

Weapons for Queer Escape

by ZACH BLAS

Queerness is always in tension with identification and recognition, that is, queer politics oftentimes play out along an axis of recognition, responding to desires to be recognized or identified in particular ways. There is a confusion with queer today, in the places it resides between queer ways of living and queer theory, between its homo-normative co-optation and its more radical contingents. It is easy enough to suggest that today there are different types of queerness that resist—or engage recognition and acts of being-recognised—in various approaches and styles.

There are numerous modulations of a politics centring around gaining visibility through recognition, just think of current debates around same-sex marriage in the US or the “It Gets Better Project” in response to LGBT youth suicide.¹ These calls to visibility typically coincide with a desire for recognition from the state or a longing to be validated by our neoliberal order. There is also another queer politics that could be said to be concerned with the non-recognisable, a politics that is anti-identity, anti-state, anti-recognition; let’s call it a politics of escape.

I would like to argue for this politics of queer escape as a radical form of resistance, and importantly, a form of resistance that requires weapons. Hardt and Negri have told us “we need to invent new weapons for democracy today,”² weapons that defend, destroy, as well as construct. They give us the example of Queer Nation’s kiss-ins. What kinds of weapons do we need to create for queer escape? What follows is one possible conceptual framework for building these weapons; it consists of fragments of ideas, ideas as resistance.

Nonexistence & the Face

In the book "The Exploit: A Theory of Networks", media theorists Alexander Galloway and Eugene Thacker write that "Future avant-garde practices will be those of nonexistence."³ They explain that to non-exist, as opposed to not-existing, or death, is making oneself unaccounted for. Galloway and Thacker claim that since existence, in our biopolitical age, has become a means of control, nonexistence is that which resists or avoids control. For them, a tactics of nonexistence is concerned with developing "techniques and technologies" to perform this unaccountability or nonexistence. This is different from common conceptions of going "off the grid." Rather, nonexistence is going off the grid while staying on the grid. Finding ways to stay on the grid and yet maintain autonomy is a positive act for Galloway and Thacker. Importantly, they stress again and again that nonexistence is not an absence, lack, or invisibility (even if one is not visible) but a fullness. Nonexistence is existing fully. This fullness is the "abandonment of representation."⁴

This refusal of representation as a radical gesture hinges upon Giorgio Agamben's earlier claim in *The Coming Community*, which Galloway and Thacker quote: "A being radically devoid of any representable identity would be absolutely irrelevant to the State."⁵ Thus, to perform a tactic of nonexistence, one must make oneself unaccounted for by becoming devoid of any representable identity. How might one do this? Galloway and Thacker give a general example: disingenuous data, or the circulation of false data on oneself. For example, instead of actually deleting your Facebook page, overload it with irrelevant data by liking everything, accepting everyone's friend requests, and giving false information on yourself (date of birth, sex, current location).

Galloway and Thacker provocatively end this section of their book with the following: "The nonexistent is that which cannot be parsed by any available algorithms. This is not nihilism; it is the purest form of love."⁶ To be devoid of representation is qualified here: one is only devoid of representation if one cannot be parsed by "any available algorithms." For Galloway and Thacker, this becomes the purest or fullest form of existence. But what of love? Galloway and Thacker do not attend to love here; it is the word they end with.

All we know from this text is that if we are able to achieve nonexistence we will have found love. While we could certainly critique Galloway and Thacker on a number of fronts, I would prefer to make use of this concept.

Notably, nonexistence connects with several political fronts: The Invisible Committee's call to flee visibility and turn anonymity into an offensive position, the recent University of California student protests slogan "Demand Nothing, Occupy Everything," as well as the Autonomist Marxist concept of exodus.⁷ For queerness, a recent study of facial recognition

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and sexual orientation presents the face as a mode of capture to escape, to make nonexistent. The *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* recently published a 2008 study conducted at Tufts University that tested people's ability to identify homosexual men from photos of their faces.⁸ Ninety faces were shown to ninety participants, and those tested proved remarkably accurate in their ability to recognize faces that had been classified as homosexual, even when exposed to the face for only 50 milliseconds. What could be the benefits of proving to the world that such a recognition apparatus exists? Does it not only further confirm and scientifically validate one of the

processes of LGBT stereotyping? This study parses us into categories that will be used against us, gives us a visibility that only controls us, and makes us easily knowable to those in power. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari taught us not so long ago: “to the point that if human beings have a destiny, it is rather to escape the face, to dismantle the face and facialisations, to become imperceptible, to become clandestine [...] by strange true becomings that [...] make faciality traits themselves finally elude the organisation of the face.”⁹ Yet, we must know the organisations of the face before dismantling: “Know them, know your faces; it is the only way you will be able to dismantle them and draw your lines of flight.”¹⁰

What are tactics and techniques for making our face nonexistent? How do we flee this visibility into the fog of a queerness that refuses to be recognized? We can start by making faces our weapons. We can learn many faces and wear them interchangeably. A face is like being armed. Think of the female Algerian freedom fighters in Gillo Pontecorvo’s 1966 film *The Battle of Algiers*; they break into occupied territory of the colonizers, in part, by wearing their oppressors’ faces, or the Zapatistas who hide their faces so that they may be seen. Surely, us queers know something about this, given our deep and tangled relationships to the performative. As we use faces to modulate and change, attempting our escapes from the control of visibility and recognition, we must select the faces that target most accurately. In this fog, we will still find our friends and love.

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- 1 See the “It Gets Better Project” at <http://www.itgetsbetter.org/> as well as Jack Halberstam’s post “It Gets Worse” for the Social Text Periscope on “Queer Suicide: A Teach-In,” <<http://www.socialtextjournal.org/periscope/2010/11/it-gets-worse.php>>
- 2 MICHAEL HARDT and ANTONIO NEGRI. *Multitude*. (New York: Penguin Books, 2005), 347.
- 3 ALEXANDER R. GALLOWAY and EUGENE THACKER. *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 136.
- 4 *Ibid.* 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 *Ibid.*, 137.
- 7 See *The Invisible Committee*, *The Coming Insurrection*. (Semiotext(e): Los Angeles, 2009), the Occupy California blog at <http://occupyca.wordpress.com/>, and Paolo Virno’s “Virtuosity and Revolution: The Political Theory of Exodus,” *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1996).
- 8 For a summary of this study, see Jesse Bering, “There’s Something Queer about That Face,” *Scientific American*, <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=something-queer-about-that-face>
- 9 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 171.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 188.