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"The question of souls is old—we demand our bodies, now" (1890): Voltairine de Cleyre's Anarchist-Feminism

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Abstract: In late nineteenth-century America, the so-called 'Woman Question' prompted political activists and freethinkers to fight for women's rights, including marriage reform, birth control, and suffrage. Anarchist women such as Voltairine de Cleyre, however, envisioned a still more revolutionary future. Inflamed by what she defined as 'sex slavery' and 'rape in marriage,' de Cleyre rejected patriarchal institutions altogether, demanded sexuality separate from reproduction, and denied motherhood as intrinsic to woman's nature, in outright defiance of the puritan ethos. Her uncompromising and sectarian temperament, sometimes leaning towards asceticism, was doomed to be misunderstood even by her own comrades. Different from previous studies which have tended to root de Cleyre's incendiary thought in European anarchism, this essay locates sources of her ideology and inventive use of language in pre-Civil War abolitionist movements and American Quakerism.

Keywords: Anarchist-feminism; Voltairine de Cleyre; Emma Goldman; slavery; abolitionism; Quakerism.

It was Margaret S. Marsh who first used the term 'anarchist-feminism' to define the contribution of some sex radicals of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century America to what was then called the 'Woman Question.'[1] As Eugenia C. DeLamotte has pointed out, however, most of these activists would not have approved of the definition, as they saw themselves as apart from and, sometimes, even in opposition to mainstream women's movements ("Refashioning" 158). In their view, the larger feminist movement advocated the electoral and marital rights of middle- and upper-class white women, while ignoring more fundamental economic, social, and sexual issues. Despite the fact that anarchist women such as Voltairine de Cleyre (1866-1912) and Emma Goldman (1869-1940)

[1] Marsh first coined the definition in a 1978 essay titled "The Anarchist-Feminist Response to the 'Woman Question' in Late Nineteenth-Century America" and then elaborated on it in her book-length study *Anarchist Women 1870-1920* (1981). In her view, nineteenth-century anarchist-feminism failed to leave a lasting mark in American history for lack of organization and the excessive emphasis on women's economic independence.

openly scorned contemporary feminist agendas, I still use the term anarchist-feminism to refer to their belligerent work.

Drawing extensively on de Cleyre's writing, I position it within the context of late nineteenth-century fight for women's emancipation, while at the same time searching for its roots in pre-Civil War anti-slavery movements. While the anarchist legacy to claims of sexual freedom by late eighteenth-century European activists such as William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft has been amply acknowledged (Avrich 158-61; DeLamotte *Gates* 212-3; Presley and Sartwell eds. 192), the influence on de Cleyre's philosophy of American abolitionism, as voiced by dissenting Quaker women such as the Grimké sisters and Lucretia Mott, still needs to be fully explored. As the only Protestant denomination accepting female ministers, Quakerism espoused women's rights as a logical extension of their larger humanitarian concerns. Their aversion for any form of weapon, faith in individual awareness, and distaste for the growing materialism of American society foreshadow de Cleyre's radical critique of state violence, authoritarianism, and the market economy. Such a connection is key to an understanding of American anarchism as a homegrown tradition, with its own native language, rather than a "foreign poison" (Havel 5) illegally imported into the US by seditious émigrés.

While at the end of the nineteenth century US-American identity was being created—mostly in reaction to massive immigration, industrialization and labor conflict—anarchism was framed as a foreign ideology, ill-adapted to the values of democracy, liberalism and upward mobility on which the American nation had been founded. As this essay argues, however, the seeds of the sex revolt which climaxed at the end of the nineteenth century were permeated with anarchist feelings which dated back to the origins of the American nation itself. Different from Emma Goldman, who had migrated from Lithuania in the 1880s, been naturalized American, and then deported from the US under fears of Bolshevism in the 1920s, Voltairine de Cleyre was native born, and her Americanness could not be questioned. De Cleyre's anarchist-feminism was deeply ingrained into the principles of liberty and equality which had informed American colonial history from the time preceding the

Revolution up to the Civil War, the anti-slavery movement, and the Underground Railroad. Far from seeing her fight in opposition to the founding myths of the American nation, de Cleyre conceived of anarchist-feminism as their direct filiation with the Salvation Army, early Quakers, and abolitionists as forerunners of that same social revolution she aspired to (in Berkman ed. 221-231).

Voltairine de Cleyre is today acknowledged as one of the most radical American thinkers of her time, with a substantial corpus of essays, short stories, poems, and translations articulating her own original slant on anarchist-feminism.[2] Despite such copiousness, her work is still mostly neglected, obscured, or misunderstood. When, in the early 1970s, second-wave feminism rediscovered Emma Goldman's pioneering role in the fight for women's liberation and her works first became available in paperback (Shulman 4; Falk xi-xii), the same resurrection did unfortunately not include de Cleyre, whose short career, "sectarian temperament," and uncompromising "almost fanatical code of behavior" (Avrich 11; 90) alienated her from a wider audience.

In this essay, I expand upon existing feminist research on the turn-of-the-century anarchist-feminism and highlight de Cleyre's marginalization not only among her contemporaries, but also within feminist scholarship. Her striking modernity and linguistic rigor call for a more in-depth analysis to underscore the literariness of her prose as well as the originality and foresight of her thought.[3] At the intersection between gender, race, and class struggle, de Cleyre's work anticipated themes still relevant to twenty-first century feminist theory and women studies. Her interest in language(s), inventive use of metaphor, and attention to the origin of meaning emerge as distinguishing features of her writing, as she introduces innovative terminology to talk about extremely controversial issues. In particular, I read de Cleyre's phrasing 'sex slavery' and 'rape in marriage' in light of Ricoeur's

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[2] Alongside Marsh, DeLamotte, Wendy McElroy, and Catherine Helen Palczewski, it is imperative to include Paul Avrich's extensive work on American anarchism in de Cleyre's bibliography. The author of the only complete biography of de Cleyre (1978) to this day, Avrich was the first to rescue her from oblivion.

[3] DeLamotte was the first to highlight the literary ambition inherent in de Cleyre's writing. She also uncovered new archival material in her 2004 monography.

definition of the literal vs. the figurative, and of his notion of language 'awakening.'[4] Accordingly, de Cleyre's must not be read as dead metaphors (which is something twenty-first century readers of her work might be tempted to do), but as the awakening of early women abolitionists' struggle. Significant differences among apparently similar feminist stances thus come to the forefront.

Born in Michigan in 1866 from a descendant of the Puritans and a French immigrant, Voltairine de Cleyre inherited abolitionist beliefs from her mother, and a revolutionary spirit, a keen intellect, and a sincere passion for languages from her father. Although she started her career as a libertarian and freethinker, she soon converted to anarchism and began lecturing throughout the country as well as in Europe, while frugally supporting herself by teaching English to immigrants. Very favorably impressed by Philadelphia on her first visit there in 1888, she made "The Quaker City" her elected home (Avrich 70). The fourth largest American city at the time, Philadelphia vaunted a revolutionary tradition and a cosmopolitan population. In de Cleyre's words:

> […] I am glad to pay my tribute to those noble Liberals, who in the city where the iron tongue of American liberty first spoke, yet hear the chains of bygone eras clank; who feel the curse of "church and state" like a hot, close mantle round them, yet dare to stand in the midst of all and say, boldly and fearlessly, "I despise your shackles; I ignore your priestly bondage; I defy your authority to chain my mind; I laugh at your superstition; I stand for truth, liberty, and justice" (*The Truth Seeker* July 28, 1888).

De Cleyre's disillusionment with American democracy came after the Haymarket affair and trial (1886-7), whose tragic outcome shattered her faith in the American legal system. Primarily interested in the injustice of capitalist order, and the connivance of State and Church in producing class, race, and gender oppression, she dedicated most of her life to the fight for women's liberation. She authored a number of essays, poems, and short stories focusing on sexuality and the body. Their iconoclastic content and language remain thought-provoking today.

[4] To Ricoeur, the literal meaning is the one which is lexicalized in current usage. It is only use in discourse, therefore, and not some prestige attributed to the primitive or the original, that specifies its distance from the figurative (343). Language 'awakening' occurs when an apparently worn-out metaphor refers back to its origin.

The so-called 'Woman Question' was a hot topic in the US at the turn of the century, and it attracted a constellation of reformers, agitators, and freethinkers, debating contentious issues such as: women's desire and right to consent, sexual intercourse outside and inside marriage, birth control, childrearing, prostitution, divorce, and suffrage. Within the variegated panorama of the burgeoning women's movements, however, some activists, many of whom belonged to the Woman's Christian Temperance Union, openly supported conservative policies (including public morality, abstinence, prohibition, or sexual purity legislation), and viewed equality as equal treatment under the existing laws and institutions (Shulman 6; McElroy 3). In sum, they advocated the maintenance of social order, sometimes even favoring racist and xenophobic policies, more than the liberation of women.[5] Anarchist women participated in the debate and sometimes shared the platform with their feminist sisters, even if their positions differed quite substantially from those of mainstream movements. In the anarchists' view, patriarchal institutions could not be reformed; they had to be overthrown. Goldman, for example, considered herself the undisputed leader of the birth control and free motherhood campaign, and had a hard time acknowledging the valuable contribution of other feminists, such as Margaret Sanger, whose positions she viewed as too moderate (Falk 184-6).

Voltairine de Cleyre was among the founders of the Woman's National Liberal Union, directed by Matilda Joslyn Gage, a women's suffrage activist, and lectured for the freethought feminist organization twice, in 1890 and 1891 (DeLamotte *Gates* 32-3; Marsh "Anarchist-Feminist Response" 540). Founded in protest against the almost exclusive focus on the right to vote of the National Woman Suffrage Association, the WNLU was a short-lived organization that shared some of the anti-Church and anti-State views of de Cleyre and the anarchist-feminists. In the Report of the Convention for Organization held in Washington D.C. in 1890, de Cleyre took the floor many times as a delegate from Pennsylvania and even composed a poem, "The Gods and the People," for the occasion. In 1895 she also addressed

[5] According to McElroy, post-Civil War feminism differed substantially from abolitionist-feminism and even employed white supremacist arguments to promote the extension of suffrage to white women. In her view, eugenics and social purity became a staple of mainstream feminism following the Reconstruction era (11-12).

the Ladies' Liberal League (Avrich 157-61), although she ironized on their "innocuous" name (in DeLamotte *Gates* 261) and ridiculed the respectability of the word 'Ladies.' She concluded her address by inviting any "creature with a grievance" to come to the podium, and "if there is a subject tabooed on every other platform as dangerous" to voice it (in DeLamotte *Gates* 269-270).

As is known, anarchist-feminists neither cared for suffrage nor did they support their sisters in the fight for obtaining it. Goldman, for example, thought that the English suffrage movement was a waste of time and clarified that she was not opposed to it in principle as she, in fact, sympathized with those women who suffered heroically for something they believed in. To Goldman, the right to vote was simply not worth having. In her words, "[…] there is no reason why she shouldn't have just as much chance to make a fool of herself with it as men have in the last hundred years" (qtd. in Falk 108-9).[6] De Cleyre was on the same page as Goldman when she wrote: "Mind you, I never expect men to *give* us liberty. No, Women, we are not *worth* it, until we *take* it. How shall we take it? By the ballot? A fillip for your paper rag! The ballot hasn't made men free, and it won't make us free" (in DeLamotte *Gates* 249; emphasis in original).

Before the Civil War, male abolitionists had also rejected women's claim to suffrage, although for a tactical rather than ideological motive: women's votes, they claimed, would interfere with and delay the progress of the anti-slavery cause. In their opinion it was necessary to prioritize Black rights over women's rights. William Lloyd Garrison (1805-1879), the historical leader of the abolitionist movement and a sincere advocate of feminist battles, also refused to support women's suffrage, although due to different reasons. In his view, a moral reform should precede any reformation of the ballot system, as the electoral right was not sufficient *per se* to liberate men and/or women from cultural constraints. Non-conformist preacher Lucretia Mott viewed Garrison's non-resistance, which included a refusal to allow women's votes, as the new vanguard of Quaker pacifism, and never considered women's suffrage a priority over the demand for universal liberty and justice (Faulkner *Mott's Heresy* 83).

[6] On the same topic, see also Goldman's 1910 essay "Woman Suffrage," in Shulman ed. 190-203.

Garrison and Mott anticipated some of de Cleyre's views on race and sexual equality, the inconsequence of suffrage, and the primacy of individual conscience. To outsiders, however, the notion of non-resistance as advocated by Garrisonians seemed to embrace an anarchical 'no government' position.[7]

As Catherine Helen Palczewski has pointed out, there are three main issues, namely marriage, motherhood, and sexuality, on which de Cleyre's views differ substantially not only from those of women's movements, but also from fellow anarchists' positions (e.g. Emma Goldman and Lucy Parsons).[8] While most of contemporary movements advocated marriage reform and practiced some forms of free love and/or polygamy in the numerous experimental colonies that proliferated at the time (some of these experiments would in fact replicate that same oppression of women that they were supposedly fighting against), de Cleyre never theorized freedom in terms of full access to love and objected to any form of permanent domestic arrangement, whether sanctioned by religious or civil ceremony.

> It is of no importance to me whether this is a polygamous, polyandric, or monogamous marriage, nor whether it is blessed by a priest, permitted by a magistrate, contracted publicly or privately, or not contracted at all. It is the permanent dependent relation which, I affirm, is detrimental to the growth of individual character, and to which I am unequivocally opposed. Now my opponents know where to find me (in DeLamotte *Gates* 304).

De Cleyre also introduced the innovative idea of 'rape in marriage' as opposed to 'prostitution in marriage'—which also Goldman referred to[9]—or 'adultery in marriage.'

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[7] Garrison's line of opposition to women's suffrage and his kinship with anarchist-feminism is still relatively unexplored. See "Rights of Woman" January 12, 1838, "Abolition at the Ballot-Box" June 28, 1839, "Women's Rights" October 28, 1853, in Cain ed. 97-101; 106; 132-133. On Mott's disagreement with Elizabeth Cady Stanton over women's suffrage, see Faulkner *Mott's Heresy* 140-9.

[8] Despite being quite liberated on other matters, Parsons recoiled from what she considered a shocking new trend in anarchist ideology, i.e. sexual 'varietism,' and paid obeisance to gender conventions when she wrote that the greatest ambition for a woman was to find a husband and a quiet place she could call home (qtd. in Jones 273). On Parsons's ambiguity towards marriage, sex and color, see Jones 245-6.

[9] See Palczewski 58. See also this passage from Goldman's "Marriage and Love" (1910) in Shulman ed. 211: "The institution of marriage makes a parasite of woman, an absolute dependent. It incapacitates her for life's struggle, annihilates her social consciousness, paralyzes her imagination, and then imposes its gracious protection, which is in reality a snare, a travesty on human character. [...] Marriage but defiles, outrages, and corrupts her fulfillment. [...] does it not degrade and shame her if she refuses to buy her right to motherhood by selling herself?"

Elisabeth Cady Stanton, the famous women's rights activist and founder of the National Woman Suffrage Association, had been the first, in the 1860s, to describe marriage as 'legalized prostitution.' The metaphor had soon replaced within radical circles that of 'adultery in marriage,' which was more palatable to most nineteenth-century feminists in that it offered a moral critique of marriage instead of a revolutionary one. Stanton herself would be marginalized within feminist movements, as only a few women activists were ready to discuss marital sex at the time (Faulkner *Unfaithful* 63).[10] In nineteenth-century parlance, any sexual act which was not mutual was "adulterous," hence immoral, just like any loveless marriage (Faulkner *Unfaithful* 112-3).

De Cleyre was miles apart from these ideas in that she refused the inviolability of marriage together with the implication that it be founded on true love, and proposed 'rape' as a novel way of describing forced sexual intercourse whether outside or inside marriage. Different from other feminists of the time who adopted the metaphors of adultery and prostitution as a replacement for some missing expression, de Cleyre introduced an entirely new concept and insisted on her literal wording. In her philosophical discourse, the language of rape is more than a substitution, a juxtaposition, or a simple analogy. I propose to read her anarchist-feminist theory as an extension of the abolitionist fight for women's rights, as well as a sharp break from post-Civil War feminism, whether anarchist or not. De Cleyre's 'rape in marriage' is not a compensation for some lexical lack but, to borrow from Paul Ricoeur, a "revived metaphor" (344). By referring back to the all too recent history of the American nation—specifically, the loss of property rights over one's own body of black women under slavery—her metaphor has the power to re-describe present reality and create new meaning. This is how she formulates rape in marriage in her essay "Sex Slavery:"[11]

[10] Later on, as Stanton and Susan B. Anthony felt betrayed by the Republican Party and repudiated it, they came closer to the traditionally pro-slavery Democratic party. Their association with racist George Francis Train split the post-Civil War feminist movement in two. See McElroy 9-10; Faulkner *Mott's Heresy* 188-194.

[11] Written in defense of Moses Harman, the notorious free-love campaigner and editor of the radical journal *Lucifer*, who had been incarcerated for obscenity under the Comstock laws (1873), this essay is replete with images of confinement and master/slave language. Harman's daughter, Lillian, would also be imprisoned, together with *Lucifer* co-editor E. C. Walker, for their non-State, non-Church marriage in 1886. Accused of living together as man and wife without being legally married, the couple was one of the first

> […] beneath the shelter-shadow of home, and sanctified by the angelic benediction of a piece of paper, within the silence-shade of a marriage certificate, Adultery and Rape stalk freely and at ease.
>
> Yes, for that is adultery where woman submits herself sexually to man, without desire on her part, for the sake of "keeping him virtuous," "keeping him at home," the women say. (Well, if a man did not love me and respect himself enough to be "virtuous" without prostituting me, he might go, and welcome. He has no virtue to keep.) And that is rape, where a man forces himself sexually upon a woman whether he is licensed by the marriage law to do it or not (in Berkman ed. 345).

De Cleyre also objected to any idea of marriage as romantic passion or to the supposed "joy of motherhood" and "innate craving for motherhood," which Goldman argued for in her best-known essay "The Tragedy of Woman's Emancipation" (in Shulman ed. 161-3). In her post-mortem tribute to de Cleyre, Goldman praised her comrade's "forceful personality" and famously defined her "the most gifted and brilliant anarchist woman America ever produced" (in Presley and Sartwell eds. 29-30). Goldman, however, also accused de Cleyre of being "entirely lacking in the mother instinct" and of having alienated her own son's affection, in fact of having "repelled" him through her "austere mode of living" (in Presley and Sartwell eds. 42). We know from de Cleyre's biographer Avrich (70-74), and from the documents preserved at the Labadie Collection, University of Michigan, however, that such a narrative was not true and that Goldman was at least unfair in her portrayal of de Cleyre's relation to her son.[12] Besides, Goldman's phrasing suggests an ambiguity towards motherhood as personal experience, if not as an institution, which she herself would never resolve.

De Cleyre, on the other hand, unequivocally opposed any conventional idea of woman's femininity (DeLamotte *Gates* 236), and clearly distinguished any pre-existent difference between the sexes from the inequality stemming from power relations. She expanded the

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to violate marriage statutes. See McElroy 13-17.

[12] Goldman's bias is further revealed in the following words from the same essay: "Nature has been very generous towards Voltairine, endowing her with a singularly brilliant mind, with a rich and sensitive soul. But physical beauty and feminine attraction were withheld from her, their lack made more apparent by ill-health and her abhorrence of artifice" (in Presley and Sartwell eds. 39).

notion of love beyond the familial, advocating sexual expression as a universal human right, as well as part of the general 'processes of nature.' She also preached a liberated, non-procreative, and non-marital sexuality, in which a single standard of morality be applied regardless of gender. She did not believe in eternal love either and encouraged men and women to terminate relations once they had come to a dead end:

> […] freedom for sex does not mean one must always be worrying about his sexual existence. Let not his conviction that love should be free effervesce so much […] that he is unable to recognize himself as part of the general processes of nature […]
>
> Love—when free—dies in its due season. It dies to make way for other activities, equally imperative in the building up of character. Don't seek to prolong the agony; let it die in peace (in DeLamotte *Gates* 298).

De Cleyre's feminist theory is more radical and far-reaching in its implications than Goldman's or any of her contemporaries (DeLamotte *Gates* 210). While Goldman stresses the right to love and be loved, "the beauty of nudity," the "limitless joy" and "ecstasy" of sexual pleasure, together with the "fountain springs of that happiness,"[13] de Cleyre is contemptuous of romantic love (DeLamotte *Gates* 215) and refuses it as relevant to her discourse on sexuality and the body. She would have agreed with Simone de Beauvoir that freedom is more important than happiness (DeLamotte *Gates* 106) and that one is not born a woman but becomes a woman under the circumstances she is forced to live in. To de Cleyre, the body is more of a site of pain and sorrow than one of happiness and pleasure, and her language is imbued with imagery of physical suffering.[14] In Judeo-Christian theology women's pain in childbirth is traditionally taken as a sign of God's wrath and punishment, the consequence of the curse laid on Eve in Genesis. Passive endurance has therefore become a

[13] See Goldman's "The Hypocrisy of Puritanism" and "The Tragedy of Woman's Emancipation" in Shulman ed. 153 and 159-167.

[14] See, for instance, her sketch "The Sorrows of the Body" in Berkman ed. 451-453. De Cleyre's apprehension of physical pain was not due to a penchant for asceticism or self-loathing, as Goldman suggests: "Her approach to life and ideals was that of the old-time saints who flagellated their bodies and tortured their souls for the glory of God" (in Presley and Sartwell eds. 39). Quite the opposite, it was the result of an uncommon sensibility towards human suffering and horror for State-inflicted violence. While lecturing in London in 1897, for instance, she met some victims of torture just released from the Montjuïc fortress in Barcelona. The sight of the scars on their bodies, which she described in detail in a letter to her mother, left in her an indelible memory.

trope of femininity. Against this archetypal view of maternal suffering as a 'natural' female destiny, de Cleyre calls for resistance, firmly invoking what she calls 'direct action.' In so doing, she anticipates late twentieth century feminist critique of the "womanly woman" and the "maternal mystique" (see de Beauvoir 573-4; 565; Rich 128-9), rather than replicate worn-out clichés. In the following passage, for example, she insists on the notion of childbirth as a forceful entrance into a world of suffering, but then envisions the woman as a warrior against a desolate expanse of land and sky:

> In my dreams, I see the figure of a giantess, a lonely figure out in the desolate prairie with nothing over her but the gray sky, and no light upon her face but the chill pallor of the morning. […] Such will be your figure, O Woman, […] in the day of your emancipation. In the day when you break from your cell, this warmed, round cell, whose horizon is your children's eyes, whose light is your husband's eyes, whose zenith is your husband's smile. Better the pitiless gray of the clouds than the white ceiling of a prison: better the loneliness of the prairie than the caress of a slave-born child; better the cold biting of the wind than a Master's kiss. "Better the war of freedom than the peace of slavery" (in DeLamotte *Gates* 250).

The notions of 'rape in marriage,' 'pregnancy as torture,' and 'sex slavery' in de Cleyre's writing must be read in continuity with and as an expansion of early women abolitionists' work. According to Ricoeur, a dead metaphor is a metaphor which has been lexicalized in current usage to the extent of becoming the proper word. In fact, it is not even a metaphor anymore, as it has replaced literal meaning, simply extending its polysemy (342-3). De Cleyre's use of lexical items such as rape, torture, and slavery to describe women's oppression in contemporary society is not a by-product of by then obsolete vindications, but the rejuvenation of seemingly worn-out metaphors. The use of figurative speech, therefore, is as a sign of the fecundity of her language, not its imitativeness. This characteristic stands out particularly in de Cleyre's handling of metaphorical language around the concept of slavery.

The comparison of women to slaves dated back to the anti-slavery movement in the early 1830s. Abbie Kelley (1810-1887), a former Quaker who later broke her allegiance to the Society of Friends, had been among the first to argue for the self-ownership not only of one's own property, which women lost by marriage, but also, and more importantly, of one's own

body. Most Quaker abolitionist women also highlighted the fact that a woman would give up her rights to personal property (Sarah Grimké's "Legal Disabilities of Women" 1837), as well as to her person (Sarah Grimké's "Woman Subject only to God" 1837), after marriage.

Sarah Grimké, however, one of the daughters of a wealthy slaveholding family from the South, never went as far as assimilating a married woman to a slave:

> I do not wish by any means to intimate that the condition of free women can be compared to that of slaves in suffering, or in degradation; still, I believe the laws which deprive married women of their rights and privileges, have a tendency to lessen them in their own estimation as moral and responsible beings, and that their being made by civil law inferior to their husbands, has a debasing and mischievous effect upon them, teaching them practically the fatal lesson to look unto man for protection and indulgence (in Grimké and Grimké 87).

De Cleyre, on the contrary, literally conflates in her hallucinatory prose the condition of woman in marriage to that of a bonded slave, as well as the figure of husband to that of master.[15] To her, any form of unwanted sex, whether within marriage or not, constitutes actual rape, and the pangs of giving birth—"the ordeal of pregnancy and the throes of travail" (in Berkman ed. 344) —amount to real physical torture.

By adopting the lexicon of slavery and delving into the abolitionist feminists' line of reasoning, she revives old metaphors and de-lexicalizes them (Ricoeur 344-5). In the process, de Cleyre achieves semantic innovation and makes new conceptual production possible. In sum, her recourse to an extended use of words from ordinary language—such as rape, master, torture, prison—i.e., her use of a metaphor cluster related to the semantic field of slavery, is not the result of a deficiency in naming or an obsolescence of thought. Quite the opposite, it is the "reanimation" (Ricoeur 344) of an apparently worn-out language. In so doing, she deconstructs conventional meaning by going back to its etymological motivation and creates new semantic pertinence. Her philosophical discourse thus destabilizes accepted ideas and generates revolutionary meaning.

[15] The Declaration of Sentiments also included a reference to the status of a husband in marriage as master. Although generally attributed to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the document, drafted on the occasion of the 1848 Seneca Falls women's rights convention, was the work of a group of activists comprising three Quaker women (Faulkner *Mott's Heresy* 139-141).

A common setting in the American gothic narrative of the nineteenth century (see, for instance, "The Oval Portrait" by Edgar Allan Poe; "The Birthmark" by Nathanael Hawthorne; "The Yellow Wallpaper" by Charlotte Perkins Gilman; as well as "The White Room" by Voltairine de Cleyre herself), the space of the dungeon was often used as a literary allegory for the entrapment of woman in Victorian society. De Cleyre pursues her own radical critique of the institution of marriage by bringing the image of the prison-cell back to its initial, non-figurative, meaning, thus, in Ricoeur's wording, awakening it. In her vision, there is a fallacy in the English language according to which there is no sweeter word than 'home.' Beneath the word, indeed, hides the fact of, "[…] a prison more horrible than that where he [Moses Harman][16] is sitting now, whose corridors radiate over all the earth, and with so many cells, that none may count them" (in Berkman ed. 344). She then presses on by adding that the earth itself is, in fact, a prison and the marriage-bed a cell, in which women are the prisoners and men the keepers. Such a disparity between the sexes has permeated, in her view, all sexual interaction, especially when licensed by the marriage law.

In addition to her critique of women's suffrage and marriage, De Cleyre's interest in the origin of languages, etymology and the literalness of translation, particularly translations of the Bible, is another element she shared with Quaker abolitionist women. As is known, in the first half of the century the Bible was often cited, not only by pro-slavery advocates of Southern States, to endorse what was hypocritically known as 'the peculiar institution.' The Bible was also used to justify the subjection of women in patriarchal society. Both Sarah and Angelina Grimké insisted on the fact that the Bible does not assert the supposed "inferiority of women" (or slaves, for that matter). Rather, Sarah Grimké quotes directly from the Holy Scriptures to demonstrate the opposite, i.e., that man was created in the image of God, "after our likeness," to distinguish them from "the fish of the sea, […] the fowl of the air, and […] every creeping thing, that creepeth upon the earth" (in Grimké and Grimké 5), the biblical distinction clearly being between a man and a *thing* and not between a man and a

[16] Refer to footnote 10.

woman, or a man and a slave.[17] In sum, the Grimké sisters argued that the true meaning of the sacred text had been altered by translators under the influence of educational prejudice (in Grimké and Grimké 109), and both suggested new ways of rendering key biblical terms and phrases in order to reassess the role of both women and people of color in American society.

Like the Grimké sisters, de Cleyre also highlights the manipulative way the language of the sacred texts has been used to endorse misogynist policies. She accuses the Christian Church of having been complicit in constructing the inferiority of women, although she does not ultimately reject a belief in true morality as suggested by the Christian Church. De Cleyre's idea of a true morality is in unison with the Quaker doctrine of an "inner light," especially seen in Lucretia Mott's commitment to one's own individual conscience above all forms of religious and/or temporal authority (Faulkner *Mott's Heresy* 10-17). Mott's and the Grimkés' radicalism, however, never severed them from the Society of Friends they belonged to, while de Cleyre's biting attacks on the Christian Church clearly set her apart from any religious or ecclesiastical association:

> In one form or another […] runs the undercurrent of the belief in the fall of man through the persuasion of woman, her subjective condition as punishment, her natural vileness, total depravity, etc.; and from the days of Adam until now the Christian Church […] has made woman the excuse, the scapegoat for the evil deeds of man. So thoroughly has this idea permeated Society that numbers of those who have utterly repudiated the Church, are nevertheless soaked in this stupefying narcotic to true morality (in Berkman ed. 349; emphasis in original).

[17] Sarah Grimké goes on by saying that the Hebrews had no term in their language for slave in the "Colonial sense" and quotes from Genesis to demonstrate that asserting that Abraham held slaves is a mere slander (in Grimké and Grimké 11). On the same topic, see also Sarah Grimké's "Letters on the Equality of the Sexes," in Grimké and Grimké 40; 92. She concludes her essay by writing that, according to the Bible, both under the New Testament dispensation and the Old, women were the recipients of the gift of prophecy (in Grimké and Grimké 103) and that wherever woman was spoken as "minister of the church," the common translation into English had transformed her into "servant of the church" (in Grimké and Grimké 105).

Translations of the Bible were a hot issue in de Cleyre's time.[18] This was also the time when *The Women's Bible* first appeared. Led by Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the project consisted of a compilation of all sections from the Bible referring to women alongside a comment on them. Published in 1895 and 1898, *The Women's Bible* was an attempt to draw attention to the sexist bent in current translations of the Bible into English and provoke a critical response. It also aimed at freeing the original scripture from mistranslations and demonstrated the role they had played in the oppression of women.[19] By the same token, de Cleyre often wrote about her scholarly interest in Hebrew and praised her Jewish immigrant pupils from Philadelphia for teaching her Yiddish, a language she learnt well enough to be able to translate anarchist literature from it:

> I really think its [sic] pretty near a sin to read the Bible, for the reason that unless one knows Hebrew and can read in Hebrew, he doesn't know the meaning of the writer at all. The language, like all primitive languages, is so full of symbolism, double and triple meanings, poetry whose beauty is turned into caricature by translation that so abstract a language as English cannot possibly express it. It is simply meaningless nonsense half the time, where the original is really beautiful. If I had time I would surely study Hebrew so as to read the literature (Letter to the mother, Phila. February 20, 1894, Labadie Collection).

De Cleyre was deeply influenced by abolitionist-feminism and looked back at the foundation of the American nation and religious dissenters for inspiration for her revolutionary ideals. She repeatedly praised the non-resistance and pacifism—which she called "direct action"—of early Quakers for refusing to pay church taxes, bear arms, or swear allegiance to any government, as opposed to the "political action" of the Puritans that she despised (in

[18] Lucy Stone, a leading women's rights reformer and abolitionist, taught herself Hebrew. After doing so, she remained convinced that there was no basis in the Bible for woman's subordination. See Simon 116.

[19] The controversial publication of *The Women's Bible* stirred a mixed reaction, especially among the suffragists who marginalized Stanton within the movement. Stanton's liberating theology and her attention to the poetics of language were in tune with de Cleyre's vision, although de Cleyre would not have supported her sister's fight for women's right to vote. Garrison had showed an interest in the language of the Scriptures, too. However, he did not think that the Bible should have settled the question of women's rights as the human soul was greater than any book. In his opinion, if there was any truth in the Bible, it had to be believed, otherwise it could be discarded (see Garrison's "The Bible and Women's Rights" January 12, 1855 in Cain ed. 140-1). Mott also blamed the Bible for the "existing abuses of society" and called it "a giant scarecrow, across the pathway of human progression" (in Faulkner *Mott's Heresy* 155-156).

Berkman ed. 223-4). Similarly, she prided herself on her maternal grandfather, who had been an active member of the Underground Railroad and helped many a fugitive slave to find their way to Canada. Aiding fugitives had been an important task of the anti-slavery movement, which viewed the infringement of an unjust law as an act of civil disobedience. However, it also caused disagreement among the Philadelphia Female Anti-Slavery Society, some of whose members, Mott included, saw it as a diversion from the society's true aim, i.e., ending slavery (Faulkner *Mott's Heresy* 113-4). De Cleyre also shared some of the spiritual fervor of Quaker women, drawing from their scorn for material ease and ornament in attire to preach her own anarchist version of the liberation of women.[20]

However, she also moved forward in the battle for women's emancipation by highlighting the need to free woman's body from institutional chains. In so doing she adopted an apparently derivative language to talk about something thoroughly new. By ridiculing the Church for discussing trifling issues such as the existence of women's souls while viciously reinforcing their earthly submission, she unequivocally demanded the liberation of women's bodies from their worldly constraints:

> […] in the sixth century […] the fathers of the Church met and proposed the decision of the question, "Has woman a soul?" Having ascertained that the permission to own a nonentity wasn't going to injure any of their parsnips, a small majority vote decided the momentous question in our favor. Now, holy fathers, it was a tolerably good scheme on your part to offer the reward of your pitiable "salvation or damnation" (odds in favor of the latter) as a bait for the hook of earthly submission […] But fortunately fourteen hundred years have made it stale. […] The question of souls is old – we demand our bodies, now (in Berkman ed. 350-1).

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[20] De Cleyre personally disdained women's adornment in dress. Her penchant for austerity was often ridiculed, even by her fellow comrades, namely Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, sometimes with an openly sexist slant. See, for example, this entry from Berkman's diary of October 7, 1910: "It's pity she dresses with so little taste. Perhaps it's the influence of her Dominant Idea; maybe she wants to be "principled," yet is it against principle, is it compromise to make oneself as pleasing to the eye as possible, yes, even to one's own eye. That picture-pin on her neck is simply awful, large, gigantic, ugly. Sweetheart, I suppose. *Even she is a woman*" (own emphasis). The Grimké sisters were also ostracized in their native Charleston, South Carolina, for refusing to dress as women of their social class, i.e. the slaveholding aristocracy, and preferring instead simple Quaker clothes (see Perry 33; 51). Lucretia Mott adopted plain clothing and free calicoes too as a way of banning the products of slave labor from her household (Faulkner *Mott's Heresy* 54).

Between asceticism and anticlericalism, piety and blasphemy, de Cleyre was poles apart from the self-flagellating martyr or the moral crusader that some anarchist hagiography would have her. An indomitable fighter, she adamantly refused received assumptions about femininity, motherhood, and sexuality to envision a future where woman would be empowered and ultimately free from social, religious, and economic constraints.

To conclude, Voltairine de Cleyre drew from pre-Civil War feminism, but she also distanced herself substantially from both contemporary mainstream feminism and fellow anarchist women, anticipating some of the most innovative ideas of second-wave feminism. She revealed the conservative, racist, and classist strains inherent in some of the coeval feminist organizations— whose aim was not to change the status quo, but be included into it (McElroy 3) —and articulated her critique in a language that was violently lyrical and theoretically sound, speculative, and poetic at the same time. Her metaphors did not deviate from ordinary language in search of a replacement for some exhausted meaning, but brought language back to its inception, thus producing thoroughly new knowledge. Constantly aware of the power of language and its manipulative use by church and state, she longed for a return to a true morality, while mourning the impossibility of women to liberate themselves under the present economic conditions. In the fight for a more equitable society which would include body sovereignty, gender liberation, and racial justice, she never compromised and always sided for those on the receiving end of oppression and violence. Her visionary thought and incendiary language could have radically transformed American society but were way ahead of their time.

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