

Reviews

Ontology for edgelords

Andrea Long Chu, *Females* (London: Verso, 2019), 112pp., £7.99 pb., 978 1 78877 737 1

In a dialogue published in the *Transgender Studies Quarterly* last year, Andrea Long Chu declared the death of trans studies. In her words, the discipline produces nothing but ‘warmed over pieties’ about sex and gender, devoid of any ‘true disagreement’ that would be able to ‘birth theories’. She claimed that theorists working within the ever-more-indistinct field are essentially replicating queer theory with a trendy new prefix, and that this leaves important realities of ‘transsexual’ life unexamined. Chu has been championed by influential figures of various stripes, from trans studies ‘founder’ Sandy Stone to media theorist McKenzie Wark and affect theorist Lauren Berlant, precisely for her willingness to disavow disciplinary truisms. But one should wonder: is Chu’s animosity directed at the current state of trans studies, or is it directed at transness itself? What does Chu herself have to say once she finishes shooting the New Materialist fish in her barrel, for example? Throughout the 27-year-old’s rise to the status of pop theorist, Chu has held off on substantially articulating an approach to desire, identity and politics that might differ from what she polemicalises against. With the release of her first book from Verso, *Females*, she has attempted to do just that.

More autotheory than theory, the theoretical claims made by *Females* are bracketed by oblique fragments of culture writing and personal memoir. Chu leaves it to the reader to bridge what is auto- and what is -theory in the text, and doing so is not easy. The narrative gaps between her autobiographical vignettes are filled in by theoretical claims that are as sweeping as they are poorly argued, and the intellectual gaps in her argument are plastered over with half-finished close readings of performance art or sophomoric reminiscences about her pre-transition self’s college years. (‘I was full of rage then: red, male,

viciously intellectual.’ Salingerian sentences like this, or the moment Chu describes someone about to dive into a swimming pool as ‘bracing for the angry kiss of chlorine’, hint that her reputation as a prose stylist is a tad overblown.) It is not that the autotheoretical form makes good theory or good autobiography impossible, but when both modes are present purely to compensate for each other’s insufficiencies, the form as a whole fails.

The book’s constant shifting between personal and academic registers also makes substantive criticism of its project difficult; autotheory is Chu’s preferred form for a reason, and it seems to be an effective defense mechanism. Despite their unqualified embrace of her ideas, Chu’s acolytes like to insist that one can never read her at face value, and wave away critique by deferring to some deeper truth of this or that metatextual frame, whether it be satire, trolling, irony, confessionality, etc. But despite this goalpost-shifting, *Females* does make a definite theoretical argument about sex, gender, transness and being, and this argument runs through all of Chu’s work – there is no *Females*, and no Chu, without it – so evasive or not, such work must be able to be read seriously if it is to be read at all.

The text revolves around the claim that ‘femaleness is a universal sex defined by self-negation, against which all politics, even feminist politics, rebels.’ Chu minimally defines the ‘female’ as the one for whom ‘the self is sacrificed to make room for the desires of another. ... To be female is to let someone else do your desiring for you, at your own expense.’ But Chu qualifies repeatedly that her model of the female has nothing to do with biological sex or gender identity as such. It is more that femaleness for her is the ‘sex’ of subjectivity (if not being) itself: ‘How one copes with being female – the specific defense mechanisms that one consciously or unconsciously de-

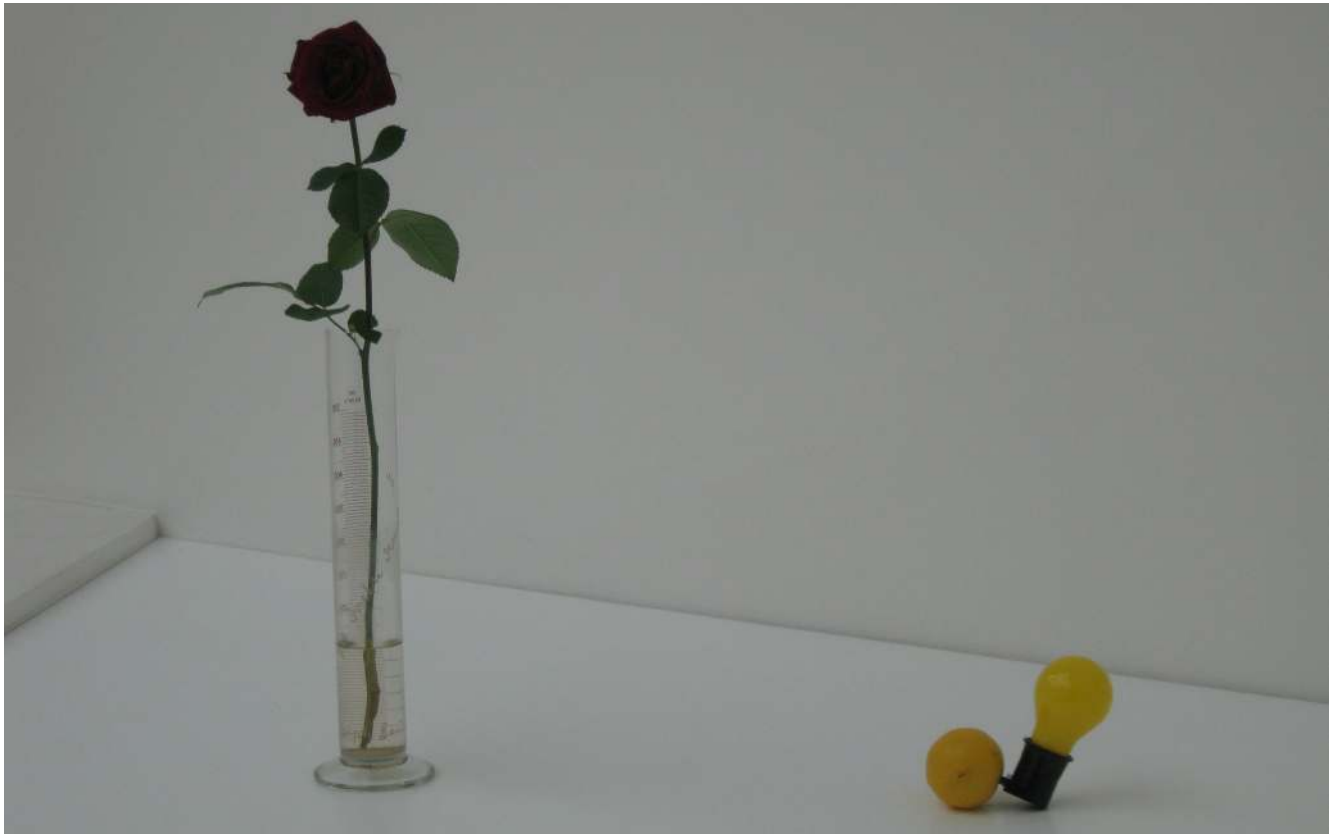
velops as a reaction formation against one's femaleness, within the terms of what is historically and socioculturally available – that is what we ordinarily call gender.' Yet despite these qualifications, Chu repeatedly codes the female to femininity, to penetration, submission and passivity. The figures she analyses – women like Jamie Loftus, Yoko Ono, Gigi Gorgeous, but also men who are pick-up artists and incels – are all said by Chu to index femaleness because of the way they carry ideals of femininity and womanhood (self-abnegation, most of all) to their extremes. 'Being Female' in Chu's special sense always ends up looking indistinguishable from 'being female' in the contingent, everyday sense. And given that she uses the formulation to make claims like 'men are not men, men are never men', it is clear that there is no meaningful way for Chu's argument to understand the position of trans men or nonbinary people. In fact, *Females* neglects to mention that they exist.

If being female is 'a universal existential condition, the one and only structure of human consciousness', and if at the same time 'to be is to be female', then the reaction to femaleness is not just the truth of sex and gender, but of all forms of identity. Race, class, and subjectivity itself are for Chu the same epiphenomenal residue of a sexed position that is supposedly nothing other than its empty formal receptivity to external desire; these forms are nothing other than their capacity to 'get fucked', because 'fucked is what a female is'. But race plays an especially troubling role in Chu's work. *Females* practically begins with the statements 'the entire incarcerated population is female' and 'females masterminded the Atlantic slave trade' – Chu can't quite follow through on her own line of thought and tell us that the enslaved, too, were female, but this is implicit.

Chu's triangulation of 'femaleness' with blackness becomes central in her analysis of sissy porn, a genre in which men (often white) are forcibly turned into women through sexual domination by other men (often black). 'Sissy porn did make me trans', Chu says. 'At very least it served as a neat allegory for my desire to be female – and increasingly, I thought, for all desire as such.' Using this racist genre of pornography to metaphorise not just one's own sense of one's femaleness and desire to transition, but everyone else's as well, is perhaps the dictionary definition of telling on oneself. By describing a generalised male 'inferiority complex' in a way that sub-

lates white supremacy, Chu all but erases antiblackness, or renders it a side effect of the universality of femaleness. Chu extends this misreading by appealing to C. Riley Snorton's argument that gynaecological research's historical brutalisation of enslaved black women was fundamental to the development of an abstract idea of sex (female, unraced) as distinct from gender (woman, raced as white). To mistake the fungibility of race for the formability of sex in this way – to treat racialised violence as a kind of evidence for an idea of a sub-sexual sex which necessarily precedes race – is a serious error.

What then does Chu think being trans means? 'Gender transition, no matter the direction', we are told, 'is always a process of becoming a canvas for other people's fantasies.' There is only one possible colour for this canvas, however, and by pure coincidence it is the author's favourite. Chu repeatedly slips femaleness in on both sides of the ontological difference: 'To be female is, in every case, to become what someone else wants.' At the same time, 'the female is always the product of force, and force is invariably feminising.' In truth, there is not any agential subject in Chu's schema that could resist its femaleness, no self to sacrifice. As a result, despite her claim that 'gender transition begins ... from the understanding that how you identify yourself subjectively – as precious and important as this identification may be – is nevertheless on its own basically worthless', Chu herself is caught in the same trap of tautological insistence that she claims 'mere identification' finds itself in. What is the female 'produced' out of, if there is but one sex which precedes and creates all the forms which might initiate such a force? Where can the desires of others come from if everyone is an empty vessel awaiting those desires? What could ever create a new desire, trans desire most of all, if 'female' is all there is to be? In the end Chu only says that everyone is female because, like any good solipsist, that is the only way she can convince herself that she is. If everyone is female, no one is, and real transition is in the end impossible – a view that Chu seems to uphold when she posits that 'autogynephilia', a transphobic and discredited psychiatric diagnosis which sees trans women as men who get off on the idea of being women, is 'the basic structure of all human sexuality'. Unable to muster any fidelity to the ontological possibility of transition, she instead settles for weaponising its purported ontological impossibility as a general axiom: if trans



people can't really be what we are, then no one can.

In her essay 'The Pink', which preceded the publication of *Females* by half a year, we see some of the thinking behind this book presented with greater honesty. There Chu took up the supposed obsolescence of a 'universal category of womanhood', and attempted to critique the way that contemporary feminism has discarded a 'vaginal imaginary' that might exclude pre- or non-operative trans women. True to character, Chu argued that a trans-inclusive gesture would be equally impossible. Her surrender to this dilemma was bleak:

We have this, at least, in common: two kinds of women, with two kinds of self-loathing, locked in adjacent rooms, each pressing her ear up against the wall to listen for the other's presence, fearing a rival but terrified to be alone. For my part, cousin: I don't want what you have, I want the way in which you don't have it. I don't envy your plenitude; I envy your void. Now I've got the hole to prove it. I would give anything to hate myself the way you do, assuming it's different from the way I hate myself—which, who knows.

For Chu there is not really one void called femaleness, but at least two voids: one is cissexual and one is transsexual, and the former is vastly more desirable

than the latter. Why? Well, this is just how desire is, we cannot question it, it has no history, it has no ethics; it is, and we are (for it is all we are) opaque. It's striking to see Chu try to inscribe cis supremacy into something as empty and formless as the void, but this is the project's endpoint, and explanatory of her popularity with a cis audience. But it is useful to contrast this image of femaleness, in which 'two kinds of women' fear one another and loathe themselves, to an image presented by Chu's role model, Valerie Solanas: 'In actual fact, the female function is to relate, groove, love, and be herself, irreplaceable by anyone else. ... In actual fact the female function is to explore, discover, invent, solve problems, crack jokes, make music – all with love.' As racist, misanthropist, transphobic and hateful as Solanas was, Chu manages to discard the one optimistic kernel of an otherwise pessimistic theory.

Chu too has been described as a pessimist. In fact, it would be more accurate to call her a fatalist, who at heart believes that the difference between being cis and being trans is absolute, made intractable by an ontological ground that can never truly be determined. In her *TSQ* dialogue, Chu said she longed to see the birth of 'real theory' that would reorient our ideas of transness

away from its current articulations. But Chu's conclusions are no different from the 'pieties' she positions herself against, which see the trans subject as always hybrid, always crossing borders, always becoming but never being. Chu reaches the same dead-end of thought, not by particularising sex, gender and transness to the point of meaninglessness, as trans studies indeed tends to do, but by universalising her own hopelessness about transition: not 'always becoming but never being', but 'always not being'. Here trans women are still not women, but we do

get to be 'females' like everyone else – in other words, nothing at all.

A reorientation and revivification of trans theory is certainly necessary at the moment, and it is clearly something many are hungry for, given the attention Chu's work has received. But if *Females* is any indication, Chu will not be among those who manage to stage such an intervention.

Nora Fulton

Unstable histories

Lucas Richert, *Break on Through: Radical Psychiatry and the American Counterculture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2019). 224pp., £22.00 hb., 978 0 26204 282 6

In May 1969, in the plush surroundings of Miami's Americana Hotel, the ordinarily staid annual meeting of the American Psychiatric Association (APA) became the flashpoint for a standoff which had been brewing within the profession for a number of years. The newly-formed Radical Caucus of the APA issued a defiant challenge to the association's leadership, and to the profession as a whole. No longer content with 'hiding behind the couch', its spokespersons argued, it was time for psychiatrists to take a principled stand against the social, political and economic injustices that divided the US. Members distributed pamphlets condemning the medical establishment's endemic racism and sexism, and attacking psychiatrists for their complicity with the American military. They denounced the Vietnam War, called for the decriminalisation of drugs and of abortion, and supported gay rights protestors calling for the declassification of homosexuality as a psychiatric disorder.

Break on Through by historian Lucas Richert seeks to offer 'a reinterpretation of medical and mental health knowledge in American society in the 1970s'. This was a decade (give or take a few months) which opened with the formation of the Radical Caucus, and closed with the publication, in 1980, of the third edition of the APA's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III), now widely seen as signalling the triumph of a narrowly biomedical psychiatry. In reality, Richert's book encompasses a longer period, stretching from the late 1950s to the early 1980s, and taking in a wide range of

challenges to mental health orthodoxy. As well as critiques from within American psychiatry, and from the international anti-psychiatry movement, he covers scientific explorations of parapsychology and of psychoactive substances, the development of alternative therapies and grass-roots health activism, and the take-up of mental health issues by various political constituencies.

This was a period which saw both a politicisation of psychology and a psychologisation of politics. Radicals in the 'psy-' professions argued that the problems described as 'mental illnesses' should not be seen in purely medical terms, but instead as the psychological effects of unjust socioeconomic relations. Neither the talking cure of psychoanalysis nor the scientific pretensions of behaviourism, they claimed, were adequate to deal with the challenges posed by contemporary American life. Rather, mental and emotional wellbeing could only be achieved through social transformation. 'Therapy means political change', as one enigmatic slogan of the Radical Caucus put it, 'not peanut butter.'

At the same time, the language of psychiatry – of madness, alienation and paranoia – was infiltrating Cold War discourse in the United States and Europe at a variety of levels. For an iconoclastic new left in the 1960s, the irrationality of a 'sick society' was evident in everything from racial segregation to the Cuban Missile Crisis. What was the 'delusion' of a psychiatric patient who believed the atom bomb to be inside of her, asked the Scottish anti-psychiatrist R.D. Laing, compared to the madness