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Death, Sex, and Nylon

Christine Hume

The invention of plastic plummeted us into a collective dream, an occult heritage we thought dead, now coming to life in perplexed new forms. We projected ourselves into plastic's material will to change. Yet plastic is, Roland Barthes notes, "the first magical substance which consents to be prosaic. [. . .] for the first time, artifice aims at something common."

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Twenty days after Wallace Hume Carothers applied for the "fiber 6-6" (nylon polymer) patent in April 1937, he checked himself into a Philadelphia hotel room and drank a cyanide cocktail. He had been wearing a capsule of potassium cyanide on his watch chain during the synthetic fiber's development, and as a chemist, he knew dissolving cyanide in a citric solution would quicken the poison's effect. His suicide took place at the crossroads of the biological: two days after his forty-first birthday, in the first trimester of his wife's pregnancy, less than a year into mourning his beloved sister's sudden death, and several years before the word 'nylon' burst into being. These elements bonded to form a chain of reactions, an exchange of properties. Carothers was prone to wandering off, sometimes for weeks at a time. In those blank moments of his biography, we see him at a distance, walking away, barely visible, on the other side of the river, or tracks, or highway. We know a few things: he didn't want children. He felt bereft in the wake of his sister's fatal car accident. With the Depression cutting into DuPont's budget, the company officially modified its expecta-

tions for Carothers, demanding he work toward commercial goals. And the more DuPont pressured him to produce commercial applications of his ideas, to shift from pure to practical research, the harder he failed to find meaning or inspiration in his work. This era also marks DuPont's move away from its original market in manufacturing explosives in an attempt to rid itself of the 'merchant of death' image and to avoid antitrust concerns over its stronghold on the defense industry. In doing so, the company transformed the old science of war explosives into the mythical modernity of polymer chemistry. When we say 'chemistry,' we mean the effort to turn creativity into money, waste into worth, and sex and death into a consumer good.

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Carothers's patent's approval—his fiftieth for DuPont—came posthumously. Immediately newspapers reported that "one of the ways to prepare the new synthetic silk fiber might be to make it out of human corpses" by using cadaverine, a reeking chemical excreted from decaying flesh. Gunpowder and dynamite residue, the traces of wartime death and suicide, it turns out, is hard to shake off. Just like DNA, nylon is a polymer, but instead of cracking the code of life, it impersonates life. At the 1939 World's Fair, "Princess Plastic," modeling nylons, emerged from a giant test tube, as DuPont's press release sought a rebirth of nylon's image: "wholly fabricated from coal, water, and air" yet "fashioned into filaments as strong as steel, as fine as the spider's web." Using organic metaphors to outdo nature, DuPont heralded the nylon stocking industry and the Age of the Leg. With it came a chemical industry revelation, proof that polymers uniquely could be predicted and engineered, which sparked a vision of a world to come. On May 15, 1940, officially known as Nylon Day (N-Day), five million pairs of brown nylons landed in department stores. They sold out in two days.

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Nylons emblemized a technologically rich tomorrow, in step with the dream of air conditioning and television. They evoked the electrified utopian dreams of American empire extended into the natural world, which would be colonized and perfected through science. Our domestica-

tion of the atom meant a Faustian manipulation of creation itself. The life cycle of organic materials no longer mattered: death to silk and cotton, long live synthetics! By returning us to nylon's early affiliation with death, a reminder of how much *thanatos* is wrapped up in *eros*, nylons carried a mystique of otherworldly enchantment, a magnetism somewhere between chemistry and alchemy. Before nylons became commercially available, rumors circulated that the tornado carrying Dorothy to Oz was in fact a nylon stocking, filled with earth and blown by a fan, in a miniature scene projected large in *The Wizard of Oz*. True or not, the potent optics of nylon stockings transported us over the rainbow. We marveled at nylon's image of infinite transformation; we swooned for what it might make of us and for us; we titillated at the whiff of death coming off nylon's parade of uniform legs.

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How does skin become a uniform? White women wanted access to the full range of skin tones, with none of the burden or biases of colorism. Nylons first came in one dark brown color, but mass production stalled until scientists figured out how to make sheer, 'natural' tones. These 'natural' colors were, of course, shades of white skin, differentiated in three lines: 'beige' for every day, 'suntones' for the summer, and 'taupe' for special occasions. White women in the 1940s tried to complement their skin color with slightly darker shades that would visually slim their legs and correct skin imperfections. This was not a consideration extended to women of color. Though black and brown women wore stockings—decorum required that all women wear something on their legs, and stockings helped to raise hemlines—they and everyone else understood them to be *for* white women. The men who made these stockings were white, and mainstream American beauty standards valorized whiteness as the pinnacle of feminine chastity and goodness. Nylons demonstrated that white women were so white that they could temporarily adopt darker skin and imbue it with their privilege. They could empty 'color' of its despised qualities and keep its physicality as they embraced a sun-kissed fantasy of endless summer.

Nylons homogenized the look of all women's legs as if gender itself were a uniform and race were a construct, both of which are true even if we act as though they are not. Science made nylons as it had previously in-

vented race, a white supremacist fabrication. The irony of putting on darkening nylons, while centering whiteness as a social and political power, lends this story a full dose of the uncanny.

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When we say ‘women,’ we mean that white women dubbed themselves protagonists, and they did so at the expense of women of color, who were relegated to side plots as extras or minor characters. As they emerged into the light of day, women’s legs were always a collective: we first saw the solidarity of white women standing together in photographs of nyloned legs in advertising. The nylon itself diffused light like the stylized soft focusing of camera lenses rubbed with Vaseline, a common way to photograph women at the time. In nylons, legs became replaced by romanticized images of legs. Glossy, elastic, skin-perfecting nylons lifted skirts and shifted erogenous zones. Women’s legs became the new ‘erotic weapons,’ aimed at commanding the attention of men and delivering a deathblow to the Japanese silk trade. DuPont instructed us to “use our buying power for justice [against the Japanese].” But there was no way to guarantee that aesthetics would produce ethics—affect can feed narcissism and beauty can serve violence. As the United States entered World War II, DuPont redirected its nylon production from consumer to military use. With pressure from the Department of Defense, DuPont embraced its history of profiting on war. In 1940, ninety percent of DuPont’s nylon went into stockings; by 1942, all of it went into parachutes, rope, mosquito netting, and bomber tires. Encouraged by wartime propaganda and the push to recycle, women donated used nylons to be reprocessed—melted down and re-spun—into parachutes for Army flyers.

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Picture a parachute malfunction that paratroopers called the “Mae West.” The nylon heats, fuses, and refuses to open, suspension lines contorting the nylon canopy into the shape of an enormous bra. A woman falling from the sky, hissing and spreading, backlit against the blue. Even in its errors, nylon served projection: a woman who falls from the sky is a concept that refuses to open—a siren, a femme fatale, a Princess Plastic, a Miss Chemistry, a Chemical Girl, a Mae West. Can we dream ourselves out of

what consumes us? Without an animating body, a nylon stocking is an abandoned puppet, a memory gone limp, an unthought shape, a spectral shimmering that holds out the seductions of being intelligible as a gendered subject. Slipping into nylons means being shaped by the gender imaginary, as if women's legs exuded nylon like a pheromone.

For women, the nylon stocking was both an intimate garment and the habit of practicing freedom on the ground, striding out confidently to take their place in the public sphere. For a human who wishes to strut or fly, a stocking or parachute is also a prosthetic. In rituals of courtship and warfare, nylon extends the body. We grew attached to our supplemented bodies; we libidinized our augmented aesthetics. We embraced our second skins, and the love felt reciprocal. We saw our future through cartoonishly gendered parts. We saw our gender as prosthetic, as the extent to which we go in order to be loved.

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In August 1945, just a week after Japan's surrender, DuPont launched an aggressive ad campaign for nylon stockings that news headlines succinctly echoed: "Peace, It's Here! Nylons on Sale!" Just as DuPont had created the original N-Day five years earlier, this advertising blitz came packaged as journalism and peppered with numerical precision: eleven pairs for every American woman by Christmas! DuPont slyly transferred its campaign focus from the 'miracle' material, its mystery easily filled with fear and distrust, to the consumer item itself, the stocking. Loaded with the allure of scarcity and sacrifice during the war, nylons now promised a return to domestic affairs, a re-orientation around what white, middle-class women valued. Nylons promised the good life, a return to glamor, to a time that never existed though we wished it had. During the war, the US War Production Board urged churches to destigmatize women attending service without stockings. Now that nylons reentered civilian life, the expectations of ladylike comportment returned full force, revived by merging style with technology. In this new world, we cannot overstate the social status of wearing nylons. The name itself is a kind of commodity-fetish-meets-science-fiction spell. Fashioned from pronouncing the words 'no run' backwards, then complicated to avoid trademark issues, 'nylon' was a consumer fantasy made real by almighty science.

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DuPont had made its promise. When it couldn't come close to meeting the demand, women grew outraged standing in mile-long lines for hours. In 1945, ten thousand women gathered outside a store in San Francisco, thirty thousand lined up in New York, forty thousand in Pittsburgh: the Nylon Riots erupted. For nine months, shoppers smashed showcase windows; they shouted, punched, pushed, and passed out. All year long, headlines told the news: in Los Angeles, "Near Riot Puts Nylon Sale off"; in Syracuse, "Nylon Jam Causes Minor Riot"; in Atlanta, "Women Risk Life and Limb in Bitter Battle for Nylons"; in Memphis, "Try All Tricks in Rush for Nylons; Call for Sportsmanship"; in Baltimore, "Girl Collapses; Woman Loses Girdle at Nylon Sale"; in Washington, DC, "Nylon System Set up to Prevent Stampedes"; in Grand Rapids, "Sale of Nylons Brings Riot Call." In September 1945, Chicago detectives ruled out robbery as a motive in a murder case because the perpetrator had left six pairs of nylons untouched at the crime scene. In January 1946, Memphis retailers complained that customers "sabotaged" their coupon system for fair nylon distribution. That same month, *The New York Times* reported "a mob [. . .] of frenzied women" who "shrieked and screamed ecstatically" as they made their way through a complicated maze to prevent "the throngs from rushing the counter" to purchase nylons. By the spring, after calling in riot police on a disturbance of fifteen thousand customers, a San Francisco department store held ten thousand pairs of nylons under lock and key until they could devise a way of selling them without causing harm, and New York was still contending with "mobs of eager women" who "shoved, ran, and even kicked" to snatch a pair. The riots weren't only the surge of women running into history: this was the jolt of housewives producing their own reality; this was the uproar of working women struggling for recognition; this was a loud crack in the mythological certainty that politics can exist without violence; this was the shattering of representation; this was the cacophony of mattering. Crowds crashed whole shelving systems and stormed over counters, fighting tooth and nail, to snag the last pair. Women had had enough of nothing, and they knew how to get what they wanted. Though for housewives nylons were a luxury, and for working women they were a necessity, both groups of women rioted, and their violence underwrites representation as either its motive force or its condi-

tion of possibility. They were not going to sit pretty or unpretty, certainly not passively; their collective rampage recalled nylon's grim beginnings, its proximity to death, its weaponization. They wondered at the death required to birth nylons, and during those nine months of rioting, they sometimes wondered what exactly they were birthing. Whatever it was, it felt like freedom. DuPont had built alluring ideas about the future into nylon's molecular structure; women imbued those ideas with a powerful sense of their own agency.

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It's easy for us to see them pulling hair and pulsing ahead, thrashing like a refrain to which just a few years before they had been kicking their legs in step and smiling. America has trained us to understand women rioting over a fashion accessory as risible. They are frivolous and spoiled. They are absurd and expensive. Unfolding in a context of consumption, women's anger was made into an especially silly mockery. Yet during the war, women worked in every stage of production in order to help their husbands and the state. Women who worked for DuPont during the war, dubbed WIPS (Women in Productive Service), were critical to operating nylon plants, for instance. We wonder, didn't they know their support was always contingent? We see them in this moment like children whose dutifulness has turned disobedient, scratching faces and ripping each other's clothes. We see them scream, and we hear their pent-up sexual energy. At the National Press Club, DuPont showed a film of two women at Macy's wrestling over a pair of nylon stockings while a wide-eyed saleswoman watched in open astonishment. What possessed these women? The men watching at the Press Club thought the scene was hysterical. Instead of a riot, we find a laugh riot. What makes the riots funny, a quirky footnote to 'real history,' is the qualifier 'nylon,' the oxymoronic pairing. We write it off as mass hysteria, a postwar sexual panic. We scoff at women's parody of masculinity, at their misplaced willfulness, at this porn plot waiting to be tamed by police rods. What sort of person riots to purchase an object of their own oppression?

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During the war, women had already reimagined themselves as something beyond consumers and objects, wives and whores. Women believed that

their empowerment in the workforce secured their emancipation, or at least their lasting impact on the market. As the economy reorganized around civilian life, women were expected to move from producers to consumers, from an essential to surplus population, without retaining their political feeling. Their labor was effectively 'returned' like an inferior product. But unified by dispossession and riding on the highs of postwar optimism, women resisted ceding their economic power. They demanded control of circulation; they knew the "hose men" were manipulating distribution to drive up the prices and maintain an aura of rarity. They had not endured the sexual harassment, patronizing infantilizations, and low wages of their wartime jobs only to be told to step back. Women could run a household and build a bomber; they could manage businesses and farms; they could produce beyond reproduction and what Silvia Federici, in making a distinction between paid labor and unpaid, devalued, culturally naturalized domestic work, calls "the patriarchy of wage." They understood their power, especially *en masse*, at the very moment we tried to shove them back into kitchens and bedrooms, re-mystifying them as a natural resource.

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As a historic condition of women, silence is what the rioters struggled against, and it is what we struggle against in trying to imagine their own accounts. Did they write their mothers or grandmothers about their flashes of rage, their florescent hope? Did they offer their children blow-by-blow accounts of the eruptions? Did they plot together, renouncing the narcotizing effects of passivity around the water cooler? Did they embrace or fear the implicit threat of widely reported violence? Did they tell their husbands about their tactics to outsmart store managers? In photographs, we see a coherence of white women, jamming the streets, congesting the wide aisles, women who could not find room for anyone else on their pedestals. They wrote official letters, they signed petitions, they waited, and they rioted, but their whiteness protected them from being beaten or imprisoned by police. There are a handful of women of color in these crowds and even more men, but this fight was most visibly fought by middle-class, white women. Whiteness acts as a form of capital, which operates over and against the oppression of black and brown women. Working class and

bourgeois white women might join in solidarity, but in this volley for power, this unimaginable desire for plasticity, for agency, for mobility, for soaring possibility, they kept a tight grip on their capital as white people. As in contemporary movements like the Women's March and #MeToo, white women fail themselves and their goals when they cling to their whiteness and enforce the politics of respectability. Think: a form of victim blaming where marginalized Americans police their own in order to demonstrate group assimilation. Think: being fired for not wearing stockings or for wearing dreadlocks, or being lectured for speaking African American Vernacular English (AAVE). Think: 'correcting' women whose rioting overturns respectability in order to attain its badge, a nylon stocking.

Both #MeToo and the "politics of respectability" were coined and implemented by black women, Tarana Burke and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham respectively, as was "intersectionality," by Kimberlé Crenshaw, all conceptually essential to raising the status of women. When we think about the whitewashing of the Nylon Riots, we understand the imperative of rewiring history toward something yet to come, conceived as bestowing value on life by way of the future anterior. The aspirations of white women left them vulnerable to predations of capitalism, its false promises, its recuperation of resistance. Their racism, their psychic investment in black subordination, led white women into white spaces, where they identified their potential power in the very forces that sought to keep them in check. What the riots make clear is the price that white women were not willing to pay for their nylons.

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Women didn't only want more, they wanted better. Why did these old parachutes suddenly turn delicate and easy to puncture when they got close to women's bodies? If nylon was strong enough for industrial ropes and bomber tires, surely it was tough enough to endure a day at the office or a night on the town. Women's demand for quality as well as quantity was fundamentally about who would run the new economy. It was a rally for a consumer-driven market, against profit mongering, lying producers.

DuPont had witnessed long nylon lines snaking through cities even before the war, when department stores insisted that nylons be paid for in ad-

vance; they had taken note of high nylon prices on the black market during the war.

Immediately after the war, they identified a new marketing target, the American housewife, for the ruthless sport of consumer manipulation and price gouging. Maintaining exclusive patent and production rights for over a decade, DuPont understood nylons through their own greed. Women understood nylons through their own plasticity. Privy to the logic of capitalism, women raised eyebrows and hell. They called bullshit on DuPont for deliberately planning obsolescence and suppressing production. Despite an eight-fold expansion during the war (paid for almost entirely by taxpayers), DuPont's nylon production strategically lagged behind civilian consumption. To shift the blame, DuPont pointed fingers at needy working women and greedy housewives. The company actively shamed women who kept working once men returned from the war. Press releases blamed the shortage of stockings on "piggish" housewives who were "animated by the most abominable selfishness." The media and the Civilian Production Administration picked up DuPont's language and reissued it as headlines, official reports, and editorials.

As an early pioneer of spin, DuPont engineered public perception. With divide and conquer tactics, they pitted women against each other in oft-repeated corporate speeches. By naming the riot after a woman's accessory, DuPont undermined its purpose, just as the Zoot Suit Riots (1943, LA) addressed something more urgent and fundamental than fashion. By calling a protest a 'riot,' they delegitimized the political power of women's anger and action; they turned it into an impulsive, violent consumer frenzy. DuPont's misogynist campaign denouncing women's vanity and excessive needs made sure nothing would come of their demands. This was not DuPont's first or last time to turn on their own customers, claim no culpability, and redirect consumer attention. Who hasn't heard of DuPont's decades-long cover up of the lethal toxicity of Teflon? DuPont wrote the book on corporate deception of the public. Right after World War I, federal investigators charged DuPont with price fixing and violating antitrust laws. In response, DuPont spun a patriotic yarn about fair market competition that newspapers printed almost verbatim. Through one scandal after another, DuPont's vigorous publicity campaigns landed their press releases on the front page of newspapers that they owned. In 1926, when word got out that DuPont's 'dyes' plant was manufacturing poison gas, a highly

toxic product killing the people who made it, company-owned papers reported not a single company death. As with Teflon, DuPont intentionally covered up their own complicity for years. In 1959, when their newly minted polyethylene dry cleaning bags suffocated fifty children, DuPont blamed careless parents. In addition to their own magazine, DuPont aired a popular anthology radio series, *Cavalcade of America*, once a week at prime time. DuPont hired blue-chip writers to produce scripts that were read by leading actors. These dramas propagandized DuPont as a leader in humanitarian progress through technological innovation. Women's lives in particular, DuPont pledged, would be freed from household tyranny. On N-Day, an entire episode of *Cavalcade of America* was dedicated to a fictionalized interview with a 'typical' housewife about the wonders of nylon. DuPont's campaign to keep women happy at home relentlessly extended their commitment to less ironing, better kitchen utensils, and garments that were easier to clean. All that paternalism of course had consequences when women demanded a say in controlling production and distribution.

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Women had given their nylons to be repurposed into parachutes for men, but in the process of returning these instrumentalizations of gender, the system double-crossed them. When we say 'nylon,' we mean the plasticization of women's bodies, encased in the first fully synthetic material, which refigured women both as artificial objects, rigid and timeless, and as unstable fabulations, capable of shapeshifting on a whim. DuPont's effective mixed messaging, percolating with male anxiety, reifies this paradoxical understanding of women: (1) the gals need to learn a lesson/who's boss, and (2) aren't those foolish ladies hysterical? Either way, the solution was clear: women's unruly bodies and desires urgently needed management. By co-opting the public narrative, DuPont turned the homogeneity of the chorus line into an angry chorus of mass hysteria. But if the Nylon Riots remade a state of war in the department store, it also refashioned the spectacle women had been made to become. In spite of the fiction of the static subject, the legs move, the eye moves; it multiplies what it sees. The new visibility of their legs meant a deeper commitment to mobility, action, and freedom. These women rioted for the idea of plasticity, for imagina-

tion and movement; they called upon a common language to do so. We understand them when they shove and shout and smash things up, desperate to get what's theirs. We recognize their bodies, seized by history, bent on self-determination. What is the structure of self-determination? It is fully synthetic. In the mid-twentieth century, women had imagined themselves into technicolor, easy-care futures, and they were not going to recede back into the dark corners of their tidy houses.

Over whose dead body?

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During the riots, nylons began to appear in the news in yet another context. Women turned up dead with nylons tied tight around their necks. In over a dozen articles in *The New York Times* between November 1945 and May 1946, the murder weapon of choice was a nylon stocking. After strangling his wife or lover, a man now and then shot himself. Some reports feature what jewelry the dead women wore and who found them. In one case, women in prison loaded one foot of a nylon with a jar of cold cream to beat a female prison guard to death. They were trying to escape.

Recalling nylon's material death drive, its early proximity to Carothers's suicide, the cadaverine rumored to create nylon, their mutations into instruments of war, and DuPont's legacy as a gunpowder and dynamite manufacturer, these deaths amplify women's objecthood. A beautiful corpse, or at least a well-adorned one, choked with *the* contemporary symbol of modern liberation: what did that give evidence to if not the backlash against women's autonomy?

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'Riot' was from the beginning a domestic agitation or a sexual act. In the twelfth century, it was also a noise, a folly, idle chatter, or waywardness; it was moving in and out of the house. Even in its meanings, it was disobedient. It wore a nylon over its face as it robbed us of our senses, and it wore a nylon on its legs as it walked freely into vagrancy and loitering laws, informal policing practices and unofficial applications of laws that kept women off the streets. A 'man in the street' is a synonym for the citizen, voter, or everyman; a 'woman in the street' is a 'woman of the street,'

a streetwalker. Too many women in a house labeled that house legally a brothel.

Outside, the noise of gathering women overflows quickly and turns into *eros*. It leaps into the story of a moral crisis and sexual panic: women “sirening across the town.” It resolves in paternalism and discipline: men “sirening across the town” (Gwendolyn Brooks). It gets dully measured against effectiveness (what did it change?) and the settling of accounts (who won?). But as with that other definition of ‘riot,’ we follow the wrong scent. In hunting, to run riot means to run after the scent of something other than the prey. It wasn’t the nylons, or not only the nylons; women wanted to hold on to the power to walk around, to make noise, to be angry and heard.

After 1200, the noun ‘riot’ is “debauchery, extravagance, wanton living”—from the Old French *riote*, a “dispute, quarrel, (tedious) talk, argument, domestic strife” and from Latin *rugire*, to roar—it is anything but accommodating and quiet. For as long as anyone can remember, ‘riot’ has also been a euphemism, of uncertain origin, for “sexual intercourse.” In the imaginary OED of women, ‘nylon riot’ means a counter-erotics; it means a death-saturated desanctification of time; it means to reject cathartic closure and posit instead the limits of the knowable in historic moments of sociopolitical unruliness, and with it the liveliness of possibility.

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Had the Nylon Riot’s meanings proliferated and not been stopped by journalism siding with industry and government or strong-armed by capitalism; had it not been rewritten by male laughter, nervous and furious, “indelible in the hippocampus,” as Christine Blasey Ford characterized it in her testimony, we might still be drawing on its reserves, correcting its oversights, calibrating our gains, and re-steering its momentum. In other words, if white women hadn’t written black and brown women out of the story, and if men hadn’t written off women in the story, we’d live in that real ‘better world’ induced not through science but through justice. The etymology of ‘riot’ tells us something we already know, even if the knowledge has been culturally suppressed. Despite historical perceptions, women are often catalysts; they are initiators of rebellion and first actors of riots. We don’t know this because patriarchy grooms us to trust its au-

thority, which creates the official story. We don't know this because any assembly of women prostitutes itself to the image of social contagion. Mobs of women might sweep bystanders into their libidinal chaos, their mental and medical diseases, their public displays. But, bitches, will we believe it? What we are encouraged not to know about women, a patriarchal unknowing, becomes part of the history of disbelief and trivialization of women's anger. We face this combustible past knowing full well we cannot hear the unheard but doing it anyway. All the stories never told rush into our mouths, all the philosophies and songs, all the refusals and fantasies, open ways forward. We find a way, "working out the vocabulary of [. . .] silence" (Muriel Rukeyser), which we hear like shockwaves after a blast and in which new meanings point toward new beginnings. We feel the reverberation, the repeating echo of women striking back.

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The riot plummets us into a collective dream, a heritage of fury we thought was dead, coming to life in perplexed new forms. We project ourselves into the riot's material will to change. Yet the riot is the first magical action which consents to be something common.

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Note: Violence against women is continuous, making women shut up and stealing their narratives. This creative yet factual counternarrative displaces the authority of (mostly male) sources as it breaks with official logics and challenges our notion of what constitutes a story worth calling 'history,' or a perspective we might want to take with us into the latest rage.

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