

## **Feminist love, feminist rage; or, Learning to listen**

**Jed Picksley, Jamie Heckert and Sara Motta**

I have a new appreciation of the song Mr Jones by Counting Crows. It joined Blondie's "Room with a view" for me this week, as I saw/heard/thought how it might be all about the gaze of desire; looking with appreciation. In "Room with a View" Blondie sings about wanting to just stare at her beautiful man-lover. In Mr Jones, the man laments his position as a man in a narrow patriarchal world, where if your aim is to be desirously gazed upon, it's easier to be a woman. The song holds the pain, the bad-deal for men in patriarchy; whereby all the beautifulness, all the stare-at-able glory has been allocated to women. In order to be gazed upon with appreciation in today's mainstream western world, the man has to go through a bizarre lens - like an international pop-career, or a deliberate self-sexualisation or post-patriarchal liberation (like Dalí or Picasso). The other route is being a professional sport's person, whereby your manhood is sufficiently secure through your football-field prowess, that you can get away with (David Beckham's...) sarongs. Far fewer men than women are "allowed" to be pictured, adored or "beautiful" in the public gaze, which the singer of "Mr Jones" would rather be on the other side of.

This piece of the bad-deal of patriarchy, the uneroticised-man's part was first properly lit up for me by a mighty queer who lamented having spent 15 years learning how to make love to a woman, before he finally learnt how to ask a woman to make love to him, and (more years of practice required), how to receive that desire - how to give away enough power, to be powerfully appreciated!

My own definition of patriarchy, is the elevation of hardness, fixedness, speed, loudness and action over softness, flexibility, pauses/rest, quiet and reflection. I know this is just a slither of understanding from one instant of impermanent me, which doesn't even directly engage with sexism, disempowerment or oppression of other sorts, but I find it a good guide right now for confronting the patriarchy that I experience inside my own head.

I think it's radical in our culture to seek perspective, introspectively, about our own behaviours. Loud, bossy, interrupting and excitable behaviour is sometimes just brushed aside as individual character, but if it's the dominant feel of a sub-culture or a meeting, then surely that constitutes or contributes to the anti-empowerment features of hierarchy or patriarchy, that - we anarchists assert - we can do without.

When I'm being a loud, hurrying, assertive leader in a meeting, agreeing a plan or during the erection of a marquee, I sometimes catch my blokey self with dissatisfaction - I internally accuse myself of just re-enforcing patriarchy.

When I described this in a "Confronting Patriarchy" discussion, one guy said "hang on, isn't that [taking power] actually subverting patriarchy because you are a woman?"

I said "No. It's not a matter of sex or gender, it's a matter of style". I believe that there are quieter, gentler, slower more learning-focussed ways to do things - not just this fast, loud, hard effective version that I catch myself falling back on. Being a female leader might confront a particular shade of "sexism", but it doesn't touch "patriarchy" in the wide and tricky meaning of the word that we're developing in discussions like this.

Back to personal character though, in the worlds I live in, is it really a problem that I am sometimes bossy, hasty, loud and controlling? I think it would be pretty exhausting to be like that all the time, and maybe the dissatisfaction I sometimes feel in that mode is merely a warning about the onset of the exhaustion. *Sometimes* I am happy to be openly confused, inviting other opinions, creating pauses and making big space for a rethink. *Sometimes* I shut up entirely, sit back and do the silent facilitation of taking notes, drawing maps or just listening attentively.

Perhaps "confronting patriarchy" is as simple as accepting and practising such individual *diversity of approach*. And watching out for the deluded aspiration to be a superhero of awareness all the time! This writing is a bloom of knowingly momentary confidence - I'll change my mind tomorrow.

Right now, I reckon that diversity is sanity.

- Jed Picksley, *Earth First Summer Gathering, August 2011*

From time to time I visit sexualised male spaces. I love those queer utopian elements of gay saunas and beaches. Here, men can make intimate connections which cross the usual social divides, meeting those they might never consider talking to in the outside world. These connections might be brief moments of intensity or the beginning of a love affair or a lifelong friendship. Here, those elements that Jed and others note that patriarchy denies are celebrated: embodiment, rest, opening ourselves to receiving love and pleasure. Whether that is muscles softening in the heat of a steamroom, a bodymind relaxed by the gentle repetition of waves on the shore and sunlight on skin, or the opening of a body to the sensuous attentions of others, there is a certain release, a letting go.

Of course, it isn't always that easy. Oh no. Those patterns we might call patriarchy aren't instantly released. They don't dissolve just by entering a different space. Learning to notice them, to let them go, can be a challenge for many of us. And I do try to be compassionate, like Jed in her piece above.

But sometimes, I just get angry. Furious in fact. Men making assumptions about my desires, deciding in advance that I must be up for "it" just because I'm in that space. "We all come here for the same reason", he says to me. Do we, I ask?

Sometimes, often times, I just like to have a sauna or lie on the beach without being expected to wear any clothes. The trade off is that sometimes, often times, I say no to stop someone in their assumptive tracks. Sometimes I have to say it repeatedly, getting louder each time. I've grabbed wandering hands, pushed insistent bodies away and even shouted a couple of times. My god, haven't they heard of feminism? Don't they have the simple awareness that their desires may not be the same as mine? Sure, it's nice to be appreciated for male beauty without having to become a pop star or a footballer, but it's even nicer to wait and see if the appreciation is mutual before following eyes with hands. Or, at least let hands be tentative, gently questioning rather than roughly asserting.

And then I hurt my knees and I saw it all differently.

I thought it was fine, doing those advanced hip opening stretches in yoga class. Yeah, I can crouch on all fours and then get my knee up over the top of my supporting elbow. Yeah, I'm that flexible. Yeah, I'm pretty advanced in my practice. I think my body is ok with this. It's kinda uncomfortable, but it's ok. I think.

That night my knees let me know in no uncertain terms that they were unhappy. They had not given consent. Their desires had not been listened to. "We need to talk", they said irritably, "about our relationship."

Oh, that anger and scorn that I had felt toward those men who hadn't understood my desires suddenly turned inwards. I'm supposed to be some sort of expert on listening and intimacy. I'm supposed to be a good queerfeministanarchist and I'm training to be a yoga teacher. How could I have made such a mistake? What if I've ruined my knees forever? I beat myself up for not being a superhero of awareness.

Ah, patriarchy in the head.

I spoke about it with a teacher at the yoga retreat that weekend. He said something like, "It's difficult when you think you have the go ahead." His compassion took a while to sink in. It was an invitation to be gentle with myself and to remember not to give too much emphasis to thought. "I 'think' my knees can take it" isn't the same as checking in with them, gently exploring, listening with great care.

A strong workout can be great and bodies do love to be challenged physically. It's how they grow, how they become strong. The challenge, as Jed points out, is to notice desires for strength over gentleness. There need be no judgement. Simply an observation. And then perhaps an exploration of what can be adjusted for even greater freedom and spaciousness. What gives support, strength, integrity? What effort can be let go? The flipside is watching out for the attraction of weakness, the need for the state/authority/strong-man to protect/educate/define us. What strengths might we deny in ourselves in attempt to be the same as others? Is this what we mean when we say equality?

The diversity Jed calls for, it seems to me, comes not from trying to vary our style, trying to be a good feminist or good anarchist or whatever, but by listening

within ourselves. Why might I be drawn to showing off how flexible and strong my body is in a yoga class or how clever my analysis is in a meeting? Perhaps I simply want some loving attention. Can I listen to that? Can I give myself that without demanding attention from others? Then, my own needs fulfilled, I can listen to discover what gifts I have to offer others. Then I can receive the gifts of others with simple pleasure.

- *Jamie Heckert, Poole, Dorset, Southwest England, September 2011*

The patriarchy in my head. Patriarchy as way of being, of exercising power over others, of silencing voices, of taking away others' ability to speak and of denying ourselves.

How to get to the point of being differently, of speaking that which is silenced, denied, taken for granted, of being heard and seen.

The words and emotions stuck in the throat, in the gut, not wanting to be the one that asks the question that makes others feel uncomfortable, not wanting to be the one that cries again and leaves the room as others look uncomfortably at the floor, afraid to feel for what might happen.

Confronting the patriarchy that causes pain and is exercised through violence against my self and my loved ones, a violence that is multiple and sadly often expressed by individuals exercising power over others and yet in doing so denying something of themselves and their possibilities.

How I agree with Jed and Jamie that to confront and transform this we have to construct other ethics of being, of touching, of seeing and feeling based on an embrace of plurality and dialogue. And how in our visualising and actualising of this it needs be embodied and affective, gentle, soft and tender. How beautiful. Tears well up in my eyes.

Yet others' way of being, softness, ethics of affirmation leaves me, or makes me feel in my day to day, that there is little room for rage and anger. When the anger comes I ask myself is this the patriarchy in my head, are these emotions and actions that speak over others? Am I re-enacting that violence that denies through my rage? How can we have a feminist anger? How do I find space to express that rage?

Ironically the fear of expressing anger and rage also plays into the patriarchal framing of public space and of female identities; that we should be rational and calm, unemotional and disembodied, that as women we care for others but not ourselves. So where amongst these contradictory thoughts and emotions do I/we find a place and a space for a feminist rage?

I wrote a post on facebook the other day asking the question "how do we create a feminist practice of everyday life?" Jamie commented "gently". I scroll down to his reflections on Jed's reflections and see the word gently again with the word anger.

Be gentle with myself. Perhaps not expect too much. No quick answers and final fixes. Patience, pauses, reflections.

Sometimes the anger can't be contained. A feminist practice of everyday life has to have space for anger and rage, for screaming. Perhaps it is possible to do this in a way that is affirmative and a recognition of self, a speaking and feeling honestly that lets go of fears about what others might think and feel without re-enacting violence. Visualising this affirmation I take a deep breath, a beautiful affirmation of ones self. No more denial, no more shame and no more fear.

Maybe to create spaces and relationships of collective affirmation, softness, reflection, pauses, gentleness we need to recognise the rightfulness of rage and to be able to embrace and transform that rage into voice and courage.

How might we open these types of conversations in our communities? How might we build the languages and the tools to create spaces for a feminist rage and anger as a moment and experience of affirmation of self and desire, a statement of being here?

- Sara Motta, Nottingham, October 9th 2011

Safe space for a Feminist Rage!? Crikey, what a proposal. The unboundless, bounded; at least 400 years of resentment invited for expression. This space will not be for everyone – so many hopes, such high ambition that alas, no “support group” could hope to be enough, and the freedoms we want to explore might only happen one friendship at a time. One note at a time. One article, one conversation, one experimental agreement at a time.

The blooming and gleeful complication, the personalisation and exploration of my thoughts circled back to me has been satisfying and exciting. Welcoming and daring me to say more, to go further.

Rather than “cap” this writing with a closed circle though, rather than return to my voice, I'd prefer to open the circle wider. Let these pages be a place for other voices. Let the questions and answers, the experiments and experiences spiral out of control. More editions, more writing, more reading aloud, discussing with daring, off the page and into practice.

Off into the future please, spread it about.

And into the past. Like a right nerd I want to include a reading list! This exploration does not begin in the present. As long as borders, (patriarchy, oppression, hierarchies, violence...) have existed, resistance has risen to meet them. Go, meet.

- Jed Picksley, from the pages of *The Modern Antiquarian* by Julian Cope, *Ten Women who shook the World* by Sylvia Brownrigg and Ursula Le Guin's note-rich translation of the *Tao te Ching*. October 17th 2011

## About the authors

**Jed Picksley** spent an isolated childhood in the far north east of Scotland before being socialised from the age of 17 in Edinburgh, Autonomous spaces, climate camps, housing co-ops and the permaculture association. She enjoys lecturing, writing books, tinkering and facilitating discussions, workshops and group art projects on many themes and topics, all over the UK. After several years of designer homelessness, she is now settled at Earthworm Housing Co-op in Herefordshire. She publishes sporadically on-line, and between staples or hand-sewn spines, and can be contacted at jed2f4 AT yahoo.co.uk

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