

# Temporary autonomous friend

## On Miesseroﬀ's *Fag Hag* and Fox and Lane-McKinley's *fag/hag*

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'You don't have to be a couple to participate in the couple form', observed the writer and artist Hannah Black in an article published in *The New Inquiry* before the global onset of this coronavirus pandemic. We are participating when we presume others' romantic dyads, when we conceptualise uncoupled lives as 'single', and when we idealise marriage (not just when we marry or couple up). At the same time, as Black had already noted elsewhere, 'correct' embodiment of the couple form under capitalism is the exclusive purview of the structurally white, procreative nuclear household; 'for the rest of us – people of color, queers, queers of color, single women, and so on, that whole mixed and conflicted bag of lives – there is whatever we can make do with.' Classically, one such human accommodation to the probably-universal need for closeness and mutual recognition is the model of the pair comprising one non-lesbian woman and one queer man. Like many of my female friends, in adolescence, I was a bisexual 'hag' to many a 'fag': above all, to my semi-closeted brother – and closest friend – but also to a succession of more public best friends no one was ever going to mistake for my boyfriend. Fag/hag is a 'wrong form', as the writer Max Fox suggests, but sometimes we find in it a tolerable 'mode of moving through a wrong world.'

Two slim books about moving fag-and-hag-wise through the world have lately appeared in English, bearing more or less the same title, albeit rooted in engagement with different decades: respectively, the glorious late sixties and seventies, and the 'very rotten long

nineties'.\* The first of these, *Fag Hag* from PM Press, is a memoir by the Franco-Russian soixante-huitarde and veteran of the Front Homosexuel D'Action Révolutionnaire, Lola Miesseroﬀ (*Fille à pédés* in the original), translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. The second is the volume of epistolary family-abolitionist theorising *fag/hag*, published by the Australian collective Rosa Press, and authored by Fox together with another millennial native of the American west coast, Madeline Lane-McKinley. In an exchange of letters beginning amid the first COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns in 2020, Max and Madeline are empowered by their own longstanding communist-feminist comradeship and friendship to grapple with problems of solidarity across difference, as well as bittersweet legacies of utopian struggle waged by their forebears. One of these is Guy Hocquenghem, a former comrade of Miesseroﬀ's, whose writing Fox has also translated. On a different, because reciprocal, plane of intimacy, throughout *fag/hag*, the two authors are united in a shared intensity of posthumous fagdom or hagdom vis-à-vis another gay Marxist – Christopher Chitty – who took his life in 2015, leaving behind life-changingly brilliant manuscripts for his surviving friends and lovers to adopt and nurture. If the goal of the FHAR, for Miesseroﬀ, was '*explosions les codes sexuels!*' (let's explode sexual codification!), then the promiscuous bond between Max-Madeline-and-Chris – by turns co-parental, romantic, quasi-filial, comradely and sororal – does something similar to the received scripts for fag-hag relationships.

\* Lola Miesseroﬀ, *Fag Hag*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oakland: PM Press, 2023) 144pp., £16.99 pb., 979 8 88744 010 1; Max Fox and Madeline Lane-McKinley, *fag/hag* (Sydney: Rosa Press, 2024), 100pp., \$22.00 pb., 978 0 64523 922 5

In the received version, the spinster and the gay bachelor (closeted or not) form an alliance somewhere at the intersection of couple, kin and friends, united not by sexual intimacy but by disidentification from patriarchal heterosexuality. Gay community slang commonly ascribes centrality more to *her* than to *him* in this equation, as in ‘queen bee’, ‘fairy princess’, or ‘Goldilocks’ (get it? – and the bears). However, in mainstream English, the linguistic centre of gravity tends to be the *homo* element, as in ‘beard’ or ‘fruit fly’, where the woman represents the instrumentalised accessory or orbital, doubly abject because tarred with queerness, but only by association. Indeed, the snuffy assumption of many commentators has been that some kind of arrested development is in play: fag hags, Barbara Ellen wrote in a 2001 *Observer* article, ‘borrow the gay sexual identity because they have little of their own.’ Few people talk of hag fags, still less dyke bros. If a contest exists as to which half of the two, hag or fag, society has disparaged *more* as a figure of tragicomic thwartedness, immaturity or delusional ersatz coupledness, it doubtless remains moot. The main thing, to quote the French ACT UP veteran H  l  ne Haz  ra, is that ‘fag hags come in all shapes and sizes’, reactionary and radical. Some such women undeniably belong to the Right, but many others, on the Left, ‘cock a snook at gay male chauvinists and share their lives and loves with homosexual men’ ever since (at least) the days of Charles Fourier and his early eighteenth-century ‘new world of love’.

acknowledged: 'the fag-hag is the absolute bottom in a very complex emotional relationship' and 'a major symbol of unrequited love and failed femininity.' If hags are meant to be doomed by love for men who cannot return their feelings in kind, some women apparently want to narrate their unfulfillment that way, 'owning' the pathos of that imagined bottom rung.

In 2009, a much-shared *Salon* piece – ‘Ladies, I’m Not Your Gay Boyfriend’ – sought to put an end to reclamations, nihilist or otherwise. Thomas Rogers, the author, railed against the affluent women who arrogantly appropriate and condescendingly desexualise gays. Most of the ‘overeager self-described “fag hags”’ in the post-*Will and Grace* West were nothing like the brassy, culturally queer man-eating broads who originally defined it, à la Mae West or Liza Minnelli, Rogers said. In fact, they had ‘square-jawed boyfriends’ and ‘seemingly little understanding of gay culture’. But crucially, even the ‘fabulous gay-loving straight women of yore’, were no longer make-or-break in the average gay’s coming-of-age in many decreasingly homophobic regions of the world. Rogers concluded with a pointed, dignified hope that tomorrow’s hags would call themselves ‘something more

accurate. Like “friend”. The disyllabic remains kicking nonetheless, possibly because the politics of friendship between men and women, and between male gays and feminists more specifically, has continued to generate considerable anxiety – as evidenced by neo-separatist discourses like the originally Korean boycott of men, ‘4B’, the increased discussion of gay male misogyny, and the rise of transphobia in some ‘LGB’ circles.

Fag/hag is a thing it ‘feels a bit too archaic to invoke’, proposes Fox, ‘but its persistence in my life at least means it needs theorizing.’ The formula’s undead persistence in culture is striking: the writer Grace Byron began 2025 with a celebratory essay, ‘The f\*g h\*g grows up’, in *Dirt magazine*, where she proclaimed: ‘the FH has gotten sexier over the years.’ Listicles still float about like the *LARB*’s ‘Top 10 Fag Hags of Henry James: A Definitive Ranking’, and *FAGHAG* is the title of Dylan Mulvaney’s Edinburgh Fringe debut of 2024, which charts Mulvaney’s gender transition, from twink into twink-loving woman, or hag. While New York’s Miss Fag Hag Pageant has long since been retired, and the organisation SWISH (Straight Women in Support of Homos) rebranded itself, many veteran AIDS activists – such as the scholar of ‘friend grief’ Victoria Noe, author of *Fag Hags, Divas and Moms: The Legacy of Straight Women in the AIDS Community* – gamely defend the use of ‘fag hag’ to this day.

Miesseroff is one of these. Gorgeously succinct, entertaining and theoretically confident, her *Fag Hag* is a whistlestop autobiography of a Marseillaise’s life lived on the ‘*outré-gauche*’ or ‘outer left’ of France. This phrase, intended to bring to mind outer space, is Miesseroff’s coinage for an archipelago of lesser-known anti-state communes and subversive experiments, from the naturalist colonies of her childhood as the daughter of anarchist émigrés from Russia, to the Situationist-inspired insurrectionary gangs of her adult life in the environs of Aix-en-Provence and Paris. It’s a world the author positions as ‘beyond’ the realms of all those more classic species of Marxist typically credited for the uprisings of the extended 1968 period. Anti-authoritarian, queer and trans-feminist to the bone, Lola’s people are ‘vandals’, rioters, orgiasts. Anecdotes abound of ‘higgledy-piggledy’ living arrangements and ‘polysexual explosions’ among motley crews squatting houses or ‘sleeping under the stars’.

Notably, against prevailing assessments of historic solidarity between gay and women’s liberation move-

ments as an overwhelming failure, it is a central contention of the *fag/hag* dialogue that neither uprising could have happened without the other. Too rarely is it appreciated, for instance, that ‘lesbians and prostitutes’ make ‘an historical sisterhood’, in feminist sex-radical’s Joan Nestle’s terms. Likewise, ‘Hocquenghem’s theorization of male homosexual desire was facilitated by his embedding in the revolutionary strand of women’s liberation’ in the sixties and seventies. For its part, Miesseroff’s anecdote-forward portrait of this period makes such interconnections and interdependencies seem like the most obvious and inevitable thing in the world. She nonetheless succeeds, on the whole, in steering clear of romanticisation. *Fag Hag* does not excise the bad moments from the ‘enchanted parentheses’ created by her fellow ‘vandalist’ communards, as for instance when ‘one of our number drowned before our eyes in the Rhône’.

For all their intoxicated blunders and bravado, though, the *outré-gauchistes* appear in these pages as infinitely more honourable than those cliques of university-affiliated party radicals who responded to the neoliberal counterrevolution in the eighties by swiftly trading in (in Hocquenghem’s memorable phrase) ‘their Mao collars for the Rotary Club’. To be sure, membership in the propertarian regime of family values was granted to many formerly militant gays, even before the advent of ‘equal marriage’ legislation. But for the author of *Fag Hag*, relinquishing commitment to class war and care communisation in exchange for ‘the posts, sinecures, and honours on offer’ would be akin to clitoridectomy. In a 2023 interview with the writer and school teacher Gilles Dauvé, Miesseroff affirmed that ‘The only deep structural contradiction is the one inherent to capitalism: the class antagonism that capitalism is based on’ – yet her very next breath was this: ‘Polysexuality is the ability to love whom we want and fuck freely with whomever we want without any gender distinction, but also, if we feel like it, to do it with several people at the same time.’ From the Situationist International she learned, she said, to *oppose separation*.

*Fag Hag* is prole-, hag-, whore- and fag-identified, then, but this bone-deep insurgent identity is lived as much as possible as an anti-identity, oriented toward its own ‘self-transcendence’ in a future society wherein ‘any need to claim a particular sexual orientation should disappear.’ Pending the positive obsolescence of sex-radical



politics, in other words, our heroine refuses all attempts to disembody those politics from anticapitalism. As a result, fag-hagdom becomes palpable, across dozens of anecdotes, as a refusal of identitarianism: a rejection of all attempts to separate lesbians' interests from faggots', feminism from gay liberation or even from men, men from childcare politics, and women from the struggle against the family-form. 'I shouted with all my might', Lola recounts of her first and last experience attending a Gouines Rouges (Red Dykes) feminist meeting in 1971, during which a FHAR queen in drag entered the room in search of a left-behind coat, only to be jeered at as a patriarchal intruder. Lola fetches the coat and bellows at the assembled sisterhood that 'the comrade was anything but an enemy', before storming out to buy 'him' a surely needed drink: 'end of conversation with these "red" lesbians'. On another occasion, a Women's Liberation Movement meeting 'led by bourgeois ideologues' fatally repels Miessleroff and her then-housemates Elsa and Annabelle, who try in vain to contest the 'single-sex nature of the assembly' by explaining that 'we lived in a group with men both straight and gay, that we could not imagine any struggle without them, and that for us the emancipation of women could not come about in isolation from the emancipation of everyone, all sexual tendencies included.'

The intuition that 'a transgressive sexuality [can] also be a political weapon' clearly came to Miessleroff extremely early in life via the example of the queer and trans leftists and antifascists in her parents' community of adults committed to the southern naturist lifestyle. From adolescence, her intimate comradeship relationships are formed often with queer men, even as her deepest loves bind her to women. For example, in 1965, the eighteen-year-old Miessleroff forms a trio with Michel and Léo as a freshman at Aix university ('after the fashion of *Jules and Jim*, although I slept with neither of them'). It is Michel, as it happens, who dubs Lola a fag hag for the first time. Although reluctant to be 'pigeonholed' at this point, our heroine has to admit that she is a 'a magnet to men-loving men' – a 'fag catcher', in her mentor Alban's phrase. Everyone concurs with this, and even Lola's father boasts that their godless family contains, not Rita, Saint of Whores, but 'Lola, Saint of Fags'. The fact of the matter is, Lola simply experiences her position as a woman – a voraciously polyamorous non-trans working

class bisexual, to be precise – as inseparable from the oppression of 'fags'.

The fag-hag relation is never overtly instrumental in her story. In terms of respectability, Miessleroff was far from a beard or cover for closeted individuals in her circles. Picture this: shortly after May 1968, Lola has joined an action committee in her parents' French Communist Party-controlled hometown of Aubagne: an unaligned revolutionary initiative begun by 'high schoolers, a few college students, and several workers.' There, she befriends Christian, a fifteen-year-old homosexual. Christian is a leading figure locally in the Trotskyist league JCR (Jeunesse Communiste Révolutionnaire), but Lola is giving him all kinds of unorthodox radical literature, such as Raoul Vaneigem's *The Revolution of Everyday Life* or the Situationist International pamphlet 'On the misery of student life' (*De la misère en milieu étudiant*). Soon enough, Christian is expelled from the JCR for associating with anarchistic elements – 'in other words, with me.' Clearly, Lola was a 'perverting' influence on her peers, if anything an anti-beard. Decades later, Lane-McKinley evokes a similar horizon when she reminisces about an arrangement she formed in middle school to be someone's beard: 'it was hetero drag for the both of us, not just for him.'

How should an anticapitalist person like Madeline, or Max, or me – raised in the nineties – relate to the memory of yesteryear's revolutionary potential today without falling into melancholy, or nostalgia, or the fantasy that one could somehow recreate irretrievable historic circumstances so as to repeat those bygone days' beautiful failures? Half a century on from the general strikes and mass street warfare of May '68, 'we have been taught to cope with the sense that revolution is unreachable', as M muses to M. (It is possible sometimes to infer who is Max and who is Madeline, but not always; the use of the initial is clearly a purposive transindividual blurring.) And yet, look, 2020 was a time of riotous uprising in the United States, starting at Minneapolis's 3rd police precinct, which fire then spread to hundreds of cities, at one point even forcing the president into a bunker. 'What's going on right now reminds me of previous moments of heightened possibility', writes the hag to the fag, or maybe vice versa, referencing the 2010 Oakland riots for Oscar Grant in which they both participated, while simultaneously gesturing at riots that took place before either

ently nurtured embryonic anti-families together in the interstices of society, yet their self-definition *in relation* to that economy also means that their banding-together has privileged a coupling-up, one that reflects limits on the anti-familial imagination as much as a vision of another world.

Recall, for example, how the hags and fags of the long nineties – e.g., Julia Roberts or Madonna with Rupert Everett in *My Best Friend's Wedding* or *The Next Best Thing* – were always folding themselves into some kind of pseudo-nuptial or would-be-parental family narrative. Will and Grace became fixated on having a family, possibly with each other, and at the end of *Dawson's Creek*, the fag stepped in to father the dead hag's child. As Lane-McKinley and Fox put it: 'the threat of coupledness looms'. Only in 'moments of uprising' does this threat really recede, as far as M and M's 'actual experiences of political community' are concerned. Miessleroff's account of outer-left political community very much bears the latter insight out, insofar as the final sections of *Fag Hag* take an abrupt despondent turn because the author is addressing the relatively demobilised and anti-utopian left of 'that damnable decade', the eighties, and its long aftermath, a landscape she views as dominated by 'exclusionary' feminisms, 'fragmented identity politics', deeply unradical gay communitarianisms, and merely 'defensive' struggles.

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‘Les Gazolines’, the trans break-off group from the FHAR. What if the onus to militate against forgetfulness, like the tending of a fire, could be collectively distributed? Lola’s shared apartment was, Hazéra says, ‘a place where the last live coals of the furnace of May 1968 still glowed.’ The glow may nowadays be imperceptible to some, but there are still some who regard those live coals as an inheritance, a responsibility.

Pending the dissolution of these limiting categories, what could the hag aspire to be to the fag, the fag to the hag? In that *Salon* article, the category of friend was held up as the dignified option, a given. Are we sure, though, that we know what friendship is? For the late Chitty – about whom Lane-McKinley and Fox are lovingly talking in much of their correspondence – friendship was something that capitalism, homophobia, heterosexuality and the bourgeois family have killed. In a series of unpublished notes, tended to like embers by those he left behind, Christopher charged our society with the murder of ‘the friend-as-lover’, and linked the very possibility of doing politics, *revolutionary* politics, with the resurrection of this elusive promise he called the friend. Many readers will surely balk at the very construction ‘friend-as-lover’, let alone the premise of friendship as a utopian horizon not-even-yet-quite-graspable to us in the present. Our culture’s tendency is to subordinate the terminology of friendship – as in the banal ubiquity of *friending* and the status demotion of *friendzoned* – to the more serious attachments of coupledness. That, surely, is why I feel it would be controversial to characterise the opposite-sex bond of the fag-hag duo in the aspirational terms of Chitty’s mourned institution, ‘the friend-as-lover’.

And yet! Lovers are not defined by their fucking. Lane-McKinley and Fox, throughout *fag/hag*, repeatedly unsettle their reader by asking us to countenance the liminal, antagonistic fag-hag relation as a kind of ‘not-quite-heterosexuality’ – a love that is ‘not-quite-gay and not-quite-straight’. Furthermore, they insist that to strive toward loving friendship in this hell-world, whether on a fag-hag axis or otherwise, is no banal given, but a verti-

ginous task. It is vertiginous because the world we seek to bring into being because of our desire for one another’s flourishing will necessarily make us into quite different people via a transformational leap; one devoutly to be wished, yet replete with loss. This is friendship, or, what Fox and Lane-McKinley call ‘becoming other together’. What it paradoxically means is that true friends are those who muster willingness to one day leave each other (as well as their selves) behind.

As we enter the second Trump presidency in the West, we are witnessing a rash of separatist and micronationalist impulses among self-described gays and feminists. My intuition, in this moment, is to ask some of them what the horizon of superficially reasonable utterances like ‘no to penises’ or ‘ladies, I’m not your gay boyfriend’ is ultimately supposed to be. Like: sister, who made you the womanhood border-police vis-à-vis that queen looking for her coat? And, brother, how can you be so sure? Why not take a leaf out of Lola’s book, loosen your grip on yourself, and try it? The reports of friendship’s death are greatly exaggerated, one hopes. A horizon of friendlessness between feminized minorities and other sex/gender deviants remains as unimaginable to many of us ‘feminists against cisness’ (to borrow Emma Heaney’s term) as it is, apparently, appealing to the various ‘post-liberal’ factions of contemporary gender politics, from queerphobic ‘reactionary feminism’ to the rise of (trans)misogynistic gay conservatism. If the fires of friendship have not quite been killed, however, Miessersoff, Lane-McKinley and Fox’s animation of the fag-hag dialectic still point to the urgency of stoking them. Capitalism, I suspect, loves to see us unfriendly, on account of the friend’s terrifying capacity to bring alive the substance of revolution in our hearts, compelling us to get together or, in other words, become other.

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