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Kill your Darlings (Working Title)

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ABSTRACT: The following think piece explores what it means to exist in a culture of idols by questioning the universalistic practice of canonization. By rejecting homogenous Eurocentric thinking, this piece makes room for the voices of plurality and collective thinking with each other. To this end, it relies on feminist praxis to criticize the genius-based, self-contained understanding of creativity and success perpetuating within contemporary scientific research. Indeed, it presents a case for cultivating cultures of failure within academia and demonstrates with its own stylistic development how cultivating a stream of thoughts can speak to the fragmented and collective nature of the entangled process of thinking and writing.

KEYWORDS: philosophy of science; radical praxis; feminism and science; experimental literature; decolonization; failure; canonization

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Inspired by Virginia Woolf's writing technique of following a stream of consciousness, I aim to create a text that reflects on the very process of exploring an idea, bearing witness to how ideas grow and eventually leap into actuality. Thus, I step into a stream of thoughts and try to find a beginning, (re-)visiting ideas from the past and the present that occupy my mind rent-free.

'Kill your Darlings' — a phrase which I have to admit I never gave much consideration. It appears as a clear message, or I thought it would. For me, it meant that we should be able to leave our idols, professional or otherwise, behind us. Learn to let go of and detach ourselves from the umbilical cord, so to speak. Thus, it is a perfect fit for my title, even if it is a bit too catchy for the current think piece. The phrase has an Oedipal ring to it, and my interpretation of it as killing off the father figure made me look into it deeper only to find out that, indeed, my assumption was incorrect, although not too far from the original meaning.

'Kill your darlings' is often a piece of advice one receives from experienced writers in a manner of a masterclass.

You kill your darlings when you decide to get rid of an unnecessary storyline, character, or sentence in a piece of creative writing — elements you may have worked hard to create but must be removed for the sake of your overall story.¹

Why is my failing to catch the meaning of this phrase so important? Because for the longest time, I have been curious about how we can produce knowledge differently in order to bend the frames of disciplined processes of thought and hopefully open it to others.

What does it mean to kill your darlings when you see them as your idols? In our contemporary networked culture, an idol refers to a person who is a greatly admired role model since they cannot fail by any means. Our patriarchal academic practice loves producing these idols whose works shine some celestial light upon us and treating them like geniuses. Indeed, a person who is constructed in terms of such intellectual power is assumed to be born with this gift. Their gift is seen as ‘natural’ or god-given, as if they were blessed with it. Not surprisingly, men most often have taken this name and position, whereas the woman, the Other, the sinner, falling from grace, is rarely seen as a genius. But why is this role assigned to women, and to everyone whose existence challenges the (gender) binary system? Taking it a step further: why do we even need geniuses in the first place?

Despite the ever-continuing, if not expanding, war raging on science and women via a conservative politics on the rise (again), feminist, queer, and decolonial theories try to hold their ground strong while coming from the margins. Since current academia and its epistemic regimes

1 ‘What Does It Mean to Kill Your Darlings?’, *MasterClass*, 8 September 2021 <<https://www.masterclass.com/articles/what-does-it-mean-to-kill-your-darlings>> [accessed 21 December 2022].

are still products of the overbearing patriarchal culture, I would like to tackle the myth(s) of knowledge production that this culture reproduces. I grew up in Catholic Hungary, surrounded by Christian mythology. In this respect, my first gesture would be to connect the tropes of the intellectual role model with two myths: that of the genius and that of the banning of Adam and Eve from Eden. More specifically, I am interested in what kind of connection one can find between the myth of an exile from Eden and the male genius. In this respect, the striking aspect of the myth is that it condemns one more than the other. For instance, due to childbirth and menstruation, women are sentenced to greater physical pain and on top of that to be governed by men. Thus, a woman who curiously seeks knowledge becomes the Other-ed, categorized as a transgressor to be tamed and repressed. The underlying message here is to be wary of curiosity and change as much as it is to distrust what one recognizes as the Other — the woman. Only knowledge derived from a deified figure can be valid and trustworthy. The authority of this figure of superiority, the man, cannot be questioned — like the establishment itself. Through these cultural threads, even implicitly, the model of the genius has not surprisingly become associated with the male, mainly white figure.

Then, who is the idol that I am fighting here? Am I contesting the mechanisms that constitute these god-like idols? Should I dig into these idols as symptoms of the contemporary knowledge cultures and power asymmetries that are within them? But really, what kind of knowledge is produced by a genius? A singular, self-contained, mythical figure of knowledge-making, as if he were devoid of history, roots, or influences? How does this bubble of omniscience maintain itself as well as the authority of geniuses it hosts? Yet, all these questions indicate a self-justifying image of

the genius that does not reflect material and social conditions of knowledge production in the sense of intellectual labour and creativity. This self-justifying image hides away from the cultivation of the community and denies individuals perceived as the Other the right to participate. The authority becomes mystic as much as solid, where canons arise to separate and dominate.

From this perspective, I now interpret the phrase ‘kill your darlings’ as a call to kill the intellectual geniuses I have been educated with and eventually constrained by. Nothing too bloody or naive, but it is time to question their place and relevance and to let go of their patronage in order to think with others, thereby overcoming universalistic and exclusionary approaches that do not align with the world around me.² In a masterclass, allegedly coming from the German *Meisterklasse*, you get the qualification to be a master of your art by being mentored not only by the best intellectuals but by those valued for their way of thinking beyond the disciplinary boundaries and their asymmetrical valuation of knowledge-making traditions. Indeed, the system of the masterclass recognizes that the educational framework can be and should be expanded through the view of ‘experts’ who offer alternative modes of transmitting one’s know-how. Although I do not yet know, and may never know, how to fully escape the narrative of idolatry, seeking mentors who engage in a similar quest, and prioritizing the task of thinking with others, seems like a good place to start.

By drawing on Donna Haraway’s and Ursula Le Guin’s reflections, I try to be grounded in theories that attempt

2 Becoming a feminist killjoy is definitely one way to go to transform the rage and other negative energies. For inspiration and guidance see Sara Ahmed, *The Feminist Killjoy Handbook* (London: Allen Lane, 2023).

to stay open to dialogue, self-reflexivity, and transformation without being overdetermined by exclusivity or judgment.³ Accordingly, for this current piece I gathered female identifying authors in order to challenge the male-authors-dominated curriculum I have often encountered in higher education in Germany and Hungary. For instance, students are constantly exposed to the works of male authors and thinkers, and these students come to assume that the task of intellectual creation is reserved mainly for men. After I had struggled with gender pronouns in a first language that doesn't use them, the educational setting in German and English, languages with gender pronouns, more clearly exposed how students most of the time assume that the author is He, a male. The globally growing trend of diversifying the curriculum (e.g. decolonizing the curriculum) has also reached here in Berlin, but in what capacity? What are the potentials and challenges that await us? The framing of 'us' here refers to the cultural and academic workers teaching and researching in Germany, a country that has hardly come to terms with its colonial history and present.

Thus, I propose to focus on authors who can guide me while I address all these questions, which are layered and complicated enough. I organize them in a list format to highlight their processual methods of thinking that allow incompleteness and growth, since learning with others is a never-ending endeavour (for me). In other words, this is my first attempt at a draft for a masterclass I would like to attend.

3 See Ursula K. Le Guin, 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction', in *Carrier Bag Fiction*, ed. by Sarah Shin and Matthias Zeiske (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2021), pp. 34–44, and Donna J. Haraway, *Manifestly Haraway* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016).

Speaking nearby: Trinh Minh-ha beautifully describes how she tries to escape the so-called objective world built by the white man. She reflects on the historical construction of man as the all-knowing subject of knowledge and truth that is allowed to speak for/on behalf of everyone else. Her strategy is simple yet effective: She alienates the white man as she freely plays with his thoughts, which she displays without naming them. She points out that man's obsession with objectivity is actually a delusion produced by a positivist dream of neutrality. Trinh gestures at 'a continuation striving for continuation' rather than totalization — her voice is not the only one but speaks among many; she does not speak about but nearby.⁴ Following her reasoning, there is no writing that would not refer to other texts; there is no I nor you to come first. Then, the act of writing creates a dialogical encounter through which one can recognize the relationality of self as a prism of reflection that necessarily implies collectivity as much as connectivity.⁵

Speculative thinking: Sadie Plant gathers different facts and quotes to create 'connectedness across time and space' as if 'weaving different textures together.'⁶ Through her protagonists, she weaves threads of speculation by interlinking history, science, and fiction. When I first read her book, I held it in my hand as an academic text that was serious and professional. Shortly afterward, I visited an exhibition inspired by the book and changed my perception of it to a fictional novel. Even though this revelation irritated me, I soon realized that this gesture of combin-

4 Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 49.

5 Ibid.

6 Sadie Plant, *Zeros and Ones: Digital Women and the New Technoculture* (London: Fourth Estate, 1995), p. 15.

ing fiction and academic standards fascinated me all along. Isn't it the sheer display of free thinking that appealed to my intellect? When I read her book, I dreamed of forming a friendship with Plant's protagonists, Ada and Eve.⁷

Critical fabulation: Saidiya Hartman's concept of critical fabulation is an exemplary approach for scholars who seek to appropriate fiction to create a historical reality for those whose existence has been denied for too long. By re-enacting the phantom experience of the overlooked and unseen, Hartman not only explores what they might have been but also deconstructs and reformulates the tropes of (official) history-writing. The act of fabulation, registering the absent presence of those left out of official histories, disrupts the conventions of the archive and of history-writing that have been built upon the white man's claims to truth under the guise of objectivity. Indeed, her critical, fact-based fabulation reveals that the voice of the oppressed was always dominated by the oppressor even when included within the text. In other words, the oppressor dominated the narration of reality by means of silencing and speaking on behalf of the other. The author, a descendant of the oppressed, reformulates as much as she deconstructs the tools of the oppressor to find her voice beyond this colonial, binary logic that reduces her to the role of the oppressed. Hence, Hartman's theoretical work gains political relevance by blurring the boundaries between categories, such as reality and fiction, and thus dismantling the system of opposites.⁸

Cosmopolitan science: Anna Tsing argues that we have to reopen our imagination to a 'cosmopolitan sci-

7 Ibid.

8 Saidiya Hartman, *Venus in Two Acts* (New York: Cassandra Press, 2021).

ence' that is composed of patches rather than constituted by totalizing domination. In this approach, academic discourse and its epistemic regimes embrace their relational, incomplete nature as part of a large, shifting multitude. While researching the globalized commodity chains of matsutake mushrooms across national borders and scientific paradigms, Tsing engages with multiple and sometimes conflicting practices and motivations of different stakeholders, farmers, amateurs, contributors, and sellers. For her, scientists should stay open to an encounter with the varied aspects of so-called shared reality and the heterogeneity through which even totalizing systems like capitalism operate. Not surprisingly, Tsing situates her work at the expanding edges of academic discourse by experimenting with writing styles, too. For example, she incorporates prose that bring forth her voice as well as the poetic nature of living and knowing. What fascinates me is the very gesture of sharing knowledge in an accessible, demystifying language as she evokes fictions and narratives historically tied to a community, a collective.⁹

Radical scholarly praxis: Katherine McKittrick reflects not on the genius-being of one person but on the collective that has nourished that creativity. For instance, I like her listing of the names that have influenced her work right at the beginning of the book. When she describes what she calls 'radical scholarly praxis' as inquiring about something 'unknown, unnamed, unbound', McKittrick underscores the possibilities of thinking outside the established Euro-American white supremacist culture that is internalized and normalized to the point that it hides its

9 Anna L. Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibilities of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

own historical constructedness. An ignorance that stems from privilege fails to see that there is nothing more fictitious than our understanding of reality itself. Seeking poetry in thinking/theorizing motivates us to embrace the fictive and incomplete nature of objectivity as much as subjectivity. The question I ask is: Can a scientific practice that cannot accept any realities other than those it describes call itself a scientific practice?¹⁰

In this text, I reflect on how my thoughts develop in the entangled process of writing and thinking, and I ask myself again and again: Why is my tone so angry? Am I going to keep this tone forever, or will writing help me heal, too? It is hard to escape the long-lasting legacies that surround us and shape our understanding of what constitutes theorization, especially when the already-should-be-here structural changes are still too far away despite all the victories.

The list above demonstrates various ways of killing the god-like idols of academia or theory at large. These ways involve speaking, listening, and thinking nearby. They are open to being challenged. Indeed, they challenge themselves in every corner of their research and books because they know well that not being challenged means missing out on the epistemological benefits of failure and the freedom of not knowing 'completely'.

This manner of thinking is expressed not only as freedom but as a beauty that flourishes in one's openness to new encounters and the reality of the unknown, the unknowability of the world, others, and ourselves, never isolated and stable. So, how do I deal with epistemic legacies that have constituted me without totally abandoning them? How to not only reconfigure the asymmetries

10 Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021).

they keep reproducing but also generate new modes of community-building?

Eventually, my rage was channelled into a project that advocates cultivating what I call, alongside my colleague Mafalda Sandrini, cultures of failure within academia. For instance, this agenda may involve acknowledging the possible epistemological benefits of scientific errors or critically reflecting on the structural precarity embedded within the academic career that fails to provide fair means of working and living for scholars. This project has taught me to allow myself to heal with others while laughing, crying, and thinking with them. We fail nearby each other and seek small hacks to counter the mechanisms of academia that often economically and sometimes intellectually marginalize us, early career scholars, and find ways to implement the seeds of change.

My conclusion so far is that we need to learn to let go of ideas that serve only a few and adopt a practice of canonization that allows for these canons to be reshaped by practicing, first and foremost, what I call attempted murder on the loop: killing darlings. For let us not be naive, these geniuses will not disappear so easily. We need to create alternative systems of canons as Le Guin describes so beautifully in 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction'. These are not just stories but stories with the figure of a hero, which is to say, we need to dismantle the normative formations, such as patriarchy, that maintain this image of the self-contained figure of authority that monopolizes claims to truth. Indeed, it is not enough to kill our idols since idols are not the problem per se; they could only be symptoms. So, why not just put them in the carrier bag of theories? We cannot forget them, but we can multiply stories to the extent that they lose their dominance so that we can open up new trajectories for relating and knowing. For sure, it will first be

necessary to form something like a counter-canon, which mimics killing. But ultimately the point is not to 'kill' but to 'multiply'.

I first learned about the concept of the carrier bag from Le Guin's *The Word for World is Forest*.¹¹ I learned it through the actions of her protagonists, not by her naming what she was doing; then I forgot it and learned it again. She imagined the way of knowledge in the World of Athshe, where learning and knowing is based on the needs of the collective. Before the colonizers came, Athsheans lived in a peaceful society, in harmony with their surroundings, not knowing what killing or violence meant. They share a collective memory entangled by everything living. Hence, they cannot forget the killing that man has brought with him, but they can choose not to act on it; their organizing principle of life is based on the needs of the collective and they choose to leave violence untouched in their bag of knowledge, as they decided they have no need for it.

Ultimately, we need to undertake the task of reconfiguring how we value alternative modes of knowledge and creativity within academia. For instance, we can re-evaluate the place of fiction in our research practices, move towards a cosmopolitan science composed of patches — as Anna Tsing describes it — and question the assumed homogeneity of the logic underlying exclusive claims to universality. We can advocate institutional infrastructures for egalitarian, collaborative settings of knowledge production. We can reject the mystifications through which the kingdoms of experts and geniuses endure. Keep failing! In doing so, embrace failure's many facets and use them. Keep questioning, forgetting, learning, and relearning, not neces-

11 Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Word for World Is Forest* (New York: TOR, 1972).

sarily in that order, but always with others. In this sense, I want to close this text by saying that it has been a pleasure to think with you, Eylül, Ira, Jakka, Juliana, Mahmoud, Fred, Şirin, Michela, Bruna, Ana Carolina, Nader, Firoozeh, Bernardo, Marlon. Being part of this collective extended the stories, widening my bag of theories and making room for all those narratives that are otherwise pushed to the margins. And my hopes are, I could do the same for you.

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