# EROTIC IDENTITIES AND THE POLITICS OF SEXUALIZATION

**By**

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**ABSTRACT**

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This dissertation is an investigation into how sexualized individuals, and specifically highly sexualized women, navigate through experiences of sexual objectification and sexual subjectivity in order to complicate existing accounts, and re-center the embodied experience, of the erotic. My goal is to generate a discursive space primed to investigate the phenomena of sexualization, lust, and desire by paying attention to not just the oppressive structural aspects, and the hyper-individualistic "personal choice" aspects — but by looking at how these phenomena impact women's lives, world-building, and identity-creating practices if we understand individuals as being both constrained by existing narratives and free to reinterpret meaning, both accountable to a community while demonstrating capacities of personal agency and autonomy, and capable of making choices for immediate survival as well as progressive change, in order to move beyond the shadows of legacy to build a liberatory sexual politics.

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## Introduction

My old philosophy department had two big glass doors at the entrance, above which read a quote by Plato: “Philosophy begins in wonder.” It was a little pretentious, but so was I as a young philosopher-in-training. In those early years, I understood Plato’s remark as referring to the big questions: What is the meaning of life? What does it mean to be a good person? What is existence? These were lofty questions, and I felt important contemplating them.

And then I realized that in my philosophy classes, we only studied men’s thoughts, many of whom explicitly disparaged me, calling me the darkness to their light, the irrational to their rational, the unknowable to their known. It was, in some ways, mortifying, because I had thought I was one of them. I, who studied Aristotle, and Hume, and Kant, and even Hegel, hadn't noticed that it took four years to read words written by a woman because I had assumed that these men spoke for me, too. So much for my insight and superior intellect.

Forced to reconcile this particular blindness, I reconsidered what it meant to be a woman in philosophy. I learned to read ‘men’ in the particular rather than universal, recognizing that it had most likely been written with that intention. After all, I was in a space not meant for me, studying the knowledge of people who, at best, hadn't considered women as philosophical subjects, and at worst, considered women to be subhuman, especially in terms of their intelligence. It was…disheartening.

And so I turned to feminist theory, looking for well articulated critiques of the field that I had until recently felt a part of, and then suddenly apart from. And I found those critiques — about the lacunas inherent in the traditional male perspective, the phallocentric metaphysical tropes, and the gendered dichotomies of knowledge — but I also found so much more. I found

women engaged in world building through knowledge production, and the worlds that they created sparked in me a new kind of wondering: What might it mean to be a woman in philosophy? What did it even mean to be a woman in the world?

This line of questioning has led me to wonder about the quality of life I can expect as a woman. Especially as the type of woman that I appear to be. I wonder what it would take to feel safe. I wonder what the world would need to look like for someone like me to flourish. I wonder what would have to change to not have to change myself, and still be treated with dignity and respect. And, most pertinent to this dissertation, I wonder about the impacts of sex and sexualization on my ability to navigate my various social and professional spheres.

People talk about sex a lot. We talk about how sex sells, how women are sexually objectified by advertisements and the media, we gossip about who is having sex with who, and try to figure out how many sexual partners celebrities have had. We debate what kind of sexual education is appropriate for children, we censor the word sex in songs on the radio, we elect presidents who brag about sexually assaulting women. There is power inscribed in the way we interact with the sexual in our world, in our society. There is a politics of sex, a politics of sexuality.

I also think about sex a lot. Sometimes in positive ways and sometimes not. It is a present part of my daily lived experience, from the erotic fiction that I read, to explicit texts that I exchange with my partner, to the comments I get from strangers. I have been negotiating sexual power dynamics for all of my adult life, and a good portion of my childhood, and consider myself to have a certain practical expertise in the subject matter. People say ‘write what you know.’ Well, this is what I know.

As will become clear very quickly, this project is personal and self-reflective — documenting a journey through understanding how I engage, on a personal level, with sexual politics. My main objective is to analyze how eroticism functions in my life, especially in relation to power and the possibility of empowerment and powerlessness. I am particularly interested in the viability of ways in which I have attempted to engage in sexual politics, and how I have taken on sexuality as a dominant part of my identity. How it has come to be something that makes me feel like *me*, that ties me to myself. And while the sexual, the sensual, writ large, has been forced upon me in so many different ways, it has also come to be something exquisitely valuable, even essential, to my understanding of self.

By sexuality I refer not to sexual preference, or sexual orientation, but rather sexuality as eroticism — the quality or character of being recognized as a sexual being and partaking in performances of sexual desirability. I am interested in the experience and structure of sexual desire, how lust and power relate to each other, and how the relation of desire and power both manifest in people's lives and impact their agency and autonomy. Because I am in part interested in eroticism as a phenomenological experience, I will be especially attentive to sexual desire and pleasure as they manifest in embodied experience. I want to present alternative narratives for understanding women's engagement with lust/desire that do not automatically assume a paradigm of victimization but rather explore how women's agency may involve sexual desire.

I believe an attentiveness to how individuals navigate through intersubjective experiences of desire will help complicate existing accounts of sexualization, and re-center the embodied experience of the erotic. My goal is to generate a new discursive space to talk about the phenomenon of sexualization by paying attention to not just the oppressive structural aspects, or the

hyper-individualistic "personal choice" aspects — but by looking at how it works in people's lives if we understand individuals as being both constrained and free to reinterpret meaning.

In some ways, I have decided that what I am working on is best expressed in what is at stake for me (at an embodied level). It was not easy to focus so narrowly on my own experiences, centering on phenomena that are high stakes for me specifically, insofar as this kind of selfish approach strongly diverges from the philosophical tradition in which I have been trained. But I have found that a universal approach to philosophy does not work so well when theorizing particularity.

Therefore, I find myself in a situation where I hope to bring to light certain truths about the world and about my experience within it, that have the potential for broader application; that can be picked up and played with by people different from me in order to bring their own truth to light. So I focus on my own hopes and experiences for two purposes: to avoid speaking for others, and to offer something true about myself that might have purchases on a larger endeavor to create theory that has liberatory potential.

**A. So what is at stake for me in this investigation?**

1. Possibilities for empowerment. Simply put, I want power and I want my agency validated and appreciated. Popular narratives about sexuality, especially women's sexuality, do little to offer possibilities for empowerment, and often reify women's powerlessness. I find this to be ingenuous and misrepresentative of my experience. While I sometimes feel acted upon by forces I have little control over, this is not my dominant mode of existence. There is more to the negotiations of women under oppressive structures than oppression. Women exhibit power and intelligence, and their negotiations bring to light under-appreciated knowledge about the

world. I also think there is something poetic about emphasizing power in the actions that people claim disempower you.

2. Disrupting narratives of 1) shame and 2) adaptive preferences by honing in on the rough ground of women's experiences. I hope to present viable alternative narratives for employing sexualization in everyday interactions and reclaim existing narratives of eroticism and desire so that they benefit women rather than sexist superstructures. Narratives create and constrain possibilities, and I think there are benefits to both changing existing narratives as well as creating new ones. Often changing old ones requires an attentiveness to the texture of experience, which is why I am taking such a personal, self-reflective approach in this investigation. I believe that by paying attention to the particularities of my experience, and the tensions and frictions that arise when my experience diverges from available narratives, I can find a starting point for creating more accurate descriptions of the phenomena in question in this investigation.
3. Personal safety. The dominant ways of analyzing sexuality/eroticism often victim-blames the eroticized subject in ways that perpetuates a rape-culture ideology. In concrete terms, I have a lot of fear stemming from my existence as sexualized, based in the promises of sexual violence that I experience on a regular basis. I am truly, honestly, terrified of being raped. It is something that I spend a lot of time and energy avoiding, while simultaneously recognizing that I have limited control over what happens to my body. There is a very specific powerlessness that comes from being a woman, and sexualized, in a world hostile to women, and I believe it deserves critical attention. Bringing attention to the kinds of threats faced by sexualized subjects in a sexist system may help uncover assumptions and dynamics that are impera-

tive for creating a more just understanding of sexuality, one that disrupts common narratives about the inevitability of sexual violence.

4. Highlighting pleasure. I believe pleasure has intrinsic and extrinsic value and is part of a well-lived life. Audre Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic" is the foundational text for my investigation because it invests importance in the erotic and the sensual as fundamental aspects of living well. I reject the notion that pleasure is a gratuitous or un-philosophical subject matter, and believe that it is imperative that we include pleasure in any discussion of sexual politics as something that is a necessary part of lived experience.

These four elements represent the motivations for this dissertation and shape my commitments and purpose. This also means, as a matter of consequence, that there is quite a bit missing from this discussion. Depending significantly on personal narrative, this project is therefore limited by the kinds of sexualized experiences that plague me specifically, which are defined by a certain intersection of power relations that I am situated in as a white, heterosexual woman living in the United States. The narratives that are available and accessible to me are also limited by these factors, as are the assumptions and expectations that I carry with me. And while I hope to use my positionality to explore issues of identity throughout the paper, it will not be my main focus, for I am not trying to create a conclusive account of sexual politics, femininity, beauty or desire, although these are all important components of this discussion. Therefore, I go into this investigation acknowledging that my experience does not reflect women as a whole, and will not speak to all women. This is a reality I am comfortable with, as it would be inappropriate to expect that I could speak to all the different manifestations of sexual politics that women experience. There is therefore a truly selfish component to this discussion, as it focuses on my needs

and desires, although I hope that it does so with an acknowledgement that there exist other needs and desires that may complement, and sometimes contradict, my own.

**B. Road Map**

In Chapter 1, I hone in on the phenomenological structure of sexualization by providing a descriptive account of what it feels like to be sexualized and what I have learned about myself and the world from these finite experiences. Starting with a phenomenology is useful in that it allows us to bracket some of the normative assumptions about eroticism (these normative values will be reintroduced throughout the rest of the dissertation). Phenomenology also allows us to explore the things we take for granted about the world and look into them deeper — find underlying structures that present us with a particular picture of the world that can help clarify the situation that we are in. With my phenomenology of sexualization, I hope to come up with a description of sexual desire that is neither phallocentric nor beholden to a master-slave dialectic (of dominance/submission). I will also challenge certain existing erotic phenomenologies (overwhelmingly written from the male perspective), while attempting to create an account of sexualization that is distinctive and resists a narrative of victimization.

In Chapter 2, I explore existing narratives/tropes for understanding myself as a sexual subject involved in power relations by investigating the figure of the femme fatale. I chose to look at the femme fatale trope because it is such a visible and iconic example of female sexual politics. I use the femme fatale narrative to explore the implicit claim that erotic or sexualized existence is necessarily harmful to the subject. I draw this assumption from popular descriptions of erotic desire as being something to fear or suspect because of the way it limits autonomy, and the way it further stigmatizes women in a sexist system. By drawing upon philosophy of lan-

guage and narrative theory, I will examine how the language we use and the language games we play will impact our ability to see sexual agency as subversive, and argue that we have a choice to make in how we interpret the actions of women invested in sexualization as a way to navigate interpersonal relationships.

In Chapter 3, I will argue that women have something to gain by paying attention to the kind of theorizing done by black women around the question of sexuality and pleasure. Pleasure politics looks at the advantages and disadvantages of eroticism by centering the black female subject and the importance of pleasure. I find this specific discourse extremely helpful when theorizing desire because of the unique way it navigates between hyper-structural accounts that foreclose agency, and certain liberal accounts that focus too narrowly on individual rights. The strategy of showing how constructs generated within problematic power relations can be negotiated and redefined is essential to rethinking the political value of eroticism. I believe that Pleasure Politics shows us explicitly how re-describing existing erotic narratives and sexual identities can come from "within" rather than without. I will offer a political methodological engagement with a set of theories that are not about me, but may offer me life tools, and ways of re-conceiving the world that can position me differently in the world as a result.

And finally, in Chapter 4, I will argue that the charge of false consciousness (also referred to as 'adaptive preference' or 'oppression by choice') is often used to deny women autonomy, the ability to interpret their own experience, and the ability to generate their own meaning-making and production of knowledge. Through the charge of false consciousness, people's self-expressions become simply the manifestation of a pathological process of self-perpetuated oppression. I am skeptical of the quickness with which false consciousness is brought up in discussions about

the relationship between women's experience of erotic desire and their agency and self-definition, and advise caution when theorizing the ways in which women participate in, or are responsible for, their own oppression.

In many ways, this dissertation is the culmination of my academic philosophical training, both in terms of subject matter and motivation. It seems a fitting conclusion to my studies, as it captures the questions that have consumed me and the theories that have had the deepest impacts on my work. It is also an opportunity to be honest and deliberate with my theorizing, and to take the time to delve into the issues that have the strongest impacts on my everyday experience. Sex, desire, pleasure, abuse, rape and pain make up a rather large portion of my cognitive phenomena, due in large part to my daily experience, but probably also in response to my temperament and personality. I recognize that a lot of people don't care about these issues to the extent that I do, and won't agree with how I articulate the themes included. And even in the circles where these topics are valued and pursued, there will be disagreement with my world-building, which is only to be expected. If there is one thing that I walk away from my studies with, it is the inevitability of my inadequacy in articulating and creating in ways that no one will find problematic, or offensive. And so I invite you to learn something from me, because I do think there is something valuable about my perspective, however limited it may be. And I welcome challenges to the frameworks that I propose, for I surely have created something that is insufficient as a stand-alone model. All that being said, I hope this investigation offers something valuable to anyone who is interested in reclaiming the sexual and the erotic as something critical, vital and vibrant, a source of knowledge and power that resonates throughout our experiences, and allows us to live a full and flourishing life.

**Citrus Salad**

I bought a new dress.

Its striped like citrus salad, with off the shoulder sleeves that keep me from raising my arms all the way if I want to keep the lines straight. Oh well, beauty is pain, right?

I feel like summertime, I feel like light. The teal next to the lime is the best thing I've ever seen, except the clementine down at the bottom is even better. And don't get me started on that lemony stripe of sunshine wrapped around my breasts. This is the dress I've been waiting for.

I put on my strappy wedges, the ones with the skinny blush straps and the woven heels that blend into my skin. They turn my short legs into skyscrapers, stretching for miles up to the white banded hem that rests at the top of my thighs.

I look delicious. Delectable. Sweet but just a little tart.

My hair goes down, messy curls winding around each other all the way to my back. Its soft, but deadly. No brush can forge a path through these curls. I like it like that. I'm not here to be touched.

Lips get painted peach, highlight on the cupid's bow gleams bright. Lashes stretch into wide eyed wonder under arched brows that take no shit, and I am ready.

Living alone has been a revelation. I do what I want, when I want. I eat snacks all day and take long walks on the beach at sunset. I wear short clothes that make me look like Barbie because you aren't here to claim it all for yourself. I miss you in theory, but I've been growing, unfolding, since you left. I don't think I'll be the same when you come back.

Today is just another day in Summerland, and I've dressed for the occasion. Music in my ears, my steps take on a rhythm that makes my body flow. The sun beats down. The ocean breeze wraps around me. My hips sway from side to side, a hypnotizing beat that pushes me forward without interruption.

Each step is a dare, and I've never been more ready.

Look at me. I dare you.

Watch how I move. I dare you.

Feel the power of my feet on the earth.

See how strong and unashamed I can be?

I stop for no one. Does a cyclone stop its path to satisfy someone else's curiosity? I am mine.

This is life in summertime.

**Bitch**

I was eighteen and on the elliptical the first time a man called me a bitch. He wanted my phone number, I didn't want to give it. He left, but then came back. I should have gone, I knew better, but I wanted to finish my workout and so I stood there, trapped, my feet sliding back and forth on the machine, moving endlessly to nowhere, when he reacted to my final rejection: "You know, you don't need to be such a bitch."

It was surprisingly numbing. Bitch. B-i-t-c-h. Of course, I'd been called a bitch before, but not in that way. Not for that reason. I'd been a "bitch" for making a rude comment to a friend, or taking the last spot, or calling someone an asshole. Now, I was a bitch for telling him no. I was a bitch for making him a failure. I was a bitch for denying him his right. I learned something new.

A few years later, I dated a man who called me his bitch. At first, I liked it. It was edgy, harsh, a little bit dirty. It was exciting. But after a while, I noticed that when he chose to use it, I became a little less. I was his bitch, but he was my *man*. Unequal. From his lips, "You my bitch" was a declaration of ownership instead of just a turn of phrase. It reflected the tenor of our relationship.

These days, I notice that men treat me like a bitch, in the literal sense. Honest to god, I walk around feeling like I must be a god damned female dog. I knew men saw me as an easy target, but now I know they think I'm dumb as dirt, too. Seriously, just a couple weeks ago, a man snapped at me to get my attention as I was walking by him. He put out his hand and *snapped*, like I would race over to him and see if he had a treat for me. Another stepped into my path to block my way, I guess thinking I would prance up to him, sniffing his hands, ready to be pet. Once, a man in line behind me at 7-11 ordered me to wait for him outside while he finished checking out. It wasn't a request, but a command: "Go wait for me there," he pointed, while looking at my tits. What was he planning on doing to me, out in front of the parking lot? Snap a collar on me and take me home? I didn't wait to find out.

I get the sense that being alone in public must just look wrong, like seeing a dog walking around on its own with no leash. What was I thinking? Silly girl. Someone needs to own me, before I get myself in trouble.

## Chapter 1: Phenomenology of Sexualization

In this chapter I will attempt to describe the phenomenon of sexualization as I experience it. The following is therefore primarily a personal narrative about what sexualization is, and how it feels. I am calling this a phenomenology of sexualization because it investigates the pertinent conscious phenomena from a first person perspective. By starting from this standpoint, I am able to narrow in on the particularities of what it means to exist as a sexualized being, and provide an account that is sensitive to the embodied nature of relevant phenomena, including desire, lust, entitlement and eroticism.

This will mean, by necessity, that my account of sexualization is situated within the particularity of my life, flavored by my distinctive mix of identities — by my background or horizon. I want to be as clear as possible that my account is therefore partial and limited, and cannot be said to expose the *Truth* of sexualization, as if there were such a thing. Rather, I hope that critically organizing my particular experiences will uncover structures that may be helpful when understanding how sexualization can function in women's lives and how it might impact their identity formation and sense of well-being.

I am also taking a narrative approach because it seems a more natural (at least for me) way to approach this topic, which is so deeply personal. It is intimate in a way that resists the clean cuts of clinical philosophical inquiry because it involves aspects which are visceral, material, and that at times seem unreasonable. It is not the type of thing that can be understood in a vacuum, divorced from the feelings it engenders. And to be fair to myself as narrator, it is not a simple task to organize all the various aspects and nuances of sexualized existence. Sexuality and sexual desire are complicated and messy phenomena that are at work in a complicated and messy

world. They are also phenomena with rich historical legacies that inform how we think, the language we use, and the way we understand ourselves. I find myself, in life as well as in this dissertation, consistently negotiating between the influences of many different forces, some of which are contradictory to my goals.

This is not to say that philosophical inquiry is inappropriate for this investigation, but rather that we ought to exhibit a certain amount of flexibility when attempting to theorize the activity and experience of being sexualized. For these reasons, I find phenomenological methodology, understood here as descriptive accounts of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view, or even more simply as the study of structures of experience, or consciousness,[1] particularly well suited for investigating this type of account. That being said, this is not a *true* phenomenology in the Husserlian sense, especially as I shift from a descriptive to an explanatory framework in the latter half of this chapter, and I take a certain amount of artistic license in describing it as such. Rather, it is a way to introduce broad-scale phenomena without overgeneralizing, or making universal claims about the state of the world. This chapter is also titled a phenomenology as an homage to Sandra Bartky's "Towards a Phenomenology of Feminist Consciousness,"[2] which is a beautiful account of an individual's intentionality might take on a feminist flavor. In this vein, my "Phenomenology of Sexualization" documents how an individual's intentionality might incorporate an awareness of the structures of sexualization.

Before we begin, I would also like to address the question of novelty. Sexual politics is certainly a topic that is at the forefront of feminist philosophy, and the modern feminist political

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[1] Smith, David Woodruff. "Phenomenology." The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/phenomenology/>.

[2] Bartky, Sandra Lee. "Toward A Phenomenology Of Feminist Consciousness." *Social Theory and Practice* 3, no. 4 (1975). http://www.jstor.org/stable/23557163.

platform. We avidly talk about the effects of objectification on young girl's development, we argue about whether or not pornography is hate speech, and we catalogue the wide spectrum of sexual harassment and sexual violence that women all over the world face. In fact, I do many of these things in this chapter. And yet, I still believe that these are topics that for one reason or another, do not receive enough critical attention, which has allowed the philosophical discipline to maintain a certain willfully ignorant standpoint when it comes to the messy and often contradictory nature of sexualized experience. Which is not to say that eroticism has not garnered philosophical attention. Theorists like Levinas, Sartre, and Foucault (among others) have taken up the question of sexual desire. But to be perfectly honest, in my opinion these accounts leave a lot to be desired (no pun intended). Levinas's account of Eros[3] manipulates the ethical relationship with gendered tropes to create a non-ethical erotic relation, and stereotypically objectifies Woman as unknowable, mysterious, and dark. Sartre's account of sexual desire[4] is frustratingly individualistic and antagonistic, as sexual relations become just another example of existential conflict between persons. Foucault's account of sexuality as a historical phenomenon[5] is certainly valuable in how it tracks the growth and changes of sexual paradigms over time, but it nevertheless misses vital embodied aspects of being sexualized. Not to mention that most of the available philosophical accounts of sexuality and sexual desire take a male perspective for granted, one imbued with phallocentrism, penetration, and possession. It has long been my desire to push back against the masculine assumptions that are so prevalent in academic accounts of eroticism,

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[3] Levinas, Emmanuel. "Phenomenology of Eros." In: *Totality and Infinity*. Martinus Nijhoff Philosophy Texts, vol 1. Springer, Dordrecht, 1991.

[4] Sartre, Jean Paul. *Being And Nothingness: An Essay In Phenomenological Ontology*. Secaucus, N.J. : Citadel Press, [1964], c1956.

[5] Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality*. OKS Print. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

and center a female, though not universal, perspective — someone with unapologetic sexuality, invested in a paradigm of pleasure rather than shame. As these are topics that inform so much of the treatment directed towards women, I believe that this investigation is not only necessary, but ethically imperative.

And finally, I would like to address, in advance, some of the conflicts inherent in this discussion. I make a pointed effort to resist a narrative of victimization, one which observes the impacts of sexualization largely in terms of harm. But, as you will see, the first half of this account does indeed emphasize the ways in which being sexualized has placed me in a position to be harmed in specific ways. I grapple with the tension between my desire to develop an account of sexuality as something pleasurable and empowering, and my experiences of sexuality as a source of pain and fear. I believe both of these are accurate representations of what it means to be sexualized, and I will account for both in this specific discussion.

**1. Discovering oneself as sexualized**

What does it mean to have a consciousness as a sexualized being? Largely speaking, it means an awareness that you are fuckable. It is the recognition that you remind people of sex, that when they look at you they see the possibility of sexual activity as strongly present. As sexualized, your function as a being, and sometimes as an object, changes from what it might be in a normal social interaction. It becomes narrowed, focused on the pleasure assumed potential in you. The awareness of your embodiment becomes exaggerated, central to your value and purpose in the world. The force of this awareness becomes a tangible state of affairs between you and others. You are made flesh, flesh that demands attention as flesh, whether you wished it or not.

To be conscious of one's sexualization is to understand that your very meaning as a person has changed. Your existence is now predicated on your ability to function as an object of sexual pleasure, instigating an instantaneous symbolic transformation. This manifests in subtle shifts in how your body is received and acknowledged: your breasts become tits, your butt becomes an ass, and your vagina becomes a pussy.[6] These spaces take on central and exaggerated importance, because they are now spaces imbued with a specific type of meaning. They are the places that take on a new light as covetable, but also as morally suspect, because they remind people that you can be fucked. They become signs that you are being treated as you were made to be treated — as penetrable, as space predetermined for seeking out pleasure. Your meaning and purpose in the world shifts, centering primarily upon your ability to summon these feelings and images in those observing you. You have been put in your place, and that place is specifically to be the representation and incarnation of sexual desire and permissibility.

At twenty-eight years of age, I have long since developed a consciousness as a sexualized being, but this was not always the way I understood myself. This consciousness developed over years of experience, learned through practice as I came to recognize the specific types of expectations and values that I represent to the public. And of course, sexualization became more aggressively prevalent as I began to take on the qualities coded as sexual and sexually desirable.

My specific introduction into the dynamics of sexualization began with my experiences as a pretty child. For as long as I can remember, people complimented my parents on *my* looks, as if I were truly an object of their creation — a living doll. They said that I was going to be a beauty, that I would drive the boys wild, that my parents would have to put me under lock and

[6] This description takes for granted a normative female body, although it is certainly possible for male and gender non-conforming bodies to be sexualized, as well.

key. There were so many elements that people would hone in on, bringing to light things that I had never felt a need to pay attention to, that I did not intend, or even see myself. People commented on the clarity of my skin, and the darkness of my features, my silky hair, my dramatic brows, my high cheekbones and my dimpled smile. My attention was consistently and systematically brought back to how I looked, as I learned that there were so many details that people would invest with value.

This attention made me far too aware of my physical appearance from a very young age. In many ways this would foreshadow the atomization of self that often accompanies sexualization, as I learned to inspect and dissect my body into pieces, neatly organized into what was valuable or not. My eyes were brown (bad), but lustrous (good), almost glowing from within. My nose was too big for classic beauty (bad), but my arched brows gave me an exotic flair (good). My hair was dark (bad), but my skin was clear and fair (good). And as I grew older I lived up to the expectations of those around me, my appearance garnering always more attention. For this reason, my experiences of sexualization are intimately intertwined with standards of beauty. This is not to say that sexualization or sexual desirability is dependent on beauty standards, but rather that the two often become convoluted in my own experience. I emphasize this for the dual purpose of, again, recognizing that the account provided here is limited and finite, and acknowledging that the attention paid to my physical appearance has been a constant in my life and that this attention cannot always be systematically organized by cause. I cannot neatly separate the experiences that are based in sexual desire from those based in standards of beauty, and together they become what I understand to be the focus of attention paid to me.

**2. Breasts**

Up to my early teen years, I was still firmly childlike in my interactions with the public, even if those interactions were often framed through an objectifying lens. And then the summer before I turned thirteen, I grew breasts. This marked a turning point as the attention I received spread beyond my face to the rest of my body. It was almost as if the emergence of breasts created a spectacle of my body, and enabled attention to spread south of my neckline. People continued to talk about me, in front of me, but not really *to* me, as if they understood that discussing my body would become unseemly if they acknowledged my personhood (after all, it is objectively inappropriate to comment on how a 12-year old girl's body is filling out, and how she is developing a "figure"). Through this new kind of scrutiny, I learned that there were even more standards that I would be judged against when it came to my body. This attention, coupled with a growing discomfort with my changing body, exacerbated feelings of shame and regret as I continued to develop and take up more space, while simultaneously garnering more and more public attention.

In school, I learned from my peers that my breasts were one of my dominant features, one of my *assets*. They became a salient feature in my identification, and I found out that when people thought about me, my breasts became an automatic rejoinder. To the adolescent mind, Sophia suddenly equaled Big Boobs, a metamorphosis based in new flesh. They were startling on my adolescent frame, better suited to the likes of the lingerie models and actresses that graced the pages of Cosmo and GQ. I often felt that my breasts took on a life of their own, endowed with special powers to demand attention, entering into spaces in front of me, announcing my presence. They turned me into something different, and while I didn't quite know what to do with

them, I felt the pressure to own them before someone else did. There was a sense of urgency, as if I could feel the countdown ticking away my last moments of anonymity.

Growing breasts marked the first time I really experienced sexualization, and it ushered in a shift in how people interacted with me. Boys started looking at my chest more than my face. I got frequent comments about the visibility of my nipples through my shirts. Even my friends commented on my new breasts, joking about how I should be in wet t-shirt contests, teasing me about how they jiggled and bounced, capturing the attention of those around me. A classmate referred to me as "his type" while cupping his hands in front of his chest to indicate that what interested him about me. My history teacher handed me an oversized t-shirt in the middle of class and told me to put it on because my dress was dipping too low in front as I was hunched over my desk working. It became clear that I was hyper-visible. I developed a tense relationship to the flesh that brought me so much attention, in the form of desire, discomfort, vulgarization and shame.

**3. Growing up sexualized**

Puberty and the subsequent changes to my body altered the way I was treated by the general public. It was during this time that I began to have my life interrupted by grown men. Not only the boys I went to school with, but men anywhere from one to six decades older than me. They stopped me at the grocery store to tell me that I had a beautiful body, or while I was shopping to ask if we could see each other again. They yelled at me and catcalled from their cars as I was walking by. They often thought I was older than I was, regardless of my baby fat and chubby cheeks, and I started to realize how vulnerable and unstable my protected status as a minor was. Being a child did not matter to people who saw my body as being that of an adult. And because I

could now attract adults, I also became responsible for avoiding them. I had to tell them that I was too young, that no they couldn't have my number, that no we couldn't have coffee and chat. I was told by "well-meaning" and "concerned" individuals that I shouldn't dress in ways that made me look older and more mature if I didn't want that kind of attention. From both directions — of desire or blame — I learned that I was now responsible for the treatment I received, and that I no longer could expect to be recognized as protected, untouchable, or "too young."

As a child, I had almost fetishized the idea of becoming an adult, and the freedom that adult agency and autonomy would offer. But this status was manipulated into something altogether unexpected, as I was denied adulthood and instead ushered into a lesser category. It was in my early twenties that I realized that I did not have the privilege of being just an adult, of being a grown human being. Instead, I was immediately placed in the category of Woman as it became apparent to everyone around me that I was distinctly female, fuckable, and therefore vulnerable.[7] And this vulnerability was made tangible to me in particularly explicit ways. I started to get stalked by faceless men in cars, who trailed behind me as I walked around. Men who had once only catcalled now approached, aggressive and predatory. They made explicit comments about my body and what they would do to it. Some grabbed me around the waist, or reached out and touched my arms, my hair, or played with my clothes, as if considering undressing me right there. I was followed home and cornered at the gate to my apartment complex. Men trapped me in small spaces, like my car, elevators, and hallways, pressing close enough that I could smell their scent as their eyes lingered slowly over my body.

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[7] These are not the only characteristics of the social category of Woman, but the ones that were predominant in my experience and understanding of myself as gendered.

Although I knew, objectively, that these were not experiences that were unique to my situation, I nevertheless felt isolated and alone, not knowing how to process these newer, more dangerous events that had been introduced into my life. And this sense of isolation was only enhanced by the reactions of those closest to me. My partner at the time grew sensitive to the attention I received, and began blaming me whenever men displayed too much interest. He commented on the clothes I put on, the way I smiled at people, accusing me of asking for it when I complained about the treatment I received. Female authority figures that I went to for advice and wisdom dismissed my experiences with suggestions that I dress differently. Again I was reminded that it was my responsibility, and therefore my fault, when others sexualized me. I was assumed complicit in not only the ways that I was perceived, but also the ways I was treated. This new attention exacerbated my natural tendencies towards shyness, as it became harder and harder to fade into the background. I learned to fear being seen not only because it made me uncomfortable, but in order to avoid the judgmental voices that accused me of seeking out the very attention that caused me anxiety.

Needless to say, I learned quickly what it meant to be a woman in this world, or at least what it meant to be the specific kind of woman that I am. I was reminded so often that I began to see almost every social interaction through a lens of sexual predation or judgment, depending on whom I was interacting with. While perhaps unfair — after all, NOT ALL MEN — having had the persistent threat disclosed, I felt I had a moral license to treat future encounters in this way. Or maybe it was simply for the sake of survival that I started to become jaded. An ever-present cloud of threat hung over me, heavy on my body as I moved through space. Whatever the reason, it was quickly evident to me that the available interpretations for these new experiences were not

only limited, but that my safety hinged upon choosing the right one. It behooved me to become suspicious of people's intentions, if only to limit the chance of harm. Even so, the terrain I found myself navigating was often ambiguous and confusing, making it hard to feel prepared for what were quickly becoming inevitable interactions.

I had been prepared for these experiences to a certain extent, from stories about not walking alone at night to off-the-cuff remarks about how "men are dogs," and yet I was still ill equipped to deal with the messiness of my circumstances. See, the thing is that the men who let me know in no uncertain terms what I had become, they were not always malicious with their attentions. I say this not to excuse their behavior, or cater to their masculinity, but to address the complexity of navigating the sexual arena. Some of them clearly were after the power play — they wanted to see me demeaned and belittled in front of them. They wanted to put me in my place so that they could assert theirs. And they did this with their explicit and unsolicited references to my body, making sure I knew that it was publicly available for their consumption. Or by shrugging off my attempts to dismiss them, asserting that they alone had a say in the interaction we were having, and when/how it could end. They laughed at my discomfort and fear, enjoying the 'game' that we were playing, regardless of the fact that it was not a game to me.

But often, the men who approached me did so almost as if they couldn't help themselves. They would look at me upon receiving my attention as if they hadn't planned that far, and had no idea what to do. They would look at me like all their plans had gone up in smoke, or as if they hadn't even been thinking at all as they approached me. This planted within me a seed of deep discomfort and distrust of men, and reinforced the lesson that I would be uniquely responsible for what men did to me, because they were not in control at all. Their eyes, when they looked at

me, were bewildered, perplexed, and uncertain. They looked nervous, fidgety and almost desperate, which made possible a unique kind of existential threat, for which I was not prepared.

I learned to be terrified of those expressions because men's uncertainty tinged with desperation presented a special type of danger. By this I mean that people who have historically been allowed to act upon their whims, and are celebrated or excused for their actions simply because they are men, are people who represent a tangible threat because they are not held accountable for said actions. The lack of control that they exhibited showed me that I literally did not know what they might do to me in those moments. I didn't know if they just wanted a smile and a polite thank you, if they wanted an opportunity to test their pick-up skills, if they would let me walk away, if they would grab me, if they would insist upon my participation in a situation they had forced me into. This uncertainty, coupled with the knowledge of what men are capable of doing to women, learned over a lifetime of cautionary tales, left me feeling particularly powerless. It didn't matter so much that *this* particular man in *this* particular instance did not harm me, because the fear remained that the next one might very well do so. It seemed almost inevitable.

**4. Rape threat**

Rape became a persistent worry in my mind, and something that I actively strove to avoid on a daily basis. Rape was brought into my life as a tangible threat, as it is in the life of so many women, because of how men treated me. They treated me like an object for the taking, and approached me with entitlement that left me feeling small, vulnerable and violable. The licked lips and roaming eyes, the lingering hands and invasive posturing made it clear that I was not granted things like choice, autonomy and agency as a sexualized subject. At best, I was left with the abil-

ity to gate-keep my sexual availability, which is a dubious power, because it persists in the assumption that my body is there for some man's sexual pleasure, its just my choice to safeguard it for that 'special' man. Gate-keeping also perpetuates the idea that women are responsible for men's actions, that we must be the moral standard that keeps men in line, that our strength in purity and chastity must stand firm in the face of men's voracious sexual appetites.[8] And so, although I missed the official declaration, it became quickly obvious that it was open season on Sophia, and I was never more aware that life had changed for me as when I recognized that one of the seemingly inevitable consequences of being sexualized was the claiming of my body as a prize.

And it was not only the treatment of men that enforced upon me the truth of my own violability. From (primarily) women I learned that I would be blamed if something did happen to me, that I would deserve it because of how I looked/dressed/behaved. The judgment of my female peers and authority figures taught me that there would be little compassion for the treatment I received under the guise of sexualization. The snide comments about my clothing, body, and the attention that I received exacerbated an already tense state of affairs. Even empathetic friends would subtly remind me that I was different, other than them. They would respond to my complaints with pitying expressions, and ask me, in the gentle tones of one talking to a child who ought to know better, "What did you expect?" This blind acceptance made me feel crazy for thinking that things could be otherwise. It made me feel that my insistence on being treated with dignity and respect was unreasonable, the idealistic dreams of a naive girl. And so, in a variety of

[8] Its almost funny how women's strength is only assumed/allowed when it comes to enabling men's weakness.

ways, I was taught that I deserved the treatment I received, or that at best, it was simply my lot in life.

In some ways, this was simply a practical acceptance of what had become normal. Wishing that things were different, or believing I deserved better had no tangible effect on my daily experience. And so, I had to make compromises to stay safe. Real life does not always allow you to act on principle and ideal. I learned, by necessity rather than desire, to navigate the sexual landscape as prey. I learned how to accept compliments graciously: “well thank you, that’s so sweet,” “how nice of you to say so,” “I appreciate it,” “you’re too kind.” These lies flowed off my tongue like honey, with just the right amount of appreciation to appear suitably grateful for a man’s attention without implying that I sought more. I learned that slightly-disinterested politeness was the quickest way to extricate myself from an uncomfortable situation, because it catered just enough to men’s egos to (usually) satisfy their expectations without manifesting their anger or further efforts. This careful negotiation came from a recognition that men are fragile creatures, easily lost to turmoil and identity crises when faced with a woman’s dismissal. They do not like their “efforts” to go unrewarded.

And so I smiled, I laughed, I shook hands, I introduced myself and accepted introductions, I gave fake names — I catered. I catered because it was easier and safer than being called a bitch or a slut, being yelled at, having someone follow me home, and getting cornered and forced to accept their attention. I stopped trying to explain that it didn't matter if I already had a boyfriend or not, and started taking the easy way out of claiming that yes, unfortunately another man already owned me, and no, he wasn't into sharing. I learned to give fake names and take

men's phone numbers down in notes on my phone, deleting them as soon as I was out of sight. These were my survival strategies.

**5. Sexual advances**

Rape threat creates a particular way of being in the world that I now call 'constant vigilance.' Of course, at the time, I simply understood the need to be constantly aware, even hyper-aware, of my surroundings. I could no longer lose myself in window shopping while walking around the mall, or whatever book I was reading at a coffee shop, but instead had to always have one eye out to see who was around me, who had noticed me, or even who might notice me. I learned that the second I took for granted that I could be present in a public space without repercussion, I would get punished. While seemingly dramatic rhetoric to some, the idea of punishment captures the force of the spectrum of reminders that I was not safe when in public, that ranged from small, like being interrupted during a task, to truly threatening, like being pushed against a car in the mall parking lot with no one else around.

Of course, constant vigilance is not a phenomenon that I alone experience, or even one that women alone experience. It is arguable that any group that faces targeted threats of violence will experience this type of awareness. I think there is, however, a particular flavor to the kind of paranoia that manifests from women's experience as public beings, one that I believe is a direct product of rape threat. It is almost like rape is the promise of a heteropatriarchal world (both heteronormativity and patriarchy are important here) — "be careful or you could get raped" is whispered on the wind, or more realistically, in the hushed tones of girls speaking to other girls about what happened to *her*. Women learn fear at the hands of men; it is a part of our socialization into the category of woman — the knowledge that we can be raped. But rape threat is not

performed solely, or even primarily, by direct promises of sexual assault. More covertly, it is insinuated through a myriad of actions that bring me to my next topic: the category of *sexual advances*.

This transition from rape threat to sexual advances might seem jarring, but I would ask the reader to bear with me, as it accurately depicts the way in which rape is persistently brought to the forefront of my experience. After all, rarely has someone actually verbally indicated that they want to rape me, although this has, sadly, happened. And yet, even without explicit reference, I am overwhelmingly aware that rape is a very possible part of my future, a reality which weighs heavily on my shoulders. It is a future so tangible and thick that I can almost feel my power being leached away, in preparation of the violation that I fear so much. This fear, I argue, is revealed and reinforced by a range of sexual advances, because they manifest as an extension of our heteronormative sexual politics, one in which rape becomes the inevitable conclusion of a patriarchal system.

Sexual advances are something I have become familiar, if not comfortable, with. For the purposes of this discussion, I consider 'sexual advances' to be an umbrella term covering a range of interactions including flirtation, propositioning, hitting on, harassment, and even assault. I propose that sexual advances are some of the most common reminders of sexualization, as they are different phenomena motivated by the same things: namely, sexual desire and power. They present different levels of invasiveness and potential threat, and may be welcome or unwelcome in different ways by different women. I say all this just to be clear that I am trying to avoid making hasty generalizations by grouping these different phenomena together. I understand that by bringing these diverse phenomena together under the banner of "sexual advances," I am using

this term differently than how it is often used colloquially. However, I think it is appropriate to establish the connection between interactions that are obviously violent and ones that are more subtly so, because it underlines the way in which our heterosexual interactions are often founded upon harmful norms. In other words, I am trying to draw attention to the ways in which these different ways of interacting, some harmful and some not, are related, in order to establish a spectrum which organizes the frequency of sexual predation and aggression towards women.

For my purposes, I hold that flirting implies a mutual interaction in which both/all parties involved consent to the interaction. I consider propositioning to be a direct request with an ultimate aim of engaging in sexual activity: "Can I take you home tonight?" Harassment is unwanted attention that interferes with one's well-being by implicitly or explicitly threatening harm. When harassment turns physical, e.g., groping or grabbing, I would consider this in the realm of assault. All of these function as sexual advances, i.e., verbal and physical expressions of sexual desire. Certain of these also function as power plays, and deployment of masculinity, etc. By taking on the social role of 'woman,' I have experienced the entire range of sexual advances. In fact, these experiences in many ways constitute my understanding of what it means to be a woman.[9] But while all of these interactions are pertinent to this discussion, I want to focus specifically on the experience of getting hit on, because it is arguably one of the most common sexual advances.

Getting hit on is a particularly predominant manifestation of sexual politics in women's lives, by which I mean it is easily one of the most common ways in which women learn what it means to be a woman *qua* sexualized,[10] and encounter the power structures of sex and gender. In

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[9] This may not be the case for all those who identify as women.

[10] There are, of course, other ways in which women learn what it means to be a woman. I happen to be focusing on women's experiences of sexualization specifically, which I consider to be a particularly dominant way in which women are trained into the social category.

fact, its so common that we regularly overlook it when considering manifestations of sexist social structures in favor of the more dramatic examples of sexual politics, e.g. harassment and assault. But I think that this kind of routine interaction is part and parcel with the more blatant examples of sexual entitlement that feeds sexual violence towards women and deserves critical attention to better understand the demands placed on sexualized female bodies. I say this because in my own experience, getting hit on often feels threatening, even if it is not explicitly so. There is something unsettling and destabilizing about someone with greater social power willfully interrupting your life to demand recognition on the basis of their desire for you.

While colloquial, "getting hit on" is actually a fairly descriptive term that identifies a somewhat ambiguous, grey-zone phenomena. "Hitting on" refers to unsolicited interactions when someone, usually a stranger, attempts to create a personal connection in order to introduce the possibility of sexual desire. It is the suggestion — sometimes covert, and often overt — that more is desired. Usually, it is the precursor to conquest. When this type of behavior is welcome and reciprocated by the subject, I would put this in the realm of flirting. So perhaps I could call getting hit on unsolicited, and potentially invasive, initiation of flirtatious interactions.

The unprompted nature of hitting on someone is part of why it can quickly pass into unpleasant harassment and invasion of personal space, especially when the other person actively indicates with body language or speech that they are not interested and the interaction continues nonetheless. Being engaged in any form of conversation without it being solicited can be frustrating and unpleasant. This discomfort is magnified when based in sexual desire because of the long-standing assumptions that women owe men sexual attention and gratification. And so, in my own experience, men commonly assume that I am as interested in conversing with them as

they are with me, and rarely, if ever, do they ask for permission. In fact, they usually keep talking incessantly so that I do not have an opportunity to exit the un-asked for conversation, like a telemarketer who doesn't pause so that you can't politely decline the call, leaving someone trying to avoid instigating fragile masculinity in an awkward position.

There exists a pervasive idea that getting hit on is flattering. And this idea is perpetuated by both men and women. We've turned aggressive behavior into a normal interaction between individuals that women must accept, otherwise be labelled as ungrateful. People tell you that it is flattering, and complimentary, to have your life interrupted by someone demanding your attention as they try to force an intimate connection on you. They say that you'll appreciate it when you're older, because in a society where women's value is largely determined by their sexual desirability, these reminders can be seen as validating. Men are taught that they must actively pursue women they find attractive, that 'scoring' with her adds to their masculinity, while her rejection deteriorates it, and women are taught to play along lest they make a man feel inadequate. These gendered presuppositions are part of what complicates a clear understanding of how these states of affairs really impact women's health and well-being.

Personally, there are times when I feel that I can't walk outside of my house without having my life interrupted by a man who just *has* to have some of my attention. I often adjust my schedule so that I do not have to go out alone, preferring to have the safety of a male accompaniment, even for everyday tasks. It is a persistent reminder of my powerlessness, and that this world was not made for me to thrive. These constant demands upon my person remind me that I am not allowed to simply exist, and feeds into the hyper-vigilant paranoia. Men continuously approach me as if their desire gives them permission to interrupt my life. And they do interrupt my

life — while I am working, eating, talking on the phone, grocery shopping, exercising, reading for pleasure, and generally pursuing my own goals. In fact, never am I simply sitting somewhere expectantly, making myself available to strangers, and yet I get treated as if the purpose of my existence is to be an opportunity.

**6. The trouble with fantasy**

As I became the target of sexual advances, I started to recognize that often preceding these interactions was the existence of fantasy. Fantasy, as I am using it here, is the narrative manifestation of possible states of affairs that are seen as desirable. Being fantasized about is often understood as a non-violent private act that has no purchase on the "real world." If someone casts me in their fantasy, it does not concern me in any tangible way precisely because it is make-believe. But I find that in practice, this is not necessarily true. Fantasies speak to our hopes for reality, our vision of a perfect world, and therefore creates expectations that have tangible impacts on how we interact with others.

Being the object of fantasy can be dangerous in a heteropatriarchal context, because to be cast in someone's fantasy, particularly a sexual fantasy, often requires being flattened and reified. When someone casts you into their fantasy, they build expectations about who you are and how you will behave. They make choices for you, insofar as they assume your consent within their fantasy. And the dynamic of patriarchy being what it is, the assumed consent within a fantasy scenario often translates into an assumed consent in reality. Sexist social systems teach men that it is appropriate to assume women's consent, especially when we are sexualized, or worse, that consent is not necessary when it comes to women.

The male imaginary, in terms of the masculinity developed in a sexist social system, is one in which fantasy is the first step towards actualizing a certain state of affairs. It goes: I want something, I get it because I deserve it. Or alternatively: I want sex, I deserve sex because I am a man, therefore women owe me sex. Male entitlement is precisely the expectation that fantasy desires can and will be actualized on women's bodies. And so, being the object of a man's fantasies often feels like violence as I am placed in an untenable position where I am already cast into a role that I am then forced to play out. When approached with their fantasy in mind, it became that much harder to assert myself as independent and my choices and actions as not conditioned by their expectations. This is part of why I hate being hit on — I am being presented with a fantasy scenario in which it is assumed that I am a willing participant, therefore, there is rarely if ever an actual inquiry into whether I want to engage back. And the verbal and non-verbal cues that I do not welcome the interaction are often ignored because they do not fit into the fantasy scenario of having a connection with a stranger that validates a man's sexual interest and prowess.

The thing about being cast into someone's fantasy is that it has little to do with the actual state of the world. The Sophia that stars in men's fantasies is not me, which is obvious because, for the most part, these fantasies come from people who do not know me, or know me on a purely superficial level. They see me as their sexy teacher, the slutty nerd, the secret nympho, the cute bookworm studying at the neighborhood coffee shop, or the dumb white girl with a fat ass. These are roles that I do not get to choose for myself, and unsurprisingly place me in less-than-powerful positions, ones in which I am often at the mercy of a man's attraction and desire. They tend to curtail my available options for responding or altering such fantasies, and easily place me

in a position to be acted upon rather than act. This is deeply dehumanizing, as it is a reminder that as sexualized I am no longer quite human, deserving of dignity and respect, but rather something sub-human, my existence and purpose predicated on my ability to fulfill men's desires.

So the stranger who looks my body up and down, declaring that he "has to take you out for dinner," doesn't seem to consider the possibility that I have no interest in joining him for any meal, instead assuming that his interest is tantamount to my acceptance. In fact, my very presence becomes an allowance. And this leaves me a distinctly powerless position, because the interaction has been defined with the assumption that our positions are not equal, and that we do not have equal say in the outcome of the interaction. To assert my own desires, which are namely to say no, is then more than just a rejection of his offer, but also a rejection of the basis of the interaction. It is a rejection of the assumption that I am an object to be acquired through a predetermined ritual. It is a rejection of a legacy about women's purpose and the meaning of women's bodies. This becomes a much more complicated endeavor because my actions are more likely to be misinterpreted to fit into the assumed state of affairs. My 'no' can be taken as coy, playful, just part of the role that I have been assigned.

Similarly, the person who assumes that my main priority is securing male attention flattens all aspect of my being to that shallow intention. In fact, it is so generally assumed that women prioritize male attention in all of their decision making that I start to wonder if we have overlooked two important realities: how incredibly easy it is to secure men's attention and how incredibly threatening that attention can be. It is hardly the boon that people imply it is, and yet many persist in seeing my choices through the lens of seeking male approval. And so, for instance, those who judge me as 'slutty' or 'indecent' for the way I dress and comport myself at-

tempt to determine the meaning of my appearance for me — in ways that foreclose the possibility that I just like this outfit, that this is my style, or that I feel comfortable like this, etc. And people feel incredibly entitled in assuming that my main purpose in life is getting male attention, to the point that they obscure any alternative motivations that may exist for my actions.

Through sexualization, my body becomes not only a space for men to play out their desires and fantasies, but also a space for acting out tropes of respectability and reputation. I have learned that in a variety of ways, being sexualized is tantamount to being dehumanized, whether it is used to deny my agency, erase my access to choose otherwise, or limit my personhood. It can be challenging to see beyond how the body is co-opted by other's desires and use-values, and to frame the value of one's physical being outside of those external judgments. This, in my experience, has been one of the most pernicious aspects of sexualization. It is simply too easy to fall into the trap of blaming oneself for treatment received on the basis of being sexualized.

It is also easy to feel complicit in the ways in which you are evaluated by others. After all, there I am, moving through space with my various parts. People assume things about me — my availability, reputation, respectability, and value — based on the visual I present. Even if it is not my intention, I still actively participate in this performance. Coming to terms with this reality is challenging, not only when faced with accusations from outside: that I should know better, "what do you expect when you look like that," "well maybe you should have thought about it more before you decided to wear that," etc — but also when faced with internal stress and disappointment. It wears on me, makes me second guess my own judgment, makes me doubt the legitimacy of my access to indignation and frustration because maybe, just maybe, people are right.

That little voice in my head tempts me with my own culpability: *Maybe I really should have known better, and maybe I really did want it just a little bit*.

There is no easy answer to these charges. Even today, I find myself continuously forced to reconcile the fear and frustration of a world in which I am unsafe with my own participation in that world, even if my participation is largely based on nothing more than my physical presence. Being sexualized makes people feel justified in using you for their own purposes, emphasizing the public component of how sexualization functions, e.g. that your sexualized body functions as a spectacle for others to impose meaning on for their own use. This can be an incredibly demeaning position, one that I still struggle to deal with effectively. No matter how much of a feminist consciousness I've developed, I often find myself frozen and startled in situations where others attempt to control the meaning of my body while simultaneously denying my ability to determine those meanings for myself. It is disarming to be confronted with the limits of one's power to articulate one's own purpose.

**7. Power**

At the beginning of this chapter, I said that this would not be a victim narrative, flat and typical. But to envision a way out requires an explicit accounting of things as they are. Therefore, it made sense to start by emphasizing how stifling and complicated sexual power dynamics are in practice because this reflects the chronology of my own experience. It is often painful, scary, and frustrating to be sexualized in this world. It is the thing that makes me feel the most threatened, that most impacts the decisions I make and what I do in my daily life. It is also my biggest source of insecurity, both in a physical and existential sense. Of course, I recognize that this speaks volumes about the relative security and privilege that I live in, and I want to be clear that I

am not arguing that sexual stigmatization is the worst type of discrimination that people can experience. I simply want to articulate the precise ways in which my life is impacted by sexual politics, and to emphasize the harms inherent in the way that the practices of sexualization are currently enacted.

The way I see it, I have a few — limited — options. I can become what people tell me I am, and see myself as less than because I look a certain way and inspire certain desires. I can swallow the bitter pill of only being good for one thing, and allow my function to be diminished to the pleasure derivable from my body. In contrast, I can resist and attempt to become the opposite. I can reject the role I have been given by denying the parts of me that cause me pain. While limited in scope, there is still much I could do to change my body specifically to make it less desirable, or even less attention grabbing. Of course, this may mean sacrificing aspects of myself that bring me joy, or make me feel good. It also keeps me subordinate to others' perception of my being and calls into question the autonomy of my choices. Or, as a third alternative, I can negotiate something different — something that feels right, that is comfortable and happy, at least *most* of the time (let's be realistic).

I have worked to negotiate with the cards I was dealt because I refuse to settle for a way of life in which I am devalued. I simply can't accept that option, not after years of letting myself be denigrated for no good reason. In no uncertain terms, my survival depends on it. And the thing is, no matter what corners people have tried to back me into, I still maintain a capacity for meaning-making that is perhaps my greatest strength, because it allows me to navigate the epistemic landscape critically, rather than obediently. It just so happens that a majority of the messages I received about myself as sexualized taught me to feel shame and accept a dehumanized status.

But, while certainly culturally dominant, this is not a necessary state of affairs. I may have been trained to feel powerless, but there is a depth of knowledge at the core of my being that reminds me that I am worth more than how I have been treated. My life has become a work of resisting, with greater and lesser degrees of success, the types of meanings imposed on my body by forces that would see me disempowered.

As I mentioned earlier, sexuality is performative and intersubjective, and so how I have come to understand myself as sexualized is derived from the continuous interactions between myself and others. It is through these social interactions that I have learned, or been taught, that I am sexy, desirable, and beautiful, but also that I am simultaneously inappropriate, shameful and distasteful. These are not things I would come to know without being told. And so in this way, identifying as easily sexualized is something that has been forced upon me without my explicit consent. It isn't a character trait that I introduced into my life, or something that I sought out with any particular intent. Nevertheless, I know that it is a salient aspect of my being, present to the most superficial inspection. So while perhaps not intentional, being easily sexualized has become an important part of my personal identity. And, despite my explicit enumeration of the harms prompted by this identity, I have learned to appreciate it rather than be resigned to it. I would even go so far as to say that I have learned to enjoy it, although not necessarily for the reasons that people might assume.

At some point, I realized it was okay to be the way I was; that I could continue being just who I was without shame or regret. Harassment and policing did not obligate me to become something different if I did not wish to be changed. I would describe this internal shift — the recognition that I need not relegate my sexual identity to the norms and scriptures of society —

as a process of unfolding. The labels and judgments and shame that wrapped around me, slowly loosened their grip on my consciousness until I could step out of their folds. And without these constraints, I unfurled, stretched out for the first time, testing my new limits. It was a revelation, a moment of wonder, as I realized that I was not a pet, or a doll, or an animal. I was not a thing to be owned, or a creature to be tamed. I was not a canvas upon which the public could lay out their desires and judgments and fantasies. I was just me, and I could find joy in that fact.

For so much of my life, I had been uncomfortable with the fleshiness of my body, with the jiggling and the rolls and the curves that garnered so much attention. But I decided instead to feel strong and proud of my presence, luxuriating in the bounce of my body with each step of my strut. Instead of hiding for fear of being seen, I went out in the world and appreciated what it meant to be tangible — to feel the pressure of the ground beneath my feet, the wind flowing around my body and the sun beating down against my skin. Materiality was a joy, because it let me *feel*. Sensation grounded me, provided me with a foundation from which to build myself anew. And so I settled into the tactile, the sensual, and found purpose and value in my body, in my very physicality, outside of anything it could provide for others, by honing in on what it provided me. These small acts were the start of something new for me, something exciting and thrilling and bold. The shift was subtle, especially from the outside. But internally, my inner compass suddenly had a new north, and it was infinitely better because it directed me towards my own satisfaction.

I also developed a new orientation to pleasure, luxuriated in the feeling of my body coming into being, and I learned to appreciate that desire could also work in my favor. Sexual pleasure was a highlight, something bright and beautiful, against a backdrop of fear, that I decided to

fight for because it made me feel good, a rarity in my life. Feeling good, though simple, was something that I invested heavily in because it confronted a lifetime of experiences that had taught me that suffering was normal and to be expected. Women do not get taught to experience pleasure for themselves, but always as a function of men's enjoyment. I found myself no longer willing to take the role of prop, used as a screen to act out some fantasy. I wanted more — recognition of my being and appreciation of my desires. Instead of feeling resigned to the fact that I was a woman, I decided to find joy in it. It became something I actively appreciated instead of bemoaned, something that made me feel powerful and strong instead of small and weak. I chose joy, in the way I dressed, the way I moved through the world, the things I did. Sexual or not, this internal shift changed how I addressed so many aspects of my being. It translated into a wide spectrum of acts that reinforced self-acceptance and the joy of pleasure.

These experiences, on the one hand of developing a strong sexual and erotic identity, and on the other hand of being targeted for my assumed sexual potential, created a certain friction or tension that captured my attention. Honing in on that tension, I started to see how the very things that I was beginning to love and cherish were also consistently under siege by others, how they were twisted and used against me. There was a battle happening, as the world sought to make me drop the reins of my pleasure and my passion, and hand them over to be used and controlled by others. And there I saw power — power at play, and power at stake. And the question, the temptation, arose as I started asking myself: Could this power be mine?

This question continues to preoccupy my mind and my imagination, and I have since accepted it as centrally important to my well-being in this world. I have tasted power — in the pleasure I can give myself, and the joy of consensual and respectful coming-togethers. There is

unmistakable power in the awareness that I garner from others, in my apparent ability to captivate and claim attention with nothing more than my presence. Of course, this source of power is deeply loaded and attempting to mobilize it is a challenging task, one that I am not assured to be safe or successful in. I have seen that being sexually desirable is both a benefit and a curse, depending on my ability to consent and control a situation. But power is hard to ignore, and when it comes into being in a visceral way, regularly rearing its pointed face in my daily life, I think it deserves attention. In fact, I find I must pay attention to it, because it is perhaps the most pervasive example of power in my life — it is nearly ever-present, and follows me throughout just about any space I inhabit, whether it be personal or professional, private or public.

Desire is a messy and complicated power, one often at stake of being a double-edged sword. It can be tenuous and changeable. Even so, sexualization has come to be not only a constraint on my body and available actions, but a way in which I have come to know myself that brings me joy and pleasure. In a most basic sense, sex makes me grateful to have a body, a rarity in a world that punishes women for their materiality. Of course, I don't mean to imply that sex and sexualization are the same things, but insofar as sexualization is the state of being recognized as a sexual being, sexualization becomes important for sexual activity. They are intimately tied together, and the pleasure and gratification I receive from engaging in sexual activity make me recognize some of the more positive aspects of being sexualized. And there *are* aspects of sexualization that I have come to realize are generative, fun, enjoyable and exciting. It is important to me that these aspects be emphasized in this discussion because it would hurt to relegate sexualization to the realm of patriarchal enforcement, to allow sexist structures to take ownership and control of a salient aspect of my identity.

In a perfect world (whatever that means) perhaps I would choose to derive power from a different source, one less rooted in my oppression, one that does not flirt with the reason that I can't walk alone at night, that I have to stay constantly vigilant, that I am polite when I would like to tell people to fuck off. But these hypothetical scenarios of a different world do little to help me understand and hone the power that I have access to now. And to be perfectly blunt, I want the power that I can get. And I want the negotiations and moves that I make to be recognized as attempts not only for survival, but as actions that subvert commonly held assumptions about the purpose of female sexuality. I am more than the product of a sexually repressive and oppressive culture, and I have learned to see beyond the lens of our hegemonic sexual ideology. I hope others will see it too.

And so I emphasize the range of different experiences pertinent to my eroticized existence in order to avoid creating an account of my sexual identification that rests solely in victimization. I cannot, or will not, be reduced to a victim, even though I have been harmed by my public recognition as a sexual being. This matters, because it is all too easy to collapse women's experiences of sexualization until they are nothing but another way in which we are harmed, another instance of a sexist, misogynistic system. I use myself as an example to show that it is always more complicated than that, and I demand a fuller recognition of my humanity and of my agency — not only from those who would seek to reduce me to my sexual use-value, but also from those who would seek to reduce my actions and motivations to nothing more than the products of a sexist society, with special terms like "adaptive preferences" and "false consciousness." My so-called allies that insist on defining me by the abuse I endure, and interpreting everything about me — from the way I dress, to the way I move, to my sexual activities and the things I desire —

as little more than knee-jerk unreflective reactions to a hostile world, harm me in ways that are parallel to the men who see me as little more than a sex doll. Both agree that the ways in which I am sexualized define me, and judge me accordingly.

I stand by the declaration that I can both participate in and subvert an oppressive system. And I must persist with this conviction because I have little control over the way in which I am encountered. This lack of control problematizes assumptions made about women's bodies and their consent to sexual objectification. My curves have always been exaggerated, obvious. The way my body takes up space does not provide the option of hiding it. No matter how high the neckline, how long my skirt, how loose my dress, I cannot avoid being noticed as long as my body remains the way it is. And I won't be pushed into denying that I sometimes find satisfaction is walking through the world and capturing attention. Attention seeking is not a moral flaw, unlike the construction of masculinity that condones the abuse and mistreatment of women who capture attention.

**8. Conclusion**

I am hardly alone in lacking the power to control when and where I am sexualized. And to be sure, while my sexualization is by far a product of my shape and features, for others it is also a product of skin color, heritage and class. These things deserve critical attention because there are many reasons why someone may be incapable of truly controlling how they are viewed and what is assumed about their character because of how they look. The idea that women can choose to be recognized as simply human, that they can control by whom they are sexualized — these assumptions perpetuate a victim-blaming narrative that exacerbates the shame and disgust that many women feel about their bodies. It also leads to women feeling like their bodies are

against them, that their bodies are to blame for their pain and stigmatization, and that it is their fault that they are targeted in these ways.

I've come to the conclusion that I cannot avoid being sexualized; it is a state of reception that I cannot escape. But this assertion does not mean:

1. That I am claiming that everyone is attracted to me. Being sexualized and being sexually desired are not exactly the same thing. Being sexualized is, in its barest form, just the perception of sexual traits or characteristics. It is the reminder of sex, in some capacity, whether it is a focus or awareness of sexually coded body parts — like breasts and hips — or the general association of sex to one's being. Plenty of people sexualize me and make a point that I am unappealing because of it.
2. That I am claiming that everyone, at all times, is sexualizing me. People often attempt to downplay my experiences by implying that I am cherry picking events in order to craft a particular narrative. They accuse me of exaggerating, insisting that sexualization is something I *choose* to perceive. And, of course I have interactions with people in which I do not feel objectified, or reduced to base biological capacities. The thing is, I don't need everyone to sexualize me to feel persistently sexualized. I just need enough people to do it that it becomes a constant reminder.
3. That I am creating an exclusive and definitive account of femininity, womanhood, or sexuality. This phenomenology is not an attempt to define what it means to be a woman, or what the qualifications of womanhood are. Rather, I am trying to bring to light an aspect of being a woman that is highly significant to my own experience, and that I believe is shared by many, although certainly not all, people who identify as women. The category of 'woman' is not

one that is easily defined, or delimited, due in large part to it being a socially constructed, and therefore unstable, category. There are some prevalent phenomena associated, although not universally, with the label, one of which I think is sexualization. The way I see it, this phenomenology is just one patch in a quilt, and some of my ideas may be supported by the experiences of others, while others may be more limited in scope. I may see things differently than other people, and certainly have blindspots that listening to others will bring to light, including individuals who were not socialized into womanhood from the beginning. I do not use my experiences of being gendered and sexualized to deny the experiences of others who also identify as women, and I recognize that gender manifests on a broad spectrum. I am not particularly invested in a binary gender system, nor use this phenomenology to legitimize a gender binary — rather, I describe heterosexual dynamics because of how they impact my life, and in order to critique the heteronormative performances that we take for granted. My life would be better, and safer, if we did away with our current narrow understanding of gender, even if that meant I would lose out on some of the privileges I now access.

This phenomenology is just the beginning of this story. While anecdotal, I have pointed to structures at play when it comes to sexualization. These phenomena offer a backdrop, a sense of the horizon of my inquiry, and will be elaborated on in the following chapters. I hope readers will keep in mind the complex and contradictory nature of sexual agency. It is not a straightforward state of affairs, and so our conversations will have to allow for certain amounts of ambiguity. This is not a failing, but an acknowledgement of the realities of sexual politics as they manifest in real women's lives.

**Samson**

You are my sweetest downfall
I loved you first, I loved you first
Beneath the sheets of paper lies my truth
I have to go, I have to go
Your hair was long when we first met

Samson went back to bed
Not much hair left on his head
He ate a slice of wonder bread, and went right back to bed
And history books forgot about us and the Bible didn't mention us
And the Bible didn't mention us, not even once

You are my sweetest downfall
I loved you first, I loved you first
Beneath the stars came fallin' on our heads
But they're just old light, they're just old light
Your hair was long when we first met

Samson came to my bed
Told me that my hair was red
Told me I was beautiful, and came into my bed
Oh, I cut his hair myself one night
A pair of dull scissors in the yellow light
And he told me that I'd done alright
And kissed me till the mornin' light, the mornin' light
And he kissed me till the mornin' light

Samson went back to bed
Not much hair left on his head
He ate a slice of wonder bread, and went right back to bed
Oh, we couldn't bring the columns down
Yeah, we couldn't destroy a single one
And history books forgot about us
And the Bible didn't mention us, not even once

You are my sweetest downfall
I loved you first[11]

[11] Regina Spektor. “Samson.”

## Chapter 2: Love a Man Dead

I care about sexual politics because I see it as a fundamental way in which my life is shaped by social and political forces. I understand sexuality and the power dynamics encoded within it as deeply defining the ways in which I am identified, how I identify, and the treatment I receive in everyday interactions. Because I delve deeply into the sexual landscape, as I describe in my previous chapter, it has become apparent to me how much sexual power dynamics structure my lived experience and that of countless women. I have also noticed that these dynamics are largely described in ways that victimize women, and reinforces our lack of power. I find this to be (at times) contradictory to the rough ground of my experience, and therefore fundamentally restrictive — allowing for very little space to create new definitions and descriptions that better represent what it means to be a sexualized subject. In order to bring to light alternative possibilities that widen our understanding of sexual politics and how women can be situated within it, I would now like to turn to narratives that exist about highly sexualized women, in order to see if they offer possibilities to someone interested in liberatory sexual politics — i.e. an understanding of sexuality that is not beholden to a patriarchal narrative, but has the potential to subvert it.

To accomplish this task, I will be investigating the trope of the Femme Fatale, an iconic example of both female sexual agency and objectification. While there is no single definition of the femme fatale, she is commonly portrayed as an agent who uses physical attractiveness to manipulate and dominate others, specifically (though not necessarily) men. Often morally ambiguous, the femme fatale is also portrayed as duplicitous, dangerous and mysterious, and is alternatively referred to as an enchantress, witch, spider woman or succubus. The femme fatale motif, and its many different iterations, is arguably ubiquitous, and according to William Jankowiak and

Angela Ramsey, exists nearly universally across cultures,[12] demonstrating a widespread and enduring fascination with women who are powerful and threatening insofar as they are desirable. This preoccupation is often tinged with a certain amount of fear, reinforcing the femme fatale's position as a dangerous woman. And while there are many tropes that place women as objects of sexual desire, the femme fatale is distinct in the threat that she embodies and her ability to engender chaos and death.

Arguably an iconic example of powerful female agency, the femme fatale is nevertheless a controversial figure insofar as she inhabits multiple, contradictory positions – that of sex object and sex agent, that of supporting cast and master of her own fate. Rather than overdetermine her with descriptions,[13] I hope to draw your attention to the power that the femme fatale trope uncovers as well as how that power is constituted, in order to explore the ambiguous themes of sexual agency and eroticism in patriarchal contexts. For the purposes of this discussion, I am interested in exploring the concept of the femme fatale in order to see if it can be read as a narrative of subversive agency that is useful for someone engaged in liberatory sexual politics. By this I mean: does the femme fatale represent a way of being in the world that showcases agentic structures that can be recognized as disruptive in a sexist power structure?

My personal interest in the femme fatale follows from a fascination with powerful female characters used and misused in storytelling — the jealous sidepiece, spurned lover, beautiful innocent, morally suspect sorceress — cast as instruments and, less often, as manipulators of fate. I am particularly interested in how sexualization is featured in these narratives, especially for the

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[12] Jankowiak ,William and Angela Ramsey. "Femme fatale and status fatale: a cross-cultural perspective." *Cross-Cultural Research* Vol 34, Issue 1, (2000). Pg. 62.

[13] As Cressida Heyes argues, specificity is not always to our advantage.

purposes of vilifying and dehumanizing what should be complex and multi-dimensional characters. The femme fatale, as a narrative trope, in some ways encompasses all of these varied characters, or rather, all of these characters can be described as having characteristics of a femme fatale insofar as their desirability to men makes them a force to reckon with.

Of course, these stories, as traditionally told and written (by men), often minimize these women's agency by casting them as either too stupid or too evil to be responsible for their own impacts. And it is true that desirability is not the most active of roles, as exemplified by the term sex *object*. We tend to minimize women's claims to their own appeal, instead finding ways for men to take ownership of women through their desire. However, I believe we shouldn't be so quick to dismiss the femme fatale and instead should investigate the sexual, social and ideological unrest that she represents, as well as possible motivations for deliberately devaluing or erasing this type of agency. Insofar as the femme fatale represents power derived from sexualization, I hope to show that sexual agency and eroticism can be acts of subversion or resistance, in order to complicate the traditional narrative that such acts only perpetuate women's oppression.

**1. What does it mean to re-appropriate?**

For the purposes of this chapter, I am interested in the question of whether women can choose to create and play more liberatory language games even if they are not completely distinct from sexist language games that we also participate in, and if therefore we can describe the practices of women as sexual agents as actually subverting oppressive norms. While I have centered the figure of the femme fatale in this discussion, this chapter is not meant to be literary or cinematic criticism but rather a philosophical exploration of a particular manifestation of sexual agency. For the purposes of this chapter, my intent is not to label the femme fatale as a role mod-

el, or make her aspirational in any significant way, as much as call upon an iconic example of a woman whose power is tied up in her desirability. And with an attentiveness to language, we can articulate the femme fatale not so much as a character or personality type, but rather as a description of certain practices. These practices are most commonly articulated in two main ways: one situated in a "sexist" language game, and the other in a "subversive" language game.[14] I use these labels to set up a contrast as well as draw attention to the material realities of the femme fatale in each language-game, but it is important to note that these language-games are not mutually exclusive, but exist in relation to one another. Indeed, most of us participate in both of these language-games, among many others.

To better articulate how tropes and narrative exploration can be helpful for this type of investigation, I will briefly turn to the philosophy of language of Ludwig Wittgenstein. According to Wittgenstein, to acquire the sense of a concept we must "examine it within the complex form of life that is revealed in the way speakers *live* and *act.*"[15] For Wittgenstein, meaning resides in social use, and so to know the meaning of a concept is not simply a matter of being able to define it, but of knowing how to use it. In order to show understanding of a term or concept, it is necessary to make the appropriate connections between the concept and the language-game within which it is deployed. Language-games, according to Wittgenstein, link a particular employment of language with the "actions into which it is woven,"[16] and are therefore the setting

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[14] I leave open the possibility that there may be other articulations/language games available for understanding the Femme Fatale that are not included in this discussion.

[15] Marie McGinn, Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Wittgenstein and the Philosophical Investigations (1997) 71., quoted in Leader-Elliott, Ian, and Ngaire Naffine. "Wittgenstein, Rape Law and the Language Games of Consent." Monash University Law Review 26 (2000). Pg. 52, emphasis mine.

[16] Wittgenstein, Ludwig, and G. E. M. Anscombe. Philosophical Investigations. Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1997: Pg. 77.

within which our terms find meaning. I believe this conceptualization of language is particularly useful for our investigation because it allows us to take a practical approach to understanding our world, one in which we come to know something by doing it. It also recognizes that those who participate in a language game have access to shared meaning, for we come to know through our participation in a shared world.

Because language is social, there is no possibility of a private language, meaning that in this investigation I cannot make Femme Fatale represent *just anything* to suit my purposes. Things as they are in the world constrain the possibilities of our imagining, and of our language. One can't invent meaning out of nothing — therefore, even if language is arbitrary insofar as it is contingent, meaning must come from something publicly available. Hilde Lindemann showcases this dilemma with what she calls the "Humpty Dumpty theory of language," using the following excerpt from Alice in Wonderland:

> "But 'glory' doesn't mean 'a nice knockdown argument,'" Alice objected.
> "When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less."
> "The question is," said Alice, "whether you can make words mean so many different things."
> "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master – that's all."[17]

Alice and Humpty Dumpty present us with a philosophical question: Is language master, or do we master language? This question is somewhat deceptive because although we create language, it exerts force upon us and our world. The legacies of our shared language-games create certain

[17] Lindemann, Hilde. "Wittgenstein Meets 'Woman' in the Language-Game of Theorizing Feminism." In *Feminist Interpretations of Wittgenstein*. Ed. Naomi Scheman and Peg O'Connell. University Park: Penn State Press, 2002. pg. 217.

restrictions on how we may speak in the future. Private language or private meaning (what Humpty Dumpty is claiming to have) is incoherent according to Wittgenstein because language is by nature a public thing, insofar as meaning resides in social use.

'Femme fatale,' then, like any other term, "requires a grammar, a certain conventionally determined positioning in the language," as well as "criteria for application whose correctness can be determined independently of the person wielding them."[18] That there are grammatical constraints on 'femme fatale,' does not mean, according to Lindemann, that the concept cannot be rescued from certain illicit usages, no matter how popular or entrenched they may be — the reason being that language, like the forms of life in which it is embedded, always contains the possibilities of challenge and change.[19] When a language game ceases to be useful, it loses its force in the world and demands change for practical reasons — so that we may continue communicating and living in a shared world. Since we all participate in these language games, there may come a time when they are no longer adequate, and the disruption may prove capable of not only challenging what has generally been acceptable for communicating and understanding the world and ourselves, but may provide the impetus to change it. With this in mind, let us further contemplate the way in which the femme fatale is popularly understood, as well as the possibility of addressing what I propose are inadequate language games.

**2. Saving the femme fatale: an impossible task?**

According to Lynne Tirrell, a story is "a narrative with a certain very specific syntactic shape (beginning-middle-end or situation-transformation-situation) and with a subject matter

[18] Ibid. 219

[19] Ibid.

which allows for or encourages the projection of human values upon this material."[20] Stories arrange events into rationalized sequences which speak truth about the world, people and their interactions. We use narrative structures to make sense of ourselves and to speak to the human condition. We also tell stories to promote a certain way of understanding our environments and to establish world paradigms. In telling a story, "one articulates what one thinks about a set of events, a particular character, a set of characters, an issue, a problem, or whatever. One has one's say. In addition, one presents a perspective, a character, and a set of judgments which delimit each."[21] Storytelling is therefore never purely objective, as it is always inscribed with a certain position, whether this position is taken consciously or not.

As I alluded to in the introduction to this chapter, the idea of the seductively powerful woman has been at play in our collective hermeneutical resources for millennia (just consider Eve's seduction of Adam, or Circe's seduction of Odysseus), but the archetype of the femme fatale especially flourished in contemporary pop culture with the introduction of film noir, the dark and brooding style of cinema that came into prominence in the 1940s. The noir cinematic genre is easily identified by its hyper-stylized visuals, depicting a world cast in monochromatic grayscale, and steeped in shadows, often taking on a stark, almost prison-like aesthetic. Equally as iconic as the dark visuals are the dark plot lines — thrillers and detective films imbued with an overwhelming sense of cynical pessimism. This moodiness is reinforced by the stereotypically disjointed and fragmented narration style, lending an almost confessional air to the story. All of these elements — the desaturated and underexposed visuals mixed with melancholy voiceovers

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[20] Tirrell, Lynne. "Storytelling and Moral Agency." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 48, no. 2 (1990). Pg. 115.

[21] Ibid. 116

— serve to disorient the viewer, creating a sense of alienation and threat that lingers throughout the storyline.

In the classic film noir plot, the (male) protagonist finds himself infiltrating a dark world of corruption and intrigue, precipitated by a chance encounter with the femme fatale, who becomes the driving force of his downward spiral into darkness and criminality. And while their meeting is coincidental — he knocks on her door to sell life insurance, like in Double Indemnity[22] — as Elisabeth Bronfen so wonderfully puts it, their meeting follows the fateful logic of love at first sight,[23] although invariably the story is far from a typical romance. Indeed, the noir plot is almost a subversion of the traditional love story, as the classic boy-meets-girl trope thrusts the male protagonist into danger and criminality rather than heroism, and love-at-first-sight is imbued with deception and betrayal rather than the hope and purity of the fairy tales that provide the most culturally prominent Happily Ever Afters. The male protagonist and the femme fatale are partners in only the most superficial of ways, as there is a constant undercurrent of distrust in their relationship, and neither truly fits the mold of the classic love interest, the femme fatale not helpless enough, and the male hero not invincible enough.

In the vein of love stories gone awry, the classic femme fatale diverges dramatically from more traditional love interests because she is not only sexually uninhibited, but also unabashedly independent and ruthlessly ambitious.[24] She has no qualms about using her seductive charms and her intelligence to liberate herself from an untenable situation, which in the noir narrative is often

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[22] *Double Indemnity*. Directed by Billy Wilder. Paramount Pictures, 1944.

[23] Bronfen, Elisabeth. "Femme Fatale — Negotiations of Tragic Desire." *New Literary History* 35, no. 1 (2004). Pg. 105

[24] Ibid.

the imprisonment of an unfulfilling marriage. In fact, it is not so hard to imagine the femme fatale as the cynical product of the famous fairy tale love stories that have captured our popular consciousness, if these stories were to extend past riding into the sunset hand in hand with one's True Love. She is Cinderella after marrying Prince Charming, realizing that she has traded the prison of servitude for that of matrimony. Or Snow White after being awakened by her True Love's Kiss, still valued primarily for her beauty and still in the service of men. While maintaining a status of desirability, the femme fatale has lost the shiny veneer of purity, replacing it with a brooding sensuality, obscured by a haze of cigarette smoke.

And so, "from the moment the hero catches sight of the femme fatale, both find themselves caught in a sequence of events which can go only one way"[25]: intrigue, betrayal and ultimately death. In their chance meeting, the femme fatale recognizes the protagonist as a means of escape, and pursues his complicity in her machinations in order to free herself from the static and unsatisfying fate that she has been taught to welcome — namely, matrimony. She will seduce him, he will be seduced, and subsequently duped into participating in her scheme to be free. As this scheme usually involved the death of the femme fatale's husband, the protagonist becomes an accomplice to murder, and sometimes theft and extortion through life-insurance scams, as in *Double Indemnity*. Her seduction is the launching point for his descent into criminality and destruction, which he can only escape through the inevitable death of the femme fatale, often at the hands of the protagonist, thus absolving himself of her scheming, and any responsibility for their shared actions. Nevertheless, his status as agent is forever called into question as the specter of the femme fatale's manipulations taints his autonomy and self-determination with a reminder of

[25] Ibid. 105-6

his fallibility. It is not a traditional happy ending, but one that lingers in the realm of ambivalence as the hero comes face to face with the limits of his agency, and a reminder of his mortality.

This classic noir plot is compelling, not only because it delves deep into the dark side of human nature, but because the same sequence of events can tell two very different stories. Since any given story takes on a particular perspective, one meant to impact the audience in a certain way, then we should ask ourselves what the noir narrative's purpose is, who is telling it, and why it matters. These factors will speak to the function of the language game within which it is deployed. Delving into the femme fatale trope presented in film noir, we are confronted with multiple levels of meaning-making: the author's, or in our case the film-maker's, intent, the meaning of the film itself, and the wider social impacts of the film. These multiple levels of interpretation are simultaneously at play, allowing the story to have a larger sphere of impact than perhaps intended, and to reverberate through our social fabric and collective imagination. This is also why the femme fatale story can speak to issues beyond the characters and events it portrays — and can tell us something about our hopes, fears and beliefs, depending on the grammar and the language game within which it is situated. I will now briefly contrast the femme fatale's manifestation in the sexist language game and the subversive language game to elaborate on this point.

The femme fatale as she is constructed in the sexist language game takes on multiple frames of reference: the trope carries sexist intentions, is told through sexist storytelling and has sexist consequences/resonances in society. In other words, the femme fatale trope can be understood as oppressive within the framework of the film, and it can also signify oppression outside of the film. The femme fatale trope can be articulated as a product of sexist intentions in two main ways: first, that the femme fatale is nothing more than male fantasy, highlighting the simul-

taneous fascination with sexualized women with a fear of the power they may hold over men, and second, that the femme fatale's figurative purpose is to police women's sexuality in order to maintain the status quo. Within the film, the trope can be interpreted as a ritualistic performance of male dominance over female agency. Outside the film, the trope validates the gendered social order, and men's patriarchal desires, by suggesting that these social and legal orders exist to prevent men from being taken advantage of or otherwise exploited by women. It serves not so much to highlight women's sexual agency (even a limited sense of agency) but rather serves to reinforce men's desires to silence women through the problematic concept that men must safeguard not only their masculinity, but also ensure that women's sexuality is constantly policed, in order to maintain male hegemony.

The subversive language game challenges the primacy of the sexist language game by providing alternative interpretations of the femme fatale's meaning, both within the framework of film noir, recognizing that the femme fatale trope within the context of film noir can be understood in a variety of ways, but also in the wider social context of sexual politics writ large, recognizing that the femme fatale trope may offer insight into the politics of sexualization as a social phenomenon. Having access to an alternative interpretation allows the subversive language game to articulate a femme fatale that is not beholden to harmful norms in a way that perpetuates the marginalization of women as nothing more than sex objects, thus providing a novel way of understanding the impact of the noir plot. It also provides us the opportunity to reconceptualize a classic account of female sexual agency that is widely available, and thus accessible. The subversive language game generates possibilities for understanding gender and sexuality as constructs that are malleable rather than fixed. Indeed, what is subversive about the subversive language

game is that it challenges the authority of sexist knowledge production, calling into question the internal logic of patriarchal world-building and meaning-making.

**A. Sexual Agency**

I would like to look at these different levels of interpretation first by looking at how female sexual agency is interpreted in the sexist language game in contrast to the subversive language game. Generally speaking, in the sexist language game, the femme fatale's sexual agency is nothing more than a mechanism for policing women's sexuality. In the subversive language game, the femme fatale's sexual agency is used for the sake of securing independence and freedom.

The sexist language game presents us with a femme fatale who acts as a mirror for heteropatriarchal paranoia used to reinforce hegemonic norms of appropriate female sexuality. In this game, she is primarily the manifestation of male fantasy, revealing both a fascination with sexually aggressive and uninhibited women, while simultaneously revealing fears of feminine domination.[26] These contradictory preoccupations speak to the ways in which female sexuality is established and policed within a sexist system. In fact, the policing of female sexuality depends upon a paradoxical construction — where women will be simultaneously reviled and desired for their sexuality. Women are put in their place, so to speak, by creating conditions for successful existence that are impossible to meet. Female sexuality is further constrained by being placed in contrast to respectability, so that sexual aggression in the femme fatale, while desirable, also becomes a reason to find her morally suspect. This is because sexually aggressive behavior represents a transgression of feminine norms, insofar as women are supposed to be sexually passive in

[26] Ibid. 106

order to maintain a tenuous respectability. And yet, patriarchal systems continuously promote representations of women as hyper-sexual, creating a consumerist culture of women as sexually available objects. In effect, women are both rewarded and punished for transgressing these sexist feminine norms, which is reflected in the distrust that the femme fatale encounters in the noir plot.

The significance of female sexual desirability in the noir narrative also reinforces certain assumptions about the use value of female sexuality. The femme fatale's power, grounded as it is in her existential eroticism — her existence as beauty and sex object[27] — is easily implicated in perpetuating, rather than subverting, oppressive social conventions designed to keep women in a subservient position. After all, sex object — even sex icon — is a status designated by men in a sexist superstructure, and therefore seems to be constrained by its source — one that is structurally opposed to female agency. It is certainly true that if we accept that women's lived experience as and through sexual desirability forecloses their autonomy,[28] then focusing too narrowly on the femme fatale's sexual agency could cause us to overlook that her sexuality (and any power therein) is simply derivative of heteropatriarchal norms. In other words, her desirability seems to allow her some sort of power only because it was granted by men, and so it is a power constrained by men's use for women's sexuality. As Maddy Coy and Maria Garner argue, "such exchange-use of femininity… is shaped by restrictions created by structural factors, legitimated only by masculinity and therefore unable to claim power of its own."[29] The femme fatale, insofar

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[27] Welch, Shay. *Existential Eroticism: A Feminist Approach to Understanding Women's Oppression-Perpetuating Choices.* Lexington Books, 2015: 35.

[28] Ibid.

[29] Coy, Maddy & Garner, Maria. "Glamour modelling and the marketing of self-sexualization: Critical reflections." *International Journal of Cultural Studies*. 13. (2010). Pg. 660.

as she is implicated in a politics of male-defined female sexuality, arguably fails to challenge the material realities of continuing gender-based oppression. Without challenging material realities, it can be difficult to envision how she might effectuate any meaningful change to power dynamics.

This type of critique is frequently raised within the confines of the sexist language game, and should be taken seriously, because we ought to avoid perpetuating, or otherwise becoming complicit in, our own oppression. It is therefore a complicated terrain to navigate, particularly if we accept that the source of power has determination over its use and influence. But it is worth noting that this assumption boils down to a question of whether the source of a force in the world (like sexualization, or even sexual desire) is mastered by where it manifests. While I am not sure that all powers are completely indebted to their source, this is a frequent worry of feminist critical projects, and we ought to be attentive to the ways in which legacy can impact possibility. It is certainly the case that in a language game like the sexist language game, there is no possibility of female sexual performance serving any interests but men's. Personally, I find this highly unsatisfying, and believe there is a need for alternative interpretations of female sexual agency that are less deterministic.

Turning to the subversive language game, we find an account of sexual agency that offers subtle but significant differences to the sexist language game. In this second interpretation, the femme fatale is more than simply a symptom of the hero's fantasy realm. While she may be the object of the hero's desires, her meaning goes beyond that which is prescribed to her from the male gaze. The femme fatale therefore represents an alternative to traditional gender roles by offering a practice of eroticism that is not entirely reducible to patriarchal constructs — insofar as

its purpose is primarily for her own self-advancement, and her sexuality is only instrumentally for the purposes of male desire. She will use male desire to get what she wants or where she wants, but her end game is not male gratification, or even the exercise of being desirable — rather these things are a means to an end. This is a subtle but significant distinction; the femme fatale may gain power over the noir hero by nourishing his sexual fantasies, but her own interests remain only superficially erotic.[30] Considering the sequence of events that lead to the femme fatale's seduction of the protagonist, this interpretation offers a challenge to the sexist language game's assumptions that female sexual desirability can only serve men's purposes.

Within the subversive language game, we are offered an opportunity to recognize the femme fatale's agency within the confines of her situation. It is arguable that the femme fatale recognizes the role that she has been cast into by the protagonist, and uses her position as prey "in order to introject her own scenario into his romantic one."[31] In effect, she uses the sexist language game's blind spots to dupe the hero and manipulate the situation to her own ends, for the male protagonist could never recognize her as his equal. This presents an internal critique that showcases the limits of the sexist language game's ability to accurately represent the state of gender dynamics. Therefore, the threat of the femme fatale to the status quo manifests primarily in how she affects the social dynamic through her performance as an object and subject of desire — her willingness and ability to express herself in sexualized terms for her own benefit. The femme fatale creates a tension or resistance to the heteronormative model by using desire to assert her own power and assert control over social interactions, "largely abjur[ing] traditional ro-

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[30] Bronfen, "Femme Fatale," 106.

[31] Ibid. 108

mance and passive domesticity."[32] I believe this presents an alternative to the view that women's sexuality as desirability is shaped and limited to the model of gender as dominance.[33] It shows that the sexist language game, or the patriarchal grammar it is encoded with, is not essential or necessary. And while most likely not the noir author's intent, the narrative nevertheless shows an attentive viewer that pleasure and power are not always in the purview of the man, nor are they beholden to male structures of dominance. Rather, power is so to speak malleable, and the same set of actions may be deployed to very different ends.

**B. Purpose of the Femme Fatale**

Next, I would like to look at the femme fatale's purpose in the sexist language game in contrast to the subversive language game. In the sexist language game, the femme fatale is positioned as a tool for perpetuating male power and maintaining masculine hegemony and female oppression. Within this fits an articulation of the femme fatale as static and un-agentic sex object. In the subversive language game, the femme fatale challenges heteropatriarchal assumptions to show that there is an excess of meaning that cannot be consumed by sexist structures — an excess of meaning that points us to the existence of alternative epistemic resources for understanding women's experiences of sexual agency.

Part of what makes the femme fatale so compelling is that she seems rife with contradictions. Bronfen argues that within the sexist language game, film noir itself can be read as a "male fantasy" with a poignant contradiction:

> Even while it offers a stage for the dangerous woman, it also relentlessly plays through her demise. This is because "the myth of

[32] Boozer, Jack. "The Lethal Femme Fatale in the Noir Tradition." Journal of Film and Video. Vol. 51, No. 3/4. (1999): Pg. 20.

[33] Welch, *Existential Eroticism.*

> the strong, sexually aggressive woman first allows sensuous expression of her dangerous power and its frightening results, and then destroys it, thus expressing repressed concerns of the female threat to male dominance.[34]

While intentional or not, the destruction of the femme fatale takes on an inevitability that speaks to the role that sexualized women are given within a sexist system — namely, as something to be dominated. This is because the femme fatale poses an existential threat to the male protagonist specifically, and also men in general, by calling into question the construction of masculinity. This threat can only be contained through the destruction or domestication of the femme fatale, forcefully reasserting the primacy of masculinity, which is evidenced in the routine way in which noir film ends with the femme fatale either dead or married.[35] The logic of the sexist language game, therefore, requires that the femme fatale be destroyed in order to maintain the status quo of gender politics, because she "functions as a symptom of the noir hero's fatal enjoyment in such a way that, by destroying her he hopes to purify himself of the desire she inspired and the guilt this entailed."[36] The femme fatale's body becomes the screen upon which the male protagonist plays out his fantasies, distances his failures, and reasserts his independence and position of power. This speaks to a cultural backdrop of sexism and misogyny, where women are simultaneously devalued and feared, fetishized for the pleasure they manifest and used to reaffirm the logic of patriarchy.

Film noir therefore rather explicitly showcases the destructive repercussions of attempting to cross the boundaries set in place by sexist structures of power. The femme fatale, charac-

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[34] Bronfen, "Femme Fatale," 113.

[35] Boozer, "The Lethal Femme Fatale," 22.

[36] Bronfen, "Femme Fatale," 107.

terized by uninhibited and aggressive sexuality, is set up to fail precisely because she refuses to conform to appropriate modes of feminine existence. Her demands to be a player in the game, to assert her independence and use rather than be used, all turn her into the type of being that does not easily fit the sexist model. Jack Boozer argues that the frequency and similarity of the femme fatale's incarnations in classic noir films "clearly points to a mass market demand to see these demonstratively ambitious and dangerous women put back in their domestic 'place.'"[37] In this way, the femme fatale's ritualistic destruction at the end of her story offers a cathartic solution to a society plagued with fears and anxieties about women's sexual and economic liberation. In order to reinstate the status quo, the femme fatale has to pay for transgressing social norms, especially for being a sexual agent — perhaps even more so for being a sexual agent than for the other crimes she commits.

Within this sexist framework, where the femme fatale's only use-value is to police the behavior of women in order to reinforce the practices of appropriate femininity and desirability, the viewer might ask why the femme fatale would even attempt to free herself when her destruction seems almost pre-ordained, particularly if we conceptualize sexist gender politics as a kind of omnipotent "higher power." Bronfen claims that *Double Indemnity* offers us a possible answer to this question in a brief, but arresting, exchange between Walter (the male protagonist) and Phyllis (the femme fatale). In the scene, Walter tells Phyllis about a woman who ended up in prison after killing her husband when his life insurance claim was investigated, a situation eerily similar to the one Phyllis finds herself in. The camera closes in on Marlene Deitrich's face, the actress playing Phyllis, as she replies quietly, talking more to herself than Walter, "Perhaps it was

[37] Boozer, "The Lethal Femme Fatale," 22.

worth it to her." This brief moment provides rare insight into the femme fatale's interiority, and a glimpse at the high stakes of her actions. While Walter cannot fathom why the woman had attempted to commit what he only sees as insurance fraud and murder, Phyllis obviously empathizes with the woman's motivations, and her willingness to risk getting caught in her scheme. The gap between the two character's assessment speaks to the space separating them, both in terms of their motivation, but also in terms of their logic and grammar. As Bronfen argues, this rupture renders visible the incompatibility of their two fantasy scenarios, and offers the viewer a choice: "will we privilege Walter Neff's misogynistic description of the femme fatale in his voice over narrative, or recognize her as a separate human being, exceeding his appropriation of her, and in doing so, exhibiting an agency of her own?"[38] This choice encapsulates the possibility of switching between language games by offering a moment of disruption in which the viewer is offered the opportunity to choose one interpretation over the other.

The juxtaposition of the femme fatale's experience of her life as deeply unsatisfying with the trappings of a successful existence (for a woman) i.e. money, clothes, and wedded bliss, creates a tension that, to the outsider, may seem minimal. But for the femme fatale, it becomes unbearable, precisely because this tension illuminates what the femme fatale lacks — freedom and independence. She has nothing that is her own; even her value is dependent upon others around her, and specifically the husband she seeks to escape. So given the opportunity, or the chance encounter, the femme fatale decides to put to use that which she is used for, in order to achieve what she really wants: independence. While this is often framed as selfishness, it can equally be recognized as an act of desperation. The femme fatale *needs* to escape her situation, which takes

[38] Bronfen, "Femme Fatale," 112.

on an all-encompassing and oppressive flavor that sets the stage for her seduction of the protagonist. Her motives are not particularly pure, nor good in an unambiguous way. She toes, and usually crosses, the ethical line, navigating through the murky space to the side of morality, because for her, it is a matter of survival. And so, in her seduction and manipulations, she takes on a mercenary characteristic which foreshadows her inevitable destruction. She is fighting a losing battle because her aim is more than just money — it is something that destabilizes norms of femininity and sexual difference in a way that threatens the security of masculine power.

The subversive language game provides us with the resources to acknowledge the femme fatale as a subject of her own actions, and an opportunity to

> No longer be[] blind to the way she is anything but a screen for male fantasy. It also means overcoming a critical prejudice, which, by treating her as a symptom of masculine anxieties and not as a subject of female agency, allows us as critics to avoid the tragic message she relentlessly embodies.[39]

The femme fatale's desperation can be overlooked if we persist in interpreting her as mercurial, selfish and intent on petty destruction. But a deeper look unveils a figure who feels trapped, despairs her fate, and is willing to do almost anything to set herself free. Rather than simply being blindly destructive, the femme fatale has reason behind her actions. She may be ruthless, even merciless or cruel, but that ruthlessness serves a purpose. To limit her impact to only perpetuating patriarchal interests does a disservice to the femme fatale by turning her into a caricature, and obscuring the realities that she faces. It also shields us from the moral obligation that comes from recognizing that a harm has been done. It is far easier to "avoid the tragic message" that the

[39] Ibid. 115

femme fatale embodies in favor of seeing her as foolish, flat, and nothing more than the manifestation of masculine suspicion and distrust of women.

**C. Broader Cultural Context**

Finally, underlying both interpretations of the femme fatale's sexual agency and narrative purpose, we see that the treatment of the femme fatale within the context of film noir speaks to a broader social context.

In the sexist language game, the femme fatale trope speaks to a larger fear of women becoming more financially and personally independent, and therefore less beholden to men for survival. Noir narratives found cultural resonance in the social instability of the 40's and 50's,[40] as traditional gender norms and roles were called into question in what would later be recognized as the very beginnings of the women's liberation movement. The iconic darkness and cynicism of film noir capture the hegemonic response to the unstable social and economic conditions following the second world war, including the newly found economic independence of women who had entered the workforce by necessity only to be pushed out again when their men came home from war.[41] Once offered the opportunity to provide for themselves, and have their labor compensated, even if not at the same level as men could expect, many women were understandably resistant to the idea of being forced back into unpaid domestic labor.

In response to these cultural shifts, the classic noir plot speaks to the insecurities of men encountering new practices of feminine independence and self-sufficiency that destabilized established social norms. The femme fatale, who plots to take her husband's money, becomes a foil

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[40] Boozer, "The Lethal Femme Fatale," 22.

[41] Ibid.

for the threat of women usurping what rightfully belonged to men — particularly the ability to make money and partake in capitalist enterprise. Not only does the femme fatale try to accumulate wealth for herself, bypassing the need for a man to provide her with economic security, she does so using manipulation and deception. The implication is that women are not capable of earning their own capital without engaging in some sort of underhanded or criminal endeavor, and that any woman who is independent has gained that status through some kind of deception and therefore cannot be trusted. In effect, female independence becomes a signal for criminal behavior, which justifies the femme fatale's demise.

In the subversive language game, the femme fatale speaks more broadly to a shift in gendered power relations. It is commonly assumed that women profit from oppressive norms simply for the sake of profiting — in this case for the sake of being seen as desirable or fitting the prescribed model of a *valuable* woman. But the femme fatale shows an alternative to this model insofar as desirability is merely instrumental to what she hopes to achieve. Part of my own fascination with the femme fatale stems from how she uses that which is so often used against her for her own benefit. She turns the table on traditional dynamics of desire and attraction. And when you walk away from her story, whatever else you may think of her, it is hard to deny that she is strong, conniving, intelligent, and strategic. And yes, she is beautiful, but her beauty is an active thing rather than static and reifying — her beauty is but a starting point for her activity. She has depth; she is more than just a reflective surface for men's fantasies. She circumvents traditional roles to create new pathways, and her existence troubles the kinds of meaning-making that traditionally surrounds women.

Beauty, in a sexist system, often renders women powerless, because it becomes the determining factor of their fate. To be beautiful is to be targeted as prey, to be hunted down and reified as some status object, a living trophy. Beauty gets you trapped in loveless marriages, bartered as a good for trade, treated as property to be used for status and pleasure. A subversive reading of the femme fatale recognizes the limitations of valuing beauty as a thing in itself. Which is not to say that beauty has no intrinsic value, for there is arguably pleasure and joy to be found in the presence of beauty. Beauty adds something essential, something necessary, to our world, and participating in it brings a sense of satisfaction that is undeniable. In my more fanciful moments, I like to imagine myself as a flower of some kind, whose very presence adds something special to its environment and draws the eye, providing a moment to pause and reflect on the wonder of nature and an appreciation for color, texture and lines. I like being beautiful, not even primarily because of what it can get me, or its use-value, but because it is nice to participate in a good. I don't even mind when people tell me I'm beautiful, unless their intent is to turn me into a possession. But this is an unfortunate reality within a sexist language game, wherein beauty as a good is constrained.

I offer the femme fatale trope as a critique of beauty, not because we ought to reject its intrinsic value, but rather to showcase the mistaken assumptions made about the extent to which beauty positively impacts women's lives. The femme fatale recognizes that simply being beautiful does not give her the life she wants. This idea, that beauty is not by itself a satisfying life for a woman, contests deeply rooted assumptions about women's values and desires, especially the tacit assumption that beauty is an end point for women, and that to be beautiful is to have reached a coveted status that satisfies in and of itself. Which is not to say that beauty isn't covet-

ed, and that it doesn't impart a certain status even within the subversive language game. Rather, it is often a highly unsatisfying status, one that fulfills limited needs, and does not impart much in the way of survival. While perhaps a minute point, or even a mere technicality to some, this shift acknowledges a hermeneutical lacuna that further justifies the need to see otherwise.

The femme fatale's power and agency are also highlighted when contrasted with the passivity and helplessness she causes in those she engages with. Phenomenologically speaking, in the narrative of the femme fatale, desire and lust overwhelm the protagonist's attention, holding him "captive," so to speak, even if only for a brief moment. I argue that the femme fatale recognizes that this ability to engender desire potentially gives her the upper hand, insofar as it enables her to frame a social interaction. In film noir, this can be seen in her ability to entrance and hypnotize her victim; hence, the femme fatale today is still often described as having a power akin to an enchantress, witch, or demon.[42] While captivated by the femme fatale, traditionally active players (like men) become passive and malleable, allowing the femme fatale the opportunity to manipulate states of affairs to her advantage. In this way, I believe the femme fatale manifests new practices and description of what it means for a woman to actively encourage being encountered as a sexualized being.

Through the subversive language game, we therefore are presented with a new concept of the erotic, one which inverts the sexist language-game's understanding of eroticism, in which eroticism can have no ultimate end other than male approval. The grammar of the sexist language game forecloses the femme fatale's type of sexual agency, and arguably does her a disservice by misinterpreting or misrepresenting the rough ground of her being. Which is not to say

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[42] Ridge, George Ross. "The "Femme Fatale" in French Decadence." *The French Review* 34, no. 4 (1961): Pg. 352.

that the subversive language game should be considered the end-all-be-all of female sexual agency. Even understood as subversive, the femme fatale's eroticism is not ideal or unproblematic. But it also does not have to be to show marked improvement over the sexist language game's articulation of female sexuality.

**3. The dialectic**

By emphasizing Wittgenstein's conceptualization of language as a public shared activity, one that is always stemming from and relating to practices, we can see that the sexist and subversive interpretations are both valid insofar as they are part of different language game – respectively creating and foreclosing the possibility of subversive sexual agency. If we accept that both of these language games exist simultaneously, then the opportunity arises to make a choice. I believe that directing our attention to the existence of different language games – tied to different descriptions of practices, can create a starting point to advocate for one conception over the other. From a political standpoint, one interpretation clearly presents opportunities for empowerment that the other does not, and ultimately in this investigation I am most concerned with how ideas play out in people's lives. If agency is constituted by the norms and discourses made available to us, then I argue that it is especially important to reconceptualize tropes like the femme fatale.

Narratives/stories and pictures are often how people are placed in hierarchies, "how social stratification is made to seem inevitable and right, how feelings of inferiority and superiority are engendered, and how indifference to violence against those on the bottom is rationalized and normalized."[43] According to Wittgenstein, we are often held captive by a picture, a picture that

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[43] Langton, Rae and Caroline West. "Scorekeeping in a Pornographic Language Game," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, Vol 77, No 3. (1999): Pg. 305.

can be misleading as it shows the world (and us) in a misrepresentative way.[44] Cressida Heyes argues that to the extent that we are held captive or entranced by such a picture, we are unfree, especially if that picture does not fit our "ethical commitments, or if it limits our agency and possibilities."[45] Beholden to an image, people can fail to see otherwise, to recognize alternatives that already exist. We can also be blind to the material realities of people's lives and actions. The practices that create differences in privilege and marginalization are thus deeply intertwined with our language-games, and one cannot be changed without the other. In order to "see the world differently," we must "revisit the history of our own self-image, to see whether we might construct an alternative genealogy."[46] Constructing these alternative genealogies becomes an essential strategy for those wishing to introduce alternative ways of speaking and being.

Looking at the different practices of female existential eroticism that we have been presented with, we can see on the one hand an argument that the femme fatale exists solely to support men's sexual and social identities, and on the other hand that the femme fatale is an erotic being in her own right, rather than simply a derivative of patriarchal norms. Of course, being an erotic being in her own right does not automatically qualify the femme fatale as a radical being, but it does present an essential flaw in the patriarchal narrative. After all, this narrative requires the femme fatale to serve the promotion of sexist ideology, indeed to perpetuate the very status quo that undermines her access to agency. If we can find evidence that she disrupts this status quo, then not only are we faced with critical weaknesses in the sexist narrative, but we are forced

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[44] Heyes, Cressida J. "Pictures of the Self: Wittgenstein and Foucault on Thinking Ourselves Differently," in *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies.* Oxford University Press., 2007: Pg. 16.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

to reconsider the narrative force of the femme fatale trope. Such a disruption of established meaning introduces the possibility of seeing otherwise, illuminating deception and mistruths that have clouded our ability to recognize alternative possibilities, and it opens the door to ask: how might we understand how sexual agency operates in a way that is not beholden to these sexist structures?

This introduces a moment of possibility that is striking to someone dissatisfied with conventional approaches to understanding and categorizing sexual agency. I find myself truly excited by the possibility of creatively producing, through imaginative thinking, alternatives that allow for novelty. It is in this pursuit of understanding otherwise that I find myself looking for more in the femme fatale's story than appears at first glance. There persists an unresolved tension between her actions and the traditional interpretations that demands a certain accountability from the viewer, and if one pays attention, the predictable assumptions about the femme fatale become, to my mind, unsatisfactory, as she is revealed to represent so much more.

So although noir films present the viewer with an image of the strong, unrepressed woman, then attempt to contain her subversive sexuality by destroying her (through her murder at the hands of the hero) or converting her to traditional womanhood (through marriage),[47] it is debatable whether the femme fatale can be made to serve the status quo so easily. In fact, the ritualized destruction of the femme fatale as an attempt to foreclose the possibility of female sexual agency often seems artificial or forced, heavy handed. It seems precisely like someone trying to make a point, rather than the inevitable conclusion of her actions. As Bronfen argues,

> Even though, in the course of each cinematic narrative, the
> femme fatale loses her power both on the diegetic level (she dies)

[47] See Boozer, "The Lethal Femme Fatale" and Bronfen, "Femme Fatale."

> and on the visual level (she falls into shadows, diminishes in size, has no voice-over of her own), the disturbing power she embodies remains through the end… Her transgressions against masculine authority — killing her husband, cheating the insurance company, bringing about the demise of her disloyal lover — is what tarries in our memory.[48]

There is something about the femme fatale, some sort of *je ne sais quoi*, that stays with us, even after she is eliminated as a threat. She forces the recognition of power, destructive or manipulative though it may be, and this power is not easily dismissed. Patriarchal language games may attempt to foreclose her agency, making her an object in someone else's narrative, reducing her value to her sexual objectivity, or otherwise minimizing her agency, but she arguably remains an example of female independence and a threat to the existing distribution of power in a patriarchal society.

The femme fatale trope continues to exert force on our collective imaginations precisely because she shines a light on hegemonic structures, forcing us to confront the social construction of power and question the extent to which these constructions remain stable. She directs our attention to the rough ground of experience, that excess of meaning that cannot be contained even by the most ingrained legacies of oppression. There is something undeniably compelling about the story of the femme fatale, something that captures our attention and forces us to look closer. Superficial interpretations, while abundant, are unsatisfying precisely because she triggers a recognition that there is more to be said. The femme fatale perplexes, confuses, and otherwise obfuscates; "the meaning she assumes in any given text refuses to be fixed."[49] To greater or lesser extents, we know that women are not just objects to be acted upon. We know that a woman's

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[48] Bronfen, "Femme Fatale," 113.

[49] Ibid. 113

ambition is more than a desire for irrational destruction. The femme fatale demands recognition as a person — complex and dimensional — despite the attempts to flatten and reify. She is necessarily more than a Jessica Rabbit who was "drawn this way."

So perhaps the question we must ask ourselves is: Are there insurmountable constraints on seeing the femme fatale as subversive and agentic? Luce Irigaray argues that the main problem for women has been the lack of a language of their own or at least the impossibility of speaking of women's experience within the hegemony of masculine linguistic structures.[50] She argues that women both exist and yet are excluded from a male dominated society and language. They play the dominant language game, often conversing fluently in the language that demeans them, the language built to support sexist practices and ways of life that are inherently harmful to women. And while women also play alternative language games, these are often precluded from uptake, meaning that the experiences and practices not recognized by dominant language can have no purchase. One cannot speak what one does not have the language to voice. In this way, women have been denied the possibility of introducing new meaning into the popular context.

Rae Langton and Caroline West argue that there are some illocutionary moves that women cannot make in certain contexts.[51] Our use of language is limited by the popular grammar, by the accepted rules of what counts as meaning. Women, therefore, often find themselves "unable to alter the score of language games in the ways that they intend – and find themselves altering the score in ways they did not intend."`[52] In hostile contexts, women's words are often

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[50] Davidson, Joyce, and Mick Smith. "Wittgenstein and Irigaray: Gender and Philosophy in a Language (Game) of Difference." *Hypatia* 14, no. 2 (1999).

[51] Langton, Rae and Caroline West, "Scorekeeping," 313.

[52] Ibid. 314

used against them — they do not have the illocutionary force intended, or are received as meaningless by others. Only think of how often women are trapped by the rules of consent as configured in a sexist language game. A 'no' from a woman is often heard as a 'yes' from a listener, if it is even heard at all, begging the question of whether women really have access to consent in the first place. Indeed, the practice of entitlement towards women's bodies often precludes the possibility of women having an option, emphasizing the public construction of language. While this may seem to trap us in a perpetual loop, Wittgenstein reminds us that "the language-game is so to say something unpredictable."[53] He states that "certain events would put me into a position in which I could not go on with the old language-game any further. In which I was torn away from the sureness of the game."[54] We can see, then, that language and meaning are not fixed, given once and for all, "but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence and others become obsolete and forgotten."[55] In other words, while our use of language has inertia, it can be shifted to swing in another direction with enough force.

I submit that the reason we cannot go on anymore with our current use of language is because of its inability to articulate the practice of sexual agency as anything other than complicit in patriarchal norms. If we recognize that demeaning sexual agency is itself an oppressive act, insofar as it silences women's alternative practices and relegates them to being responsible for the harms done to them in the name of desire, then we should begin to build a new way of speaking that accounts alternative conceptualizations of sexual practices. The material consequences

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[53] Wittgenstein, Ludwig, G. E. M. Anscombe, and G. H. von Wright. *On Certainty.* Oxford, UK: Blackwell,1972. §§ 559

[54] Ibid. §§ 617

[55] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations,* 23.

of seeing figures like the femme fatale as perpetuating patriarchy – a charge often found in feminist analyses of self-sexualization and other uses of desire/lust for personal gain, creates conditions that belittle individuals for being eroticized – something that is not always within one's power to control. That we persist with a grammar and language that insists on a traumatizing and hostile account of sexual politics is unacceptable especially because we can already imagine alternative possibilities.

**4. Conclusion**

In this chapter, I look at stories because the stories we tell matter. Stories create new routes for lives to travel through — like water eroding through rock, engraving grooves and rivets that guide the droplets that follow. We follow the paths that people have taken before us, funneled in by the routes often traveled, and the deeper they are, the easier they become to slip into and perpetuate. In other words, the stories we weave have inertia, and they create expectations for how the world works. In some ways, we become our stories, and we force others to conform to the narratives that we entertain. And yet, that network of lifelines carved in the bedrock — the stories that structure our lived experience and expectations, the narratives that we are trained to see as true/natural/inescapable — if you were to take a new perspective and look down upon it, you might notice that there is much empty space waiting to be inscribed with new stories. If we can bring that negative space to the foreground, in high relief, we can start to see the possibility for something new/novel/other. All it takes is a drop to diverge, to take a left turn into uncharted territory, to pick the road less traveled. In this way, new networks of possibility can come into being.

Of course, so many of the stories available to women are sexist and unpalatable. This is hardly a surprise, as we live in a world long structured by systems of gender-based oppression. Like any good tyranny, patriarchy will use the ideological tools at its disposal to reinforce the spaces in which women are allowed to exist — and these spaces are by and large powerless, dehumanizing and victimizing. Which might beg the question: does diverging from these stories make a difference? Even if we go off the beaten track, is that space corrupted in a way that will not allow for the type of novelty that has potential to destabilize oppressive structures and inject a feminist consciousness? I believe these are the questions that lead people interested in liberation to argue that the only option is a radical rejection of what currently exists — by declaring the only option is the opposite of what we contest.

I find this strategy to have its own flaws. After all, this type of move takes the same starting point as the sexist narrative, and is therefore framed by what it fights against. Which is not to say that rejection is not a viable strategy. Sometimes what has been is so very wrong, that to do the opposite provides the best opportunity for resistance. But it seems to me that the mechanisms and impacts of sexism are not often so black and white, and the ambiguity of those boundaries between what is sexist and what is liberating can be convoluted, messy and fraught with tension. I believe that, rather than being seen as an impediment for liberatory action, this should be seen as an asset — for we have possibilities for feminist praxis present right now with the way things are, no matter how imperfect they appear. I firmly believe that those interested in dismantling systems of oppression need to be flexible and open-minded about what liberation can look like. This is in particular true of feminists, who may dismiss something like sexualization or objectifi-

cation out of hand because it has been used to harm women, but in doing so foreclose the possibility for women to take on those aspects of life willingly and without threat of victimization.

The way I see it, we have a couple of (inclusive) choices: we can reject the stories that we are told and create new ones, or we can retell the stories that we have inherited in new ways. I think both strategies are important, and in this chapter I am especially interested in the latter strategy and the possibility of recuperating or renegotiating the meanings of existing narratives about sexualized women. I find this to be a worthwhile and compelling project for several reasons. First, there's something special about taking a story meant to belittle and dehumanize, to put you in your place, and inscribing it with truth and agency. Second, stories that we are familiar with have the advantage of already participating in our collective hermeneutical resources. And third, by retelling stories we do the double work of both rejecting a particular popular interpretation that we judge to be inadequate and harmful, and replacing it with one that is more honest and representative of a certain truth that has been hidden/denied.

I believe that there is great potential in the practice of recuperating historically maligned or notorious female figures through storytelling — whether it is Lilith, or Delilah, or any other incarnation of a femme fatale. There's just something irresistible about the idea that there is more to a well known figure than has been told — that there is a story behind the story — because although women are often placed front and center in folklore and mythology, they are seldom presented as complex and compelling characters. Instead, they are often figures acted upon, used as plot points or motivations for their more active male counterparts. Not only are women confined to sexist or otherwise unpalatable roles, they seldom have a voice of their own.

When retold from the perspective of the heroine, well-known events, like the Trojan War, or Camelot, uncover women trapped by circumstance, struggling to assert agency in states of affairs brought about by the actions of gods and men. And while these stories are often tragic, because even in our imagination women are often placed in un-winnable situations, the outcome is not what is most important about a retelling — its the excavation of otherness. It is the process of raising a voice that may not have been intended by the original author, but that is viable because the character has been brought into being through storytelling, and because we can imagine it. So even though Helen of Troy's purpose was to be the "face that launched a thousand ships," Homer nevertheless brought into our collective imaginings a woman whose existence shook the world. To recover a character for her own purposes showcases the incredible power that narrative has to open possibilities for understanding women's actions and motivations in ways that are complex and resist stereotypical interpretations.

Certain language games currently only allow women to be defined in terms of their utility for male identity and heteropatriarchal norms. We are all responsible for the insistence upon this particular form of life. I (fairly uncontroversially) charge these language games with being inadequate and poorly representing the complexities of sexual agency. Changing the way that sexualized women are conceptualized, and introducing descriptions and practices into hegemonic language-games so that women can be valued as sexual agents in their own right and not solely, or even primarily, for the benefit of patriarchal systems, will require a large scale communal project. Indeed, it will require altering the grammar of our shared culture.[56]

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[56] Davidson, Joyce and Mick Smith, "Wittgenstein and Irigaray," 87.

The femme fatale presents us with the opportunity to theorize what it would mean to imagine sexualized women otherwise. To see their actions in a new way — one that may open doors for interpreting women differently — provide us with a new paradigm, one more attentive to the rough ground, so that we may play a new language game. Do I want to make the femme fatale a heroine? Not really. Its more about using her to understand how tropes often carry inherent contradictions, that they can be read in different ways to uncover new, more subversive, narratives that might offer us possibilities for seeing the world in new ways, and highlighting the systematic way in which sexual power has been denied from women and rewritten to go back to men.

Irigaray argues that feminist praxis is necessary in order to address the circuitous relationship between language-games and oppressive norms, and believes that this is the only way a feminist language game can have a chance to develop.[57] This feminist praxis, I believe, must in part be the act of redescribing traditionally heteronormative subjects or mythologies in a way that brings to light a subversive agency that exists but has been overlooked. So although the trope of the femme fatale may in part have been the sexist hegemony's way of attempting to restrict the possibility of women's agency in a way that could be co-opted to fit in and reinforce the heteropatriarchal initiatives and norms, as Lindemann says, "The original need not and should not be thought of as essential."[58] So while debate continues over whether figures like the femme fatale represent "a liberatory loosening of constraints or the mainstreaming of subordination for women,"[59] I would like to leave open the possibility that feminist praxis may allow women to

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[57] Ibid.

[58] Lindemann, "Wittgenstein meets Woman," 230.

[59] Coy, Maddy and Maria Garner, "Glamour modeling," 659.

elaborate and constitute their own erotic identities, ones that do not have to be completely divorced from the language-games in which they have participated, and that they not be held responsible for someone else's language game.

**Goodies**

I bet you want the goodies.
Bet you thought about it.
Got you all hot and bothered.
Maybe ‘cause I talk about it.
Looking for the goodies
Keep on lookin’ ‘cause they stay in the jar.[60]

[60] Ciara, “Goodies”

## Chapter 3: The Power of Pleasure

In the previous chapter, I argue that narratives have power, both to maintain the status quo, but also to create new realities. I believe that we ought to attend to narratives that describe and articulate the dynamics of sexualization and eroticism, because they speak to issues that many women find themselves embroiled in, and can serve as a starting point to create new definitions that are more suitable for women engaged in practices of critique and liberation. I have been particularly interested in women's sexual narratives, and the ways in which eroticism, desire and sexualization intertwine in their daily lived experiences. I find these experiences to speak loudly to how women show strength and resilience in the face of harmful structures of power. It also showcases the flexibility and practical intelligence of women, as they navigate states of affairs meant to harm and oppress.

The ways in which women maneuver and navigate our social fabric deserves attention and admiration, for it uncovers realities that deny malicious untruths about women's capacities, or lack thereof. But so often, women's actions are trivialized or diminished the point that their agency is discounted, or not perceived at all. I believe this is an egregious oversight, one that perpetuates the intent to marginalize women's production of knowledge. In doing so, we keep women in the position of perpetual victims of a legacy they did not create, and overlook the work that has been done to slowly come out from the shadow of that legacy. Women are left to confront histories of abuse, often without recognition that they maintain the basic capacities of personhood. Even when this personhood is acknowledged, women often find themselves faced with standards for agency that are both unrealistic and unfair, as if constraints on available actions necessarily devalue the choices that people make.

I find this to be particularly true when issues of sexuality are considered. Perhaps this is because sexuality is such a highly charged topic, with a seemingly endless legacy of violence against women, leading us to collectively confront the ways in which sexuality has long been a linchpin of women's oppression, and a mechanism through which their humanity has been denied. It has been the focus of many feminist critiques, which expound on how sexuality has been used to harm and victimize women, across centuries and cultures. And rightly so — after all, gender-based oppression rooted in sexual difference is arguably one of the more ubiquitous forms of oppression at work across time and cultures. While all of this is true, I have often been uncomfortable with how persistently feminist theory has insisted upon women's position as victim, and pursued an understanding of sexuality and eroticism as almost inherently oppressive to women. As something to suspect, to view with suspicion and distrust. To someone whose identity is invested in these categories, it can be extremely demoralizing to over and over again read the words of one's allies and see that they disparage the qualities and characteristics that you find meaningful, that have come to be an integral part of how you understand yourself.

This is why, in the last few years, I have tried to develop a personal sexual politics that better reflects how I employ sexuality, desirability, and pleasure in ways that destabilize commonly held assumptions about women's value and purpose, and potentially loosen the hold of ideological constraints associated with the sexist worldview. To combat the cycle of fear, shame and self-blame that I discussed in Chapter 1, I believe a need exists for feminist engagement with how, as Treva B. Lindsey puts it, different women carve out spaces for authoring self-actualized

sexual selves,[61] in order to widen our scope of "acceptable" sexuality. A need exists for a sexual politics that works for women situated in diverse ways, and takes seriously the different ways that women experience and understand themselves as sexual agents. While it is true that I have been focusing rather narrowly on certain particular manifestations of sexual agency throughout this dissertation, I recognize that an effective sexual politics requires the space for all different kinds of sexual performances to rise to the level of legitimate. Otherwise, we simply replace one constrictive paradigm with another.

For the purposes of this chapter, I look to the work of women who are already engaged in this type of endeavor, because their work has been such a source of inspiration to me throughout my doctoral program. It is, therefore, no exaggeration to say that this dissertation is deeply in-debted to the writings of theorists like Audre Lorde, Joan Morgan, Mireille Miller-Young, Jessica Marie Johnson, and Treva B. Lindsey, because their work speaks to my hopes of destigmatizing and reinvisioning what it means to be a sexual subject. Of course, it is worth pointing out that none of these women are writing to me, or have me in mind in the worlds they are creating, and so putting this chapter together has been a delicate process, so to speak. There are parts of these works that I simply don't have access to, or the training required to truly understand, and so I have repeatedly made mistakes based in fundamental cultural differences. But I could not write this dissertation without this chapter, because these authors created something that gives me hope and direction, both personally and professionally. They also offer philosophical guidance for a problem that I am deeply invested in solving.

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[61] Lindsey, Treva B. "Complicated crossroads: black feminisms, sex positivism, and popular culture." *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal*, 6, 1 (2013): 56.

Which is not to say that the authors included always agree with one another, or even have obvious methodological compatibility. In weaving together these diverse theories, there are moments of tension that I do my best to appreciate, and I try to avoid collapsing these different theoretical frameworks on the assumption that these thinkers ought to have similar views because they share a common community. And so while at first glance, the theorists included in this chapter may seem to have only superficial commonalities, I believe that by bringing these disparate theories together in a dialectic, a more comprehensive and practical picture of the erotic and sexual agency can come to light. I begin with Lorde because she provides a backdrop, a way of understanding the sensual, the erotic, as an integral part of humanity, one that should not be shied away from, but embraced. Lorde's theory of the erotic justifies the attempts I have made to argue that sexuality, pleasure and desire are essential capacities for identity formation and deserve philosophical consideration. I then turn to Morgan, whose paradigm of Pleasure Politics addresses some of the gaps of Lorde's conception of the erotic by providing grounded and practical resources for women looking for an alternative to theories of sexuality and eroticism that reinforce victim-status or creates dichotomies of good/bad sex. Lindsey and Miller-Young provide concrete examples of Morgan's theory at work, in the music industry and the porn industry, respectively.

I have done my best to respect the context that these theorists speak from, and their focus on black women's sexualities and embodiment in order to maintain the integrity of their frameworks. The works mentioned here explore sexuality (and explicitly black female sexuality) in ways that are novel, not because they draw on new histories and experiences, but because they look at those histories and experiences and find new paradigms for understanding sexuality, sex-

ualization, eroticism, desire and sexual politics. These paradigms create the possibility for allowing women to exist as they are, without shame, by asking the viewer to reconsider the hermeneutical resources they draw on to understand and interpret women's actions and choices, in effect placing the burden on the viewer to understand women differently, rather than expecting women to be different in order to deserve recognition. I find this approach refreshing insofar as it legitimizes ways of being that are often dismissed.

**1. Audre Lorde**

In "Uses of the Erotic," Audre Lorde articulates a conception of the erotic that is much broader than I have been using throughout this project. She positions the erotic as a kind of power, but one that has been traditionally under-recognized. However, she points out that this lack of recognition is not accidental — rather it goes hand in hand with a tradition of the subjugation of women. Lorde describes it as a mechanism of women's oppression: "In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives."[62] This idea speaks to the ways in which the erotic has been trivialized and diminished, both as a matter of critique, and as a consideration for personhood.

Of course, a suppression of power is *some* kind of recognition, but it is one that attempts to negate. For the erotic, this negation has taken the shape of suspicion and shame, as women have been "taught to suspect this resource, vilified, abused, and devalued within Western

[62] Lorde, Audre. "Uses of the Erotic," in *Sister Outsider.* Brooklyn, N.Y.: Out & Out Book, 1978. Pg. 53.

society."[63] This trivialization has led many to the false belief that "only by the suppression of the erotic within our lives and consciousness can women be truly strong."[64] And yet, paradoxically, the superficially erotic has been simultaneously encouraged, but only as a sign of women's inferior status.[65] This has created an untenable state of affairs in which the erotic is both recognized and ignored, encouraged and suppressed, valued and feared. Ultimately, it creates a system in which women are bound to lose, because the game is set up so that it is impossible for them to play. Therefore, Lorde shows us that patriarchal models of power are constructed in such a way that will not allow women to succeed, no matter what they do.

But Lorde argues that "the erotic offers a well of replenishing and provocative force to the woman who does not fear its revelation."[66] To the woman who recognizes that this power has been twisted and used for the pleasure and service of men, purposefully devalued and trivialized, there emerges the possibility of uncovering and dismantling these lies that have enabled a certain ignorance. As I mentioned before, Lorde makes it clear that the erotic has been twisted to serve male systems of power, which in itself establishes a weak point in the ideology of male supremacy — a point of tension that reveals a deeper truth — that the erotic, that deep feeling which Lorde describes, is powerful and valuable enough to be possessed. Therefore, it is not merely a product of patriarchy, or a sign of women's demeaned status, but something that predates patriarchy — chronologically and metaphysically.

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[63] Ibid.

[64] Ibid.

[65] Ibid.

[66] Ibid. 54

Although Lorde describes the erotic in depth, she does not necessarily define it as an independent concept, but rather, as is her style, as a poetic construct and a practice in our lives. She explains what it does for the woman who does not fear it, and how it impacts life. She describes the erotic as "a measure between the beginning of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings," and as an "internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experience with it, we know we can aspire,"[67] that allows us to demand more from ourselves, our lives and our work. The erotic is an "internal requirement towards excellence" and it guides us not only in our actions, but in "how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing."[68] The erotic becomes a way to measure the quality of our various life endeavors, a state to achieve in our doings, our labor. By embracing the erotic in all of our endeavors, our work becomes a "conscious decision — a longed for bed which I enter gratefully and from which I rise up empowered."[69] The erotic establishes something authentic, true and basic. I would, upon reading Lorde, even consider the erotic as a kind of intuition — or intuitive awareness of what is right, good and real — that makes our work meaningful by attending to human need.

The erotic is also something universal and accessible — a feeling that is not limited to a certain group nor does it require a particular status. In my own life, I have felt this depth of sensation when reading something truly beautiful — philosophy that makes me feel alive, that rushes through my body as if awakening every nerve. That tingling, tightening sensation, that accompanies the reading of theory that is more than simply an exercise in critique or cleverness, but an effort of love that speaks to my hopes and passions — it reminds me what theory can do in the

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[67] Ibid.

[68] Ibid.

[69] Ibid. 55

person and the world if its full potential is unleashed. And it is the same kind of feeling I get when I take a walk in the sunshine, or help someone see something differently, or lean into my partner's arms and breath him in deep. These are the moments, where I see the richness and possibility of life, the feeling of fullness and satisfaction, that (I think) I understand what Lorde refers to when she speaks of the erotic. Once attuned to the sensation, it becomes a sign of the 'rightness' of a particular choice, the validation of a chosen path. These are everyday experiences, unexceptional in appearance, and yet integral to a healthy development of self.

There is an unmistakably intersubjective aspect to the erotic, a recognition of otherness that guides the deepest feeling that Lorde speaks of — whether that otherness is the world in which you are one piece, or a person whose presence feeds the erotic within you. There would be no erotic in a vacuum, or a world alone. I believe this is why Lorde emphasizes the act of sharing when she discusses the erotic. One obvious example of this type of sharing is sex. Sex can connect us to another person in a moment of undisguised joy, from which stems a unique knowledge of ourselves and our capacity for pleasure. This type of pleasure is certainly part of Lorde's erotic, although the concept as a whole is not reducible to sexual pleasure. Rather, sex is the way in which we are most comfortable, or accustomed to thinking about the erotic within us. It is therefore a useful model for the type of deep feeling and sharing of joy that Lorde articulates, even if the erotic is not reducible to sex.

Of course, not all sex meets Lorde's criteria for the erotic, which she makes clear with her distinction between eroticism and pornography. Lorde describes these two contrasts as "diametrically opposed uses of the sexual."[70] Pornography, according to Lorde, is some kind of distortive

[70] Ibid.

reduction of the deep feeling that characterizes the erotic, transformed into "the confused, the trivial, the psychotic, the plasticized sensation."[71] Lorde describes pornography as the opposite of the erotic — sensation without feeling. It is a "direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling."[72] Pornography makes a mockery of the erotic, and turns it into something shallow, erasing the depth of feeling that comes with sensation, leaving only the most superficial of impressions.

Since Lorde describes the erotic as the "lifeforce of women,"[73] one can conclude that the pornographic is an attempt to usurp that life force, to use women for their power and sensation. Lorde claims that patriarchy attempts to erase women's capacity for joy and obstructs access to their deepest knowledge. And although "deepest knowledge" seems to be a deliberately vague term, one that implies philosophically contentious concepts like an access to *Truth*, with the implication that there is an actual truth and some kind of essentialized meaning — by deep knowledge, Lorde in fact refers to knowledge that is dark and ancient and prior to both understanding and language. This deep knowledge is a guide, an undercurrent to reason. For Lorde, saying that something "feels right to me," rather than being simply a turn of phrase, "acknowledges the strength of the erotic into a true knowledge, for what that means is the first and most powerful guiding light towards any understanding."[74] Deep knowledge is therefore that which is deepest within ourselves,[75] and by linking the erotic to deep knowledge, Lorde grounds the erotic in a

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[71] Ibid. 54

[72] Ibid.

[73] Ibid. 55

[74] Ibid. 56

[75] Ibid. 102

*before* space of awareness that is not given to language and is not privy to understanding. She describes the erotic as the "nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge,"[76] our understanding of which is only the "handmaiden which [] wait[s] upon, or clarify, that knowledge, deeply born."[77]

This deep knowledge is erased by the kinds of systematic male dominance that hold women captive, distorting the erotic into something empty and shallow. Which is why Lorde argues that "the erotic has been used against us, even the word itself, so often, that we have been taught to suspect what is deepest within ourselves, against our feelings."[78] Patriarchy has succeeded, to a great extent, in making the erotic something dirty, shameful and small — a source of shame rather than strength. And so, for Lorde the *pornographic* (a shallow distortion of what the erotic really is) becomes a tool of patriarchal systems to deny the power of the erotic, and simultaneously attempt to sustain it is such a way that it forecloses women's access to deep knowledge while maintaining sensation in the most superficial of ways. After all, the "male world" that we live in "values this depth of feeling enough to keep women around in order to exercise it in the service of men, but which fears this same depth too much to examine the possibility of it within themselves."[79] Therefore, the pornographic allows women to be "maintained at a distant/inferior position to be psychically milked;"[80] to be used for their power while maintaining male supremacy and the fiction of women's devalued status.

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[76] Ibid. 56

[77] Ibid.

[78] Ibid. 102

[79] Ibid. 53-54

[80] Ibid. 54

As Lorde emphasizes throughout "Uses of the Erotic," empowered women are dangerous because they can demand more — and the erotic is what allows them to recognize that more is both possible and desirable. As the nursemaid to "that deep and irreplaceable knowledge of my capacity for joy," the erotic "comes to demand from all of my life that it be lived within the knowledge that such satisfaction is possible."[81] The dangerous truths that the erotic reveals, makes me unwilling to accept the lies and distortions that lead to the feelings of powerlessness and resignation: "In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression and denial."[82] I no longer need to be compliant with a way of life that is fundamentally unsatisfactory when I realize that so much more is not only possible, but within my grasp. But of course, this type of awakening threatens the fabric of male supremacy, and therefore cannot come into existence without a struggle. Like any power, sexism will fight to maintain itself by twisting and manipulating the truth to its advantage. And so women "are taught to separate the erotic demands from most vital areas of our lives other than sex,"[83] in order to hide the latent power waiting in the shadows. Women are taught that we are nothing more than the sensation others can get from our bodies, that we are there to be used so that others might profit from us. We are taught that sex is our realm, and yet Lorde argues that even this space is carefully circumscribed to make sure that we do not find true satisfaction in ourselves and our

[81] Ibid. 57

[82] Ibid. 58

[83] Ibid. 55

work, lest we begin to demand more from other aspects of our lives. And so even sex loses its erotic value, becoming merely pornographic without the value and fulfillment of the erotic.[84]

But I am not so sure the by "pornographic" Lorde refers to actual pornography. I am inclined to think that this erotic/pornographic distinction is more of an illustrative concept to showcase the twisting and derivitization of those deep feelings until they are plastic, hollow and superficial — rather than referring to the tangible practice of pornography. Of course, I hardly claim access to the "true meaning" of Lorde's words, and her poetic philosophical prose does lead to certain ambiguities that have exacerbated rifts within feminist accounts of sexuality. It is no surprise that feminist theory has a long-held tradition of demonizing pornography, and particularly the pornography industry, as a symbol of women's oppression. Some have even (mis)used Lorde's own framework to create normative sexual binaries that implicate certain kinds of sexual practices as harmful. For example, Patricia Hill Collins contrasts the *erotic* with *sex/fucking*,[85] mirroring the erotic/pornographic dichotomy that Lorde articulates.

Nevertheless, I believe that Lorde, in invoking the pornographic like she does, is talking about its conception rather than its practice. The contrast between these two ways of understanding the erotic can be challenging to discern, especially if one subscribes to the Wittgensteinian theory of language proposed in Chapter 2, where the practice simply is the concept. Nevertheless, I do not think Lorde herself would ascribe to that type of theory, and so it seems reasonable to recognize that for her, the erotic as practice and the erotic as concept are related, but they are not the same. Therefore, I believe it is arguable that when Lorde speaks of the "pornographic,"

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[84] Ibid.

[85] Hill Collins, Patricia. *Black Sexual Politics : African Americans, Gender, and the New Racism*. New York :Routledge, 2005. Pg. 298

she referring to a concept within an idealized space, rather than specific tangible manifestations. That being said, it does leave quite a bit of space for interpretation, showcased by the wide range of interpretations of Lorde's text.

So while Lorde's erotic/pornographic distinction may seem to imply that pornography, as a practice, is something we should distrust and demonize, I believe we ought to take care before we read her as developing binaries of good vs. bad sex. Of course, many feminists understand Lorde in this way, and I do not have the experience and knowledge to claim authority on the matter. My hesitation stems mostly from my suspicion that Lorde would not want her words used to shame actual women, whether or not they engage in activities that reflect her concept of the pornographic. But the fact that her words have been used to defend the defamation of women's choices to participate in certain activities should give us pause — not necessarily to critique Lorde's work itself, but to ask ourselves why we may jump at the opportunity to condemn women. Instead, I find it fruitful to ask what other interpretations might exist that would allow us to understand Lorde's words in a way that does not perpetuate the association of shame with sex.

I think that this is a point where more materially grounded theory is necessary in order to investigate these questions that are messy, convoluted and rarely straight forward. There are perhaps limits to the type of theory that Lorde provides, and while it is beautiful, hopeful and poetic, it leaves us with many questions as to how to actualize her words — how to bring the positive changes she describes into reality. I believe Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic" is consistent with my commitment to destigmatizing women's existence as erotic subjects, but this will involve a willingness to get messy, so to speak. It will involve recognition that when theorizing about material realities like sexual politics, eroticism and pleasure, things will not always appear as we think

they ought to, and this is not necessarily a sign of failure. We should not allow our theoretical commitments to make us blind or deaf to the realities of real women. And to claim otherwise is to be dangerously out of touch with the daily negotiations of sexuality and pleasure that are commonplace in the lives of many women.

There is something to be said for practicality — for theory that toes the line between idealism and realism. For theory that acknowledges that things need not be perfect to be worthy of our critical attention and respect. It is also worth noting that ideal theory may have to shift and change when applied to specific contexts, and that situating our goals/desires in a particular setting may demand adjustments to what we think things ought to look like. Like Lorde, Joan Morgan seeks "a framing of the erotic that is both deliberative and expansive."[86] However, she is quick to point out that she does not condone a reading of the erotic that is opposed to the sexual, or that "implies that the erotic can only be achieved by a transcendence of mere sex, or by eschewing sex that isn't regulated to the realms of romantic love or the spiritual."[87] Instead, Morgan offers an account of erotic agency that is realistic and practical, that resists binaries and "demands space be made for honest bodies that like to also fuck,"[88] rejecting the notion that sex must be legitimized in order to be defensible. Her work is not necessarily a natural counterpoint to Lorde's, and so I would like to be clear that I am not setting up a genealogy, as they have both methodological and phenomenological differences that are significant in scope. That being said, I think these works complement one another, particularly as we investigate what new erotic para-

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[86] Morgan, Joan. "Why We Get Off: Moving Towards a Black Feminist Politics of Pleasure." The Black Scholar 45, 4. (2015): 39.

[87] Ibid.

[88] Ibid. 40

digms might look like in practice in our ever changing world. Morgan's work offers necessary insight for someone invested in an account of the erotic which defies sexist mythology.

**2. Joan Morgan's Pleasure Politics[89]**

Joan Morgan proposes *pleasure politics* as a liberatory black feminist project that "elevates the need for sexual autonomy and erotic agency without shame to the level of black feminist imperative."[90] She recognizes that the black feminist agenda has commonly engaged in disputing a wide and often contradictory spectrum of deeply entrenched stereotypes[91] around black women's sexualities that have led to the "creation of a black feminist master narrative in which black women's damaged sexuality takes center-stage as a site of reoccurring trauma."[92] In acknowledging this theoretical tradition, Morgan worries that BFT has become overly reliant on paradigms that reinforce how black women have been harmed by the sexual identities placed upon them,[93] and argues that by overstating the violence done to black women in the name of desire, black feminist theory has shown a "mulish inattentiveness to black women's engagements with pleasure — the complex, messy, sticky, and even joyous negotiations of agency and desire that are irrevocably twinned with our pain."[94] Black women's experience of pleasure is more complicated than many theories would imply by honing in on victim narratives at the exclusion of alternative depictions. She argues that disregarding the importance of pleasure and a healthy

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[89] A term I am borrowing from Joan Morgan.

[90] Ibid. 39

[91] Ibid. 36

[92] Ibid.

[93] Morgan specifically mentions "the field's most trenchant theories — specifically Kimberle Crenshaw's "intersectionality", Patricia Collin's "controlling images", Audre Lorde's deployment of the erotic, Higginbotham's "respectability politics", Hine's "cultural dissemblance."" (Morgan 38).

[94] Ibid. 46

erotic serves to "discount[] black female interiority — i.e. the broad range of feelings, desires, yearning (erotic and otherwise) that were once deemed necessarily private by the politics of silence."[95] In other words, there is much of black women's experience that is under-theorized, and therefore discredited.

Morgan therefore presents an alternative to theories of respectability that advocate or conclude in shame and victimization, showing that these are not the only options available to black women. She argues that pleasure is an "under-theorized resistance strategy for black women"[96] and that to actively emphasize pleasure as a viable theoretical paradigm:

> Encourages recognition of black women's pleasure (sexual and otherwise) as not only an integral part of fully realized humanity, but one that understands that a politics of pleasure is capable of intersecting, challenging, and redefining dominant narratives about race, beauty, health and sex in ways that are generative and necessary.[97]

This speaks to the discursively generative potential of pleasure — it has purchase in many dynamics of power that structure black women's embodied experience, and can speak to many different aspects of their lives. Morgan recognizes that pleasure, insofar as it relates to black women's engagements, commitments and desires, can be a site for challenging and subverting hegemonic norms.

Although Morgan most explicitly defines the value of pleasure in her philosophical investigations of black women's agency, I believe that Treva B. Lindsey and Mireille Miller-Young echo her commitments by showing "real-world" examples of Morgan's theory already at play.

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[95] Ibid 37

[96] Ibid. 44

[97] Ibid.

For example, Mireille Miller-Young asks: "what if pleasure is one of the most radical tools black women can mobilize to intervene in their oppression?"[98] And while I am highly sympathetic to their similar goal of emphasizing the importance of the erotic and pleasure in black women's lives, it is not necessarily clear that black women's sexuality is socially constructed in such a way that centering black women's assertions of sexual subjectivity has the impact these theorists propose. This is because the (often contradictory) controlling images of black female sexuality present particular challenges for subverting the harmful sexual tropes attributed to black women. However, I believe that the theorists in this chapter are attentive to these issues and describe how black women already engage with their sexualities in ways that provide both discursive and material possibilities to contest norms and definitions and create new ones. They also show why it is important to explore the complicated and sometimes uncomfortable spaces of explicitly sexual imagery, behavior and narratives that black women engage in because of their generative potential for disrupting popular conceptions of black women's value and eroticism.

**3. Treva B. Lindsey**

In "Complicated Crossroads," Treva B. Lindsey looks at the sexualized performances of black women in the entertainment industry, noting the burden of a unique historical legacy that "continues to affect contemporary popular representations of the black female body."[99] This unique historical legacy — one rife with dehumanization, exploitation and hypersexualization that has identified black women as "deviant, dysfunctional, inferior, and 'other-ed'"[100] — con-

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[98] Miller-Young, Mireille. A Taste For Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography. Duke University Press Books, 2014: Pg. 280

[99] Lindsey, "Complicated Crossroads," 55.

[100] Ibid. 56

fronts black women entertainers with a social imaginary of fascination, desire and fear of black female bodies.[101] Lindsey frames her discussion within this legacy to show how black women's bodies are always already subjected to discourses that place black female entertainers in a starting position invested in particular images of black womanhood. In other words, the standards that black women are measured up against are hardly built to allow for subversive readings of black women engaging with the policing tactics directed at their bodies, because the position they start from is one that confronts seemingly endless assumptions and stereotypes about their value, character and sexuality.

However, Lindsey argues that the historical legacy of dehumanizing and exploitative images of black women in popular culture does not foreclose the possibilities for black female artists claiming pro-sex standpoints. She believes that music videos, as dynamic narrative spaces, provide black music artists with the space to "challenge and manipulate racial, gender, and class specific historical entanglements,"[102] and allow them an "opportunity to function as authorial figures in the creation and dissemination of representations of African-American female bodies."[103] She specifically references the performances of Kelly Rowland and Ciara, both of whom she argues "embrace sexual desire and expressivity in their videos and claim leading and authorial roles in determining the sexualized components and parameters of their music videos."[104] For Lindsey, this signals a subversion and arguably, an "outright rejection of gen-

[101] Ibid.

[102] Ibid 58

[103] Ibid.

[104] Ibid. 56

dered racial and sexual stereotypes about black women."[105] In other words, there is something special about the way in which these women employ their sexuality in the public eye that pushes back against commonly accepted norms and scriptures associated with black female sexuality.

I admit that this is a point of Lindsey's argument that I had a hard time processing at first. While I agree that asserting the value of pleasure and a healthy erotic are important tools for liberation from oppressive sexual norms, Lindsey is less clear how, or when exactly these contestations will start to subvert norms in a way that is noticeable to particular individuals out in the world. But she nevertheless claims that the black female artists she cites "compel black feminists, particularly those invested in representations of black women, to theorize the transgressive possibilities of black women's bodies within contemporary popular music performance."[106] For Lindsey, there is something significant about the sexual performances of women like Ciara and Rowland that "illustrate a dynamic and complicated response" to the deeply embedded histories of devaluation that frame black women's sexualities.

In order to address these concerns, I would like to take a moment to unpack Lindsey's argument to better understand how the strategies she mentions might work for women. Central to Lindsey's argument is the idea that narrative spaces offer transgressive possibilities for black female performers/artists because they allow these women to author their own sexual identities. This identity negotiation — "women making decisions about their sexual selves and self-identifications based upon their desires to engage or not engage in sexual activity"[107] — is for Lindsey a mechanism that destabilizes harmful stereotypes. Lindsey argues that artists can contest tropes

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[105] Ibid.

[106] Ibid.

[107] Ibid. 58

of black female sexuality by taking authorial roles in their sexual representation, and that these authorial roles allow them to challenge popular narratives by giving them the publicly available space to create and perform their own identities. This is arguably subversive because it resists determination from the outside. It demands recognition of autonomy and agency, both of which are systematically denied to women and black women in particular. In other words, the assertion of the "right to the explicitly sexual within potentially objectifying spaces such as music videos signals a subversion and/or outright rejection of gendered racial stereotypes that police the public behavior of African-American women,"[108] because they create alternatives for black women's sexual realities that can begin to infiltrate our collective hermeneutical resources and hopefully become accessible to all women.

Demanding multiple possibilities for sexual expressivity, particularly for bodies confronting "stultifying stigmas" rooted in racist/heterosexist/patriarchal discourses, forces us to reconsider our most basic reactions to women's sexual expressivity — ranging from "fear to disgust to fetishization to desire."[109] As Lindsey notes, because their movements are so sexual, for many, figures like Ciara and Kelly Rowland (and more contemporary figures like Beyonce and Rihanna) become symbols of the *changing-same*[110] with regards to representations of black women in popular culture, i.e. the more things change the more they stay the same. This accusation reflects "a perpetual discomfort with explicit sexuality forming part of black women's sexual identities,"[111] a discomfort that is pertinent because of the harm done to black women in the

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[108] Ibid.

[109] Ibid. 56

[110] Ibid. 60

[111] Ibid.

name of their sexuality. Similarities in appearance, especially superficial similarities, can be read as perpetuating a long history of oppression, and erase transgressive possibilities. But discomfort is not license for dismissal, and performing sexuality publicly should be recognized as more than the changing-same insofar as it demands recognition of autonomy, self-definition and self-ownership.

Lindsey argues that despite the potential for objectification, which is always present in visual imagery, the "lyrical narrative coupled with the moving visual provides [these women] with a space to control and manipulate how the audience gazes upon [their] bod[ies]."[112] It matters that these women deliberately perform their sexualities, that they do so consciously and decisively. This deliberate performance allows them to set the tone of their sexual expressivity, and helps frame, although it cannot determine, the reception by the audience. In effect, she argues that Rowland and Ciara, by deliberately portraying themselves as sexual agents, assert black female subjectivity in a way that does not sacrifice the erotic for respect. They push back against the objectification of black women's bodies by deliberately positioning themselves as agents. And while it is true that any action is,

> Always mediated through existing power structures such as record companies and television networks as well as a popular culture landscape in which sexism, misogyny, heterosexism, racism, and patriarchy continue to flourish, it is important to recognize that racial and sexual stereotypes should not preclude possibilities for African-American female artists to author and participate in sex-positive representations of African-American womanhood. [113]

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[112] Ibid. 58

[113] Ibid.

Lindsey expresses a reasonable concern that we not restrict black women's access to meaningful sexual performances on account of misrepresentations created to oppress. Holding these women accountable to these racial and sexual stereotypes may serve to further marginalize their voices and control their meaning-making capacities.

Instead of assuming that they are coerced into the way they represent themselves (often with movements and clothing that fairly explicitly summon their sexuality), we should ask why they choose to represent themselves in such a way. The answer could reveal an agentic standpoint that subverts the generally accepted rationality that black women only behave in these ways because they are victims of a sexist system. I take her to be saying that there is something particular about black women's experience that makes the assertion of sexual subjectivity especially important. Sometimes we must delve deeper in the things that have caused us historical pain — that have dehumanized and terrorized — in order to find new ways of understanding ourselves. Historical legacies can only be broken when we recognize an alternative to the story we have been told. And those alternatives may take effort to bring into being — it may take practice to become viable. New paradigms become relevant because we demand them, arguably in the way that these women demand recognition of their sexual agency through their erotic performances.

Lindsey recognizes that sexuality deserves critical attention, that it has under-acknowledged generative and liberating capacities, and that it is something marginalized bodies can use to their advantage. She also thinks that representing black female sexuality in such a way will force black feminists to critically consider how the "'gray area' of black female sexuality and

black female hypersexuality"[114] might offer possibilities and not only constraints on black women's agency and choices. While recognizing that these constraints exist, Lindsey puts forward what looks like a cautionary tale to feminists, warning us to recognize that our current interpretive frameworks can cause us to misread pro-sex black feminist performance, erase agentic and self-authoring capacities, and consequently "imprison black female sexual expressivity."[115] This is a lesson that is pertinent to all individuals engaging in feminist politics, as it is a reminder of the role we all play in enforcing certain stereotypes that constrain our interpretive frameworks. If we are serious about liberation, we need to be open to the ways in which women, including the black female entertainers that Lindsey engages with, choose to represent themselves, regardless of whether or not it fits our model of respectable womanhood. The discomfort that we may feel is not license to dismiss a woman's choices out of hand.

**4. Mireille Miller-Young**

In *A Taste for Brown Sugar,* Mireille Miller-Young looks at the American porn industry, and specifically at the experiences of black female porn actresses. Her interest in the porn industry as a context for investigating black women's sexuality and erotic agency is in some ways reminiscent of Catherine MacKinnon, insofar as they both conceive of pornography as reflecting popular culture, and reproducing the values, fantasies and fears of society. However, unlike MacKinnon,[116] Miller-Young thinks that pornography has positive creative potential for black women. She argues that by bringing previously illicit subcultures, communities, and sexual prac-

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[114] Ibid 62

[115] Ibid. 63

[116] MacKinnon is particularly well-known for her firm anti-pornography stance.

tices into the public eye and into other modes of culture,[117] pornography has made black women's sexualities more visible, and is therefore a space in which they can publicly manipulate and define their sexuality (an argument reminiscent of Lindsey's).

Making black women's sexuality more visible has subversive potential in at least two ways: it forces uptake and recognition of what is often hidden/ignored, and, coming from black women, it allows for more authentic/truthful representations of the diversity of black women's experiences as sexual agents. Both of these destabilize commonly accepted norms and bring into question the viability of the status quo. Harmful legacies cannot be contested if they remain unseen, and so there is something to be said for the public performance of sexuality. These performances force us to confront our assumptions and beliefs, work through our discomforts and recognize the existence of other persons.

Like Lindsey, Miller-Young traces the nature of desire for, use of, and pleasure in black women's sexuality (in the United States context) to the sexual economy for black women's bodies under slavery. According to Miller-Young, the pervasiveness of the cultural mythologies associated with slavery has restricted black porn actresses' access to various roles, often forcing them into the position of reproducing denigrating stereotypes like the 'ho' if they want to make a living. For Miller-Young, the 'ho' trope is a pejorative catch-all which describes "a class of women who are perceived to represent multiple legitimacy crises — the 'disappearing' black family, epidemics of teen pregnancy, HIV/AIDS, and even the materialism and consumerism of black youth culture."[118] Because of this, black women in porn face censure for participating in

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[117] Miller-Young, "A Taste For Brown Sugar," 7.

[118] Ibid. 163

the very same cultural standards that undermine their value, and reinforce the inherent label of deviance forced upon them by white supremacist cultures.

The apparent willingness with which these porn actresses play into harmful stereotypes for the consumption of (mostly white) men arguably reinforces their role in the continued production of negative tropes about black women, with the result that they are often considered irredeemably complicit and shameful. In many cases, feminists politically and ideologically distance themselves from women in the sex industry because they are seen as too deeply invested in the very structures that feminism contest, and this is particularly the case when it comes to black women, who traditionally face harsher scrutiny and censure for their sexual habits. Miller-Young argues that instead of turning away from women in porn in an effort to "recuperate ourselves from myths and violence associated with black sexual deviance,"[119] we should work to recognize that black women in the sex industry are much more than simply victims or puppets — they are "active social agents" who use "alternative economies" to work within and against structural and discursive constraints.[120] It is important to recognize that working *within* and *against* are not mutually exclusive possibilities, and that participation in sex work writ large does not invalidate a woman's claim to agency. These sorts of restrictions serve only to further erase these women's testimony.

Miller-Young presents an alternative interpretation of black women working in the porn industry. She argues that these women use their sexualities strategically for both social mobility as well as everyday survival, in effect having both long and short-term goals. Referring to this as

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[119] Ibid. 145

[120] Ibid. 7

a trick-off, a game, or hustle,[121] Miller-Young argues that black women in porn have learned to capitalize on their sexual performances,[122] in order to attempt to exceed the limits of their often devalued roles.[123] In doing so, these women bring to light the often concealed fact that "while black women may be characterized as valueless hoes, in fact both white and black men benefit a great deal from commodifying black women's sexualities."[124] An under appreciated reality is the substantial amount of money made from exploiting black women's bodies and sexuality, and yet very little of it benefits the women themselves, effectively reinforcing their "value-less" status. Uncovering the ways in which men invest in black women's sexuality while simultaneously discrediting it helps to contest the assumed non-value of black women's sexuality. This, in turn, creates the space for black women in porn to "employ, repel, or rework those images, reshaping representation"[125] in order to provide more complex meanings for black female sexualities — meanings not limited to those created specifically to reinforce an exploitative state of affairs.

This idea that black women put hypersexuality to work in strategic ways[126] may seem paradoxical, but Miller-Young argues that this speaks to the inadequacy of our interpretive frameworks rather than the impossibility of black women's potentiality. Because self-commodification and investment in sexualized performance are equated with objectification rather than subjectivity in many feminist frameworks, sex workers (understood broadly) are often treated as

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[121] Ibid. 11, 49

[122] Ibid. 176-7

[123] Ibid. 146

[124] Ibid.

[125] Ibid.

[126] Ibid. 11

flat and undynamic caricatures that are denied the complexity given to other kinds of workers,[127] regardless of the magnitude of their labor. But black women in porn are in fact engaged in complex negotiations between "contestation of and consent to damaging images that constantly evolve and take on a life of their own."[128] As Miller-Young argues, these harmful and demeaning tropes are not static but historical and evolving, and women actively infuse these narratives with new meanings through their "illicit eroticism"[129] and "erotic sovereignty,"[130] terms that I will explain below.

Miller-Young described erotic sovereignty, which she also calls sexual dissent,[131] as a process, rather than a state of being,

> Wherein sexual subjects aspire and move toward self-rule and collective affiliation and intimacy, and against the territorializing power of the disciplining state and social corpus. It is part of an ongoing ontological process that uses racialized sexuality to assert complex subjecthood, inside of the overwhelming constraints of social stigma, stereotype, structural inequality, policing, divestment, segregation, and exploitation under the neoliberal state.[132]

By emphasizing complex subjectivity, erotic sovereignty disrupts deeply entrenched discourses of "sexual responsibility, gendered propriety, and racial loyalty."[133] The recognition that people are complex, that their commitments may at times contradict one another, and that the deployment of sexuality is not determined by established norms, creates the opportunity to reconfigure

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[127] Ibid. 178

[128] Ibid. 165

[129] Ibid. 11

[130] Ibid. 16

[131] Ibid. 203

[132] Ibid. 16

[133] Ibid. 203

the erotic negotiations of black women in pornography. And while these women make up a very small portion of women in general, the power dynamics they navigate mirror those of many women, as the sex industry is in many ways a microcosm of our collective sexual politics. Therefore, it behooves us to pay attention to the mechanisms and strategies that these women have developed, consciously or otherwise, to not only survive in an arena built to exploit them, but to thrive.

Miller-Young argues that by using their sexualities strategically, black women in pornography aspire to material survival and security, but also to define their own sexual needs and desires outside of everyday exploitation.[134] In this way erotic sovereignty, or sexual dissent, "prioritizes, or at least aims toward, an autonomous, independent, and self-defining sexuality, while also acknowledging the forms of affiliation, relation, and responsibility that sexual subjects have to one another."[135] Erotic sovereignty is not an excuse to disregard our intersubjective commitments, or place self-interests before our community responsibilities. Rather it is a mechanism through which these highly stigmatized women bracket the judgments and assumptions aimed towards their bodies in order to articulate sexual identities that have practical value. The recognition of the inadequate existing sexual narratives is already subverting popular conceptions of black women, if only we can change our frame of reference to better see it.

Our second term, illicit eroticism, gives us the background for erotic sovereignty by "provid[ing] a framework to understand the ways in which black women put hypersexuality to use."[136] It is a term used by Miller-Young in two slightly different contexts: first, to identify a

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[134] Ibid. 146

[135] Ibid. 203

[136] Ibid. 11

repertoire unique to the realm of sexual and sexualized labor; and second, to describe how black women use, manipulate, and deploy their sexualities within the economic sphere.[137] According to Miller-Young, the tactics of illicit eroticism are threefold:

> First, black women in pornography use illicit eroticism to intervene in the **realm of representation**, working around, against, and through often-stereotypical roles to produce illicit erotic images of black female sexuality. Second, black female porn performers use illicit eroticism in the **realm of personal development and exploration**, using erotic performance as an opportunity to have new sexual experiences, and presenting themselves and their biographical experiences as courageous, groundbreaking, and transcendent, not exploited or victimized. Finally, illicit eroticism is useful to black women navigating the **field of pornography as an industry**. The industrial tactics of illicit eroticism include black women's use of their sexual capital for material survival, the ways in which their participation in the industry may provide space for future actresses to enter, and their ability to take control of the means of production.[138]

Miller-Young uses 'illicit eroticism' to describe tactics available to those whose sexualities have been subject to a tradition of erasure, and have historically been identified as illicit, in order to change the roles they have access to, develop an attitude of playfulness in exploring and developing new sexual identities, and impact the industry in which they work for immediate survival as well as future change. Illicit eroticism therefore "conceptualizes how these actors use sexuality in ways that necessarily confront and manipulate discourses about their sexual deviance while remaining tied to a system that produces them as marginalized sexual laborers."[139] In other words, black women in pornography can be seen to work within their industry with the intent of changing the ways in which they are perceived. The fact that they continue to rely on the pornographic

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[137] Ibid. 182

[138] Ibid. 266 (emphasis mine)

[139] Ibid. 16

industry, which is deeply invested in racist and sexist structures, for material survival does not foreclose their ability to overcome their exploited or victimized status. In fact, many of the women that Miller-Young speaks to deliberately use their sexual capital, and commodify their sexualities, as part of the strategic and tactical labor they use in capitalist economies.[140]

This type of strategic labor recognizes that "consumer demand for one's sexuality, including (but not limited to) the unspeakable, taboo desire for racialized erotic fantasy that dominates most markets for black-oriented adult entertainment,"[141] provides a starting point to assert one's value in a realm that reinforces black women's valueless-ness. By deploying their "sex, sexuality, and eroticism in ways that promote one's human capital, survival, and self-care in the face of enormous impediments,"[142] black women in porn are able to "navigate a sexist, racist, and classist society by using their embodied, or corporeal, resources for material survival."[143] They engage meaningfully with the power dynamics that they are embroiled in, both resisting and acquiescing at different times and in different ways.

**5. Discussion**

Both Lindsey and Miller-Young engage in commendable efforts to excavate and establish positive and empowering sexual identities and practices for black women in a contemporary context. They work to show how black women make sense of their sexual lives, take seriously the testimony of black women who engage in sexual politics, and witness the ways in which black women refuse to be shamed into accepting a starting position of sexual victimization. They also

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[140] Ibid. 182

[141] Ibid. 183

[142] Ibid.

[143] Ibid. 182

outspokenly contest the suspicion and dismissal of black women's claims to agency, and their complex deployment of sexuality for their own benefit and pleasure.

Of course, it is important to reflect upon whether the examples mentioned in their work — of porn actresses and pop stars — are translate-able. Will they impact representations in a way that can be later picked up and manipulated by all women? Do they serve as a model for what women can do if they desire to? I believe as prominent and visible examples of women deeply invested in sexuality, they at the very least have a right to be heard. Their experiences and testimony of the way sexuality works for them should be recognized — and I am included narrative and theatrical representations (like music videos) — as constituting a kind of testimony here. It is also important to recognize who Lindsey and Miller-Young look to for insight into the workings of sexual politics — namely, women engaged in these politics in concrete and explicit ways. If we stay true to our commitment to reframe existing narratives about female sexuality, then it would seem especially important to listen to the ways in which differently situated women already do this work.

In "Why We Get Off" Morgan states that the project of pleasure politics asks two important questions: "What possibilities can a politics of pleasure offer for black feminist futures?" and, "Specifically, how can deepening our understanding of the multivalent ways black women produce, read and participate in pleasure complicate our understanding of black female subjectivities in ways that invigorate, inform and sharpen a black feminist agenda?"[144] I obviously cannot speak to some of the specificities of these questions as a white woman. But, as I have tried to show in this chapter, there is much to learn from these discussions, and it is worth attending to

[144] Morgan, "Why We Get Off," 46.

the specific spaces that these theorists work in. By engaging with these various works, I hope to promote a more communal understanding of sexual politics, one which takes seriously the diversity of approaches that women take to understanding and acting out their sexual identities. It behooves me to listen to women who are different than me, not only because I owe it to them to pay attention to their experiences, but also because I can learn something valuable by paying attention.

The paradigms and practices of eroticism proposed by these different authors deserve attention and bear witnessing because they present important possibilities. I am particularly receptive to the idea of centering pleasure and satisfaction in our sexual paradigms, as they provide a necessary intervention to the stagnant tradition of victimizing narratives. That being said, I am not sure that I can be explicit as to how these contestations will start to subvert norms in a way that is noticeable to the general public, and therefore has an impact on the collective hermeneutic resources used to understand women's sexual agency. It will certainly depend on uptake, and specifically, uptake by a significant enough portion of the public to be considered a valid position. However, I also do not think that this is as difficult as it may seem at first glance. After all, we witness the changing of meanings throughout our lives. It is a common experience, and one in which we all take part. However, it does underscore our dependence on our communities to create new life practices and ways of thinking.

It is important to pay attention to how both Miller-Young and Lindsey emphasize that we must all actively participate in changing the ways that we interpret women's actions and motives. We need frameworks that better suit the types of sexual agency exhibited by women, and we need to actively push these frameworks into mainstream understanding. As Miller-Young argues,

agency, even if it goes to work within larger embedded relations of subordination, should be recognized as a *dialectical capacity* "for progressive change as well as everyday survival."[145] There is a give and take when it comes to matters of agency, and our ability to impact our environments in the ways we wish. Sometimes, what will help us survive another day is not entirely compatible with what will help us succeed in the long run. A successful politics of sexuality must recognize this dialectical capacity between making moves for now and for later, for oneself and one's community, and for survival as well as change. Moving forward, we should consider how we can shift the conversation from that of adaptive preferences, or complicity in oppression, to what Lindsey describes as the excavation and establishment of female-authored sites of sexual expressivity.[146] We must grow to be receptive to the work that women do to liberate themselves, even if it presents contradictions or tensions.

Which is not to say that public performances of sexuality are never problematic. Rather, "problematic" is not a death sentence. Problematic does not invalidate a position in and of itself, and if we are willing to bracket "problematic" we may come to learn something important from the experiences of women that we tend to disregard. By listening to the testimony of women engaged in these dynamics, I believe we will find perspectives and strategies that are vital to destigmatizing women's existence as erotic beings.

The varied accounts presented in this chapter all have something to say about how we ought to re-envision the erotic in order to release women from the stranglehold of sexist, and racist, structures. And while each author understands the practice and conception of the erotic in

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[145] Miller-Young, "A Taste for Brown Sugar," 17.

[146] Lindsey, "Complicated Crossroads," 60.

different ways, they all have something valuable to offer the person interested in liberation. Lorde provides a way of articulating the erotic as an integral aspect of a life worth living, one which validates the erotic as something primal and indispensable — and therefore worth the time and energy necessary to recover it from illegitimate usages. By tying the erotic to deep knowledge, to something prior to understanding, Lorde also shows that it is something prior to the manipulations of sexism and racism. Morgan provides a targeted and textured account of contemporary black women's sexual identities that is grounded in specific interventions. Hers is an important counterpoint to Lorde's, one that does not rest on any sort of dichotomous conceptualizations of sex and sexuality. Lindsey offers us a more nuanced look into some very visible examples of black female sexuality at work in public spaces, and warns us not to underestimate the power of authoring one's own sexuality. Finally, Miller-Young offers a look into the lives and labor of women deeply invested in eroticism, in order to problematize some of the assumptions made about these women, and showcase their creativity and strength in developing strategies for both short and longterm survival.

**6. Conclusion**

In this dissertation, especially with the goal I have in mind of articulating a sexual politics for women invested in sexualization that nevertheless has liberatory potential without impossible standards, I find myself limited insofar as my performance and exhibition of sexuality are, in comparison to many other women, protected if not respected. It is not enough to talk about how life might be better for me if the world learned new sexual paradigms that don't dehumanize and derivatize women, because I am not the only one impacted by these dynamics. In other words, while this project is certainly self-interested, its importance is not solely on account of potential

improvements to my life, as I cannot change the world for myself without changing it for others too. Nor would I want to. The experiences I have of being sexualized are rooted in structures of power that are necessarily intersubjective, as they put me in relation to other people. Therefore, my struggles and fears and hopes are intimately tied with those of many other people, and I desire to work for them at the same time as I would ask them to work for me.

While this desire is perhaps commendable, I've not always gone about this the right way. Like many other white women, I've fallen prey to the privilege that allows me to be incredibly self-centered in my work, political goals and personal aspirations. And while I would consider my studies, invested as they are in feminist theories of race, sexuality and power, as effective training for knowing better, I have nevertheless faltered, and showcased the types of ignorance inherent in the privilege from which I profit. This, I believe, has been particularly evident when I've worked with black feminist theory and black feminist accounts of sexuality, perhaps because my whiteness is deeply implicated in these accounts. It is not surprising then that I find myself navigating the reality that while I want to be part of the solution, I am also part of the problem.

I have come to understand that solidarity requires a healthy dose of humility. I have learned that "me too" is not always the right way to approach common ground.[147] At best, "me too" misses the point of someone else's experience, at worst, it does violence by attempting to erase the particularities of another's differences. And while I do not wish to be that type of person, I do wish to learn from those who are different from me, and find truth and hope in their experiences and knowledge. Figuring out how to do this in a respectful and appropriate manner is not particularly simple, especially because philosophical methodology is not immune to co-opt-

[147] Incidentally, I wrote this before the introduction of the "me too movement" into popular culture, and am not intending to direct any judgment towards that particular cultural phenomenon.

ing the production of knowledge of marginalized groups. These conflicts mean that reading BFT is not a carefree activity but one in which I work to actively remind myself that it is not about me, and that my place is not at the center.

The women cited in this paper write beautiful, meaningful narratives that deserve to be held up as examples of exceptional feminist theory. They present us with a particularly necessary conversation to have if we are interested in liberatory sexual politics, i.e. ways of conceptualizing and acting out sexual politics that dismantle oppressive systems and create vibrant new possibilities for sexual subjects. And while it is not obvious how these narratives relate to my experience or offer something that I can use, considering my particular mix of identities, I think there is value in working across difference. I also believe that coalition building, both in our theory and activism, is vital for introducing real change. Of course, effective coalition building is thwarted by the aforementioned privileged point of view, and so people like me need to actively work to address the ways in which we make poor partners for change, and how we can be more accountable in the future. In this vein, I have started weeding out certain terms from my vocabulary, including *borrowing*, *transferring*, and *translating*, and replaced these with the idea of *thinking with*. Thinking with requires thoughtful and active listening that is supportive and unselfish.

Perhaps I am simply repeating what Lorde and Morgan have already recognized: that this ought to be a labor of love.[148] I hope to participate in imagining new erotic possibilities for women, because I am dissatisfied with the limited options currently available. And these new

[148] Morgan writes: "I share this piece as a reminder (to both the reader and myself) that inherent in the noble search for new directions in BFT is the diffident, exciting, uncertainty of that new-new — that tricky, impolitic thing that positions itself precariously on the firm foundation of black feminist intellectual labor and a destabilizing, clearly crunk willingness to strip the house down to its structural beams, if necessary. Like all successful renovation projects, it is driven by love…this is not a comfortable or easily habitable space." (Morgan 40)

possibilities ought to exhibit both fluidity and flexibility, in order to address the needs of "the enslaved to the pop star to the sex worker."[149] This will be a collective project, so that no group assumes the position of 'neutral,' or the capacity to speak for others. And collectively, I believe we can engage in sexual identity negotiations that constitute a project of accountability and healing.

[149] Morgan, "Why We Get Off," 38.

**Daddy**

Is it that much worse than ‘baby’?

## Chapter 4: False Consciousness

Charges of false consciousness often accompany many of the topics covered in previous chapters, particularly around sexuality, desire and the sexualization of women. False consciousness strikes at the heart of the experiences that drive this entire project, because it is the most potent theoretical obstacle to overcome in my pursuit of sexual paradigms that allow for more empowering and agentic erotic identities. It is a charge that has often been sent my way, along with the implication that I am lacking in some critical capacity as evidenced by choices that I have made, or just some aspect of myself. One could say it is therefore something I have not only academic, but personal, interest in. While I feel a great deal of affinity with many aspects of feminist theory, false consciousness is a concept to which I have always been resistant, perhaps because it threatens that which is not merely a professional preoccupation, but an effort of survival.

I have decided to finish this dissertation with a systematic account of false consciousness in order to address the ways in which these accusations infringe upon women's spheres of action, and limit the ways in which they can cultivate a disruptive sexual identity. While I do not reject the notion of false consciousness, I find it to be a loaded concept, easily misused and inappropriately applied, particularly with the intent to demean or invalidate experience. Of course, I am not the first person to cast a critical gaze on the purpose and function of false consciousness in feminist theory/praxis, but I hope that my personal entanglements with the concept will elucidate the caution that I would like to instill in our invocations of false consciousness when we address women's choices and actions.

## 1. Genealogy of false consciousness

False consciousness, as a philosophical concept, can be traced back to Marxist theory on capitalism. For Marx and Engels, false consciousness was a form of consciousness produced by the life practices of capitalist society,[150] and therefore intimately tied to capitalist ideology. In traditional Marxist theory, the "relation between false consciousness and ideology is conceived of in terms of the relation between social existence and social consciousness, a relation between who one is (objectively) and about what one (subjectively)."[151] For Marx and Engels, ideology described the distorted beliefs held about a society while false consciousness described the ways in which individuals were deluded about their own beliefs.[152] This idea of delusion — that people can be misguided about the source of their beliefs — is central to the organizing power of false consciousness and ideology because it provides a mechanism for falsehoods to be propagated as truth.

Marx and Engels also argued that false consciousness was the normal way of perceiving and acting within capitalist society,[153] because the commodity relations of capitalism permeated all spheres of society, and thus the logic of capitalism became part and parcel with people's everyday experiences. False consciousness therefore affected everyone's perception and construction of reality, whether they were bourgeois or proletariat, because their class position demanded a structural blindness to capitalism as a social system and cultural organizing force. In this way, false consciousness is a necessary instrument in the domination of both the ruling bour-

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[150] Eyerman, Ron. "False Consciousness and Ideology in Marxist Theory." *Acta Sociologica* 24, no. 1/2 (1981): 44

[151] Ibid.

[152] Ibid.43

[153] Ibid. 45

geoisie and working class in the capitalist system,[154] bringing their disparate interests in line with one another.

With this theoretical backdrop, we see that, generally speaking, false consciousness can be described as the holding of beliefs that are contrary to one's interests and which contribute to the disadvantaged position that a person/group finds themselves in. False consciousness is necessarily produced by an accompanying ideology — a way of thinking about the world that false consciousness supports by ambiguating or otherwise distracting attention from certain truths. It is, in essence, a way in which people lie to themselves that serves a system of power that they are harmed by. False consciousness is an arguably necessary component of any exploitative system, because it accounts for the participation of those who are oppressed. Without false consciousness, it would be hard to explain why people choose to perpetuate systems in which they are harmed. Therefore, false consciousness serves a distinct theoretical purpose in most conceptualizations of social power dynamics.

**2. Feminist accounts of false consciousness**

Within feminist theory, the notion of false consciousness is derived largely from Catherine MacKinnon's work on sex and consent.[155] MacKinnon argues that the social and cultural conditions of patriarchy compel women to consent to states of affairs that "they do not authentically desire and that is often against their physical, dignitary and political interests."[156] Not only do women consent to these practices, they are also trained to desire, or otherwise willingly en-

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[154] Ibid.

[155] See MacKinnon, Catharine A. "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory." *Signs* 7, no. 3 (1982): 515-44. and MacKinnon, Catharine A. *Toward a feminist theory of the state*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989.

[156] Wells, Shallyn. "Feminism, False Consciousness & Consent: A Third Way." 18 *Geo. J. Gender & L.* 251 (2017): 254.

gage in them. MacKinnon focuses particularly on how the system of patriarchy conditions women's sexual practices and expectations, especially as structured by heterosexual intercourse, which she considers to be endemic to the devalued status of women in a sexist system. She argues that sex, in particular, is a space in which gendered power relations manifest and play out to the detriment of women, because "sexuality is to feminism what work is to marxism,"[157] and is therefore a space primed for false consciousness. According to Wells, for MacKinnon, women are conditioned to patriarchal sexual practices in three ways:

1. Coercive social context — Women are conditioned to submit to sexual activity with men for fear of the consequences of not submitting to sexual activity with men. This fear of harm creates a social context that exerts pressure on women's actions.[158]
2. Habit formation — Women come to normalize a baseline of having sex that they do not really want and that is often not in their interest, considering it to be normal.[159]
3. Adopting patriarchal interests — Women submit to this type of sexual activity that is not in their interest, and that they do not really want, because "they have come to desire submission; degradation has become sexy; the threat has become foreplay. Women have, under this theory, adopted the interests of patriarchy as their own desires."[160]

It is this third level, wherein women come to desire the interests of the sexist system, that is regularly referred to as false consciousness. In effect, by adopting patriarchal values, women invest in the very ideological systems that are the basis of their oppression, allowing these harmful ideologies to frame their identities and desires. Therefore, for someone like MacKinnon, in a move strongly reminiscent of Marx and Engels' theory of capitalism, if patriarchy is the ideology, then "desiring sex that is physically and psychologically contrary to one's interests is the false con-

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[157] MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism and Method," 515.

[158] Wells, "Feminism," 254.

[159] Ibid.

[160] Ibid. 255

sciousness."[161] It is not simply the acceptance of, but the desire for, sex that is harmful and demeaning which constitutes women's false consciousness under patriarchy.

False consciousness is sometimes also referred to as "adaptive preferences,"[162] which is the idea that women's choices under patriarchy are not 'real' choices because they are in fact prompted by the interests of a system which is structurally opposed to women's dignity and flourishing. They are choices 'adapted' to patriarchy, and thus conditioned by oppressive social contexts to such an extent that they should be viewed with skepticism and suspicion. Wells argued that, for MacKinnon, within the context of heterosexual activity, and under the hegemonic regime of patriarchy, "women's desires are conditioned by the limited options made available to them…these societal limitations are internalized as personal choices and desires, which in turn inform how and when consent is given and desire is felt."[163] According to this logic, women's access to authentic desire is blocked by patriarchal ideology to the point that their consent can hardly be understood as such, since it is given within a context in which there is no adequate alternative. In order to avoid confronting the reality of their lack of ability to choose for themselves when consent is given and when desire is felt, women learn to see that which is forced upon them as a choice. In other words, women lie to themselves about their desires in order to ignore their lack of choices, and therefore willingly participate in a system that demands they act against their own physical, social, and political interests. Women's desires and inclinations therefore take on a suspect quality that reinforces that women's intentionality cannot be trusted, as they become a benchmark of how ingrained patriarchy is in women's everyday decision making

[161] Ibid. 256

[162] Ibid. 258

[163] Ibid.

processes. The logic of this type of feminism concludes that if women wish to be liberated, they must then act against their felt desires, insofar as these desires are conditioned by patriarchy.[164]

To summarize, arguments about the existence of false consciousness attempt to explain behavior through which an oppressed group contributes to, or perpetuates, the patterns of its own oppression. They do so by describing "such actions as being the product of internalization, by the oppressed group, of essential elements of the dominant ideology," and "describ[ing] this internalization of and determination by ideology as occurring beyond the conscious comprehension of the oppressed group."[165] Both false consciousness and adaptive preferences can easily be projected onto a wide spectrum of women's experiences, including (but not limited to) women's voting practices, clothing choices, grooming habits, and interpersonal relationships. It is a powerful explanatory device with an incredibly large scope, because in many ways, *all* of women's actions and choices can be seen through a lens of patriarchal oppression, whether we look at it from a perspective of language-games, or simply recognize the ubiquitous nature of patriarchy in our social fabric.

**3. Questioning the deployment of false consciousness**

Of course, the purpose of this chapter is not to question the veracity of false consciousness as a concept, but rather the way it is deployed. I have no intention of arguing that false consciousness is a phenomenon that does not exist. It is well documented that oppressive structures can obscure self-knowledge, and make us resistant to the truth of our own subordination in a variety of ways. As Matsuda argues,

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[164] Ibid. 260

[165] Abrams, Kathryn. "Ideology and Women's Choices." *24 Ga. L. Rev.* (1989): 763.

> Various phenomena, such as working-class authoritarianism, Asian-American homophobia, and Women's internalization of patriarchal body images, show how subordination can obscure as well as illuminate self-knowledge. The long, cold history of subordinated status generating subordinating impulses is well known to both scholars and targets of recycled hate.[166]

Not only does false consciousness identify a real phenomenon (this cycle of subordinated status generating subordinating impulses), it is particularly useful for understanding how and why people may willingly opt into systems that cause them harm. It is certainly more useful than simply claiming that people are irrational, stupid or lack free will.

False consciousness, as a concept, is also useful insofar as it reinforces that oppression is structural, and that any project with a goal of dismantling systems of subordination requires that we look at the systems that inform individuals' behaviors and beliefs. For issues of sexual politics, "a reading of theorists like MacKinnon is valuable because it reveals sexual hierarchy and suggests theoretical structure,"[167] offering an account that highlights the mechanisms through which ideology becomes reified and naturalized. It takes a bird's eye view that shows the scaffolding of patriarchy, helping us bring together a wide spectrum of phenomena in one cohesive narrative about the subordination of women.

By bringing together so many disparate experiences under one umbrella of sexual domination, Abrams argues that theorists like MacKinnon also prevent women from exempting themselves from her analysis.[168] False consciousness implicates all women because it shows that the structures of patriarchy produce certain ways of thinking that we share in common by nature of

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[166] Matsuda, Mari J. "Pragmatism Modified and the False Consciousness Problem." *63 S. Cal. L. Rev. 1763* (1990): 1777

[167] Ibid. 1766

[168] Abrams, "Ideology and Women's Choices," 775.

existing in a shared society with a common language and grammar. In the most generous sense, false consciousness articulates how gender hierarchy is perpetuated through our acceptance and adherence to gender ideology — to the way in which we consume and live gender mythology. Because the stories we tell about gender are so ubiquitous, impacting so many aspects of our lives, it is, practically speaking, almost impossible to exist outside of them. Our social interactions are predicated on ideas of male dominance and female submission, and women are forced to participate in these gendered politics, voluntarily or not. To exist in our culture means accepting, to some extent, existing gender hierarchies, although, of course, this acceptance does not preclude one from attempting to dismantle them at the same time. Rather, it is important to recognize that we are all complicit in the systems in which we participate, simply on the basis of that participation.

Abrams also argues that theorists like MacKinnon use concepts like false consciousness to "turn up the volume" on feminist messages for strategic purposes.[169] There is no doubt that declaring that (all) women participate in their own oppression is attention-grabbing, even sensationalizing. It is even more attention getting to argue that women may not even be aware the extent to which their everyday choices and actions are a result of their subordination as women in a patriarchal system, because it calls into question the everyday motivations for our actions. If taken seriously, these charges implicate everyone, from the housewife to the factory worker to the feminist scholar. It also instills a sense of pressing importance, a weight and insistence that may not be as easy to see in a less wholesale theory, one that does not incite a call to action, so to speak.

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[169] Ibid. 776

Nevertheless, it is certainly the case that arguments about how women are the victims of false consciousness, and that "their choices are unconsciously determined by gender ideology," have been a long-standing source of disagreement and concern in feminist theory and politics.[170] I will now outline a few of the critiques of false consciousness that I believe are particularly pertinent to our discussion. This is by no means a conclusive account of the different positions that theorists have taken, but rather the critiques most palpable in my own experience. It is also worth noting that these critiques are closely tied together, and there is significant overlap between them.

**4. Critiques of false consciousness**

Generally speaking, critiques of false consciousness attempt to showcase the limitations of the concept. Often, particular issues that are called upon as evidence of false consciousness are more nuanced and complicated than they may initially appear. In fact, many phenomena used to support the viability of false consciousness resist a decisive account of how women are implicated in gender hierarchies, calling into question the extent to which women are culpable for their continuing oppression. These arguments also involve a judgment process that can be very paternalistic and imply that women are less capable of understanding themselves than a more "objective" outsider perspective. The rhetoric of false consciousness frequently overstates the degree to which women should be held responsible for their own oppression.

**4. a. Academic bias**

False consciousness, particularly as it appears in academic theory, is often used to privilege academic voices over those of non-academic lay persons. This seems to be a somewhat nat-

[170] Ibid. 761

ural consequence of claiming that some group, i.e. women, does not understand their own best interests, but I, the academic/researcher, understand what they do not from my privileged standpoint of superior knowledge. I think that this type of entitlement is somewhat indicative of the field of philosophy, and the academy more generally, given that we invest particular importance in our expertise, our methodologies and our general know-how. Of course, philosophy is not the only field to perpetuate this type of paternalistic thinking. Matsuda, who works in legal theory, articulates the type of academic bias inherent in claims of false consciousness within her profession:

> When I have argued in the past that legal theorist should seek out subordinated voices, I have heard in response a regiment of reasons why this search would prove pointless, ranging from "we already know what they have to say," to "it does them disservice to romanticize their position," to "their immersion in their own subordination taints their analysis."[171]

There are many different ways in which experts marginalize the voices of the oppressed, but they largely boil down to an assumption that closeness causes blindness, or an inability to reflect critically on one's experience. Instead of knowledge, it may simply be "the way things are"[172] to the individuals in question. Which is why some might conclude that even if experts do go to the trouble of identifying and reaching out to subordinated groups, there is no guarantee that the individuals in these groups have any valuable knowledge to share about their own subordination.[173] Instead, we are better off looking to the experts to speak to the experiences of women, rather than

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[171] Matsuda, "Pragmatism Modified," 1777-8.

[172] Ibid. 1777

[173] Ibid.

women themselves, who run the risk of being inarticulate and incapable of sharing what they know.

The idea that women, as a group, are less capable of understanding and being able to articulate their own experiences, rests on an assumption that they cannot be trusted to take a critical stance on their own positionality. This type of view is further justified by arguing that because the average woman participates in "ideologically infused acts which contribute to [her] subordination," women's awareness and appreciation of their own experiences are less reliable than an experts.'[174] But this does beg the question: are women in academia exempt from ideologically infused acts? It is unclear why we should assume that experts are successfully impartial, bestowed with a special objectivity that allows a better understanding of women's situation than women themselves. Rather, it would seem that these experts are also implicated in the systems in question, and therefore are not necessarily better equipped to take an objective viewpoint. In fact, this type of separation is exactly what theorists like MacKinnon deny — that any women could consider herself exempt from the influence of patriarchal ideology. Even claims to expertise and developing particular sensitivities to phenomena that others may be numb to, so to speak, cannot really justify this type of move, which is not to say that this type of training is not valuable, but rather that it does not automatically translate into action. Therefore, it is somewhat untenable to claim that a woman is incapable of truly comprehending the motivation for her own actions, but that a "feminist scholar's explanations of her choices should be categorically preferred to the woman's own."[175]

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[174] Abrams, "Ideology and Choice," 765.

[175] Ibid. 770

It is also unclear how exactly being "ideologically infused" should make a particular act or choice suspect. After all, it is hard to conceive of an action that is not ideologically infused in some capacity. We all participate in these ideological systems, and no space is completely exempt from them. I do not find this to be a flaw, but rather a recognition of the settings in which we all live and work. Nor is it clear how being situated in ideological structures would make something not a choice. The alternative, that actions only count as choice when they are radically free of ideological influence, presents such a restrictive concept of agency as to be nonsensical. I agree with Matsuda when she claims that, "My personal and unscientific suspicion is that there can be false consciousness about false consciousness. There is a strong incentive for academics to believe that poor and working people have little of value to say about law, social life, or politics."[176] This incentive is arguably the maintenance of academic voices as superior, bestowing them with authority and expertise to be respected and listened to. It is also worth pointing out that although I am arguably one of these 'experts,' my testimony is frequently dismissed by my peers, which begs the question of who is able to claim expertise and have that status recognized.

**4.b. Demeaning to women**

A second critique of false consciousness argues that it is a concept that is demeaning to women, or regularly deployed in ways that demean women, specifically through the implication "that women somehow lack sufficient agency to make and manage their own choices and by (offensively) suggesting that they do not properly understand their own 'real' interests."[177] This idea, that women are in some way incapable of understanding themselves, and consistently make

[176] Matsuda, "Pragmatism Modified," 1778.

[177] Gill Rosalind and Ngaire Donaghue. "As if Postfeminism Had Come True: The Turn to Agency in Cultural Studies of 'Sexualisation'." In: Madhok S., Phillips A., Wilson K. (eds) *Gender, Agency, and Coercion.* Palgrave Macmillan: London, (2013).

choices against their perceived best interests because they simply cannot know better, is one used to discredit women as agents and degrades them to the status of subjugated object-person. It is also closely tied to our first critique, as this type of discrediting sets the stage for the privileging of 'expert' voices.

The emphasis on *women's interests,* often seen in these discussions, should give us pause because it is a concept does not necessarily hold up to scrutiny as it is content-poor. While group interests are not necessarily arbitrary or relative, they are also not particularly easy to articulate, especially as you attempt to get into specifics. Of course, at a general level, it is easier to say what is desirable for women — to be treated equally to men, or even to have equal social, economic and political power and agency in our world. This may involve certain prescriptions about changes that we need: dismantling rape culture, getting rid of the gender pay gap, easy and safe access to abortions and birth control, and better representation in political institutions, among many other things. There are clearly many things that we can think of when considering women's interests.

But it becomes more challenging to specify exactly what is in (or against) women's best interests as we attempt to hone in on specific practices and embodied phenomena. Many things can be implicated in a system of oppression without being responsible for it. Focusing on people's individual actions, or even the practices of communities and groups, is often inadequate for constructing hypotheses about what is helpful or harmful in a feminist context. Which explains the frequent tension in feminist discourses about the appropriate theoretical and political positions to take on sexual practices and institutions like pornography, BDSM, slut walks, and stripping, to name a few. All of these can easily be (and often are) called upon as evidence of false

consciousness, and yet these arguments present an incomplete picture of what these activities entail. Very few things are as cut and dry as being able to say that "x" practice is not in women's interests.

Perhaps particularly demeaning is the way in which false consciousness overly simplifies the "complexity of women's experiences, subjectivities or investments in particular cultural forms or modes of femininity."[178] Relegating women to the status of cultural dupe, unable to see the real patriarchal forces at work in their social fabric and everyday interactions, further implies that women's agency can be wholly compromised by patriarchal forces. But this claim also presents a certain amount of ambiguity. On the one hand, it is certainly true that structures of oppression will limit and constrain oppressed people in ways that those in power are not subject to. Patriarchy creates important limitations on women's choices by enforcing particular ways of life that must be respected in order to survive. Take for example, the fact that I will seldom walk alone at night — a product of my training in rape avoidance, which is a state of affairs that is a direct product of the violence against women used as policing mechanism under patriarchy. There are very tangible ways in which my daily choices are affected by the sexist structures that I live in.

On the other hand, it does not necessarily follow that these constraints make me less capable of being recognized as agentic. While I am forced to move within specific parameters, the ways in which I navigate those structures are still reflective of my capacity to deliberate, think critically, and behave in ways that speak to my reflexive capacities. The question may be, how significant are the barriers of patriarchy? This is not a simple question to answer, as it will de-

[178] Gill and Donaghue, "As if Postfeminism had come true."

pend on myriad factors that complicate the possibility of coming to a universal answer. In other words, the barriers of patriarchy will be customized to the women who face them, and so there is no straightforward account of how exactly, and to what extent, sexist structures constrain women.

Analyses dependent upon false consciousness bring to mind an image of women as caged, trapped within the confines of patriarchal structures and incapable of escaping. With this view in mind, it becomes more difficult to argue that agency exists, that choices matter, and that women's actions represent something generative and empowering. And yet, it is unclear as to why we must relegate ourselves to this type of model. Perhaps it behooves us to recognize that different women experience the restrictions of sexism in different ways, and while there is value in hyper-restrictive accounts, relying too heavily on these may create a picture of women that does not accurately reflect their autonomy, or their experience of being agents. I believe it is important for our theoretical constructs to meaningfully engage with women's own sense of themselves.

Some theorists claim that critiques about the ways in which false consciousness as a theory undermines women's agency necessarily leads to moral relativism. Speaking to this specific critique of false consciousness, Wells argues that,

> Even recognizing what this argument assumes (that the feminists deciding what is and is not false are condescending and paternalistic), the argument cannot stand without accepting some kind of total moral relativism. However, in the context of, for example, female genital mutilation, it becomes clear that this relativism has its limitations. Surely even most feminist relativists believe there is no cultural context that makes female genital mutilation morally permissible — even when women in that culture say it is… Whatever the reason, to believe that there is no cultural context in

> which female genital mutilation is morally acceptable from a feminist perspective, is to believe that women in that culture who submit to, consent to, or desire this procedure are suffering from false consciousness.[179]

I find this line of argumentation problematic in a few ways, which I will discuss here. That being said, I first would like to state that moral relativism ought to be avoided in feminist theory because, in a very basic sense, if things are "all relative," it creates significant challenges for claiming that sexism is bad. Feminists need to take a strong moral stance on sexism and patriarchy that articulates these structures as objectively harmful, and therefore something we should actively work to dismantle. However, I do not think that avoiding the charge of moral relativism requires us to disregard the agentic potential of any and all possibly controversial acts. In other words, it is not clear that arguing that women exhibit agency under patriarchal structures invites morally relativistic accounts. Neither is it the case that taking on a position that certain claims of false consciousness do not adequately account for women's agency necessarily forces one to defend a practice like female genital mutilation. It is also worth noting that female genital mutilation is an extreme example that does not adequately capture more commonplace, if still controversial, choices that women may make. There are many facets of sexist and misogynistic cultures that do not exhibit such strongly objective harms to women, and female genital mutilation can hardly be used as a model for this type of investigation.

Of course, I don't mean to imply that arguments in favor of the existence of false consciousness necessarily claim that women do not have agency, but rather that they can restrict women's agency to the point where it becomes trivial. And to trivialize women's agency under patriarchy is not only demeaning, but harmful, for it assumes that women are not capable of act-

[179] Wells, "Feminism, False Consciousness and Consent," 256.

ing in meaningful ways and mirror tropes about women's irrationality that have been used for centuries, if not millennia, to justify the dehumanization of women. Whether a result of the systematic oppression they face or not, it does condemn women to a diminished status that is commensurate with that which women are assigned under patriarchy.

Some might argue that false consciousness is not a claim that women are not agents, but rather an inquiry about the conditions necessary for women's agency.[180] Feminist theory becomes the space in which to determine what the necessary conditions for agency are; to determine which assumptions, beliefs, and practices are harmful to women, to determine how patriarchal ideology has been internalized by women, and to determine what practices and beliefs are contrary to women's best interests. But this again begs the question: who decides what is in women's best interests? Ideally, this is a collective project between women, but in practice this has clearly rarely been the case. There is often a select group of women deciding what behaviors and beliefs are "bad," or "wrong," or otherwise subvert women's interests. But while some practices may be glaringly toxic to women — i.e. female genital mutilation — other, equally popular, symbols of women's oppression, are less straightforward.

**4.c. Ignores intersectionality**

A third critique of false consciousness is that it is a theory that does not adequately account for intersectionality. This is particularly apparent in arguments about the ideological determination of women's experiences as sexual subjects. While it may be the case, as MacKinnon argues, that "all women live in sexual objectification the way fish live in water",[181] there is still a

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[180] Ibid. 257

[181] MacKinnon, *Towards a feminist theory of the state*, 149.

spectrum of women's experiences within objectification culture. In fact, you could substitute "sexual objectification" for any manifestation of patriarchy, and it would still be the case that the phenomenon in question exists within a spectrum of experience. This is why terms like "hyper-sexualization" have been developed — to do the work of articulating that different kinds of women experience the same sexist phenomena — i.e. sexualization — in different ways, and that these differences can be crucially important for understanding how the intersection of identities impacts women's experiences.

It is important to attend to difference, even while invoking a commonality. Ideological determination arguments, like those of false consciousness theory, often "neglect the crucially diversifying influence of race, class, and sexual orientation,"[182] when attempting to develop a coherent theory. It is simply the case that some groups may not be sensitive to the same ideological constraints. For example, "the social construction of the sexuality of women of color has often differed radically from that of whites,"[183] and yet most feminist accounts of sexuality and sexualization are overly reliant on white women's accounts and experiences. As we saw in the previous chapter, overlooking the differences between different groups of women can hinder our ability to adequately theorize oppression, and may keep us from recognizing effective practices of resistance. It can also obscure crucial areas of divergence between different populations, and the types of ideological constraints that different women face.

This is of particular importance to my overarching focus on sexualization throughout this dissertation. Theorists who utilize false consciousness theory to explain women's oppression,

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[182] Abrams, "Ideology and Women's Choices," 768.

[183] Ibid. 769

often focus on sexuality and sexualization as a hallmark of women's ideological indoctrination into patriarchy to the exclusion of alternatives. For example, MacKinnon argues that women contribute to their own subordination through the very act of engaging in heterosexual relations, and that both the "choice and enjoyment of sex may themselves be shaped by the practices and the ideology of male dominance."[184] She argues that "some women eroticize dominance and submission; it beats feeling forced,"[185] overlooking the possibility that sex can be playful, and that women can approach dynamics of power within intimate spaces in ways that are creative and imaginative. Since MacKinnon's conception of false consciousness relies heavily on universalization, this line of reasoning effectively:

> Homogenizes, and ignor[es] differences and obscur[es] the fact that different people are sexualized in different ways and with different meanings. Sexualization does not operate outside of processes of gendering, racialization, and classing, and works within a visual economy that remains profoundly agist, (dis)ablist and heteronormative.[186]

By creating such a narrow framework, feminist accounts of false consciousness often contain their own inherent weaknesses, because it becomes all too easy to find an alternative. When building a theory of sexual politics, it is important to constantly confront the limitations that any particular point of view will inevitably face. This is why, although I begin this project deeply embedded in my own experience, I try to acknowledge that my experience, while valid, may not reflect that of other women, even those similarly situated. There will be aspects of my work that do not apply to other women, and may seem inaccessible, or impractical, which is only natural.

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[184] Ibid. 764

[185] MacKinnon, *Towards a feminist theory of the state*, supra note 5, 172-83.

[186] Gill, Rosalind. "Media, Empowerment and the 'Sexualization of Culture' Debates." *Sex Roles* 66.11-12 (2012): 741.

That does not make this project less valuable, but rather circumscribes its possible impacts by recognizing the diversity of perspectives and assumptions that exist, even about a topic like sexual politics.

**4. d. Ideological overdetermination**

A fourth critique argues that false consciousness presents an overly deterministic account of ideological influence, which leaves little room for alternative conceptions of how women interact with oppressive structures. It also promotes a view of intellectual laziness that is arguably unfair to large portions of the populations. This critique is intimately tied to the previous one about intersectionality, because it emphasizes the importance of recognizing alternatives, and the fact that even ubiquitous dynamics impact different people in different ways.

On a personal level, it can be deeply frustrating when trying to articulate how, as an individual, I retain the capacity to encounter sexist power dynamics with cleverness, creativity and awareness that provides the opportunity to make adjustments to the game. Being denied the opportunity to exist in ways that are not completely subsumed by deterministic accounts runs counter to my own experience of navigating the complex terrain of gender politics. And it is not a particularly good sign when theory about women directly contradicts, and even negates, their own experience. False consciousness arguments based in ideological determination describe, at best, "a woman who operates reflexively or at worst resignedly, while many women's experiences are more indicative of the tension and anxiety that accompany hard choices."[187] Our interactions with gender politics are complex, often constituted by tension and conflict, rather than coercion or force. We survive patriarchy "sometimes resisting, sometimes acquiescing, some-

[187] Abrams, "Ideology and Women's Choices," 781.

times knowing, sometimes deceiving" ourselves.[188] People deserve the benefit of the doubt that their actions are more than knee-jerk reactions, even if this may not always be the case.

Ideological determination arguments may also be particularly unpalatable for women who "have understood, or resisted, the pull of ideological influences."[189] For someone who has gone through consciousness raising practices, worked towards developing sensitivities to structures and manifestations of oppression, and otherwise developing a critical consciousness, it is demeaning and belittling to be treated like a stagnant cog in a machine. Being viewed this way may also keep women from becoming empowered in situations where exerting agency is particularly important. Abram argues that ideological determinism may "cast doubt on women's capacity for choice in contexts in which such doubts may be particularly costly; and they may, by presenting women's choices as determined by one socially diffuse influence, impede remedial inquiry into the complex array of factors that shape women's choices."[190] If we accept that power is dynamic, always adjusting and shifting in subtle ways, it does not seem appropriate to support a theory that does not have space for women to operate reflectively.

Which is not to say that ideological determinism does not allow for a way out under any circumstance, but rather that it makes the chances of transformation so rare as to become almost nonexistent. MacKinnon, who fairly or not has become the poster child for this sort of position,

> Does not rule out the possibility that an individual woman may find herself within a crack in the system of gender inequality — a rare experience which may transform her "choices" into choices and make her "consensual" sex consensual — yet this is rarely the way she responds to women's reports of such experiences. She is

[188] Matsuda, "Pragmatism Modified," 1767.

[189] Abrams 762

[190] Ibid.

> more likely to ask, for example, whether lesbians who engage in forms of behavior that resemble heterosexual relations "express the male supremacist structure or subvert it" or to suggest that those people, including women, who report consensual sex, want to believe they already have this more than they want to have it.[191]

This type of totalizing account is unrealistic, and presents an overly simplistic portrayal of how power organizes and informs action. It is also a decidedly top-down approach, not recognizing the ways in which people may adjust or subvert power structures through meaning-making, world-building, and other creative endeavors. And it re-emphasizes the bias mentioned previously — a prejudice towards theorists' perceptions of women's actions over women's own articulation of their experiences.

Gill and Donaghue argue that there exists a general "fatigue with what [are] understood as totalizing feminist accounts in which women were always depicted as victims."[192] This is consistent with the position I have advanced throughout this project. As Matsuda asks, "If woman is defined as a victim, how will she be anything but that?"[193] Accounts that overemphasize victimhood artificially restrict other stories that we can tell about women. And they place an unnecessary burden on women to prove that they aren't merely victims, forcing them to implicitly accept a powerless status as a starting point. Personally, I admit that it is exhausting to be continually reminded of how much of a victim I am by people who are supposedly my allies. Which is not to say that I deny the strategic value of identifying as a victim in certain circumstances, but it is something that I would rather self-identify as than be forced into.

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[191] Ibid. 765

[192] Gill and Donaghue, "As if postfeminism had come true."

[193] Matsuda, 'Pragmatism Modified," 1775.

**4. e. Makes women shoulder the burden of their own oppression**

And finally, it is arguable that false consciousness makes women shoulder the burden of their own oppression by over-emphasizing "the limited role of women in perpetuating a system of gender inequality that they did not create."[194] Perhaps there is some strategic advantage to turning our gaze inwards, and reflecting on how we participate in the very structures that cause us harm. After all, how can we expect change if we ourselves are still beholden to the systems we want to dismantle? And yet, to posit this as the most important step may place an undue burden on an already subjugated population. It is akin to saying, "Here is this problem that you didn't ask for, now figure out how to fix it and start with yourself." We ought to consider how this push to focus on one's complicity may at times distract from the project of liberation itself, for if all of our energy and attention is spent inwards, it is unclear what will be left over to change our world.

That being said, false consciousness is hardly a stand-alone theory, and is most commonly presented along with other feminist accounts in order to present a more complete picture of how patriarchy functions. There is certainly benefit to this type of work, but we should be honest and reflective about what the benefit is and what its limits are. Being able to articulate how women participate in sexist structures is a necessary part of dismantling these systems of oppression, insofar as our participation further cements the states of affairs that harm us. Acknowledging the part we play is therefore important, especially if we maintain a sense of responsibility to other women and our shared situation. This is particularly important for white women, whose status is enabled by the further exploitation of women of color. Whiteness becomes a way for white women to benefit from a patriarchal system, and therefore become particularly complicit in

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[194] Abrams, "Ideology and Women's Choices," 783.

systems that oppress women as a whole. All this to say that of course false consciousness theory has a place at the table. The question is, how much space should it take up? How much of our attention should it receive? How effective is the concept of false consciousness at dismantling patriarchy? What might it cover up, and what might it overemphasize? We ought to be careful that our theory does not over-burden the very people it aims to liberate.

**5. Structural vs. Personal**

I want to now turn our focus to *agency* as it is not only a vital part of any type of liberatory politics, it is also a point of contestation amongst feminist critics. Agency comes up often in discussion about false consciousness because it seems to be the natural counterpoint to ideological determinism. We are either free or we are determined; we can either act or we are acted upon. Agency is also important in any discussion about oppression, because it is a vital mechanism for altering the world in which we live: "The very possibility of social transformation of gender relations depends upon [agency]: in order to change the world we must act."[195]

One result of the debate about false consciousness and agency that I find particularly interesting (and dangerous) is the emphasized dichotomy between structural and personal. On the one hand, false consciousness as a theory would seem to support an understanding of women as existing within structures, and being determined, to greater or lesser extents, by the overarching social system in which they exist. This position has routinely been critiqued by turning to individualism and the ideal of personal empowerment. The tension between individual vs. structural deserves our attention because it is foundational to the controversy surrounding false consciousness and claims that women work against their own interests when their actions are

[195] Gill and Donaghue, "As if Postfeminism had come true."

seemingly the products of a patriarchal system. Critiques and defenses often swing between the two, setting them up as binaries that we cannot think around. While this juxtaposition is important for illustrating how power influences us, it can also be misleading.

This negotiation between personal and structural is one that I personally come up against in this project, for I am deeply invested in the idea that I have personal agency and some type of autonomy, even if it is circumscribed by my responsibilities to others, and that I can use my intelligence and creativity to influence the world around me, and begin a shift in power. Some will be uncomfortable with the emphasis that I place on individual agency, even if they share my larger goal. I admittedly have fairly liberal convictions of what the good life consists of, and I think these convictions are well placed. For instance, I believe in the importance of agency and autonomy, especially within a context like sexualization, because it so often manifests as a denial of my ability to choose for myself, to author my own experience and to testify. I also believe that the underlying assumptions of individual agency do not restrict or foreclose the possibility of supporting the liberation of others or having a more community oriented vision of liberation. After all, I am both a subject, and an *inter*-subject, and I don't necessarily need to privilege one over the other in the grand scheme of things, although I think it is only natural that I sometimes hone in on one depending on the type of experience I am exploring.

However, I do recognize that an over-dependency on these individualistic phenomena can lead to theorizing that is too isolated to be effective. I want to avoid some common pitfalls, particularly those concerning certain forms of liberal feminism, by which I refer to feminist politics that emphasize individualism, personal agency and autonomy at the *exclusion* of more collective goods. Agency that is highly individualistic in this way can overlook collective struggles in favor

of focusing on personal acts. And with such a narrow focus on the individual, this type of feminism makes it easier to justify what might otherwise be controversial acts, while simultaneously ignoring collective responsibility. This is often done by bracketing social context, as context inevitably complicates the significance of a particular act, and therefore emphasizing the value of a woman's choice rather than on "creating the conditions of possibility for all women to enjoy safe, consensual and pleasurable sex."[196]

A common refrain goes something along the lines of "if its my choice, then its a feminist choice," highlighting the prioritization of personal agency above all else. And, to a certain extent, the idea that "the point of feminism is that I, as a woman, get to choose for myself" is something I agree with, insofar as feminism exists in part to break down the strictures of oppressive gender roles, so that women are actually able to make choices for themselves. Only think of the pro-abortion refrain: "my body, my choice," or even the types of rules that exist about what women can say, what they can wear, how they should speak, when they should speak, what professions they should pursue, etc. In this vein, a liberal feminist might support a woman who strips on the basis that women have the freedom to exploit their bodies to their own advantage, while someone like MacKinnon would probably see the same woman as perpetuating oppressive sexual norms and the general subjugation of women as a class. As far as I am concerned, both of these arguments are valid. We can't ignore that strip clubs are, in many ways, a subjugating space for women, where they sell the promise of sex to men who are literally able to control them with money. And yet, I will never disparage a woman for using that which it is at their disposal, even if it is her body. And I believe friends of mine who strip when they tell me that they have found

[196] Gill, "Media," 743.

ways of becoming empowered in this type of work. So how do we negotiate between these two positions? I think we ought to attend to women's testimony, take seriously their claims of empowerment, and ask ourselves who bears the burden of responsibility for these sexist structures.

In this project, I have been interested in using personal testimony as a starting point for investigating how a focus on agency, particularly in a context of sexualization, can be challenged by proponents of false consciousness, and how we might reformulate the central arguments so that we are not beholden to some of the inherent weaknesses of certain versions of liberalism,[197] particularly its potential to focus on the individual at the exclusion of the community. This is particularly pertinent in discussions on sexualization, an issue which has garnered so much attention (in the form of anxiety and concern) that it has become a discursive space in which agency has become a preeminent topic of concern. There is a tremendous amount at stake in these discussions, as we decide what meaning will reign supreme, which interpretation will get more traction, and who will be able to define what it means to exist in a way that aligns with feminist politics. It is why I advocate for a kinder and more fluid sexual politics that is vital for the success of feminist politics writ large. This will mean recognizing that there is no *right* way to be a woman, and that while we may recognize that there are practices that perpetuate harms, it is not always obvious how much of a burden rests on an individual woman's shoulders to *do* or *be* otherwise. Of course, this does not mean that women are not accountable to one another, and that we cannot make demands of particular women. Rather, we ought to be circumspect when issuing charges, like those of false consciousness, which can overestimate the responsibility of any single individual, as well as the legitimacy of our censure.

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[197] I find it worth noting that 'liberalism' covers a wide range of political theory, and should not be rejected wholesale.

It is vitally important to articulate agency in a way that is more than simply rhetoric, in order to recapture it from illicit usages that undermine what agency really stands for in these discussions. It is too important; there is too much at stake in the idea of my ability to think and act, in spite of and within forces that are larger than me. Forces that organize both my thoughts and actions but are not conclusive of my possibilities. I resist attempts to trivialize talk of agency, to turn it into something shallow, a tool of the privileged to justify their choices. This discussion is difficult for me, because it threatens things that are vital to my understanding of myself, to the strategies that I have developed to survive and flourish in this world. It holds up my hopes to a light that shines through and reveals the weaknesses inherent in the assumptions that I have about my freedom, and the autonomy I take for granted, that I emphasize in order to feel more powerful. Power matters when you are made powerless, and it is no wonder that some feminists find ways to read power in moments that might otherwise be overlooked. I empathize with these intentions, and yet I cannot ignore the force of critiques that argue that to call *anything* agency, to read power in any act, no matter how small, can create an account of power that is not radical enough to create change — that adds to the mortar between the bricks of sexism rather than wearing it away. It can in effect create an account of agency that has no content, because it has no limitations.

**5. b. The problem with empowerment**

As Gill argues, many activities that are seen as controversial can be defended, or even celebrated, because they can be described as 'empowering'[198] — usually by emphasizing personal feelings of empowerment i.e., "Doing X makes me feel strong/powerful/good." The problem

[198] Gill, "Media," 736.

with empowerment as a justification for any given act taking on feminist meaning is that the language of empowerment can trivialize systematic accounts of oppression. At its most insidious, "empowerment is regarded merely as a cynical rhetoric, wrapping sexual objectification in a shiny, feisty, post-feminist packaging that obscures the continued underlying sexism."[199] As the language of empowerment has been co-opted by mainstream culture, and especially consumerist capitalism, it also runs the risk of been stripped of its subversive potential, to the extent to which it can in fact actively contradict the purpose of empowering by adding additional (and unnecessary) demands for women to meet, i.e. that women *need* to be sexually adventurous, or that sexual empowerment must conform to a very particular set of physical manifestations, to be consumed by the public. When women are called on to perform their sexualities in specific ways, they are again placed in a position of being told how to develop erotic identities, rather than being able to choose for themselves. This is exactly the opposite of what I hope for in advocating for more fluid accounts of sexuality, that do not force women to participate in sexual politics in any *specific* way, but that also do not punish women for participating in those particular ways either.

I believe in the importance of rescuing empowerment from hegemonic cooptation because I have tasted the bitter, acrid taste of powerlessness — and worse than powerlessness, the sting of disempowerment — of having my power wrested from me in order to turn me into something less than human. And, akin to the picture I drew in chapter 1, I have learned to replace moments of powerlessness with feelings of empowerment through a variety of strategies. Though no strategy is foolproof, they are still tools in my toolbox, so to speak, that I will hang on

[199] Ibid. 737

to until I come across something better. One of those tools has been to alter my own interpretation of my actions, to see the things I do in new ways in order to find new meaning. And since my disempowerment, because of who I am, centers in many ways around sexuality, I am preoccupied with the conditions of sexual empowerment. This sometimes means, as Gill argues, "opening up questions about what constitutes sexual empowerment, who has the right to decide this, and, significantly, the nature of the relationship between subjective feelings of empowerment, and actually being empowered."[200] I find this to be a particularly worthy inquiry because there are many conflicting accounts of sexual empowerment, from 'anything I choose to do is empowering,' to 'no heterosexual activity can be empowering.' Both of these extremes distract us from exploring the space in between.

A common refrain is that feelings of empowerment do not empowerment make. In other words, it is not enough that I *feel* empowered, if that feeling does not accurately reflect a state of affairs in which I have actually taken on power that I previously did not have. Yet again, we enter into the murky territory of interpretation, and attempt to anchor our actions to objective truths in order to prove that something has shifted, that there has been a legitimate change in the allocation of power. The fin of false consciousness rises above the waters, as we learn to develop a healthy skepticism of claims of empowerment. It is in this way that we encounter arguments like the following: "Although they feel empowered, their sense of power is, in fact, a false consciousness marketed to them by a sexualized advertising culture."[201] These type of arguments persist in portraying women as dupes, manipulated into desiring the very things that keep them

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[200] Ibid.

[201] Ibid.

oppressed. It also justifies a continued skepticism towards women's own accounts of their actions and motivations, and gives the viewer the moral and epistemological high ground.

The issue at stake here is deciding how we are to interpret women's actions as sexual agents. When women act in ways that seem in accordance with hegemonic norms of female sexuality, does that relegate them to nothing more than the status of cultural dupe? While this line of thinking makes little sense to me when accounting for the complexity of both women's decision making processes, as well as the sexual landscape, it is evident that I must defend against these types of charges if I want to maintain the legitimacy of sexual agency within an oppressive sexual landscape. Which is why I will state again that resemblance is not the same thing as culpability, and discomfort is not license for dismissal. It is inappropriate to create additional requirements that women have to meet in order to account for the semblance of domination in their choices.

All too often, we are faced with questions like Calogero's: "Does compliance with the system and the garnering of rewards for doing so constitute empowerment?"[202] This, of course, assumes multiple things, including that women who behave in ways that fit hegemonic standards are "complying" (where complying means to act in accordance to a wish or demand) for the sake of complying rather than doing so for other strategic reasons. As we saw in previous chapters, things are not always as they appear, including women's motivations for their actions. Second, it assumes that the rewards for complying are granted externally, the implication of course being, by men. However, as we saw with the femme fatale, male approval may only be tangentially re-

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[202] Calogero, Rachel M. *On objects and actions: Situating self-objectification in a system justification context.* In: Gervais, Sarah J., ed. Objectification and (De)Humanization: 60th Nebraska Symposium on Motivation. University of Nebraska Press, 2013: 109.

lated to a specific act. And finally, it assumes that empowerment is nothing more than receiving the gratification of having behaved as one should, which in this case would be according to feminine standards of desirability. Again, the problem with this is that it presents an unnecessarily narrow view of the concepts that are pertinent to this discussion. Empowerment should not be framed within the restrictive lens of hegemonic norms, especially considering that many of these norms have been crafted with the intent of limiting access to power.

If we accept such a narrow view of sexual politics, then we find ourselves formulating accounts of existential eroticism that portray women as short-sighted, misguided, and subservient, leaving us with arguments like the following:

> Clearly some women feel quite powerful by "controlling" or "choosing" their sexualized appearance to capture the attention of men. Yet, there is reason to be skeptical of the empowerment veneer. First, the fact that some women report pleasure through their own bodily objectification is not surprising when we consider that the objectified lens through which they come to view themselves emphasizes their value to men as sex objects. When their appearance elicits attention and approval from men, many women view it as flattering or validating, and therefore advantageous to themselves and their in-group and prefer to interact more with men who sexually objectified.[203]

The above account is too restrictive to be fair. First, it assumes that garnering male attention and approval is the end goal of sexualized appearance. It also assumes that women can only get pleasure from emphasizing their materiality through the male gaze. And it implies that said male gaze is the dominant lens through which women can view their bodies. It assumes that male attention and approval is unconditionally desirable to women, and that it is both flattering and validating. I will not attempt to speak for all women; mind reading is beyond my training, no matter how il-

[203] Ibid. 108-9.

lustrious academic philosophy is, and without engaging them in respectful and unscripted dialogue, I can hardly claim to know the truth of women's motivations and goals. However, I am privy to my own mind, and can confidently say that this interpretation does not do justice to the complexity and tension that is endemic to my sexual performances. Nor does it account for my motivations for choosing a sexualized appearance, or adequately capture my pleasure at eliciting attention.

Of course, this does not necessarily relieve the issue of empowerment as an individualized phenomenon, especially when the term is used indiscriminately without relating analytically to issues of power, inequality, or oppression.[204] When empowerment appears as such a dislocated, individualized, and atomized experience,[205] it presents challenges to feminist goals of dismantling systems of oppression because there is a disconnect between the personal and the political. This disconnect can manifest in the creation of "insecure positions of power for some women and prevents other women from ever gaining access at all."[206] In other words, women's choices to feel empowered may be taking advantage of oppressive structures to profit momentarily, if not long term.

This harkens back to the description of adaptive preferences, where 'empowerment' can be used as a rhetorical device to justify making adaptive preferences (preferences adapted to an oppressive context), without having to pass a critical glance at what kind of power is available through a given (and assumedly sexist) act. It also focuses so intently on the individual that discussions of social intersubjectivity and relationality are not even broached. But this does bring to

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[204] Gill, "Media," 741.

[205] Ibid.

[206] Calogero, *On objects and actions,* 109.

light an important tension between individual women maneuvering to make the most of their own lives, and the overarching goal of empowering women collectively. This is a tension that I don't necessarily have an answer to, other than to say that it seems prudent to encourage women to find ways in which to empower themselves on a regular basis, without assuming that their doing so will harm women more generally. We must be sensitive to the need for women to feel like they have influence over their lives, that they are capable of making moves that allow them to create a life in which they can flourish as individuals.

Does this resolve any and all fears that the source of power can be necessarily corrupt? Probably not to the satisfaction of someone beholden to ideological determinism, who might ask something along the lines of "If women's outcomes are dependent on men's responses to their appearance and sexual appeal, then do women actually hold the power?"[207] Again, we find ourselves looking for reductive answers for incredibly complicated situations. Although one might argue that outcome dependency on men does not empower women collectively, it is still unclear that women's outcomes are actually entirely dependent on men's responses in the way that we generally assume. Of course, I can hardly argue that there are no questions raised by the use of self-objectifying behaviors — behaviors that seem to enact exactly what women are "supposed to do" or how they have been trained to behave. Not only do we get trained on how to act in a way that bolsters patriarchal politics, our very expressions of femininity are conditioned to soothe and please the construct that is masculinity. I'm supposed to wear short skirts and high heels because they hamper my movements and make me easier to catch. I'm supposed to shave my legs and my pussy so they resemble a prepubescent girl's, and grow my hair out so it is un-

[207] Ibid.

necessarily and impractically long to attract attention to my “feminine” features. And since I have large breasts and wide hips, I’m supposed to feature those *assets* without flaunting them disgracefully, so that I both reveal and conceal at the same time. I am charged with both leaving a little something to the (male) imagination while also taking on the responsibility of garnering that attention in the first place. I have to smile and laugh, although not too loud or too openly, and look appropriately interested in whatever man is talking at me.

It is true that there are so many ways in which my daily life is directed by male approval. This is just what it means to be a girl in the world. So consciously or not, I have learned how to get that approval. But just because I’m able to do so, does not mean that I always do, or that I do so with the most obvious of intentions. In other words, that knowledge that allows me to curry approval also provides me the opportunity to manipulate. When you learn the rules of the game, then you can use them to your advantage, possible with the result of changing the game itself.

All this to say, often our worry about whether or not some given choice is acceptable is maybe not the most appropriate use of our energy. It neither is or isn't acceptable purely based on the action itself. Context matters. And it is too easy to come up with alternative accounts for any given choice. Which again, brings us to a point at which we must choose which account we grant greater epistemic value. Like with the femme fatale, we have a choice to make in how we portray women. Are they dupes or heroines, objects or agents, cogs or wrenches? Well, to be perfectly honest, women are neither, or perhaps they are all of the above. Which is to say, it’s complicated, and at any time, all can be the case. These worries are ultimately a distraction as we spend more time trying to either undercut or justify individual actions, and we forget that the issues at stake are much larger.

This is why I find arguments about false consciousness that center on self-sexualization, dress choice and sexual behavior to be particularly frustrating. Too much attention is paid to things that, while perhaps not trivial, are also not the linchpins of gender hierarchy. I believe that the preeminent focus "on embodies practices such a wearing high heels, painting finger nails, and participating enthusiastically in sexualized culture,"[208] serves more to constrain women, and usher them into a cycle of shame and self-blame, than actively work against systematic gender oppression.

Without denying the need for critical consciousness about these phenomena, I believe that certain manifestations of patriarchal culture need not be seen as wholly negative, or evidence of the victimization of women. Perhaps we would be better off admitting that some of the choices we hone in on and invest with value are not that important. Or perhaps it is fairer to say that they can have multiple meanings and we need not oversimplify. Rather than spend time articulating the reasons why women should not wear lipstick, wouldn't our energy be better used to create a world where it doesn't matter if a woman wears lipstick or not? This would seem to me to be an ultimate goal of feminist praxis.

**6. Conclusion**

Facing the demands of radical feminist theory is not always simple or clear. I often find myself wondering what aspects of myself I will have to change to appear/qualify as feminist enough, to garner the support and defense of my peers. Of course, it is expected that our politics will ask us to change ourselves at times. And liberation is an ongoing activity, with both external and internal focuses. But all changes are not equal, or necessary. Which is why I urge caution in

[208] Gill and Donaghue, "As if postfeminism had come true."

declaring the ways in which women must change themselves to exist legitimately, or so that they do not take on the appearances of complicity with harmful hegemonic norms. I worry that this train of thought leads to apathy towards certain women's suffering, because they are viewed as undeserving of support.

If the intent of feminist theory is liberation, it should not further justify the dehumanization of women — by dehumanization I mean the implication that women cannot think for themselves, that they are easily misled and fooled, that they are uncritical. This type of thinking follows a long tradition of sexist theories of mind that posit women as non-rational, lesser than men specifically because of their lack of capacity to think. This has been used to dehumanize women for centuries, if not millennia, and we should be suspicious of theories, even/especially those purported to help women, that perpetuate sexist stereotypes that have been used to justify the subordination of women.

False consciousness can easily become another justification for demeaning women for sexualizing themselves, or even for being sexualized in the first place. If we are not cautious in our deployment of false consciousness, we can make women responsible for their own victimization by claiming that they are acting in concert with patriarchal ideology, rather than allowing that women may navigate oppressive structures in ways that are more nuanced and complicated than simply being cultural dupes. Let those of us invested in feminist politics avoid overlooking the resilience, negotiation, creativity, struggle that are daily occurrences in the lives of women.

## Conclusion

Feminism is an act of critique — it points out the ways in which our current state of affairs is flawed. Feminism is also creative — it imagines new possibilities of how things could be. This dissertation is an attempt to hone in on the creative potential of feminist philosophy by articulating the capacities we already have for building a world in which an endless spectrum of women can thrive. Of course, I have focused specifically on highly-sexualized women, because it is a state of affairs that speaks to my experiences, hopes and frustrations, and that I am therefore particularly interested in on a theoretical level. The limitations of this project are self-evident — this is a partial account of femininity and womanhood, a taste of a bigger picture. I believe it is a taste that speaks to larger structures of sexism and eroticism, and has value beyond just being an account of myself. That being said, I have no intention of advocating that all women encounter the world in the ways I do, but rather hope that we can open up our concepts to allow for more fluid and flexible accounts of sexual politics and erotic identities; e.g. for accounts that build a sense of eroticism that is open to innovation, playfulness and difference. There will be ways of understanding eroticism and sexual performances that are not included in this account, and people who are not represented therein. I will push for these alternative conceptualizations to be taken seriously, the same way I advocate for my own.

Eroticism deserves critical attention because it so deeply impacts our interpersonal relationships as well as our broader social fabric. I encourage an understanding of the erotic that is destigmatizing, so that more women will become comfortable with attending to the erotic in their lives. Women deserve the opportunity to understand their erotic identities in ways that do not force them deeper into cycles of shame and unhappiness, as is commonplace within our sexist

social structures. It is past the time to address the ways in which eroticism has been, and continues to be, used as a mechanism of oppression. I hope that I have offered a glimpse into how this may be the case, by showcasing why loosening our understanding of sexuality is an important step in liberation. By this I mean that the wider our range of sexual performances becomes, the more inclusive and open to difference we can be.

In many ways, this project has outlined my own personal politics, and the ways in which I live my life. It has been developed over years of anger and frustration, love and joy, and trial and error as I have attempted to construct an understanding of myself as an erotic subject that is both empowering and honest. While there will always remain domains in which we are implicated in certain structures of privilege and oppression, this reality does not mean it is unacceptable to be an unapologetic sexual subject. In fact, the very idea that we have to apologize for our existence as erotic beings shows the extent to which we allow these aspects of our lives to be vilified. There is little logic to this type of vilification, other than to condone the types of violence that women face as sexualized subjects.

By delving deep into the sexual landscape, I have attempted to articulate sexual phenomena that are ubiquitous, and yet under-acknowledged. We cannot address issues that affect many women's lives if we are unwilling to spend the time and energy to settle into the themes taken up in this project. It was my goal to open up the space to really consider what it means to be sexualized, what it means to develop an erotic identity, and why someone might develop such an identity both for practical purposes, but also to live a fuller life. I have attempted to push back against narratives of victimization, while also acknowledging the power of legacy, in order to create more potent opportunities for the erotic to have positive potential in our lives.

This dissertation is merely the start of a broader conversation about the power of the pussy, about the dynamics of desire, and the stories we tell to make sense of sexual politics. There is so much more to think about, and so many more directions in which this project can go. As a project born of personal necessity, there are inherent limits to this discussion insofar as I am situated in the world in a very specific way. I believe this creates an opportunity for different women (and men) to take up the charge of engaging with liberatory sexual politics in ways that are customized to their own situation, and speak to their own identities. And it need not take my experiences as the basis for their own, but rather take up my intention in a way that creates possibilities for their own lives. And if those other narratives contradict my own, I will be attentive to the areas of tension, and offer myself the opportunity to learn something new. This project is not meant to circumscribe how individuals ought to go about the process of sexual liberation, but rather to present an account of how I have formulated what a liberatory sexual politics might look like, in order to provide a starting point for further discussion.

Given the time to expand this project myself, there are many topics that I would be interested in including. I believe that the phenomenon of rape fantasies, and the eroticization of power implied by these sexual narratives, is a potent example of creativity, playfulness, and the limits of false consciousness as an explanatory mechanism. I am also deeply interested in the production of pleasure through erotic literature, a field that is overwhelmingly dominated by women, and overwhelmingly geared towards women. Both of these topics represent everyday engagements with sexual politics in ways that are intimate, but also speak to common misconceptions about how women, in particular, understand themselves as pleasure-seeking subjects.

And so, as I wrap up this chapter of my life and prepare to exit the academy and go out into the 'real' world, I find myself wondering how this will be received. I hope that, at the very least, this project will offer an opportunity for critical reflection on the ways in which we all engage in sexual politics, and the narratives that we hold on to when interpreting women's actions as sexual subjects. I know that people will take issue with not just my claims, but my presuppositions, and the framing of my project. I recognize that I depend on certain concepts that are the subjects of philosophical debates like a dependence on individual empowerment, autonomy, and personal choice. I have done my best to be aware of the potential pitfalls of these positions, and yet I do find them useful enough to warrant engagement with. I am, after all, a product of my own language games, and fixate on certain aspects of freedom and pleasure that are particularly evident to me, but may not be so evident to others. I say all this simply to acknowledge that I have much to learn if I want to work in concert with others for the sake of creating a safer and more pleasurable world.

That being said, I believe that a strategic focus on individual agency is cohesive with a larger focus of shifting power relations, which is by necessity a communal project. If we take what I have created here as one patch in a quilt, then it becomes less of an individualistic narrative, and more of a single thread in a tapestry of coalition (to mix metaphors). The tapestry is large enough to allow for economic, cultural, social and political difference, for conflict and dissension.

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