia," *The Advocate*, 5 April 1992, 37; and David Ehrenstein, "Basic Instinct," *The Advocate*, 21 March 1992, 87. In Ehrenstein's article, his obvious disgust at the infamous Sharon Stone crotch shot revealed that misogyny played a rather large part in gay male journalists' rejection of the film.

18. C. Carr, "Ice Pick Envy: Reclaiming Our Basic Rights," *Village Voice*, 28 April 1992, 35–36.