

ACT III [90 min]

00:00:00 - 00:00:26 // WrC Intro

00:00:26 - 00:07:56 // Natalie Galpern "The Widow Ching" part 3 & 4 (around 7 mins)

00:07:56 - 00:09:56 // [MING] INTRO (2 min)

Ming and Elaine live here with you from Linz, you're listening to WIDOW RADIO CHING, our amateurfunkdienst. We've moved upstream on the Danube to occupy a small territory in front of Stadtverkstatt, and we've been here this evening spreading the poisons of the Widow Ching Bar.

Eva Ursprung: last night hydrophone, tonight hydrofemme.

00:09:56 - 00:19:56 // from a LIVE PERFORMANCE: Eva Ursprung (10 min)

00:19:56 - 00:20:01 // WrC (Shillings) (5 sec)

00:20:01 - 00:28:40 // curated sound programme  
Tortuga Magazine contribution (8'39")

Tortuga, created in 2013 in Graz, is an experiment, an open media platform and a forum beyond efficiency and usability, a blank canvas for the silent, the crazy, the well-behaved, the wild.

This contribution of Tortuga has been created by Adina Felicitas Camhy [Camhy is pronounced "Kami"], Martin Kollmann, Bettina Landl, Elisabeth Pressl, Katharina Pressl and Eleonora Wenzel.

00:28:40 - 00:30:40 // curated sound programme

Aurelia GUO excerpted poem "Care" (2:00)

00:30:40 - 00:32:40 // CREDIT TORTUGA and AURELIA  
[MING] INTRODUCE SYMPOSIUM (1:55 min)

Aurelia GUO is an artist and writer living in London (@aurelia\_guo)

Deborah COWEN is an activist, author, and scholar. Deeply committed to social transformation and justice struggles, Deborah has been engaged in research and organizing around the suburbanization of poverty, issues of race and space, the politics of securitization, and queer and labour issues.

00:32:35 - 00:33:39 // Audiopedia "LOGISTICS" (1:04 min)

00:33:39 - 00:54:47 // SYMPOSIUM: "Queering Logistics" with Deborah COWEN

// Part I (21:08 min)

WrC: So we thought that there was actually an interesting link between the concept of the hydrofemme and your concept of queering logistics. This was sort of the main thing that we were hoping to speak with you about today. We've read parts of your book "The Deadly Life of Logistics" and recognize that queering logistics is almost really a proposition at the end and doesn't really address a direct mode of action. But we were hoping you could take us through that and any further thoughts you've had as you've been moving through the research.

This project departs from the sort of mythology that has arisen out of the obscurity of the global supply chain—that the fast fashion chain ZARA has these full production lines on boats. This was a story that repeatedly came up to explain the mysteries of current methods of production and distribution. We thought that this was really intriguing, but also indicative of the fact that despite the fact that supply chains really dictate everything around us, the flow of goods, we have such little general knowledge about them that people have to create their own myths.

The hydrofemme, then, is departing from the idea that capitalist rhetoric has appropriated various watery metaphors, to connote the constant circulation and flow of capital and goods. Astrida Neimanis points out, however, that bodies of water have always historically and metaphorically been female. So the work is to step back, considering this metaphorical but also materialist view of our current economic condition. So we wanted to start with your proposition of queering logistics and see how it might participate in this conversation.

DC: Yea, it is a kind of proposition at the end of the book and not entirely fleshed out because I hadn't yet arrived there. I'm still working through it and have been having a lot of generative conversations—it's something that I return to in a piece I did with viewpoint, and online journal. I'm still working through it and in some ways I think you've identified some of the key points in terms of the strangeness of talking about queering or queerness in the context of supply chains precisely because the infrastructures of management and of global trade are not places that we tend to associate with queer politics, or questions of desire or difference which are pretty central to constituting anything we would understand as queer.

In some ways, the way I engage queering supply chains or the queerness of supply chains, requires a bit of a step back from what people, at least people who aren't necessarily engaged in the broader debates in relation to queer theory, might assume. I guess before I start I would want to say that the kind of queer approach that I'm interested in

requires a very serious engagement with anti-colonial and critical race approaches, that really puts the question of difference as not just one of sexuality or identity or even desire, but one very much about bodies, livelihoods and reproduction, and sees sexuality and desire as centrally implicated in a much broader terrain of what I would think of as reproduction. I think there are lots of exciting connections between questions of social reproduction as feminist materialists have thought about for decades and some of the work you're looking at with hydrofemme. What I'm increasingly interested in with some of the feminist taking up of these questions of reproduction in science and technology studies. I'm thinking of works like that of Michelle Murphy that are taking up questions of reproduction, not necessarily in new ways because it's very much rooted in older thinking—really important thinking in feminist materialism, queer theory, indigenous work, marxist work—but work that tries to think about reproduction in significantly different ways. Not to say that work hasn't done this before, but we think about reproduction first and foremost as essentially something distributed. Of course something with the word distributed is of immediate interest to me, I'll return to that in a moment, but distributed in the sense that reproduction is something that is assisted, as Michelle Murphy talks about. So thinking of reproduction not only of individual bodies but also types of people, and the ways in which state policy has long been involved, whether it's in terms of eugenics, disabling the reproduction of radicalized bodies, and radicalized people, or pro-natalist policies like the welfare state, which often encourages the biological and social reproduction of especially white and middle-class, and otherwise normative, people understood as mentally able. Biological reproduction itself, but at the scale of collectives, and not just individuals, has always been something assisted. So that's one really crucial infrastructure for some of the work of queering I want to do.

But Michelle Murphy also really flags that, again, the scale of the individual body is not in itself one that we should remain anchored in. I think one of the assumptions we have is about queer approach is that it's about desire and sexuality and gender identity in an individualist way. But I think that the best queer theory tells us something very different, and asks us to think how the collective reproduction of not individual bodies, not even necessarily biological reproduction but kinds of people, groups—what Michelle Murphy calls “the capacity to live intergenerationally” is really at the center of reproduction in this kind of reconfigured way.

So in a lot of ways my work in queer theory might not seem particularly familiar. In terms of approaching supply chains specifically, and logistics as a management of circulation, I think it's important to remember that capitalism is premised on the mobilization of difference, and a very instrumental one. We can think about longstanding work on

uneven development, which is in some ways a different way of saying neocolonialism, which requires difference. Not even just a simple economic difference, but relies on the making of different kinds of people surplus, non-human, monstrous, and so exploitable or killable and therefore not essential to the reproduction of capitalism and capital circulation.

More recently we can think about someone like Anna Tsing's work. Tsing has been looking at what she calls "supply chain capitalism" and argues very centrally that difference is at the center of capitalism, but it's a kind of cynical form of an exploitation of difference. So capitalism relies on and requires difference, it produces difference. But a kind of cynical difference that can be contained, consumed—in the sense of exploitation. So I guess what queer theory allows, in reconfigured ways, is a kind of vehicle to think about supply chain capitalism and logistics in relation to difference, differently.

WrC: Would you mind reiterating the comparison of difference to difference?

DC: Sure. I was saying that capitalism has a relationship to difference, but it one that's rooted in containment, consumption and that I think what queer theory offers is the kind of potential to use difference against capitalism and imperialism, differently.

WrC: You had a really compelling quote in your book citing Elizabeth Grosz in which she defines queer attraction as "finding desire where it isn't supposed to be," which we found really compelling. In your work you have been observing the strategies of logistics PR to align themselves with wildlife television programs that are following a sort of Darwinist logic of survival of the fittest. It seems that what your saying is that the life of logistics is really one of death—resembling of Achille Mbembe's Necropolitics—and we were wondering if you could describe for us who occupies the sort of second subjugated strata, this second geography, that are the subjects of your research.

DC: Sure yea, that's helpful because the more grounded way that I would move to think about difference, and queerness, in response to or in relation to a kind of counter-imperial strategy in the world of logistics is really through this question of coalition. I try to think that through with the help of a lot of different folks—some the work of the Peter Linebaugh or Marcus Reddiker who have done work on thinking about the ways in which the violence of empire, if we think through its cartographies, it not only oppressed and exploited and dominated, but it also connected really different located, both socially and spatially, people. They offer us, with the model of the many-headed hydra, a kind of architecture of connectivity that may have, in a sense, been produced

or engineered by imperial practices but that also gave the shape or ground to different kinds of connections between different groups of people that didn't necessarily have anything like the same kinds of oppression in relation to imperialism, but had in some sense a common foe and could sometimes be found working in a coalition—sometimes intentionally, sometimes more intentionally—precisely because of how they had been brought together by this architecture of imperialism.

I was thinking that through with the kinds of movements I've been observing today on the ground with a focus on coalition that has happened especially in queer theory, which is really interesting because it suggests that difference is essential, not essential in that our particular differences are necessarily essential, but that we don't need to or want to, or it's not helpful to, obliterate difference, deny difference, but rather work from difference.

For instance, the kinds of coalition work that's happened here in North America, between the I Don't Know More movements and Black Lives Matter, have been really exciting not just because it brings together separate or different forces, people or bodies or issues, but because of their generative nature. Coalition is not a new concept at all, but a really helpful one, again because of the distributed nature of supply chain capitalism.

So we can see it in social movements, working around issues of state and colonial violence, but of course we can also see it more directly and immediately within the labor or supply chain capital itself. I've learned a lot from people in different parts of the world in different sectors, transport workers and the really crucial and creative work that's been happening in those sectors. For instance, joint actions between longshore workers on the west coast of north america with workers in the docks and oil sector in Iraq. Really breathtaking, courageous moves that put them at the center of anti-capitalism, but also anti-war and anti-imperialist of politics. Coalitions between undocumented workers and workers who are considered at the center of labor aristocracy—so across really different economic positions, in terms of status and rights. These coalitions have immediate potential in terms of the kinds of ways that unions have responded to their actions, literally shutting down or disrupting trade flows. This has been the focus of increasing interest in the field of counter-logistics, where there's a lot of debate these days. I would flag folks like Alberto Toscano who's been thinking carefully and critically about these kinds of questions. But also in expansive ways, in terms of can we block a ship or can we block a port for a day and cause economic damage, which is certainly interesting and at least diagnoses how crucial these spaces have become, and labor has become. It certainly suggests the power of workers in some of those key nodes, which again speaks to specific geographies of our economy and how

it is operating through circulation. This is at least as interesting to me, in addition to those forms of disruption and what can happen through the process of disrupting.

For many years we've heard of what happens to people when they take part in such actions, whether it's on a strike picket line or kind of blockade. New kinds of ideas, new kinds of understandings and new kinds of strategies, but also new subjectivities, can emerge in those spaces. I think for me, my interest in feminist politics really highlights that as a crucial part of the process, and not just as a sort of minor after effect or side effect of coalition, but actually one of the most important promises of what coalitional politics can help us to do.

00:54:47 - 01:01:38 // curated sound programme

"Hydro Theory" by Drexciya (6:51 min)

Drexciya was an American electronic music duo from Detroit, Michigan, active in the 90s, consisting of James Stinson and Gerald Donald. Drexciya, which eschewed media attention and its attendant focus on personality, developed an afrofuturist myth. The group revealed in the sleeve notes to their 1997 album *The Quest* that "Drexciya" was an underwater country populated by the unborn children of pregnant African women who were thrown off of slave ships; the babies had adapted to breathe underwater in their mother's wombs. The myth was built partly on Paul Gilroy's *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993), according to Kodwo Eshun.

01:01:38 - 01:02:03 // WrC Intro (25 sec)

We return to our conversation with Deborah Cowen who is, once again an activist, author and scholar. In this part of the dialogue we will be talking a little bit more about piracy—how it is very integral to societal infrastructures in ways that many of us don't see. Of course, we've mentioned in previous talks about the sea being somehow ignored in discussions of the urban context. Not only is it embedded in a kind of anti-authoritarian discourse, but also a neo-imperial one.

01:02:03 - 01:22:03 // SYMPOSIUM: "Queering Logistics" with Deborah COWEN  
// Part II (20 min)

WrC: I'm kind of interested in your notion of piracy, which I read about in your book a bit. How do you see this in terms of coalition, in terms of being a form of disruption or diverting of these kinds of flows?

DC: Yes, piracy is an interesting question. Especially because we're surrounded by images of pirates—the kind of more cartoonish version or the popular cultural version, or metaphors of piracy which certainly abound in the era of the digital. This is not to say that those aren't

very important in helping us understand a lot of things about what I think is interesting and potentially very explosive about piracy as tactic or strategy. I was thinking about your notion of the hydrofemme. I would almost want to bring them together to create a hydrofemme-pirate and amalgamate these figures. In my book I do talk about pirates, the kinds of people that are named pirates in our contemporary moment, in particular in the very volatile and I think crucial location of the Gulf of Aden in the horn of Africa and the so-called somali pirate who has become kind of notorious, not just in popular culture, but of course in the legal remaking of imperial geographies. It is certainly at the center of lots of concerns about the safety and security of supply chains because of the importance of that maritime corridor, through the Gulf of Aden into the canal zone there.

But I think if we step back and think about what is the pirate, what is the figure of the pirate and what has it done in terms of not just this moment, or the immediate concerns about Somalia, though I don't want to trivialize those, but I want to highlight the pirate as an important legal figure in the history of imperialism. I've learned so much from the works of people like Lauren Benton and Daniel Heller-Roazen, and then a lot of community organizers in London who are thinking about what's going on in Somalia and activists who are trying to raise questions about the particular incarnation of so-called piracy today.

What they all highlight to me is that pirate is such a crucial figure because empire required it. The pirate is not an accident of empire, imperial law invented the pirate in order to stabilize a system of international law. This is what I take from reading a lot of historical work on piracy. You had on the one hand a system of national laws where you had crime and criminality defined on the scale of an individual within the nation-state, and then you had a system of law that defined criminality or crime and tried to regulate the scale of nations and national governments in relation to each other. In a sense what was not accounted for in this, and which gave us this figure, the law of piracy historically, is the question of jurisdiction and sovereignty, outside of national territory. Of course the most crucial space at the time of early Atlantic imperialism was maritime space, which was seemingly unregulated, but which Lauren Benton helps us to see wasn't unregulated at all, but instead that what we saw with the rise of the law of piracy were these kinds of corridors or kind of zones of sovereignty and legality that emerged. That's a much more accurate picture of maritime law. So the pirate is sort of this figure that exists outside of national law. It troubles not just the law of one nation, but the law itself—the whole infrastructure and architecture of the law.

And so piracy is in a sense a kind of flexible character and category of law that could be applied to any figure that troubled the law, one piece

of legislation or a law within, or a kind of jurisdictional power, the kind of cartography of imperial law itself. And this is something that I suggest in my book that we are seeing today. The reason that the maritime is so crucial is because for such a long time the oceans have been considered these ungovernable spaces that exist outside of the authority of any particular nation. But I think it also understand, for instance, why digital space or airspace are so amenable to this way of thinking today. So on the one hand piracy shows us that the law is not something developed for the protection of rights, but instead a technology of imperialism that is profoundly geographical. Pirates are not just figures outside of the law, but outside of the very material jurisdictions of law and so require these kinds of new infrastructure. We've been talking in reference to the era of early Atlantic imperialism, but I'm also suggesting that the law of piracy is being remade in really important ways today.

In regards to some of the ways that piracy is being taken up as a sort of popular figure today, there's an anarchist queer bike coop up the street from my house called "Bike Pirates" of course embracing the figure of the pirate precisely because the pirate is considered this anti-colonial figure. It's a playful one perhaps in terms of it's popular culture incarnation, but I wouldn't want to belie the kinds of violence it incites in the world today.

WrC: It seems like a sort of double-edged sword, the ways the pirate tends to be heroicized as an opportunity to reclaim an anti-imperial, anti-colonial subjectivity, but then on the other hand if we consider it being a completely derived concept, as an instrument, as a way to control, I would almost be fearful then again that it's a kind of top-down kind of movement that may render it ineffective. In the same way that capitalism produces difference in order to re-exploit it.

DC: Precisely because of what you're highlighting is why I don't necessarily want to embrace or romanticize any subject that is already made the pirate by the state, or any corporation. It's rather the kind of diagnostic that it offers us, in terms of which figures are deemed pirates, in the more immediate or metaphorical sense that are deemed such because of the challenge that they pose to forms of imperialism and as a rejection to particular aspects to the law or unjust forms of regulation. I don't want to romanticize any subject or action that is already deemed piracy, but I do think that as a diagnostic it's really helpful in terms of highlighting the kinds of ways that various, actually existing kinds of collectives, individual actions, and networks of people who are contesting or rejecting the sort of theory of law itself to the point that they become enough of a threat that the state requires the legal infrastructure to address them. And in many ways the term that's more familiar to us in the present is the terrorist,

but there's been interesting legal work that highlights how the laws of terrorism are premised on the laws of piracy and not the other way around. Again, I wouldn't celebrate what are deemed acts of terrorism as liberating or transgressive, but I do think that what these legal and state categories help us to see is a profound threat that comes from what is rejection of imperial law and the kinds of systems and circulation, and modes of reproduction that they organize. To me groups like the Bike Pirates' use of the term are kind of mobilizing it in that sense. Not in the sense of a legal category of international law that they want to occupy, but because of the ways that that kind of category responds to a kind of transgression or contestation.

WrC: I guess the core of that possibility goes back to your discussion of coalition because it moves away from an individual act of piracy, which could be seen for example in the case of information leakers, or whistleblowers, that exist as kind of agents in the contemporary condition, but what is interesting is to consider after that. The possibility for the pirate mythology to visualize an alternative kind of common place, which is linked to this notion of the coalition. We consider acts of piracy as individual acts, like the act of plunder or a hack, but what is interesting as you say is to consider this as more diagnostic that can be turned towards the building of a network or coalition, or another type of autonomous commons.

DC: Yes, for sure. In the book I talk about piracy, but I also talk about indigenous figure that occupies other more terrestrial forms of supply chain capitalism but also long histories of imperialism, which is indigenous uprisings and revolts. I'm speaking to you from a part of the world where there are very active anti-colonial movements that are not mild in terms of the challenges that they are posing to state law and jurisdictions. They are also not marginal. We are just on the heels of a release of a truth and reconciliation report in Canada that if the recommendations are taken seriously and actually addressed by government, which is looking increasingly unlikely, it would require a radical rethinking of the authority and jurisdiction of settler-colonial government. So we have not at all individual kinds of approaches that share some of the qualities of so-called piracy offers. But in terms of its rejection of the entire architecture of the settler colonial regime. It's not at all individual, quite the opposite in fact, be asserting prior and ongoing alternative jurisdiction and authority. And the higher Canadian courts have supported this to some extent, and said in some cases that where land isn't ceded by a formal treaty that it's the Canadian government that has to establish right to jurisdiction. So there's incredible potential and momentum in thinking radical about the limits of the architecture of imperialism, and in this case settler colonial states as not nearly secure or ubiquitous as those states would

like to have us believe. And again, thinking about coalition efforts, there are all kinds of possibilities that emerge when movements that are routed in very particular histories and geographies of violence and struggle are able to connect and work together and share not just experiences but also kinds of efforts and ways forward and consider what different kinds of futurity could look like. This could bring us back to questions of queerness. Someone like Munoz, I think has really beautifully argued that queerness in the more expansive sense is not just about desire in terms of sexuality, or even gender or identity sense, but really requires that we think differently about time and temporality but especially futurity. And I think that kind of hangs a lot of our conversation together in terms questions of difference, of queerness, of logistics and coalition, and forces bringing us into a different set of possibilities.

01:22:03 - 01:24:48 // The Hydrofemme radio play ACT III(2:45 mins)

ZARA doesn't tell you what she wants because she doesn't need to. Dear listener, she never asks for anything. On the ground, her trend forecasters are out in throngs waiting to tap into what's "a la mode." A wire signal sent out to sea sets dozens of sewing machines whirring. By the time the ship reaches shore, several hundred thousand pieces have been sewn and the instant you feel a compulsive urge to buy a particular version of cropped tee, it has already miraculously appeared on the shelves—at a store near you.

At this point, your confusion concerning the skeptical nature of our heroine is warranted. The hydrofemme is a becoming mythology, and her implications within the mainstreaming of desire are meant to be read like the passing of the thousand philosophies adorning t-shirts in public space. The representations contradict or even satirize their wearers, and while she may be superficial, her impact is anchored much more deeply than those donned layers of ready-to-wear. Indeed, it is because she is always ready-to-wear that she slips through identity so fluidly and mercilessly, and her materialisms turn over, transmit and replicate.

— sound —

Desire is a funny thing. Before a single stitch is sown, before the thread hits the needle's eye, it's already born. Fashion is fast, but the ocean is oh so slow. Between its waves you can catch glimpses of the many eyes of the hydrofemme that is ZARA—the fetish, and the factish god.<sup>13</sup> We are part of this refracted gaze. You may not always see us directly, but we are there—in the "sequins of sequence" lining your décolletage, glinting from the pearl button on your sleeve, and swaying lightly in the hem of your skirt. We seized the means of production and channeled distribution to places it never should have gone.

ZARA, among other things, is a war machine that traverses the seas silently and relentlessly. Because her movements are often more dictated by economic currencies than watery ones, they are not always straightforward. This makes her a difficult beast to catch.

01:24:48 - 01:26:48 // CLOSING STATEMENTS and T H A N K Y O U s (2 min)

Credit: Ulrike Ottinger's Madame X: Eine absolute Herrscherin (1977)

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01:26:48 - 01:26:55 // JINGLE "WrC whisper" (7 sec)

01:26:55 - 01:30:00 // Fade out with "Shui Chang Liu" by Yao Su Rong (3:05 min)