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Intellectual Inquiry Otherwise: An Interview with Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore

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Margot Weiss talked to Mattilda Bernstein Sycamore about the academic appropriation of activist intellectual labor and the hierarchies of intellectual work inside and outside the university. Sycamore is a writer, editor of several books including That's Revolting! Queer Strategies for Resisting Assimilation (Soft Skull, 2004, 2008), Nobody Passes: Rejecting the Rules of Gender and Conformity (Seal, 2007), and Why Are Faggots so Afraid of Faggots? Flaming Challenges to Masculinity, Objectification, and the Desire to Conform (AK Press, 2012), queer activist, artist, filmmaker, and critic.

Margot: Let's start with what you've described as *trickle-down academia*. What kinds of intellectual work would you characterize in this way?

Mattilda: I use the phrase *trickle-down academia* to describe the process by which academics often appropriate anything they can get their hands on—especially people's lived struggles, identities, methods of activism, and other challenges to the status quo—and then, claim to have invented the whole package. Historically, this is perhaps most obvious in disciplines like anthropology or sociology, but unfortunately the same thing happens in newer fields that initially came about to address some of the structural problems with these older disciplines—sure, fields like queer theory and cultural studies might hone a more-sophisticated rhetoric, but often it's just to earn status in the battleground of ideas.

Margot: Is this kind of appropriation akin to speaking for, rather than with or within, a community, or to the cachet that can accrue to academics who claim proximity to radical activisms, or to something else entirely?

Mattilda: Part of this is a problem with academia in general, with its hideous hierarchies and maniacal competitive viciousness. Careers are made by the discovery, categorization, analysis, or exploration of something “new.” I first noticed this with AIDS activism, sex work, and gender transgression in the early 90s. Not to say that’s when it started, obviously—that’s just when I started to look at things as an avowedly queer, radical person in the world. Some of this academic work felt intoxicating in its rigor and attention to detail—I think that’s the potential of academia, to take something specific and examine it in all its facets. But more often than not I think it becomes a quest for ownership—string together some cool new vocabulary words (or rework some old ones), and the territory is yours, you own it, you are the expert on *homonationalism* or *homonormativity* or *affect* or *temporality* or whatever. I’m just using *homonationalism* and *homonormativity* as examples—I actually think they can be elegant and insightful terms, but they are building on decades of activist struggles to challenge the violence of gay assimilation, something that many who embrace the latest theoretical jargon often ignore. I’m not saying that I’m against cool new vocabulary words, or even entire new vocabularies—I’m a writer, so I love the possibilities of language. What horrifies me is the group-think that arises, the endless drive to utilize the hottest terms of the moment but not necessarily the intended politics or analysis. Sometimes I think that academics have the amazing ability to take everything that means something to me, and repackage it as a dead object, museumified and mummified for elite consumption. That’s why I left college in the first place—I saw that the most avowedly radical courses were the most intellectually elitist—I couldn’t deal with that contradiction.

But this happens with activism, too—people might use the word *pink-washing* to show that they are in the know, but not really to expose the Israeli government’s strategy of packaging tyranny as LGBT inclusion. Or *cisgender*, a term I often see wielded as much to police the right type of speech as to expose gender hierarchies.

Margot: You’re speaking to the dynamics of power and knowledge that hierarchize forms of intellectual work?

Mattilda: I grew up in a status-driven upper-middle-class assimilated Jewish family where academic attainment was seen as the most important thing—my parents’ upward mobility was also a fantastic tool to camouflage their abuse. While this silenced me as a child, as an adult it has been very instructive in peeling back the layers of violence in all types of Shiny Happy People my-

thologies. As an incest survivor who survived the abuse by retreating into my head and becoming the ultimate overachiever student, the drive to excel was so implanted in me that it was assumed that I would go to a more prestigious college than anyone in my family, and continue on to grad school. I did follow that path at first—I also learned a lot when I got to that hallowed institution, but mostly from doing activism for racial and class justice against the university. I left because I realized I was just learning how to beat my parents on their own terms—instead, I wanted to reject the terms, and so at age nineteen I moved to San Francisco to find radical outsider queers, sluts, vegans, anarchists, direct action activists, incest survivors, runaways, drug addicts, freaks, and whores desperate to create alternatives to the status quo in the glorious ruins of our own lives.

Margot: What brought you back to college campuses? Given what you've said about the academic appropriation of activist knowledges, how have you experienced the academic reception of your own work?

Mattilda: As an author, editor, and activist who has always worked outside institutional structures, my initial impetus for giving talks at universities was to help pay for my book tours. I've always appreciated the engagement with my work, but at first I definitely felt more alienated than comfortable in those university settings. I supported myself as a hooker for about thirteen years, and during that time of course I found myself, over and over, in high-consumer gay settings that represented everything I abhorred—but, in this horrifying world, you have to make a living somehow, right? At first, doing university gigs felt a little like that—except that what was being consumed wasn't just the charade of masculine realness and a little talent with the throat muscles, it was actually me, my work, everything that mattered to me. This was more empowering in a way, because I could articulate the world as I saw it, but not necessarily less alienating.

But, over the years, something has changed. On my most recent book tour, for *Why Are Faggots So Afraid of Faggots*, I found myself truly inspired by the conversations that ensued in academic settings. Part of this is because many of the students who came to hear me were already familiar with my work. At Scripps College, I gave a talk in a posh building that looked like a chapel, on a campus that felt like a Southern California version of Ivy League insularity. But when I spoke I felt like I was talking to people who were engaging in these struggles with me, these questions about gender and power and intimacy and love and lust and longing, these questions about when we fail, about all our

dreams that lead to nothing and how do we get somewhere else. Afterward people were talking about their own experiences with coming up against walls—sexually, socially, politically. It felt so intimate. If I can bring that to the university setting—if the university can bring that to me—then I'm all for the engagement.

But I don't mean this anecdote to serve as a justification for academia. Recently a student wrote to me saying there was a rumor circulating that Amherst College was about to hire me as a queer studies professor, and if this was the case they would be so excited because then they could take my courses! I don't even have an undergraduate degree, so the likelihood that any university would hire me as a professor is close to zero. It doesn't matter what I might have to offer—that's just how the university system works. It's ironic, because of course I think that everyone should have the ability to go to college or grad school if they want to. At the same time, I see the way that educational attainment often becomes a trap, siphoning away radical possibilities under the guise of knowledge production and critical engagement. What would it mean to envision an entirely different model for learning, scholarship, teaching, research, inquiry, and, perhaps most importantly, instigation?