

**ACTIVISM AS FETISHISM.**

*a pamphlet essay for Activists.*

*Sydney, December 2009.*

**I.**

“The maoism of the French and of western youth in 1968-70 has nothing to do with Mao. It's a western revision of rebellion and rejection. It's important to understand that and not take an anachronistic view...These were utopias which had nothing to do with localised Chinese dogmatism. We rapidly came to understand that the Chinese weren't nearly so revolutionary as we imagined...we were 'cultural' maoists. My own maoism consisted of taking a course on Chinese and learning to write Chinese so as to be better equipped to immerse myself in a tradition which, I thought, had more place for women. It was all about trying to acquire some sort of non-European subjectivity that belonged really to our own utopian dissidence from western norms. It was a way of interrogating the West by means of the East.” -Julia Kristeva, 2000.<sup>1</sup>

In his analysis of the ideological atmospheres of the 'new left' in the Paris of 1968, Scottish political theorist Tom Nairn (then teaching in Paris) remarked that "every idea, in time, acquires a fetish-like rigidity".<sup>2</sup> Reflecting on the same period over thirty years later, Julia Kristeva - above - sketches the outline of the particular

'first world', western, feminist activist fetishes then at work in her imagination.<sup>3</sup>

The quotation from Kristeva exemplifies the many lexicons of fetishism - the term "fetish" can refer to a *Christian imperialist* name for non-European subjectivity, a *psychoanalytic* stand-in for repressed dissidence, a *commoditisation* of the sign of otherness, a *postcolonial* appropriation of the third world by the first, a *queer*-ing of the self towards other subjectivities, and a *radical anthropological* force for re-appropriation.

The trajectory of Nairn and Kristeva is significant for this essay, as much contemporary 'left' activism (such as that associated with the so-called global justice movement or 'anti-globalisation' movement) is heavily influenced by the anti-vanguard politics and ironic play espoused by the 1960s Parisian left and iconified in the May 1968 protests. Indeed, that ideals become fetishes seems an irony *par excellence*; that which is resisted ends up being reproduced. This is often felt rather terribly, as any 1970s western communist, discovering and digesting the brutal realities of Maoism and Stalinism, could tell you. As Linda Hutcheon points out, irony's mixture of amusement and betrayal produces its' definitive edge - along which irony

may at once critique, debase, reinforce and reconstruct.<sup>4</sup>

In the spirit of this irony, then, I pose activism *as* fetishism in this essay, and explore the implications of this for an activist ethics of solidarity across power imbalances and cultural differences. In this I focus upon the discourses of privileged or 'first world' activists, which is a reflection of my own location.<sup>5</sup> With an analysis of the fetish across the key lexicons listed above, fetishism can be understood as both a blockage and an opening to ethical alliance. I suggest that, for first world activist consciousness at least, it is more fruitful to consider *how* we fetishise rather than *whether* we fetishise. This is spoken through five years of physical and textual travel through parts of the global justice movement, loosely framed - through readings, interviews, observations and conversations within this timespace.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See her *Irony's Edge*, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> I am leaving the meanings of the terms 'privileged' or 'first world' deliberately vague - suffice to say that I am using the terms to talk about an alliance where there is a power imbalance ("any alliance", you might say - well, yes; and herein are some salient examples).

<sup>6</sup> I refer here to my PhD thesis, completed in 2008 and comprising research and writing on the subject of solidarity in the global justice movement.

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<sup>1</sup> In Edward Scheer, ed., *100 Years of Cruelty: Essays on Artaud*, 2000.

<sup>2</sup> Nairn and Quattrocchi, p.x

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<sup>3</sup> Kristeva is referring principally to her book *Des Chinoises (About Chinese Women)*, 1974. The quote here reflects substantial criticism of this book's 'Orientalism', by, for example, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in a 1981 essay entitled *French Feminism in an International Frame*.

## II.

In activist discourse, fetishism recurs as something to be avoided.

Ben and Claire, in their reflection on protests staged in 2002 at the Woomera immigration detention centre in South Australia, are concerned “that the Woomera protests should not be overly fetishised.” Claire urges that “it’s important for those of us outside the fences to stop fetishising those inside as somehow being the incarnation of certain ideological fantasies.”<sup>7</sup> For Ben and Claire, the fetish appears as an obstruction to authenticity and singularity – that of the protests at the Woomera detention centre, as well as the lives of those imprisoned within it.

Canadian journalist Naomi Klein, insider-chronicler of the global justice movement, writes of North American support for the 1994 indigenous Zapatista rebellion in Mexico:

“Zapatista mania looked suspiciously like just another cause for guilty lefties with a Latin America fetish: another Marxist rebel army, another macho leader, another chance to go south and buy colourful textiles. Hadn’t we heard

this story before? Hadn’t it ended badly?”<sup>8</sup>

The significance of fetishism to activism was also borne out in conversations informing this study.

I interviewed Kris, who has worked with diverse grassroots international campaigns for many years. He noted that “there’s a problem with fetishising third world colleagues...we try to avoid it but it’s always a possibility. We [first world activists] have to realise that these guys have flaws like we all have flaws...”.

A fellow campaigner, Kate, said fetishisation is “a notorious problem in [first world] activist training contexts for international projects”.

Kate also observed that first world activists “often overlook the fact that the third world fetishises the first, too, which is another example of fetishisation - as though people from the third world are too pure to be fetishisers.”

So the fetish recurs, in activist discourse - but must it always recur as an obstacle to activism, to a certain kind of ethico-political action?

We can examine this question through the registers in which the fetish appears in activist discourse, prefigured above by Kristeva.

### *The missionary position*

The first readings of the fetish fall within religious, economic and social frameworks associated with European colonisation in the seventeenth century. This project was defined by Christianity, capitalism and its civilising mission.

Scholars are generally agreed that the word ‘fetish’ was coined as *fetiche* by Portuguese explorers and traders on the west coast of Africa. It comes from *feitiço*, meaning artificial.

‘Fetishes’ referred to the inanimate objects worshipped by ‘natives’, including the gold coins brought by the newcomers, all of which were used for trading in this early ‘contact zone’.<sup>9</sup>

Notwithstanding their own worship of shiny coins, wooden crucifixes and men in white frocks; the colonial missionaries, theologians and anthropologists viewed ‘fetish worship’ as the mark of a variously un-Christian, pre-civilised and degenerate society. Fetishes were a stand-in for the ‘real’ God and ‘real’ market value at the peak of European expansion. (God’s second commandment in the Old Testament of the Christian Bible is, after all, “thou shalt have no other gods but me”).<sup>10</sup> Such an understanding of fetishism as a primitive form of worship

<sup>9</sup> ‘Contact zone’ is Mary Louise Pratt’s term; used to encapsulate the complex space of encounter between indigenous peoples and colonisers during the invasion and conquest of the Americas. See her 1991 essay, *Arts of the Contact Zone*.

<sup>10</sup> This is pointed out in Bruno Latour’s book *Iconoclasm*, 2002, p.18.

<sup>7</sup> Ben and Claire, ‘An engagement with the real: A dialogue’, in *Desert Storm*, by the Desert Storm Editorial Collective (DSEC), 2002.

<sup>8</sup> In her *Fences and Windows*, 2002, p.109.

corresponded in nineteenth and twentieth century anthropologies of religion, and in the work of the ‘father of sociology’, Auguste Comte (1798-1857).

This earliest reading of ‘fetish’ particularly haunts activism through the figure of the missionary, which undoubtedly occupies a place in the genealogy of the contemporary first world activist subject position. Critiques of ‘the missionary position’ are often used by activists to denounce the sort of activism carried out by church groups and charity-based non-government organisations, as well as using it as a way to reflect upon their own practices. In Australia this debate has been played out across solidarities pertaining to white-Indigenous relations or immigration detention as much as global neoliberalism.

For example: white Australian activist Clare Land’s contribution to the *A Space Outside Reader* – a collection of writing to accompany activism around the meeting of the G20 in Melbourne, 2006 – was an analysis of the Indigenous rights camp, Camp Sovereignty, held over the period of the Commonwealth Games earlier that year. Land notes that

“a racist, missionary vibe had been allowed to develop, with hundreds of over-keen white supporters outnumbering and putting off Indigenous people, occupying those role properly filled by Indigenous people, and assuming control of the running of the camp. Suddenly the camp was not a

space that was empowering for Aboriginal people, a place that should have enacted sovereignty and autonomy. It seemed a microcosm of the rest of Australia.”

In the case of Woomera<sup>2002</sup> and other detention centre protests, ‘autonomous’ activists recalled (and rejected) the missionary roots of contemporary church groups advocating against the treatment of refugees in detention and particularly those seeking to remove children from detention.

(And indeed: organisations who are active supporters of refugees in Australia, such as Centacare and UnitingCare, are the institutional descendants of church based organisations that, for most of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, facilitated the removal of Indigenous children from their families and indentured them to domestic or stock work. They are one of the more salient reminders that “the judgement ‘good’ was not created by those to whom goodness was shown!” – in the words of philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche).

Critique of the missionary position is resonant in contemporary activist and academic debates spearheaded by Indigenous, Black and third world feminists who note the propensity of white, first world feminists to behave as agents of ‘salvation’ (“saving brown women from brown men”, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak put it).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> In her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak*, 1988, p.297

Others make a similar critique of the proliferation of non-government organisations (NGOs) being set up by westerners to promote the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people in eastern Europe, Latin America and other parts of the ‘third world’. As Shannon Woodcock puts it these organisations tend to peddle western ‘salvation’ from the ‘repression’ of queer sexualities under previous (non-western) regimes.<sup>12</sup>

These latter examples may also be read as cases of ‘postcolonial’ fetishism (which I discuss further along), given that the relations underpinning the figure of the missionary, and the prior seventeenth century *feitiço*, have changed a great deal in their character.

However, as the critics referenced above have pointed out, first world activism is rooted in ‘the helping relationship’ and its orientation to ‘others’. As they demonstrate, ‘the civilising mission’ endemic to the western Christian imperial project remains part of the logic within the privileged position of western, first world social movement actors, no matter how post-colonial we might think we have become.

### *Fetishism in psychoanalysis*

Fetishism gained wider usage, in fin-de-siècle Europe, at the behest of psychoanalysts Alfred Binet (1886), Richard von Krafft-Ebing (1886)

<sup>12</sup> See Woodcock’s *The Globalisation of LGBTI Identities*, 2004.

and Sigmund Freud (1927). Through their theories, fetishism became a category of sexual pathology – it is “the model perversion” of this time, according to Michel Foucault.<sup>13</sup> Within this thinking the fetishist receives ‘abnormal’ sexual excitement from an object (a shoe, a whip) or a fixed part of the body (a foot, an elbow), which becomes the only way in which sexual relations are possible.<sup>14</sup>

Freud thought that the subconscious origins of this lay in the “castration anxiety” of boys. For Freud, the young boy thinks that his mother is a castrated man, which causes him to fear his own castration. Therefore, the fetishist (NB: women couldn’t be fetishists) is excited by the object they fetishise because of its potential to replace the mother’s absent – indeed lost – penis. Further along into the twentieth century, Jacques Lacan (who otherwise broke new ground in psychoanalysis), maintains that the fetishist is trying to replace the penis.<sup>15</sup>

Importantly, these psychoanalytic versions of fetishism emphasise that it is a form of “scopophilia”, or love of looking.<sup>16</sup> Fetishism relies on a border between the seen and the unseen. In western culture, this is directly

reflected in notions of the inside and the outside.<sup>17</sup>

So, in psychoanalysis the fetish is a stand-in for something lacking. The lack is felt by the fetishiser (on the inside); unconsciously they fill it with the fetishised object (on the outside).

For example – Su-Lin Yu argues that the reason Julia Kristeva fetishised *Les Chinoises* is because she perceived a lack in the dominant western symbolic order, which she and her peers were so critical of. *About Chinese Women* was the outcome of her longing to have this lack filled, to have her critique realized in a fixed, functioning, other scenario. She was a European feminist maoist who “recognized her own cultural lack” as “a Western woman” living under patriarchy and capitalism.<sup>18</sup> Consequently she fetishised matriarchal society and communism, which structured her impressions of *Les Chinoises*: “the mothers at the centre”; “the women in command”.<sup>19</sup> As Kelly Oliver suggests, “Kristeva was looking for herself.”<sup>20</sup>

### *Australian lacklustre*

I traveled to Brazil in August 2005 to conduct research on the Movimento sem Terra (MST), or Landless Worker’s Movement.

In doing so I was following my own deep longing for a place that is not dependant on western neoliberal structures of governance and social administration.<sup>21</sup>

I reconsidered the idea that “Brazil” might reflect this fantastic opposite to my own cultural experience as time and travel went on.<sup>22</sup> However, in the early days of my travels my diary shows that I am quite invigorated by what felt like a cultural passion for politics in the spaces I was visiting.

I write that “I hadn’t realized just how affected I was by political apathy in Australia” and how that had impacted on my decision to withdraw almost completely from ‘activist work’: “to organize public forums that nobody comes to, to write letters to the editor that nobody reads and to have dinner conversations tactfully re-directed from detention centres to the footy score – well, there’s only so much of that any leftesque dogooding sort can handle.” In comparison, Brazil feels like a place where there is “a politicised culture where political participation is a firm value”, a place with a “cultural thoughtfulness about politics”.<sup>23</sup>

By the end of the first month I have traveled from Porto Alegre to São Paulo, where I am to stay in a seminary for a few weeks.

<sup>13</sup> In his *History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, 1980, p. 114

<sup>14</sup> Freud, *Complete Psychological Works*, 1961, p. 152

<sup>15</sup> As pointed out by Elizabeth Grosz in *Jacques Lacan: A feminist introduction*, 1990, p.18 and Anne McClintock in *Imperial Leather*, 1995, pp. 192-195

<sup>16</sup> Emily Pietz and William Apter, *Fetishism as cultural discourse*, 1993, p. ix

<sup>17</sup> As discussed by Pietz and Apter; also Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing*, 2001, p. 168.

<sup>18</sup> See Su-Lin Yu, *Reconstructing western female subjectivity*, 2002, p.6

<sup>19</sup> Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, 1977, p.45; p. 128

<sup>20</sup> Kelly Oliver, *Reading Kristeva*, 1993, p.195

<sup>21</sup> In retrospect, maybe I could have just waited for the GFC.

<sup>22</sup> I’ve written some academic articles about this process of ‘de-romanticisation’, for example, ‘Moving Encounters’, *Cultural Studies Review*, March 2009.

<sup>23</sup> From my notes, August 2005.

By this time I have been engaged in a number of conversations that reinforce my sense of Brazil's political difference to Australia.

Marta, who works in the kitchen at the seminary, asks me about the government in Australia one day: is it a dictatorship, or a democracy?

I am surprised: I rail against 'John Howard's dictatorship' in Australia, but I suppose growing up in Latin America makes this a less ambiguous question.

"It's a democracy, but..." I try to think of a way to explain myself further in my limited Portuguese. "Well, our Prime Minister and George Bush are good friends!"

"Oh, a *democracy*", Marta says, making inverted comma signs with her fingers.

Some time later, a geography student I am talking with on the bus remarks that "I guess Australia doesn't have social movements, because you're a rich country."

A relentless comparison with the Australian socio-political landscape (in which Australia always comes off badly) continues throughout my early notes in/on Brazil. I soak up a culture that "talks politics" and incorporates alternatives to US-led neoliberal globalization (*Bush Terrorista* is a favoured graffito). It replaces the lack I feel in my own political culture: a familiar discourse to Australian dissidents. 'I Hate Australia' declared Sydney artist Adam Geczy in 2006. My friend Sandra (an Irish settler

descendant) makes similar intonations when I interview her:

I'm involved in activism...because I hate the fact my country is founded on a lie. I hate the racism, the white bread culture...

That, among white Australian citizen activists, this 'hating Australia' morphs into a fetish for 'the other' - who is oppressed by Australia - is hardly surprising within the psychoanalytic reading. These others fill in where lack is felt.

### *Commodity fetishism*

By the end of the nineteenth century, Karl Marx had established the powerful notion of commodity fetishism – that is, the central logic of capitalism whereby the commodity is thought to possess intrinsic value by virtue of being a saleable item. 'The secret' of commodity fetishism is that this appearance of value obscures its conditions of production under the class system. To reveal its secret is to reveal the conditions of production.<sup>24</sup> The commodity, as fetish, is worshipped at the expense of 'reality'.

By the end of the twentieth century Jean Baudrillard was challenging the Marxist reading of the fetish. He remarked on its etymological relationship to 'fakery' in the age of hyper-real,

simulation-based commodity capitalism.<sup>25</sup> Under Baudrillard's model it is the sign of the commodity (promulgated through advertising and other media culture) that becomes the fetish object, above and beyond the commodity itself.

### *Armbands*

As the global monetary policy-makers hit Melbourne in November 2006 for the G20 annual summit, so too did the global Make Poverty History (MPH) campaign.

This campaign was spearheaded by international NGOs such as Oxfam and World Vision, along with rock stars such as Sir Bob Geldof and Bono.

Bono addressed the G20 summit along with a number of NGO heads, making a plea for debt reduction in impoverished African nations and pointing out the gross inequality in quality of life, life expectancy and infant mortality wrought by national debt, famine and preventable diseases in third world countries. G20 ministers, Bono reminded them, have the power to intervene in this situation – indeed, to do nothing less than save thousands of lives through international finance policy.

Alongside these negotiations the MPH campaign staged a rock concert and distributed armbands to supporters. The concert and armband campaign was hugely attended and the overall MPH

<sup>24</sup> Karl Marx, trans. Moore and Aveling. *The fetishism of commodities and the secret thereof*, 1867.

<sup>25</sup> Jean Baudrillard, 'Fetishism and ideology', in *For a critique of the political economy of the sign*, 1981, pp. 88-101.

campaign was declared a success when G20 attendees announced their plans for significant debt reduction and financing of social welfare programs across the third world.

MPH and its high profile campaigning carried little favour with many affiliates of the global justice movement, who noted the reformist nature of their demands: ‘forgiveness’ of debt that was unfairly accrued, the continuation of punitive ‘structural adjustment’ conditions attached to aid money, and the persistence of policy making power in the hands of the world’s rich elite, all of whom subscribe to the same ideology of neoliberal globalization that have economically crippled these nations in the first place – i.e. in a continuation of the western colonial project.

Bono, according to *A Space Outside* (ASO), “believes in opening Africa’s markets. This is the same ideological message as the World Bank, the IMF and the G20”. For activists who truly want to ‘make poverty history’, they said, “the best alternative is to increase our capacity to resist the global dominance of capitalism” and instead to make neoliberalism, capitalism, John Howard, George Bush history.<sup>26</sup>

The struggle against neoliberal globalization, ASO argued, risks neutralization and co-optation by the reduction of ‘the global problem’ to ‘poverty’ as opposed to ‘capitalism’ by the involvement of large NGOs and rock stars.

<sup>26</sup> A Space Outside, 2006.

The commodity fetish is central to these activist critiques of the MPH campaign. Under these analyses, MPH commoditises the “third world” as well as “activism”. The political construction and power of these terms are reduced to an inoffensive, collectible ‘magic item’: the third world is a generically African child to whom one sends two dollars a week, activism is a five dollar armband to take away after a feel-good rock concert.

ASO notes that MPH “has done a lot of work” through this mediatised commoditisation of the third world and activism, “to raise awareness about the impact of debt in Africa, but it is largely apolitical and emphasizes charity over systemic change”.

“It also”, they add pointedly, “provides a useful forum for washed-up celebrities wanting to resurrect their public profile by having their photo taken with starving African orphans.”

When read through commodity fetishism, activism is thus produced by and reliant on liberal capitalist democracy.

As numerous texts in the ASO reader noted, MPH displaces the guilt of first world consumers onto an object which exudes the aura of ‘doing something about third world poverty’, ‘making a difference’ – but in requiring little else from the consumer, the global system which created the third world in the first place (which holds it in place and must be dismantled before any poverty is ‘made history’), remains unchallenged and unscathed. However, the critics themselves also

remain unchallenged – which is where the postcolonial fetish comes in.

### *The postcolonial fetish*

Feminist scholar Anne McClintock brings the commodity fetish together with the psychoanalytic fetish.

In this way, the story of fetishism in the colonial history of western modernity is not reduced to either the commodity or psychoanalytic incarnations.

Instead, McClintock develops a way of reading the fetish that recognizes its ambiguity. Through an analysis of colonial social conditions and relationships, she comes to understand the fetish as more generally an object onto which contradiction or a ‘crisis in value’ is (dis)placed.

This ‘postcolonial’ fetish is thus located on more points across relationships such as that between colonizer and colonized (inside and outside, seen and unseen).

This kind of ambiguity is key to other avowedly postcolonial readings of the fetish.

Homi Bhabha and Frantz Fanon both deploy this reading using psychoanalysis, suggesting ‘racial fetishism’ to be a parallel of sexual object fetishism.<sup>27</sup> For these two theorists the fetishisation of the racialised other is a way of

<sup>27</sup> See Bhabha’s *The location of culture*; Fanon’s *Black skin, white masks*.

subjugating this other and containing the confrontation with difference, the ambiguity, that they signify.

Sara Ahmed uses the commodity fetish reading to advance her theory of 'stranger fetishism'; something that is manifest in sites as varied as multiculturalist government policy, ethnographic research, and the globalised market economy.

In/on these sites the figure of the stranger (the foreigner, the other) acquires a life of its own. 'The stranger' is cut off from the histories of 'its' determination. This is an attempt to foreclose the confrontation that the other brings; to incorporate their difference into the selfsame.

Ahmed positions the stranger as precisely not strange, as already "known" and thereby making it possible for 'at-home-ness' to be imagined.<sup>28</sup>

### *Sebastião Salgado's photography*

If 'looking' is an orientation to otherness (recalling that fetishism can be 'the love of looking'), then 'overlooking' is perhaps a denial of otherness.

The key problem of the postcolonial fetish, as it is read by McClintock, Bhabha and Ahmed, is overlooking. That is, the overlooking of the fetish object's history and conditions of production.

As something to look at, under conditions which can be overlooked, the photographs of Brazilian photographer Sebastião Salgado may be seen as central in circulating the fetish of the MST as representative of 'third world struggle' for consumption by (among others) first world audiences.

Salgado is a Brazilian who has lived in Paris and London since 1969. He is a firm supporter of the MST and donated the profits from the sale of his book *Terra* to the movement, who use his images in much of their promotional material (Figure I, Ia).

Figure II, 'A Final March', is iconic in visual representations of third world struggle, exemplified in *New Internationalist* magazine's 'Reclaim the Global Commons' campaign (Figure IIa).

Salgado's images also have a life as part of his international reputation as a photographer and essayist – they were offered for sale, for example, at a Sydney commercial art gallery in July 2005. He also has a commercial photographic practice, Amazonas Images, through which he has been engaged, for example, to create advertisements for Volvo (Figure III). Whilst the processes and intentions associated with *Terra* and with Volvo are very different, Salgado relies on fetishism in both scenarios. This has been the angle from which many have critiqued his work.

<sup>28</sup> In Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied others in postcoloniality*, 2000.





I: The Icons of Victory, from *Terra*, Salgado 1998, pp.132-33



II: A final march, *Terra*, pp. 134-153



III: Advertisement for Volvo, Amazonas Images 1991-2.



Ia: Arte em Movimento, cover, compact disc, MST, no date.



Iia: Reclaim the Commons poster, *New Internationalist*, 2002

In his images of ‘third world peoples’, Salgado gives “his First expect and want”, as art critic John Mraz argued in an essay entitled *Sebastião Salgado's Latin America*. That is, Salgado provides a romanticized version of third world existence, to which first world viewers can in turn romanticize their relationship.

An Australian activist who I consulted on the images reinforced this. He said that, “it’s nice to be reminded there are ongoing revolutions, not just in our history books but out there in the world, far away from iPods and plastic surgery.”

The people in Salgado’s images are lined up against the notions of land (*Terra*, 2005), subalternity (*Otras Americas*, 1986) and work (*Trabalhadores*, 1997). This feeds the consciousness of first world activists who feel a sense of disconnection from these alleged ‘third world realities’.

In this vein I interviewed João, a Brazilian activist now living in Australia, who prepared a photoessay on the MST from time spent on an MST settlement. He reflected:

“During my contact with the landless, I thought that I was doing ‘an epic essay on an epic theme’; that I was registering their revolutionary day-to-day. Later, when I had all the prints gathered, I started to realise that day-to-day and revolution are antonyms. My prints showed children playing, workers cutting trees, plowing the land, playing cards,

having breakfast ... Salgado had workers being shot by police, at funerals, starving, invading land and especially looking pitiful.”

In observing his ‘realisation’ whilst on the assentamento “that day-to-day and revolution are antonyms”, João highlights the ambiguity of the photograph as fetishized image.

João feels that Salgado’s images ‘only’ highlight the ‘revolutionary’ moment of MST activism, and that his own showed the more mundane realities of living on an assentamento. He acknowledges, then, the role of visual material in the imagination and what they can communicate about their object.

Certainly the uptake of Salgado’s images can be analysed as a manifestation of the commodity fetishism of first world activists, as in A Space Outside’s analysis of the Make Poverty History campaign. But like me, João feels a little fooled by the images of the MST that he had been exposed to before arriving on the assentamento. He seems to be suggesting that Salgado hasn’t shown him the truth, which he has since discovered to be far more mundane.

However, this ‘truth-seeking’ approach to the fetish does not probe the grey areas in the freeze-frame image. Diane Nelson suggests that such an approach “misses the fantasy work” of the fetish, which acts to “cover over a lack of solid

identifications”.<sup>29</sup> Seeing to “unmask” the fetish denies the possibility that, ***through fetishism, shared fantasies are at work and are being acted upon in contingent ways.***

In the case of Salgado and the MST, to seek exposure of this kind is to reduce the significance of the sem-terra’s agency in the production and circulation of the photographs – in consenting to them, receiving funds from their sale, and using them in the movement’s own promotional material.

It also ignores the possibility that many sem-terra see desirable and/or productive images of themselves in the images, as do other land activists across Latin America.

Whilst traveling in 2005 and 2007 I saw images from *Terra* on the walls of houses on MST assentamentos, on the cover of Zapatista publications in southern Mexico, on display in various NGO offices in Brazil and Mexico and in a farmhouse in a small township in south-eastern Bolivia.

Salgado’s images still function, then, as fetishes. However, with a postcolonial analysis, they can be wielded by both coloniser and colonised at multiple points in time and space. The fetish moves in multiple directions. To critique the uptake of Salgado’s images as a linear

<sup>29</sup> In her book *A Finger in the Wound: Body politics in quincennial Guatemala*, 1999, p.124

progression from third world to first world is to deny this dynamism.

So if the fetish can move, does this mean that it can move into a more expansive, hopeful, critical space?

### III.

In many of the examples above, the fetish is posed as a blockage of space – an obstacle to ethical solidarity, and therefore to effective activism.

This may well explain why fetishism is not discussed any further in the activist discourse – in the fragments from Klein, Ben, Claire, Kris and Kate, fetishism is generally foreshadowed as a problem and then dismissed.

However, the rejection of a constituent part, as Kristeva went on to demonstrate in her work on abjection, does not manifest in its disappearance.<sup>30</sup>

McClintock observes that, by definition, “the fetish scene is destined to recur, again and again”.

If this is the case, then I think it is worth conceptualizing activism ‘as’ fetishism, in order to see how activists might relate to the fetish differently, in ways that might further furnish our political solidarities with an ethics.

Suggesting that fetishism is constitutive of activism, as it is constitutive of globalised western cultures, allows the conversation about fetishism in activism to go on. It takes ‘fetishism’, as a criticism of activism, to more places than denunciation.

This is possible by thinking about fetishism in relation to idealism and utopianism, which is arguably what Kristeva is suggesting at the beginning of this essay. Fetishes come about because of ideals: how we want the world to be, and the ways in which we think and feel that this is possible.

Religious fetishes are “gods in the process of construction”, as David Graeber puts it.<sup>31</sup>

Freudian fetishes are a way for the fetishist to imagine the wholeness they seek to restore.

The Marxist fetish, including the Baudrillardian sign, embodies consumerist ideals of ‘the good life’.

In the words of Jean-Luc Nancy, the fetish is a problem because of “the incommensurability of the creator and the product marketed” – of the idealized and the ideal – and the ways in which this ‘space between’ may be exploited.<sup>32</sup>

I am arguing, then, that the politics and ethics of solidarity are governed by *the way in which*

*activists identify with their fantasies* of how they want the world to be.

Jean-Luc Nancy calls on us to “reappropriate the power of the fetish rather than simply confronting it with pious denunciation”.

In this vein, Amanda Fernbach emphasizes the use of fetishism to locate otherness, and the liberatory potential in this “fantasy of transformation” that is inherent to fetishism.<sup>33</sup>

This transformative aspect of the fetish is also emphasized in the work of radical anthropologists David Graeber and Michael Taussig,<sup>34</sup> and by theorist Bruno Latour.

The fetish in activism, I argue, must be related to as a (reductive) expression of our (expansive) ideals.

Within this tension between reduction and expansion, it must be able to move.

This, I will now argue, is enabled by revelation and denunciation; *along with*, perhaps, ambiguous and ironic reappropriation.

Such movement is essential for a critique of activism-as-fetishism that does not paralyse activism, even as it may undo it.

<sup>33</sup> Fernbach, *Fantasies of Fetishism*, 2002

<sup>34</sup> See Taussig’s *The devil and commodity fetishism in South America*, 1980; *The magic of the state*, 1997.

<sup>30</sup> Kristeva, trans. Roudiez, *Powers of horror*, 1982.

<sup>31</sup> See his essay, *Fetishism as social creativity*, 2005.

<sup>32</sup> See his *Two secrets of the fetish*, 2003.

It also needs to be movement ‘in conscience’ - not movement for movement’s sake, or movement to avoid complicity.<sup>35</sup>

As Fernbach’s survey of fetish culture shows, participants and analysts of contemporary fetish subcultures, loosely grouped under the rubric of BDSM (bondage, discipline, sadomasochism) have complicated the canonical psychoanalytic reading of fetishism as a perversification of normal and healthy sexual practices.

Although canonical readings persist, there has been much made of ‘female fetishism’ (i.e. the woman as fetishist, something Freud for example thought was not possible), gender variance and queer sexualities in activism and theory.

In these readings the fetish is not a symptom of castration anxiety.

Instead, it ranges in significance from a creative, fantastic way to ‘get off’, to one of gaining “symbolic power over perilous memory,”<sup>36</sup> to an aid in pursuing spiritual freedom.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, the queer fetish has served to shift the psychoanalytic reading of the fetish into a broader schema of cultural practices – untied from phallogocentric, individualized pathology; involving a horizontal exchange of power and

<sup>35</sup> I have written about this point in more detail using the concept of ‘shifty subjectivity’ in an article called ‘Giving way at the intersection’. It was published in the journal *Australian Feminist Studies*, December 2009.

<sup>36</sup> McClintock 1995, p.146

<sup>37</sup> Nicholas Largier, *In Praise of the Whip*, 2007, pp. 35-75.

located in historical relationship to cultural crisis and subversion.

So fetishism, in its queer register, is a creative, oppositional response to cultural circumscription. It is a temporary vehicle for cathartic release.

Contemporary activism is strongly influenced by this approach. It is crucial for the left’s ongoing “de-tox after Stalinism”, in the words of Martha, another interviewee for my study.

This approach also has an important role in resisting the strictures of economic and state power under global neoliberalism which otherwise generate “alienation”. For Martha, “joy” is a key emotion of solidarity in the global justice movement.

And certainly the burlesque, the carnivalesque, clowning, jestering – which generate pleasure, joy and desire – are all key to global justice movement practice as they were to the anti-vanguard politics of 1968 and its modern precursors.<sup>38</sup> They are also significant in the feminist and queer activisms that resist radical feminist denunciations of BDSM.<sup>39</sup>

The queer fetish is an implicit critique of unreflexive activist fetishes: such fetishes come about through ‘lactivism’: a repression of desire.

<sup>38</sup> See Richard Day’s *Gramsci is dead*, 2005, pp. 21-25; Leela Gandhi’s *Affective Communities*, 2006, pp. 187-189; Kristin Ross’ *May ’68 and its afterlives*, 2002.

<sup>39</sup> E.g. Gayle Rubin, *Thinking Sex*, 1984; see also Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 2006, pp. 194-195.

Taking over the streets of cities which host global neoliberal policy making summits and turning them into a delirious party has become the norm when organisations like APEC, the IMF, the WTO and the World Bank meet.<sup>40</sup> Strategies often détourn activist fetish items such as banners, chants and revolutionary costume. This emphasizes the nature of these items as props.

So in activism, the queer fetish registers an irreverent and substantial response to the centralized cadre model of traditional public protest.

Affinity groups during the Woomera 2002 protests sported absurd names like ‘Footy Fans for Justice’; lampooning the earnest names borne by 1970s activist groups like ‘Mothers Against the Bomb’. More recently, the Bandicoot Insurgent Rebel Clown Army (BIRCA) trickstered their way through the G20 protests in Melbourne, 2006. In 2007, the Tranny Cops Dance Ensemble shook their suited-up booty during protests around Dick Cheney’s meeting with the Prime Minister in Sydney. (They were arrested, charged, and acquitted of the charge of impersonating a police officer).

Further afield, London’s Space Hijackers currently await the outcome of legal proceedings against them after they drove a fake armoured

<sup>40</sup> As discussed in Klein’s *Fences and Windows; Confronting Capitalism* by Eddie Yuen et al, 2004 and *We are Everywhere* by Notes from Nowhere. 2003.

vehicle through protests surrounding the 2009 G20 summit. Radical anthropologist Chris Knight was suspended from his teaching post on account of his involvement in associated actions involving the performance of zombie bankers.<sup>41</sup>

In such situations, *acknowledging the fetish in activism as it is in culture* and/or not taking it so seriously is a way to fend off its more destructive effects.

Such tactics suggest a self-reflexivity that can make the fetish move out of the missionary position.

The resurgence of this form of fetishism in international activism is a link taken up by first world activism from third world social movement: such as the Zapatista National Army of Liberation's mocking of the military model (their leader is an anonymous subcommander, they display fake weapons and carry out 'air strikes' on the Mexican National Army using paper planes), and the Karnataka Farmer's Union – who, 50, 000-strong, enacted their protest against the Indian Government's market-driven land policies by spending the entire day outside the relevant government office, laughing.<sup>42</sup>

This is 'playing fool to the king' and it is part of a very long western history of jestering or trickstering:<sup>43</sup> throwing the fetishes of dominant

<sup>41</sup> Space Hijackers: <http://www.spacehijackers.co.uk/>; Chris Knight: <http://www.chrisknight.co.uk/>

<sup>42</sup> See John Jordan and Jennifer Whitney's 2001 article entitled *Resistance is the secret of joy*.

<sup>43</sup> Desiderius Erasmus, *The praise of follie*, 1549.

power back at itself, which grants a provision of oppositional strength to the activist or critic.

Another way in which the fetish has been analysed in terms of its transformative potential occurs within radical anthropology.

In their comparative anthropologies of indigenous Latin American and West African cultures, Michael Taussig and David Graeber re-read the practice in indigenous cultures that was named 'fetishism' by western colonisers.

In so doing they disclose that fetishism is intrinsic to western modernity; 'fetish' is a linguistic category.

For Taussig, fetishes are expressions of the kind of faith required to subscribe to the most 'reasoned' of western institutions. As he says, "God, the economy, and the state...clearly they are fetishes, invented wholes of materialized artifice into whose woeful insufficiency we have placed soulstuff".<sup>44</sup>

For Graeber, fetishes are mediators for alternative visions of society – he speaks of "fetishism as social creativity".

Thus, Taussig and Graeber emphasise the creativity of the fetish as an unstable and fecund maker of meaning: reminding us that fetishes were named as such because of their magical properties, connecting worshippers to the realm

<sup>44</sup> *The Magic of the State*, p.5

of gods, and thereby located in the register of faith and spirituality.

Put another way:

For the colonisers the fetish delimited legitimate faith and worship under Christian imperialism – so by its own definition the fetish is inherent to western society and culture.

In this sense, acts of protest that turn the gaze back on our culture, drawing the enmeshment of fetishism to our attention (i.e. the linguistic category 'fetish' as a form of self-representation, rather than that of others) can be said to be engaging the radical-anthropological fetish. It is an "ironic" or "blasphemous" faith directed at the lie of colonial origins, as Donna Haraway would have it.<sup>45</sup>

The radical-anthropological fetish is not out to create the truth behind the fetish, just to expose it as a mediator for a question, and as something questionable.

### *Ultimate failure*

The ironic moments gestured to above are acts of mimicry that Homi K. Bhabha might say are "at once resemblance and menace"; "between mimicry and mockery."<sup>46</sup> They destabilize the prevailing images of third world activism or third world experience, marking their 'failure' as static representations.

<sup>45</sup> See her *Manifesto for Cyborgs*, 1991,

<sup>46</sup> *The Location of Culture*, p. 85

As McClintock suggests, it is failure that the fetish most powerfully represents.<sup>47</sup> For Ahmed, too, the path away from stranger fetishism is one that “works with the failure of encounters to recuperate the distance” between first and third world experience.<sup>48</sup> The fetish ‘exposed’ by radical anthropology also exposes the constitutional failure of the fetish to capture the object that it is projected onto.

It is tempting to square off the playful and transformative fetishism present in the queer and radical anthropological readings against the more dichotomous self-other/subject-object readings prominent in the Christian imperialist, psychoanalytic and commodity fetishes, as well as those postcolonial theories of the fetish that rely on these models.<sup>49</sup>

Still: the interpenetration of the readings of the fetish in this essay (it is surely a false boundary that I draw between each one) suggests that *the fetish remains whether we renounce it or celebrate it*.

Furthermore, it seems that both renunciation and celebration make the fetish more coherent and decidable (and less movable) than is implied by its multiplicitous manifestations.

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<sup>47</sup> *Imperial Leather*, p.85

<sup>48</sup> *Strange Encounters*, p.145

<sup>49</sup> In my thesis I note that Fernbach’s survey lacks a problematisation of racial fetishism (the postcolonial fetish) in some fetish cultures.

For Jean-Luc Nancy, the fetish is ‘ineradicable presence’: calling ‘fetish’ as the truth of something reveals that something as being cut off from its conditions of production.

But, this revelation cannot necessarily “show the truth of the producer in person or as a subject, and his unique and community existence”.<sup>50</sup>

Such an analysis does not have the potential to remove the fetish in favour of ‘truth’.

In revealing the fetish, even in trying to get beyond it, its presence remains.

The fetish is “presence gathered up as a sign” of desire.<sup>51</sup>

Thus, it does not hide “a derisory secret”.

Rather, it *signifies in itself* “the farce in which the will for truth exists.”<sup>52</sup>

To try and delete the fetish from discourse, then, is to try and will away the constructedness of truth and its interplay with fantasies and ideals.

As Latour observes, “no matter how adamant one is about breaking fetishes and forbidding oneself image worship; temples will be built, sacrifices will be made...”.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> *Two secrets of the fetish*, p.142

<sup>51</sup> *Two secrets*, p.146

<sup>52</sup> *Two secrets*, p. 147

<sup>53</sup> *Iconoclasm*, p.23

#### IV.

On this understanding of the fetish, my fantasy of Brazil as approximating a socialist utopia can be re-appropriated from the reading of ‘Latin America fetish’. I can seek not to fetishise ‘Brazil’, but that does not mean the ideals or fantasies that underpinned by imagining of Brazil have to disappear.

In many ways this is already reflected in the ironic activism played out in the global justice movement: communist kitsch, overdone chanting, outrageous costumes.

We are aping the old styles, mourning for them – not wanting to reproduce them, but remaining thrilled by the ideals and wanting to see them realized.

How we *ethically negotiate ideals*, then, depends perhaps on how we embody them, how we identify with the fantasies they create – how we fetishise, rather than whether we fetishise.

At the beginning of these essays, the people I quote (Klein, Ben, Claire, Kris and Kate) all suggest, through their denunciation of fetishism, that it is possible not to fetishise.

However, a discussion of the multiple readings and manifestations of the fetish suggests otherwise: that we are all complicit in the fetish, in that we all have language and sociality and imagination.

As a site for negotiating ideals, the fetish represents dialogue between the transcendent and the concrete.

Within this process, it is essential that the fetish does not freeze the scene of domination and subjugation that is so often reflected in the first-third world activist alliance.

This, rather than presenting an obstacle to stymie the ethical project, instead allows us to imagine an alternative ethics of solidarity.

For activists, then, the fetish is an aid to the world we are fighting for – fetishised others and events are evidence that ‘another world is possible’, as the World Social Forum slogan goes.

The challenge, in alliances across difference and power, is recognizing the constructedness of truth that the fetish stands for, and thus attempting to ally with the ideal more than with the fetish.

Irony and blasphemy are among potentially many affects which perform this function by drawing attention to the performative nature of ideology and belief and the shifting nature of ‘principles’ in relation to ‘principals’.

The space that this creates is tethered to a capacious, multiplicitous and shared fantasy of transformation, onto which an ethical politics of solidarity might be projected.

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*Dear Reader*

*I wrote my PhD thesis on the ethics and politics of solidarity.*

*These are some thoughts that came out of my research and writing for it.*

*There may be a few more essays to come, and/or maybe a book.*

*Contact: [ann.deslandes@gmail.com](mailto:ann.deslandes@gmail.com); see also <http://flat7.wordpress.com>*

*Thankyou :-)*

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