

# The Gender Knot: What Drives Patriarchy?

Allan G. Johnson

Sociologist Allan G. Johnson received his Ph.D. in 1972 from the University of Michigan. He teaches at Hartford College for Women and conducts training courses and seminars on gender for business and educational institutions. Besides *The Gender Knot*, he has authored several books, including *Human Arrangements: An Introduction to Sociology*, in its fourth edition (1996), and *The Forest and the Trees: Sociology as Life, Practice, and Promise* (1997).

*Patriarchy is oppressive and counterproductive, Johnson acknowledges. Given that men and women depend on each other for life and existence, it is also puzzling: Why does it exist at all? Johnson argues that although it affects both women and men, patriarchy originates with men, driven by what is inside them. The task, then, is to understand the factors in men that impel them to the values and behaviors we recognize as patriarchal.*

PATRIARCHY IS FULL OF PARADOX, not least of which is the mere fact that it exists at all. Consider this. Female and male are two halves of the human species. In union they bring new life into the world; they live and work together to make families and communities; they trace their deepest time-space sense of who they are and where they came from through ties of blood and marriage that join them as children, parents, siblings, or life partners who bring with them some of the profoundest needs for intimacy, belonging, and caring that humans can have. And yet here we are, stuck in patriarchy, surrounded by gender prejudice and oppression, fundamentally at odds. Obviously, something powerful is going on here and has been for a long time. What kind of social engine could create and sustain

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such an oppressive system in the face of all the good reasons against it? Why patriarchy?

The answer that first occurs to many people is that patriarchy is rooted in the natural order of things. As such, it reflects "essential" differences between women and men based on biology or genetics (which is why such arguments are often called "essentialist").<sup>1</sup> Men tend to be physically stronger than women, for example, which might explain their dominance. Or men must protect pregnant or lactating women from wild beasts and other men, and female dependency somehow requires men to be in charge. Or men are naturally predisposed to dominance, and patriarchy simply *is* men and what they do to one another and to women. In other words, patriarchy comes down to guys just being guys.

If we take such arguments seriously, it's hard not to conclude that gender oppression is simply part of who we are as a species. This will appeal to anyone who wants to perpetuate patriarchy or who wants to blame men for it in a way that leaves men no room to maneuver. For people like me, who sometimes feel overwhelmed by men's violence, it is also hard to resist the idea that there's something fundamentally wrong with maleness itself. Unfortunately, though, essentialism offers us little hope short of changing human nature, getting rid of men, or finding a way for women and men to live completely apart (which won't do anything about the awful things many men do to one another).<sup>2</sup> Given this, it makes little sense to embrace essentialism unless there's solid evidence to support it. But there isn't. Essentialism requires us to ignore much of what we know about psychology, biology, genetics, history, and how social life actually works. We have to be willing to reduce incredibly complex patterns of social life not just to biology and genetics, but to the even thinner slice of human life that defines sex, a position that gets little support even from biologists, including sociobiologists like E. O. Wilson.<sup>3</sup>

Something fundamentally wrong w/ maleness?

And if we believe in evolution, essentialism backs us into the corner of arguing that oppression is actually a *positive* adaptation, that societies organized around gender oppression will thrive more than those that aren't.

Essentialism also implies that patriarchy is the only system that's ever been, since what makes something "essential" is its universal and inescapable nature. Some things, of course, are essentially human, such as small children's unavoidable period of dependence on adults to feed, protect, and care for them. When it comes to patriarchy, however, all kinds of evidence from anthropology, archaeology, and history point to anything but a universal natural order. There is, for example, a lot of archaeological evidence from prepatriarchal times that dates back to about seven thousand years ago, when goddess imagery held a central place throughout modern-day Europe, Africa, and the Middle East.<sup>4</sup> We also know that the status of women varies a great deal among pre-industrial tribal societies. In many cases, for example, kinship is traced through women, not men; women are neither subordinated nor oppressed; misogyny and sexual violence are unheard of; and women control property and have political authority.<sup>5</sup> Since essentialism assumes that all humans share the same human "essence," it falls apart in the face of such striking and widespread variations.

The best reason to pass up essentialism may be that it doesn't fit with what we know about how patriarchy and gender actually work. Essentialism, for example, can't account for the enormous variability we find among women and among men, or for the similarities between men and women in similar situations.<sup>6</sup> On various measures of mental ability, men differ as much from other men as they do from women; and men and women placed in the same situation, such as having sole responsibility for child care, tend to respond in ways that are far more similar than different.<sup>7</sup> Essentialism also can't explain why so much coercion and violence are needed to keep patriarchy going. If gender oppression is rooted in some male essence, for example, then why do many men experience such pain, confusion, ambivalence, and resistance during their training for patriarchal manhood and their lives as adult men?<sup>8</sup> And if women's essence is to be subordinate, how do we explain their long history of re-

sisting oppression and learning to undermine and counteract male dominance?<sup>9</sup>

In spite of its appeal, essentialism doesn't hold up as a way to understand patriarchy. The alternative takes us into the deep root structures of society and social forces powerful enough to drive patriarchy in spite of all the good reasons against it. And it takes us deep into ourselves, where the terms of life under patriarchy often seem to permeate to the core of who we are.

#### MISSING LINKS: CONTROL, FEAR, AND MEN

More than anything else, patriarchy is based on control as a core principle around which entire societies are organized. What drives patriarchy as a system—what fuels competition, aggression, and oppression—is a dynamic relationship between control and fear.<sup>10</sup> Patriarchy encourages men to seek security, status, and other rewards through control; to fear other men's ability to control and harm them; and to identify being in control as both their best defense against loss and humiliation and the surest route to what they need and desire. In this sense, although we usually think of patriarchy in terms of women and men, it is more about what goes on *among men*. The oppression of women is certainly an important part of patriarchy, but, paradoxically, it may not be the *point* of patriarchy.

It would be misleading to suggest that control is inherently bad or inevitably leads to oppression. Control is, after all, one of the hallmarks of our species. It is our only hope to bring some order out of chaos or to protect ourselves from what threatens our survival. We imagine, focus, and act—from baking bread to composing music to designing a national health plan—and all of this involves control. Even small children delight in a sense of human agency, in being able to make things happen. Under patriarchy, however, control is more than an expression of human essence or a way to get things done; it's valued and pursued to a degree that gives social life an oppressive form by taking a natural human capacity to obsessive extremes.

Under patriarchy, control shapes not only the broad outlines of social life but also men's inner lives. It does this through its central place in the definition of masculinity: a real man is in control or

at least gives the impression of being in control. The more men see control as central to their sense of self, well-being, worth, and safety, the more driven they feel to go after it and to organize their inner and outer lives around it. This takes men away from connection to others and themselves and toward **disconnection**. This is because control involves a relationship between controller and controlled, and disconnection is an integral part of that relationship. In order to control something, we have to see it as a separate "other." Even if we're controlling ourselves, we have to mentally split ourselves into a "me" that's being controlled and an "I" that's doing the controlling. And if we're controlling other people, we have to justify the control and protect ourselves from an awareness of how our control affects them.

As a result, controllers come to see themselves as subjects who intend and decide what will happen, and to see others as objects to act upon. The controlled are seen without the fullness and complexity that define them as human beings; they have no history, no dimensions to give them depth; there's nothing there to command the controllers' attention or understanding except what might interfere with control. When parents control small children, for example, they often act as though children aren't full human beings, and justify physical punishment by saying that children can't reason and don't understand anything else. As the ability to see children as "other" breaks down, control becomes more difficult, especially in that memorable moment when a parent looks at a maturing child and sees a person looking back. Suddenly, control that once seemed justified may feel awkward, inappropriate, or even foolish.

Since patriarchy isn't organized simply around the idea of control, but of *male* control, the more men participate in the system, the more they come to see themselves as separate, autonomous, and disconnected from others. They can become versions of the western hero who rides into town from nowhere, with no past, and leaves going nowhere, with no apparent future. Women's lives, of course, also involve control, especially in relation to children. But the idea and practice of control as a core principle of social life is part of what defines patriarchal *manhood*, not *womanhood*, and so women are less driven to pursue it and are criticized if they

do. A woman perceived as controlling a man is typically labeled a "castrating bitch" or a "ball buster," and the man she supposedly controls is looked down upon as "henpecked," "pussy whipped," and barely a man at all. But there are no insulting terms for a man who controls a woman—by having the last word, not letting her work outside the home, deciding when she'll have sex, or limiting her time with other women—or the woman he controls. There is no need for such words because men controlling women is what patriarchal manhood is all about.

Why does control have such cosmic importance under patriarchy? One possibility is that control may be inherently so terrific that men just can't resist organizing their lives around it. In other words, men control because they *can*. But this puts us back in the arms of dead-end essentialism and up against the fact that the more people try to control other people and themselves, the more miserable they seem to be. And the idea that what men might get through control, such as wealth or prestige, is inherently so appealing that they would participate routinely in the oppression of their mothers, sisters, daughters, and wives isn't much better. For that to be true, we would first have to explain how control and its rewards could possibly outweigh the horrendous consequences of social oppression, especially involving groups as intimately involved as women and men are. A common explanation is "That's the way people (men) are: they'll always compete for wealth, power, and prestige." But that's the kind of circular reasoning that essentialism so often gets us into: Men are that way because that's the way men are.

An essentialist approach also ignores the prominent role that fear plays in most men's lives. Unlike control, fear may be one of the most powerful and primal of all human motivations, more deeply rooted than greed, desire, lust, or even love. Nothing matches fear's potential to twist us out of shape, to drive us to abandon everything we otherwise hold dear, to oppress and do violence to one another—fear of death, of loss, of pain, of what we don't know or don't understand. And the most powerfully oppressive systems are those organized to promote fear. What patriarchy accomplishes is to make men fear what other men might do to them, how control might be turned on them to do them

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harm and deprive them of what matters most to them. This encourages men to feel afraid that other men will ridicule us and deprive us of recognition as real men.<sup>11</sup> We're afraid they'll use economic power to take away jobs or hold us back or make our work lives miserable. We're afraid they'll beat us up or kill us if we're unlucky enough to provoke the wrong one. We're afraid they'll wage war against us, destroy our communities and homes, beat, torture, rape, and kill those we love. In short, we're afraid of all the things that men can do to exert control and thereby protect and enhance their standing as real men in relation to other men.

Women, of course, have many reasons to fear men, but this isn't what shapes and defines patriarchy as a way of life. Men's fear of other men is crucial because *patriarchy is driven by how men both cause and respond to it*. Since patriarchy is organized around male-identified control, men's path of least resistance is to protect themselves by increasing their own sense of control, and patriarchy provides many ways to do it. Men learn to hold their own in aggressive male banter, for example, whatever their particular group's version of "doing the dozens"<sup>12</sup> happens to be. They learn to keep their feelings to themselves rather than be vulnerable at the wrong moment to someone looking for an advantage. They learn to win an argument, always have an answer, and never admit they're wrong. They learn early on not to play with girls unless it's in the back seats of cars, and go out of their way to avoid the appearance that women can control them. They pump iron, talk and follow sports, study boxing and martial arts, learn to use guns, play football or hockey or rugby. In all these ways they cope with their own fear and inspire it in others, while still maintaining an underlying commitment to men, what men do, and the system that binds them together.

Men's participation in patriarchy tends to lock them in an endless pursuit of and defense against control, for *under patriarchy control is both the source of and the only solution they can see to their fear*. The more invested a man is in the control-fear spiral, the worse he feels when he doesn't feel in control. And so on some level he's always on the lookout for opportunities to renew his sense of control while protecting himself from providing that same kind of opportunity for others, especially men. As each man pursues control as a way to defend and ad-

vance himself, he fuels the very same response in other men. This dynamic has provided patriarchy with an escalating and seemingly unending driving force for thousands of years.<sup>13</sup>

Men pay an enormous price for participating in patriarchy. The more in control men try to be, for example, the less secure they feel. They may not know it because they're so busy trying to be in control, but the more they organize their lives around being in control, the more tied they are to the fear of *not* being in control. As Marilyn French put it, "A religion of power is a religion of fear, and . . . those who worship power are the most terrified creatures on the earth."<sup>14</sup> Dig beneath the surface appearance of "great men," and you'll often find deep insecurity, fear, and a chronic need to prove themselves to other men. As president of the United States, for example, one of the most powerful positions on Earth, George Bush was obsessed that people might think he was a "wimp." And rather than making men feel safe, great power makes them need still greater control to protect themselves from still more powerful men locked into the same cycle. To make matters worse, control itself is a fleeting, momentary experience, not a natural, stable state, and so is always on the edge of slipping away or falling apart:

*[P]ower is not what we think it is. Power is not substantial; not even when it takes substantive form. The money you hold in your hand can be devalued overnight. . . . A title can be removed at the next board meeting. . . . A huge military establishment can disintegrate in a few days . . . a huge economic structure can collapse in a few weeks.<sup>15</sup>*

*All power is unstable. . . . There is never power, but only a race for power. . . . Power is, by definition, only a means . . . but power seeking, owing to its essential incapacity to seize ahold of its object, rules out all consideration of an end, and finally comes . . . to take the place of all ends.<sup>16</sup>*

The religion of fear and control also blocks men's need for human connection by redefining intimacy. Men are encouraged to see everything and everyone as other, and to look on every situation in terms of how it might enhance or threaten their sense of control. Every opportunity for control, however, can also be an occasion for a failure of control, a fact that can inject issues of control and

power into the most unlikely situations. Intimacy is lost as a chance to be open and vulnerable on the way to a deeper connection. Sexual intimacy in particular can go from pleasure in a safe place to a male performance laced with worry about whether the penis—that notorious and willful “other” that so often balks at men’s efforts at control—will “perform” as it’s supposed to. Dictionaries typically define impotence as a man’s *inability to achieve or sustain an erection*, as if an erection were something a man *did* and not something he experienced, like sweating or having his heart beat rapidly or feeling happy. The more preoccupied with control men are, the more lovers recede as full people with feelings, thoughts, will, and soul, and become vehicles for bolstering manhood and relieving anxiety. And even though a woman’s opinion of a man’s sexual “performance” may seem to be what matters, her words of reassurance are rarely enough, for it’s always a patriarchal male gaze that’s looking at him over her shoulder.

Patriarchy is grounded in a Great Lie that the answer to life’s needs is disconnection and control rather than connection, sharing, and cooperation. The Great Lie separates men from what they need most by encouraging them to be autonomous and disconnected when in fact human existence is fundamentally relational. What is a “me” without a “you,” a “mother” without a “child,” a “teacher” without a “student”? Who are we if not our ties to other people—“I am . . . a father, a husband, a worker, a friend, a son, a brother”?<sup>17</sup> But patriarchal magic turns the truth inside out, and “self-made man” goes from oxymoron to cultural ideal. And somewhere between the need for human connection and the imperative to control, the two merge, and a sense of control becomes the closest many men ever come to feeling connected with anything, including themselves.

#### PATRIARCHY AS A MEN’S PROBLEM

Patriarchy is usually portrayed as something that’s primarily between women and men. At first blush this makes a lot of sense, given that “male” and “female” define each other and that women occupy an oppressed position in relation to men. Paradoxically, however, the cycle of control and fear that

drives patriarchy has more to do with relations among men than with women, for it’s men who control men’s standing *as men*. With few exceptions, men look to other men to affirm their manhood, whether as coaches, friends, teammates, co-workers, sports figures, fathers, or mentors.

This contradicts the conventional wisdom that women hold the key to heterosexual men’s sense of manhood. It’s true that men often use women to show they measure up—especially by controlling women sexually—but the standards that are used are men’s, not women’s. Men also may try to impress women as “real men” in order to start and keep relationships with them, to control them, or to get sexual access and personal care. This doesn’t prove they’re real men, however. For affirmation they have to go to a larger male-identified world—from the local bar to sports to work—which is also where they’re most vulnerable to other men. Whether in school locker rooms or in the heat of political campaigns, when a man is accused of being a “wimp” or of otherwise failing to measure up, it almost always comes from another man. And when a man suspects *himself* of being less than a real man, he judges himself through a patriarchal male gaze, not from a woman’s perspective.

Although men often use women as scapegoats for their bad feelings about themselves, women’s role in this is indirect at most. If other men reject a man’s claim to “real man” standing, how his wife or mother sees him usually makes little difference, and if women’s opinions *do* matter to him, his manhood becomes all the more suspect to other men.<sup>18</sup> Women’s marginal importance in the manhood question is plain to see in the risks men take to prove themselves in spite of objections from wives, mothers, and other women who find them just fine the way they are. The record books are full of men who seize upon *anything*—from throwing frisbees to flagpole sitting to being the first to get somewhere or discover something—as a way to create competitive arenas in which they can jockey for position and prove themselves among men.<sup>19</sup> If a man must choose between men’s and women’s views of what makes a real man, he’ll choose men’s views most of the time. “A man’s gotta do what a man’s gotta do” is typically spoken by a man to a woman (often as he goes off to do something with other men); and just what it is that he’s got to do is deter-

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mined by men and patriarchy, not by women. It isn't up to women to decide what a real man is. Her role is to reassure men that they meet the standards of a patriarchal culture she doesn't control.

When a woman does question or attack a man's masculinity, the terms of the attack and the power behind it are based on men's standards of patriarchal manhood. She's not going to attack his manhood, for example, by telling him he isn't caring enough. When she uses what are culturally defined as *women's* terms—"You're not sensitive, nurturing, open, or vulnerable and you're *too* controlling"—the attack has much less weight and produces far less effect. But when women don't play along—when they criticize or question or merely lose enthusiasm for affirming patriarchal manhood—they risk the wrath of men, who may feel undermined, abandoned, and even betrayed. Men may not like being criticized for failing to measure up to "women's" ideas of what men should be, but it's nothing compared to how angry and violent men can be toward women who dare to use "men's" weapons against them.

In the patriarchal cycle of control and fear, no man is safe from challenges to his real-man standing, which is why even the rich and powerful can be quick to defend themselves. In his analysis of John F. Kennedy's presidency, for example, David Halberstam argues that Kennedy initiated U.S. involvement in the Vietnamese civil war in part because he failed to appear sufficiently tough and manly at his 1961 Vienna summit meeting with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev. Khrushchev challenged Kennedy from the start, and Kennedy, surprised, responded in kind only toward the end. Upon returning home, he felt the need for an opportunity to right the impression he'd made and remove any doubts about his manhood. "If he [Khrushchev] thinks I'm inexperienced and have no guts," Kennedy told *New York Times* reporter James Reston, "... we won't get anywhere with him. So we have to act ... and Vietnam looks like the place."<sup>20</sup> And so the horror and tragedy of America's involvement in Vietnam turned on a political system organized in part around men's ability to impress one another with their standing as real men. And this no doubt played a prominent role in the tortured progress of that war and the stubborn refusal of all sides to compromise or admit defeat.

In addition to what Kennedy's dilemma says about patriarchal politics, it also challenges the stereotype that macho displays of manhood are largely confined to lower- and working-class subcultures. The roots of men proving their manhood run deep in the upper classes, from the enthusiastic stampede of Britain's elite to the killing fields of World War I to Kennedy's sexually compulsive private behavior to the San Francisco Bohemian Grove retreats where captains of business and government gather to make deals, mock women in cross-dressing skits, and otherwise relax in the comfort of male privilege.<sup>21</sup> Men, of course, aren't born to this; they must be trained and given ongoing incentives.

In the early 1960s, for example, I was a middle-class freshman at an all-male Ivy League college, a training ground for the sons of the elite. Among my classmates' fathers were prominent figures in business, government, and the professions, who fully expected their sons to follow in their footsteps. In late fall, dorm residents who'd been accepted to fraternities prepared for "sink night," a time to celebrate their newfound "brotherhood" by getting very drunk. Before they went off, they warned freshmen not to lock our doors when we went to bed because they intended to pay us a visit later on and didn't expect to be stopped by a locked door. We didn't know what was coming, but there was no mistaking the dense familiar weight of men's potential for violence.

When they returned that night, screaming drunk, they went from door to door, rousting us from our beds and herding us into the hall. They lined us up and ordered us to drop our pants. Then one held a metal ruler and another a *Playboy* magazine opened to the centerfold picture, and the two went down the line, thrusting the picture in our faces, screaming "Get it up!" and resting our penises on the ruler. The others paced up and down the hall behind them, yelling, screaming, and laughing, thickening the air with a mixture of alcohol and the potential for violence. None of us protested, and of course none of us "measured up." We weren't supposed to (any man who'd managed an erection would have become a legend on the spot). That, after all, was the point: to submit to the humiliation, to mirror (like women) men's power to control and terrorize in what we later learned was a rite of passage called "the peter meter."

For them, perhaps, it was a passage to a fraternal bond forged in their shared power over the "others"; for us, it was a grant of immunity from having to submit again, at least in this place, to these men, in this way. But our lack of outrage and the general absence of talk about it afterward suggest we got something else as well. As outrageous as the peter meter was, it touched a core of patriarchal truth about men, power, and violence that, as men, we found repellant yet ultimately acceptable. The truth is, we, too, got a piece of real-man standing that night, for by deadening and controlling ourselves in the face of an assault, we showed that we had the right stuff. Had anyone protested, he wouldn't have been seen as the more manly for his courage; more likely he'd have been called a sissy, a pussy, a little mama's boy who couldn't take it. And so we both lost and gained during our late-night dip in the patriarchal paradox of men competing and bonding at the same time.<sup>22</sup>

#### WHAT ABOUT WOMEN?

In one sense, women, like all else in patriarchy, are something for men to control. The consequences of this are enormous because of the damage it does to women's lives, but controlling women is neither the point of patriarchy nor the engine that drives it. This means that women's place is more complicated than it might seem, especially in relation to competition among men.<sup>23</sup>

This works in several ways. First, heterosexual men are encouraged to use women as badges of success to protect and enhance their standing in the eyes of other men. People routinely compliment a man married to a beautiful woman, for example, not because he had a hand in making her beautiful but because he has proprietary rights of access to her. In contrast, people are much less likely to compliment a man whose wife is financially successful—especially if she earns more than he does—because this threatens rather than enhances his status as a real man.

Men's use of women as badges of success is a prime example of how men can compete and ally with one another at the same time.<sup>24</sup> On the one hand, they may compete over who has the highest standing and is therefore least vulnerable to other

men's control, as when they vie for a specific woman or use women in general as a way to keep score on their manhood. A man who lacks enthusiasm for pursuing women may have his masculinity questioned, if not attacked, especially by being "accused" of being gay. In this sense, "getting laid" is more than a badge of success; it's also a safe-conduct pass through perpetually hostile territory.

At the same time that men may compete with one another, they're also encouraged to bond around a common view of women as objects to be competed for, possessed, and used. When men tell sexist jokes, for example, or banter about women's bodies, they usually can count on other men to go along (if only in silence), for a man who objects risks becoming an outcast. Even if the joke is directed at his wife or lover, he's likely to choose his tie to men over loyalty to her by letting it pass with a shrug and perhaps a good-natured smile that leaves intact his standing as one of the guys. In this sense, the competitive dynamic of patriarchal heterosexuality brings men together and promotes feelings of solidarity by acting out the values of control and domination. This is partly why there is so much male violence against gay men: since gays don't use women in this way, their sexual orientation challenges not so much heterosexuality per se but *male solidarity* around the key role of control and domination in *patriarchal* heterosexuality.<sup>25</sup> John Stoltenberg argues that violence against gays also protects male solidarity by protecting men from sexual aggression at the hands of other men:

*Imagine this country without homophobia: There would be a woman raped every three minutes and a man raped every three minutes. Homophobia keeps that statistic at a manageable level. The system is not fool-proof. It breaks down, for instance, in prison and in childhood—when men and boys are often subject to the same sexual terrorism that women live with almost all the time. But for the most part homophobia serves male supremacy by keeping males who act like real men safe from sexual assault.*<sup>26</sup>

A second part that women play in men's struggle for control is to support the idea that men and women are fundamentally different, because this gives men a clear and unambiguous turf—masculinity—on which to pursue control in competition

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with one another.<sup>27</sup> Women do this primarily by supporting (or at least not challenging) femininity as a valid view of women and how they're supposed to be. The idea that male sexuality is inherently aggressive, predatory, and heterosexual, for example, defines a common ground for men in relation to both women and other men. To protect this, it's important that women *not* be sexually aggressive or predatory because this would challenge the idea of a unique male sexuality as a basis for male solidarity and competition.

When women challenge stereotypically feminine ways of acting, it makes it harder for men to see themselves clearly as men. This muddles men's relationships with women and their standing as real men under patriarchy. In the film *Fatal Attraction*, for example, the villain embodies a predatory, violent female sexuality that sent shock waves through audiences across the country. The history of film includes legions of obsessive, murderous men, but with the appearance of the first such woman there was a rush to analyze and explain how such a thing could happen. Perhaps her greatest transgression was to trespass on male turf by violating the strictures of cultural femininity. How fitting, then, that everything should be "set right" when her lover's wife—who embodies all the feminine virtues of good mother, faithful wife, and constrained sexuality—kills the madwoman who's invaded the sanctity of this normal patriarchal household.

In a third sense, a woman's place is to support the key patriarchal illusion that men are independent and autonomous. An unemployed wife who sees herself as dependent, for example, props up images of male independence that mask men's considerable dependence on women for emotional support, physical comfort, and a broad range of practical services. On the average, for example, married men are both mentally and physically healthier than single men and live longer, whereas for women just the opposite is true.<sup>28</sup> Men also tend to have a much harder time adjusting to the loss of a spouse than women do, especially at older ages.

And the standard model for a career still assumes a wife at home to perform support work, and any man (or woman) who doesn't have one is at a disadvantage.

The illusion of male independence and female dependence is amplified by men's complaints about

the burdens of the breadwinner role. In fact, however, most husbands would have it no other way, because for all its demands, the provider role brings with it power and status and exempts men from domestic work such as cleaning and child care. As a result, many men feel threatened when their wives earn as much or more than they do. They cling to the idea that breadwinning is a man's responsibility that anchors male gender identity, and that women are little more than helpers in that role<sup>29</sup> if not "little women" waiting for a man to bring home the bacon. This arrangement, however, was created largely by working- and middle-class white men who fought for the "family wage" in the early 1900s. This enabled them to support their families by themselves and justified keeping wives at home, where they would be financially dependent and available to provide personal services.<sup>30</sup>

You might think that such arrangements are a thing of the past, that with so many married women working outside the home, the breadwinner role is no longer male-identified. But the superficial appearance of gender equity and balance masks a continuing imbalance that's revealed when we consider how men and women would be affected by leaving paid employment. If the woman in a two-earner household were to give up breadwinning, it might create hardships and negative feelings, but these probably wouldn't include making her feel less than a real woman. But for a man to give up the breadwinning role, he'd have to contend with far more serious threats to his sense of himself as a real man, and both women and men know it. This is why, when someone in a marriage has to leave paid employment—to take care of children or ailing relatives, for example—it is generally understood that it will be the woman, regardless of who earns more.<sup>31</sup>

A fourth aspect of women's place is to help contain men's resentment over being controlled by other men so that it doesn't overpower the male solidarity that's so essential to patriarchy. Most men are dominated by other men, especially at work, and yet judge their manhood by how much control they have in their own lives. It's a standard against which they're bound to fall short. If they rebel against other men—as in worker strikes—the risks are often huge and the gains short-lived. A safer alternative is to accept as compensation social



support to control and feel superior to women. This provides both individual men and patriarchy with a safety valve for the frustration and rage that might otherwise be directed toward other men and at far greater risk to both individuals and the system as a whole.<sup>32</sup> No matter what other men do to a man or how deeply they control his life, he can always feel culturally superior to women and take out his anger and frustration on them.<sup>33</sup> **NO!**

In this way, men are allowed to dominate women as a kind of compensation for their being subordinated to other men because of social class, race, or other forms of inequality. Ironically, however, their dominance of women supports the same principles of control that enable other men to subordinate them, a contradiction that is typical of oppressive systems. Men may buy into this so long as they can, in turn, enjoy the dominance that comes with applying those principles to women. The use of such compensation to stabilize systems also works with race and class inequality where one oppression is used to compensate for another. Working-class people, for example, can always look down on people receiving welfare, just as lower-class whites can feel superior to people of color. The playing off of one oppression against another helps explain why overt prejudice is most common among the most disadvantaged groups, because these are the people most in need of some kind of compensation.<sup>34</sup>

Related to men's use of women as compensation is the expectation that women will take care of men who have been damaged by other men. When he comes home from work, he wants a woman there to greet and take care of him, whether or not she's been at work all day herself. On a deeper level, he wants her to make him feel whole again, to restore what he loses through his disconnected pursuit of control, to calm his fears—all, of course, without requiring him to face the very things about himself and patriarchy that produce the damage in the first place. When women fail to "make it better"—and they are bound to fail eventually—they are also there to accept the blame and receive men's disappointment, pain, and rage. Men who feel unloved, incomplete, disconnected, battered, humiliated, frightened, and anxious routinely blame women for not supporting or loving them enough. It's a responsibility women are encouraged to accept,

which is one reason so many victims of domestic violence stay with the men who abuse them.

how can we not?

### MISOGYNY

These days even the slightest criticism of men or male dominance can prompt accusations of "man hating" or "male bashing"; but only feminists seem to care about the cultural woman hating that's been around for millennia as part of everyday life under patriarchy.<sup>35</sup> Men's hypersensitivity is typical of dominant groups such as whites who often react strongly when blacks refer to whites as "honkies" or merely express anger over continuing white resistance to dealing with the everyday reality of racism. But whites barely notice the racial hostility that pervades the lives of minorities, for part of white privilege is the subtle arrogance of not having to pay attention to how that privilege affects others. What men don't get about gender, white people don't get about race: whites don't have to go out of their way to *act* hatefully in order to participate in a society that produces hateful consequences for people of color. Simply flowing with the mainstream and going about business as usual is enough.

The cultural expression of misogyny—the hatred (*mis-*) of femaleness (*gyny*)—takes many forms.<sup>36</sup> It's found in ancient and modern beliefs that women are inherently evil and a primary cause of human misery—products of what the Greek philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras called the "evil principle which created chaos, darkness, and woman."<sup>37</sup> There is misogyny in the violent pornography that portrays women as willing victims of exploitation and abuse, in jokes about everything from mothers-in-law to the slapping around or "good fuck" that some women "need." Misogyny shaped the historical transformation of ancient wise-women healers into modern-day images of witches who roast and eat children; in the torture and murder of millions of women from the witch hunts of the Middle Ages to recent Serb terrorism in Bosnia; in the everyday reality of sexual coercion, abuse, violence, and harassment; in the mass media display of women's bodies as objects existing primarily to please men and satisfy the male gaze; in cultural ideals of slenderness that turn women against their own bodies and inspire self-hatred and

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denial; in the steady stream of sensationalized and sexualized mass media "entertainment" in which men terrorize, torture, rape, and murder women.<sup>38</sup>

Not to be overlooked is the routine of insulting males with names that link them to females—sissy (sister), girl, pussy, son of a bitch, mama's boy. Notice, however, that the worst way to insult a woman isn't to call her a man or a "daddy's girl"; it's to call her a woman by another name by highlighting or maligning femaleness itself—bitch, whore, cunt.<sup>39</sup> The use of such words as insults is made even worse by the fact that prior to patriarchy many had neutral or positive meanings for women. A "whore" was a lover of either sex; "bitch" was associated with the pre-Christian goddess of the hunt, Artemis-Diana; and "cunt" derives from several sources, including the goddesses Cunti and Kunda, the universal sources of life.<sup>40</sup>

It's difficult to accept the idea that in the midst of wanting, needing, and loving women—if only as sons in relation to mothers—men are involved in a system that makes misogynist feelings, thoughts, and behavior paths of least resistance. Most men would probably deny this affects them in any way; often the most sexist men are among the first to say how much they love women. But there's no escaping misogyny, because it isn't a personality flaw; it's part of patriarchal culture. We're like fish swimming in a sea laced with it, and we can't breathe without passing it through our gills.<sup>41</sup> Misogyny infuses into our cells and becomes part of who we are because by the time we know enough to reject it, it's too late. As with everything else in a culture, some people are exposed to more of it than others; but to suppose that anyone escapes untouched is both wishful and disempowering. It's wishful because it goes against what we know about socialization and the power of culture to shape reality; it's disempowering because if we believe that misogyny doesn't involve us, we won't feel compelled to do anything about it.

Misogyny plays a complex role in patriarchy. It fuels men's sense of superiority, justifies male aggression against women, and works to keep women on the defensive and in their place. Misogyny is especially powerful in encouraging women to hate their own femaleness, an example of internalized oppression. The more women internalize misogynist images and attitudes, the harder it is to challenge male privilege or patriarchy as a system. In

fact, women won't tend to see patriarchy as even problematic since the essence of self-hatred is to focus on the self as the sole cause of misery, including the self-hatred.

In another sense, patriarchy promotes the hatred of women as a reaction to men's fear of women. Why should men fear women? Every oppressive system depends to some degree on subordinate groups being willing to go along with their own subordination. The other side of this, however, is the potential to undermine and rebel. This makes oppression inherently unstable and makes dominant groups vulnerable. Throughout the slaveholding South, for example, white people's fear of slave revolts was woven into the fabric of everyday life and caused many a restless night. And I suspect that much of the discomfort that whites feel around blacks today, especially black men, also reflects a fear that the potential for challenge and rebellion is never far from the surface.<sup>42</sup> For men, the fear is that women will stop playing the complex role that allows patriarchy to continue, or may even go so far as to challenge male privilege directly. Women's potential to disrupt patriarchy and make men vulnerable is why it's so easy for women to make men feel foolish or emasculated through the mildest humor that focuses on maleness and hints at women's power to stop going along with the status quo. Making fun of men, however, is just the tip of the iceberg of what women can do to disturb the patriarchal order, and on some level most men know this and have reason to feel threatened by it.

In more subtle ways, misogyny arises out of a system that offers women to men as a form of compensation. Because patriarchy limits men's emotional and spiritual lives, and because men rarely risk being vulnerable with other men, they often look to women as a way to ease their sense of emptiness, meaninglessness, and disconnection. However, the patriarchal expectation that "real men" are autonomous and independent sets men up to both want and resent women at the same time. This is made all the worse by the fact that women can't possibly give men what they want. Caught in this bind, men could face the truth of the system that put them in it in the first place. They could look at patriarchy and how their position in it creates this dilemma. The path of least resistance, however, is to resent and blame women for what men lack, by

how we stop patriarchy

accusing women of not being loving or sexual enough, of being manipulative, withholding, selfish bitches who deserve to be punished.<sup>43</sup>

In a related sense, ~~misogyny can reflect male envy of the human qualities patriarchy encourages men to devalue and deny in themselves as they avoid association with anything remotely female.~~ Under patriarchy, women are viewed as trustees of all that makes a rich emotional life possible—of empathy and sympathy, vulnerability and openness to connection, caring and nurturing, sensitivity and compassion, emotional attention and expressiveness—all of which are driven out by the cycle of control and fear. On some level, men know the value of what they don't have and see women as privileged for being able to hold on to it. As a result, women live a double bind: the patriarchal ideology that supports women's oppression devalues the human qualities associated with being female, yet it also sets men up to envy and resent women for being able to weave those same qualities into their lives.<sup>44</sup>

Finally, misogyny can be seen as a cultural result of men's potential to feel guilty about women's oppression. Rather than encourage men to feel guilty, patriarchal culture projects negative judgments about men onto women. When men do feel guilty, they can blame women for making them feel this way: "If you weren't there reminding me of how oppressed women are, then I wouldn't have to feel bad about myself as a member of the group that benefits from it." Anger and resentment play this kind of role in many oppressive systems. When middle-class people encounter the homeless on the street, for example, it's not uncommon for them to feel angry simply for being reminded of their privilege and their potential to feel guilty about it. It's easier to hate the messenger than it is to take some responsibility for doing something about the reality behind the message.

As a mainstay of patriarchal culture, misogyny embodies some of the most contradictory and disturbing aspects of gender oppression. When love and need are bound up with fear and envy, hate and resentment, the result is an explosive mixture that can twist our sense of ourselves and one another beyond recognition. If misogyny were merely a problem of bad personal attitudes, it would be relatively easy to deal with. But its close connection to

the cycle of control and fear that makes patriarchy work will make it part of human life as long as patriarchy exists.

## Notes

1. See, for example, Steven Goldberg, *The Inevitability of Patriarchy*, new ed. (New York: William Morrow, 1993); and Lionel Tiger, *Men in Groups* (London: Nelson, 1969). For a view of feminist essentialism, see Rosemarie Tong, *Feminist Thought: A Comprehensive Introduction* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1989).

2. Which, of course, some feminists, lesbian separatists in particular, have suggested.

3. E. O. Wilson, "Biology and the Social Sciences," *Daedalus* 106 (fall 1977): 127-140. See also Ruth Bleier, *Science and Gender: A Critique of Biology and Its Theories on Women* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1984); Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Myths of Gender: Biological Theories about Men and Women* (New York: Basic Books, 1985); Katharine B. Hoyenga and Kermit T. Hoyenga, *Gender-Related Differences: Origins and Outcomes* (Needham Heights, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon, 1993); and Eleanor E. Maccoby and Carol N. Jacklin, *The Psychology of Sex Differences* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974).

4. See Riane Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade* (New York: Harper and Row, 1987); Elizabeth Fisher, *Woman's Creation: Sexual Evolution and the Shaping of Society* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1979); Marilyn French, *Beyond Power: On Men, Women, and Morals* (New York: Summit Books, 1985); Marija Gimbutas, *The Civilization of the Goddess: The World of Old Europe* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1991); idem, *The Language of the Goddess* (New York: HarperCollins, 1989); Richard Lee and Richard Daly, "Man's Domination and Woman's Oppression: The Question of Origins," in *Beyond Patriarchy: Essays by Men on Pleasure, Power, and Change*, ed. Michael Kaufman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 30-44; Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); and Merlin Stone, *When God Was a Woman* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976).

5. See, for example, Maria Lepowsky, "Women, Men, and Aggression in an Egalitarian Society," *Sex Roles* 30, nos. 3/4 (1994): 199-211; Margaret Mead, *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (New York: William Morrow, 1963); Henrietta L. Moore, *Feminism and Anthropology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988); Peggy Sanday, *Female Power and Male Dominance: On the Origins of Sexual Inequality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); and Peggy Sanday, "The Socio-Cultural Context of Rape: A Cross-Cultural Study," *Journal of Social Issues* 34, no. 7 (1981): 5-27.

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6. See Fausto-Sterling, *Myths of Gender*.
7. See, for example, W. T. Bielby and D. D. Bielby, "Family Ties: Balancing Commitments to Work and Family in Dual Earner Households," *American Sociological Review* 54, no. 5 (1989): 776-789; Maccoby and Jacklin, *The Psychology of Sex Differences*; B. J. Risman, "Intimate Relationships from a Microstructuralist Perspective: Men Who Mother," *Gender and Society* 1, no. 1 (1987): 6-32; and Naomi Weisstein, "Psychology Constructs the Female," in *Woman in Sexist Society*, ed. Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran (New York: Basic Books, 1971).
8. See, for example, Deborah S. David and Robert Brannon, eds., *The Forty-Nine Percent Majority: The Male Sex Role* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1976); Clyde W. Franklin, *Men and Society* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1988); Michael Kaufman, ed., *Beyond Patriarchy: Essays by Men on Pleasure, Power, and Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Sam Keen, *Fire in the Belly: On Being a Man* (New York: Bantam, 1991); Michael S. Kimmel and Michael A. Messner, eds., *Men's Lives*, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1992); Joseph H. Pleck and Jack Sawyer, *Men and Masculinity* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1974); and Andrew Tolson, *The Limits of Masculinity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).
9. For a history of European women's early awareness of and resistance to patriarchal oppression, see Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen Seventy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
10. The following discussion draws on many sources, especially Eisler, *The Chalice and the Blade*; Fisher, *Woman's Creation*; French, *Beyond Power*; David D. Gilmore, *Manhood in the Making: Cultural Concepts of Masculinity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990); Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*; Lee and Daly, "Man's Domination"; Miriam M. Johnson, *Strong Mothers, Weak Wives: The Search for Gender Equality* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); and Robert Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person, and Sexual Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).
11. For more on this see, for example, Michael Kaufman, "The Construction of Masculinity and the Triad of Men's Violence," in Kaufman, ed., *Beyond Patriarchy*, 1-29.
12. A form of ritual aggression most often associated with African American males in which the contest is to trade progressively harsher insults until one or the other contestant either gives up or cannot better the previous insult.
13. It is, of course, possible for women to identify with patriarchal values and pursue power just as men do, but this is the exception that proves the rule and does not therefore do much to help us understand how patriarchy works as a system. Like Elizabeth I and Margaret Thatcher, under patriarchy such women can never be more than guests in an essentially male terrain.
14. French, *Beyond Power*, 337.
15. *Ibid.*, 508.
16. Simone Weil, "Analysis of Oppression," in *Oppression and Liberty*, trans. Arthur Wills and John Petrie (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1973), quoted in French, *Beyond Power*, 508.
17. This was the subject of a now classic experiment in social psychology. See Manfred Kuhn and Thomas McPartland, "An Empirical Investigation of Self Attitudes," *American Sociological Review* 19 (1954): 68-76.
18. Anyone who doubts this need look no further than the nearest school playground and the persecution endured by boys who show any interest in playing with girls. Among adults, woe betide the man who openly prefers the company of women. See Barrie Thorne, *Gender Play: Girls and Boys in School* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1993).
19. I haven't done the research, but I'd guess that men comprise the overwhelming majority of entries in the *Guinness Book of Records*.
20. David Halberstam, *The Best and the Brightest* (New York: Random House, 1972), 76.
21. See William G. Domhoff, *The Bohemian Grove and Other Retreats* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).
22. Women in this position, of course, would only lose.
23. See Joseph H. Pleck, "Men's Power with Women, Other Men, and Society: A Men's Movement Analysis," in *Men's Lives*, ed. Michael S. Kimmel and Michael A. Messner, 2nd ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1992), 25.
24. See Johnson, *Strong Mothers, Weak Wives*, 117-118, and Pleck, "Men's Power with Women," 22-25.
25. See, for example, Tim Carrigan, Robert Connell, and John Lee, "Hard and Heavy: Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity," in Kaufman, ed., *Beyond Patriarchy*, 139-192; Frank Browning, *The Culture of Desire: Paradox and Perversity in Gay Lives Today* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1993); and Suzanne Pharr, *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism* (Inverness, Calif.: Chardon Press, 1988).
26. John Stoltenberg, "Pornography and Freedom," in *Men's Lives*, ed. Michael S. Kimmel and Michael A. Messner (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 482-488.
27. This is a confused area of thinking about gender that I try to clear up in Chapter 3.

28. See J. M. Golding, "Division of Household Labor, Strain, and Depressive Symptoms among Mexican American and Non-Hispanic Whites," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (1990): 103-117; E. Litwak and P. Meseri, "Organizational Theory, Social Supports, and Mortality Rates," *American Sociological Review* 54, no. 1 (1989): 49-66; and J. Mirowsky and C. E. Ross, *Social Causes of Psychological Distress* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1989).

29. See, for example, Jessie Bernard, "The Good Provider Role," *American Psychologist* 36, no. 1 (1981); R. C. Kessler and J. A. McRae, Jr., "The Effects of Wives' Employment on the Mental Health of Married Men and Women," *American Sociological Review* 47 (April 1982): 216-227; W. Michelson, *From Sun to Sun: Daily Obligations and Community Structure in the Lives of Employed Women and Their Families* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Allanheld, 1985); and J. R. Wilkie, "Changes in U.S. Men's Attitudes Towards the Family Provider Role, 1972-1989," *Gender and Society* 7, no. 2 (1993): 261-279.

30. See Heidi I. Hartmann, "The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union," in *Women and Revolution*, ed. Lydia Sargent (Boston: South End Press, 1981), 1-41.

31. For some revealing case studies of how this works, see Arlie Hochschild, *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home* (New York: Viking/Penguin, 1989).

32. Men do, of course, direct a great deal of anger at each other. For example, men are far more likely to murder other men than they are to murder women.

33. This phenomenon is part of most oppressive systems, including racist ones. See Gerda Lerner, "Reconceptualizing Differences Among Women," in *Feminist Frameworks*, ed. Alison M. Jaggar and Paul S. Rothenberg, 3rd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1993), 237-248.

34. See David R. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991).

35. See Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1974); Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1991); Marilyn French, *The War Against Women* (New York: Summit Books, 1992); and Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Only Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).

36. It is notable that although a word for the hatred of maleness exists—misandry—it wasn't included in most

dictionaries until very recently. The closest the English language comes to the hatred of males is "misanthropy," which actually refers to the hatred of people in general. Once again, patriarchal culture identifies males as the standard of humanity while women are marginalized as a hate-worthy "outgroup."

37. See B. Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); and S. Pomeroy, *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves* (New York: Schocken, 1975).

38. See N. Ben-Yehuda, "The European Witch Craze of the 14th and 17th Centuries: A Sociologist's Perspective," *American Journal of Sociology* 86, no. 1 (1980): 1-31; Kim Chernin, *The Obsession: Reflections on the Tyranny of Slenderness* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981); C. P. Christ, "Heretics and Outsiders: The Struggle over Female Power in Western Religion," in *Feminist Frontiers*, ed. L. Richardson and V. Taylor (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1983), 87-94; Dworkin, *Woman Hating*; Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English, *For Her Own Good: 150 Years of Experts' Advice to Women* (New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday, 1978); Faludi, *Backlash*; French, *War Against Women*; MacKinnon, *Only Words*.

39. It's true that "prick" is a form of insult, but it doesn't have nearly the weight of likening men to women.

40. Barbara G. Walker, *The Woman's Encyclopedia of Myths and Secrets* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983).

41. A metaphor I first heard from Nora L. Jamieson.

42. For some accounts of how this works, see Studs Terkel, *Race* (New York: New Press, 1992).

43. It should come as no surprise that abusive men tend to be very emotionally dependent on the women they abuse. See Thomas J. Scheff and Suzanne M. Retzinger, *Emotions and Violence: Shame and Rage in Destructive Conflicts* (Lexington, Mass.: Lexington, 1991). See also Claire M. Renzetti, *Violent Betrayal: Partner Abuse in Lesbian Relationships* (Newbury Park, Calif.: Sage, 1992).

44. I suspect a similar phenomenon occurs in other forms of oppression. Whites, for example, often look upon stereotypical characteristics of people of color with a mixture of contempt and envy. I've heard some whites say they would like to have the feeling of deep strength and wisdom that many African Americans have developed in order to survive in a racist society.

## AN Reclaim

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