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First Short Paper

Femininity as Both Tool and Threat: The Use of Non-Normative Femininity as a Scapegoat
Across Global Institutions from the 2000s to the Present Day

Studying examples of global, governmental gender dynamics during the mid-00s and the U.S. "War on Terror" period has impressed several basic, universal truths upon me about their intersections. Mainly, I have found that across different global institutions such as the World Bank, the U.S. Military, and security systems at airports (spearheaded mainly by the U.S. Transportation Security Administration), non-normative examples of femininity are routinely singled out as dangerous, disruptive, and used as a scapegoat for systemic flaws. Though the details of these encounters vary by their overhead institution and locations in which they take place, the fundamental principle of portraying femininity that exists against the social and institutional status quo as incendiary rings true throughout.

My first example of this phenomenon comes from when World Bank gender staff intervened in Ecuador in the early 00s, believing that local Indigenous and Afro-Indigenous women were spending too little time in the home. From the 1970s to the late 2000s, the World Bank "started paying attention to the inequitable effects of its development policies on women, and the need to incorporate gender concerns into lending" by providing micro-loans for women in developing countries to enter the workforce and contribute to the local economy (Bedford, pp. 297-298). This strategy ended up backfiring however, resulting in the often overlooked, unmentioned, and unpaid responsibilities of social reproduction being neglected by the women who usually perform them, and/or falling to the men in their communities (Bedford, p. 298). Instead of letting men take on the sole responsibilities for social reproduction, or letting the communities figure out a non-normative division of gendered labor by themselves, the World Bank felt the need to intervene.

What ended up happening was a scapegoating of this non-normative female role in both the economy and the family unit. Afro-Indigenous Ecuadorian women who had already stepped into the workforce were asked to return to their homes more often, while the men of these communities were chastised for being lazy or non-monogamous in what could very well have been an attempt at communalising the social reproduction that had fallen to them. For example, Bedford notes in her research that "One staff member told me that most people considered un- or under-employed were wrongly classified since they were engaged in productive subsistence activities" (Bedford, p. 301). I see this as mostly referring to men. While yes, "Bank staff did *not* . . . assume that women's ability to juggle multiple responsibilities was 'infinitely elastic'" (Bedford, p. 301), they exercised this through the efforts of their gender staff to "inculcate limited rationality in loving women" (Bedford, p. 303). The result of this was an attempt to instate a binaristic, heteronormative status quo for women to take on *some* economic responsibilities but otherwise remain in the home. Men who went out to find employment, on the flip side, were routinely villainized for interacting with other women and children outside of their own family unit. Had these women remained engaged in solely social reproduction, and

men as breadwinners, according to the World Bank any economic and social tensions in these Ecuadorian communities would have simmered down.

We see another example of non-normative femininity being singled out as destructive in the Abu Ghraib scandal from the U.S. war with Iraq. When photographic evidence of widespread prisoner abuse was leaked from the eponymous prison in the mid 00s, the U.S. military utilized a "bad apples" defense (Feitz & Nagel, p. 210) for the horrific actions of its military personnel. A main character in these photos of physical and sexual abuse was one Lynddie England, who was soon obsessed over by the U.S. media circus surrounding the scandal as "an unfolding soap opera starring Lynndie England as the the sexually promiscious lead . . . [and] the torture and abuse became an incidental backdrop" (Feitz & Nagel, p. 211). Her private sexual relationships with the other individuals in the torture photos were also called into question. This licentious and dangerously sexual behavior among other troops in addition to the prisoners became the main story instead of any focus on the prison environment itself (Feitz & Nagel, p. 210). Non-normative feminine sexuality was seen as the innately abusive fault.

Lynndie England wasn't the only woman scapegoated unfairly in proportion to her peers and circumstances. Brigadier General Janis Karpinski had been "put in charge of 15 military prisons in Iraq with no prior experience in the field of corrections" and became pinned with the totality of the violence at Abu Ghraib despite the influence of her own superiors to "'Gitmo-ize' US operations at Abu Ghraib" (Feitz & Nagel, pp. 217-218). While neither England nor Karpinski should be seen as victims of these situations and the stories surrounding them, the particular ways in which their stories were framed by the U.S. military and media both speak to a specific demonization of women in dominant, non-normative, systemic and sexual positions - consensual or not - while their male colleagues and co-conspirators are able to slink away from the punitive limelight.

In our final example, we are able to see that the policing of gender, gender presentation, and sex within the context of airport security more often than not hides behind conceptions of normative femininty. Transgender and gender-nonconforming travelers at airports - particularly American airports - are often singled out as 'social threats' based on the ways their bodies do not fall within normative expectations of gender. We tend to see this most often with transgender women, one of whom describes the process of going through airport security as a "ritual striptease, meant to appease the airline gods" (Currah & Mulqueen, p. 562). While all passengers passing through security checkpoints are required to disrobe to varying extents, there is nothing more specifically threatening than being a non-cisgender individual, or specifically a non-cis woman walking through, unknowing if you will be labeled as a threat.

The TSA's "Secure Flight" program and its advanced imaging technology operate on the assumption that "the body . . . cannot be forged and does not lie" (Currah & Mulqueen, p. 568), incorporating both gender and sex assigned at birth into this worldview. "In the quest for further information, then," Currah & Mulqueen elaborate, "policymakers imagine that the body itself will not just provide, but actually *be* the perfect piece of information" (p. 568). This, of course, does not even begin to account for the wide combination of bodies and genders that exist in this world. If an individual who presents herself in a feminine manner passes through a security

checkpoint where it is revealed that she has non-normative breast tissue or genitalia in comparison to a 'normal' female (Currah & Mulqueen, p. 564), her safety is going to be compromised and she will be noted as a potential threat, simply because her gender and her body are perceived to be incongruous.

We have seen physical, social, and sexual repercussions in these three examples of global systems scapegoating non-normative femininity and female behavior. From the attempts at re-educating Indigenous Ecuadorian women into more normative economic and household roles, to the framing of the Abu Ghraib scandal from the U.S. - Iraq war as nothing more than a handful of women with perverse sexual desires, to the way that transgender travelers at airports are routinely categorized as threats due to the quirks of their bodies, it is obvious that across the modern globalized systems of the world, femininity is just as much of a tool as it is a threat. While blatant systemic inequality such as this may appear impossible to overcome, what can be done about it is to notice, to document, and to hold who we can accountable for their actions against the global safety of women and femmes everywhere.

Works Cited

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