Sexual Objectification:
From Complicity to Solidarity

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Abstract

This thesis defends the diagnostic accuracy and political usefulness of the claim that women are complicit in their sexual objectification.[1] Feminists have long struggled to demarcate the appropriate limits of feminist critiques of sexual objectification, particularly when it comes to objectifying practices which women both consent to and experience as empowering. These struggles, I argue, are the result of a fundamental misdiagnosis of what happens when women are sexually objectified, whereby the abstract notion of 'treating as an object' is called upon to explicate the kind of phenomena which can only be properly understood in light of a more general set of social norms of masculinity and femininity. A more accurate diagnosis of sexual objectification, I argue, is provided by Catharine MacKinnon's radical feminist theory, according to which sexually objectifying acts are manifestations of the social process through which women are made into objects of male sexual gratification. One important implication of this account is that women themselves play a role in perpetuating the norms through which sexually objectifying treatment of women is enabled: insofar as they participate in the re-constitution of the social context which facilitates their sexual objectification, they are complicit in it. Although this idea lacks intuitive appeal from a feminist perspective, I argue that understanding the nature of the contribution women make to perpetuating their objectification enables a better understanding of what practices of resistance are necessary for effectively combatting the sexual objectification of women. I defend the explanatory power of the complicity account of objectification in light of two pressing debates in contemporary feminist philosophy: the question of how women can disidentify from femininity given the strong attachments they develop to it, and the question of how feminism can continue to appeal to the motif of solidarity considering the anti-essentialist commitments of recent feminist theory.

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Introduction

'Post-feminist' feminism

Much recent feminist theory, across a variety of academic disciplines, has been increasingly concerned with giving an account of female agency, and in particular sexual agency, amongst young women in contemporary western societies. This interest has been generated by the widely held perception, both within and outside the academy, that we are living in a 'post-feminist' world. 'Post-feminism' can be conceptualised in a number of different ways, with reference to the widespread disillusionment with second-wave feminism; the turn towards analyses of oppression which are primarily concerned with intersecting axes of inequality; the perception that feminist goals have been achieved and thus that feminism as a political movement has been rendered redundant; or indeed a combination of the above. Cultural theorist Rosalind Gill describes post-feminism as a sensibility which characterises the socio-cultural context in which the agency of young women is constructed. What is interesting – and historically unique – about this sensibility, she argues, is that it disavows feminism whilst at the same time drawing on feminist ideals. That is, recourse to feminism is repudiated on the very basis of feminist notions such as freedom, autonomy, liberation and empowerment.[1] Angela McRobbie, similarly, characterises the post-feminist mood as that which

> positively draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force. […] Post-feminism […] seems to mean gently chiding the feminist past, while also retrieving and reinstating some palatable elements, [such as] sexual freedom, the right to drink, smoke, have fun in the city, and be economically independent.[2]

According to this body of literature, the post-feminist female subject is thus deeply entangled with both feminism and anti-feminism. Young women understand themselves, and their agential capacities, as fully free and responsible, lacking nothing with respect to their male counterparts. At the same time, they disidentify with explicit feminist political discourses – indeed, such discourses are considered to be disempowering, falsely figuring female subjects as less than fully free, autonomous agents. In other words, as Deborah

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[1] Gill 2007a.
[2] McRobbie 2008: 12.

Siegel asks: "If you grew up believing you were equal, then [isn't] the term 'feminist' – with its implication of battles yet unwon – itself a threat to your social standing?"[3]

For some theorists, this position is precisely where feminism should have gotten young women – a position in which they can live freedom rather than demand or fight for it. Natasha Walter and Naomi Wolf are notable proponents of this strand of post-feminism – which can also be understood as a kind of 'new feminism'.[4] As they see it, 'new feminism' celebrates the autonomy of young women and marks the timely passing of what was considered to be an age of 'preachy' second-wave feminism, far too preoccupied with delimiting how women should and shouldn't live their lives. This new feminism, according to Wolf,

> Encourages a woman to claim her individual voice rather than merging her voice into a collectivity […] Seeks power […] Has a psychology of abundance; wants all women to 'equalize upward' and get more; believes women deserve to feel that the qualities of stars and queens, of sensuality and beauty, can be theirs.[5]

Whilst Wolf and Walter acknowledge that there remain issues of gender inequality which need to be addressed in order for society to be fully free from sexual oppression – for example, the wage gap or sexual harassment in the workplace - they both nonetheless extoll the virtues of feminism's newfound emphasis on the freedoms and capacities that women already enjoy. Indeed, they perceive this emphasis to be crucial to the task of tackling the aspects of gender inequality which remain: "If feminism is to build on the all new female confidence that exists," Walter writes, "it must not be trammelled by a rigid ideology that alienates and divides women who are working for the same end: increased power and equality for women."[6]

Other theorists, however, are more ambivalent about the post-feminist sensibility characterising the subjectivities of young women than proponents of this new variety of feminism would have us believe. Both Gill and McRobbie perceive deep contradictions or paradoxes to be at the heart of the apparent surpassing of orthodox feminism with

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[3] Siegel 2007: 151.
[4] See Walter 1999. Also Genz and Brabon 2009.
[5] Wolf 1993: 149-50.
[6] Walter 1999: 5. It is quite telling that Walter confesses, in her later book *Living Dolls*, that she was "entirely wrong" to suggest in *The New Feminism* that the time had passed for feminism to cast a critical light on the choices women make in their personal lives (2010: 6).

'power' feminism. McRobbie characterises what she calls the 'double entanglement' of feminism and anti-feminism in 'post-feminism' as that which

> comprises the co-existence of neoconservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life […] with processes of liberalisation in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations. It also encompasses the existence of feminism as at some level transformed into a form of Gramscian common sense, while also fiercely repudiated, indeed almost hated. The 'taken into accountness' permits all the more thorough dismantling of feminist politics and the discrediting of the occasionally voiced need for its renewal.[7]

For McRobbie, what theorists such as Wolf and Walters characterise as a simple moving beyond second-wave feminism, towards a new feminism premised on women's empowerment, is in fact a more sinister subversion, via an appropriation of the feminist ideal of liberation, of advances made in the collective feminist consciousness. The subversion is intimately connected to the hegemony of neoliberalism, insofar as "a problematic 'she', rather than an unproblematic 'we'"[8] has become the unit of analysis for any discussion of feminism to be viable. This thoroughgoing individualising of women turns the question of empowerment into one concerned solely with maximising the capacity of individual women to choose freely how to live their lives. Not only does this individualising process negate the possibility of discursively identifying systematic or collective oppressions, but it also entraps feminism in a thoroughly neoliberal model of thinking about responsibility. The individualising, post-feminist sensibility, according to Gill,

> see[s] individuals as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-regulating. The neoliberal subject is required to bear full responsibility for their life biography no matter how severe the constraints upon their action.[9]

Similar concerns with the consequences of this individualised model of responsibility have been expressed by Nancy Bauer who, among others, has written on the contradictory impact of the post-feminist sensibility on young women's sexual agency. In the phenomenon of 'hook-up culture' among young women – pursuing only casual (hetero)sexual encounters outside the confines of committed, monogamous relationships

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[7] McRobbie 2008: 12.
[8] *Ibid.,* 13.
[9] Gill 2007b: 75.

as an expression of sexual freedom – Bauer identifies a degree of incongruity between the self-understanding of the young women engaged in such hook-ups, and their self-reported experiences of such encounters. "[T]here is pleasure in pleasuring guys, and this pleasure is real," she explains, but there is also the "hook-up hangover" – the experience of total fungibility, the risk of being labelled a 'slut', the sexual non-reciprocity which tends to characterise such encounters. This contradictory experience exposes, according to Bauer, the same kind of 'taken into accountness' of feminism that McRobbie identifies as quintessentially post-feminist: young women laud hook-ups, drawing on feminist ideals, as the ultimate expression of sexual empowerment, whilst at the same time being deprived of precisely the kind of explanatory framework capable of illuminating why hooking-up is so often marred by feelings of shame and discomfort. Bauer concludes:

> Even if a girl never comes to suspect that the playing field might not be even […] she does not always experience her sexual way of being in the world as of a piece with her worldly 'post-feminist' ambitions.[10]

For McRobbie, Gill and Bauer, then, the task of giving an account of the conditions of contemporary female subjectivity requires engaging with the ways in which the 'post-feminist' agenda has thrown up a number of paradoxes, incongruences and contradictions in the way women exercise their agency. Ostensibly feminist ideals such as autonomy, freedom and choice seem to operate like background assumptions against which *living* one's equality has become the goal, and recourse to feminist analyses of systematic, collective oppression as a means of understanding one's experience is increasingly unfeasible, because such analyses are associated with the putatively unfeminist practice of telling women what to do.

Sexual objectification and the limits of feminist critique

The problem addressed in this thesis is usefully articulated with reference to these discussions of 'post-feminism'. This thesis is concerned with sexual objectification. More specifically, however, it is concerned with an apparent disagreement, which arises in both contemporary feminist theory and praxis, about how feminism should orient itself

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[10] Bauer 2011: 124. See also Burkett and Hamilton 2012.

critically with reference to the phenomenon of sexual objectification – or, we might say, regarding the limits of feminist critiques of sexual objectification.

On one side of this disagreement, there are those who take raising awareness about, and resisting, the sexual objectification of women to be a central part of contemporary feminist politics. Campaigning groups and organisations such as *OBJECT*, *No More Page 3* and *Lose The Lads Mag*s are typical of this side of the debate. Such campaigns maintain that treating women as 'sex objects' – primarily in the form of sexualised images of women in popular media[11] - creates a harmful culture in which women are valued primarily, or solely, as a means of sexual gratification. This in turn, they argue, perpetuates sexual violence against women:

> [Lads' magazines] portray women as dehumanised sex objects. By selling them in everyday spaces, shops like Tesco normalise the idea that it's acceptable to treat women this way. Yet extensive evidence shows that portraying women as sex objects fuels sexist behaviours and attitudes that underpin violence against women.[12]

For feminists working within or alongside such groups, then, resisting the sexual objectification of women in society is one of the most, if not the most, urgent matters for feminist politics, owing to the perceived intimate connection between ostensibly quite harmless forms of objectification and more insidious injustices. This conviction has led to some anti-objectification groups campaigning vociferously against the practice of various forms of sex work. *OBJECT*, for example, regularly informs its members of planned openings of, or approval meetings for, new lap dancing clubs or other venues for sex work, and encourages its members to protest at and disrupt such events. For these campaigners, such actions fulfil the organisation's objective of challenging 'sex object culture' and the sexual objectification of women, which they take sex work to be emblematic of – an industry in which women are literally sold as products or providers of sexual services for the gratification of men.

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[11] *OBJECT* also campaigns against lap dancing clubs and other forms of sex work, which has been a decidedly more controversial aspect of their work – indeed, this work has been a prime target for the push-back against feminist critiques of sexual objectification, for important reasons elaborated above.

[12] 'About,' *Lose The Lads Mags*, http://www.losetheladsmags.org.uk/about/ (Date of retrieval 12/04/16)

The efforts of these groups to campaign against sex work, though, are part of what motivates the other side of the schism regarding feminism and sexual objectification. At least equally prominent in grassroots feminist activity is what might be described as a backlash against the feminist focus on sexual objectification inherited from the second-wave. This position – which might be understood as a kind of 'anti-anti-objectification' stance – takes issue with what is deemed to be a campaign of blame and shame directed against sex workers and other women who engage in behaviours deemed to be sexually (self-)objectifying. There are two somewhat distinct, though overlapping, strands to this criticism. The first is the claim that the kind of anti-sex work campaigning engaged in by groups like *OBJECT* serves only to further stigmatise and marginalise those made most vulnerable by misogynistic oppression. This might be understood as a practical critique of the anti-objectification stance; one which takes issue not with the critique of sexual objectification itself, but with the practice of trying to tackle objectification through further destabilising the working conditions of sex workers. The increasing feminist lobby in favour of the full decriminalisation of prostitution is a key element of this practical critique.[13]

The second strand of the 'anti-anti-objectification' camp, however, is a normative critique of the idea that feminism should be concerned with fighting against and objecting to sexual objectification. This critique taps into the very real and important fact that for many women, embracing and taking ownership of their sexuality and sexual attractiveness brings an important kind of liberation from conservative patriarchal ideas about women and sex. Conceptualising such personal expressions of sexual freedom in one-dimensional, negative terms of 'objectification' is thus understood by some feminists to be, at the very least, reductive of women's experience and, worse, just another way of denying women autonomy over their bodies and sexuality. As one notable response to the increasing levels of discussion around the 'sexualisation' of young women and girls asks:

> [O]ne of the central gains of the feminist movement includes legitimizing new
> forms of gender expression and agency for girls and women, including sexual

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[13] This position has long been a feature of feminist campaigning from sex workers unions and organisations, but is increasingly gaining traction amongst more mainstream movements for social justice. See, for example, the decision of Amnesty International in 2015 to advocate for the decriminalization of all aspects of consensual adult sex: https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2015/08/sex-workers-rights-are-human-rights/

> agency […] If one self-constitutes as an object of desire through sexiness, is this a sign of oppression?[14]

This facet of the anti-anti-objectification position, therefore, amounts to a challenge to the normative foundations of the kind of feminist critique of sexual objectification advanced by groups like *OBJECT*. On what basis, this position asks, can the choices individual women make with respect to their bodies and sexuality, be subject to *feminist* critique on the grounds of sexual objectification?

It should be easy to see how the idea of a 'post-feminist sensibility' is a useful framework for understanding this disagreement in contemporary feminism. The 'anti-anti-objectification' stance is critical of the approach to sexual objectification adopted organisations like OBJECT; but this criticism is made from a position in which certain key ideals of feminism have been 'taken into account,' as McRobbie describes. Central to the anti-anti-objectification position is recognition of the fact that systemic patriarchy has meant that women historically have been denied any substantial autonomy over their bodies, desires and sexual practices; and this in turn motivates the conviction that a world which takes feminism into account should not be a world in which women's autonomy in this regard is denied or challenged.

Understanding this 'anti-anti-objectification' stance as a kind of post-feminist politics in this way is crucial for understanding the motivations of my research. Like McRobbie and Gill, I take the taking-into-account of certain central tenets of feminism in this critical approach to feminist critiques of sexual objectification to be simultaneously important and problematic. What is accurately perceived by the 'anti-anti-objectification' position is the fact that attempting to make a monolithic feminist critique of sexual objectification necessarily involves ignoring the lived experience of many women and the complicated relationship they have to their sexual self-expression. The approach typified by *OBJECT* and their contemporaries, in other words, is incapable of grappling with the complex intertwining of sexual agency and sexual objectification, and ignores the importance of sexual agency as a feminist goal.

But this taking-into-account of the feminist ideals of sexual agency and autonomy is by no means unproblematic; rather, I contend, it is a double-edge sword. The same move which seeks to undermine the potentially reductive and oppressive nature of crude

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[14] Dworkin and Lerum 2009: 254-58.

feminist critiques of sexual objectification also serves to institute firmly a thorough individualism in contemporary feminist discourse. Gill identifies precisely this individualising consequence of post-feminist politics when she writes:

> What is striking is the degree of fit between the autonomous postfeminist subject and the psychological subject demanded by neoliberalism. At the heart of both is the notion of the 'choice biography' and the contemporary injunction to render one's life knowable and meaningful through a narrative of free choice and autonomy -- however constrained one might actually be.[15]

Both Gill and McRobbie identify a strong synergy between the post-feminist valorisation of the autonomous choices of individual women and the exclusive focus on individual choice found in neoliberalism more generally. The trouble with the individualising nature of post-feminism, they argue, is that it negates the possibility of appeals to enduring structural oppressions as a means of understanding, and engaging critically with, female agency. Post-feminist subjects, like neoliberal subjects in general, are "required to bear full responsibility for their life biography no matter how severe the constraints upon their action."[16]

The problem seems to be that those who oppose anti-objectification feminism uncritically accept the neoliberal premise that "[a]s the overwhelming force of structure fades, so also […] does the capacity for agency increase."[17] The kind of hyper-structural account of sexual objectification offered by the second-wave, and their contemporary heirs such as *OBJECT*, thus comes to be understood as another constraint acting against female agency (this is how Wolf and Walter characterise second-wave feminism). But this account seems to elide the difference between the constraining forces of different structures. Principally, it ignores the fact that, regardless of whether the second-wave account of sexual objectification was excessively reductive in the picture it painted of women's sexual agency (and I think it was), it was nonetheless a response to the structural force enacted upon women's agency by systemic, deeply entrenched sexism. To resist the structural force of the feminist diagnosis of sexism is thus not to free female agency from structural constraints; it is rather to institute an artifice of free agency, one which cannot be fully operable in conditions which remain heavily

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[15] Gill 2007a: 154.
[16] Gill 2007b: 74.
[17] McRobbie 2008: 19.

constrained by sexism. This is precisely the 'contradictory' or 'paradoxical' nature of contemporary female subjectivity identified by Gill, McRobbie, Bauer and others:

> the contradictory nature of the postfeminist sensibility is that on the one hand young women are freed from past sexual restraints and responsibilities, yet on the other they are […] subjected to intense scrutiny regarding their sexual decision-making.[18]

Crucially, this 'post-feminist' feminism can have nothing substantial to say about the continued sexual objectification of women. The reduction of feminist politics to uncritical support for the choices individual women make not only means that positing sexual objectification as a problem affecting all women becomes untenable; it also means that feminism cannot speak meaningfully about the political responsibilities women have to resist and fight enduring sexism. But feminism, I submit, must be able to do both of these things if it is to retain any capacity for making a meaningful contribution to the fight for sexual equality.

The fourth way

What is required, therefore, is a new way of thinking about sexual objectification which avoids the reductive, one-dimensional account offered by second-wave feminists and pays adequate attention to the complicated ways in which sexually objectifying norms and practices are implicated in women's agential capacities – this much, the 'anti-anti-objectification' position gets right.[19] At the same time, however, this new theory of sexual objectification must not fall prey to the same problems as the 'post-feminist' position. That is, it must not endorse the choices of individual women at the expense of offering a structural account of what forces continue to inhibit the freedom of women, and what factors sustain these forces. There are, I think, three distinct feminist approaches in the existing literature through which sexual objectification might be discussed: the radical, second-wave account (where the notion of sexual objectification

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[18] Burkett and Hamilton 2012: 821.
[19] This is not to say, however, that second-wave accounts of sexual objectification have nothing to offer contemporary attempts to get to grips with the phenomenon. The merits and failings of second-wave accounts of sexual objectification – specifically, Catharine MacKinnon's - will be elaborated in the second chapter of the thesis.

first entered feminist discourse); the neoliberal or post-feminist account; and the liberal, empowerment account.

The problems with first and second approaches should be clear from the foregoing discussion. The second-wave, radical feminist position offers a thoroughgoing structural account of sexual objectification as a heteronomous force determining the social status of women. As has long been pointed out, however, radical feminist theory is plagued by numerous problems which inhibit its effectiveness as a political project. For the purposes of the discussion at hand, two of these problems are especially pertinent: radical feminism often under-theorises the agential capacities women retain even under oppressive conditions, and it unhelpfully construes women as passive victims of sexism rather than political actors with the ability to resist. In the radical feminist picture of sexual objectification,[20] then, the choices women make to engage in sexually objectifying practices are not free, autonomous choices; they are simply *what women do*, under varying degrees of constraint. As a consequence, women can also not be held politically responsible for these choices on the radical feminist account, since that would be to blame women for what is not in their power to resist.

The neoliberal, post-feminist approach to sexual objectification, by contrast, imbues women's sexually objectifying choices with an unreasonable degree of autonomy and responsibility. In this picture, modern women are living out the feminist ideal of freedom and exercising their autonomy whenever they make decisions about how to live their lives. Women's choices – even their apparent sexually objectifying choices – are thus to be respected and left unchallenged by feminist critique. However, this absolute respect for autonomy entails a corresponding, individualised attribution of responsibility. If an individual woman's choices are considered to be entirely the product of her own autonomous faculties, then it stands to reason that she must also bear the responsibility for any undesirable consequences if that choice. This is the punishing, neoconservative account of responsibility offered by self-described 'feminists' like Katie Roiphe, who argues that women who consume drugs or alcohol can and should be held responsible if they experience sexual assault or rape as a 'result.'

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[20] It is important to note that what I am characterising here is probably best described as a somewhat crude characterisation of radical feminist accounts. There are, certainly, radical feminist theorists who avoid these more obvious pitfalls and have much more interesting things to say about power, subjectivity and agency. I offer here a cruder picture partly as a means of laying out, in very broad strokes, the theoretical terrain this thesis navigates, and partly because it seems important that, despite the fact that more subtle radical feminisms do exist, it is this crude characterisation which is typically taken to task in contemporary feminism.

Introduction

The radical, second-wave approach and the neoliberal, 'post-feminist' approach thus differ along two axes, and provide polarised accounts of women's political agency: women as unfree victims of forces beyond their control, and women as wholly free, autonomous agents, responsible for their decisions:

	No (political) responsibility for choices	(Political) responsibility for choices
Women's choices are free and autonomous	**A**	**Neoliberal, 'post-feminist' feminism**
Women's choices are not free and autonomous	**Radical, second-wave feminism**	**B**

Conceptualising the disparities between these two approaches along two axes in this way reveals that there are two possible further ways of thinking about sexual objectification with respect to freedom and responsibility:

A) Conceptualising women as capable of making choices which are free and autonomous, and hence to be respected, but without attaching responsibility for the potentially undesirable consequences of these choices to individuals (individual freedom without individualised responsibility);

B) Conceptualising women as incapable, or not fully capable, of free and autonomous decisions, meaning that the choices of individuals can be called into question by feminist critique; but also leaving room for attributing responsibility to individual women for the (political) consequences of their actions.

The first of these options (A) is what I am calling the 'liberal empowerment approach'. This approach to navigating a compromise between the radical and neoliberal positions is, I think typified by much of what has come to characterise the 'fourth wave' of feminism – that is, the upsurge in feminist discourse and activity seen in the past decade or so, heavily based on social media and new technological platforms. What characterises this approach, I think, is that it attempts to incorporate the important insights from both the radical and neoliberal positions, whilst avoiding what are taken to be the problematic

implications of both. From post-feminist, neoliberal discourse, respect for individual choice and preference is taken up and rendered axiomatic of feminist praxis. This conviction arises from the important recognition that any feminism which seeks to be overly prescriptive about what is or isn't good for women runs the risk of papering over the lived experience of individual women (and the ways such experience will be effected by intersections with other systematic oppressions). Whilst this approach is clearly liberal, however, the idea of empowerment is also crucial; respect for the choices of individuals is emphasised, but this emphasis is predicated on the idea that individual women are the best authority on what is empowering to them.[21] This crucial connection between individual choice and empowerment is what separates this approach from the neoliberal model. Placing any degree of responsibility on women for the consequences of their choices, from a feminist perspective, is largely repudiated in the fourth-wave, and this seems to be because the fourth-wave, in contrast to post-feminism, does not disavow entirely the structural analysis of sexism offered by radical feminism. In other words, the fourth-wave recognises the extent to which systemic sexism acts upon women in many constraining ways, and thus rejects the neoliberal injunction to hold individual women responsible for the consequences of their decisions; but it couples this rejection of neoliberalism with a presupposition that feminist praxis must fundamentally be concerned with granting women the freedom they have historically been denied – or, at the very least, not adding further restrictions to a long list. Marilyn Frye, I believe, captures the sentiment behind this approach well:

> [I]s it necessarily both stupid cruelty and a case of 'blaming the victim' to add yet one more pressure in our lives, in each other's lives, by expecting, demanding, requiring, encouraging, inviting acts and patterns of resistance and reconstruction which are not spontaneously forthcoming?[22]

The 'liberal empowerment approach,' then, combines a robust respect for the autonomy of women as individuals, and a close connection between individual choice and empowerment, with a rejection of an individualistic picture of political responsibility.[23] With regard to the question of the limits of feminist critiques of sexual objectification, this approach thus draws the limit at the individual level. That is, it restricts discussions

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[21] See, for example: https://twitter.com/daysiadarko/status/706342155430686720
[Text reads: 'Nudity empowers some. Modesty empowers some. Different things empower different women and it is not your place to tell her which one it is.']
[22] Frye 1985: 216.
[23] See Freeman 2016.

of sexual objectification to those instances in which women are objectified against their will. The harm or problem of sexual objectification, from a feminist perspective, is thus conceived in terms of restrictions on the freedom or autonomy of individual women.[24] It follows that when seemingly sexually objectifying practices are experienced by individual women as empowering or liberating, the 'liberal empowerment approach' finds no place for a feminist critique of sexual objectification – since this would violate the founding conviction that individual women must be conceived, as a matter of principle, as best placed to say what is and is not empowering for them.

Whilst this approach, typified by the fourth-wave, is admirable in its efforts to navigate the terrain between second-wave feminism and neoliberal (post)feminism, it is the contention of this thesis that contemporary feminism should in fact be seeking to occupy the fourth space depicted in the grid below (B). Rather than conceptualising women as free and autonomous but without any political responsibility for their choices, I contend that we should instead be thinking about female agency as structurally lacking in freedom but empowered, nonetheless, through an inescapable endowment of political responsibility.

	No (political) responsibility for choices	(Political) responsibility for choices
Women's choices are free and autonomous	**Liberal empowerment approach**	**Neoliberal, 'post-feminist' feminism**
Women's choices are not free and autonomous	**Radical, second-wave feminism**	**B**

This may seem counterintuitive; if the purpose of the 'liberal empowerment approach' is to retain the important insights from the radical feminist and neoliberal approaches whilst avoiding their significant drawbacks, then the fourth way shown above appears to do the opposite. That is, it takes from radical feminism the idea that women's choices, under conditions of pervasive sexual inequality, should be understood as largely unfree; but it also (seems to) take, from neoliberal feminism, the idea that women should be held responsible for the (political) consequences of their choices.

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[24] The implications of this approach for thinking about sexual objectification will be elaborated and criticised in the first chapter of the thesis.

Unpalatable as such an approach may initially seem, however, I believe it constitutes the best means of conceptualising the agential capacities women retain under conditions of pervasive sexism. The desire of the fourth-wave to articulate the ways in which we can recognise freedom in the actions of women despite the restrictions placed upon them is, I think, right. But the liberal approach ultimately fails to give a plausible, thorough account of the conditions of subjectivity from which the proposed autonomous capacities of women emanate. The idea that individual women know best what empowers them – which I take to be the central tenet of the autonomy-without-responsibility approach of the fourth-wave – ignores, to my mind, two crucial insights with respect to the sexual objectification of women.

The first of these oversights is the failure of the liberal approach to incorporate the insights from post-structuralism and, in particular, feminist interpretations of Foucault regarding subjectivisation and the relationship between individuals and power. These insights, I believe, present important complications to the assumption that individual women can and do know what empowers them. Crucially, however, they also complicate the decidedly one-dimensional picture of patriarchal power offered by radical feminism.[25] Incorporating a Foucaultian-inspired account of power and subjectivity into a feminist theory of sexual objectification compels us to resist thinking about women as either acted-upon, passively scripted, by socially pervasive sexual objectification, or as agents with a sufficient level of autonomy to know their own good and act upon it. Rather, it requires us instead to think critically about the ways in which our preferences, desires and self-understandings are deeply entwined with the norms, customs and ways-of-being prescribed by our social world. On such an account, it is possible to understand that embracing a sexualised self-image can be felt or experienced as thoroughly empowering for an individual woman, whilst at the same time refraining from saying that such behaviour is, in an absolute sense, empowering for the individual *qua* woman – or that it cannot still be subject to feminist criticism.

This brings us to the second failing of the liberal model, which is a distinctly political failing. Since the individualised approach to empowerment ignores the extent to which our subjectivities are shaped by our social conditions, the liberal model also, as a

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[25] Or, more precisely, the version of radical feminism that has been taken up in the canon; part of my argument in Chapter 2 will be to show that Catharine MacKinnon's feminist theory contains more points of convergence with Foucault-inspired accounts of power and subjection than is typically recognised.

consequence, fails to consider the ways in which we all play a role in upholding and perpetuating the norms and customs of our shared social world. Fourth-wave feminism repudiates – and rightly so – the idea that women can and should be held responsible for their individual suffering *qua* women (an important departure from the likes of Roiphe and other rape apologists masquerading as liberation theorists). But it also, and in the same stroke, repudiates the suggestion that feminism might need to play a role in holding women responsible, politically speaking, for the role they play in perpetuating the conditions of sexual oppression (which may or may not impact upon them personally, but affects them and others *qua* women). I maintain, however, that part of what follows from a proper understanding of the phenomenon of sexual objectification is a recognition of the part we all play in perpetuating the social context in which the worst instances of sexual objectification – for example, sexual harassment – are normalised and made acceptable. In other words, individual women bear some degree of political responsibility for the continued sexual objectification of women as a group, just in virtue of being implicated, or *complicit*, in the gendered norms which are constitutive of it.

It is in this way, I believe, that it becomes important to think of women as endowed with a kind of political agency – the power to resist. This capacity is importantly distinct from the kind of agential capacities which the liberal approach conceives women to possess – the capacity to know and pursue their own individual means of 'empowerment.' Perhaps the single most important implication of incorporating post-structuralist insights about subjectivity into feminism is that it ceases to make sense to suggest that the ideas, opinions, preferences and even bodily desires of individuals are not intimately tied up with their (limited) social context. This is not to say that subjects lack any capacity to interact with their context in new and critical way; rather, it is to say that field of agency for subjects in contexts of oppression is constituted by the fact of oppression. It is in the way we take up our *relationship* to our social context and seek to engage with it critically, then, that oppressed subjects both exercise their limited freedom and, more importantly, assume a degree of responsibility for this context. This is the 'fourth way' identified above and, I maintain, the only viable means of constructing a feminist critique of sexual objectification which is attentive both to the phenomenon itself, and to the normative imperatives of the feminist project.

Chapter Outline

I begin the thesis by examining the paradigmatic approach to the phenomenon of sexual objectification advanced by Martha Nussbaum. According to Nussbaum's account, sexual objectification occurs when a person treats another person as an object for the satisfaction of their sexual desires, rather than another person whose treatment should accord with their humanity. On this basis, consent becomes the normatively significant factor when it comes to determining whether or not a particular act of objectification is problematic; if we act in accordance with an individual's self-identified ends, we show sufficient respect to their humanity.

Drawing on the concept of social pathology employed in critical theory, I argue that Nussbaum's approach is fundamentally missuited to diagnosing the phenomenon of sexual objectification as a particular, and endemic, harm to women. That is, it lacks the explanatory apparatus to account for the full experience of being treated as a sex object in the kinds of cases which have traditionally been the subject of feminist concern – for example, street harassment. Nussbaum's principle diagnostic error, I argue, is that she imagines that the phenomenon of objectification can be understood in abstraction from the social context in which a specific act of objectification takes place – when, in fact, the social context is *constitutive* of sexual objectification. This diagnostic error is revealed by the fact that the only political resource generated by Nussbaum's account for charting how the pervasive sexual objectification of women can be overcome is a feminist politics of consent. As the longstanding and intractable feminist debates around the value of consent as a normative transformer indicate, a politics of consent will do very little to advance us in the task of adjudicating the limits of a feminist critique of sexual objectification.

In the second chapter, I turn to Catharine MacKinnon in order to develop the basic insight derived in the first chapter, that social context is constitutive of the phenomenon of sexual objectification. For MacKinnon, sexual objectification is not primarily a phenomenon located on the level of interpersonal interactions, as it is for Nussbaum; rather, it is a social process, through which the eroticised hierarchy between men and women is created, enforced, and justified. Specific instances of objectification, on this account, are therefore only manifestations of the social process of objectification. Principally, this chapter establishes that MacKinnon's radical feminist theory offers a more convincing explanation of the phenomenon of sexual objectification than

Nussbaum's account. This superior explanatory power, I demonstrate, is reflected in the fact that MacKinnon's account generates much more sophisticated resources for thinking about feminist critiques of sexual objectification. Specifically, it deconstructs the zero-sum game between consent and critique which haunts so much feminism, and creates the conceptual space to acknowledge the first-personal, phenomenological significance of consent alongside a thoroughgoing interrogation of women's choices and their implication in the conditions which oppress them. This leads onto a further finding of the chapter. My systematic reconstruction of MacKinnon's theory of sexual objectification reveals that the conceptions of power and agency that she works with are much more nuanced than is typically acknowledged in secondary literature. Specifically, they are a good deal more aligned with the Foucaultian, constructivist notions of power and subjectivisation that have been powerfully employed by feminists in recent years to understand how oppression creates women's subjectivities as well as constraining their freedom. Although these ideas are present in MacKinnon's work – and, I argue, underpin her important analysis of the phenomenon of sexual objectification – she fails to develop them in such a way that they become useful for theorising feminist practices of resistance. Accordingly, I take up the task of developing her work along these lines in the fourth chapter.

My point of departure for the third chapter is the insight offered, but crucially underdeveloped, by MacKinnon: that women can be complicit in the reproduction of the world which facilitates and legitimises their continued sexual objectification. This complicity takes the form of willing conformity with the norms, ideals and expectations of femininity, which strengthens the credibility of the social 'truths' which facilitate their continued sexual objectification. In the third chapter, I seek to justify this charge of complicity by providing a theoretical account of the kind of contributions women make to the perpetuation of their sexual objectification – an account which, I argue, requires a more nuanced understanding of complicity than can be found in the existing philosophical literature on the subject.

Existing accounts of complicity fall into two camps. Some accounts maintain that a person must have made a causal difference to the commission of a wrong in order to be held partially responsible for that wrong (the *causal contribution model*); whilst others claim that the morally significant aspect of complicity is the intention to act in accordance with the aims or efforts of someone else, rather than the difference actually made to their act (*the teleological model*). I show how neither of these models of complicity are fully able to

capture the way in which individuals are complicit in their social context – though both can be used to illuminate different facets of the phenomenon. I conceptualise individual action in a social context as having two facets: 'acting-together' and 'causing-together'. 'Acting-together' describes the way in which we draw on shared norms, customs and habits when acting as an individual. 'Causing-together' describes the way in which these shared norms, customs and habits are instantiated, and thus perpetuated, through the actions of individuals. So understood, I argue, social complicity incorporates elements from both the causal contribution model and the teleological model, insofar as individual agents both act with respect to, but also contribute to, the perpetuation of social norms. Combining these elements, I propose an account of victim complicity in oppression-perpetuation as a specific phenomenon.

Although the third chapter establishes that women can, and do, make significant contributions to the perpetuation of the social norms and expectations which facilitate their sexual objectification, the resulting charge of complicity can only have normative bite as a ground for feminist politics, if it is also possible to establish that women have the ability to resist making such contributions. This requires explaining how women can gain critical purchase on the gendered norms, ideals and expectations which are productive of their subjectivities. In order to provide such an explanation, in the fourth chapter I turn to Judith Butler's performative theory of gender in order to supplement MacKinnon's account of sexual objectification. Although Butler's feminism is typically understood to diverge in a number of crucial ways from MacKinnon's (including by both authors themselves), I argue that my reinterpretation of MacKinnon's work reveals a number of important points of convergence with the key tenets of Butler's performative theory of gender. As such, Butler's insights concerning the nature of gender identities, and our attachments to them, can be used to help locate the possibility of women resisting being complicit in the reproduction of heteronormative ideals and expectations.

I analyse Butler's performative account of gender from a phenomenological perspective, identifying and developing two specific ideas which are helpful for understanding the kinds of attachments women have to normative femininity: the idea of gender as habit, and the idea of gender performance as beset by anxiety. Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological account of embodiment and Clare Carlisle's work on the self as habit, I show how Butler's conceptualisation of gender identities as the product of the repetition of norms misses the important point that, over time, this process of repetition creates deeply ingrained habits of gender, which structure our ways of interacting with

the world. These habits conceal the contingency of our gender from us. However, since femininity, even when it is habitual, is haunted by the excluded possibilities through which it is constituted as a coherent identity, it is characterised by a pervasive anxiety. Drawing on the tradition of existential phenomenology, I show that this anxiety is both compelling and repelling: it discloses the possibilities excluded by our adherence to normative femininity as both exciting and terrifying, joyful and disquieting. The capacity for women to gain critical purchase on their complicity in the reproduction of heteronormativity, I argue, thus inheres in the potential for the compelling facet of anxiety to motivate them to try and cultivate new and subversive habits which can replace the habit of femininity. This phenomenological way of thinking about resistance to gender, I argue, provides an important complement to the psychoanalytic approach employed by Butler in her later work.

In the final chapter, I demonstrate how theorising sexual objectification in terms of complicity undercuts one of the main objections that has historically been levelled at MacKinnon's account of objectification (and more generally been used as a reason to turn away from radical feminist analysis) – namely, that her account is essentialist, insofar as it maintains that all women, across their many differences, share the experience of objectification. I approach the task of responding to this objection indirectly, through contemporary feminist discussions of solidarity – which address explicitly the question which hangs in the background of all feminist debates about essentialism, namely: does an effective feminist politics requite the idea that there is such a thing as being treated, or having experiences, *as a woman*?

Feminist critiques of the notion of solidarity trade on the assumption that solidarity relationships between members of a particular group must be grounded in some kind of pre-existing affective bonds, which in turn can only be generated by the fact that group members share some matter-of-fact, common ground. Attempts by feminists to salvage the notion of solidarity work with the same assumption, in (broadly speaking) two different ways: some aim to show that common ground between women can be supposed in a way which is sufficiently sensitive to the diversity of women's experiences and identities; others seek to show that solidarity can be reconceptualised as a bond which is generated through political action, rather than as one which precedes it. Both thereby fail to reconcile the intuition that there is something distinctive, and politically efficacious, about feminist solidarity between women, with the imperatives of contemporary anti-essentialist feminism.

My reconceptualisation of sexual objectification in terms of complicity, by contrast, is able to preserve the insight that the potential for a particular kind of solidarity inheres between women in virtue of their oppression, without understanding this potential as derived from common ground between women. Women are affectively connected, I argue, through their implication in the reproduction of normative femininity – since performing gender is always something that we do with, and through, other people. It is this interconnectedness – and not any substantive shared experience of womanhood – which, I argue, grounds solidarity relationships between women. This approach to grounding solidarity in the mechanisms of oppression, rather than the qualities of the group produced by oppression, not only evinces the political usefulness of conceptualising sexual objectification in terms of complicity, but it also, I believe, provides MacKinnon with a possible way of responding to the accusation of essentialism, whilst preserving the radical political implications of her work.

Chapter 1

Consent to Sexual Objectification:
A Category Mistake?

Introduction

The concept of sexual objectification has become common currency in both academic feminist theory and feminist activism.[1] The notion appears to derive its popularity from its intuitive appeal – that is, the fact that something about the idea of being treated as a 'sex object,' as primarily or essentially a means for the gratification of male sexual desire, seems to resonate with the experience of many women.[2] 'Sexual objectification,' then, seems to function as something like a conceptual lens through which feminism – practiced by academics, activists and women more generally – gives expression to at least some of the experiences of oppression and inequality which it seeks to overcome.

Insofar as feminist accounts of sexual objectification seek to explicate and analyse the conditions of a kind of oppression, therefore, it seems plausible to think of them as engaging in a kind of feminist critical theory.[3] One of the principal aims of critical theory, broadly construed, is to give an account of the current social conditions of injustice – what Benhabib describes as the "explanatory-diagnostic"[4] function of critical

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[1] Sexual objectification as a concept has been normalised as an important part of feminist campaigns (see *Object! Women Not Sex Objects*: www.object.org.uk), as a topic of debate in popular media (see Cosslett, R. (2013) 'Dress up Page 3 all you want – it will still objectify women.' The Guardian, 11 Feb: http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/feb/11/page-3-women-rupert-murdoch) and as a public policy issue (see Papadopolous, L. (2010) Sexualisation of young people review http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100418065544/http:/homeoffice.gov.uk/documents/Sexualisation-of-young-people.html).

[2] The uptake of #YesAllWomen on Twitter, for example, seems to demonstrate the widespread willingness of women to understand their individual experiences in light of sexualised ideas about women as a group.

[3] It must of course be noted that this terminology is a significant departure from how many, or most, feminists working on sexual objectification would describe their work – given that most work within the framework of mainstream liberal political philosophy. Given that I am employing the term 'critical theory' here in a relatively loose sense, to refer to any body of theory which seeks to diagnose oppressive social conditions with a view to overcoming them, however, I believe that this descriptor is justified – or, at least, that that the onus would be on any proponent of an account of sexual objectification which takes itself to be engaging with the same phenomenon that has historically preoccupied feminists, to explain why this descriptor would not be justifiably applied to their work.

[4] Benhabib 1996: 226.

theory. Feminist attempts to theorise the sexual objectification of women can be usefully understood with reference to this aim, since they seek to diagnose and explain the ways in which being treated as a sex object in contemporary society harms women and makes them in some way unfree. Of course, as Benhabib points out, critical theory must do more than diagnose modernity's conditions of unfreedom; it must also serve what she calls an "anticipatory-utopian"[5] function. This second, crucial aspect of critical theory is concerned with theorising the means through which current conditions of unfreedom might be overcome or transformed. In other words, it is concerned with *theorising liberation*. This aim, too, seems to be constitutive of feminist accounts of sexual objectification, insofar as any theory or practice which understands itself to be feminist must be aimed in some way towards surmounting sexual and gender inequality.[6] We might say, then, that insofar as feminist accounts of sexual objectification aim to accurately diagnose the phenomenon of sexual objectification and chart a path through which its harmful impact on the lives of women might be practically overcome, then feminist accounts of sexual objectification are – whether explicitly or not – engaged in doing critical theory.[7]

Of course, the diagnostic and emancipatory facets of critical theory are closely connected. It is only through making an accurate diagnosis of the unjust, oppressive conditions of the present – fulfilling the first aim - that we can theorise how to move towards an emancipated future – fulfilling the second. As Benhabib explains,

> When explicating the dysfunctionalities of the present, a critical social theory should always do so in the name of a better future […] The purpose of critical theory is not crisis management, but *crisis diagnosis such as to encourage future transformation*.[8]

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[5] *Ibid*.

[6] See e.g. Finlayson 2016: "Feminism has two basic components. First, it recognises or posits a fact: the fact of patriarchy. Second, it opposes the state of affairs represented by that fact." (6)
It need not be the case that every piece of feminist work must be engaging in both these tasks at the same time; it is of course perfectly legitimate to conduct purely explanatory work, without always needing to draw out the resources for liberation offered by the explanatory work. This does not mean, however, that we are not entitled to do this work ourselves, with pre-existing explanatory research; nor that we cannot, if we find the resources for liberation to be wanting, criticise the explanatory account on the basis that it generates inadequate emancipatory resources.

[7] Allen also draws on Benhabib's framework in order to characterise the tasks of feminist critical theory (2008: 3).

[8] *Ibid*., [my emphasis].

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The transformative, emancipatory capacities of critical theory thus depend on its ability to identify and explain accurately the unjust, harmful and oppressive conditions of modernity. It follows that if a given critical theoretical endeavour misdiagnoses the problem or crisis which it seeks to address, then the resources it will offer for overcoming the problem will likely be incorrect for the task. This much is quite clear from critical theory's appropriation of biomedical language to articulate its own enterprise. Critical theory positions itself as seeking to diagnose and propose remedy for the 'ills' of modern society. [9] As with the wide range of pathologies which can afflict human bodies, it is of course possible – perhaps not unlikely – that the symptomology of a given affliction will not immediately reveal the root cause of the patient's suffering. Ascertaining precisely which disease someone is suffering from, and thus determining the correct treatment to prescribe, often requires a good deal of effort on the part of medical practitioners. But as long as the practice of medicine continues to be concerned with identifying and treating or curing diseases – rather than, say, attending primarily to symptom management – the successful overcoming of illness requires the successful diagnosis of the root pathology. So too, then, for critical theory; charting a course of treatment and remedy for what ails society requires an accurate diagnosis of the root ailment.

If, then – as I have proposed – feminist accounts of sexual objectification can be understood as engaging in a kind of feminist critical theory, then the ability of these accounts to contribute towards the practical overcoming of sexual and gender inequality depends on the accuracy of their diagnoses of the phenomenon of sexual objectification. The purpose of this chapter, however, is to argue that the way feminist philosophers are currently thinking about sexual objectification constitutes a fundamental *mis*diagnosis of the phenomenon. In other words, existing accounts of sexual objectification – or, to be more precise, the general framework they employ for approaching the phenomenon - provide the wrong tool for performing the first, "explanatory-diagnostic" task of critical

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[9] See e.g. Freyenhagen (forthcoming). It is worth noting that the use of the notion of 'social pathology' within critical theory is controversial, on account of, among other things, the facts that it requires us to think of society as some kind of quasi-organic whole, that it implies a (politically problematic) standard of societal normalcy, and that the notion of an 'ill society' has historically been used as an ideological justification for monstrous acts. I am not, however, invoking the notion of social pathology here in the stricter, narrower sense used in the Frankfurt School tradition; rather I am simply drawing on same biomedical analogy employed in this tradition to highlight the connection between the content of a given theoretical account of a social problem, and the content of the resources that account will generate for how to overcome that problem. The problem in question need not be 'social' in the Frankfurt School sense (i.e. a pathology of social rationality).

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theory. Because of this failure, I argue, they are unable to fulfil the second, "anticipatory-utopian" requirement of critical theory. That is, the resources they offer for charting a path to the practical overcoming of the problem of sexual objectification are inadequate to the task.

Indeed, I want to claim something more – that the critical resources for social change provided by these existing accounts are not only inappropriate for the task; they in fact serve to obscure and cover over the reality of the phenomenon of sexual objectification, in a way that is highly damaging to the kind of feminist politics required to successfully overcome the suffering it causes women. The prescriptions of existing accounts of sexual objectification, in other words, are not only misguided, but also detrimental to advancing liberation. Given that these detrimental prescriptions are founded on a fundamental misunderstanding about what sexual objectification is, what we need to rectify the situation is a new account of sexual objectification which offers a more accurate explanation of the phenomenon. Only by improving the diagnosis of the problem, I argue, will we be in a position to think constructively about how the problem might be overcome. The purpose of this chapter, accordingly, is to show where the current diagnoses of the problem of sexual objectification are going wrong.

In the first part of the chapter, I will outline Martha Nussbaum's account of sexual objectification – which I take to be paradigmatic of contemporary feminist philosophy on the subject - focussing particularly on her distillation of the phenomenon in terms of instrumentalisation (I). I will then argue in the second section that Nussbaum's equation of objectification with instrumentalisation means that consent is the only factor which distinguishes harmful objectification from benign objectification in her account - despite her contention to the contrary (II). In the third section, I will briefly recount the feminist debates around the use of consent as a normative standard, in order to show that Nussbaum's account of sexual objectification commits her to taking a stance within this intractable debate (III). The fourth section, finally, will show that Nussbaum ends up mired in the consent debates because she makes a crucial diagnostic error in her account of sexual objectification – namely, she conceptualises social context as merely an addendum to the phenomenon of objectification, rather than as constitutive of it (IV). Bringing this diagnostic error clearly into view, I hope, will reveal the paucity of a politics of consent for challenging the objectification of women.

I. Objectification as instrumentalisation

Martha Nussbaum's account of objectification represents something of a paradigm shift in the literature on the subject. Nussbaum cites as the impetus for her paper the seeming fact that, although – or perhaps because – the term 'objectification' has moved out of its origins in a particular branch of academic feminism and into the wider vocabulary of social criticism, there remains much confusion about what, precisely, is meant by the term. Instructive of this confusion, she argues, is the degree of ambivalence around the question of whether objectification should always be considered morally problematic – as its original conceptualisation in radical feminism suggests – or whether some forms of objectification might in fact be "necessary and even wonderful features of sexual life."[10] This ambivalence and confusion, she argues, points to the need for a thorough conceptual analysis, whereby we deconstruct and clarify precisely what is meant by the notion of objectification.

Nussbaum's approach – which inaugurates what I will call the 'conceptual' turn in accounts of sexual objectification – has proved pivotal in setting the direction for future feminist discussions of sexual objectification. Her conceptual approach to the phenomenon has provided the framework for much feminist philosophy on objectification in recent years.[11] More than that, however, her approach has also been taken up in feminist political campaigns against sexual objectification.[12] As I will show at the end of the chapter, the way Nussbaum's conceptual, individualistic framework continues to inform feminist discourse and activism around the issue of sexual objectification means that her failure to theorise the proper means of overcoming objectification, generated by her diagnostic errors, is also inherited by much contemporary feminist praxis.

Nussbaum proposes that objectification, in the most basic sense, means "treating as an object what is not really an object, what is, in fact, a human being."[13] In order to

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[10] Nussbaum 1997.
[11] See Langton 2009, Papadaki 2010 and Marino 2008.
Whilst these accounts differ in the degree to which they incorporate the political analysis of radical feminism into their conceptual analyses of objectification, they have in common a commitment to the conceptual framework.
[12] See, for example: http://msmagazine.com/blog/2012/07/03/sexual-objectification-part-1-what-is-it/
[13] Nussbaum 1997: 289.

ascertain the particular harm constituted by treating a person as an object, then, we must establish what is constitutive of the way we treat objects, and what about this treatment conflicts with our sense of how we should treat humans. Accordingly, Nussbaum identifies a minimum[14] of seven characteristics of our treatment of objects: instrumentality (treating something as a tool for one's own purposes); denial of autonomy (treating something as lacking the capacity for self-determination); inertness (treating something as lacking in agency and activity); fungibility (treating something as freely interchangeable with other alike things); violability (treating something as lacking in boundary integrity); ownership (treating something as a thing which can be owned, bought and sold) and denial of subjectivity (treating something as though its own feelings and experiences need not be taken into account).

Nussbaum's claim is not that our treatment of any and all objects will exhibit all seven of these characteristics. Depending on features specific to the object in question, more or fewer of these seven kinds of treatment might be relevant. Ballpoint pens, for example, are typically treated as fungible (we might ask a colleague *Can I borrow a pen?* meaning any old pen will do), whereas the idea that one Van Gogh painting might reasonably be substituted for another of his works seems absurd to us. We seem to feel less than comfortable with the idea of owning, for instance, features of the natural landscape (imagine the suggestion that the Grand Canyon or Niagara Falls should be the property of one individual, to do with as they please). Yet owning a coffee cup or watering can seems appropriate to the kinds of objects they are.

So, the way we treat different kinds of objects will vary quite significantly according to their specific characteristics; but one or more of the seven characteristics listed above will be present, Nussbaum argues, in our treatment of anything which is object and not subject. Of course, if 'treating like an object' can be characterised by any combination of these seven traits, with no necessary overlap between them, this brings into question whether or not there is sufficient conformity in our treatment of objects to make it useful for contrasting with our ideas about treatment proper to humans. However, through a careful consideration of a range of examples, Nussbaum subsequently identifies two of the seven characteristics as carrying more significance than the others:

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[14] Nussbaum does not intend the list to be exhaustive. Rae Langton, in her own conceptual analysis of objectification, has added three more characteristics of treatment of objects to Nussbaum's list: reduction to body, reduction to appearance and silencing. (2009: 228-9)

denial of autonomy and instrumentalisation.[15] Denial of autonomy is the more obviously decisive characteristic; the capacity for self-determination seems precisely to be that which distinguishes inanimate objects from (at the very least) sentient beings. Conceptually, it is difficult to imagine both treating an inanimate object as autonomous, and treating an autonomous being in most, if not all, of the other ways proper to objects. Instrumentality, on the other hand, carries the most moral weight for Nussbaum. Even in cases where denying autonomy may be appropriate, she argues, it does not follow that we are justified in treating a thing as a tool for our own purposes. The decision to avoid instrumentalising a particular thing does not conceptually necessitate avoiding the other facets of object-treatment – in the way that the decision to treat something as autonomous seems to – but it does place a moral obligation on us to determine what kinds of treatment are compatible with the kind of thing the object is, *as an end in itself*. To put it another way, whether or not we should deny autonomy to a particular thing depends, it seems, on what sort of thing it is; whether or not we should instrumentalise it, by contrast, seems to depends on our relationship to the thing, as it is.

Denial of autonomy and instrumentality, then, seem to function as something like conceptual and normative nodal points for 'treating as an object.' This intuition holds when we turn to the question of how our treatment of objects differs from how we think humans should be treated. As indicated above, autonomy is a quintessentially (if not uniquely) human capacity; it is precisely in virtue of the fact that humans are capable of meaningful self-determination – that is, are beings with their own, self-legislated ends - that denying such a capacity seems wrong. This can be seen if we consider the limited range of cases in which we tend to think that denying autonomy, or full autonomy, to humans is acceptable. We typically treat young children, for instance, as lacking the capacity for full self-determination, and deem it permissible to restrict them accordingly. What is important in such cases, however, is that in denying some people full autonomy, we nonetheless refrain from treating them as mere tools for our own purposes. Denial of autonomy, in other words, does not legitimise instrumentalisation. Using other people as a means for achieving our own ends seems to be unacceptable in all circumstances, even those where we might not be required to attribute full autonomy to someone.[16] Think,

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[15] Nussbaum 1997: 292-3.
[16] Nussbaum is ambiguous about whether it is instrumentalisation, or only mere instrumentalisation, that is impermissible; I will return to this in the next section.

for instance, of the public outrage expressed when those charged with the care of vulnerable individuals are shown to be abusing their position for their own ends.

Thus, Nussbaum concludes:

> [A] certain sort of instrumental use of persons, negating the autonomy that is proper to them as persons … leaves the human being so denuded of humanity … that he or she seems to be ripe for other abuses as well… The lesson seems to be that there is something especially problematic about instrumentalizing human beings, something that involves denying what is fundamental to them as human beings, namely, the status of being ends in themselves.[17]

It is instrumentalisation, then, that Nussbaum ultimately identifies as the essential feature of objectification; it is when we use people as mere tools for our own ends that we improperly treat them as objects and not as human subjects.[18] It is important to note, however, that autonomy, or something very closely connected to autonomy, remains highly important in Nussbaum's account. Instrumentalisation is uniquely problematic, she argues, because it entails treating people in a way which is fundamentally incompatible with due respect for what she calls their humanity. By this, she means "their status of being ends in themselves." What does it mean for people to be ends in themselves? Following Kant, Nussbaum identifies autonomy and subjectivity as crucial to humanity.[19] Both autonomy, defined as the capacity for self-determination, and subjectivity, defined as a unique and personal set of thoughts and feelings in relation to oneself and the world, are constitutive of personhood. Humans, accordingly, must be considered ends in themselves, on account of the fact that they are capable of determining and directing their lives in light of their unique set of thoughts, feelings and experiences. Treating someone as means for one's own ends is thus morally impermissible in virtue of the fact that such treatment rides roughshod over the individual wishes, aims, desires and interests of the other person. We might say, then, that instrumentalisation, on Nussbaum's account, is morally problematic insofar as when one treats another person as a means to one's own ends, one fails to respect that that someone is also a person, with their own, individual ends.

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[17] *Ibid.*, 295. [my emphasis].
[18] This identification of instrumentalisation as the central morally impermissible feature of objectification is reaffirmed in Nussbaum's second paper on the subject: "Objectification is wrong, to the extent and in the ways that it is, because it is always wrong to treat a human being as a mere means to another's ends." (2007: 51).
[19] Nussbaum 1997: 296.

II. Benign objectification:
Instrumentalisation and consent

Instrumentalisation, then, is for Nussbaum key to understanding why treating a person as an object is morally problematic – at least some of the time. As indicated above, Nussbaum is willing to consider that not all objectification is necessarily morally reprehensible. She is concerned to offer an account which – in contrast to her interpretation of radical feminist theories of sexual objectification[20] - leaves room for the possibility that some forms of objectification can be positive features of healthy sexual relationships.

Nussbaum is somewhat unclear, however, about whether she thinks instrumentalisation, in particular, can ever be morally benign – or whether any and all benign objectification must necessarily be free from instrumentalisation. In reference to what she takes to be paramount literary examples of benign sexual objectification, she claims that they are benign on account of there being a "complete lack of instrumentalisation."[21] Yet in her concluding remarks, she ambiguously writes that treating a person as a means for one's own ends is morally problematic "if it does not take place in a larger context of regard for humanity"[22] – which suggests that instrumentalising treatment of a person might be permissible if it takes place within the constraints of due regard for the instrumentalised person's humanity.

This ambiguity, I think, arises out of a failure on Nussbaum's part to clarify the distinction between treating a person as a means to one's own ends, and as a *mere* means for the same purpose. For it is of course possible for me to use you as a tool for achieving my ends, whilst at the same time limiting my instrumentalising behaviour according to an understanding of, and respect for, your ends. To put it differently, I might use you for my own purposes to the degree that is allowed to me by respect for your autonomy and subjective experience. In so doing, I certainly instrumentalise you;

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[20] Nussbaum reads Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin as failing to account for the possibility of benign sexual instrumentalising between heterosexual partners. I think that this reading misunderstands the kind of analysis of sexual objectification that MacKinnon, at least, gives – and in particular, it misunderstands the kind of implications that MacKinnon's account has for (heterosexual) sexual interactions between individuals. I will return to this point in the second chapter.

[21] Nussbaum 1997: 303.

[22] *Ibid.*, 313.

but crucially, I do not treat you *merely* as a means to my own ends. Rather, I make my own desire to use you subordinate to my respect for your humanity.

If the problem with instrumentalisation, as Nussbaum sees it, is that it denudes a person of their humanity and thus opens them up to a host of abuses, then it must be the case that either a) to instrumentalise a person is always treat them as a *mere* means to one's own ends, which necessitates a disregard for the autonomy and subjective experience of the individual, meaning that instrumentalisation is always morally problematic, or b) that one can use another a means to one's own ends, and thus instrumentalise them, but can do so within the limitations of due respect for the other person's autonomy and subjectivity. In either case, however, what renders the treatment of the other morally benign is acting with regard to respect for their humanity – whether or not we say that such action can and should still meaningfully be understood as a kind of instrumentalisation thus becomes something of a moot point.[23]

The crucial question for Nussbaum's account, then, is how due respect for one another's humanity can be established in a relationship, such that instrumentalisation or mere instrumentalisation is avoided. On this point, however, Nussbaum is somewhat unclear. On the one hand, at several points in the essay she explicitly identifies consent as a playing a central role in securing the appropriate context for morally benign objectification. In light of the Kantian framework Nussbaum is working with, this suggestion makes a lot of sense. If the problem with using another person for our own purposes is that we fail to respect their uniquely human autonomous capacities and subjective experience, then if we establish the wishes and desires of the other and delimit out actions according to these stated preferences, it seems to follow that we act with due respect for their humanity.[24]

On the other hand, Nussbaum also identifies other conditions besides consent as constitutive of the appropriate context for morally benign objectification. In expounding the virtues of Lawrentian objectification, she discusses how the objectifying features of the sexual relationship between Connie and Mellors are "symmetrical and mutual" and take place within a "context of mutual respect and rough social equality."[25] Here, then,

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[23] On this point, see Jütten 2016: "[O]nce morally impermissible objectification is conceived of as mere instrumentalization, the whole analysis of objectification becomes an analysis of the moral requirements of permissible instrumentalization or use." (31)

[24] For a clear example of this line of argument, see Gardner 2007.

[25] *Ibid.*, 303.

she further picks out symmetry, mutuality and social equality as constitutive features of a context capable of rendering objectification benign. These conditions place further stipulations on which actions can be objectifying in a neutral or positive way; not only must I act towards my partner in accordance with their consent, but I must also do so in a relationship which is, at least approximately, symmetrical, mutual and equal.

It is not clear, however, what function these extra conditions of symmetry, mutuality and equality are intended to serve in establishing the appropriate context for benign objectification, over and above the condition of consent. The example best suited to speak to this issue offered by Nussbaum is her hypothetical case of using one's lover's stomach as pillow. Even if your lover is asleep, Nussbaum maintains, if there is an established context between the two of you in which your lover "is generally treated as more than a pillow," then it is not morally problematic to use his stomach to support your head. This is because, she claims, in such a context one can have a "reasonable belief that he would not mind" about your making use of his body in this way.[26] In this example, then, the pre-existing context of the relationship, in which you generally treat your lover as more than a means to rest your head, allows you to *infer* consent for your using his body as a pillow.[27] Limiting your instrumentalising treatment of your lover according to an awareness of their ends – their wishes, desires, needs and the like – remains the normative criterion rendering the use benign; the wider context of the relationship simply allows one to infer where these limitations lie when they cannot be, or have not been, made explicit. Symmetry, mutuality and equality, then – assuming these are the features Nussbaum imagines to characterise such a relationship – seem to function not as conditions on the possibility of benign objectification in their own right, but rather as addenda to the condition of consent. We can summarise this interpretation as follows:

1.   Treating a person as an object is morally problematic when it involves using that person as a mere means to one's own ends, without respecting that the person themselves is an end.
2.   That people are ends in themselves means that they are autonomous subjects, capable of self-determination – in other words, that they have their own ends.

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[26] Both *ibid*., 296.
[27] Michael Plaxton (2014) concludes, similarly, that this example shows that Nussbaum is open to the possibility that consent can be *implied*.

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3. Respecting a person as an end in themselves thus requires respecting their ends, and allowing our own actions to be constrained by an awareness of their ends.

4. Treating a person only in those ways to which they have genuinely consented ensures that your actions are constrained by that person's own ends.

5. Treating a person only in those ways to which they have genuinely consented thus ensures you treat a person as an end in themselves.

6. Therefore, acting in accordance with a person's consent is sufficient to render one's objectifying behaviour morally benign.

Some commentators disagree with this interpretation. Michael Plaxton acknowledges the lack of clarity provided by Nussbaum regarding the relationship between instrumentalisation, consent and further contextual factors of the relationship. He maintains, however, that certain qualities of a sexual relationship – specifically, mutuality – are constitutive of any instance of benign sexual objectification.[28] Consent, he claims, may be a necessary feature of morally benign objectification, but it is not sufficient:

> If you and I *both* treat me as an instrument for your ends, we are surely not engaging in morally permissible conduct. We have made the same moral mistake, regarding me as something less than an autonomous agent. But it is no less a mistake.[29]

Plaxton's contention is that, by treating someone only in ways to which they have consented, we do not thereby ensure that we treat them as an end in themselves. He disagrees, in other words, with (5) in the above interpretation. But it is not clear what Plaxton's reasons are for claiming that consent is insufficient to treat a person as an end in themselves; or, to put it differently, it is not clear what he thinks is entailed by the idea that people must be treated as ends in themselves. In the above passage, he identifies the mistake made by the actors in question as failing to treat a person as the *autonomous agent* that they are. If this is what it means to be an end in oneself, then it he appears to agree with (2) above – that humans are ends in themselves insofar as they are autonomous agents, capable of determining and pursuing their own ends. But if he agrees with this point, then his disagreement must be with (3) – he must disagree that respecting a person as an autonomous agent requires only that we constrain our action in accordance with their ends.

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[28] Plaxton 2014.

[29] *Ibid.*, 4.

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It is certainly possible to adopt an interpretation of Kant's ethics which would support the suggestion that consent is an insufficient criterion for treating someone as an end. It is plausible to suggest, for example, that in the following passage Kant's claim is that, in order to treat others as ends in themselves, we must not only respect their ends, but also seek through our actions to further and enhance these ends:

> [H]umanity would be able to subsist if no one contributed to the happiness of others yet did not intentionally remove anything from it; only this is only a negative and not a positive agreement with humanity as end in itself, if everyone does not aspire, as much as he can, to *further the ends of others*.[30]

If we read Kant here as saying that non-instrumentalisation requires us not only to act in accordance with the other person's ends, but also to further and promote these ends through our own actions, then we might think Plaxton is right to suggest that consent is insufficient for treating a person as an end in themselves. This would mean that using a person for sexual gratification in a way that is delimited by what they have consented to would be insufficient to render this use morally benign – meaning that consent is not, in fact, the only morally relevant criterion for distinguishing benign objectification from morally problematic objectification.

This reading, however, is not so straightforward; for Kant goes on to say: "regarding the subject which is an end in itself: if that representation is to have its total effect on me, then *its ends must as far as possible also be my ends*."[31] This means that even if the requirement for treating a person as an end in themselves is promoting and furthering their ends, rather than merely respecting them, it is nonetheless the ends of that person that must direct my action. That we must treat people as ends in themselves, recall, is demanded by their autonomous nature – that is, by the fact that humans have the capacity to rationally self-legislate. It is unclear, therefore, how acting in accordance with another person's ends – whether as a limiting factor, or as something to actively promote – could constitute anything other than acting in accordance with what they have rationally self-legislated; in other words, what they have consented to.[32]

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[30] Kant 2002: 48 [my emphasis].

[31] *Ibid* [my emphasis].

[32] John Gardner employs a similar line of reasoning when he writes: "[S]ex industry workers typically are being objectified by their clients and consumers, and this is indeed an attack on their humanity. They are being used purely for sexual gratification. But the sex workers' right to sexual autonomy, where their consent is genuine, serves to license the abuse […] [E]even if, in a particular sexual encounter, the ultimate value of a person was denied (i.e. that person was used merely as a means),

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Moreover, Plaxton equivocates as to whether the condition over and above consent which he stipulates as necessary for morally benign objectification – the condition of mutuality – functions as an addendum to consent (as in my interpretation of Nussbaum's account above), or as a free-standing, additional condition for respecting a person's humanity. At some point, he seems to be explicitly claiming the former: "mutuality is important primarily because it guarantees that the parties are in a position to give meaningful consent."[33] At other points, however, he seems to be claiming that there is something inherently harmful or problematic in non-mutual sexual encounters. Specifically, he claims that sexual encounters make a person vulnerable, and this vulnerability, when one-sided, transforms the sexual encounter into something shameful for the vulnerable individual. He writes:

> [In the case of non-mutual sexual encounters] the asymmetry of power as between the two parties, one permeable and vulnerable, the other inscrutable and in control, not just of him or herself but of the other, transforms the nature of the act. It suggests that one's vulnerability to the other is indeed something shameful, that my amusement at your involuntary responses is at your expense and not a pleasure that we can share as equals.[34]

Now, in the first instance, Plaxton does not seem to offer any convincing reason as to why a person must necessarily feel ashamed if they serve as an unreciprocated source of sexual pleasure to another. Even if we grant that there is some kind of inherent vulnerability involved in making one's embodied self open to another in a sexual interaction, it doesn't seem to follow that this vulnerability can only be remedied by mutuality. Asymmetry of a significant degree is an important part of the sexual experience for some people (for example, within the BDSM community), and it doesn't seem desirable that we adopt an account of sex that renders all such experiences as tainted with shame, by structural definition.

More importantly for the issue at hand, however, Plaxton crucially fails to explain why one-sided or imbalanced sexual encounters pose an inherent risk of instrumentalisation, specifically. Even if we allow that unequal sexual interactions precipitate shame in the more vulnerable participant, we have no reason to equate shame with having one's ends

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the value of having a system of sexual relations in which people control by consent the treatment of their own bodies secures optimally respect for the ultimate value of people." (2007: 19, my emphasis)
[33] Plaxton 2016: 10.
[34] *Ibid.*, 8.

as an autonomous individual disrespected; unless, that is, the feeling of shame becomes a barrier to genuine consent. We can imagine, for instance, that someone who is made to feel sexually ashamed by their partner may find themselves in a situation where they no longer feel able to freely communicate their desires and wishes, or expect their partner to respect them. In such a case, shame is connected to instrumentalisation – but only to the extent that the feeling of shame creates an infertile environment for the giving of genuine consent.[35]

Plaxton's claim about the freestanding importance of mutuality, then, ultimately collapses into his second claim – that mutuality "guarantees that the parties are in a position to give meaningful consent."[36] On this interpretation of Nussbaum's account of sexual objectification, mutuality plays a subsidiary normative role, with consent as the ultimate normative factor which distinguishes benign from objectionable objectification; but it is none the less a necessary role, if indeed it is the case that 'meaningful consent' is attainable only in conditions of mutuality. This would mean that the conclusion of Nussbaum's account would be something like:

> *It is only under the condition of mutuality that we can guarantee that someone has given meaningful, genuine consent; and only by securing this consent can we ensure we are acting in accordance with that person's ends as an autonomous individual. Therefore, only in mutual encounters can one's objectifying behaviour be rendered morally benign.*

Even this version of Plaxton's interpretation of Nussbaum, however, seems untenable. Not only do we have good reason, as suggested above, to be suspicious of the claim that consent requires mutuality – since it requires us to equate non-mutuality with shame – but we also have good reasons to doubt that mutuality can secure consent in the way Plaxton suggests. Patricia Marino, notably, has levelled this doubt against Nussbaum's focus on mutuality and intimacy. Marino argues that we have no good reasons to assume that genuine consent is easier to obtain or infer from a sexual partner in mutual and symmetrical relationships than in other sexual contexts; rather, she contends, we actually have some reason to suppose the opposite. "[I]n contexts of intimacy," she writes,

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[35] One possibility might be that Plaxton is drawing on our common-sense understanding of 'dignity' and juxtaposing it with the idea of shame – thus implying that sexual activities which generate shame cannot be compatible with respect for human dignity. This would, though, be a substantively different account of what is meant by the notion of human dignity from [?] the equation of dignity with autonomy that Plaxton endorses in the above passage.
[36] Plaxton 2016: 10.

> consent is even murkier and harder to understand than in contexts involving strangers […] the complexities of intimate relationships ensure that the participants are involved in a web of interwoven requests, demands and favours.[37]

According to Marino's analysis, then, Plaxton (and Nussbaum, by extension) is mistaken to claim that mutuality can serve as a guarantee for meaningful, genuine consent, thus ensuring that any objectification is of the morally benign sort. The only conditions which we can say must be in place for objectification to be non-problematic are those which allow individuals to determine that they have the genuine and ongoing consent of the person they are objectifying – and we have no good reasons to suppose that these conditions are any more likely to be found in intimate, mutual relationships than they are in any other sexual encounters.

In the absence of a conception of humanity or personhood which does more than attribute a common level of autonomy to all humans, then, Nussbaum lacks the resources to explain why something over and above consent is necessary in order for humanity to be properly respected in sexual interactions. If she wishes to establish that acting in accordance with that to which someone has consented is insufficient to ensure that one treats them as an end in themselves – thereby omitting or at least neutralising any instrumentalisation – she would need to give a more substantial account of what is required in order to respect a person's humanity, over and above respecting their capacities as an autonomous agent. Such a move, however, would undermine her own account of what's wrong with sexual objectification, since the identification of instumentalisation as the nodal point of harmful objectification in her account is premised on the fact that instrumentalisaiton violates humanity, *defined in terms of autonomy* – namely, the capacity for rational self-legislation.

At this juncture let us, by way of taking stock, return to the suggestion introduced at the start of this chapter, that any feminist account of sexual objectification can and should be understood as engaging in a kind of feminist critical theory. A feminist critical theory of sexual objectification, I suggested, should be capable of performing two basic tasks: it must be able to explain the phenomenon of sexual objectification and diagnose accurately its harmful effects, and it must also be able to theorise the means through which this harm might be practically overcome. Regarding the explanatory-diagnostic

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[37] Marino 2008: 350-1.

requirement, Nussbaum's account explains sexual objectification as a form of interaction between two people, in which some person A is treated as an object and not a person by someone else B as a means of satisfying B's sexual desires. Sexual objectification becomes harmful, for Nussbaum, when this objectifying process happens without due respect being shown to A as an end in themselves. Sexual objectification as a problem or pathology, then, occurs whenever someone treats another person as a means of satisfying their sexual desires, without also paying due respect to that person's humanity – them being an end in themselves, an autonomous agent with their own ends.

As the foregoing section showed, the corresponding anticipatory-utopian content of Nussbaum's account – that is, what it offers in terms of charting a path for overcoming the problem it diagnoses – is concerned with consent. Since, as we have seen, treating a person as an end in themselves can only plausibly amount to aligning oneself with their ends, according to what they consent to, the remedy for the problem of sexual objectification as diagnosed by Nussbaum seems to amount to something like a feminist politics of consent – a politics which emphasises the importance of consent for ensuring the proper treatment of women as human subjects whose autonomy must not be violated.

IV. Consent and its discontents:
Problematising the remedy

In the preceding sections, it has been established that Nussbaum's account of sexual objectification, interpreted through the framework of feminist critical theory, diagnoses the problem of objectification as one of harmful and/or pathological sexual interactions between individuals, in which one person uses the other (or both use each other) as mere means to the satisfaction of their sexual desires. This explanatory analysis results in the identification of a feminist politics of consent as the appropriate remedy for the problem of objectification, since delimiting one's use of a person to those things to which they have consented ensures that one respects their autonomy. We have seen that, contra Nussbaum's contention, we don't have good reasons to think that consent, in practice, is more easily or more reliably established in mutual, intimate relationships than in other kinds of relationships – which prompts the question as to what conditions *are* necessary for the establishment of genuine, authentic consent. If Nussbaum's account is to be truly

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capable of sorting benign from problematic sexual objectification, then an answer to this question must be found. A vast, extensive literature has been written on the subject of sexual consent and its conditions of validity; a literature I cannot hope to do full justice to here.[38] What follows is an outline of the key features of the terrain of this discussion - particularly as it has, and continues, to relate to feminist concerns – in order to show the parameters of the debate on which Nussbaum must take a stand.

Consent, defined as acquiescence, agreement or permission, may be given in a range of circumstances, which will have a significant impact on how 'freely' we consider the consent to be given. Put crudely, we might imagine consent as part of a spectrum of choice. At one end, we have the ideal of genuinely free, authentic consent – a decision made in a context free from constraint or coercion, with full information made available. At the other extreme, we have 'choices' or 'decisions' which are distinct from cases of outright force only on a technicality; choices made only where circumstances – for example, the threat of violence or annihilation - are such that acquiescence becomes the only viable option for the individual. In between these two extremes, there lies a potentially infinite range of cases where circumstance or context can be understood to have more or less of an effect on how free a choice or decision should be understood to have been made, and it is somewhere on this spectrum that we must place the marker for the point at which consent becomes valid. Physical coercion, threat or sanction might be fairly straightforward cases - but what about factors like emotional obligations, peer expectations, or misperception of the true range of one's options? To what extent should these kinds of factors be taken into account when considering the quality of consent? In light of the fact that none of our decisions seem to be truly captured by the ideal standard of genuine free consent – it doesn't seem realistic to suppose that any of our choices are wholly uninflected by context or circumstance – where should we draw the line between consent given freely enough to be morally significant, and consent given un-freely enough to be morally negligible?

Alan Wertheimer summarises this concern when he imagines the hypothetical example of a woman, B, who consents to being the mistress of a wealthy man, A, so that he will pay for the expensive medical treatment her son requires, which she cannot afford. Wertheimer writes:

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[38] See, as representative of this corpus, Wertheimer 2003 and the extensive literature he discusses.

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> There may be good reasons why A should not make this proposal, or perhaps,
> why B should not be held to the terms of the agreement. But it is arguable that A
> is treating B as an end in herself and not merely as a means, that it is for B to
> decide whether she wishes to make the deal, and given her own ends, she may
> quite rationally decide to accept A's proposal or even initiate the proposal
> herself.[39]

In other words, establishing the point at which external factors should be understood to
be playing such a significant role in the giving of consent as to render that consent
invalid is no easy task. Radical feminist critiques of consent have turned on this very
worry, but have sought to argue that women's acquiescence to sexually objectifying
treatment under patriarchy falls so far towards the 'unfree' end of the choice spectrum as
to be morally insignificant. On these accounts, sexual inequality is considered to be so
pervasive, and to shape the circumstances under which women consent to sexually
objectifying treatment so radically, that only a farcically thin conception of consent could
accommodate them. Robin West makes this point when she considers the plethora of
situations in which we could claim that a woman 'consents' to a sexual interaction, where
her choice is clearly substantially constrained by the position she finds herself in as a
woman:

> A woman might consent to sex she does not want because she or her children
> are dependent on upon her male partner for economic sustenance [...] A woman
> might consent to sex she does not want because she has been taught and has
> come to believe that it is her lot in life to do so [...] A woman might consent to
> sex she does not want because she rightly fears that her refusal to do so will lead
> to an outburst of violent behaviour.[40]

The basic claim of feminists who criticise the standard of consent, then, is that woman
are incapable of consenting in any authentic, meaningful way, to sexually objectifying
treatment under conditions of pervasive gender inequality. In the most extreme version
of this claim, consent is indistinguishable from force and coercion under patriarchy.[41] If
this is the case, then it seems that Nussbaum's account of sexual objectification cannot,

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[39] Wertheimer 2003: 128.
[40] West 1997: 263-4.
[41] "Consent as ideology cannot be distinguished from habitual acquiescence, assent, silent dissent,
submission, or even forced submission. Unless refusal of consent or withdrawal of consent [are] real
possibilities, we can no longer speak of 'consent' in any genuine sense." (Pateman 1980: 150).

in fact, allow for the possibility of morally benign sexual objectification that women freely engage in – for this would be a contradiction in terms.

Of course, the radical feminist critique of consent as a morally significant standard is far from universally accepted; quite the opposite, in fact. The polemic and totalising nature of radical feminist assessments of gender inequality has precipitated a significant backlash against what is seen as the pigeonholing of women as passive, helpless victims. Some of this 'post-feminist feminism', in an effort to right the perceived wrongs of second-wave feminism, cleaves very close to neo-liberal conceptualisations of freedom, choice and consent and emerges with what many might see as some spectacularly un-feminist feminism. Perhaps most notoriously, Katie Roiphe, in her book on date rape on college campuses in the US, writes:

> If we assume that women are not all helpless and naive, then shouldn't they be held responsible for their choice to drink or take drugs[?] If a woman's judgment is impaired, as they say, and she has sex, it isn't necessarily always the man's fault; it isn't necessarily always rape.[42]

Not all critiques of the radical feminist position are as reductionist as Roiphe's, though. Many scholars have drawn attention to the problematic erasure of female agency from radical feminism without lapsing into appeals to overly simplistic notions of free choice and consent. Elizabeth Schneider's work on the false dichotomy between agency and victimisation in the development of feminist legal approaches to domestic violence is a good example of such a nuanced approach. Schneider argues that the inception of the notion of 'battered woman's syndrome,' and the attendant focus on the helplessness of abused women, had both positive and negative consequences from a feminist perspective. Positively, it allowed courts, judges and jurors to be educated about the extent to which the choices women make in the face of violence from their partners are radically conditioned by their abusive circumstances, and must be understood and judged as such. Negatively, however, this shift also erased the extent to which abused women often show considerable agency in actions they take to protect themselves and their children from their partner, leading their actions – for example, in cases of retaliatory violence against an abusive partner - to be considered as wholly removed from the sphere of rational, justifiable action. The result, Schneider argues, has been a "false and

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[42] Roiphe 1993: 53-4.

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disabling dichotomy between notions of victimization and agency"[43] which does not, and cannot, do justice to the multiple and varied aspects of women's decision-making experiences under oppressive conditions. "Although women are not merely sexual victims," she writes,

> "women's assertion of sexual pleasure and agency is complex… [T]here is [a] tension between the recognition that coercion extends beyond traditional liberal concepts of choice and the desire to grant to women a sense of empowerment and agency to make choices."[44]

The empirical work done by scholars like Schneider on the subtle and complex interplay between freedom and coercion that characterises many of the situations in which women have to make choices highlights the central controversy surrounding feminist debates around consent. Conceptualising consent as something women can give wholly freely, in light of the substantive work feminist activists have undertaken to expose the pervasive extent to which gender inequality shapes women's lives and curtails their freedom, seems untenably naïve. Theorising consent as an empty concept which, in light of these pervasive conditions of inequality, tracks nothing meaningful in the lives of women, conversely, seems reductionist and unfaithful to the experiences women themselves have of consenting, and having their consent violated. The only viable option, then, seems to be to acknowledge the irreducibility of many of women's choices under conditions of gender inequality to either authentic, unrestrained freedom or wholesale unfreedom.

Where does this leave Nussbaum's account of sexual objectification, in terms of resources for emancipation? Not in very good shape, it turns out. If the morally significant factor which serves to differentiate problematic from benign sexual objectification is the giving of free consent, and if the best account we can give of a woman's ability to consent under conditions of pervasive gender inequality is one which acknowledges that at least a good deal of consenting must fall short of the ideal of fully authentic consent, then Nussbaum's account appears to provide us with no useful resources for differentiating which instances of sexual objectification feminists should take issue with. We have no way of adjudicating, for example, how far along the spectrum from 'free' to 'unfree' a woman's consenting to being treated as a means for sexual gratification can fall before we should deem her consent inauthentic enough to be

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[43] Schneider 1993: 389.
[44] *Ibid.*, 398-9.

invalid. Moreover, nothing in her account helps us to understand which external, contextual conditions play an important role in warping women's consent with respect to sexual objectification. Yet specifying these conditions seems crucial, given that consent plays such a decisive role in Nussbaum's account. Without a thorough analysis of which external constraints, under which conditions, serve to render a woman's consent to being sexually objectified insufficiently genuine, Nussbaum's account fails to yield a blueprint for a feminist program of political practice aimed at freeing women from the harm of sexual objectification.

The problem created for Nussbaum by feminist critiques of consent as a normatively significant standard, it seems, is that these critiques force her account open to the question of the wider social context in which objectification takes place. Nussbaum is of course not unaware of the relevance of social context to discussions of objectification – she credits the benign objectification in Connie's and Mellors' relationship in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, after all, to the rough social parity they share as an upper-class woman and a working-class man. However, by approaching the phenomenon primarily as a lack of consent within interpersonal relationships, she puts herself in a precarious position. One the one hand, she cannot seriously advocate consent as a normative standard for benign objectification without acknowledging the need for a sophisticated theory of consent which takes account of the oppressive conditions under which women have to make 'choices' about what they are and are not willing to do. On the other hand, her framework for analysing sexual objectification, as a violation of human dignity which can only be remedied by consent, makes it untenable for her to accord the social context of objectification too much significance; for an understanding of the external factors which limit women's choices will always be to some extent in tension with a commitment to respecting women as autonomous agents.

To put it another way, the diagnosis of the problem of sexual objectification as a pathology of interpersonal sexual interactions (instrumentalisation) dictates that the remedy must also be found at this interpersonal level (consent) – and this means that Nussbaum cannot escape the fraught task of delimiting at what point external factors render consent invalid. To allow that contextual social factors are of such significance to the nature of sexual objectification that they are more foundational to the phenomenon than the kind of interpersonal interactions involved would be to categorically alter the diagnosis – which, perhaps, is precisely what the paucity of a feminist politics of consent calls for. The inefficacy of a purported remedy for a physical ailment can prompt us to

reconsider whether we have received a correct diagnosis for what ails us. In the same way, I suggest, the fact that Nussbaum's account of sexual objectification offers us a remedy which fails to distinguish which manifestations of sexual objectification we should problematize in our political practice, should prompt us to reconsider the accuracy of her diagnosis of the phenomenon.

V. Beyond consent:
Re-diagnosing the problem of sexual objectification

I have suggested that the problems we encounter in trying theorising emancipation from sexual objectification in terms of a feminist politics of consent should prompt us to reconsider the diagnosis of the phenomenon offered by Nussbaum. Let me now spell out more specifically what I mean. Recall that Nussbaum defines objectification as "making into a thing, treating *as* a thing, something that is really not a thing [that is, a human]." This basic formulation, which forms the basis of her elaborate analysis of object-like treatment, and which eventually leads her to identify instrumentalisation as the central moral harm committed in the act, lends itself to conceptualising sexual objectification as something which any one person may do to any other person, at any given time. That is, it assumes that we can understand everything we need to about sexual objectification through an analysis of the interactions between the parties in question. The question 'Did A sexually objectify B in case C?' is presumed to be answerable by determining whether A's treatment of B was instrumental, and whether this instrumental treatment was consented to by B (with the conditions comprising C becoming relevant only to the extent that they impinge on the possibility of B giving genuine consent).

Now, the first thing to note about this way of approaching the phenomenon is that it departs significantly from the way the concept of sexual objectification was developed, and became a part of women's collective self-understanding, through the feminist consciousness raising movements of the 70's. An awareness of the socio-cultural context and its imposition of a certain sexualised meaning on women was an essential part of women giving expression to their experiences – both personal and, later, collective – through the notion of sexual objectification.

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The second and more important point about this approach, however, is that it fails to give a sufficient account of the kinds of phenomena that we want the concept of sexual objectification to capture. There are two distinct facets of the phenomenon of sexual objectification, I think, which Nussbaum's account is unable to account for. The first is the question of *how* one person can come to possess the power or social standing to treat another person as an object – that is, how the kinds of acts and behaviours that we think of when we talk about sexual objectification are made possible by a broader social context. As Timo Jütten has argued, "Nussbaum's instrumentalization account […] does not explain the relationship between instrumentalization and the processes of social stereotyping of women that make this instrumentalization possible."[45]

Now, one possible justification Nussbaum could offer for this first explanatory failing is that the focus of her account is on the nature of the harm done to the individual by sexual objectification, rather than the social conditions which facilitate the widespread sexual objectification of women by men, specifically. She might claim, that is, that we fundamentally misunderstand the purpose of the account she offers when we look for an explanation as to why certain kinds of objectification are systemic; and, further, that there is nothing in her account of what sexual objectification does to individuals which would make it incompatible with a complementary explanation of the social setting in which objectification takes place.[46] As I have indicated above, I do not think this reply would do much to get Nussbaum off the hook; since her invocation of consent as a normative transformer requires her to address the social complexities of consent-giving, which brings the social into her account, even on her own terms.

Even if Nussbaum can acquit herself of this first explanatory failing by limiting the scope of her account merely to explaining the harm done to individuals by sexually objectifying treatment, however, this strategy would simply increase her liability with respect to the second explanatory failing of her account. This second failing, I submit, is that she does not account for the facets of the experience of being treated like a sex-object which are not derived narrowly from the actions of the 'objectifier'.

To see how this constitutes a fundamental failure to adequately capture the phenomenon, let us consider, by way of example, the case of a woman who is wolf-

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[45] Jütten 2016: 49.
[46] Kathleen Stock (2015) suggests something similar with her argument that Nussbaum's and MacKinnon's accounts of sexual objectification are (at least potentially) compatible accounts, which simply have a different focus.

whistled and jeered at by a group of men as she walks down the street. I think most women to whom this has happened would consider this to be an instance of sexual objectification, in the colloquial sense of being made to feel like a 'sex-object'. According to Nussbaum's account of sexual objectification, determining whether or not the behaviour of the men is an example of objectionable sexual objectification becomes a matter of establishing whether or not, in their treatment of the woman, the men treat her as a mere means for their own sexual gratification, thus failing to respect her dignity as a person. Such a judgement, as we have seen, will turn on whether the woman can meaningfully be understood to have consented to this treatment – perhaps we can imagine a scenario where the group of men are close personal acquaintances who have an established jovial relationship with the women, where they can reasonably assume that she would consent to this kind of treatment. If, however, we imagine this treatment is imposed on her, against her will and with no reasonable assumption that she has consented to it, then on the Nussbaumian account, the men fail to treat her as an end in herself, and thus violate her dignity in a morally reprehensible way.

Now, perhaps this interpretation of the example has some plausibility. However, it also seems fair to say that analysing this example as an abstract interaction between socially un-situated individuals misses a lot of what is at play in the making of the woman to feel like a sex-object, and also a lot about what facilitates this feeling, and who plays a role. When the woman hears the whistle, looks around and sees the men leering at her, is it their treatment of her as a mere means to the gratification of their desires, *simpliciter*, which makes her feel like a sex object? Or is it also: the fact that she is treated this way by men with monotonous regularity in her life; the realisation that no one else on the street appears to find their behaviour objectionable or even remarkable; the acknowledgement that, were she to tell a friend about the incident, it is highly likely she would be told to calm down and learn to take a compliment; her awareness of the fact that if she turned around and told them to leave her alone, she would be placing herself at considerable risk of further retaliatory behaviour; her reflexive questioning of her choice of clothes, and her wondering in spite of herself whether she did something to create this situation she finds herself in?

Indeed, I submit that these factors are more central to the feeling of being objectified in this case than the precise nature of the actions of the men. The objectifying impact of the actions of the individuals in this example is facilitated by, and is only possible because of, the various social norms and customs identified above. It is for this reason

that – and this is something I want to claim unapologetically – the case of a man being wolf-whistled at by a group of women is meaningfully distinct from the case of a woman being whistled at by men. A man in this position may feel uncomfortable, singled-out, even potentially intimidated – but he would not be sexually objectified in the same way as a woman, and the differential factor is to be found precisely in the cumulative weight of social and cultural attitudes and norms which ground the behaviour of the men when they whistle, where they would not ground the actions of women doing the same thing. It is for these same reasons, I think, that women can sometimes be made to feel like sex objects in situations where there is no intention on the part of men to treat them as means for sexual gratification. Being approached by a man in a bar, for example, can solicit this response – even in cases where nothing in the man's behaviour or treatment indicates that he is only, or even at all, interested in the woman sexually.[47] The point is that such interpersonal interactions take place within a wider social context in which much of the social identity that women have to operate with is defined sexually, and this context is an *irreducible* element of the phenomenon of sexual objectification – irreducible, because we cannot adequately explain the phenomenon, from any angle, without appealing to this context. That is, we can neither explain the impact of the whistle on the woman (how it makes her feel, how she responds, what enduring impact it has on her self-understanding, etc.), nor the action of the whistle itself (why the men do it, the meaning of the whistle, what it communicates to the woman, etc.) without appeal to the social context of the interaction.

This, I believe, is the crucial point. Context is not an addendum to the sexual objectification of women; it is constitutive of it. The problem with Nussbaum's account is that it treats the context of sexually objectifying interactions as an afterthought, with the main action as far as sexual objectification is concerned taking place in the interaction between individuals, abstracted from context. But this, as the phenomenological analysis above shows, is a category mistake; rather, we should conceptualise sexual objectification in precisely the opposite way – as a phenomenon which is inextricably bound up with social structures, norms and attitudes. To fail to consider it in this way, I submit, is to fundamentally mischaracterise it.

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[47] We could even go one step further, and imagine a woman who hears a whistle in the street and erroneously thinks that she is being wolf-whistled, when in fact someone is just trying to hail a cab. Even if she eventually discovers her mistake, her feeling of being objectified may not abate entirely; for the *possibility* that she was being wolf-whistled may have precipitated an anxious self-consciousness, a heightened awareness of the men around her, and so on.

1. Consent to Sexual Objectification: A Category Mistake?

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to spell out exactly how best to characterise the relationship between particular sexually objectifying acts, like wolf-whistling, and the social context in which they take place (I take up this task in Chapters 2 and 3). For the purposes of the argument at hand, however, what is important is that, when it comes to giving an account of what the phenomenon of sexual objectification is, we cannot begin by looking at actions abstracted from their context – for to do so is to exclude from our account much of what makes sexually objectifying actions and behaviours *what they are*. By assuming, as Nussbaum does, that we can give essentially the same explanation of instances of the sexist objectification of women (her example of Playboy magazine) as we give of other instances of sexual instrumentalisation (her example of using one's lover's stomach as a pillow), we rule out in advance that the substantially different contexts for these cases will require us to give *essentially different* accounts of what they are.

It is my contention, then, that as an account of the sexual objectification with which feminists concern themselves, Nussbaum's theory provides a misdiagnosis of the phenomenon.[48] This explains why the prescription for an anti-objectification feminist politics that we get from Nussbaum's account seems untenably stretched between two, conflicting poles: the primary focus on the individualistic standard on consent, on the one hand; and the need to acknowledge the social factors which delimit who can give meaningful consent, to what, and when, on the other hand. That Nussbaum's account cannot help but be dragged into intractable debates about what constitutes meaningful consent is, I submit, indicative of the fact that her presentation of contextual considerations as having only ancillary importance to the phenomenon of sexual objectification constitutes a fundamental diagnostic error.

VI. Conclusion

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[48] Some may object that it is wrong to frame Nussbaum's account as seeking to diagnose the specific problem of the widespread sexual objectification of women, with which feminists are typically concerned (Stock claims as much, and points to the fact that one of the examples Nussbaum draws on is one of a man objectifying another man (2015: 193)). I do not think this objection is valid, however. Nussbaum herself pitches her conceptual analysis of objectification as being capable of capturing, and explaining, both the harmful, patriarchal objectification of women that people like MacKinnon and Dworkin are concerned with, and the kind of benign or positive objectification which can be part of the sexual lives of any and all people (and of the range of examples she draws on, a good proportion are certainly cases that feminists would be interested in).

1. Consent to Sexual Objectification: A Category Mistake?

The purpose of this chapter has been to establish that feminist analyses of sexual objectification must move away from the conceptual approach inaugurated by Nussbaum's account and upheld by most contemporary work on the subject. If we believe that the purpose of formulating a rigorous account of sexual objectification is to establish what is needed to overcome it (or, at least, its harmful impact on women), then we need an account which is faithful to the phenomenon – and, in particular, the manifestations of the phenomenon which we most want to combat. Only then can we competently perform the 'anticipatory-utopian' theoretical work of charting a feminist politics capable of fighting against the sexual objectification of women. Nussbaum's approach, as we have seen, yields a focus on consent which saddles any resulting anti-objectification feminist politics with the question of when consent is, and isn't, authentic; and this is because she misdiagnoses sexual objectification as primarily a product of interpersonal interactions rather than a wider social context.

None of what I have argued for here is intended to imply that we mustn't take very seriously the first-personal significance of consent for individual women. The difference between being treated as a sex object in a way in which one feels one has consented to, and being similarly treated in a way which violates one's wishes, should not be underestimated.[49] But this, to my mind, is further reason to move beyond the Nussbaumian paradigm for thinking about sexual objectification. By problematising sexual objectification primarily at the social, rather than interpersonal, level, women's choices are, to some extent at least, freed from the burden which the singular politics of consent generated by Nussbaum's account places on them. Recall Schneider's concern that reducing women's actions under gender inequality to a simplistic distinction between activity and passivity, or agency and victimhood, fails to comprehend the extent to which both sides of these false dichotomies shape women's decision-making conditions in the real world. We can see this reductive dichotomy played out in the polarisation of feminist political praxis around the issue of sexual objectification. Anti-objectification feminist groups, as we saw in the introduction, tend to negate the importance of the consent of women involved in various kinds of objectifying work, focussing exclusively on the structural conditions of gender inequality in which these practices take place; opponents of such politics instead emphasise the importance of empowerment and self-determination for individual women, often at the expense of a

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[49] And insofar as it is a pervasive part of patriarchal culture to undervalue women's consent, a feminist politics should, of course, politicise the issue of consent.

1. Consent to Sexual Objectification: A Category Mistake?

sufficient analysis of agency-compromising structural factors. This polarisation arises, I believe, because both camps view consent as a normative transformer – that is, they both presume that whether or not an act or practice can be problematized from a feminist perspective depends on whether the act or practice can be understood as consensual. This motivates both the politics of empowerment, which seeks to endorse and promote the self-determination of individual women, and the anti-objectification stance, which presumes that the only way for a feminist critique of sexual objectification to be legitimate is to show that women can never, and do never, consent to being objectified. When consent is coupled strictly with the limits of political critique in this way, in other words, it inevitably becomes something of a zero-sum game, in which we can only have consent without critique, or critique and a denial of consent.

Decoupling consent from the limits of critique, by contrast, opens up a new realm of feminist political possibility. Conceptualising objectifying interpersonal behaviours as manifestations of, and contributions towards, the wider social context allows us to circumvent this reductive dichotomy of victimhood and agency, and theorise sexual objectification as something that happens to, with and through women. We become freed, in other words, to take seriously the first-personal, phenomenological significance of consent, and maintain its politico-legal importance, without at the same time preventing ourselves from critically analysing the extent to which the choices of individual women can be a product of, and serve to contribute to, the structural conditions which enable them, both consensually and non-consensually, to be treated like sex objects. The remainder of this thesis is dedicated to theorising these conditions and their implications for feminist politics. In the next chapter, I develop an alternative account of sexual objectification – one which takes seriously the intuition that we cannot make sense of what paradigmatic cases of objectification (such as wolf-whistling) are without understanding that they emerge out of, and form part of, a particular social context.

Chapter 2

'First in the world, then in the head.'
Catharine MacKinnon's account of sexual objectification

Introduction

Radical feminist theory is, and has been for some time, decidedly out of favour. Within feminist philosophy, a number of serious theoretical charges have been levelled against the analysis of women's oppression offered by radical feminism: that it assumes a uniformity of experience amongst women and thus fails to incorporate the intersectional imperative; that it denies women agency by framing them as mere victims of domination; and that its emphasis on eroticised domination denies the possibility of any authentic female sexuality, to name a few. These theoretical charges have informed, and are in turn reinforced by, new currents in feminist politics. Many contemporary feminist movements in the so-called 'fourth wave' focus on the historical exclusion of transgender women, and marginalisation of the needs and priorities of sex workers, from earlier feminist movements – the remedying of which is associated with righting the wrongs of the radical feminist movements of the 70s and 80s.[1]

In light of this distinct turning away from radical feminism – and particularly, in light of the seriousness of the charges levelled against it - it might seem rather imprudent to return to radical feminist theory in order to think about sexual objectification. Yet such a return is precisely what I intend to pursue here. The purpose of this chapter is to advocate a reorientation of contemporary feminist philosophical discussions of sexual objectification around the formulation of the concept offered by Catharine MacKinnon's radical, "unmodified" feminism. This move, though seemingly ill-advised, is motivated by a number of factors. The first reason for turning to MacKinnon is the paucity of the paradigmatic approach to sexual objectification exemplified by Nussbaum's account. As we saw in the first chapter, the only critical apparatus generated by Nussbaum's individualistic account of sexual objectification is a feminist politics of consent, which leaves her mired in intractable debates about the limits of authentic consent. For this reason, we must look elsewhere for an account of sexual objectification, one capable of

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[1] See Munro 2013. There are, of course, those who have refused the identification of radical feminism with trans and sex worker exclusion. See, for example, Williams 2016.

yielding more sophisticated political resources. Given MacKinnon's foundational role in bringing the concept of sexual objectification to the forefront of feminist discourse, her account stands out as an alternative orientation point to Nussbaum's conceptual paradigm.

There is a second, more substantive reason to turn to MacKinnon for a more promising account of sexual objectification, however. The inadequacy of the politics of consent generated by Nussbaum's account of sexual objectification, I have argued, results from her misdiagnosis of the phenomenon – and, specifically, her failure to interrogate the constitutively social nature of the *kinds* of cases of sexual objectification that feminists have historically been concerned with. By contrast, MacKinnon's account of sexual objectification, as we shall see, is social all the way down, and motivated from the outset by the kind of phenomena that Nussbaum's account struggles to explicate, such as street harassment and the effects of sexualised depictions of women in media (issues which continue to animate feminist politics). Not only, then, does MacKinnon's account offer a clear alternative to Nussbaum's approach, but there are also good reasons to believe that the *way* in which it differs will mean that it can be generative of a more useful feminist politics.

Sexual objectification, for MacKinnon, is a social process. Specifically, it is the process by which women are made into a uniquely subjugated social group through the creation and maintenance of the gender distinction. The essence of this distinction is eroticised hierarchy; the groups 'men' and 'women' are defined according to the eroticisation of dominance and submission, respectively. Hence the socially superior position of men, and the socially inferior position of women, is sustained through the reproduction of gender roles, defined sexually. This reproduction is facilitated partly through the sheer force men wield over women; women comply with their prescribed gender roles because of the ever-present threat of coercion from men. But there is another, crucial element to the reproduction of gendered reality for MacKinnon, which is the role played by the epistemological norm of objectivity. Objectivity-as-truth serves as the justification for the prescription of gender roles. When women are coerced or forced to comply with gender prescriptions, their complicity is taken as evidence of the veracity of gender stereotypes. This gives the eroticised gender distinction credence, which in turn engenders [further] non-coerced compliance on the part of women. Thus, force becomes necessary in relatively few circumstances; the apparent truthful content of propositions regarding gender roles is often sufficient to beget conformity to them.

2. Catharine MacKinnon's account of sexual objectification

This, then, is what it means for a woman to be a sexual object according to MacKinnon's understanding of the term – sexual objectification is both the process through which women are subordinated, and the effect this process has on individual women. Women are objectified in so far as they exist as objects within a solely male reality; objectively knowable and known, denied access to any reality not shaped by the perspective of men. This objectification is sexual in character because the content imposed on women under male power is sexual – specifically, women are defined according to men's sexual interests. Sexual objectification, then, is *the process by which women's subordination through the sexualized gender category of 'woman' is maintained.*

From this briefest of explications, it will be clear that MacKinnon's theory of sexual objectification is better placed than Nussbaum's to understand the phenomenon specifically as an object of feminist concern. Whereas Nussbaum's account is, in essence, context-neutral, a substantive context of gender inequality is constitutive of MacKinnon's conceptualisation of sexual objectification. Her conceptualisation of sexual objectification in terms of society-wide power dynamics and pervasive gender norms opens the door for thinking about sexual objectification as something which shapes or moulds women, as well as something which fundamentally oppresses them. Thinking about sexual objectification as something which defines the experience of being a woman *as such* also brings the possibility of thinking about a certain dissonance between the subjective experiences of individual women, on the one hand, and the socio-structural subordination of women as a group, on the other hand.[2] The central role she accords to sexuality in her account of sexual objectification, too, provides a crucial resource for considering ways in which the feeling of being objectified might become naturalised or even embodied by women. This puts her approach in a much better position to answer the kinds of questions that Nussbaum struggles with, such as: how do certain people attain the power to objectify specific others? Why does sexual objectification principally (if not solely) affect women? Who bears responsibility for the objectification of women, and from what might feminist resistance to it emanate?

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[2] I am not committing here to endorsing MacKinnon's claim that sexual objectification defines, or is constitutive of, the experiences of all women, such that it can be posited as some kind of essence of being a woman. Indeed, in the fifth chapter I will return to the issue of essentialism in MacKinnon's work, where I will ultimately argue that the most important political insights of her work can be maintained without positing such an essence. For the purposes of reconstructing and explicating her theory of sexual objectification, here, however, I am leaving this important issue (temporarily) unaddressed.

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In advocating a return to thinking about sexual objectification through MacKinnon's work, I am not attempting to offer a full-blown defence of her radical feminist theory against the many charges and accusations that have been levelled against it. I am interested in MacKinnon's work because I believe it contains important resources for formulating a feminist critique of sexual objectification which is attentive to both individual experience and structural domination and, most importantly, the relationship between the two. I am, for the most part, content to take what is useful and important from her work, and leave behind those aspects which cannot sufficiently incorporate new developments in feminist thought, and new concerns in feminist political action. This chapter should not be taken, then, as a thoroughgoing defence of MacKinnon's feminist theory, nor the political program she advocates on the basis of her analysis.[3] This does not mean, however, that the interpretation of her work given here offers nothing by way of a contribution to critical debates on the use and value of her feminist theory. An additional motivation behind the exegetical work pursued in this chapter is the belief that the philosophical richness of MacKinnon's radical feminism has been consistently underestimated, leading to widespread interpretative misunderstandings. These misunderstandings, I believe, have led commentators to overestimate the disparities between MacKinnon's ideas and the ideas that have gained popular support in post-second wave feminist philosophy – particularly those associated inspired by Foucault's accounts of power and subjectivisation. Part of what I intend to show in this chapter is that MacKinnon's feminist theory has a good deal more to say (though perhaps not in so many words) about subjectivisation, power and the discursive constitution of the social than it is typically credited with. In making this case, I will offer MacKinnon at least a partial defence against some of the criticisms that have historically been made of her work; but this defence is in the service of my primary goal of constructing a theory of sexual objectification capable of yielding a viable feminist politics of emancipation.

The chapter is structured around a conceptual distinction, in my interpretation of MacKinnon's theory of sexual objectification, between what we might broadly describe as the 'sexual' aspect of her theory, and the 'objectification' aspect. I also consider this division to delimit the separation between what I call the static and dynamic elements of her theory of sexual objectification – the static dimension addressing the question of

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[3] For example, the Antipornography Civil Rights Ordinances proposed by MacKinnon and Dworkin in the 1980s.

what it means for a woman to be a sex object and the dynamic dimension addressing the question of how women come to be sexual objects will be provided in the subsequent two sections on objectivity and power. In the first half of the paper (A), I address the sexual, static aspect of her theory, through an examination of the notions of gender (I) and sexuality (II). In the second half of the paper (B), I turn to the dynamic aspect of her theory, concerned with the notion of 'objectification' itself, and deconstruct this via the concepts of objectivity (I) and power (II).

A) Gender and Sexuality:
The form and content of sexual objectification

In the following two sections, I will reconstruct the two conceptual elements of what we might understand as the 'sexual' aspect of MacKinnon's account of sexual objectification: her theories of gender and sexuality. Taken together, gender and sexuality provide us with the form and content, respectively, of sexual objectification according to MacKinnon. In other words, they provide an answer to the question of what it means for a woman to be a sex object; an answer to the question of how women come to be sexual objects will be provided in the subsequent two sections on objectivity and power. In the first section I discuss gender, as providing the form of sexual objectification for MacKinnon, and then I move on in the second section to discuss the content, sexuality.

I. Gender

Gender, according to MacKinnon's theory of sexual objectification, is "the social hierarchy of men over women."[4] So defined, a number of implications follow. The first is that gender is fundamentally *a relation between two groups of people*, rather than a factor which differentiates. Gender is not constituted by the differences between men and women, but by the sorting of people into two hierarchically organised categories:

> One of the most deceptive antifeminisms [sic] in society, scholarship, politics, and the law is the persistent treatment of gender as if it is truly a question of

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[4] MacKinnon 1989: 127-8.

> difference, rather than treating gender difference as a construct of the difference gender makes.[5]

The claim here, then, is not that men and women, as distinct social groups, lack any perceptible differentiating factors on the basis of which they appear to be grouped. Rather, the claim that MacKinnon is making is that these differences, or at least their perception [and particular manifestation],[6] are a *product* of gender inequality, not a basis for it; "[d]ifferences are inequality's post hoc excuse, its conclusory artefact […] the damage that is pointed to as the justification for doing the damage after the damage has been done."[7] There are, then, categories of 'man' and 'woman', but these categories are defined with reference to one another: to be a man is to have social power over women, and to be a woman is to be socially powerless [relative? Against?] to men.

There are two important corollaries of conceiving gender in this way. The first is that MacKinnon necessarily rejects any feminist theory which upholds the idea of gender as difference by buying into a notion of a distinct feminine essence or identity. Many feminist scholars have advocated such a move; Carol Gilligan's effort to revaluate the feminine via a shift towards care ethics is a good example. Drucilla Cornell has criticised MacKinnon on precisely these terms, challenging what she views as an unacceptable "devaluation of the feminine" in her work.[8] On MacKinnon's view, however, these are erroneous feminist strategies, because they accept the gender difference as a given, and thereby naturalise it. The problem, she argues, "is not that differences are not valued; the problem is that they are defined by power."[9] Any approach which takes gender difference as a starting assumption, therefore, colludes in the ideology of difference and obscures the crucial feminist insight that gender is hierarchical by definition.

The second corollary is that gender cannot be understood to have any relation to the biological sex difference. MacKinnon explicitly rejects all appeals to biological determinism:

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[5] MacKinnon 1987: 8-9.

[6] The question as to what extent MacKinnon endorses a view of gender differences as *entirely* a construct of gender inequality is a difficult question to answer. This may be because her analysis does not depend on her necessarily taking a view on the matter; her claim that the differences we call upon to naturalise the gender hierarchy are an 'outcome presented as an origin' holds, regardless of whether she might yet think that there are significant differences between men and women that might subsist in a gender equitable world. I will return to discuss this issue more with reference to gender biologism, below.

[7] MacKinnon 1987: 8.

[8] I will return to Cornell's criticism of MacKinnon in the next section.

[9] MacKinnon 1989: 219.

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> It is one thing to identify women's biology as a part of the terrain on which a struggle for dominance is acted out; it is another to identify women's biology as the source of that subordination. The first approach certainly identifies an intimate alienation; the second predicates women's status on the facticity of her biology.[10]

It is not only crude biological determinism that MacKinnon rejects, but any account of women's subordination which draws upon the apparent facticity of the binary sex division. Thus, for example, she criticises Simone de Beauvoir for tying women's fate to their reproductive capacities – even though one might reasonably doubt the claim that de Beauvoir's feminism was biologically deterministic.[11]

Clearly, then, MacKinnon is imploring us to understand gender as a social construct, rather than an immutable fact of life. What is not so clear, however, is how far she intends this social constructionist narrative to extend. Predicating gender on the basis of biology is evidentially problematic for MacKinnon, and at times she directly criticises the apparent facticity of the sex binary itself: "Never mind that the biology of sex is not bipolar or exclusive."[12] In passages such as these, she seems to be moving past the now-familiar feminist move of distinguishing biological sex from socially constructed gender, and towards a more radical reconceptualization of the sex distinction itself as also a social or cultural artefact.[13] At other times, however, one can quite clearly discern the traces of what appears to be an unwillingness to eschew entirely the notion of a distinct, biological category of 'woman'; she refers, for example, to "women's biology" and its "facticity".[14]

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[10] *Ibid*., 54.

[11] See MacKinnon 1991.
I think it is at least reasonable to postulate that de Beauvoir's intention here was not to depict women's role in reproduction as an "existential fact," but simply to portray the immense task involved in freeing women from the submissive roles assigned to them on the basis of biology, whilst at the same time paying adequate attention to the fact that, factually, *some people* must carry and birth children whilst *some other people* do not have this burden. A whole host of ostensibly feminist issues such as abortion rights, contraceptive provision and maternity leave depend on recognition of this fact, and MacKinnon evidentially does not consider these issues unimportant.

[12] MacKinnon 1987: 55-6. In support of scepticism of the sex binary, see Fausto-Sterling 2000.

[13] Judith Butler has famously questioned, in this vein, whether "the ostensibly natural facts of sex [are] discursively produced by various scientific discourses in the service of other political and social interests". (1990: 7).

[14] MacKinnon 1989: 54.

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Further confusion arises when one considers the extent to which MacKinnon uses the categories of 'man' and 'woman' as designators for persons with male or female gender prescriptions:

> Not all men have equal access to male power, nor can men ever fully occupy women's standpoint. […] A woman can also take on the male point of view or exercise male power, although she remains always a woman.[15]

It is unclear here exactly what MacKinnon means by the terms 'man' and 'woman'. What is the definition of a 'man' who loses the gender ascription of male power? What properties must a 'woman' who exercises male power have, in order to remain nonetheless a woman? Not breasts, a womb, XX chromosomes and so on, presumably – at least not in essence. How, then, are we to make sense of MacKinnon's position on the relation between biological sex and gender? Is it merely a sloppy or insufficiently rigorous aspect of the feminist theory, or can we make sense of this ambiguity?

Sally Haslanger has formulated an account of gender which is both analytically precise and succeeds in treading the line between biological determinism and a radical theory of sex. According to Haslanger, "sexual difference functions as the physical marker to distinguish the two [gender] groups, and is used in the justification of viewing and treating the members of each group differently."[16] Haslanger is strongly influenced by MacKinnon's work, and MacKinnon's conception of difference as inequality's 'post hoc excuse' is clearly echoed here. In contrast to MacKinnon, however, Haslanger goes on from this point to cash out the precise relationship between gender and biology. She theorises the relationship thus:

> S is a woman if and only if: S is regularly and for the most part observed or imagined to have certain bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction; and that S has these features marks S within the dominant ideology of S's society as someone who ought to occupy certain kinds of social positions that are in fact subordinate.[17]

On Haslanger's account, then, there is an important relationship between biological sex and gender, but crucially, it is not an essential relationship in the way that a biologically deterministic account would propose. Indeed, it is non-essential in two ways. Firstly, the

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[15] MacKinnon 1987: 52.
[16] Haslanger 2012: 230.
[17] Paraphrased from Haslanger 2012: 234.

relationship is conceived as being contingent on the prevailing (sexist) ideology of our society, thus avoiding the problems of the kind of deterministic accounts MacKinnon is so concerned with. Secondly, however, and more importantly, the sex division in Haslanger's account is not entirely reducible to differing reproductive functions.

By conceptualising gender as something that is assigned on the basis of *observed or imagined* bodily differences, Haslanger allows for the very real fact that not all gender subordination occurs in correspondence with the binary sex distinction.[18] This allows for the kind of critical theory of sex that MacKinnon seems to be reaching towards at times, whilst also providing a thorough analytical explanation for why MacKinnon seems to continue to find the categories of 'man' and 'woman' useful; on Haslanger's account of gender, one can recognise the ways in which gender prescriptions track the differing roles that people play in sexual reproduction without being required to buy into either a fully social constructionist or biological account of sex. This leaves MacKinnon free to hold either position without compromising on her theory of gender. She may want to reject the binary sex distinction as itself a social construct, merely a facet of the gender construct; or she may want to hold, like Haslanger, that we may have good political or ethical reasons for continuing to think, at least some of the time, in terms of the sex binary.[19] Her continued use of the terms 'man' and 'woman' would tend to suggest that she holds something approaching the latter view; but in either case, her gender theory will not be compromised or rendered illogical.

In light of these considerations, we could usefully define MacKinnon's theory of gender thus:

> *Gender is a socially constructed power relation that divides people into two classes, the dominant and the dominated; these classes are defined relationally but track, or are assumed to track, certain biological, reproductive features of persons.[20]*

There remains one important element of MacKinnon's notion of gender which must be incorporated into this definition, however, before we have a full understanding of her account, and it is the most significant component in terms of differentiating her account

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[18] This is especially important in light of recent trans-inclusionary trends in feminist activism.

[19] See Haslanger 2012, esp. chapter on 'Feminism in Metaphysics'.

[20] This definition is sufficient for understanding MacKinnon's conception of gender in relation to her theory of sexual objectification. In the context of wider debates in feminism around issues of essentialism, it would be important to add an additional clause which recognises MacKinnon's ambivalence towards the biological sex binary; something like: "which may be a more or less socially useful way of categorising people."

from those of other feminists concerned with gender politics. What we have established so far is the *form* that gender takes in MacKinnon's feminism; that is, a structural, asymmetrical relation between people. What we have yet to establish, however, is the *content* of the gender relation according to MacKinnon; that is, what defines the gender roles of male and female. To do so requires us to get to grips with another crucial element of her theory of sexual objectification – sexuality.

II. Sexuality

MacKinnon's account of sexuality provides the key to understanding her theory of gender. She departs most notably from other theorists with social constructionist accounts of gender to the extent that she figures sexuality as foundational to gender. The perception that sexuality plays an essential role in the perpetuation of gender structures is also one of the most important factors which distinguish MacKinnon's theory of sexual objectification from others. To see how this is so, we must first establish precisely what constitutes her particular understanding of sexuality.

In contrast to much of what has been taken as a given in theories of sexuality, MacKinnon steps decisively away from understanding sexuality as any kind of pre-social, ahistorical given – as some kind of substance in its own right. [21] She abjures all such accounts on the basis that they fail to correct the most basic mistake that, she claims, people have been making since Freud; separating the content of our sexual desires from the abstract notion of 'sexuality itself':

> What sex is – how is comes to be attached and attributed to what it is, embodied and practiced as it is, contextualised in the way it is, signifying and referring to what it does - is taken as a baseline, a given […] It is as if 'erotic,' for example, can be taken as having an understood referent, although it is never defined, except to imply that it is universal yet individual, ultimately variable and plastic, essentially indefinable. [22]

Not only does MacKinnon reject such accounts of sexuality as philosophically untenable; she identifies them as a key element in the perpetuation of gender inequality. Discourses

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[21] Foucault's work on sexuality, and that of those working in his wake, of course, is an important exception to this generalisation; something MacKinnon herself notes (1989: 131).
[22] MacKinnon 1989: 129.

which naturalise sexuality rather than taking it for what it is – the content of sexual desire, that which is felt as sexual[23] – perpetuate the political-philosophical conviction that 'sexuality,' people's sex lives, are exempted from feminist critique. In fact, MacKinnon argues, a critique of sexuality is necessary for any feminism which has hopes of demolishing the foundations of gender inequality. The turning away from the assumption of essential sexuality, then, is a fundamental feminist move for MacKinnon.

Once such a step is taken, a feminist theory of sexuality can begin to be built. Such a theory, from the outset, declines to think of sexuality as an abstract universal, and instead builds its account on the basis of what we know about the *content of sexual desires*, socially. The notion of social construction, then, is no less important for MacKinnon's account of sexuality than it is for her theory of gender. Sexuality is a social construct for MacKinnon, in two distinct ways. As we have seen, the idea of 'sexuality' according to MacKinnon is a product of dominant discourses that consider sexuality to be natural and pre-social; as such, the very concept of sexuality is itself a social construct. This prompts the need to analyse sexual desire in its current, empirical existence.[24] But this exposes another layer of the socially constructed nature of sexuality; if what we desire sexually manifests not as a result of some essential sexuality arising from within us, but instead out of the context of our social position, relations and so on, then the content of our sexual desires is also a social construct: "Desire […] is taken for a natural essence or presocial impetus, but is actually *created by* the social relations […] in question."[25] Thus, both the prevailing idea and the concrete manifestation of sexuality are socially constructed on MacKinnon's account.[26] In and of itself, this is not an uncontroversial point – as MacKinnon herself is well aware – but her position becomes substantially more contentious when she cashes out precisely what she perceives to be the empirical content of contemporary sexuality:

> [T]he interests of male sexuality construct what sexuality as such means, including the standard way it is allowed and recognized to be felt and expressed and experienced.[27]

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[23] MacKinnon 1987: 6.
[24] MacKinnon 1989: 129.
[25] MacKinnon 1987: 49 [my emphasis].
[26] For a more detailed account of how social constructions may comprise more than one element of construction, see Hacking 1999: 21-4.
[27] MacKinnon 1987: 53.

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What are the interests of male sexuality? "Dominance eroticized defines the imperatives of [sexuality's] masculinity, submission eroticized defines its femininity."[28] This is perhaps the most incendiary contention of MacKinnon's feminist theory. She claims that if we see discourses around 'natural' sexuality as the fictions that they are, and begin to analyse sexual desire in its concrete manifestations, this is the content we will discover: the gendered eroticisation of hierarchy.

There are two important elements which make this such a strong claim. The first is that the content of sexual desire is shaped around what men eroticise. This is the logical corollary of MacKinnon's claim that the content of sexuality is a product of social relations; socially, men have power over women, which means that sexually, what is considered desirable also conforms to this picture – sexual dominance is considered desirable in a man, sexual submission in a woman. The second element, however, is that these social definitions of sexual desire are not just enforced on women, against their will; on the contrary, eroticised hierarchy turns women on: "our subordination is eroticised in and as female; in fact, we get off on it."[29] What MacKinnon is presenting, then, is not simply a picture of sexual relations in which men force their desire for dominance upon women – though of course this does happen, a lot.[30] What she is actually offering is something more subtle, and more profound: a feminist analysis of sexuality through which women's own sexual desires become a matter for critical scrutiny.

We are now in a position to understand the relationship between sexuality and gender in MacKinnon's account of sexual objectification. For MacKinnon, sexuality – that is, the eroticisation of dominance and submission – is the content which defines the gender distinction. The male gender is given form by dominant sexuality, the female gender is concretised in submissive sexuality. There are other characteristics of the two socially constructed genders, of course, and in the reproduction of social reality they mutually enforce one another: sexuality and gender are in some sense two sides of the same coin, gender being concerned with identity and self-presentation, sexuality with erotic arousal. Crucially, however, it is nonetheless sexuality that is foundational to gender for MacKinnon, and not the other way around: "sexuality is the linchpin of gender

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[28] MacKinnon 1989: 130.
[29] MacKinnon 1987: 54.
[30] Demonstrating this point was the intention behind soliciting the evidence of a range of women for the anti-pornography ordinance hearings. See Dworkin and MacKinnon 1997.

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inequality."[31] Gender is an elaborate artifice erected on top of the foundational sexual dynamic of dominance and submission:

> Women and men are divided by gender, made into the sexes as we know them, by the social requirements of its dominant form, heterosexuality, which institutionalises male sexual dominance and female sexual submission.[32]

Clearly, then, one must accept MacKinnon's account of sexuality if one wants to buy into her theory of gender. The controversial nature of her views on sexuality, however, means that many feminists, who are otherwise sympathetic towards radical theories of gender are, at best, highly sceptical about MacKinnon's feminism. Drucilla Cornell, for example, has been a vociferous opponent of MacKinnon's notion of eroticised hierarchy. Cornell is highly critical of what she views as an unacceptable devaluation of female sexuality in MacKinnon's feminism.   She maintains that MacKinnon's depiction of female sexuality ignores the fact that "women's sexuality is irreducible to the fantasy that we are only 'fuckees.'"[33]

That there must be something more to female sexuality than giving men what they want is, for Cornell, both a logical necessity and an empirical fact. Logically, MacKinnon cannot conceive female sexuality in such a closed, deterministic manner if she is to maintain the possibility of a feminist resistance; there must be a break in the totality of social meaning through which women develop a critical feminist consciousness.[34] Empirically, Cornell argues that feminist explorations of female sexuality have demonstrated that there is much more complexity to women's sexual desires than MacKinnon acknowledges. To conceptualise female sexuality crudely as the mere desire to be dominated violates what Cornell perceives as a feminist imperative to promote the

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[31] MacKinnon 1989: 113.

This claim would appear to contradict the argument made in the previous paragraph, that sexualised hierarchy arises as a result of the social domination of men over women; here, MacKinnon's is asserting precisely the opposite, that sexuality precipitates gender. There are two important things to bear in mind when contemplating this apparent inconsistency. The first is that, as was flagged in the introduction, there is an inherent circularity to MacKinnon's reasoning which cannot be regarded simply as bad logic. This circularity will be addressed in the first part of the next section, where I discuss the role of the epistemological norm of objectivity in her account of sexual objectification. The second thing to think about is whether or not MacKinnon's claim that sexuality is the linchpin of gender inequality is intended as a causal claim in the strict sense. I hypothesise that a better way to read this statement is as making a claim about the foundational importance of sexuality, particularly with regard to theorising what kind of resistance mechanisms women can or should be adopting to subvert gender inequality.

[32] *Ibid*.

[33] Cornell 1991: 2250.

[34] *Ibid*., 2256.

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"exploration of women's sexuality and 'sex' as we live it and not as men fantasize about it."[35]

There are two principle problems with Cornell's criticism of MacKinnon, however. The first is that, like so many commentaries on MacKinnon's feminism, Cornell's critique only amounts to a straw man (or woman) argument. Her criticisms have purchase only against a sensationalised variation of MacKinnon's arguments, which does not hold up against the scrutiny of a sophisticated interpretation of her work. Cornell claims that MacKinnon fails to "understand the critical lessons of deconstruction,"[36] and thus ignores the fact that institutionalised meaning is always in danger of slipping and changing. But this criticism is poorly aimed; MacKinnon's apparent commitment to a wholly deterministic model of sexuality is, on closer inspection, derived from a position of epistemic scepticism rather than a commitment to the idea of closed system.

MacKinnon's claim is not that there definitively cannot be any elements of female sexuality which escape the determination of male power, but simply that the conditions for grounding a political feminist project on these elements are far too precarious. Even in cases in which women may be able to develop sexualities which are in some way authentically female, their only way of communicating this is via public discourses around sexuality, which are framed in male terms. The likelihood that such affirmation projects will be subverted, therefore, is highly likely, and we would do well to maintain a certain scepticism about the success of such strategies. More importantly, however, the plasticity of sexuality means that we must allow for the distinct possibility that much of what women identify as genuine or authentic sexual desires might nonetheless be a product of sexual objectification. A subjective sense of the authenticity of one's desires is an insufficient grounding for an affirmative political project, for this feeling of authenticity itself might just as easily be a product of us identifying with and internalising male sexuality as our own. Subjectively, this may feel the same as the kind of genuine female sexuality that Cornell envisages, but structurally, it would crucially remain unfree nonetheless.

If we know at least a lot of the time, then, that the circumstances in which female sexual desire is moulded are shaped by the hierarchical relations of power between men and

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[35] *Ibid.*, 2250.
[36] Both: *Ibid.*, 2264.

women,[37] then we have no tools at our disposal to distinguish the 'good' female sexuality that Cornell insists MacKinnon misses, from those sexual desires which perpetuate our domination.[38] Another way of articulating this point is to say that MacKinnon is an epistemic negativist when it comes to female sexuality. That is, she believes that the conditions on the formation of female sexual desire – the pervasiveness of the gender hierarchy - are such that we are structurally prevented from being able to identify authentic female sexuality.[39] So construed, the problem with Cornell's critique of MacKinnon is that she erroneously believes that, under the hegemonic conditions of gender inequality, we might nonetheless have epistemic access to 'good' female sexuality.

This relates to the second problem of Cornell's critique. By arguing in favour of a feminism which affirms the feminine by celebrating the aspects of women's sexuality which are not determined by male power, Cornell falls back into the fallacy of conceptualising sexuality in precisely the kind of pre-social way that MacKinnon argues we must abjure. She posits an important link between sex and freedom, conceptualising the self as "a being of the flesh, in which sexual expression cannot easily be separated from freedom."[40] By so doing, she buys into the narrative of sexuality as healthy, positive, wholesome and good that MacKinnon wants us to move away from; not, as Cornell wants to argue, because MacKinnon has an erroneous understanding of human nature which ignores sexuality, but because she does not believe that true freedom can be *achieved through sexuality* for women:

> So long as sexual inequality remains unequal and sexual, attempts to value female sexuality as women's, possessive as if women possess it, will remain part of limiting women to it, to what women are now defined as being […] 'I do not know any feminist worthy of that name who, if forced to choose between freedom and sex, would choose sex. She'd choose freedom every time.'[41]

The point for MacKinnon, then, is not that the realisation of a genuine female sexuality should not be a goal for feminism. The point is rather that the conditions of possibility

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[37] It is important to note that this claim is not arbitrary, but is in fact backed up by the extent of the empirical research MacKinnon has conducted throughout her long career as a lawyer and feminist activist. See 1989: 127.

[38] I will return to the epistemological character of MacKinnon's theory of sexual objectification in the second part of this section, when I discuss objectivity.

[39] I take the concept of epistemic negativism from Fabian Freyenhagen's work on Adorno's negativist social philosophy. See Freyenhagen 2013: 4.

[40] *Ibid*., 250.

[41] MacKinnon 1989: 154.

for the assured identification of such a sexuality do not currently exist, and will continue not to exist until women understand that "to seek an equal sexuality without political transformation is to seek equality under conditions of inequality."[42] Emancipation must precede sexual actualisation. Recall MacKinnon's claim that 'sexuality is the linchpin of gender inequality.' This is more than a conceptual claim about the precise relationship between gender and sexuality (i.e. which is foundational to which). It is also a claim about the nature of the barrier to overcoming gender inequality. Liberation requires that we as women scrutinise and critically assess our own sexual desires. Once we acknowledge the fact that the content of what we eroticise is dictated to a large extent by our social environment, we must be willing to let go of the idea that sexual desires *as such* should be exempt from critique. This is the crucial lesson to be learned from MacKinnon's account of gender inequality; that "sexuality itself can no longer be regarded as unimplicated" in the continued domination of men over women.[43]

B) Objectivity and Power:
The dynamic dimension of sexual objectification

In the preceding sections, we established what we might term the form and content of sexual objectification according to MacKinnon's analysis. Sexual objectification takes the form of a hierarchically gendered power relation, the content of which is comprised of eroticised dominance and submission by men and women respectively. But this is only one half of the work that needs to be done to understand MacKinnon's theory of sexual objectification in full; for one of the most important things that sets her account apart from others is that in addition to providing a conceptualisation of what sex-object status means in a static sense, she also supplements this with an account of the dynamic mechanisms that perpetuate the sexually objectified status of women. It is to this side of her theory of sexual objectification – what we might term the dynamic dimension – which I now turn. I will first consider the concept of objectivity, something which MacKinnon discusses extensively in her own work; I will then move on to discuss power, an important but currently underdeveloped aspect of MacKinnon's dynamic account of objectification.

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[42] *Ibid*.
[43] *Ibid.*, 127.

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I. Objectivity

Perhaps the single most foundational idea that one needs to get to grips with in order to understand MacKinnon's dynamic account of sexual objectification is that "method organises the apprehension of truth."[44] Our choice of epistemic method, she argues, determines what counts as evidence in favour of a belief, what shows up as worthy of scrutiny and what counts as verification; there can be no clear separation between method and truth, for method is "always to some degree tautologous with its discoveries."[45] On MacKinnon's account, then, there is no apprehension of the world without a method of apprehension, and the question is what method we use. Her contention is that the way we answer this question shapes the fabric of social reality, and therefore has serious political implications.

The Western philosophical tradition, she asserts, has been predominantly obsessed with gaining authority over reality; it has tasked itself with finding a method capable of producing knowledge and truth which is certain, irrefutable and unquestionable. This desire for certainty has necessitated a particular epistemological hegemony, whereby means of knowing are considered legitimate only if they advance the project of producing certainty. According to MacKinnon, objectivity has provided this methodological hegemony.[46] Objectivity as epistemological stance reflects scientific method; it depicts itself as "the ostensibly non-involved stance, the view from a distance and from no particular perspective, apparently transparent to its reality."[47] When the criteria of objectivity – something I will return to shortly – are satisfied, the object of knowledge is considered to be known accurately and certainly.

Already it should be clear that MacKinnon will find the epistemological stance of objectivity problematic. The very idea of a method which can distance itself from the

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[44] *Ibid.*, 106.

[45] *Ibid.*, 107.

[46] MacKinnon's critique of the 'Western philosophical tradition' in this regard is similar to Gadamer's contention that post-Enlightenment thought has been plagued by a "prejudice against prejudice itself." (1975: 240). Interestingly, Gadamer argues that it is only since the Enlightenment that people have obsessed over the need to gain 'scientific' knowledge free from subjective perspectives or prejudices; pre-Enlightenment, prejudicial knowledge was not considered to be an inherently bad or problematic thing. One could certainly argue that MacKinnon has not paid adequate consideration to these historical anti-objectivist tendencies to be in a position to dismiss Western philosophy in its entirety. I think, however, it is certainly possible to discern in much of the received philosophical canon a significant enough trend towards the epistemic authority she characterises that her argument retains its potency, despite this somewhat exaggerated claim.

[47] *Ibid.*, 122.

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object of its investigations in such a way as to know it immutably is clearly something MacKinnon would consider fallacious; objectivity is considered to have access to truth, rather than having a stake in shaping what qualifies as truth. It is not this epistemological fallacy *simpliciter*, however, with which MacKinnon is concerned, and which is key to understanding her account of sexual objectification; but rather the interplay of objectivity with the hierarchically gendered structure of social reality. Gender is what makes objectivity problematic in the specifically feminist way that MacKinnon articulates, because the male perspective is what objectivity validates as the epistemological stance with access to truth. Before we move on to see how MacKinnon cashes out this claim, however, we must firstly ascertain precisely what she means by the term 'objectivity.'

Several commentators have drawn attention to the fact that MacKinnon's use of the term 'objectivity' in her feminist theory is not entirely straightforward. Conceptualising objectivity through a favourable contrast with subjectivity is a reasonably standard philosophical distinction. So construed, 'objective knowledge' is defined as "what any (ideal) knower, any subject, would find to be true of the object investigated."[48] Such objective knowledge is typically considered to satisfy several criteria: neutrality, aperspectivity, and distance.[49] Certainly MacKinnon's characterisation of objectivity reflects these standardised definitions; she describes objectivity as "the neutral posture […] the nonsituated, distanced standpoint."[50] The distinction between objectivity and subjectivity is also very important for MacKinnon, insofar as understanding how we can navigate ourselves out of the totalising effects of male power requires an account of the peculiar epistemological situation that women find themselves in, and the attendant imperative to reject the binary between the objectively knowable and the subjectively experienced.

There is, however, an important aspect of the epistemological regime that MacKinnon seeks to express with the term 'objectivity' which is not captured by these definitions. What MacKinnon seems to have in mind a lot of the time when she uses the term

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[48] Zuckert 2002: 275.
[49] Haslanger defines 'absolute objectivity' according to the criteria of epistemic neutrality, practical neutrality and absolute aperspectivity (2012: 71); Zuckert's criteria are distance, neutrality and impartiality (2002: 275).
[50] MacKinnon 1987: 50.

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'objectivity' is a particular scientistic epistemology.[51] This concern with scientific method is most clearly articulated in *Feminism Unmodified*:

> One consequence of women's rejection of science in its positivistic form is that we reject the head-counting theory of verification.[52]

The phrase 'head-counting theory of verification' here indicates an epistemology grounded in empirical observation, characteristic of the natural sciences. Not only must the objective knower be in a position to distance himself from the object of his inquiry such that he can know it in a neutral way, but it must also be the case that the content of the knowledge he gains is empirically verifiable.[53] This notion of observational verification is central to MacKinnon's account of objectivity, and is something that has been overlooked by some commentators. Rachel Zuckert, for example, criticises MacKinnon's attack on liberalism on the basis of her critique of objectivity; but she crucially mischaracterises MacKinnon's position by taking the kind of objective epistemology that MacKinnon is concerned with to be one which forbids the grounding of knowledge in perception.[54]

The significance of MacKinnon's focus on this particular scientific strain of objectivity becomes clearer once we move to consider the interplay that she depicts between objectivity and gender. This requires elaborating a further claim she makes, regarding the connection between social reality and epistemological regimes. MacKinnon contends that not only does the epistemological hegemony of objectivity determine the interpretation of reality; it also, as a result, *determines what is*. This amounts to a hypothesis about the construction and reproduction of social reality:

> What is objectively known corresponds to the world and can be verified by being pointed to (as science does) because the world itself is controlled from the same point of view.[55]

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[51] See, e.g. "[Feminism] rejects the approach of control over nature (including women) analogized to control over society (also including women) which has grounded the 'science of society' project as the paradigm for political knowledge." (1989*:* 118)

[52] MacKinnon 1987: 55.

[53] I take this to the content of Geuss' claim that positivist epistemologies regard as knowledge only those statements which are scientifically testable and have observational content. See Geuss 1981: 27.

[54] Zuckert 2002: 275.

[55] MacKinnon 1989: 122.

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What MacKinnon is identifying here is the tendency for the social world to shape itself around the dominant conception of truth. Once something is defined as true, it becomes rational to act in accordance with this perceived facticity; rational both internally, to the extent that the epistemological regime is dominant, and externally, insofar as navigating our environment becomes easier once we orient ourselves around the perception of truth shared by those we interact with. Objective epistemology is especially pernicious in this regard, because of its reliance on empirical observation as the method of verification. This creates a vicious cycle of congealing truth: what is true is defined as what is out there, manifest and tangible, yet what is out there to be observed is shaped by this very apprehension of truth, such that it will always already conform to our expectations of what is true and thus further strengthen our belief that certain propositions, and not others, are true. Hence, MacKinnon concludes, objectivity "creates the [social] reality it apprehends by defining as knowledge the reality it creates through its way of apprehending it."[56] This proposition is circular, but, properly understood, so is the process it describes.

Objectivity, then, guarantees[57] a reproduction of social reality in accordance with whatever perspectival stance is taken to be epistemologically authoritative. Recall that gender, for MacKinnon, is the socially constructed categorisation of people into two groups, defined through eroticised dominance and submission. Male dominance means that the perspective of men, as the perspective of those with social power, is taken to have authoritative access to truth. This means that the reproduction of social reality is

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[56] *Ibid*., 114.
I think it is important to qualify this claim by limiting objectivity's effects to the social world, rather than the world at large. MacKinnon does not explicitly draw this distinction herself, but I think making the distinction better captures what she is trying to say about the relationship between objectivity and gendered reality. Moreover, failing to draw the distinction has led to criticism from Sally Haslanger, who interprets MacKinnon as arguing that the world as a whole is socially constructed in the strong sense. I am inclined to suggest that we read MacKinnon's claims about the construction of the world as such from the male perspective as rhetorically imbued; she wishes to draw attention to the multiplicity of false beliefs we hold about 'natural gender' and in order to do so she sometimes exaggerates the reach of her analysis. As a rhetorical strategy this is not invalid, but philosophically, it is important to distinguish between the plasticity of the social world and the comparative rigidity of the non-social world. To this extent I agree with Haslanger. (see 2012 ch. 1)

[57] Of course, it is crucial for MacKinnon – and for myself – that this reproduction is not ultimately totalising; the task of 'feminism unmodified' is to understand the challenges posed by the epistemological dimensions of women's subjection, such that women can begin to think creatively about ways to challenge the epistemological hegemony that currently defines their possibilities. So understood, then, the circle is not ever completely closed – and I think MacKinnon is more able to heed this important lesson of poststructuralism than others have suggested. For the sake of understanding the force of MacKinnon's account of sexual objectification, however, I emphasise here the extent to which her feminist theory does conceive of the epistemological effects of objective epistemology as near-totalising.

governed by the male perspective: "men create the world from their point of view, which then becomes the truth to be described."[58] Under the rubric of objectivity, the male stance is universalised, its perspective made into truth. So established, these truths come to dictate the rational ways for one to behave, thus providing further validation of the apparent epistemological infallibility of the male perspective. This is the process that MacKinnon is describing when she claims that objectivity is the "male standpoint socially": that the epistemological hegemony of objectivity serves to perpetuate and reinforce the hierarchy of gender via the universalisation and concealment of the male perspective.[59]

Let's take a specific example: the role of 'rape myths' in the perpetuation of sexual violence against women. Commonplace in all too many discussions of rape and sexual assault against women is the assumption, sometimes implicit but often explicit, that the behaviour of women excuses, explains or at least lessens the severity of male sexual violence against them. Women's clothing choices, their interpersonal behaviour and their alcohol consumption, to name but a few, are all routinely scrutinised when an allegation of sexual violence is made, under the supposition that their comportment in these regards might reasonably point to the conclusion that they were to some extent 'asking' to be violated in the way they were. MacKinnon's account of the role of objectivity in perpetuating gendered norms sheds light on the perpetuation of this cultural trope. Through the male perspective, women are objects for sexual use by men; they are essentially inviolable by definition. This perspective makes sexual violence a fact of women's lives; but its universalisation also constructs the social world in such a way that it becomes rational for women to shape their behaviour according this belief. Innumerable successful defences against rape charges are mounted on this belief, which provides empirical validation to the claim that women are partially to blame for being assaulted. This entrenches the dogma further, to the extent that women themselves will often apportion blame on a raped or assaulted woman rather than solely on their attacker.[60] Social reality thus congeals in such a way as to make it 'factually true' that

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[58] MacKinnon, 1989: 121.

[59] Sally Haslanger deploys the concept of 'reification' to explain this process according to which socially constructed gendered traits are naturalised via objectivity (2012: 46-47). The usefulness of this concept here should perhaps be unsurprising, in light of the clear resonance that MacKinnon's critique of objectivity has with Frankfurt School critiques of positivism.

[60] See e.g. Judy Finnigan's remarks on the recent high profile Ched Evans rape case (http://www.theguardian.com/media/2014/oct/13/judy-finnigan-apologies-rape-comments-ched-evans-football); Joanna Lumley's advice on how women can avoid being raped or assaulted by

women play a role in their abuse; the world treats them as if this were true, which makes it rational for them to behave as if it were true, thus validating the initial truth claim.

We are now in a position to better understand MacKinnon's claim, explicated in the previous section, that sexual desire, even in women themselves, is shaped according to male sexual desire. Recall that from the male perspective, sexually dominating women is erotic. Objective epistemology universalises this perspective, conforming the world to this image. Sexuality, defined according to MacKinnon as what a given society eroticises, is no less immune to the effects of objectivising epistemology than other spheres of social life. Women, then, come to understand their own sexual desires against the facticity of the male sexual perspective; they come to eroticise their own submission: "Women's sexualness, like male prowess, is no less real for being mythic. It is embodied."[61] Objectively speaking, therefore, it becomes empirically true that women are sexually submissive: the evidence to support this claim is out there, identifiable in women's eroticisation of being dominated.[62] This is the profound feminist analysis contained in MacKinnon's claim that women are subjugated "first in the world, then in the head."[63]

Objectivity, then, has foundational importance for MacKinnon's account of sexual objectification:

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modifying their own behaviour (http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/9822160/Joanna-Lumley-on-how-to-live-your-life-and-make-it-glorious-darling.html).

[61] MacKinnon 1989: 123.

[62] Note that male domination is comprised of the power of men to impose their sexuality upon women; that is not to say that all women are necessarily dominated by men at the manifest level of personal sexual relationships. Male fantasies can and do involve being sexually dominated by women. The point, though, is that the attendant dominant female sexuality is nonetheless a product of objectification; that is, it is still imposed on women in the interests of male sexuality.

[63] MacKinnon 1989: 127.
I read this statement as referring to the 'thingification' of women in their own heads. Perhaps the most interesting thing about this quote, which is once again indicative of the circularity inherent in MacKinnon's reasoning, is that one could equally formulate it conversely for emphasis on a different facet of the cyclical process of objectification. That is, one could claim that women are subjugated first in the head, then in the world; to formulate it thus would be to draw attention to the way in which the world is shaped on the basis of men's sexual desires. Formulated and interpreted as above, however, it focuses on the attendant role of women's own subjectivities in their oppression: sex object status is forced upon them in the world, and then this material reality shapes the way they think about themselves. The two possible formulations, therefore, express two complementary sides of the process of sexual objectification.

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> *Objectivity is the epistemological stance of which objectification is the social process*, of which male dominance is the politics, the acted-out social practice. That is, to look at the world objectively is to objectify it.[64]

Primarily, therefore, 'objectification' as a feminist concept refers for MacKinnon to the way in which women's subjugation is constructed and enforced through the objectivising of the male perspective. Women are 'sex objects' insofar as they are the objectively knowable in this male-dominated epistemic regime; they are mere objects of knowledge, known by men, as subjects: "The objectively knowable is object. Woman through male eyes is sex object, that by which man knows himself at once as a man and as subject."[65] This is not to say that the concept of objectification cannot also be a useful means for women to articulate the experiential aspects of their subjugation, as it is used by scholars like Nussbaum; there is no reason why 'sexual objectification' cannot be used to refer to both the social process through which women's domination is maintained, and the effects of this process as experienced by women individually. That MacKinnon's concerns with objectification are primarily socio-structural, not individual or interpersonal, does not mean that the individual and interpersonal realms, on her account, are not primary sites where objectification is enacted and experienced; it is simply to draw attention to the social dynamics through which these individual and interpersonal phenomena are facilitated.

One important clarification needs to be made at this stage. We have established what kind of oppressive dynamic MacKinnon perceives to be created through the objectivisation of the male perspective on social reality. What we have yet to specify, however, is what precise relationship holds between male domination and the epistemic norm of objectivity. This point is an important one, for two distinct but related reasons. On the one hand, if MacKinnon has no convincing account for why it is that objectivity and male supremacy work so effectively together, then the worry will be that the point she makes about the ability of a positivistic objective methodology to institute and naturalise certain behaviours will be applicable to all kinds of social constructions; Iddo Landau makes precisely point.[66] On the other hand, if MacKinnon's account ties objectivity too exclusively to the male social role, then this raises the question of whether her theory of sexual objectification can adequately accommodate the role that women

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[64] MacKinnon 1987: 50 [my emphasis].
[65] MacKinnon 1989: 122.
[66] Landau 2006: 66-7.

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themselves play in entrenching sexually objectifying norms and practices. Ideally, then, MacKinnon requires a means of justifying why objectivity is specifically problematic from a feminist perspective, whilst at the same time allowing that women also play a role in the dynamic objectivising of gender norms.

Sally Haslanger has attempted to navigate this terrain.[67] Haslanger distinguishes between two different ways in which the epistemic ideal of objectivity might be considered to be 'gendered male': it might be strongly gendered male, which would mean that satisfying the norm of objectivity would be "sufficient for functioning in the social role of a man," or it might be weakly gendered male, which would mean that being objective would simply be appropriate to the social role of a man.[68] Haslanger argues that MacKinnon aims to characterise the ideal of objectivity as gendered male in the strong sense, but that ultimately she fails to make a convincing enough case for this claim. The most we can say, according to Haslanger, is that objectivity is weakly gendered male, because we have to allow for the fact that people who don't fit the social category of 'man' nonetheless subscribe to the epistemological norm of objectivity and thus collaborate in the congealment of gender norms.[69] Objectivity is tied to the social role of 'man' in a more significant way than it is to other social roles, contrary to what Landau suggests, because the social role of men is *defined* according to objectification; a man is a member of the social group which sexually objectifies the social group of women. Nonetheless, Haslanger argues, there are features of this male identity which are not covered by the epistemic norm of objectivity, and as such, it is not reasonable to say that objectivity is strongly male according to her definition.

Haslanger's analysis is useful for helping us to understand precisely what kind of claim MacKinnon is making when she argues that objectivity is the 'male standpoint.' Certainly, the reconstruction of MacKinnon's theory of sexual objectification that I have presented thus far would seem to suggest that Haslanger is correct; that there are elements of what it is to be a man according to MacKinnon's definition which go beyond enacting the epistemic norm of objectivity. The peculiarly sexual character of gender hierarchy, for example, does not seem to be entailed by the epistemological dimension of objectification. Neither, as Haslanger points out, does objectivity *simpliciter* imply the power to construct social reality in the way that MacKinnon seems to want to

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[67] See Haslanger 2012, 'On Being Objective and Being Objectified.'
[68] *Ibid.*, 38.
[69] *Ibid.*, 74-6.

suggest when she claims that "men *create* the world from their own point of view."[70] As Haslanger explains,

> [I]f one objectifies something, one not only views it as something which would satisfy one's desire, but one also has the power to make it have the properties one desires it to have. A good objectifier will, when the need arises—that is, when the object lacks the desired properties—*exercise his power to make the object have the properties he desires.*[71]

This is why Haslanger's point about objectivity allowing people to collaborate in sexual objectification is important. The point about positivistic objectivity is that it allows for the establishment of truth regimes which then in turn shape how we see the world and interact with it. This process is so effective at maintaining women's domination *precisely because* the male viewpoint becomes truth for women as well as men. MacKinnon herself, of course, is prescient on this matter; she acknowledges that the epistemological constraints placed on us mean that "women embrace and defend their place in [male supremacy]."[72] Haslanger's point, though, is that MacKinnon's account must nonetheless preserve a way of meaningfully distinguishing between the role played by men and women respectively in the perpetuation of gender domination. For Haslanger, this distinction should be located in the actual power that men have to shape the world according to their perspective; it is far from evident, for Haslanger, "why taking up an objectivist stance should be thought sufficient for having such power."[73]

On this point, however, my reading of MacKinnon – and the argument I wish to pursue about women's role in sexual objectification – diverges from Haslanger's. Experientially speaking, I submit, Haslanger's claim that women lack the requisite power to enforce conformity with the male perspective seems wrong. Indeed, it seems eminently plausible to suggest that, in fact, women themselves play a significant role in enforcing certain gender stereotypes upon one another. Of course, it is true that men possess a substantial degree of power - physical, economic, political, symbolic - over women and the way they are in the world that women do not possess against each other. Nonetheless, from a

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[70] MacKinnon 1989: 121 [my emphasis].

[71] Haslanger, 2012: 65 [my emphasis]. In my view, Haslanger complicates her analysis of MacKinnon's position by analysing the social role of 'man' as the role of 'objectifier' (for example, "Given someone who is a sexual objectifier, what would make for their (reliable) success in that role?"). When quoting her, therefore, I take 'objectifier' to be sufficiently synonymous with 'man' for the purposes of my argument.

[72] MacKinnon 1989: 115.

[73] Haslanger 2012: 77.

phenomenological perspective it would seem false to deny that the experience of being peer pressured, bullied or humiliated into a certain gendered way of behaving by other women is experienced as being subject to certain kind of power.[74]

Haslanger, then, seems to be interpreting MacKinnon too narrowly when she suggests that those persons, principally women, who conform with objectivity and thus collaborate with objectification nonetheless do not participate in objectification in a primary sense because they lack the requisite power over the social world. This ambiguity in the concept of 'power,' moreover, is discernable in MacKinnon's own work. At times, she appears to subscribe to the kind of simplistic, physical conceptualisation of power that Haslanger ascribes to her – for example, her somewhat infamous claim that "women know the male world is out there because it hits them in the face."[75] In the following passage, however, the notion of power at play seems much more open to nuance:

> Combining, like any form of power, legitimation with force, male power extends beneath the representation of reality to its construction: it makes women (as it were) and so verifies (makes true) who women 'are' in its view, simultaneously confirming its way of being and its vision of truth, as it creates the social reality that supports both.[76]

Clearly, then, the concept of 'power' at play in MacKinnon's account of sexual objectification requires clarification in order for us to understand exactly what role women themselves can be said to play in perpetuating their own objectification.

II. Power

Most commentators writing on MacKinnon's conception of power interpret her as having what has come to be known as a 'dominance theory of power.' By this, it is typically meant that the social categories of gender are defined according to power; men, by definition, have power, and women, by definition, lack it. As Amy Allen articulates this point:

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[74] In the fourth chapter of this thesis, I will develop this idea of a phenomenological account of gender reproduction.
[75] *Ibid*., 123.
[76] MacKinnon 1898: 122.

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> [W]omen are powerless and men are powerful *as such*, through processes that are coincident with, or that may even precede, the very creation of the terms 'man' and 'woman'.[77]

According to this conceptualisation of power, then, power, and the lack of it, demarcates the gender distinction. To be a man is to have power over women, and to be a woman is to have no power in the face of men. Allen characterises MacKinnon as having a dominance theory of power, in light of the fact that she conceives gender as a "dyadic, master-subject relation."[78] This characterisation of MacKinnon's position on power echoes Cornell's, whose critique of MacKinnon is founded on the accusation that MacKinnon has only the theoretical resources to conceptualise women "as victims, as fuckees, as voiceless," and nothing more.[79] Katharine Bartlett, similarly, construes MacKinnon's position as one which posits that "men have power over everything of value in society."[80]

There is clear textual evidence to support this kind of reading of MacKinnon's account of power. MacKinnon claims, variously, that:

> [T]he sex difference and the dominance-submission dynamic define each other.[81]

> The substantive principle governing the authentic politics of women's personal lives is pervasive powerlessness to men, expressed and reconstituted daily as sexuality.[82]

> [Female power] is a contradiction in terms, socially speaking […] 'female power' is a misnomer.[83]

This last claim, in particular, is highly important. It appears to indicate that MacKinnon conceptualises power in such a way that precludes the possibility of women having power, at least within the current social system. Elsewhere, though, this claim is somewhat ambiguous:

> Not all men have equal access to male power, nor can men ever fully occupy women's standpoint. If they do, on occasion, they pay for it; and they can always

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[77] Allen 1998a: 23.
[78] *Ibid.*, 25.
[79] Cornell 1991: 2256.
[80] Bartlett 1987: 1559.
[81] MacKinnon 1987: 50.
[82] MacKinnon 1989: 120.
[83] MacKinnon 1987: 53.

reclaim male power, which is theirs by default unless consciously disavowed. A woman can also take the male point of view or exercise male power, although she remains always a woman. Our access to male power is not automatic as men's is; we're not born and raised to it. We can aspire to it.[84]

In this passage, MacKinnon does allow for the possibility that a person who is a woman can attain a certain degree of power. Being a woman, she tells us, and standing up and talking in front of an audience whose attention she commands, is an example of an exercise of power.[85] But this power, crucially, nonetheless remains *male power*. A woman who finds herself in a position where she can exercise dominance or authority over others finds herself with a degree of male power; she does not possess female power, for this, as we have seen, is a logical fallacy for MacKinnon.

What are we to make of these remarks? On the one hand, MacKinnon's assertion that a woman may, in certain circumstances, assume a degree of male power seems to contravene the power-as-dominance model that Allen and others ascribe to her. Indeed, insofar as women who find themselves in these peculiar circumstances do possess power over others in some kind of material sense, one might wonder whether MacKinnon's understanding of power more closely fits an alternative model of power offered by Allen: power as resource.[86] On the other hand, MacKinnon's insistence that any woman who finds herself in a position to exercise power over others nonetheless acquires only a degree of male power is troubling for this interpretation; for this implies precisely that power is not a gender-neutral resource which is simply inequitably distributed at present, but which can be redistributed to empower women.

I believe the best way to understand the apparent ambiguity of these passages is the following. MacKinnon is claiming that all power available to any person, whether man or woman, must be understood as male power, because in our current and deeply sexist society, having power can only ever take the form of assuming dominance over others. This is, definitionally, what it means to have power socially: "It's hierarchical, it's dominant, it's authoritative."[87] This manifestation of power is male because dominance is gendered male; to dominate is to be male, to submit is to be female. If a woman finds herself in a position in which she has power over a select group of others – if she finds

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[84] *Ibid.,* 52.
[85] *Ibid.*
[86] Allen 1999a: 8-11.
[87] MacKinnon 1987: 52.

herself dominant in a particular situation – she therefore acquires a degree of male power. This is not to say that she becomes male; rather, it is to say that she is able to assume a certain subject position or social role, relative to another person or persons, which is typically reserved for men. The notion of 'female power' is contradictory because these are the only two options available to a woman: either (and for the post part) she will find herself pervasively powerless; or, on occasion, she will find herself in a position of dominance over some others – most likely, other women who are less socially privileged.[88] MacKinnon's claim that women can 'aspire' to male power should thus, I submit, be read ironically; faced with the dire choice between no power and some degree of dominance, we might strategically aspire towards the latter, but such aspirations are only ever a sad reflection of gender inequality, not aspirations towards true liberation.

So understood, it seems that Allen and others are more or less correct in characterising MacKinnon's conception of power as one of dominance. The fact that she allows for the possibility that women can, in certain situations, attain a relative position of power does not render this reading inaccurate. Men are powerful and women are powerless *as such* for MacKinnon, as Allen suggests; her account simply has the requisite subtlety to recognise the fact that certain contingent circumstances might allow a woman, precariously, to exercise a degree of dominance over others. Any such woman's social standing would still be characterised overwhelmingly by submission, if just the threat of submission; and the standing of any man, however contingently lacking in power, would be structurally characterised by possibility of regaining dominance.

The concept of dominance, then, is unquestionably a key aspect of MacKinnon's theory of power. But it is not the only aspect; there is another, highly important facet of her conceptualisation of power which remains significantly underexplored in the critical reception of her work. That is the way in which her theory of gender hierarchy lends itself to thinking about power as a constructive or productive, rather than simply an oppressive, force. Some commentators have picked up on this. Anthony Simon Laden, for example, interprets MacKinnon's account of social ontology as constructive and as contrasting significantly with more traditional liberal accounts of power.

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[88] Or, over other people who lack power in another respect – a white woman, for instance, can attain power over a black man.

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A social ontology, according to Laden, is a theory about how facts relate to the social significance they are accorded. The epistemic norm of objectivity relies on a social ontology which connects significant social facts to 'background' or natural facts: "what explains the significance of a particular social distinction is the existence of a significant background fact with which it correlates."[89] This is the justification given by objectivity for the social significance of gender; gender categories correlate with the background categories of sex and are thus accorded legitimate social significance. Orthodox liberal conceptions of power, Laden argues, are capable of the insight that inequalities of power can give us a skewed perception of which background facts should be considered socially significant. What they lack, however, and what we gain from MacKinnon's constructive account of power, is the realisation that inequitable power relations can actually reach into the realm of 'background facts' and construct them:

> [T]he problem with rationality as objectivity is not that it misdescribes what it regards as the background facts. Rather, its mistake is to […] see the significance of the background facts in question as arising from natural or inevitable features of those differences themselves, rather than *as a consequence* of the organization of social power.[90]

Lori Watson has similarly identified a distinctly constructive strain in the way MacKinnon conceptualises power. Male power as defined by MacKinnon, she argues, is constructive insofar as "it is a power that constructs the subjectivities of men and women through the normative constructs of masculinity and femininity."[91]

Both Laden and Watson, then, seem to identify something important about MacKinnon's account of power that is missed, both by scholars like Allen who criticise MacKinnon for having a reductive conceptualisation of power as domination *simpliciter*, and by Haslanger, whose account of collaboration does not include sufficient consideration of the extent to which male power, in its ability to shape both perception and reality, is constructive at the same time as being oppressive.[92] Indeed, upon closer

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[89] Laden 2003: 139.

[90] *Ibid.*, 142. [my emphasis]

[91] Watson 2010: 38.

[92] Indeed, Haslanger, despite being predominantly favourable towards MacKinnon's feminism, explicitly departs from her most significantly when it comes to MacKinnon's most strident claims about the social construction of reality as such. Haslanger maintains throughout her engagement with MacKinnon's work that an analysis of the socially constructive force of gender norms should not prevent us from acknowledging that we are capable of "forming accurate beliefs about the world that exists beyond our perspective." (2012: 107)

inspection of MacKinnon's work, there is at least as much evidence to support the constructive-theory interpretation as the dominance-theory interpretation:

> Power to create the world from one's point of view, particularly from the point of view of one's pleasure, is power in its male form.[93]

> [P]ower succeeds in constructing social perception and social reality.[94]

> Feminism has a theory of power: sexuality is gendered as gender is sexualized. Male and female are created through the erotization [sic] of dominance and submission.[95]

MacKinnon's own explicit engagement with the theoretical debates surrounding constructive theories of power raises many questions about the tenability of conceptualising her account of power in these terms, however. Of particular interest is the ambiguous way in which she appears to consider similarities, or a lack of them, between her own work and the work of Foucault. In the section on sexuality in *Towards a Feminist Theory of the State*, for example, she criticises the Foucauldian impact on social construction analysis, arguing that despite it now being *de rigueur* to speak of the socially constructed nature of sexuality, "[s]eldom specified is what, socially, it is constructed of, far less who does the constructing or how, when, or where."[96] In 'Points against Postmodernism,' too, she criticises Foucault directly for failing to engage in questions of gender inequality as part of his study of material practices.[97] In the very same essay, however, she acknowledges the similarities between her own theoretical project and Foucault's, broadly construed. In the main text, she states the intentions of her feminist theory thus:

> [M]y view was that the relation between knowledge and power was the central issue that women's situation and formal theory posed for each other, and that sexuality was where this issue was crucially played out.[98]

As a footnote to this, however, she adds the following:

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[93] MacKinnon 1989: 121.

[94] MacKinnon 1987: 40.

[95] MacKinnon 1989: 113.

[96] *Ibid.*, 131.

[97] MacKinnon 2000: 702.

[98] *Ibid.*, 687.

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> Unknown to me, Foucault may have been writing on similar themes at around the same time or slightly later. Foucault's *Surveiller et punir: Naissance de la prison*, containing some brief abstract passages about knowledge and power in the first chapter, appeared in French in 1975; he spoke on the same ideas in public in 1978.[99]

This admission echoes the thoughts articulated by Laden and Watson. In recognising the affinities between her own position on the close connection between knowledge and power and that proposed by Foucault, MacKinnon seems to open her feminist theory up to the suggestion that her conception of power is, at least to a significant degree, productive. As pointed out at the outset of this chapter, MacKinnon's account of sexual objectification differs from other, more dominant approaches to the phenomenon precisely because her account [alone] analyses sexual objectification as a structural, social issue rather than as an issue of behaviour between atomistic individuals. In this regard, and particularly with reference to instances of sexual objectification in which women themselves appear to play a substantial or even primary role, the constructivist tendencies in MacKinnon's theory are of paramount importance. Understanding women's behaviour, indeed women's subjectivities, as to some significant extent constructed by the power relations of society provides a valuable theoretical resource for theorising complicity - and what would be required to address it.

The question nonetheless remains, however, as to how MacKinnon's adherence to an account of gender as a dominance/submission dynamic can be reconciled with the clear constructivist inclinations of her theoretical project as a whole. Conceptually, it is far from clear how we could think about power as at once something that one group holds over another, and at the same time as something which permeates social structures, constructs individuals and acts upon on us all in some way or another.

Vanessa Munro has highlighted this somewhat paradoxical nature of MacKinnon's remarks on power.[100] Foucauldian inspired constructivist accounts of power, she argues, conceive of a "network of complex and interconnected 'disciplinary techniques' through which power primarily operates in modern society."[101] MacKinnon, she points out, tends towards the opposite extreme in her account of power, theorising it as "a commodity

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[99] *Ibid.*, footnote 3.
[100] Munro 2003.
[101] *Ibid.*, 82.

held in the hands of patriarchy and systematically denied to the ownership of women."[102] This conception of power is anathema to Foucault's central insight that it is categorically incorrect to conceive of power as something that certain people can possess, like property or wealth. Yet, Munro argues, we must not blind ourselves to the important points of convergence between Foucault and MacKinnon; both focus on the ability of discourse to shape social reality, and both theorise power as being in some way bound up with the construction of identity.

These convergences can be brought into sharper relief, Munro proposes, if we consider the role that the concept of domination plays in Foucault's later writings. Contrary to what is often assumed by feminist commentators, she argues, Foucault's theory of power does not neglect macro-level exercises of power in favour of a dogmatic micro-level analysis. Foucault was indeed both aware of and highly concerned with inequitable macro-level exercises of power; but rather than understanding these relations as "overarching or complete system[s]," he instead conceptualised them as the result of a process of solidification of infinitesimal exercises of power.[103] Accordingly, Munro suggests, his focus on power at the micro-level should be understood as "a technique for the identification and deconstruction of stagnated and solidified social relations" rather than an abdication of the pressing political need to theorise domination.[104]

Arriving at a greater understanding of the significance of the concept of domination in Foucault's later work, Munro proposes, "reinstates the radical feminist understanding of asymmetrical relationships within which access to power is monopolized by one partner."[105] As a result, she argues, a much more substantial area of common ground between Foucault's and MacKinnon's theories of power can be identified.

Munro's comparison between the seemingly disparate theories of power articulated by MacKinnon and Foucault thus provides one possible way in which the somewhat paradoxical elements of MacKinnon's comments on power could be resolved. Munro is not alone, furthermore, in attempting to synthesise the fundamentally important insights of Foucault's revolution in analyses of power with MacKinnon-esque radical feminist preoccupations with domination.[106] This body of literature suggests that conceptualising

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[102] *Ibid.*
[103] *Ibid.*, 90.
[104] *Ibid.*
[105] *Ibid.*, 93.
[106] See e.g. Allen 1996; also McNay 1992.

the role of power in MacKinnon's theory of sexual objectification in a way which incorporates both domination and constructivist models of power is not only possible, but might indeed be highly fruitful.[107]

Let us conclude our discussion of the role of power in MacKinnon's account of sexual objectification, then, as follows. The concept of power is central to MacKinnon's feminist theory. Her account of gender is defined according to power; the social categories of male and female track the distinction between those with power and those they have power over. At the same time, however, there are significant ways in which MacKinnon also, whether intentionally or not, offers a constructivist theory of power. Her conceptualisation of the legitimising force of objectivity is inherently bound up with a notion of power which defies the dyadic model of powerful and powerless. These constructivist themes are underdeveloped by MacKinnon herself, and they remain insufficiently addressed in the secondary literature. Yet these allusions to constructivist models of power are perhaps the most crucial element of MacKinnon's feminist theory for understanding what, exactly, the sexual objectification of women *is*; how objectifying behaviours are enabled and normalised, how the roles of male and female are intimately tied up with objectifying and being objectified, respectively – and how, as a result, women develop desires for being objectified, and even embrace objectification as a means of feeling empowered. A constructivist notion of power gives us an explanation for these phenomena, allowing us to see that the power which men wield over women, which defines their masculine position in terms of domination and allows them to treat women as sex objects, is in fact a congealed nexus of the power which creates men and women as gendered subjects.

Concluding thoughts:
A new avenue for feminist critique

Having clarified the interplay between the constitutive elements of MacKinnon's theory of sexual objectification – gender, sexuality, objectivity and power – let us return briefly

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[107] As Munro points out, the debate that has raged in contemporary feminist theory over the extent to which Foucault's analysis of power is useful or detrimental to feminist objectives has been significantly concerned with questions of essentialism and reductionism, both of which are accusations that are often lodged at MacKinnon. Articulating MacKinnon's theory of sexual objectification through an arbitration of these kinds of disputes might also therefore be a useful way of addressing these kinds of criticisms. [Slightly confusing wording here]

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to the paradigmatic example of sexual objectification analysed in the previous chapter, that of a woman being wolf-whistled by men on the street. This example, recall, exposes the explanatory limitations of Nussbaum's account of sexual objectification. Her individualistic, context-neutral approach is unable to account for the contextual factors – such as the reactions of passers-by and the regularity of the occurrence - which are part of the woman's experience of feeling like a sex object. This also means that she is unable to explain more complicated cases in which a woman might experience the feeling of being objectified, but which lack the presence of clear instrumentalisation - such as being approached by a man in a bar, where there is no clear indication that he is interested in her only as an object of sexual gratification; or even hearing the sound of a person hailing a cab and mistakenly think that she is being wolf-whistled. Nussbaum can only explain these examples as mistakes – cases where someone erroneously believes that they are being non-consensually instrumentalised, when in fact they are not.

MacKinnon's theory of sexual objectification, by contrast, is much better equipped to explicate these cases in all their complexity, in a number of ways. For MacKinnon, all cases of sexual objectification are constitutively social, since they are manifestations, or symptoms, of a pervasive social dynamic. This means that making reference to social factors is an *essential* part of diagnosing objectification – which means that MacKinnon's account is much more attuned to the phenomenal experience of the woman in the wolf-whistling example than Nussbaum's. It makes sense, on MacKinnon's account, that the reactions of passers-by, the regularity of finding herself on the receiving end of such treatment, her reflexive self-doubt about what she is wearing, and so on, are part of what make up the experience of the woman being made to feel like a sex object, since objectification is the process through which women are subordinated to men via the reinforcement of the sexualised gender binary. The act of wolf-whistling, then, and the experience of being whistled at, are specific manifestations of this dynamic; the whistle calls upon 'objective' knowledge about who counts as a woman, what women want, the right way for a man to behave towards a woman, and so on, and reinforces it in the world by sexualising a woman on the basis of it, thus making her into the appropriate object of this knowledge: a sex-object. Treating specific cases of sexual objectification as manifestations of a social process also generates a more convincing explanation of cases where women might feel objectified without there being a clear presence of instrumentalisation. Since sexual objectification is a pervasive social dynamic, it permeates all our gendered interactions and colours our experience of being gendered;

after all, "all women live in sexual objectification, the way fish live in water."[108] This means that an exercise of male power – that is, the power of making the world according to how men find it – can occur in the absence of instrumentalising intentions, if it nonetheless draws on, or appears to make use of, 'objective' knowledge about women and their relationship to men.

In terms of sheer explanatory power with respect to the relevant phenomena, then, MacKinnon's account of sexual objectification is in a substantially better position than Nussbaum's. Perhaps the most important benefit of MacKinnon's approach, however, concerns the specific issue of the limits of feminist critiques of sexual objectification. To draw once again on critical theory terminology, the emancipatory resources generated by Nussbaum's account of sexual objectification, as we have seen, amount to a feminist politics of consent. This politics of consent is not elaborated by Nussbaum; however, the position that she ends up in – stuck between respect for consent as a normative transformer, on the one hand, and the need to take into account the impact of structural constraints on the possibility of authentic consent-giving, on the other – seems to land her squarely within the intractable feminist debate about which social conditions render the consent of women inauthentic. Apart from the fact that there is no obvious new way out of this debate (and certainly, Nussbaum does not offer one), this politics of consent, as I have argued, also sets up a high-stakes zero-sum game in which feminist critique and consent are mutually exclusive: where there is consent, there is no need for feminist critique; where there is purchase for critical feminist engagement, there can be no genuine consent.

In conceptualising objectification fundamentally as a social dynamic rather than an individual or interpersonal issue, MacKinnon's account avoids this zero-sum game. Since the phenomenon of sexual objectification is social *in essence*, feminist political critique of the phenomenon, and the generation of resources for emancipation, must engage with objectification as a social phenomenon. This does not mean that consent as an individualistic standard is meaningless, nor that women cannot and do not consent under conditions of gender inequality; MacKinnon has gone to great lengths to

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[108] MacKinnon 1989: 149. That objectification is pervasive does not mean, however, that all intimate relationships are doomed to reproduce gender inequality. When asked in an interview whether men and women can have non-dominating sexual relationships, MacKinnon answered: "Yes! People work it out with great difficulty. But the first step is not to deny that it [the substantial context of gender inequality] is there." (Jeffries 2006)

2. Catharine MacKinnon's account of sexual objectification

disassociate her work from the idea, falsely attributed to her, that all sex is rape.[109] This refusal to elide the experience of rape and the experience of sex for women under conditions of gender inequality suggests a more nuanced and interesting problematisation of consent than is typically associated with radical feminism. Take, for instance, the following quote: "[b]ecause the inequality of the sexes is defined as the enjoyment of sexuality itself, gender inequality appears consensual."[110] One way to understand this claim is as intending to draw attention to the fact that the apparent presence of consent can be, and is, used to justify the exploitation and domination of women – that the mere fact that 'she said yes' can make invalid any suggestion that coercion, manipulation of the exercise of force might have been present (think Katie Roiphe on the subject of date rape). We can also read this claim a slightly different way, however – one which is more continuous with MacKinnon's gestures towards a constructivist conception of power – as calling attention to the fact that even things experienced as wholly and authentically consensual by women can be features of gender inequality. This goes further than the worry that consent, defined as mere acquiescence, can conceal force and coercion; it suggests the implication of the things women desire, choose and wholeheartedly consent to in the process which maintains their oppression. This implication, importantly, is two-way: not only are women's wants, desires and choices in part the result of the process of sexual objectification – women are objectified 'first in the world, then in the head' - but they are also part of what enables their further objectification: "Complicity in oppression acquires concrete meaning as women emerge as *shapers of reality* as well as shaped by it."[111]

This notion of women as shapers of the reality through which their subordination is maintained opens up a new avenue for a feminist critique of sexual objectification. The critical resources generated by Nussbaum are fettered by her individualistic, context-neutral account of sexual objectification, which allows us to factor in the social context of objectification only to the extent it helps us adjudicate the authenticity of consent. Our critical inquiries as feminists, in other words, are limited to asking the question: did this particular objectifying act harm this particular woman? By centring her account of objectification on the social process through which individual objectifying acts are manifested, by contrast, MacKinnon reveals an alternative entry point for feminist

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[109] See, for example, MacKinnon and Dworkin 1995.
[110] MacKinnon 1987: 7.
[111] MacKinnon 1989: 88 [my emphasis].

critiques of objectification: the contribution a particular act or behaviour makes to shaping the reality through which the sexual objectification of women is perpetuated. We can begin our critical inquiries, in other words, by asking: does this act or practice contribute to re-creating a reality in which women are systematically made into sex objects and thus subordinated? Crucially, this gives us critical purchase on objectifying practices which appear to be, and are experienced as, fully consensual by women; but this critical purchase, unlike in Nussbaum's approach, does not have to take the form of questioning the validity of a woman's consent. If a woman can play a role in shaping the reality in which women as a group are oppressed, then this fact is neither dissolved nor rendered innocuous with the presence of consent - since the normative bite of the fact is grounded in the ongoing oppression of women as a social group.

What forms do these contributions women make to shaping the reality which subordinates them take? MacKinnon writes:

> Women […] embrace the standards of women's place in this regime [of gender inequality] as 'our own' to varying degrees and in varying voices – as affirmation of identity and right to pleasure, in order to be loved and approved and paid, in order just to make it through another day. *This, not inert passivity, is the meaning of being a victim.*[112]

The role of social 'truths' or knowledge in the process of objectification is thus key to understanding women's complicity. Male power, remember, makes the world as it describes it, and re-describes the world how it discovers it, having made it. But, as MacKinnon tells us, this process is most effective when the construction of the world from the male perspective entails the least force and coercion.[113] When women 'embrace the standards' which define their place in the world of gender inequality, they thereby facilitate the re-production of the world which oppresses them, minimising the need for overt force and coercion – which strengthens the credibility of the social 'truths' which are the foundation, and effect, of their oppression.

In order to develop more systematically this idea of women as complicit in the perpetuation of their sexual objectification, however, we will have to move beyond MacKinnon. Though her analysis of the phenomenon of sexual objectification points

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[112] MacKinnon 1989: 138 [my emphasis].
[113] This is another significant point of convergence between MacKinnon and Foucault's accounts of power.

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towards a profound model for feminist social critique, her work lacks both a systematic explication of the idea that women can be complicit in sexual objectification, and an articulation of the kind of feminist politics of resistance necessary to overcome the problems she diagnoses. Her commitment to the method of consciousness-raising acknowledges the fact that the transformation of women's self-understanding will be a necessary component of overcoming their conditions of oppression, but, as I will show in the remainder of the thesis, she remains insufficiently sensitive to the extent to which the imperative of self-transformation must form the foundation of feminist emancipatory politics. In the next chapter, I will explicate in detail the kind of complicitous relationships which obtain between women when it comes to the perpetuation of their sexual objectification. In the fourth chapter, I will consider and respond to the worry that the constructivist commitments of this account of complicity leave no room for conceptualising women as endowed with the capacity to resist complicity, thus rendering it impotent as a normative charge. In the final chapter, I will articulate an account of feminist solidarity which takes the imperative to resist complicity as its normative and epistemological foundation.

Chapter 3

Constitutive complicity:
Oppression, victimhood and the constitution of the social world

Introduction

The term 'complicity' identifies, broadly speaking, the phenomenon of being a part of someone else's wrongdoing, or being a conduit for a wrong committed by someone else.[1] The key idea is that we should be held morally responsible not only for the wrongs we commit as agents, but also (though perhaps not to the same extent) for the wrongs committed by others in which we played a part. The precise nature of the part one plays, however, can take many forms: I might be complicit in your robbing a bank by acting as a get-away driver; complicit in your bullying behaviour towards a co-worker by keeping a look-out for approaching colleagues whilst you harass her in the staff room; or complicit in your cheating in an exam by knowing of your plans and failing to inform anybody.[2] Of course, in recognising the nebulous nature of the collection of moral phenomena to which the notion of complicity seems applicable, one soon runs up against limit cases which test our intuitive understanding of the notion. Am I complicit in the perpetuation of globalised inequality if I shop without a thought for fair-trade or sustainable sourcing? Am I a 'part' of the tax avoidance of the Google corporation if I work for them, despite the fact that my resignation, or attempts at inculcating institutional change, would make precisely no difference the financial operations of the company? Does my lack of objection to one colleague's bullying behaviour towards another make me complicit in the bullying, even if the soured relationship has nothing to do with me?

In the previous chapter, I identified a crucial insight of MacKinnon's account of sexual objectification: that women, as 'shapers of reality,' can be complicit in their continued sexual objectification. The basis for this complicity is conformity with the standards of

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[1] I adapt this notion of complicitous actions serving as a conduit for another's wrongdoing from Gardner's articulation of complicity as someone else's wrongful action coming into the world "through me." See Gardner 2007a: 57-8.

[2] Lepora and Goodin (2013) elaborate a wide array of ways of 'being part' of another's wrongdoing, which capture more fully this board terrain: full joint wrongdoing, conspiracy, co-operation, collusion, complicity simpliciter, complicity by collaboration, connivance, condoning, consorting and contiguity. (36-51)

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femininity: when women conform to the ideals and expectations of what, according to the hegemonic male perspective, it means to be a woman, they contribute to the making-objective of these standards, which reinforces their credibility as 'truths' and, in turn, facilitates the sexually objectifying treatment of women legitimised by these truths. In the moral language of complicity, then, the idea is that women, by conforming to the normative standards of femininity, play a part in the harmful, sexually objectifying treatment of women.

As with some of the limit cases mentioned above, however, it is not immediately clear that conformity with femininity is the *kind* of contribution that can serve as the basis for the moral charge of complicity. The crucial issue is the nature of the relationship between this conformity and the perpetration of sexually objectifying acts like street harassment: is conformity a necessary condition for the commission of sexually objectifying acts? Is it sufficient? Does conformity with femininity cause sexual objectification, or simply endorse it retrospectively? These questions reflect disagreements in the philosophical literature on the nature of complicity. The different answers given to them change significantly the range of acts that can be considered complicitous. There is a balance to be struck in constructing an account of complicity between accommodating all the different kinds of contributions people can make to the wrongs committed by others, on the one hand, and narrowing the parameters enough to retain the moral potency of the charge, on the other.

The purpose of this chapter, then, is to clarify the way in which the relationship between women's conformity with the expectations of normative femininity and the commission of sexually objectifying acts constitutes a kind of complicity. In the first part of the chapter, I will provide a more detailed explication of the insight gained from MacKinnon, that women are implicated in their sexual objectification of women. This implication, I argue, takes the form of conformity with the beliefs and expectations about what it means to be a woman which constitute the social context through which the treatment of women as sexual objects is facilitated (I). In the second part of the chapter, I consider the predominant account of complicity offered by moral and legal theorists: that complicity is to be found whenever a person makes a causal contribution to the commission of a wrong by another person. I assess the problem that causal indeterminacy poses for this account, and show how causal over-determination prevents this causal-contribution account of complicity from being able to explain the way in which women can be complicit in sexual objectification (II). In the third section, I then

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turn to the alternative account of complicity proposed by Christopher Kutz. Kutz eschews the causal-contribution account in favour of an account grounded in the participatory intentions of actors. I argue that Kutz's alternative account of complicity offers a more promising means of explaining women's complicity in sexual objectification, especially in light of its ability to conceptualise how individuals can be complicit in collective harms (III). In the fourth section, however, I suggest that Kutz's account is not fully able to do justice to the extent to which women have a two-way relationship with the norms, values and beliefs of the social context through which they are objectified. His account of the participatory basis of complicity must be supplemented by an account of a second basis of complicity, derived from women's role in perpetuating the ideas, norms and beliefs through which objectification is facilitated (IV). In the final section, I explicate the metaphysical nature of this second basis of complicity, which I couch in terms of a contribution to the constitution of the objectification-legitimising social context (V).

I. Conformity with femininity:
The basis of complicity

Before turning to the philosophical literature on complicity, I will first try to spell out a bit more clearly the way in which women are implicated in their sexual objectification, according to MacKinnon's account. Clarity on the matter is highly important; in the absence of further clarification as to what, exactly, women's contribution to the phenomenon of sexual objectification is, the suggestion that they are complicit parties to it sounds alarmingly close to victim-blaming. If it is women who are harmed and oppressed through sexual objectification, we might think, then surely, the worry goes, it is ethically and politically unreasonable to hold women themselves in some way responsible for their oppression in this way. Such worries are well-founded in a social context where women are frequently blamed either implicitly or even explicitly for falling victim to various forms of sexual violence ('What was she wearing? Did she lead him on? Why was she out drinking on her own?'). In clarifying the ways in which women might be to some degree responsible for their continued sexual objectification, we must fastidiously avoid playing into the hands of such toxic discourses – particularly if what we are seeking is a feminist critique of sexual objectification.

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MacKinnon, recall, writes of women's complicity:

> Women […] embrace the standards of women's place in this regime [of gender inequality] as 'our own' to varying degrees and in varying voices – as affirmation of identity and right to pleasure, in order to be loved and approved and paid, in order just to make it through another day. This, not inert passivity, is the meaning of being a victim.[3]

The key idea, then, is that women are sexually objectified on the basis of a certain social understanding of what it means to be a woman; this understanding enables, justifies and otherwise makes acceptable the treating of women as objects of sexual gratification (and this treatment, in turn, is called upon as proof of the veracity of the social definition of femininity). When women conform to, embrace or promote this social understanding of femininity, they thereby contribute to this cyclical process through which sexually objectifying treatment of women is perpetuated.

Ann Cudd's work on oppression will help us to spell this contribution a little more clearly. According to Cudd, oppression is sometimes, or even often, perpetuated by the choices made by members of oppressed groups. Victims of oppression, she argues, will often choose to comply with norms, expectations and structures which oppress them – either because such choices are rational in the face of a limited choice set and sanctions for non-compliance, or because their beliefs and desires have been moulded by their oppressive circumstances to such an extent that compliance is appealing. In either case, Cudd argues, by choosing to comply victims contribute to the harm done to the victimised, because they stabilise and strengthen certain beliefs and expectations about the members of the group, thereby increasing the restrictive force they have on other members:

> Part of what makes institutions so effective at coordinating is they embody the common knowledge of what people will do in certain types of situations, and this in turn narrows down the range of choices of actions one is to perform to a manageable number. This common knowledge becomes stronger and more stable the more times that the expected actions are performed.[4]

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[3] MacKinnon 1989: 138 [my emphasis].
[4] *Ibid.*, 200.

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Applying this understanding to MacKinnon's account, then, we can say that a shared body of common 'knowledge' about women (scare quotes are advisable since such knowledge, as MacKinnon tells us, is constituted at least partially through its truths being enforced and accepted in the first place) is a key mechanism of women's sexual objectification, since this knowledge is used as a means of justifying and normalising the treatment of women as sex objects. Acting in accordance with this received knowledge confirms its predictions, thereby strengthening the expectations it legitimises. Thus, when women, whether by rational choice or deformed desires, choose to act in accordance with gender expectations which form part of our shared social knowledge, they contribute to the perpetuation of one of the key mechanisms of their own oppression.[5] As Carol Hay explains:

> Accepting one's oppression can make oppression appear acceptable, or, even worse, it can make oppression appear not to be oppression at all […] sending the message that it is permissible to treat me in these ways in virtue of my being a woman sends the message that it is permissible to treat others in these ways in virtue of their being women, too.[6]

Numerous other feminists agree with Cudd's claim that women's oppression is perpetuated in part through their conformity with the expectations placed on them. Anita Superson has elaborated the harm done to women by what she calls 'right-wing women' who not only comply with restrictive gender expectations, but embrace and advocate for them as appropriate for women.[7] Shay Welch has written on the way in which sexually exploited and abused women entrench and perpetuate particularly heterosexualised gender expectations when the desperation of their situations makes conformity rational for them.[8] These accounts show two extreme examples of the range of ways in which women's conformity with the social 'knowledge' of what it means to be a woman can contribute to perpetuating women's oppression. Rational compliance with the expectations of femininity as a means of getting ahead or making one's life easier;

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[5] Whilst Cudd's explanation for how social 'knowledge' is used to justify oppression is helpful for explaining how conformity with this knowledge constitutes a kind of complicity in oppression, I do not agree with her than rational choice theory is necessarily the best way to understand how this conformity comes about (and how is can be resisted). In general, I find the rational choice account to be too cognitive, and insufficiently sensitive to the thoroughly embodied nature of gender identities (something I will elaborate in the next chapter). and certainly not the only).

[6] Hay 2011 22.

[7] Superson 1993.

[8] Welch 2015.

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uncritically accepting biological or essentialist definitions of what it means to be a woman; embracing fully, and even defending, the subordination of oneself and other women as good or natural: all contribute to the force the social expectations of femininity exert against women. The degree to which we might say that women are *complicit* in each of these cases will clearly differ, depending on the extent to which they might be further restricted by other factors such as their race and class. Nonetheless, in each of these cases the women in question can be understood as making a contribution to the perpetuation of certain beliefs, norms and expectations which form what we might call an objectification-legitimising social narrative.

Cudd is clear that the connection between conformity and oppression-perpetuation is sufficient to generate substantive moral obligations for victims of oppression to resist conforming:

> [T]he oppressed have a moral duty to recognize and fight their own oppression *because not resisting is harmful to their fellow oppressed group members* […] Whatever the actions of the oppressors, the oppressed must also tug at their own bootstraps, even when that is painful.[9]

By failing to resist the expectations of normative femininity, in other words, women harm other women – by facilitating the harms perpetrated against them on the basis of these expectations. Women, of course, are not the sole facilitators of these harms; men can also contribute to the perpetuation of oppression-legitimising narratives. Some men will make this contribution by exercising their dominance over the women in their lives; others will explicitly disavow sexist attitudes whilst taking full advantage of the benefits they afford. These contributions to the objectification-legitimising social narrative are not less important than those made by women, and certainly not less morally objectionable. I focus specifically on the contributions women themselves make to the perpetuation of objectification-legitimising ideas of femininity not because their contributions in this regard are wholly unique, but because it seems altogether more difficult to justify the claim that victims might bear some sort of responsibility for oppression.

Yet this difficulty, I believe, should not deter us from trying to give such an account. In the case of sexual objectification, the charge of complicity is one made *between* women;

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[9] Cudd 2006: 221 [my emphasis]

women who conform to the expectations of femininity are complicit in the harm done to other women in the name of these expectations. The charge of complicity, in other words, gives us a way of conceiving of some sort of normative relationship between women, which is generated through the process of sexual objectification.[10] Understanding and explicating the precise nature of this complicity thus seems to me to be a crucial step towards establishing the normative grounds of feminist relationships of responsibility and solidarity.

II. The causal-contribution account, and the problem of causal indeterminacy

Having clarified the nature of the contribution to their continued sexual objectification women make when they conform to the standards of femininity, I will now move on to examine the different philosophical accounts of the basis of complicity as a moral charge, to assess the extent to which they can accommodate this specific phenomenon within their explanatory parameters.

In contemporary moral and legal philosophy, attempts to delimit the precise nature of complicity have focussed on the issue of causality. Specifically, much debate has proliferated around the question of whether making a causal contribution to the wrongdoing of another is a necessary – or indeed sufficient – condition for ascribing complicity to a person's actions.[11] On one side of this debate, it is argued that the charge of complicity amounts to an assertion that a complicitous party makes a contribution to a harm committed, and that this contribution is causal in nature. This, such arguments claim, is just what we mean when we say that someone was a 'part' of someone else's wrongdoing. The intuition behind this position is best captured in counterfactual terms: a complicit party *makes a difference* to the wrongdoing of another, meaning that without

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[10] I will explicate the nature of this normative relationship, in terms of bonds of solidarity, in the final chapter.

[11] See, for example: Gardner 2007a and 2007b, Kutz 2000 and 2007, Moore 2007, and Petersson 2013.

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the complicitous contribution, the precise wrong would not have been committed.[12] As Björn Petersson states it,

> An essential element in holding someone to account for an event is the assumption that her actions and intentions are part of the explanation of why that event occurred.[13]

This model for thinking about complicity – what I will call the causal-contribution account – is often subject to the criticism that causation in many cases of potential complicity is either under- or over-determined. Causation is under-determined when there are epistemological, physical or metaphysical barriers to determining the extent or nature of a specific contributive act to the bringing about of a particular harm.[14] For example, I may inform you, upon hearing your plans to break into and rob a warehouse, that I know of a structurally unsound fence at the back of the yard which would be easy to break through, and it may be the case that you do, indeed, successfully break in to the warehouse via this fence. But to what extent is this contribution decisive? It is at least plausible that you might have identified this entry point yourself, or found another viable route had you been unaware of this one. This being the case, it is unclear how we should determine the extent of the causal contribution I made to your crime. Under-determination, then, occurs when we have insufficient information of the causal factors of the wrongdoing to determine the decisiveness of one particular causal contribution.

In cases of over-determination, by contrast, there is considered to be an excess of sufficient causal factors with respect to a particular act of wrongdoing, making it impossible to identify any particular causal factor as pivotal or decisive. For instance, imagine that the result of a national election is rigged by a number of election officials across the country deliberately miscounting ballots, such that the election result is skewed; and imagine further that this skewed result in fact required only a few such acts of miscounting, rather than the many that occurred. What, then, can we say about the causal contribution made by each corrupt election official to the overall election result? Since each individual contribution, on its own, was superfluous to the end result, it would appear that we cannot say that any of the election officials made a difference to

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[12] It is a highly contentious question as to what extent discrete 'events' of wrongdoing can be treated as sufficiently fragile to accommodate this appeal to counterfactual difference. For defences of such a view, see Gardner 2007a and Petersson 2013; for objections see Moore 2007.
[13] Petersson 2013: 848.
[14] Kutz 2007: 294.

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the wrong; had they each individually not acted, the result would nonetheless have been successfully rigged.[15]

Returning to the account of women's complicity in sexual objectification developed in the previous section, it becomes clear quite quickly that trying to couch women's complicitous contribution in this picture using the causal-contribution model is going very quickly to run up against the problem of causal indeterminacy – in particular, causal over-determination. Identifying the precise causal contribution made by any one women, via the perpetuation of the standards and expectations of what it means to be a woman, to the objectifying treatment of other women is clearly an impossible task, since the contribution she makes will be negligible in light of the contributions of other women. Daniel Silvermint makes precisely this point when he defines social oppression as a "multiply realizable harm, brought about by a diffuse and changing array of actions and inactions."[16] It is precisely the fact that the norms, beliefs and expectations that constitute the social narrative which facilitates the sexual objectification of women are perpetuated by individuals *en masse* that makes it impossible to determine the contribution each woman (or, indeed, man) makes to this perpetuation – much less the extent to which each contribution plays a causal role in the actions of those who draw on this narrative to treat women as sex objects.

Both John Gardner and Björn Petersson have sought to overcome the problems of causal indeterminacy and thus defend a version of the causal-contribution account of complicity. Neither of their attempts, though, is convincing. Petersson's attempt to construct a version of the causal-contribution approach which is defensible against the problems of over- and under-determination is based on a theory of events as maximally fragile. We can, he claims, attribute complicity to individuals on the basis of counterfactual causal contributions to a harm, even in cases of causal indeterminacy, since we can simply say that an event would not have happened in exactly the same way, in exactly the same place or exactly the same time, had a certain contribution been lacking:

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[15] This example follows closely the structure of Kutz's favoured example of the over-determination of the Dresden bombings, which I shall return to later in the paper.
[16] Silvermint 2013: 409.

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> We should not understand 'C caused E' as implying that 'if C had not occurred,
> E had not happened,' but rather 'if C had not occurred, E had not happened, or
> E had not happened in the same way or E had not happened at the same time'.[17]

Petersson thus attempts to rescue the causal-contribution account of complicity from the problems of over- and under-determination; but he does so at the expense of the moral potency of the charge of complicity. Since we could say of any miniscule contribution to a particular event, that some small and morally irrelevant facet of the event which occurred would have been different had the contribution been lacking, we require something other than the notion of complicity to adjudicate which counterfactual differences are morally significant. Indeed, Petersson himself concedes as much when he says that this account of complicity leaves open the question of how blame or responsibility should be attributed to someone who can be seen to have made a minor counterfactual contribution to an event.

Gardner, by contrast, is able to defend the causal-contribution account of complicity only by acknowledging the moral significance of other factors. Even in cases of clear causal over-determination, Gardner claims, we can say that the contributions of an individual make an important difference to the harm committed; the difference simply being that *we add to the world a harm to which we contributed*:

> [In cases of clear over-determination] we should resist the idea that the
> accomplice made no difference to the overall incidence of wrongdoing, in the
> relevant sense of 'overall incidence'. She added the wrongs (of the principal) to
> which she (as an accomplice) made a contribution. True, she also subtracted
> wrongs to which she did not make a contribution, wrongs which, *ex hypothesi*,
> would have been committed without her assistance or encouragement. But the
> wrongs that she subtracted cannot be regarded as literally cancelling out the
> wrongs that she added. By virtue of her contribution to them, she stands in a
> different relationship to the wrongs that were added.[18]

Key to Gardner's account, then, is the idea that a harm can properly be attached to me through my contribution to it, even if a near-identical harm would have come into the world without my actions. What makes it mine? The fact that I chose to contribute to it. The causal over-determination of the harm committed could only justify my

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[17] Petersson 2013.
[18] Gardner 2007: 74.

contribution to it if the other possible harms that might come into the world, in the absence of my actions, were part of my "practical reasoning" which caused me to act.[19] So the fact that more-or-less the same harm would have occurred anyway cannot retroactively justify my contribution to it, unless it was my intention to prevent the more-or-less-identical harm from coming into the world by making my contribution – something Gardner suggests is very rarely a part of our practical reasoning in such cases. Thus, Gardner's defence of the causal-contribution account of complicity concludes by way of an appeal to the 'practical reasoning' of the potentially complicit agents. But this introduces into the account a new, normatively significant component. If the moral permissibility of the counterfactual difference I make to the commission of a specific harm in the world should be adjudicated according to what was or was not part of my practical reasoning in deciding to make my contribution, then it seems that it is my intention to contribute, or at least my orientation to the event I contribute to, is the morally salient factor – regardless of the causal impact of my contribution. This is precisely the argument made by Christopher Kutz, who develops an alternative account of complicity to the causal contribution model, and it is to his account that I now turn.

III. Participatory intentions: Kutz's alternative account of complicity

Those who object to the 'causal contribution' model seek to show that our intuitive ideas about when we can hold a person responsible for the wrongdoing of another do not correspond sufficiently with whether or not such persons also *made a difference*, causally, to the wrong committed. Christopher Kutz claims that, despite the fact that we might feel somewhat uncomfortable with the idea of blaming someone for a harm they made no difference to, we nonetheless "frequently hold people responsible for who they are and the attitudes they express, not just the harms they cause."[20] It is this moral intuition, he argues, which provides the basis for charging people with complicity in harms to which they made no causal contribution. Intention, on Kutz's account, is what makes someone complicit in another's act – intention to participate in, aid, abet or otherwise contribute to, another's act:

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[19] *Ibid*.
[20] Kutz 2007: 300.

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> What binds together all the complicity cases is the mental state of the
> accomplice—a mental state directed both towards the accomplice's own agency
> […] and towards the agency of the principal [wrongdoer].[21]

For Kutz, then, what determines whether I am complicit in your wrongdoing is whether
I understand your intention to commit a wrong, and intend my own actions to
contribute to your commission of this wrong. Whether or not my actions actually make
such a contribution does not stop me from being complicit. In illustration of this claim,
Kutz discusses the role of U.S. legal officials in abetting the cruel and degrading
treatment of Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib during the years immediately following 9/11,
through the drafting of reams of memoranda aimed at demonstrating the inapplicability
of international agreements banning torture and prisoner abuse. According to a strict
causal contribution condition, Kutz argues, levelling the charge of complicity at these
lawyers would be near impossible. In the first instance, it is highly likely that American
foreign policy, and the counter-terrorism strategies of the intelligence agencies, would
have taken this darker turn regardless of the easing of passage provided by the lawyers.
Then there is the fact that some of the abuses in question took place before the creation
of these legal loopholes – in these cases, the actions of the lawyers served to provide a
retroactive justification for the abuses, rather than facilitating their perpetration. Because
of these facts, Kutz argues, attributing to the lawyers a causal contribution to the abuses
at Abu Ghraib is not tenable. Despite this, however, our moral instincts tell us – rightly -
that the actions of the lawyers did play a morally significant role in the abuses of
prisoners, in such a way that the lawyers should be deemed complicit in, and therefore
held co-responsible for, the actions of the intelligence officers. He writes:

> "[W]e must not lose sight of one important basis for responsibility: [the lawyers]
> were asked what they thought about what their government was already doing,
> and instead of saying as least, 'wait a minute,' they instead answered, 'good idea,
> boss.' That way responsibility lies."

One of the main motivations for Kutz's repudiation of the 'causal contribution
condition' is to allow for the possibility of retaining the moral category of complicity in
the case of what he calls 'collective action problems' – that is, cases of wrongdoing
where a group or collective is responsible for a harm, but where each individual's
contribution to the commission of the harm is either negligible, non-existent or non-

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[21] *Ibid.*

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determinable, such that attributing responsibility for the harm to individual members of the group becomes seemingly impossible. Kutz cites the Dresden bombings as a paradigm collective action problem, because it demonstrates the gulf that we often find in cases of collective wrongdoing between our moral intuitions on the one hand, and our ability to attribute responsibility on the basis on contribution, on the other. Our moral sensibilities tell us that each and every pilot, navigator, gunner, and commanding officer should be held responsible for their participation in the atrocity of Dresden. Reason tells us, however that the actual causal contribution made to the tragedy by each of these individuals is marginal to the point of insignificance. One less bomb, one less plane, would have made no difference to the ferociousness of the firestorm or the suffering that ensued. The problem we face, then, with respect to cases like Dresden, is how to justify our moral inclinations that attributing responsibility for the harm to individual members of groups is valid, despite the fact that it is not possible to identify the specific contribution (if any) made by each individual. According to Kutz, one of the most important consequences of rejecting the 'causal contribution condition' for complicity is that we find ourselves in a much better position to give an account of moral responsibility in collective action problems. By shifting the focus from causal contribution to mental stance, we are able to give an account of what binds together, and hence makes responsible at the individual level, members of groups who commit wrongs as a collective.

In light of the fact that the contributions made by individual women to the perpetuation of the objectification-legitimising norms of femininity, as we have seen, are marginal to the point of counterfactual insignificance, the complicity of women in their sexual objectification seems to be an instance of precisely the kind of collective action problem that Kutz aims to resolve. His proposed alternative account of complicity thus presents an appealing means of conceptualising women's complicity in objectification. In response to the question: "[W]hat follows ethically from individuals' participation in a wrongful collective act, an act whose underlying harm is over-determined with respect to individual contributions?" Kutz answers that

> "marginally effective participants in a collective harm are accountable for the
> victims' suffering, not because of the individual differences they make, but

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> because *their intentional participation in a collective endeavour directly links them to the consequences of that endeavour.*"[22]

The key claim of Kutz's account is that the participation of individuals in collective endeavours is founded on their understanding of themselves as acting as part of a group.[23] You and I act collectively when we both understand what we are doing to be a contribution towards a project or end which we both understand and share, and act intentionally with this shared end in mind. It is this shared teleology, this overlapping of participatory intentions, Kutz argues, which allows us to talk about complicity in cases of collective action. If the normatively salient feature of complicity is the accomplice's intention to contribute to the wrongdoing of the principal, and if my participation in a collective endeavour requires that I act with an intention to contribute to the shared ends or goals of the group, then it follows that I am complicit in – and thus morally responsible for – the harms committed by a group I am a member of, regardless of my causal contribution, or lack thereof, to the harm committed:

> We are properly held accountable for the actions of groups (and of individual group members) in which we participate, because these actions represent our own conception of our agency and our projects. This conception, embedded in our participatory action, is thoroughly normative: it expresses what we desire, what we will tolerate, and what we believe. If a set of agents' participatory intentions overlap, then the will of each is represented in what each other does qua group member, as well as what they do together. The logical overlap allows us to say that they manifest their attitudes through one another's actions.[24]

So, Kutz's intention-to-contribute account of complicity allows us to conceptualise the complicity of individual actors in harms which are the result of collective action, to the extent that they are causally over-determined. This is straightforward enough for collective action cases in which individuals clearly and intentionally act on the basis of a shared teleological understanding of their actions – such as Kutz's favoured example of the Dresden bombings. It is less clear, however, how complicity could be grounded in participatory intentions in this manner, in cases where there is no clear shared project, or teleology, which brings actors together and implicates them in the harms of the group –

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[22] Kutz 2000: 138.
[23] I take this idea of the 'participatory intentions' of accomplices to be relevantly similar to Gardner's assertion that the 'practical reasoning' of accomplices is normatively significant to complicity.
[24] *Ibid.,* 140-1.

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and this seems precisely to be the case in women's complicity in sexual objectification. Excluding the relatively small number of women who actively and intentionally seek the perpetuation of their domination – Superson's right-wing women, perhaps – for the most part when we talk about the way women perpetuate objectification-legitimising ideas of femininity, we are talking about how they do so without intention. Indeed, with the phenomenon of sexual objectification specifically, a peculiar problem for theorising complicity results from the fact that many women understand their participation in sexually objectifying acts or behaviours to be liberating or empowering.[25] In cases such as these, the participatory intentions of women are not only not aligned with the harmful consequences of the enduring sexually objectifying context: they are diametrically opposed to them.

Kutz maintains, however, that even in such cases – which he terms "unstructured collective harms"[26] - we can still ascribe complicity through an account of the intentional mental stance which explains individual actors' participation in the harm. The object which serves as the point of orientation for individual actors' actions in unstructured collective harms, Kutz argues, is something like a shared cultural and social context, or way of life. "[U]nstructured harms," he writes, "typically arise in contexts in which deeper, systemic forms of collective action lie."[27] The example he calls upon to illustrate this "nascent sense of common venture"[28] is the cumulative impact, through climate change, of individuals in wealthy Western countries driving CFC-cooled cars. Though drivers of CFC-cooled cars as individuals lack a discrete, identifiable shared project to which they intend to contribute, they nonetheless have in common a shared set of values and sentiments, in the light of which they act in the ways they do:

> [T]he values drivers put upon personal comfort and privacy are only realizable given cheap fuel and disguised public subsidies of automobile travel. Reciprocally, these social conditions themselves reflect valuations by driver-citizens.[29]

Thus, Kutz argues, drivers of CFC-cooled cars are complicit in the harm done to people in developing countries adversely affected by climate change, insofar as this collectively-

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[25] See, for example, Bauer 2011.
[26] See Kutz 2000, chapter 6.
[27] *Ibid.*, 189.
[28] *Ibid.*, 190.
[29] *Ibid.*, 188.

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caused harm is facilitated by an interdependent set of values which orients the actions of individual drivers.

Analogously, then, we might say that, to the extent that any sexually objectifying act or practice – for example, an incidence of self-objectification which is felt to be empowering - requires at least an implicit appeal to a certain shared way of understanding women, femininity, female sexuality and so on, it shares a certain orientation with other, more intuitively objectionable acts of sexual objectification. This shared orientation, if Kutz's analysis is correct, could be sufficient to warrant the charge of complicity. Such a charge would not be grounded in the claim that victims contribute causally to the oppression of themselves and others in their social group; it would be grounded in an account of unstructured collective action which frames participation in a shared socio-cultural context, or way of life, as a form of 'doing together'.

Objectification-legitimising narrative
'Common knowledge' about femininity - norms, expectations, beliefs

COMPLICITY AS INTENTIONAL PARTICIPATION (KUTZ): Conformity with narrative requires orientation towards narrative which facilitates objectification

FACILITATION: Narrative provides context which *facilitates*, justifies, makes acceptable, objectification of women

Women's conformity with normative femininity

Conforming victim is complicit in the sexual objectification of other women
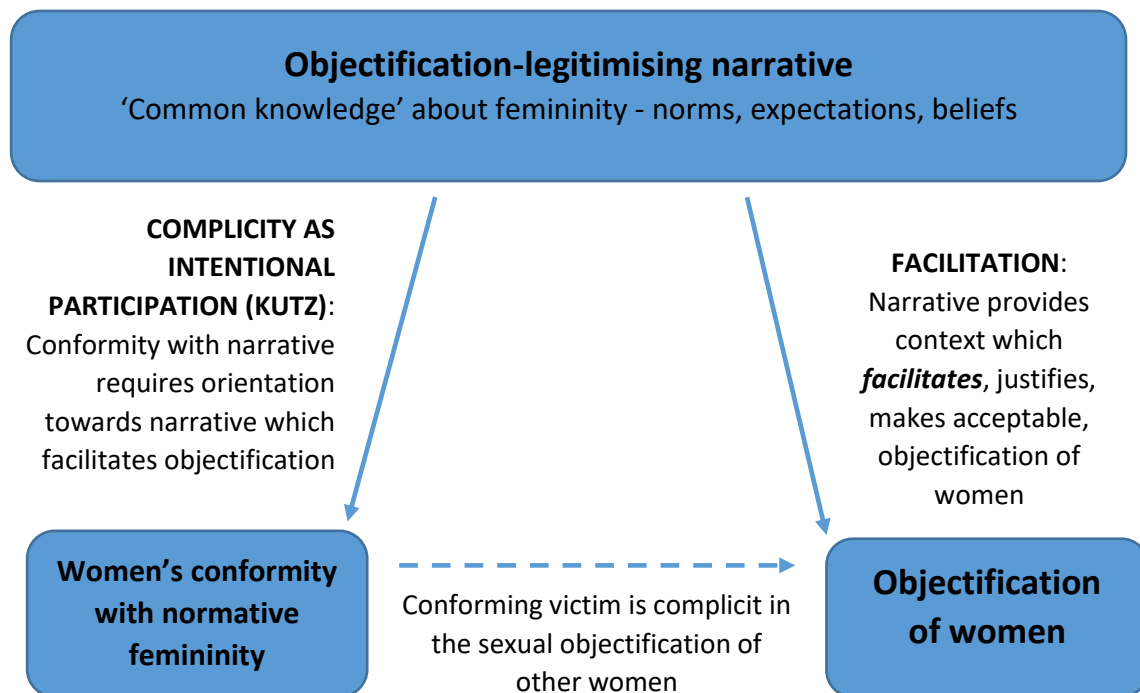
Objectification of women

Fig. 1. Schematic representation of women's complicity in sexual objectification according to Kutz's account of complicity as adjudicated by the participatory intentions of actors.

IV. Oppression and powerlessness:
On the motivational efficacy of the possibility of making a difference

With Kutz's account, then, we have a way of conceptualising the claim that women who conform to objectification-legitimising ideas of femininity can be considered in some way complicit in the continued objectification of women. Rather than positing an implausible causal connection between conformity with normative femininity and day-to-day manifestations of objectification in the lives of other women, we can say that women are implicated in objectification to the extent that they act in the light of a shared set of ideas about what it means to be a woman, which facilitate the pervasive sexual objectification of women throughout society.

Aside from overcoming the problem of causal over-determination, one crucial reason to prefer Kutz's account as a way of thinking about women's complicity in objectification is the emphasis he places on the fact that the accusation of complicity arises primarily from the perspective of victims. From the perspective of victims, Kutz argues, it is perfectly reasonable, even in cases of clear causal over-determination, to hold members of a group responsible for the harm the group inflicts. Victims perceive, primarily, their own suffering and what causes their suffering – which, in the case of collectively-caused harms, shows up to them as a cohesive group of individuals, unifiable through their membership of and participation in the group causing the harm:

> [T]o the victims, a community of accountability is identifiable: a set of individuals who jointly cause harm, against a background of interdependent activity and shared values. Furthermore, from the victims' abstracted, systemic point of view, claims against individual agents make sense. Individual agents are, broadly speaking, participants in a shared venture that does harm, and are so inclusively accountable for the unintended consequences of what they do together.[30]

This resonates importantly with my suggestion in the first part of this paper, that in the case of the facilitation of sexual objectification, complicity is a charge which is made *between* women. When I feel inclined to level the charge of complicity, for instance, at a woman who conforms willingly to the expectation that women should look or dress a certain way, I do so from the perspective of a victim, with a clear eye on what is victimising me. I see – I *feel* – the pressure exerted on me as a woman to conform to a

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[30] *Ibid.*, 187.

3. Constitutive complicity

certain aesthetic, and I see this expectation upheld by another woman. I thus see this other woman as being implicated in what harms me – I see her as implicated in the set of norms, values and beliefs which make up the social context in which I am expected to look a certain way, and socially sanctioned when I do not. In an important sense, then, Kutz's account preserves what seems to be important about the way in which the charge of complicity functions in the case of women's sexual objectification.

However, in one important sense, Kutz's account remains incomplete for the task of conceptualising women's complicity in sexual objectification. Although the causal-contribution model favoured by Petersson and Gardner falls foul of the problem of over-determination, Kutz's account, by repudiating all appeals to causality, fails to address the extent to which women not only orient their actions around objectification-legitimising ideas about femininity, but also *perpetuate* them. In other words, Kutz's account is in danger of portraying the relationship between individual women and the norms, beliefs and ideas which facilitate sexual objectification as one-way only. Yet, as we have seen from MacKinnon's account, women are not simply passive recipients of these features of their social environment; they are also their co-authors. My decision to either affirm or resist acting on the basis on the norms of femininity implicit in the socio-cultural context I find myself in not only impacts upon whether or not my ends are allied with the ends of others in this context– it also impacts upon the durability of this context.

[Curiously,] Kutz briefly acknowledges this two-directional relationship between individuals and their social environment. In explicating the 'nascent sense of common venture' which unifies individuals within their shared social context, he draws on Bourdieu's notion of *habitus*:

> [T]he individual *habitus* of a given social group […] are **both shaped by and shape** their social and natural environment, just as (it is often said) the Aristotelian personal virtues were shaped by a slave economy and a patriarchal politics, and **contributed to the maintenance of the social order**.[31]

This recognition, however, does not invite Kutz to reconsider whether there might yet be a role for something like causal contribution in accounting for complicity in unstructured collective harms. He says only that by noting the individualistic source of

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[31] *Ibid.*, 188 [bold, my emphasis].

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social structures and institutions, "they may not [thereby] be invoked as foundational causal explanations of the social structure."[32] Plainly, this is correct. But it does not follow, it seems to me, that we cannot therefore say anything about the role played by individuals in the perpetuation of the norms, values and beliefs of their social environment. Moreover, it is unclear why we should care about whether or not such contributions are *foundationally* causal, specifically (indeed, it is not at all clear what would amount to a foundational causal explanation of a set of social practices and institutions). Clearly, the value placed by drivers of luxury cars on comfort and prestige was not the founding cause of the market in luxury car ownership which is responsible for climate change; it is not the 'prime-mover' of the phenomenon. Yet it is certainly the case that these socio-cultural norms of consumption now play a role in perpetuating the luxury car market and, by extension, its harmful effects – and the fact that these norms did not bring the market about (indeed, it makes sense to suppose that they are the product of the market) does not change this. In other words, it needn't be the case that social norms and beliefs are the foundational causes of certain social structures or institutions in order for the perpetuation of these norms and beliefs to play a role in maintaining these structures and institutions.

Indeed, this is precisely the basis for the suggestion that women can be complicit in sexual objectification. The claim, recall, is that women are complicit in their own sexual objectification when they perpetuate the ideals and expectations of normative femininity which allow for the normalised treatment of women as objects of male sexual gratification. Nowhere in this account is it supposed that the norms of femininity are *foundationally* causal for sexual objectification. The claim is only that the perpetuation of these norms facilitates, normalises and legitimises the treatment of women as objects of sexual gratification.

The problem with Kutz's account of complicity in unstructured collective harms, then, is that it locates the wrong of complicity only in the fact that complicitous parties are oriented towards a certain way of life which is also the precondition for the given harm. He misses, in other words, an important second basis of complicity in cases of this type which are typified by the example of women's complicity in sexual objectification – namely, the way in which this orientation in action serves to *perpetuate and reproduce* the norms and beliefs which underpin the way of life from which the harm emanates.

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[32] *Ibid*.

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It might be objected that this second basis of complicity is unimportant; why cleave back to the framework of complicity as contribution to a wrong, when the task of adjudicating the nature and extent of these contributions in case of collective harms, as we have seen, is so often mired in problems? Is it not sufficient to have one solid basis for levelling the charge of complicity in the case of unstructured collective harms - one which avoids these problems? Kutz himself, perhaps, might favour such a response; but it is also in Kutz's approach that we find an important reason for pursuing this second basis for complicity – one which, I believe, bears particular importance for the phenomenon of women's complicity in sexual objectification. Kutz's proposal to shift our framework for thinking about complicity from contribution to intentional participation is motivated by what he sees as the "need to provide individuals with reasons to avoid and repair the collective harms" of which they are part.[33] His principal concern, in other words, is the need to identify a basis for individuals to feel *motivated* to resist participating in collective endeavours which cause harm. Kutz believes that in cases of collective harms, the idea of causally making a difference to the harm cannot motivate people to resist participation, because of the fact of causal over-determination. Now, in the cases that he considers – market facilitation and luxury car ownership – this may well be correct. In the case of women's complicity in objectification, however, it is not so clear that the idea of making a difference couldn't hold more sway.

Acting as a counter-weight to the motivational barrier of over-determination in this case is the fact that the experience of women in their social environment is, almost by definition, one of relative powerlessness; powerlessness in the face of systemic sexual violence, exploitation, harassment, stereotyping – all the myriad ways in which the social world enforces on women the social meaning of being an object for male sexual gratification. This experience of powerlessness could, I think, find some remedy in the realisation that women themselves do play a role in the perpetuation of the social context in which they are oppressed. Susan Wendell identifies precisely this motivation to regain a sense of power when she talks about victims of oppression taking on the perspective of the 'responsible actor':

> People with the perspective of the victim [of oppression] may come to take the perspective of the responsible actor when *the desire to take power in their lives becomes very strong* or when, because of a change of external circumstances or an increase

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[33] Kutz 2000: 166.

> in their knowledge, their actual power to direct their lives increases. For example, someone may show us choices we didn't know we had, or new opportunities for action may arise. We may learn of an organized effort to change the situations that victimize or oppress us. Anything that empowers victims can help them see themselves as responsible actors with choices.[34]

Coming to see the social world as something one is not simply passive in the face of, but rather as something whose ideological stability and legitimacy one has a say in, could reveal to women precisely the 'new opportunities for action' that Wendell identifies. This revelation could then have the potential to act as an important antidote to the pervasive sense of disempowerment which characterises women's situation under patriarchy. The extent of the say each individual woman has in the stability and legitimacy of the social order is, of course, very small; the issue of over-determination does not go away. But the potency of the fact of over-determination, I think, is diminished when it is pitted not against a simple desire to do the right thing, as Kutz imagines, but rather against the motivating force of discovering that one has a small degree of power over a social world which one is used to experiencing as relentlessly indifferent to oneself.[35]

V. Metaphysically speaking:
Complicity as constitution

Not only, then, does Kutz's account of complicity, with its sole focus on the participatory intentions of complicitous parties, fail to interrogate the two-way relationship between women and the norms and expectations of femininity; it also underestimates the extent to which the possibility of making even an over-determined contribution to the reproduction of the social world could motivate the charge of complicity between women as systematically disempowered persons. For these reasons, we must adopt a distinctive account of complicity for the phenomenon of women's complicity in sexual objectification – one which employs Kutz's characterisation of complicity in unstructured collective harms but supplements it with an account of the contributory role women play in the perpetuation of the objectification-legitimising notions of what it means to be a woman.

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[34] Wendell 1990: 29 [my emphasis].
[35] This motif of discovering power where one previously felt only powerlessness, I will take up in the fifth chapter.

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What remains, therefore, is the need to clarify the precise nature of this contributory role. Returning to strictly causal accounts of complicity will not, I think, be helpful here; causation, at least in its more orthodox interpretation, seems to be ill-placed to capture the phenomenon of women's perpetuation of the norms of femininity. In the first place, as we saw earlier, there is the familiar problem of over-determination – that is, the impossibility of identifying the precise extent to which a particular woman's conformity with the expectations of femininity contributes to their perpetuation, over and above the perpetuation being perpetrated *en masse* by other women. Then there is a second problem to do with causal determination, which is that, even if we could determine the precise contribution made by one individual woman to the perpetuation of objectification-legitimising norms of femininity, we would still need to determine the precise extent of causal impact these norms and beliefs had on the execution of sexually objectifying actions in the world. This second problem is thus a problem of causal under-determination – we lack the information to determine the extent to which a given norm or socially promulgated expectation of femininity plays a causal role in the commission of a certain act of objectification (for example, the act of wolf-whistling). Taken together, these two problems of causal determination make it near impossible to couch the complicitous role women play in the perpetuation of sexual objectification in terms of an identifiable causal contribution made to the commission of objectifying acts and behaviours.

There is a third and more fundamental problem with thinking about women's complicity in objectification in terms of causal contributions, however. The first two problems of over- and under-determination arise only under the twofold assumption that a) things like beliefs and norms can stand in a causal relation to the actions of individuals, and b) that the best way to understand the contribution woman make to their continued sexual objectification is as the perpetuation of specific, causally efficacious beliefs and expectations about what it means to be a woman. Many would disagree with the first of these assumptions; though, given the rich tradition in critical social theory of paying attention to the significance of ideologies, false beliefs and biases as mechanisms for perpetuating conditions of domination, I am inclined to think that the suggestion that beliefs, norms and ideas can impact causally on people's behaviour would not be particularly out of place.[36] However, even if we grant that there can be causal

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[36] For an analytical defence of the claim that non-physical entities like ideas or theories are capable of standing in causal relationships to physical things in the world, see Davidson 2006.

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relationships between actions in the world and things like beliefs and norms – for example, that the belief that women are naturally submissive could be a partial cause of sexual violence against women – it is not clear that the best way to cash out the contribution women make to their own oppression is in terms of the perpetuation of specific, discrete beliefs and norms.

The basis of the idea that women can be complicit in their continued sexual objectification, recall, is the fact that, by conforming to certain beliefs, norms and expectations about what it means to be a woman, women contribute to the perpetuation of an objectification-legitimising social narrative of femininity. This narrative is best understood as a constellation of beliefs, ideas, norms and expectations, the amalgamation of which serves to normalise, legitimate and otherwise facilitate the continuation of sexually objectifying acts, behaviours and social institutions. It is the *assemblage* of certain beliefs, ideas and norms about femininity, in other words, which makes continued oppression possible; it is not particular beliefs, ideas and norms on their own, but the context which is created in their coming together (with each other, and with other factors such as material disparities) which facilitate women's continued objectification. This cumulative effect is clear if we remind ourselves of the example of wolf-whistling that was analysed in the first chapter. When a woman is wolf-whistled by a group of men on the street, there is not one specific norm making the behaviour of the men possible – for example, a norm of street harassment of women by men – but rather there is a combination of overlapping beliefs, norms, expectations and so on which constitute a context in which the behaviour is enabled. Gendered norms of public behaviour, heteronormative ideas about sexual interactions between men and women, beliefs about what women want and how that may differ from what they say they want, male feelings of entitlement and their legitimisation, and so on, are all constitutive parts of the context which makes it possible for a group of men to wolf-whistle a woman in the street.

The objectification-legitimising social narrative to which women contribute, therefore, is not best understood as something like a particular belief or norm, but rather as a context, comprised of a range of beliefs and norms, which make objectifying acts and behaviours possible, and acceptable. One way to think about this is through an analogy with the relationship between musical notes and melodies.[37] A melody is, substantively, nothing

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[37] I am grateful to Darshan Cowles for this useful comparison.

more than the putting together of a series of individual musical notes; but it would be wrong to think of a melody as the same kind of thing as a musical note. The melody is not reducible to the notes, for it is what is created when the notes are put together in a certain way; each note takes on a particular significance when it is played with the other notes in a certain way, and it is the *significance* the notes take on when sequenced in a certain way which constitutes the melody. In the same way, it is only through the coming together of a range of beliefs, ideas and norms about woman that the context which legitimises sexual objectification is created. This context is not the same in kind as the individual beliefs, norms and ideas that comprise it; the significance of each component of the context – for instance, the norm of female sexual availability, or the belief that women who dress in a certain way are provoking male attention – is generated only by its being placed in constellation with other components.[38]

A more focussed analysis of the way in which women are complicit in sexual objectification, then, reveals that the complicitous contribution they make is not simply the perpetuation of specific and discrete norms, beliefs and expectations about femininity, but rather the maintenance, through the perpetuation of these norms, beliefs and expectations, of a *context* which facilitates their continued objectification. Re-framing this phenomenon in terms of context reveals why we cannot appeal to causality to explicate the contribution women make to sexual objectification. Metaphysically speaking, a context is not like an idea, belief or norm; it is not a bounded entity in the world, but something more like a background condition on the basis of which things in the world – like objects and ideas – are made possible, experienced, rendered sensible and so on. Things in the world exist *within* a context, not alongside it. Thus, it would be a category mistake to think that causal relationships can pertain between a context and things in the world. A context does not cause things in the world to be a certain way; for it is that within which things in the world occur. Similarly, events in the world do not cause a certain context; the context is established through the doing of things in the

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[38] This idea of a context of oppression being comprised of a 'constellation' of norms, ideas and beliefs owes much to Marilyn Frye's account of oppression – specifically, her idea of oppression as a network of intersecting and interlocking barrier and forces: "The experience of oppressed people is that the living of one's life is confined and shaped by barriers which are not accidental or occasional and hence avoidable, but are systematically related to each other in such a way as to catch one between and among them." (2000: 12) I believe that Frye, like most radical feminists, underestimates the extent to which this network of oppression can be constructive of identities which are not necessarily experienced as oppressive, and thus fails to account for the role of complicity of victims in the maintenance of structures of oppression; nonetheless, her diagnosis of the systematic relatedness of the beliefs, ideas and norms which make up a given narrative of oppression importantly echoes my analysis here.

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world. Rather, context has a two-way relationship to things in the world: a *constitutive* relationship and a *facilitative* relationship. A certain context is facilitative of the acts which take place in it, since a context renders possible, intelligible, and acceptable things in the world and the specific manifestations they take. But the things which take place in the world are also constitutive of the context in which they take place; just as a melody changes when one note is altered, so too is a context changed when the constellation of things in the world from which it is constituted changes.

Women, then, do not contribute causally to the perpetuation of a social context which allows for their continued sexual objectification; rather, they contribute constitutively to it. That is, by conforming, whether willingly, unknowingly, rationally or otherwise, to the various norms, beliefs and expectations of femininity used to justify and legitimate the treatment of women as sex objects, they thereby constitute – or, more specifically, contribute to the constitution of – the very context which facilitates this treatment. This is, in an important sense, the other side of the story that we get from Kutz. Kutz's account, recall, locates the complicity of women in the fact that, when they conform to the objectification-legitimising social narrative, they are oriented towards a certain way of life which is also the precondition for the objectifying treatment they are subject to – so they are complicit in virtue of their participatory intentions. What Kutz's account fails to address, however, is the fact that intentional participation in a certain way of life also contributes to the reproduction of the set of norms, beliefs and ideas which underpin that way of life – so conformity with the norms of femininity also contributes to the reproduction of a social context in which it is possible and permissible to treat women as sex objects.

Of course, we can only see this once we come to see that the sexual objectification of women is facilitated by a social context comprised of a specific constellation of beliefs, ideas and norms about what it means to be a woman; only then are we able to explicate the way in which conformity with a specific belief and norm of femininity is dependent on the broader constellation of beliefs and norms– the objectification-legitimising social narrative – for its meaning. So Kutz's participatory account of complicity is incomplete without an explanation of how the social context of oppression is reproduced through the actions of individuals; but my constitutive account of complicity derives an important part of its explanatory power from Kutz's insight that action oriented towards a certain way of life and the narrative which underpins it requires at least an amorphous intention to participate in that way of life.

3. Constitutive complicity

CONTEXT: Objectification-legitimising narrative
'Common knowledge' about femininity - norms, expectations, beliefs

COMPLICITY AS CONSTITUTION: Conformity with narrative is constitutive of objectification-legitimising context

COMPLICITY AS INTENTIONAL PARTICIPATION (KUTZ): Conformity with narrative requires orientation towards narrative which facilitates objectification

FACILITATION: Narrative provides context which *facilitates*, justifies, makes acceptable, objectification of women

Women's conformity with normative femininity

Conforming women are complicit in the objectification of other women

Objectification of women

Fig. 2. Schematic representation of women's complicity in sexual objectification as context constitution, drawing on Kutz's notion of participatory intentions.

Crucially, this account of women's complicity in sexual objectification allows us to maintain an important feature of traditional causal accounts of complicity without resorting to bad metaphysics: the possibility of making a difference. Causal accounts of complicity are motivated, as Petersson states, by the intuition that complicitous actions must be part of the explanation for why an event occurred. This intuition is lacking in Kutz's account, but it is preserved in the account of complicity – what I will call *constitutive complicity* – I have developed here. As I argued above, this seems to me to be an important feature of the account, since it locates for women, as people with comparatively little social power, a meaningful possibility for acting on the world. Indeed, now that we have the constitutive nature of women's complicity in objectification properly in view, the possibility for women acting transformatively on the world appears all the more meaningful. Whereas in cases of causal complicity, the possibility of making a difference to the given wrong coming into the world is mediated through the other causal factors involved in the commission of the wrong (which, in the case of collective action situations, are myriad and overlapping), in the case of constitutive complicity this mediation is absent. Complicity, on this account, is grounded in the role played by women in re-constituting the social context in a way that continues

to facilitate sexual objectification; necessarily, then, one makes a difference to the constitution of the social context if one resists acting in conformity with the objectification-legitimising narrative.[39] In cases of causal complicity, one's attempts to make a difference are at the mercy of a chain of cause and effect which may not succeed, but in cases of constitutive complicity one is dependent only on one's ability, and willingness, to take up one's constitutive role in the reproduction of a social world which facilitates and normalises the treatment of women as sex objects.[40]

Conclusion

If complicity is best captured as the phenomenon of being part of how a wrong comes into the world, then the analysis presented here certainly shows that women can, and often do, play a complicitous role in the sexual objectification to which they are pervasively subjected. This complicity, as we have seen, is neither causally grounded, as in more traditional accounts of complicity; nor grounded solely in intention, as in Kutz's alternative account of complicity. Rather, it is grounded in the fact that women, by conforming to the various ideas, norms and beliefs about what it means to be a woman that make up the social context which facilitates their objectification, thereby contribute to the re-constitution of that context. In this way, they are part of how the wrong of the treatment of women as objects of male sexual gratification is able to come into the world.

I have restricted myself here to articulating the phenomenon of constitutive complicity solely in relation to the contribution women make to their own sexual objectification. It is certainly worth noting, however, that a similar notion of victim complicity in oppression is discernible in literature on various other forms of structural oppression – particularly white supremacist and colonial oppression. A brief examination of the various ways in which this phenomenon of victim complicity in oppression has been

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[39] I will spell out more clearly, in the next chapter, how such individual efforts at context re-constitution can be particularly efficacious in the case of gender.

[40] Clearly, in the case of victim complicity in oppression there will often be a number of factors which make victims either unwilling or unable to take up this role. The risks associated with non-conformity may serve as a sufficient threat, or victims may become attached to the identities ascribed to the by the social narratives which underpin their oppression. My claim here is not that it is *easy* for victims to take up their constitutive role in the reproduction of their social world; it is only that such a role, structurally speaking, exists for them to take.

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articulated reveals that the account of constitutive complicity that I have developed here might be usefully applied to other accounts of oppression.

Anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko, for example, in explicating the need for the inward-looking, reflective process he called Black consciousness, argued for the necessity of people of colour reminding themselves of their "complicity in the crime of allowing [themselves] to be misused and therefore letting evil reign supreme in the country of [their] birth."[41] Whilst it is not immediately clear what Biko means here by the claim that 'allowing' colonialism was a form of complicity, Eunice Sahle explains that Biko's anti-apartheid analysis is concerned with, amongst other things, the perpetuation of colonial domination through narratives of racial difference which lend credibility and strength to colonial powers. Biko, she argues, sought to challenge

> the 'complicity' of black people in their continued oppression [due to] what he considered to be their internalization of the racist narrative and the naturalized representation of political, economic and cultural power by the apartheid state and its supporters.[42]

The complicity of black South Africans in their oppression for Biko, then, consisted of an acceptance of, and failure to challenge, the colonial racializing narratives which underpinned and propped up the oppressive social structures of apartheid. This has clear similarities with Cudd's claim that women are complicit in their oppression by contributing to a body of 'common knowledge' which justifies their domination. In the work of bell hooks, too, we find a similar concern with the internalisation of racist discourses:

> '[W]hite supremacy' is a much more useful term for understanding the *complicity of people of color in upholding and maintaining racial hierarchies that do not involve force (i.e slavery, apartheid)* than the term 'internalized racism' - a term most often used to suggest that black people have absorbed negative feelings and attitudes about blackness. The term 'white supremacy' enables us to recognize not only that *black people are socialized to embody the values and attitudes of white supremacy*, but we can exercise 'white supremacist control' over other black people.[43]

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[41] Biko 1987: 29.
[42] Sahle 2014: 229.
[43] hooks, b. 1999: 113 [my emphasis].

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hooks here is even clearer than Biko about the fact that white supremacy is often upheld not, or not only, by violent force, but by a set of values and attitudes. Through a process of socialisation, people of colour come to embody these values. I take 'embody' here to refer not only to the fact that people of colour buy into white supremacist narratives, but that their conformation to racist expectations serves to further justify and legitimise the knowledge claims of racist discourse.

Whether the notion of constitutive complicity will be useful for explicating the kind of victim complicity in racism and colonialism that these writers have in mind will depend on the extent to which the mechanisms which perpetuate racist and colonial oppression are similar to the mechanisms which perpetuate the sexual objectification of women. Specifically, it will depend on whether or not we understand the social narratives which underpin racism and colonialism to *facilitate* further manifestations of racist and colonial oppression – or whether they simply serve as a justification (or 'post-hoc excuse,' to borrow from MacKinnon) for the oppressive effects of capitalism and imperialist expansionism. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to attempt to answer such questions. At the very least, however, the account of constitutive complicity I have developed here, as an account of the specific mechanisms which perpetuate women's sexual objectification, might provide a useful point of comparison for understanding the similarities, and differences, between the ways in which sexist, racist and colonial oppressions are reproduced (and, by extension, how they should be resisted).

One drawback of broadening the notion of constitutive complicity in this way, however, is that it begins to seem that that it could be called upon to describe such a general and pervasive phenomenon – perpetuating the norms and values of one's social environment - that it denudes the charge of complicity of any real moral significance. Certainly, it is true that, to the extent that any given social context is being continually re-constituted through the acts and behaviours of individuals, we are all, on the account I have outlined here, 'complicit' to some extent in that context and what comes out of it. But there are, I think, a couple of reasons not to be overly perturbed by this objection. The first, and most obvious, is that the extent of the moral weight carried by the charge of complicity with respect to this very general phenomenon of context constitution will vary greatly according to the wrong that we identify as being facilitated by the context in question. To the extent that we all adhere to a particular set of fashion norms – blue rinse perms and embroidered waistcoats, for example – we are all complicit in the reproduction of a world which promotes the harms of blue rinse perms and embroidered waistcoats. But

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the moral weight of complicity is derived from the moral weight of the harm being contributed to; and unless we wish to claim that blue rinse perms and embroidered waistcoats are social harms of the same degree as misogyny and racism, then it seems that, even if we allow that constitutive complicity of the kind I have described here is a pervasive aspect of human existence, we retain an important criterion for differentiating more and less serious manifestations of this phenomenon.

The second and, perhaps, more important thing to say about the generality of the phenomenon is that we would be rash, I think, to overemphasise the drawbacks of focussing on the entanglement of the individual and the social at the expense of discerning the benefits. True, this focus brings with it Kutz's worry about the need for the charge of complicity to motivate people to change their actions to avoid being complicit; perhaps it is the case that feeling a burden of responsibility for one's role in the reproduction of the social world as a whole might prove demotivating in this respect. We should not, however, be in the practice of tailoring our diagnosis of the problems in our social world, and the mechanisms which underpin them, around worries about which analyses can, and cannot, successfully motivate people to political action. If we do, we will end up at best with a political program which is impotent with respect to the problem at hand or, at worst, a political program which undermines the kind of politics needed to remedy the problem (as we see with sexual objectification and the politics of consent). What's more, we should be wary of making judgements in advance about which explanations of social ills will and will not be effective for motivating political action. One of the most important insights of critical theory is that theory is not neutral with respect to the world it describes; description is a kind of intervention. Re-describing the social world, with all its oppressive tendencies, as something which those on the receiving end of oppression can affect and help to change, seems to me to be an important intervention of theory into practice.

Chapter 4

Anxiety, habit and self-transformation:
Phenomenological resources for resisting complicity

Introduction

According to the argument pursued so far, women can be understood to be complicit in their continued sexual objectification, insofar as their conformity with the norms of femininity serves to re-constitute the social world as one in which women are treated, and treatable, as objects for male sexual gratification. In other words, when we as women embrace or promote normative standards of femininity, we contribute to the making-objective of the male perspective according to which women are defined by male sexual interest.

In order for this charge of complicity to have significance and legitimacy as a basis for feminist politics, however, we need to do more than simply establish the fact that the actions of women contribute to the reproduction of a sexually objectifying world. The question motivating the discussions about grounding complicity in collective action cases is, to borrow from Gardner: "How do my hands get dirty if the wrongdoing is out of my hands?"[1] This question has a metaphysical element, as discussed in the previous chapter – what kind of contribution do I have to make to properly be 'part of' someone else's wrongdoing? – but it also has an important normative element. Complicity is an ethical charge; we seek to establish that a person is complicit in a wrong so that we might hold them partially responsible for the wrong, even though they were not its principal executor. But we typically take the practice of holding someone responsible for something to be appropriate only in situations where there was a reasonable possibility of doing otherwise; in cases of force and coercion, we tend to attribute, at the very least, a diminished sense of responsibility to people's actions (we might say, for instance, *there was nothing you could have done*). For this reason, the charge of complicity requires us not only to establish that a person did make a meaningful contribution to a harm executed by someone else, but also that we are reasonable in supposing that they could have avoided or resisted making this contribution. Without this second element, the ethical

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[1] Gardner 2007: 57.

bite of the charge of complicity is missing – it describes only a factual state of affairs, not the violation or disregard of a normative expectation.

In the case of women's complicity in sexual objectification, this second facet of complicity raises a potential problem, in at least two respects. The first, and more obvious, is that the very nature of gender inequality is such that we would expect the standard conditions under which we take responsibility to be diminished – force, coercion, a lack of meaningful alternative options – to pertain to many of the ways in which women contribute to their continued objectification. Since sexual objectification, on the analysis presented here, is the process through which women's subordination is maintained, it is a necessary corollary that women's choices and decisions are often made directly in the face of male power – and this power can certainly sometimes take a highly violent or coercive form. Women may choose, for instance, to appeal to ideological norms of feminine weakness and vulnerability as a means of navigating violent outbursts from their partner; and though we should not seek to capture this strategy in thoroughly non-agential terms – since that ignores the creativity and resourcefulness of women who navigate their survival in situations such as these[2] - we should certainly avoid holding women responsible for their complicity in ideological norms of femininity when this complicity constitutes a survival strategy. In building a feminist politics out of the idea of women's complicity in sexual objectification, therefore, we must be mindful of the need to acknowledge the very real conditions of violence, threat and coercion in which many women must navigate their identity.[3] The account of sexual objectification I have developed thus far, however, is intended as a response to the paradigmatic liberal approach to the phenomenon, which takes consent to be a normative transformer of objectification. My principal concern, therefore, is to show that feminism needn't allow its critique of sexual objectification to be delimited by the presence, or absence, of consent.

This leads to the second problem presented by the normative dimension of complicity, however. Whereas in cases of complicity engendered by violence, threat or coercion, we are concerned with *external* barriers to the reasonable possibility of resistance, in the case of acts of complicity experienced as consensual by women, there is the problem of *internal* barriers which might make resistance an unreasonable expectation. What do I

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[2] See Schneider 1993.
[3] The next, and final, chapter of the thesis, which advances a theory of solidarity grounded in resistance to being complicit, will engage this issue through the lens of intersectionality.

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mean by this? It is by reading a constructivist notion of power into MacKinnon's theory of sexual objectification, recall, that we generate the insight that women's desires and choices can be implicated in the reproduction of the social world which oppresses them. This implication, as I have argued, can be wholly consensual, in the sense that it can be experienced by women as something that they wholeheartedly endorse. Yet this does not solve the problem generated by the normative dimension of complicity, it merely moves it up one level. Put simply, if women become complicit in the reproduction of their conditions of oppression by doing what they want, and if what they want is itself the product of the constructive power of the social process of objectification, then in what way it is reasonable to suppose that women can resist this complicity? As Amy Allen puts it:

> [P]rogressive self and social transformation for women will entail a number of things […] it will not be sufficient to change how we think about gender, sex and normative femininity; we will have to transform not only our beliefs but also our *fantasies* and *desires*.[4]

We can call once again upon the framework of critical theory to get this problem in view. Critical theory tasks itself with diagnosing pathologies of the social in order to identify the correct remedies. Thus far I have argued that the framework of complicity gives us a useful diagnosis of the problem of sexual objectification from a feminist perspective. In order for this claim to be fully justifiable, however, it needs to be the case that the analysis of sexual objectification in terms of complicity generates theoretical insights for remedying the problem. My analysis requires, therefore, an account of the conditions of possibility for women gaining critical purchase on their gendered desires and affective comportments; only then will the framework of complicity be useful for charting a new avenue for feminist critical engagement with the phenomenon of sexual objectification.

The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to develop such an account. To develop it, however, we will have to look beyond MacKinnon's work. Her feminist theory makes reference to two kinds of remedies for women's oppression: legal change (for instance, to the laws which protect pornography under freedom of speech) and consciousness raising. The former does not address the question of how women can come to problematize their feminine identities and attachments – indeed, legal change as feminist priority sits very uncomfortably alongside the more radical social critique we get from

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[4] Allen 2008: 183 [my emphasis].

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MacKinnon's theory of sexual objectification. The strategy of consciousness raising is certainly more promising. MacKinnon defines consciousness raising as the method of feminism – as that which brings women to consciousness of their situation as common with other women, and women's situation as a group as a systemic subordination which benefits men. Consciousness raising as method thus acknowledges one important consequence of analysing oppression in constructivist terms: women must "struggle against the world in themselves as well as toward a future."[5] The problem, however, is that MacKinnon does not give an account of the conditions which precipitate this struggle. She acknowledges that this hangs in the air as a question for feminism:

> The analysis of how one gets to be the way one is does not readily explain how some come to reject it, much less the view that one must and can change it […] What accounts for women's turning upon their conditioning?[6]

Yet her answer to this question is ultimately unsatisfying. She draws her answer from Marxist theory, drawing an analogy between the question of how women gain critical consciousness of their oppression, and the question of how the proletariat become conscious of their class exploitation:

> Capitalist social relations distort cognition; yet it is precisely the relation to the mode of production under capitalism that gives the point of view of the proletariat […] its revolutionary potential and makes the old society the midwife of the new.
>
> […] The question then becomes not whether such knowledge is possible, but whether women are such a people and now is such a time.[7]

The problem with this analogy, however, is that nothing in MacKinnon's account of gender suggests that women *are* such a people. Marx's historical materialism is indispensable to understanding the development of proletarian consciousness, and there are no good reasons – certainly, none given by MacKinnon – to suppose that we can transplant an analogous philosophy of history into a theory of gender.

A further problem with conceptualising consciousness raising as a sufficient catalyst for resistance is that as method it remains too preoccupied with the cognitive. That is,

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[5] MacKinnon 1989: 102.
[6] Ibid., 103.
[7] Ibid., 104.

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MacKinnon supposes that the capacity for resistance and the desire for change emerge out of the process of coming to feminist *consciousness* - the knowledge of women's situation. Given her acknowledgement that gender finds expression not just in women's domination, but also in their affective identities, however, this cognitive strategy, by MacKinnon's own analysis, tells only half the story. To focus exclusively on the strategy of consciousness raising is to assume that affect and desire can be brought under the control of our cognitive grasp of things. Yet, as Allen has argued, we should not be so quick to assume that "rational demystification" will be sufficient to loosen the affective grip gender has on us. [8]

What is required, therefore, is an account of the conditions of possibility for women gaining critical purchase on their gendered desires and affective comportments which can supplement the strategy of consciousness raising. Following much contemporary feminist work on the subject of agency and resistance from within domination, I will draw on the work of Judith Butler to accomplish this end. In distinction from the take up of Butler's work in recent theoretical developments in feminism, however, I will not turn to her later work on subjection and the psychic attachments generated by power; instead, I will (re)turn to her earlier work on gender performativity. It is my contention that this earlier work contains resources, albeit underdeveloped, for theorising the possibilities for women gaining critical purchase on their affective attachments to their gendered identities. These resources emanate not primarily from Butler's Foucaultian commitments, but rather from the influence of phenomenology on her earlier work. Reading this work through the tradition of phenomenology, I argue, reveals overlooked resources for the possibility of feminist resistance to being-gendered.

To begin, I will review the basis of the long-standing mutual dis-identification between Butler and MacKinnon. I will argue that that their disagreements arise because they are concerned with different consequences of analysing gender as something which is reproduced socially - but that these differential focuses can be usefully reconciled in the service of this thesis (I). Moving on to analysing Butler's performative account of gender in earnest, in the second section I will argue that her understanding of gender as citation does not account for the enduring dispositions of being-gendered, and that in order to do so, we must read her work through the phenomenological understanding of identity as habit. Drawing on Clare Carlisle's analysis of habit, I will analyse habitual gender as

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[8] Allen 2008: 182-183.

that which conceals the contingency of gendered identities and relieves us from confrontation with this contingency (II). Turning next to the question of how embracing the contingency of gender identities could be motivated, given the concealing power of habit, I will suggest that Butler's sporadic references to gender performance as anxious might hold a clue. Reading her comments on gender and anxiety through the tradition of existential phenomenology, I will argue that gender is beset by anxiety because re-constituting oneself as gendered means, necessarily, closing down other possible ways of being. The ambivalent dizziness of anxiety, I suggest, opens up a possible motivation for embracing contingency (III). Bringing together these two phenomenological insights from Butler's work, I propose a way of thinking about the feminist project of resisting gender as the collective acquisition of new habits, motivated by the thrill of anxiety (IV). In the final section, I will briefly suggest some advantages that this phenomenological reading of Butler's earlier work might have over her later work on psychic attachments (V).

I. Butler and MacKinnon: what divides and what unifies them

By their own accounts, Butler and MacKinnon do not see eye to eye on the matter of feminist theory. Though their explicit engagement with each other's work is not extensive, it is sufficient to make clear that both thinkers regard each other's work as making some crucial mistakes in contrast to their own. In the preface to the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble*, Butler writes that MacKinnon's equation of having a gender with being in a heterosexual relationship of dominance "resonates with some dominant forms of homophobic argument," arguing that MacKinnon ends up reinforcing heteronormative ideology rather than opposing it.[9] In 'Points Against Postmodernism,' MacKinnon variously associates Butler with what she perceives as a number of de-politicising consequences of the postmodern turn in feminism: a denial of the importance of material inequality, a preoccupation with abstract questions about agency, and a crucial misreading of the methodology employed by radical feminist analysis, among other things. In a particular nod to Butler, she writes: "Women [in postmodernism] have

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[9] Butler 1999: xiii.

become 'an ongoing discursive practice,' or, ubiquitously, 'the female body,' which is written on and signified but seldom, if ever, raped, beaten, or otherwise violated."[10]

It would seem like an understatement, then, to say that Butler and MacKinnon are unlikely bedfellows – intent as they seem on distancing themselves from each other's feminist theory. Yet, if we look beyond their explicit engagement with each other's work, their accounts of gender have a lot of important similarities. Butler's early theory of gender performativity asserts that gender is neither a natural or essential feature of human existence, nor a simple product of a historical process of social construction; rather binary gender norms are contingent identities which must be continually performed to be sustained. The apparent fixity and naturalness of gender is thus nothing more than illusion constructed from the repeated performance of gender norms:

> [G]ender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts… [Gender] must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self. This formulation moves the conception of gender off the ground of a substantial model of identity to one that requires a conception of constituted social temporality.[11]

In claiming that gender is performed, Butler does not mean to imply a kind of voluntaristic choice to act out, or not act out, our gender on any given day. Rather, she is employing a Derridean reading of Austin's notion of performative speech acts. On this reading, performative utterances are able to bring about that which they name because of the fact that the utterance has a citational structure; that is, because the utterance conforms to an understood form. With regard to gender, this means, according to Butler, that in order for gendered acts to be socially understood as such, they must be iterations, or citations, of ways of doing and being which are already understood as being gendered in a certain way. This means that my acting in a gendered way is predicated on gender norms being socially understood, and understood as iterable. At the same time, however, gender norms only have this citational structure insofar as they are continually reinscribed through the performances of individuals. A performative act, then, for

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[10] MacKinnon 200: 701.
[11] Butler 1988: 519-20.

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Butler, is "that which constitutes meaning and that through which meaning is performed or enacted."[12]

Clearly, this indicates an important connection between the acts of individuals and the context in which their actions take place. Butler writes:

> My situation does not cease to be mine just because it is the situation of someone else, and my acts, individual as they are, nevertheless reproduce the situation of my gender, and do that in various ways. In other words, there is, latent in the personal is political formulation of feminist theory, a supposition that *the life-world of gender relations is constituted, at least partially, through the concrete and historically mediated acts of individuals*.[13]

This description of the citational nature of gender norms, as I hope should be clear, bares striking similarity to my reconstruction of MacKinnon's theory of sexual objectification. There are several important points of convergence. One is the twofold disavowal of any naturalness of gender; not only do Butler and MacKinnon both deny the existence of any essence of gender which subsists below its social manifestations and representations, but they both also conceive of the illusion of naturalness as a product of gender's social reproduction. For MacKinnon, the notion of natural gender differences is the "post hoc excuse" of inequality;[14] for Butler, it is the "truth effect of a discourse of primary and stable identity."[15] Gender is also, as a result, both constitutively social and constitutive of the social for both Butler and MacKinnon – meaning gender is a social phenomenon in essence, but also that being-gendered reproduces the social reality of genderedness. Butler grounds this dual claim linguistically through her appropriation of Derrida: individual iterations of gender are meaningful only in the context of a social world in which gendered norms have pre-established meanings – yet these reiterations are also what perpetuate and maintain these social meanings. MacKinnon, by contrast, grounds the claim in an analysis of the epistemological method of objectivity and its interaction with male power: gender is created, enforced, by male power, and is then discovered through the lens of objectivity, which takes all conformity with gender norms as evidence of their veracity. Beyond these differences, however, Butler and MacKinnon

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[12] Ibid., 521.
[13] Ibid., 523 [my emphasis].
[14] MacKinnon 1989: 218.
[15] Butler 1990: 174.

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share the important insight that gender, in some sense, both makes the world and is made by the world.

In light of these substantial points of convergence, how should we understand the perception on the part of both Butler and MacKinnon that their analyses of gender differ fundamentally? I propose that we see it as a product of the fact that they are each focussed on different facets of the social analysis of gender, and the consequences of those facets. Butler's account of the social reproduction of gender is motivated by a desire to show the contingency and relative fragility of that which we take to be essential and unchangeable. Her contention is that much feminist theory, intent on explicating the structural nature of women's oppression, thus overestimates the stability and durability of these structures – an estimation which itself strengthens them, rather than weakening or loosening them, as feminism should seek to. It is for this reason that she claims that MacKinnon "institutes a regulation of another kind" in her critique of sexual harassment: she affirms the heteronormative regulation of gender according to which to be a woman "means to have entered already into a heterosexual relationship of subordination."[16] In other words, rather than focussing on the exploitable cracks within the regulative structure of heteronormativity, MacKinnon, according to Butler, instead avows the illusory totalising power of these structures, which is counterproductive to destabilising and overthrowing them.

MacKinnon, by contrast, is concerned to show how women's choices and desires become implicated in the reproduction of their conditions of domination, because much of her work is targeted at biologism, on the one hand, and 'difference' feminisms on the other, which understand the feminist project to be one of elevating the feminine to equal status with the masculine. For MacKinnon, it is important to show how gender is socially grounded and reproduced, because only then can we get in view how these various appeals to the 'naturalness' of gender serve to perpetuate women's oppression. Understanding the thoroughly social nature of gender, in other words, is crucial to the task of revealing how notions of natural gender differences serve as the "velvet glove on the iron first of domination."[17] Her issue with postmodern feminism, then, is that it fails to take the reality of women's domination seriously, and is insufficiently concerned with the specificities of women's experience of gender *as domination*.

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[16] Butler 1999: xiii.
[17] MacKinnon 1989: 219.

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To parse these different focuses more systematically: MacKinnon is motivated primarily by what gender *does*, whereas Butler is motivated primarily by what gender *is*. That is to say, MacKinnon is motivated by the material domination of women, and her interest in the social process of gendering is in the service of explicating how this domination is maintained and abetted even by women; Butler is motivated by the nature of gender as a self-perpetuating, yet inherently vulnerable, system of social regulation, and her interest in the social process of gendering derives from her desire to reveal the contingencies of this system.

Does this make Butler's work fundamentally incompatible with MacKinnon's? I think not. In fact, I would argue, the partial truth of each thinker's critique of the other shows the need to combine their analyses. MacKinnon is surely correct to point out that Butler's feminism pays insufficient attention to the material reality of women's existence; one needn't be a radical feminist to object, for example, to her account of rape as a violation constituted discursively through its terms of description, rather than as material violence lived by women.[18] When she says that sexual difference is "a principle of production, intelligibility, and regulation which enforces a violence and rationalises it after the fact," we should, I think, want to add that this symbolic violence that *is* gender also facilitates the kind of material, gendered violence MacKinnon is concerned with – not least because this material experience of domination is surely an important, if insufficient, motivation for feminist resistance.[19] On the other hand, Butler also seems right to suggest that MacKinnon's conceptualisation of the social reproduction of gender is totalising in a way which is both philosophically and politically problematic. Without allowing for the possibility of contingencies, vulnerabilities and possibilities in the way that gender is enforced and reproduced, MacKinnon cannot account for how the affective grip that gender identities exert on us can be loosened. In other words, Butler could do with paying more attention to what gender *does*, whilst MacKinnon's work suffers from an insufficient account of what gender *is*.

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[18] Bulter 1995a: 53. Bonnie Mann articulates a similar criticism of Butler's forgetfulness of the material: "Butler seems to need to deny the ontological difference between language and materiality in order to re-collapse materiality back into language—to ultimately sidestep the very irreducibility she claims to defend. An ontological difference would demand an accounting, an inquiry into what this not-speech/not-only-speech might be. But for Butler, materiality is something that is to be "negotiated" rather than something that disrupts precisely through its frequent refusal to be negotiated." (2006: 69) In a similar vein, but with a different focus, Amy Allen has also pointed out that Butler's account of subjection lacks a distinction between "subordinating and non-subordinating forms of attachment." (2008: 94)

[19] Butler 1995a: 53.

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For the purposes of the argument of this thesis, therefore, I propose a reconciliation between Butler and MacKinnon.[20] Specifically, I suggest that we can usefully think of their respective accounts of the social reproduction of gender as explicating two different aspects of the same phenomenon. MacKinnon, as we have established, acknowledges both the constructivist power of sexual objectification and the need for an account of how this power can be resisted, yet fails herself to provide such an account; to meet this need, Butler offers a more detailed understanding of the constructivist process of gendering, as it acts both on and through individuals – and, crucially, the vulnerabilities and possibilities for resistance within gender identities. From MacKinnon, then, we get the politically vital normative insight that being-gendered, as a woman, implicates one in the reproduction of a world in which women are systematically dominated, exploited and violated; from Butler, we get the conceptually vital insight that this implication is the result of a system which is vulnerable to resistance. In the remainder of this chapter, I will develop this Butlerian insight in order to advance an account of what this resistance could look - and *feel* - like.

II. Gender as habit

Butler's performative theory of gender has long been haunted by the accusation that it lacks an adequate account of agency. This line of criticism, influentially developed by Seyla Benhabib, contends that if subjects are held to be "no more than the sum total of the gendered expressions we perform," as Butler claims, then there is no possibility of stopping and appraising the performance – which means that subjects lack any meaningful agential capacities with respect to their gender.[21] For Benhahbib, this has the consequence of undermining "the very possibility of feminism as the theoretical articulation of the emancipatory aspirations of women."[22]

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[20] I do not mean to suggest that MacKinnon and Butler can, or indeed should, be fully reconciled; only that the overlap between, and differential focuses of, their respective accounts of the social reproduction of gender can be usefully reconciled in the service of locating the possibility of resisting the fact of complicity as it has been developed in the preceding chapters.

[21] Benhabib, S. (1995b) 'Feminism and Postmodernism: An Uneasy Alliance.' In *Feminist Contentions: A Philosophical Exchange*. New York: Routledge. pp. 17-34. (21).
See also Allen

[22] *Ibid*., p. 29.

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Butler's response to this line of criticism has been to emphasise that the fact that subjects are constituted only through the expressions they perform, rather than undermining subjective agency, in fact structurally secures its possibility. Agency, for Butler, inheres in the radical anti-essentialism of the subject:

> If a subject were constituted once and for all, there would be no possibility of a reiteration of those constituting conventions or norms. That the subject is that which must be constituted again and again implies that it is open to formations that are not fully constrained in advance. Hence, the insistence on finding agency as resignification [...] [I]f the subject is a reworking of the very discursive processes by which it is worked, then 'agency' is to be found in the possibilities of resignification opened up by discourse.[23]

As Allen has pointed out, this account of agency-as-resignification should not be understood as claiming that we have freewheeling choice over how we perform our gender at each given moment: gender performance is not a pure, voluntarist act, but "a compelled reiteration of norms that constructs individuals as sexed and gendered."[24] Butler cashes out the compulsion which drives this reiteration both in terms of the social sanctions, taboos and practices of exclusion which punish those who fail to perform their gender in the way demanded, and as a result of the interpellation, or calling-into-being, of subjects from the social: "[S]ubjects are called into being from diffuse social quarters, inaugurated into sociality by a variety of diffuse and powerful interpellations."[25] In both of these formulations, the compulsion to reiterate the norms of masculinity and femininity is conceptualised as emanating from an external source: conformity is policed from the outside with violence and threats, and summoned from the outside by the call of recognition. The problem with this, however, is that it fails to capture the internal dimension of the compulsion to perform gender. It doesn't seem to speak, in other words, to the first-personal experience of interpellation, or the kinds of affective attachments to gender identities which this dual process of policing and interpellation creates. Why is this important? In order to ascertain how subjects might be capable of loosening their identificatory attachment to the norms and ideals of their prescribed gender, we need to understand what form these attachments take. Even if we take the notion of interpellation to be sufficiently broad as to cover practices of self-identification

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[23] Butler 1995b: 135
[24] Allen 1998b: 463.
[25] Allen 1998b: 463.

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– we might say, for instance, that these practices after a while take over the majority of the interpellative work of social institutions, thus making the ideological exercise of power by society more efficient – we still need to cash out exactly what these practices are, and how they take hold of us, if we are to establish how they can be resisted. The focus on the external sources of the compulsion to perform one's gender, in other words, leads to a lack of attention being payed to the results of interpellation, as they are experienced first-personally.

This lack is addressed in Butler's later work, where she analyses subjection in terms of psychic attachments to social identities; it is from this later work that Allen draws in her own account of how the power of gender functions intrasubjectively, and I will return to her account, by way of comparison with my own, in the final section. There is, however, the kernel of an alternative means of thinking about the internal dimension of the compulsion to perform gender discernible in Butler's very earliest explications of gender as performativity. Consider the following passage from 'Performative Acts and Gender Constitution':

> "Merleau-Ponty maintains not only that the body is an historical idea but a set of possibilities to be continually realized. In claiming that the body is an historical idea, Merleau-Ponty means that it gains its meaning through a concrete and historically mediated expression in the world. That the body is a set of possibilities signifies (a) that its appearance in the world, for perception, is not predetermined by some manner of interior essence, and (b) that its concrete expression in the world must be understood as the taking up and rendering specific of a set of historical possibilities. Hence, there is an agency which is understood as the process of rendering such possibilities determinate."[26]

Here, Butler draws on Merleau-Ponty's account of the body as historical idea to explicate her account of the social constitution of gender. We can see both Butler's radical anti-foundationalism and the conception of agency it entails reflected in Merleau-Ponty's account of the body: to claim that the gendered body derives its meaning and significance from the socio-historical conditions of its expression is to deny it any material facticity, beyond that which is materialised in the taking up of gendered possibilities; and to claim that this taking up of gendered possibilities is not driven by any ahistorical essence is to acknowledge the role of individual embodiment in reproducing

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[26] Butler 1988: 521

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the range of gendered bodily possibilities. Thus, for Butler and Merleau-Ponty, "the body […] is a manner of doing, dramatizing, and *reproducing* a historical situation."[27]

What is curious about Butler's appropriation of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment, however, is that she does not take on board his insight that the process of taking up specific socio-historical possibilities makes the body into our point of interface with the world, in such a way that particular "corporeal styles" become necessary to us[28] – that is, that it becomes a necessity for us to interact with the world in a gendered way. "Human existence," Merleau-Ponty writes,

> will force us to revise our usual notion of contingency and necessity, because it is the *transformation of contingency into necessity by the act of renewal.*[29]

In other words, our continual citation of the norms and ideals of gender is not only necessary for the continuation of the norms themselves; it is also necessary in order for us to continue to interact with the world: the world requires gender of us, and we in turn come to require it of the world. It is this, the *experience of requirement*, that Butler fails to draw out from her invocation of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology; and this failure means that her account of gender as citation rings somewhat hollow in terms of explicating the experience of being gendered. Allen is certainly right to emphasise that Butler's theory of performativity – at least in its more sophisticated articulations – avoids characterising gender performance as a crude kind of voluntarism; nonetheless, in its failure to interrogate the first-personal experience of gender as necessity, it is unable to account for how the conditions for performing gender in subversive and critical ways might be cultivated. As Sara Heinämaa writes of gender identities:

> [They] are not and cannot be determined by will; they are experienced as and formed already on the level of perception and motility […] in the postures of the body, in the gestures of the face and hands, and in the rhythms of their movements.
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> […] We can decide to change our ways of moving and resting […] But such a

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[27] Butler 1988: 521 [my emphasis].
[28] Ibid.
[29] Merleau-Ponty 1995: 170 [translation amended; my emphasis].

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> change is not any singular event. It is a process, similar to the laborious work of learning a new skill or getting rid of a habit.[30]

To conceptualise gender as habit is to take seriously the extent to which gender identities structure our experience of ourselves in the world. Though gender performance is an iterative process, it is a process which has a congealing effect – gender expressions congeal in our ways of being, doing and feeling. This congealed product – our *habits of gender* – compels us towards an uncritical iteration of the norms and ideals of masculinity and femininity – and thus, by the same token, acts as a barrier to us taking up a critical stance on the gender norms we embody.

Clare Carlisle's work on the phenomenology of habit will be helpful here for understanding what conceptualising gender as habitual means for the possibility of resistance. According to Carlisle, the concept of habit is necessary for rendering the commitment to radical anti-foundationalism compatible with the obvious fact that subjectivities persist through time:

> If we recognize that the self, in its psychological and physical aspects, and as subject to the inward and external contents of its experience, is characterized by flux, then we need to account for its relative stability, its apparent identity through time. Why do we repeat ourselves – on a cellular level as well as in day-to-day life – with such order and predictability?
> […] Self-identity is maintained through time not by virtue of an unchanging underlying entity, but through repeated action […] The formation of the self occurs not, primarily, in relation to a final cause, but through the momentum of accumulated, contracted pattern. Adopting habit rather than teleology as the basic principle of nature implies that beings are formed from behind, as it were, rather than with reference to a goal.[31]

In emphasising the need for anti-foundationalist accounts of selfhood to conceptualise the self as habitual, Carlisle is making the same argument I have made against Butler's account of gender solely in terms of citationality. In answer to the question 'Why do we repeat our gender identity with such order and predictability?' Butler offers only the answers of coercion and interpellation. Yet the ways in which we reproduce ourselves as

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[30] Heinämaa 2003: 68-9.
[31] Carlisle 2005: 23-4.

gendered include a range of practices which are not obviously the product of either coercion and threat or the interpellative compulsion to be recognised. As Heinämaa points out, we reproduce our gender in all the minutiae of our bodily comportment, behavioural gestures, manner of speaking and so on – much of which takes place outside of the intersubjective context of recognition. Does it make most sense to say, for instance, that I am being hailed as a subject when I am alone in my house and look regularly to the mirror to appraise my silhouette; or that my femininity is being summoned when I unconsciously fiddle with and fix my hair while I am sitting at my desk working? Or are these behaviours better explained by the fact that my self-identity as a woman forms such an integral part of how I experience myself in the world, and interact with it, that I act out my femininity habitually?

According to Carlisle, then, the habitual self is practically necessitated by the requirements of the world with which we must interact, since we save vast amounts of time and energy by navigating the world habitually rather than through constant reflection and judgement; navigating my route to work largely by habit, for example, allows me to spend my commute thinking about what I will try to write when I reach the office. On the other hand, because habit also serves to conceal from us the "lack of a fixed, permanent, substantial core" to our self-identities, it also masks their contingency.[32] Because of this, habit has both a liberating and constraining effect: it liberates us from interacting with the world as something unpredictable and senseless, but it constrains us insofar as this liberation is the product of a concealment of contingency and possibility:

> Two striking metaphors for habit are a chain, a series of links that holds one back, holds one steady, or holds one prisoner; and a veil, a customary covering. These metaphors […] express the ambivalent value of habit, or rather its plural evaluations. Habits bring comfort, ease and efficiency, and thus a kind of liberation; they also signify a lack of freedom and a lack of awareness.[33]

Butler is keenly aware of the extent to which gender identities mask their own contingency; she writes that gender is "a construction that regularly conceals its genesis" and that the contingent, performative nature of gender is "obscured by the credibility of

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[32] Carlisle 2005: 29.
[33] Carlisle 2005: 29.

its own production."[34] What she misses is the liberation this concealment brings to the subject – a *liberation* from impermanence and contingency, which has the paradoxical effect of *confining* us to our habitual selves.[35] This realisation provides a crucial supplement to Butler's analysis of gender performativity and the possibility of agency. She focuses on the constituted nature of gender identities in order to show their inherent vulnerability to being contested, but she doesn't do enough to explain why this contestation is difficult and, indeed, why heteronormativity endures despite its vulnerability. The concept of habit explains the endurance of gender against its lack of substance; conceiving of gender as habitual "at once indicates that it is possible to change, and helps to explain why it is so difficult to change."[36] Taking up gender critically, in other words, is both a possibility which is radically secured by the constituted nature of gender, and made radically challenging to enact by the fact that we are constituted as agents in the world through the accumulation of gendered habits of being.

III. Gender as anxious

Conceiving of gender as habit, then, allows us to understand why, despite their essentially contingent and insubstantial character, gender identities are so difficult to take up critically and transform. Habit provides a necessary complement to the idea of interpellation; where interpellation helps us to understand the way in which society commands us to be gendered in the way it offers us recognition, the notion of habit allows us to see how our gender identity, acquired over time through the congealing of iterated norms, comes to be constitutive of our very interface with the world. Gaining critical purchase on our gender, therefore, involves what Carlisle calls the "paradoxical idea of self-transcendence," since it requires us to challenge, subvert and put into question the very habitual self with which we act in the world.[37]

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[34] Butler 1988: 522.
[35] Certainly, the idea of the benefits of concealed contingency is a theme in her later work on subjection, in which she claims that subjects would rather attach to any identity, even an oppressive one, than be without a social identity at all; my claim here is that she does not interrogate these benefits in her performative theory of gender, despite the fact that the theoretical resources are there to do so.
[36] Carlisle 2005: 31.
[37] Carlisle 2005: 32.

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The question which remains, then, is how this project of self-transcendence can be motivated. If the habitual self masks the contingency of identity, then putting our habitual self into question requires a confrontation with contingency – and it remains unclear what could compel us towards such a confrontation. Since our gender identity forms (at least part of) the basis of how we interact with the world, confronting and taking up the contingency of this identity will throw many of our established ways of being into question; it will disrupt, in other words, some of our most fundamental agential modes. In light of this fact, from the perspective of motivating resistance to complicity, the deck seems heavily stacked against the possibility of engaging critically and subversively with our gender identities. What Butler's theory of performativity requires in order to ground the possibility of a motivational space for resistance, then, is an explanation for why the habitual nature of gender identities does not rule out the possibility of a desire for, or interest in, the contingency which questioning our gender brings.

A clue as to how such an explanation might be constructed can be found in one of the central tenets of Butler's performative account of gender. Gender, according to Butler, is not only fundamentally illusory and contingent; the norms and ideals which constitute masculinity and femininity are also essentially unfulfillable:

> [T]he demand to signify or repeat the very terms which constitute the 'we' cannot be summarily refused, but *neither can they be followed in strict obedience*. It is the space of this *ambivalence* which opens up the possibility of a reworking of the very terms by which subjectivation proceeds – and fails to proceed.[38]

Insofar as gender ideals as just that – ideals – they can only be approximated and strived towards. Our attempts to live up to them can be better or worse, more or less convincing; but they can never be perfect instantiations of the ideals themselves, since heteronormative gender is idealised as essential, natural and unchangeable – precisely that which it can never be. The policing of gender via the "regulatory fiction" of the natural gender binary, in other words, sets up the inherent possibility of failure;

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[38] Butler 2011: 84 [my emphasis]. See also "Identifying with a gender under contemporary regimes of power involves identifying with a set of norms that are and are not realizable, and whose power and status precede the identifications by which they are insistently approximated. This 'being a man' and this 'being a woman' are *internally unstable affairs*." (Ibid, 86)

conformity is demanded to such a high degree that the ideological apparatus used to compel it undermines the possibility of strict obedience.[39]

To perform one's gender, then, is to attempt to complete a task that, necessarily, cannot be completed in its entirety; which means that gender is always performed under the threat of failure. On several occasions, Butler invokes the concept of anxiety to describe the affective state characterised by a failure to conform oneself to one's prescribed gender identity:

> Performing one's gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all. That this reassurance is so easily displaced by *anxiety*, that culture so readily punishes or marginalizes those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism should be sign enough that on some level there is social knowledges that the truth or falsity of gender is only socially compelled and in no sense ontologically necessitated.[40]

The idea that gendered subjects will have cause to feel anxious when they fail, or are in danger of failing, to perform their gender in strict accordance with binary gender norms, is intuitively plausible. Butler is certainly correct in identifying a range of punitive cultural and social sanctions against persons who do not successfully perform a gender identity which follows obediently the expectations placed on them. Finding oneself in a position where one is unable to make one's gender performance conform sufficiently to the given social situation is certainly likely to precipitate anxiety, and a very legitimate fear of sanction. Think, for example, about the anxiety a young woman might feel at the prospect of not living up to hypersexualised expectations of femininity in her first sexual encounter with a man.

At other times, however, Butler invokes anxiety not as an affective response to a specific possibility of failing to be sufficiently gendered, but rather as a pervasive feature of being-gendered more generally:

> To claim that all gender is like drag, or is drag, is to suggest that 'imitation' is at the heart of the heterosexual project and its gender binarisms, that drag is not a secondary imitation that presupposes a prior and original gender, but that

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[39] Butler 1988: 528.
[40] Butler 1988: 528 [my emphasis].

> hegemonic heterosexuality is itself a constant and repeated effort to imitate its own idealizations. That it must repeat this imitation, that it sets up pathologizing practices and normalizing sciences in order to produce and consecrate its own claim on originality and propriety, suggests that *heterosexual performativity is beset by an anxiety that it can never fully overcome*.[41]

In contrast to the previous passage, in which anxiety was linked to those specific occasions where we perform our gender unconvincingly, here anxiety is construed as a general affective state in which gender performance takes place. This claim is altogether harder to make sense of than the claim that we sometimes, or even often, feel anxious when we are unable to live up to the gender expectations placed upon us. Much gender performance is undertaken without explicit effort or intention, and we often only recognise the extent to which we were performing our masculinity or femininity in a certain situation through reflection after the fact. For example, a man might recognise his domineering conversational interventions in a social setting as a manifestation of his gender only after having their peculiarly masculine quality pointed out to him by a female friend. This kind of bringing to awareness the gendered nature of our ways of being is often experienced as a revelation of something previously unseen: '*I had no idea I was doing that*.' Moreover, acting out our gender is at least sometimes something we enjoy, as Butler herself acknowledges when she says that gender is something which is put on "daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure."[42] If the performance of our gender is something that we do not notice much of the time, and even notice positively at other times, then it is difficult to make sense of the suggestion that gender performance is always anxious; this claim either seems to mischaracterise much of our experience of putting on our gender, or it characterises anxiety in such a way that the concept can no longer do justice to the anxiety we recognise ourselves feeling when we fail to adequately perform our gender.

Let us consider more closely Butler's characterisation of this phenomenon of generalised gender anxiety. She connects the unassailable anxiety of gender performance to the fact that heteronormativity is "consistently haunted by that domain of sexual possibility that must be excluded for heterosexualized gender to produce itself."[43] Since gendered identities are contingent modes of being and doing masquerading as necessary and

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[41] Butler 2011: 85 [my emphasis].
[42] Butler 1988: 531.
[43] Butler 2011: 85.

unchangeable, they are necessarily exclusionary, insofar as the construction of the illusion of a natural gender binary requires the exclusion of ways of being and doing that do not conform to these binary norms:

> It is important to remember that subjects are constituted through exclusion, that is, through the creation of a domain of deauthorized subjects, presubjects, figures of abjection, populations erased from view.[44]

What is excluded by heteronormative gender performance, then, is precisely those possible ways of being and doing whose bracketing is necessary for the coherence of binary gender norms. These excluded possibilities haunt – are a looming, hovering presence around – our attempts to perform gender heteronormatively. All gender performance, thus, is structured by the exclusion of alternative ways of being. The naturalising narratives of gender attempt to mask the contingent and contestable nature of this exclusion, and when we perform successfully or seamlessly, this masking does its job and the excluded possibilities of being-otherwise are kept at bay. But in the moments in which we experience a clear and explicit failure to be sufficiently gendered, or the threat thereof, the illusory necessity of heteronormativity falls away and we are made aware, at least to some extent, that being gendered is something we are striving for, something which is not inevitable. What we experience in the explicit anxiousness of a failure to perform our gender, then, is a realisation, or manifestation, of the contingency of the identity we are striving to conform ourselves to fully. If this is the case, then it could make sense to use the notion of anxiety to describe both the response we have to a specific failure to embody gender expectations, and the pervasive affective state which besets gender performance. The explicit anxiety provoked by a specific failure of gender, on this understanding, would be a kind of bringing-to-the-surface of a latent, more generalised anxiety that is a feature of all gender performativity, both successful and inadequate, which is merely felt more readily in the midst of the failures.

This interpretation becomes more plausible if we consider it in light of the significance of the notion of anxiety in the tradition of existential phenomenology. Both Kierkegaard and Heidegger write about anxiety as an affective state or feeling which discloses something fundamental about the nature of human existence. This nature is disclosed to us through the anxiety we experience in response to specific objects; but insofar as these experiences are revelatory of a fundamental characteristic of our existence as a whole,

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[44] Butler 1995a: 47

the anxiety with which we respond to them is not strictly isolable to, or contained within, the specific conditions of these particular experiences. As Kierkegaard writes:

> Anxiety may be compared with dizziness. He whose eye happens to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy. But what is the reason? *It is just as much in his own eye as the abyss, for suppose he had not looked down*.[45]

In this analogy, the 'dizziness' of anxiety is provoked or brought on by the specific condition of the precipice; but the capacity for dizziness, or the condition for its possibility, is not the precipice alone. The precipice brings out, or realises, the potential dizziness in the eye of the person on the precipice, and this potential for dizziness remains present, haunting, even when there is no precipice, or similar condition, to provoke its realisation. In Heidegger's account of anxiety, too, we find a distinction between anxious or fearful feelings provoked by specific objects or things in the world and the anxiousness which characterises human experience as such: "that which anxiety is profoundly anxious about is not a definite kind of Being for Dasein or a definite possibility for it. Indeed the threat itself is indefinite."[46]

For both Kierkegaard and Heidegger, moreover, the fact about human existence which is disclosed by anxiety is, variously, freedom or possibility. For Kierkegaard, it is "the dizziness of freedom that emerges when […] freedom now looks down into its own possibility."[47] For Heidegger, anxiety "makes manifest in Dasein its Being towards its ownmost potentiality-for-Being."[48] According to both writers, then, the anxiousness of human existence is the result of the constitutive possibility of this existence. In Butler's account, too, anxiety is intimately connected to possibility; her characterisation of gender performance as pervasively anxious is derived from the claim that the contingent exclusion of possibility is constitutive of heteronormativity. Gender performance is anxious because the naturalising narratives of masculinity and femininity can never fully mask the contingent exclusion of other possible ways of being.

The most crucial aspect of the characterisation of existential anxiety that we find in Kierkegaard and Heidegger, however, is the idea that the experience of anxiety is fundamentally ambivalent. The confrontation with the freedom of possibility brings with

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[45] Kierkegaard 1980: 61.
[46] Heidegger 1967: 187-8 [German pagination].
[47] Kierkegaard 1980: 61.
[48] Heidegger 1967: 187-8 [German pagination].

it both the potential for a positive recognition of new possibilities to be taken up, but also the potential for a negative, fearful response to the awareness of infinite possibility, and one's radical contingency. As Jeffrey Haynes explains:

> Insofar as anxiety is made up of an antipathetic and sympathetic aspect – two 'lenses' – it is a starkly ambivalent phenomenon. On the one hand the relation to 'nothing' is disquieting, hostile, terrifying, provoking fleeing; on the other hand it is sweet, friendly, joyful, captivating [...]the antipathetic 'lens' is repulsing – it repels one away from the 'nothing'; while the sympathetic 'lens' is attracting – it attracts one towards the 'nothing.[49]

This ambivalence is captured well in Kierkegaard's equation of anxiety with dizziness – a feeling of standing on a precipice, gazing into the 'abyss' of possibility and potential freedom. We are both enchanted by the abyss, and repelled by it; it thrills us and terrifies us. In Heidegger's account, the form of this ambivalence is made more explicit; anxiety manifests both *about* something, and *in the face of* something. That which we are anxious in the face of is our "thrown Being-in-the-world" – that is, the concrete and particular, yet arbitrary, life we are engaged in.[50] In anxiety, this engagement falls apart and the life we were absorbed in ceases to have traction on us; the resulting experience is one of fear and repulsion towards anxiousness. That which we are anxious about, by contrast, is our "potentiality-for-Being-in-the-world" – namely, the nature of human life as constituted by the potential to take up certain possibilities over others.[51] In anxiety, this potential is disclosed to us, and the resulting experience is one of attraction towards anxiousness. The experience of anxiety, therefore, is characterised by attraction and repulsion, or, as Haynes puts it, sympathy and antipathy.[52]

Why is the ambivalent character of anxiety important for Butler's account of gender performativity as pervasively anxious? By recognising the attracting facet of the experience of anxiety, we can locate a potential source of motivation for the project of transforming our habitual, heteronormative selves. As we saw previously, the crucial task for Butler is to explain how we might be motivated to put our gendered selves into question and seek new habits, when doing so means relinquishing some of our most established ways of navigating the world. The ambivalent character of anxiety – its

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[49] Haynes 2015: 72.
[50] Heidegger 1967: 191 [German pagination].
[51] Ibid.
[52] Haynes 2015: 74-9.

disquieting, repelling quality and its thrilling, attracting quality – both sharpens this problem and points towards a solution.

We can employ the repellent quality of anxiety to further explain the difficulty of embracing the contingency of our gender identities. If the anxiety which pervades our continual attempts to perform our gender (and makes itself known in cases where we fail to perform convincingly) discloses the arbitrariness and contingency of our concrete gender identity, then this anxious feeling will, in part, repel us away from a confrontation with this contingency. Heidegger refers to this turning away from the collapse of our worldly identity as 'fleeing,' which has interesting synergy with Carlisle's characterisation of the liberation we gain from inhabiting the world habitually. If our habitual femininity or masculinity liberates us from facing the contingency of gender as a mode of being in the world, then relinquishing this habitual identity means an attendant loss of this liberation from contingency – or, to put it another way, a condemnation to confront contingency. So construed, it makes sense that this is a state of affairs we would flee from, reinvesting ourselves back into the fiction of natural gender rather than facing the prospect of navigating a new range of unknown possibilities.

On the other hand, we can employ the attractive, thrilling quality of anxiety to explain why resisting being-gendered is nonetheless possible. The flipside of anxiety's disclosure of the contingency of our identity is the disclosure of radical possibility – the 'excluded domain of sexual possibility,' as Butler terms it, through which heteronormativity is constituted and reproduced. The realisation of the potential to be otherwise is what gives anxiety its attractive, thrilling quality. Carlisle's account of habit is once again reflected here; at the same time as it liberates us from contingency, habit also constrains and hinders us, imprisons us within one mode of being. Anxiety's sympathetic facet thus compels us towards confronting the possibilities from which we are barred by our habits – which is precisely what is needed to motivate the project of relinquishing our habits of heteronormative gender. In anxiety's sympathetic facet, therefore, we find an element of the affective experience of being-gendered which is capable of securing the possibility of motivating resistance to reproducing heteronormativity. What remains is to clarify precisely how this anxious attraction towards contingency and our habitual attachment to our gender identity can interact in practices of feminist resistance.

IV. Resisting gender:
Embracing anxiety, cultivating new habits

Combining the twofold analysis of gender as habitual and gender as anxious, we are now in a position to construct out of Butler's performative theory of gender an account of the conditions which make it possible for women to gain critical purchase on their gendered desires and affective comportments. As we have seen, the ambivalent character of the affective experience of anxiety mirrors the structural ambiguity of habitual modes of interacting with the world. Insofar as our habitual identity provides us with a dependable means of navigating the world, it frees us from confronting the fact that this identity is contingent, vulnerable to rupture and change; the repellent quality of the anxiety we feel when we fail to perform our gender convincingly thus compels us to flee from this contingency and reinvest ourselves back into our identities as if they were essential and unchangeable. On the other hand, to the extent that our habits also shield us from other possible ways of being, they confine us to an inessential identity; in moments where our identity is realised as inessential (i.e. when we fail to perform gender convincingly) the thrilling quality of the anxiety we experience compels us towards embracing and exploiting the contingency opened up to us. The possibility of women being motivated to engage with their feminine identity critically, therefore, is contained within the tension between these two affective responses to the contingency of gender identity - and, more specifically, the ability of the thrilling, compelling facet of anxiety to win out over the repellent, fearful facet.

The constitutive anxiety of gender performance, then, provides the potential animus for seeking out new habits of being and doing, beyond the narrow confines of masculinity and femininity. Of course, conceiving of engagement with the world in terms of habit means that feminist resistance to heteronormative gender cannot be thought of solely in terms of losing or shaking certain habitual ways of being and doing. Habitual modes, according to the phenomenological account pursued here, are how we interact with the world, and feminist praxis should after all seek to enable and empower women to act in - and, indeed, on - the world. The latter is particularly important in light of the wider argument of this thesis, in which women's conformity to the norms and ideals of normative femininity is considered critically in light of the way in which it contributes to the re-production of these norms and ideals, which facilitate the continued sexual objectification of women as a group. Resisting this complicity requires that women

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undertake to contribute to the production of a post-heteronormative social world. The project of resisting being gendered, therefore, must aim not only at the relinquishing of the old habits constitutive of normative femininity, but also at the cultivation of new habitual modes of being and doing which help to reconfigure the social world as one without normative gender ascriptions.

How, then, do we go about cultivating new habitual modes which are subversive of heteronormativity? Carlisle explains the process of seeking new habits in terms of receptivity and resistance. To form any habit, whether deliberate or unconscious, is to "become more or less receptive to certain influences and more or less resistant to others."[53] When we intentionally seek to develop new habits, she argues, we try to orient our receptivity and resistance to certain influences around a particular goal or ideal; we practice responding to the right cues and ignoring the wrong ones. If we apply this analysis to the feminist project of resisting gender, we can think about letting go of old habits of femininity and acquiring new, subversive habits along the same lines. Practices of resistance, then, will consist of attempts to modify our receptivity and resistance to different influences – cultivating resistance to the normative ideals of femininity (for example, body image standards, expectations of demure or deferent behaviour, or certain sexual desires) and receptivity to other ways of being and doing (for example, using our bodies in new and exciting ways, practising different manners of speech, experimenting with new sexual practices, and so on).

Clearly, it is easier to give substantive content to the negative part of this process – resisting existing gender expectations – than it is to the positive part of cultivating new habits; this is because the hegemony of heteronormativity, and the violent policing of bodies and identities which do not conform to its standards, rob us of easy access to alternative modes of being to emulate and strive towards. An additional problem is that, even where we can identify the enactment of seemingly alternative or subversive possibilities, we must be wary of the extent to which seemingly subversive practices are in fact merely a co-option of feminist principles, which serve to reaffirm heteronormative gender via a tokenistic illusion of diversity and pluralism.[54] Yet, a purely negativistic approach to the project of resistance, which abjures all attempts to do- and

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[53] Carlisle 2014: 133.
[54] See, for example, Lorna Finlayson's explication of the co-option of the feminist motifs in the service of capitalism and colonialism (2016: 211-225).

be-otherwise and confines resistance to practices of refraining-from,[55] will not suffice; in order for old habits to be broken and new ones developed, sufficient time and energy must be invested into the exploration of specific possibilities, which means we at least have to entertain these possibilities as ones which might be able to serve the subversive, critical purpose we have in mind. Certainly, we should resist reifying any particular ways of being and doing as essentially subversive or progressive beyond question, and we should preserve the space to question and re-evaluate the practices we currently take to be critical – but we should also create arenas for feminist praxis which allow for the serious and sustained exploration of new ways of being, doing and feeling.

It is important to recognise the arduousness of this process of exploration and cultivation; as Heinämaa writes, to change our habits of self "is not a singular event [but] a process, similar to the laborious work of learning a new skill."[56] If the acquisition of a new habit of, for example, eating more healthily is a significant undertaking (as many of us find it to be), then the cultivation of new habits of interacting with the world – as our habits of gender are – will be no mean feat; indeed, to the extent that the task of overcoming the hegemony of heteronormativity is one of complete societal transformation, it is likely to be a lifetime's work. In light of the magnitude of the task, one thing is clear: whilst the process of changing one's habits of gender is essentially one of self-transformation, it is a process which will be most easily undertaken in collaboration with others. Some of the reasons for this are obvious; the risks associated with subverting gender norms - humiliation, social exclusion, and even physical violence - are reduced when one acts together with others; being part of a community of people who are committed to the same political project as you makes it easier to persevere with the work to be done. One particularly important reason for the project of resisting heteronormativity to be collaborative, however, is that the examples set by other people provide us with a crucial source of inspiration for, and instruction on, the taking up of new possibilities. As Heinämaa explains:

> [In the process of transforming our habits] we are also often dependent on
> others […] Instructors and teachers present their own bodies as visual and tactile

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[55] By 'purely negativist' approach, I have in mind Freyenhagen's Adornian negativism, according to which "the realisation of the bad prevents us from knowing the good directly – we cannot just read the good off from its manifestations in social institutions and practices, for there are no such manifestations; nor can we read it off from the radical potential of these institutions and practices, for they are too infected by the bad even for this." (2013: 10)

[56] Heinämaa 2003: 69.

models to be imitated. They also teach us how new movements feel by concretely manipulating our limbs and directing their course. To change one's way of moving is not a solitary enterprise but a dialogical attempt.

Without the examples set by others, our attempts to break our habits of femininity and acquire new ways of inhabiting the world will have no points of reference, no guidance notes or practical footholds. Seeing *how* another woman interacts with the world differently to me is a crucial part of my coming to see how I could comport myself differently; indeed, the examples set by others can be the primary means by which the alternative possibilities suppressed by the ideology of femininity appear to us in the first place. Take, for example, my experience of being a woman in the male-dominated discipline of philosophy. I navigate the environment of academic philosophy in light of my understanding of myself as a woman, and the range of possibilities which show up as available to me are shaped by this understanding. I see my participation in seminars, for instance, as dictated by my femininity: the need to be accommodating and kind to other participants, the imperative not to be domineering, bossy or shrill, the importance of my physical appearance when under scrutiny by others, and so on. Even when I get some critical purchase on this experience, and recognise that the expectations of femininity force me to compromise between being a good woman and a good philosopher, I might nonetheless see no possibilities for myself beyond this double-bind. If, however, another woman comes along to the seminar, and navigates the situation in a way which had not previously appeared to me – for example, by asserting herself through humour – then I might suddenly see a new possibility for navigating my environment. Once this possibility becomes open to me, I can attempt to take it up myself – by taking this woman as my instructor and observing, for example, the way she carries herself, the gestures she uses, her tone of voice and manner of speaking, and so on. Over time, and with perseverance, I may be able to lose my old habitual ways of navigating this situation – for example, smiling, deferring and preening - and acquire new habits of confidence, articulation and authority.

Other people, then, are a crucial source of inspiration and instruction when it comes to opening us up to new possibilities and directing us in how to take them up. When this inspiration and instruction is reciprocal, moreover – for example, amongst members of a community who are engaged together in the process of shedding their habits of femininity – it is possible, I think, for the feminist work of self-transformation to be

pleasant, even joyful. In a recent interview with Sara Ahmed, Butler herself gestures towards the positive experience that this sort of collective project of transformation can be:

> The moment that interests me, a recurrent moment, is what happens when we grasp that we are in the midst of reiterating a norm, even that a norm has entered into a basic sense of who we are, and start to deviate […] from that more obedient sense of repetition. I want to say that deviation brings with it anxiety, fear, and a sense of thrill, and that when it is undertaken in concert with others, it is also the beginning of new forms of solidarity that make it possible to risk a new sense of being a subject.[57]

For women, a 'new sense of being a subject' is most certainly a risk – but, as I have shown in this chapter, it is a risk which it is possible to take, despite the subjectivising force of gender. This allays the worry, articulated at the beginning of this chapter, that the framework of complicity might not be suitable for generating a feminist political program with respect to the problem of sexual objectification. The worry, recall, is that the normative bite of the charge of complicity requires not only that someone makes a contribution to something bad, but also that there was a reasonable possibility for them to have avoided making this contribution. The phenomenological account of being-gendered presented in this chapter shows that this second condition, at least in principle, obtains in the case of women's contribution to the perpetuation of the norms and ideals of femininity which are facilitative of their continued sexual objectification. Of course, the degree to which resisting the reproduction of normative femininity is a real, viable possibility will differ significantly among women, according to (among other things) the other structures of oppression which affect them and the access to alternative possibilities afforded to them by their social environment. I address the political importance of these differences in the next chapter, in which I articulate an account of feminist solidarity grounded in the obligation to resist complicity.

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[57] Butler, in Ahmed 2016: 484.

V. Coda:
The benefits of thinking gender phenomenologically

My goal in this chapter has been to articulate the theoretical basis for the possibility of resisting conformity with the heteronormative gender identities which reproduce the conditions for the sexual objectification of women. I have been concerned, in other words, to show why resisting normative femininity can be a valid expectation of feminist politics, despite the subjectivising power that gender wields in, on and through us. Amy Allen's influential work on synthesising the insights of Foucault with the imperatives of Frankfurt School critical theory is similarly motivated by the concern to account fully for the subjectivising power of gender whilst at the same time theorising the conditions for the possibility of resistance:

> Without an account of subjection, critical theory cannot fulfil the first task [of diagnosing social crises] because it cannot fully illuminate the real-world relations of power and subordination along lines of gender, race and sexuality that it must illuminate if it is to be truly critical. But without a satisfactory account of autonomy, critical theory cannot fulfil the second task; it cannot envision possible paths of social transformation.[58]

In her elucidation of the kind of feminist critical theory necessary to capture the subject as both socially constituted and capable of autonomous action, Allen draws on Butler's later work on subjection and the psychic attachments of power. Allen finds in Butler's claim that "the subject would rather attach to power than not attach" the necessary insight for explaining why people whose identities are constituted through oppression nonetheless "become passionately attached to, and thus come to desire, their own subordination."[59] Although she ultimately finds Butler's psychoanalytic explication of the workings of power to require supplementation in order to account for the conditions of possibility for overcoming subjection, Allen agrees with Butler's assertion that a theory of power can have emancipatory potential only when combined with a theory of the psyche.[60]

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[58] Allen 2008: 3.
[59] Allen 2008: 11.
[60] Allen 2008: 11, note 39.

4. Anxiety, habit and self-transformation

In light of the success Allen finds in using Butler's later work to construct a feminist account of the subjectifying power of gender, one might question the sense of my searching Butler's earlier work for resources to accomplish more or less the same end – especially in light of the fact that Allen herself turns to Butler's later work because she finds her earlier performative account of gender precisely to lack the kind of resources necessary for grounding feminist resistance.[61] Why, then, should we turn back to Butler's earlier work, when her later work deals more explicitly with the issue of oppressive identities and the attachments victims develop to them?

To be clear, I don't want to claim that we should *reject* her later work on subjection and psychic attachments in favour of her earlier theory of performativity; nor am I arguing that my phenomenological re-interpretation of her early work contradicts or undermines her later psychoanalytic analysis. What I am proposing, however, is that we gain something through re-reading her performative account of gender phenomenologically that we do not get – and is more difficult to extract - from her account of subjection.

To get this gain in view, let us consider the point at which Allen concludes her study of the politics of our selves. She ends by identifying an issue which remains unaddressed by her account: namely the question of how the conceptual framework she has developed can be made "useful for the project of analyzing gender domination and the possibilities for transforming it."[62] She suggests two possible sources which might provide the grounds for pursuing the feminist political praxis of self-transformation: the generation, through collective social movements, of conceptual and normative resources to help women develop non-oppressive identities and attachments; and the creation, through cultural and artistic production, of new possibilities which could serve as a kind of feminist imaginary. Allen concludes that:

> Both of these visions of possible social transformation have in common the assumption that we have no choice but to start form where we are, as gendered subjects who are constituted by power relations, but they also suggest ways in which it is nonetheless possible to resist, subvert and transform those relations from within.[63]

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[61] Allen 1998b.
[62] Allen 2008: 180.
[63] Allen 2008: 184.

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These potential strategies for resistance, in many ways, are very similar to those I have suggested in this chapter; they involve the collective envisioning of new possibilities, the pooling of imaginative resources in the service of enlarging the horizons of women's identities, and the creation of spaces for critical experimentation. The difference between Allen's account of potential strategies for resistance and my own lies not in the content of the strategies we envision, but rather in the kind of explanations for the effectiveness of these strategies we offer.

On Allen's account, cultural and artistic spaces and collective social movements "create alternative structures of social recognition that in turn generate new, potentially less subordinating modes of attachment" which can replace women's attachment to their oppressive feminine identity.[64] They provide opportunities, in other words, for women to engage in practices of positive, reciprocal recognition through which they may come to develop modes of attachment which are less bound up with oppressive social configurations. I say 'may' partly in recognition of the concerns I raised above, about the difficulty of carving out and maintaining such strategic spaces against the hegemonic presence of heteronormativity, and the ease with which they can become co-opted; there is certainly no guarantee that such strategies can succeed in fomenting the right kind of subjective attachments. I also say 'may,' however, in light of the fact that this precarious process of transforming attachments seems to be something which can only happen, as it were, behind the back of the women participating in these strategic endeavours. Locating the attachment to normative femininity in the psyche, as Allen does, separates and secludes it in an important way from the subject's intentional participation in practices of resistance, which means that these practices are aiming at the transformation of an object that they have no real access to. All we can do, in other words, is participate in these spaces of resistance in the hopes (however reasonable they may be) that over time our affective attachments will change.

Approaching the attachment to identity phenomenologically, by contrast, puts the first-personal perspective of the subject at the centre of the process of transformation. On my account, the identity to be resisted is not something which primarily resides in the inaccessible nexus of psychic processes, but rather subsists through the patterns of interaction between self and world. This means that the transformative potential of the proposed strategies for resistance – the cultivation of new habits in reciprocal political

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[64] Allen 2008: 174.

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communities – can be grasped first-personally; we can see the impact that our subversive practices have on our habitual ways of being and doing, in the same way that we can see the impact on our piano playing of our daily finger strength exercises.

This does not mean, of course, that the phenomenological approach and the psychoanalytic approach are incompatible; in fact, I think each can be used to supplement the other in important ways. It is certainly not the case, for example, that the entire process of acquiring a new habit or skill is transparent to us; there is often a point where we feel like our abilities take a qualitative leap (yesterday I was still unable to somersault, but this morning, suddenly, I could do it for the first time). In the same way, there can be sudden and intangible progress in the course of changing our attachments to normative femininity – I might suddenly find one day that I no longer feel embarrassed or self-conscious about baring my un-shaved legs in public, for example. The idea that our habitually-constituted selves are psychically anchored can help us understand and explain these more opaque aspects of the process of self-transformation. By the same token, psychoanalytic explanations for the durability of feminine identity will have to find ways of engaging the first-personal perspective of women in order to explain the efficacy of strategies for resistance. To explain why reading imaginative feminist fiction can help us to psychically detach from certain aspects of normative femininity and reattach to a less subordinating identity, for example, we need to explain how the possibilities embodied in these fictitious worlds show up as possibilities for us, and how experimentation with alternative modes of comportment, gesture, desire and so on can chip away at, and gradually transform, our attachment to normative femininity. We need to explain, in other words, how our attachment to gender is constituted by, and reproduced through, our ways of being, doing and feeling.

Indeed, this last point is perhaps the greatest benefit of approaching the attachments of gender phenomenologically: the account of strategies for resistance offered by the phenomenological approach better reflects the iterative nature of gender. The psychoanalytic approach, by focussing on the impact of the power of gender on the subject, neglects the other crucial insight of the performative account of gender – that gender is reproduced through individuals, at the same time that it is productive of these individuals. The phenomenological approach, by contrast, takes this two-way interaction between individual and world as its point of departure, meaning that the question of how gendered subjects can resist identification with their prescribed gender is posed in light

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of an understanding that individuals reproduce a world which expects heteronormativity from them. For the purposes of the argument of this thesis, which seeks to develop a feminist theory of solidary political practice grounded in resistance to complicity, this is surely an important advantage.

Chapter 5

Solidarity *contra* complicity:
Between political potency and anti-essentialism

Introduction

MacKinnon's account of sexual objectification has historically run up against one important line of criticism which I have not yet addressed. With her theory of gender, as I argued in Chapter 2, she strongly repudiates any appeal to biologically essentialist understandings of what it means to be a woman. There is, however, another accusation of essentialism which is often levelled against her – namely, that her theory of gender presupposes a uniformity or homogeneity to women's experience, a presumption which ignores the extent to which women's experiences *as women* differ along other axes such as race, class, sexuality and so on. According to this line of criticism, the fact that gender is a social construct for MacKinnon does not mean that her account avoids an essentialist notion of womanhood, since she nevertheless conceives of the construct of femininity as defined by sexual objectification, meaning that all people with the social identity of 'woman' have in common the fact of their objectification. As Alison Stone argues:

> [S]ocial constructionists can readily be essentialists if they believe [as does MacKinnon] that a particular pattern of social construction is essential and universal to all women […] The (false) universalization of claims about women in effect casts particular forms of feminine experience as the norm, and, typically, it is historically and culturally privileged forms of femininity that become normalized in this way. Essentialist theoretical moves thereby end up replicating between women the very patterns of oppression and exclusion that feminism should contest.[1]

MacKinnon's response to this line of criticism has been to emphasise that the tenets of her radical feminist theory are constructed out of the practice of feminism; her theory of sexual objectification is a theoretical explication of the experiences of women which were articulated through the process of consciousness raising:

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[1] Stone 2005: 140.

> To speak of social treatment 'as a woman' is thus not to invoke any abstract
> essence or homogeneous generic or ideal type, not to posit anything, far less a
> universal anything, but to refer to this diverse and pervasive concrete material
> reality of social meanings and practices […] [C]ohering the theory of "women"
> out of the practice of "women" produces the opposite of what Elizabeth
> Spelman has criticized as a reductive assumption of essential sameness of all
> women that she identifies in some feminist theory.[2]

In other words, MacKinnon maintains that it is women's experience in all its concrete
specificity which makes up the theoretical account of women as defined by sexual
objectification; indeed, to the extent that intersectionality is concerned with capturing the
specific ways in which women's experience is shaped by their race, class and sexuality,
MacKinnon sees it as an extension of her own methodological commitments.[3] There is,
however, an ambiguity in this line of defence, which raises problems for MacKinnon,
however she resolves it. The ambiguity concerns whether the commonality between
women's experiences, on her account, is experientially grounded (and therefore a mere
description), or theoretically reconstructed. That is, it is unclear, on MacKinnon's
account, to what extent individual women themselves understand their experience as
"one embodiment of a collective experience" of womanhood, or whether this collectivity
is something which has to be theoretically reconstructed out of women's diverging
experiences.[4] If the former, then MacKinnon puts herself in the position of having to
assert the veracity of her description of women's experience against the repeated
objection by others – most notably, women of colour – who do not see their experiences
reflected in her description. Angela Harris, for example, has argued that, in her
articulation of the collective experience of women, "MacKinnon rediscovers white
womanhood and introduces it as universal truth […] black women are white women,
only more so."[5] On the other hand, if the idea of women's situation as defined by
pervasive sexual objectification is something which is theoretically reconstructed out of
women's experiences – meaning that it explicates or makes sense of the multiplicity of
women's experiences without identifying a common feature of that experience – then
this begs the question of the epistemic authority of this reconstruction. To this,
MacKinnon lacks a convincing answer, since she understands the authority of her

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[2] MacKinnon 1991: 16.
[3] See MacKinnon 2013.
[4] MacKinnon 1991: 16.
[5] Harris 1990: 592. See also Mahoney 1992.

analysis to derive from the feminist methodology of taking seriously the concrete experience of (all) women– which takes her back to the previous problem, of offering a description of this experience which is essentialising and thus "invariably false."[6]

MacKinnon, then, seems to find herself in something of a double-bind. She cannot ignore the repeated claims that her analysis of gender inequality fails reflect the experiences of diversely situated women; yet to give up on the idea that what it means to be treated *as a woman* can be discovered through practice and articulated through theory would seem to require giving up on the basic conceptual intuition of feminism, that women do indeed share something, namely the fact that they are systematically oppressed, as a group.

If there is no way out of this double-bind for MacKinnon, her feminist theory – and my attempts to appropriate it, by extension – would be largely untenable as contributions to contemporary feminist theory, into which the imperatives of intersectional analysis have been thoroughly absorbed. In light of this, it may seem surprising that I have waited until the final chapter of this thesis to address the issue, crucial as it is to rehabilitating MacKinnon's work for the commitments of contemporary feminist philosophy. It is my view, however, that the reinterpretation of her account of sexual objectification in terms of complicity that I have offered in the preceding chapters generates a successful response to this double-bind. Specifically, I believe that my analysis of sexual objectification in terms of complicity reveals a way of conceptualising the mechanisms of women's oppression, and the way in which these mechanisms connect women, which is at the same time sensitive to the fact that women may share no substantive experience of womanhood or oppression as women.

Rather than directing my articulation of this account specifically towards the task of defending MacKinnon's feminist theory against its many intersectional detractors, however, I will instead approach it through contemporary feminist discussions of solidarity. I do this for two reasons. The first is merely pragmatic; the intention of this thesis has been to use MacKinnon's account of sexual objectification to advance a new, politically powerful way of thinking about the phenomenon, rather than to faithfully defend her body of work against criticism – a burden which would be excessively heavy, given the polemic quality of her writing and her uncompromising commitment to radical feminist analysis. The second reason, however, is more substantive. The contentiousness

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[6] Stone 2004: 135.

of the notion of sisterhood, or solidarity, in contemporary feminist theory offers a particularly instructive manifestation of the fierce debates about essentialism and intersectionality which form the backdrop of these criticisms of MacKinnon. These specific discussions are particularly instructive because they explicitly address the question that hangs in the background of the wider debates about the place, or lack thereof, of essentialism in feminism, which is: do we lose anything from feminism if we give up on the idea that there is something particular, and politically powerful, about solidary relationships between women? The answers feminists have given to this question, both negative and affirmative, trade on the presumption that to concede that there is something particularly efficacious about such relationships is to rely on the idea that there is such a thing as being treated, or having experiences, *as a woman*. Yet, as I will show in this chapter, this need not be so. I will use the account of sexual objectification that I have developed in the preceding chapters to show that feminist solidary relationships between women, specifically, can be grounded in women's implication in the reproduction of normative femininity. In this way, we can explain what motivates solidarity between women, and what is particularly powerful about the collective resistance it generates, without positing that all women share some kind of common experience of womanhood, or oppression as a woman. The problem with the existing feminist discussions around solidarity, I will argue, is that they focus on the question of whether women have common experiences, at the exclusion of exploring other ways in which solidarity might be grounded – for example, through the *mechanisms* of oppression. MacKinnon's mistake in responding to the challenge of anti-essentialism, I believe, is similar: she seems to mistakenly believe that we only retain the radical, transformative power of her feminist analysis if we retain the idea that women are all oppressed, to some degree, in the same way – an idea she could, I think, do without.

I. Is sisterhood powerful?

The notion of solidarity has become much maligned in feminist theory.[7] It is widely accepted that the calls for sisterhood which were a staple of the radical feminism of the second-wave presumed an unrealistic, and oppressive, homogeneity to women's experiences of womanhood and sexist oppression, which exacerbated the historical

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[7] See, for example, Allen 1999b, Dean 1996, Lyshaug 2006.

marginalisation of certain women from the feminist movement. As Brenda Lyshaug explains:

> While the second-wave appeal to "sisterhood" forged widespread unity, it did so by attributing a set of common interests to women—interests shaped by an allegedly shared experience of oppression—and it thereby suppressed, as is now widely acknowledged, the distinctive experiences and perspectives of working-class women, lesbians, and women of color.[8]

The basic worry, then, is that solidarity must be founded on bonds of group identity, the likes of which, in the wake of several decades of intersectional analyses, feminism can no longer presume to exist between women.

Let us examine the theoretical underpinnings of this problem a little more closely. It will be helpful to employ Kurt Bayertz's analysis of solidarity here. According to Bayertz, 'solidarity' is typically understood to describe a certain kind of relationship between individuals, which is comprised of two distinct levels: the factual level and the normative level.[9] The factual level of the solidary relationship is the "actual common ground" between the individuals. By this, Bayertz is referring to those characteristics by which we identify discrete social groups – nationality, class or cultural homogeneity, for example. The normative level of the solidary relationship is the "mutual obligations to aid each other, as and when necessary."[10] According to Bayertz, it is normally supposed that the normative level of the solidary relationship is justified by the factual level. That is, that the fact of a certain degree, or kind, of commonality is taken to be sufficient to generate normative bonds between people – or, as Kwame Anthony Appiah puts it, "if I think of myself as an X, where X might be 'woman,' 'black,' or 'American,' then, sometimes, the mere fact that somebody else is an X too may incline me to do something with or for them."[11] This supposition, Bayertz argues, is based on the assumption that the common ground upon which group identities are based has an emotional or affective dimension: "from common ground a feeling of obligation thus spontaneously emerges, bridging the gap between what is and what ought to be."[12] On this account, then, the fact of commonality is generative of mutual obligations of support and aid between individuals

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[8] Lyshaug 2006: 78.
[9] Bayertz 1999: 3.
[10] *Ibid*.
[11] Appiah 2001: 328.
[12] Bayertz 1999: 3.

of a particular social group; solidary relationships are thus founded on what is shared between certain individuals, as a matter of fact.

Scepticism in contemporary feminism about the possibility of feminist solidarity, then, arises out of a rejection of the possibility of such matter-of-fact commonality. There are, I think, two distinct strands to this rejection. The first comes from the increasing acceptance of the principle of anti-essentialism and awareness of the importance of intersectionality. The idea that 'sisterhood' was a powerful and important part of the feminist struggle was a key element of the women's liberation movements of the 60s and 70s. Since then, however, the idea of sisterhood has come under increasing criticism for making fraudulent claims to universalism. Both the claim that individual women share certain properties which ground solidary relationships – reproductive capacities, for example – and the claim that all women share a common experience of patriarchal oppression which can ground relationships of solidarity, have been rejected on the basis that such presumptions of homogeneity are enabled only by failing to take into account the experiences of women who are not white, straight, western and middle-class. In reality, this line of criticism goes, women's experiences – of womanhood, and of being oppressed – are simply not cohesive enough to provide the kind of common group that could ground solidary relationships. Falsely claiming that such cohesiveness exists masks the extent to which sexist oppression intersects with other axes of domination. This form of criticism is well summarised by Audre Lorde:

> By and large […] white women focus upon their oppression as women and ignore differences of race, sexual preference, class, and age. There is a pretense to a homogeneity of experience covered by the word *sisterhood* that does not in fact exist.[13]

If the first strand to the rejection of the idea of a solidarity-grounding commonality amongst women is concerned with the empirical viability of common-ground claims, the second strand is more concerned with the consequences of making such claims; that is, with the *reifying effects of common-ground claims*. The worry here is that gender identities themselves are one of the mechanisms – if not *the* central mechanism - of patriarchal oppression. In seeking some sort of universalism in the category of 'woman' in order to ground politically efficacious solidary relationships, this objection goes, we thereby re-instantiate the very binary categories the policing of which is what feminism should be

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[13] Lorde 1984: 116.

fighting in the first place.[14] Judith Butler has vocally rejected the idea of feminist solidarity for precisely this reason:

> It would be wrong to assume in advance that there is a category of "women" that simply needs to be filled in with various components of race, class, age, ethnicity, and sexuality in order to become complete […] Does "unity" set up an *exclusionary norm of solidarity* at the level of identity that rules out the possibility of a set of actions which disrupt the very borders of identity concepts, or which seek to accomplish precisely that disruption as an explicit political aim?[15]

Butler's worry, then, is that seeking common ground between women on which to build feminist relationships of solidarity in fact serves to consolidate the central fiction of gender: that the category of 'women' (alongside that of 'men') has a determinate content which is – more or less - fixed and universal. On her account, therefore, it is not simply that the conditions for a feminist politics of solidarity are difficult or impossible to establish; it is rather that the idea that feminism requires solidarity at all plays directly into the naturalisation of heteronormativity that feminism should be fighting.

Feminist rejections of the idea of solidarity, then, typically have the following form:

1. Solidarity requires that members of a solidary group share affective bonds which motivate political obligations to the group and its members.
2. In order for these affective bonds to be generated, group members must share some kind of matter-of-fact common ground. (The 'common-ground' approach to solidarity).
3. Feminism cannot and/or should not help itself to the assumption that such matter-of-fact common ground, and hence such bonds, exist between women;
    3.1   Either because this assumption ignores the fact that, empirically speaking, there is no common ground shared by women as a group which could form the basis for such bonds;
    3.2   Or because this assumption consolidates and reifies the category of 'woman', which feminism should be fighting.

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[14] Appiah, drawing on Sartre, levels a similar critique against the idea of racial solidarity as an antiracist mechanism: "The Black Nationalists, like some Zionists, responded to their experience of racial discrimination by accepting the racialism it presupposed." (1990: 11).
[15] Butler 1999 20-21 [my emphasis].

4. Therefore, since feminism cannot help itself to the assumption that pre-existing affective bonds exist between women, it lacks as a movement the basis for solidarity.

Unsurprisingly, numerous feminists have been at pains to rescue the possibility of feminist solidarity from the force of this critique. These attempts are all motivated by the same worry – the same basic intuition which animates many of the more general theoretical objections to the feminist orthodoxies of anti-essentialism and intersectionality – namely, as Amy Allen explains,

> If we reject solidarity altogether [..] it becomes extremely difficult, if not impossible, to understand how oppositional social movements can formulate common goals and strive to achieve them.[16]

In other words, feminists who seek to salvage the notion of solidarity are mindful of the need for feminist movements to have political potency in their efforts to overcome gendered oppression – something which appears to be undermined by the disavowal of any appeals to unity and collectivity. If sisterhood as traditionally conceived is not, in fact, powerful – or at least not powerful in the right way – then the question arises as to what, or where, the power of the feminist movement can be derived from.

In the existing literature, two distinct approaches to rehabilitating the notion of solidarity can be discerned, which I will term the *Inclusive Common Ground* (ICG) response and the *Unity Through Action* (UTA) response.[17] These lines of response differ according to

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[16] Allen 1999b: 101.

[17] There is one notable response to the feminist problem of solidarity which seems, at least on a first parse, to resist categorisation under either of the two strategies I have outlined, and that is Sandra Lee Bartky's feminist appropriation of Scheler's phenomenology of *Mitgefühl* ('feeling-with'). *Mitgefühl* is a kind of feeling-with which entails the maintenance of the otherness of the Other; one does not feel as the Other, nor feel the Other via a projection of one's own feelings, but rather feels an "intuitive understanding of the Other's emotional life." (2002: 83). As such, according to Bartky, *Mitgefühl* can form the affective basis of a feminist solidarity which is sufficiently sensitive to the multifarious differences between women.
Although I do not have the space to engage fully with this highly interesting account here, I have suspicion that, upon further interrogation, Bartky's account would collapse into a version of either the ICG or UTA approaches I have outlined. Her account seems to rest on ambiguity concerning the dispositional prerequisite of *Mitgefühl*, which Bartky frames as a "loving orientation toward the Other." (78) She fails to clarify whether this loving disposition is something which pertains between all persons, or between specific persons situated with respect to each other in a particular way. If the former, her account would, I think, fall into the UTA category, since it would ground solidarity in a universal capacity of humanity rather than a particular relationship between members of a particular group. If the latter, she would be endorsing a version of ICG approach, since she would be allowing that certain people share certain affective bonds on account of their membership in a particular social group.

whether they accept premises 1 and 2 from the above reconstruction: the *Inclusive Common Ground* response accepts these premises and seeks to reconcile them with the anti-essentialist orthodoxy in contemporary feminism; the *Unity Through Action* response, by contrast, rejects both premises and seeks to construct an alternative account of solidarity which is not dependent on affective bonds which pre-date political action. As I will show in the following section, the benefits of each approach reflect the drawbacks of the other; and this symmetry is derived from the fact that both approaches presume that premises 1 and 2 – that solidarity requires affective bonds, and that these bonds must be generated by matter-of-fact common ground - must be taken together, when in fact, I suggest, they can and should be considered as analytically distinct.

II. Feminist responses to the problem of solidarity

Response 1: Solidarity as 'Inclusive Common Ground'

The *Inclusive Common Ground* response accepts the claim that solidarity requires a group whose members share some common ground and hence a pre-existing affective bond, but rejects the claim that, on the basis of the matter-of-fact diversity amongst women, feminism cannot assume the existence of such a bond between women (in other words, it rejects 3.1 above).[18]

Naomi Zack's *Inclusive Feminism: A Third Wave Theory of Women's Commonality* exemplifies this form of response.[19] Zack seeks to address what she perceives to be the diluting effect of intersectionality on feminist politics. The intersectional insight that women experience sexism very differently depending on their race, class, sexuality and so on, for Zack, has led to a politically harmful fracturing of the women's movement. This fracturing is caused by the institution of artificial, purely theoretic divisions between women, which belie the unity of the category 'women' on a practical political level:

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[18] It is worth noting that proponents of the 'inclusive common ground' approach that I am reconstructing here do not address the conceptual issue of feminist solidarity as explicitly as do proponents of the 'unity through action' response I will turn to in the next section. The relevance for the question of solidarity of the variations of the ICG approach I rehearse here is thus something of an extrapolation on my part; but it is not, to my mind, an unreasonable extrapolation, since the concern about the viability of the category of 'women' in the accounts I am looking at is raised with reference to the political efficacy of the feminist project – which is the same basic worry motivating those who seek more explicitly to rehabilitate solidarity within feminism.

[19] Zack 2005. My term 'inclusive common ground response' is inspired by Zack's account of inclusive feminism.

> Different kinds of female gender may be perceived to be so distinctive as to be virtually incommensurable, a condition exemplified by the insistence by some women of color that only they can speak and write about their problems with authority, and that white feminists defer to their insistence. This is simply too much ontological and discursive difference on a theoretical level. In practice, and on a level outside feminist theory, everybody knows that it makes sense to refer to white and non-white, rich and poor, straight and gay, and First, Second and Third World women as women, and that there is something about those thus referred to which exceeds merely being symbolized by the same word.[20]

Zack contends, in other words, that the differences that factors such as race, class, sexuality and the like make between women do not preclude the meaningful unification of women as a group which can provide the basis of feminist solidarity. Her suggestion is that the common ground between women is to be found in the way in which the category 'women' is constituted socially through the disjunctive markers of female physiology, motherhood and/or sexual interactions with men ('FMP').[21] Individual women are categorised as such according to their being identified (willingly or not) with these markers. This "non-substantive, relational essence" of being a woman, according to Zack, transcends the differences created by other identity categories, since the essential commonality between women is derived only from the social facticity of female identity: "Category FMP captures what women have in common as the imagined but real group that is the logical contrary of the group of men, in human male-female, man-woman gender systems."[22]

With her FMP category, then, Zack seeks to show that recognition of the impact that factors such as race, class and sexuality have on women's differing experiences of sexism does not require that we abandon the idea of an essence of womanhood. The disjunctive definition of woman's essence – women may be marked as such, either willingly or otherwise, by some variable combination of physiology, motherhood or heterosexual practices - is for Zack sufficient to accommodate the differences between women; not all women will derive their womanly essence from the same combination of these markers, but the socially enforced connection between these markers is sufficient to demarcate an

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[20] *Ibid.,* 8.

[21] Ibid., 162.

[22] *Ibid*.

essence of womanhood which is sufficiently sensitive to difference. This essence is for Zack crucial to feminist politics:

> A universal definition of women allows for that very modality [of listening to one another's sufferings] because it is the *common ground* on which discourse among women across their myriad differences can occur. Women can listen to each other, not only by beginning with what they have in common, in theory, but by continuing to recognize that commonality across their differences as a basis for their ongoing solidarity […] The acknowledged capability among women of experiencing or suffering what other women suffer adds the possibility of empathy to solidarity.[23]

Here, then, Zack explicitly identifies the need to posit a shared essence of womanhood to ground feminist solidary relationships, pointing specifically to the way in which common ground between women provides the fertile preconditions for an empathic understanding of the sufferings of other women. We can thus understand Zack to be endorsing both elements of the common-ground account of solidarity outlined by Bayertz: that members of solidary groups must share an affective bond which motivates their mutual obligations towards each other, and that these bonds must be generated by some matter-of-fact common ground which serves as the basis of the group identity.

Ann Garry offers an alternative variation of the ICG approach to Zack's FMP category. Garry is more sympathetic than Zack to the intersectional imperative, and disputes the emphasis Zack places on the need for a metaphysically identifiable essence of womanhood. Nevertheless, she shares with Zack the concern for feminism to find a way to meaningfully conceptualise women as a distinct group; indeed, for Garry intersectional analyses only make sense on the basis that we can talk about the impact of, for example, racial identity of women's experiences:

> Those who favour intersectionality tend to favour it because it illuminates the wide varieties of women's experiences across other axes of oppression and enables them to find suitable remedies for multiple oppressions. The 'gender axis' needs to be intelligible across other 'axes', or there is nothing to appeal to in the explanation or remedy.[24]

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[23] Ibid., 141-2.
[24] Garry 2008: 616.

5. Solidarity *contra* complicity

According to Garry, however, we do not need to appeal to the metaphysically heavy notion of essences to be able to identify this 'gender axis'. Garry suggests that the Wittgensteinian notion of family resemblances can account for the coherence of the category of 'women', in such a way that can accommodate intersectionality more fully than Zack's FMP category. Wittgenstein's basic insight is that some sets or groups are unified not by a characteristic shared by all members, but by a series of overlapping similarities which run through the group. Whereas Zack's disjunctive essence of womanhood, Garry argues, commits her to the claim that all women share a common kernel of identity, the family resemblance model can account for the fact that "the similarities between some women will not be the same as those between others."[25] Using the family resemblance model, according to Garry, we can acknowledge that:

> although there is nothing – neither a property, an experience, nor an interest – that all women have in common, we know what a woman is and who women are because of crisscrossing, overlapping characteristics that are clear within social contexts. In this way, we can say that women share a gender (or that woman is a gender).[26]

Garry focuses less on the importance of her family-resemblance model for women connecting politically across their differences than Zack does with her FMP category; her focus is more on the analytical importance of the category of women. However, she is clear that she thinks her account can "accommodate much more simply everything that Zack incorporates into her disjunctive 'essence' of women – except, of course, her metaphysics."[27] It is reasonable to suggest, therefore, that Garry's family-resemblance approach to intersectionality, too, could generate an account of feminist solidary relationships which accepts the common-ground approach to solidarity. Like Zack, she is concerned to locate a space within intersectional concerns for theorising women as a politically significant group; but unlike Zack, she finds that the overlapping, yet non-universalisable, connections between differently situated women are sufficient to cohere the category, without the need for the supposition of an essence of womanhood.

Both Zack and Garry, then, offer attempts to incorporate the intersectional imperative into feminist politics in such a way that doesn't entail the wholesale rejection of the category of women as a coherent and meaningful political group. In so doing, both thus

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[25] Ibid., 617.
[26] Garry 2012: 510-11.
[27] Garry 2008: 616-7.

reject premise 3.1 of the typical feminist rejection of solidarity. For Zack and Garry, the fact that women are differentiated by race, class and sexuality does not mean that we must reject the idea that there is sufficient common ground between women to generate affective bonds capable of motivating mutual political obligations. For Zack, all women have in common their membership in the disjunctive FMP category, and this commonality provides the fertile ground for the development of empathic solidarity; for Garry, specific women share politically fertile common ground with specific other women, and these overlapping commonalities create a web of interconnected relationships which cohere women as a politically significant group. Despite their disagreements about how unity across difference is achieved, however, both Zack and Garry reject the idea that intersectionality requires us to abandon the project of theorising women as a coherent political group – in this, their responses to the feminist problem of solidarity take the same form.

The obvious benefit of the ICG approach adopted by Zack and Garry is that it allows for the rehabilitation of the common-ground approach to solidarity within contemporary feminism. The benefit of the common-ground approach to solidarity is that it provides reasonably robust grounds for optimism with respect to the feminist fight; if solidary relationships, or at least the possibility of them, are secured by the mere fact of the degree of common ground women share, then – assuming as Zack and Garry do that such common ground can be located – we have good reasons to be hopeful that solidary relationships between women can and will be a potent force in the fight against women's oppression. The ICG approach, in other words, allows for the second-wave conviction that 'sisterhood is powerful' to be rehabilitated within contemporary, intersectional feminism.

However, when we look back to the typical feminist rejection of solidarity outlined above, the problem with the ICG approach also becomes obvious: it is only able to respond to one of the two objections raised by feminists against the invocation of bonds of solidarity amongst women. Feminists, recall, have raised two distinct objections to the possibility of feminist solidarity. The first objection is that appeals to solidarity end up excluding women marginalised by other factors such as race, class and sexuality, by claiming a commonality between women which is in fact based on the experiences of white middle-class women (premise 3.1). The second objection is that the invocation of solidarity between women serves to further reify the category of 'woman', and the integrity of this category itself is something which is repressive to women (premise 3.2).

The problem with the ICG approach to solidarity is that it speaks only to the first of these concerns; the claim that the invocation of a common ground between women needn't be exclusionary does not provide a response to the second worry, that this invocation adds credence and strength to the naturalising ideology of heteronormativity. Butler's worry, remember, is not that it is not possible to give an account of what it means to be a woman which is sufficiently sensitive to differences caused by race, class and the like; rather, her worry is that an appeal to solidarity amongst women "rules out the possibility of a set of actions which disrupt the very borders of [the identity concept 'woman'] or which seek to accomplish precisely that disruption as an explicit political aim."[28] Against this worry, it seems that the ICG approach has nothing to offer. The efforts to which both Zack and Garry go to demarcate a common ground for the identity of 'woman' which is maximally sensitive to intersectional differences does nothing to dispel the worry the *exercise in demarcation itself* is politically conservative.

Response 2: Solidarity as 'Unity Through Action'

The U*nity Through Action* response to feminist worries about solidarity, by contrast, rejects the first premise of the argument reconstructed above. That is, whereas the ICG response tries to show that feminism can, in fact, help itself to the assumption of common-ground affective bonds between women, the UTA response denies that solidarity requires bonds founded on common ground – indeed, it denies that solidarity requires pre-existing affective bonds of any kind. Solidarity, according to the accounts which share this approach, is something which is achieved through (some kind of) political action, rather than something which forms the basis for political action. This form of response has been more prevalent in anti-essentialist feminist attempts to salvage solidarity – which likely stems from the fact that responses of this kind, as we shall see, are able to imbibe the full force of intersectional concerns.

Amy Allen's account of feminist solidarity is perhaps the best example of the UTA response. Allen draws on Arendt to conceptualise feminist solidarity as the result of collective political action for a common cause, rather than as a bond which precedes such action:

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[28] Butler 1999: 20-21.

5. Solidarity *contra* complicity

> Drawing on Arendt, we can view solidarity as the collective power that grows out of action in concert, binds members of the feminist movement together, and enables feminists to build coalitions with other oppositional social movements. This conception avoids the problems that plague the sisterhood model of solidarity because it is not predicated on an exclusionary and repressive conception of women's shared essence or experience of oppression.[29]

As this quote indicates, Allen's main concern in formulating her Arendtian account of solidarity is to find a way to conceptualise solidary bonds in a way that does not rely on the familiar common-ground thesis. For Allen, the lessons of intersectionality are clear: feminism must reconfigure itself as a movement which does not rely on any notion of shared identity amongst women. The unity between feminists must be derived from the political movement itself, rather than from a "pre-given, fixed and, hence, repressive identity."[30] It is important to notice that Allen's rejection of the common-ground approach to solidarity has two facets; the presupposition of a pre-existing identity between women is both *exclusionary* and *repressive*.[31] We can, I think, discern in these two formulations the two distinct worries raised by feminists regarding the harmful consequences of assuming common-ground between women: such an assumption is typically derived from the experiences of a specific (and privileged) group of women, and hence excludes the experiences and identities of some other women; in addition, such an assumption fixes in advance the boundaries of the identity 'woman,' and hence reinforces the repression of deviations from and exceptions to this limited identity category.

One important thing to note about the UTA response, then, is that it is capable of addressing both of the distinct worries that are raised by the standard feminist objection to solidarity. Whereas the ICG approach leaves unaddressed the worry that feminist appeals to solidarity further reify and consolidate the category of 'woman' (3.2 in the schema above), the UTA approach speaks both to this concern and the concern about the exclusionary nature of matter-of-fact common-ground claims. By reconceiving solidarity as the result of feminist political action rather than as its prerequisite, Allen (like others who adopt a similar approach) is able to present solidarity as something

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[29] Allen 1999b: 112.
[30] Ibid., 106.
[31] Dean, too, identifies traditional accounts of solidarity as both repressive and exclusionary (1995: 114).

which neither excludes women with more marginal identities, nor reinforces the ideological category of 'woman' – thus freeing solidarity from its negative associations and allowing it once again to be a staple motif of the feminist movement.

Proponents of the UTA response, then, conceive of solidarity as precipitated by a kind of collective political action. For Allen, solidary relationships form between members of groups who come together in a concerted effort to achieve a political aim; feminist solidarity is "the power of those who pledge to work together to fight relations of [sexual] subordination."[32] Sally Scholz, similarly, conceives of political solidarity as a relationship that is "based on a shared to commitment to a cause" and "arises in response to a situation of injustice or oppression."[33] Jodi Dean locates solidarity bonds between persons connected by the notion of a dialogically established *we*: "solidarity […] arises through critique and discussion, in the course of communicative engagements."[34]

One worry about conceptualising solidarity in this way, however, is that it simply pushes the concerns motivating the initial feminist scepticism about solidarity one step down the line. The sceptic of the possibility of feminist solidarity, as we have seen, asks 'How can there be solidarity amongst women, across their many differences?' Proponents of the UTA response, it seems, interpret this question as asking how feminist political action can be inclusive and non-repressive. Any feminist movement which presupposes in advance a common identity between women, it is thought, will not be a movement which represents the interests and experiences of all women; which is why solidarity can only come through engagement in inclusive feminist political action. One might wonder, however, whether the sceptic of feminist solidarity is in fact asking a different question – namely, on what basis can the move to collective feminist political action be *motivated*, given the myriad differences in experience and identity between individual women? The various forms of the UTA response, it seems, seek to ascertain how the feminist movement can foster inclusive, non-repressive bonds between women; but they do not question what grounds or underpins feminist collective action in the first place – what, in other words, turns women towards feminist politics.

This may seem like a strange thing to ask after; given that feminist movements exist and women join them, we might think, the important question to ask is how we can ensure that these movements are not predicated on exclusionary, repressive identities. Yet

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[32] Allen 1999: 112.
[33] Scholz 2008: 34.
[34] Dean 1998: 5.

asking what motivates the turn to feminist politics, I believe, is crucial for at least two reasons. Firstly, the assumption that the character of solidarity is significant only in those cases where collective political action is already underway ignores the fact that many pressing facets of the subjugation of women are not met with spontaneous feminist resistance. White, middle class women, for instance, are endlessly accepting of the confinement of poorer women and minority ethnic women in exploitative domestic labour. If we want to couch this as a failure of feminist solidarity – and I assume that we do – then we need to explicate on what basis there is a reasonable expectation of feminist action here which is not being met. This, I think, is the central insight of the traditional common-ground approach to solidarity – that the way in which a person is situated with respect to a political phenomenon, and those affected by it, creates a reasonable expectation that that person should act in some way with respect to that phenomenon. If all talk of solidarity only gets underway once 'action in concert' or 'commitment, group responsibility and collective action' are already taking place, then it's not clear what we get from the notion of solidarity that's not covered by a more traditional account of collective action and responsibility.

A second, and related, problem with the UTA approach is that it seemingly leaves no room for conceiving of solidary relationships as more primary or potent between some people than others. If solidary bonds are formed "not by shared attributes, location, or even shared interests [but by] a shared commitment to a cause," this seems to suggest that there is nothing distinctive or special about feminist solidarity between women – that such solidarity is indistinguishable from, say, the solidarity of men with the feminist movement.[35] This, however, seems intuitively incorrect. That members of non-oppressed groups can have important and meaningful political commitments to the fight against the oppression of others does not mean that these commitments are of *the same kind* – either practically or politically - as the political commitments made between members of oppressed groups. Certainly, we would want to say that those who participated in the consumer boycott of South African goods during the era of apartheid were acting in solidarity with non-white South Africans. But these solidarity relationships differ in important ways from the solidarity which bonded together striking coal miners in the UK during the 1980s. Differential factors between the two cases include: the sentiments and emotions driving the political commitment, the degree of reciprocity and equality within the solidary relationship, the level of risk associated with each side's participation,

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[35] Scholz 2008: 34.

the demandingness of the required solidary action, and the extent to which the action in solidarity was essential to the success of the political project. Simply put, voluntarily participating in a cultural and consumer boycott is not the same thing as withholding your labour in concert with others to try and leverage control over your working conditions. That is not to say that being part of a boycott is not a form of solidarity, but it is to say that the kind of solidarity that it constitutes is different from the solidarity which bonds together striking workers. By the same token, we may well wish to grant that men can be feminists and act in accordance with feminist principles to fight the oppression of women; but we are not thereby bound to collapse all forms and manifestations of feminist solidarity into one another. It is eminently reasonable to suggest that feminist solidarity between women differs to that of men - in terms of the motivating sentiment, degree of reciprocity, the associated risk, the demandingness of the obligations generated and extent to which the solidary relationships are pivotal to the fight for equality. To elide these differences on the basis that both men and women feminists share 'the same orientation towards a shared political goal' is to omit essential elements of the political phenomena in question.

Yet proponents of the UTA approach to solidarity, in their efforts to avoid any invocation of an exclusionary or repressive common-ground between women, ground solidary relationships exclusively in universalisable frameworks. Allen's account of solidarity as the power that binds members of political movements together is based on Arendt's account of the human condition as a "dialectical relationship between equality and distinction, commonality within difference."[36] Scholz frames solidarity in terms of individual conscience and commitment to cause, asserting unequivocally that "individuals who are not oppressed or do not suffer from injustice can and do join in political solidarity."[37] And Dean draws on Habermas to conceptualise solidarity as the "mutual expectation of a responsible orientation" to a relationship, the constitution of which is achieved communicatively through critique and discussion between individuals.[38] On each of these accounts, then, feminist solidarity between women is no less primary, likely or powerful than feminist solidary relationships between men and

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[36] Allen 1999: 107. It is important to note that the dialectical relationship between commonality and difference, on Allen's account, involves an acknowledgement of the concrete identities people find themselves with – this is the 'difference' side of the dialectic. Crucially, however, concrete identities do not *ground* particular solidary relationships between members of oppressed groups, on Allen's account.

[37] Scholz 2008: 57.

[38] Dean 1995: 123.

women.[39] The upshot of this is that the various forms of the UTA approach cannot explain what is important and distinctive about feminist solidarity between women specifically, or where this solidarity comes from.

Taking stock, then, we can see that both the ICG and UTA approaches to salvaging feminist solidarity from the critiques of exclusivity and repression run into problems. The ICG approach, in its affirmation of the possibility of locating bond-generating common-ground between women, fails to speak to the worry that the solidary relationships thus generated will reify and consolidate the category of woman; the UTA approach, meanwhile, fails to explain both how the turn to political action is initially motivated, and how specific solidary relationships have a greater primacy and potency with respect to a given political phenomenon than others. Interestingly, each approach finds its strength in the weakness of its counterpart. We have already seen that the UTA approach succeeds in discharging the worry about the reification of identity categories where the ICG cannot. Yet it is also now clear that the ICG approach accounts for what the UTA approach cannot – it explains how a given political situation motivates, and generates, specific solidary relationships.

Examining the differences between the ICG and UTA approaches to feminist solidarity thus shows that neither succeeds in fully reconciling anti-essentialist, intersectional feminism with a political notion of solidarity. The basic tension between recognition of difference and political efficacy remains, with each approach ultimately erring more towards one of these concerns at the expense of the other. In the case of the ICG approach, it is the imperative to ground politically potent solidary relationships between women which wins out, leaving concerns about the reification of the category of 'woman' unresolved. With the UTA approach, the desire to eschew any reifying appeal to identity between women takes precedence over the need to explicate the foundations for distinctive solidary relationships between women. Between these two approaches, therefore, feminism finds itself in a double-bind: it appears that in order to do enough to satisfy the demands of anti-essentialism, we must rule out the possibility that there is something about how women are situated with respect to each other that is capable of generating politically powerful mutual obligations.

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[39] Or, at least, any explanation for how and why feminist solidary relationships between women differ from those between men and women would be extraneous to the account of the basis of solidarity offered by each author. At best, then, the factors which motivate certain kinds of solidary relationships and not others could only ever be thought of as parasitical on the basic human possibility for solidarity, rather than as intrinsic or fundamental to the solidary relationship itself.

This double-bind is created, I submit, by the fact that both the ICG approach and the UTA approach assume that the kind of affective bonds capable of grounding mutual solidary relationships can only be generated by matter-of-fact, or substantive, common ground. That is, they assume that the first two premises of the feminist argument against solidarity must be taken together:

1. Solidarity requires that members of a solidary group share affective bonds which motivate political obligations to the group and its members.
2. In order for these affective bonds to be generated, group members must share some kind of matter-of-fact common ground (the 'common-ground' approach to solidarity).

The ICG approach defends the notion of common-ground between women, in the interests of grounding politically efficacious feminist solidary relationships, because it assumes that only substantive common-ground can generate such relationships. The UTA approach, conversely, repudiates the need for solidarity to be grounded in pre-existing affective bonds, because it assumes that these can only be generated by the kind of substantive commonality which can no longer be presumed to exist between women.

If, however, we treat these premises as separable, it would be possible to accept (1) without (2). That is, it would be possible to accept that politically efficacious solidary relationships are grounded in certain affective bonds that members of the solidary group share, in some way, prior to their actions in solidarity, without thereby having to accept that these bonds arise through the members sharing some substantive, matter-of-fact common-ground. This would allow us, so to speak, to have our cake and eat it: to retain the political potency of solidarity for feminism without resorting to regressive ideas of universal womanhood. And, as I will show in the following two sections, such a win-win situation is, indeed, possible, if we focus our attention back onto the mechanisms of oppression against which we wish to harness the political power of solidarity.

III. Jumping the gun:
Analysing oppression, grounding solidarity

Both the ICG and UTA approaches to the problem of feminist solidarity, I believe, fall foul of the same mistake, which renders them unable to fully account for politically

potent, non-regressive solidary relationships amongst women. The mistake both approaches make is that they do not take the claim that solidary relationships are necessary for fighting patriarchal oppression as requiring justification or explanation. Thus, one reads of the "political connections across difference" that are necessary for feminist solidarity,[40] but not of the specific content of the solidary obligations that these connections generate, nor of why grounding these obligations is indispensable for achieving feminist aims. This may seem like a strange thing to ask; we might think it obvious that it is imperative for women to support each other in the fight for equality and justice. But fleshing out what this fight is against, what such support for it would look like, and what it requires of women, is not so straightforward.

To illustrate this point, let us consider an example from contemporary race theory. Tommie Shelby's account of black solidarity seeks to ground solidary relationships amongst black people in a shared experience of oppression.[41] Shelby argues that black solidarity based on the commonality of experiences of racist oppression is both possible and desirable: it is possible insofar as the shared experience of anti-black racism is sufficient to mould black people into a group which has all the necessary characteristics for solidary relationships; and it is desirable insofar as grounding solidary relationships in this way avoids having to posit any kind of substantive, essential characteristics of black identity (which would necessarily be exclusionary or racializing). Through a shared commitment to fighting the anti-black racism to which they are all subject, Shelby argues, black people can found significant relationships of solidarity which can be a formidable force against racism.

Now, one interesting thing to note about Shelby's argument is that the structural analogue of his claim that all black people share a common experience of anti-black racism is quite resoundingly rejected by feminists. The absorption of the intersectional imperative into contemporary feminist theory means that even the claim that all women experience a common kernel of sexist oppression is seen as seeking an artificial homogenisation of what is an irreducible multiplicity of experiences. What is of particular interest to me, however, is the way in which Shelby posits the emancipatory potential of the solidary relationships he thinks can be generated by common experiences of anti-black racism. He writes:

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[40] Lyshaug (2006), p. 99.
[41] Shelby 2002.

> Recognition of this common interest [of black people in fighting anti-black racism] can lend motivational strength to a morally based joint commitment to *ending racism*. Frankly, it's doubtful that blacks will ever agree on the meaning of blackness, but they can and should agree to *collectively resist racism*, since it negatively affects them all, albeit to varying degrees and in different ways.[42]

In his attempt to argue that solidary relationships amongst black people can be grounded in nothing more substantial than a shared experience of racist oppression, in other words, Shelby takes it as a given that racism is the sort of phenomenon which can be appropriately fought by black people 'collectively resisting' it. But, surely, we need to know what the specific mechanisms of racist oppression are in order to know the extent to which they can simply be resisted or fought by those subject to them. Shelby refers at one point to "the principles of anti-racism," as if these principles and their content were self-evident.[43] Yet such principles are not at all obvious; even from the (relatively implausible, I would say) hypothetical situation in which all black people are united in perceiving (and wanting to fight) a homogenous form of racism to which they all feel they are subject, we cannot infer straightforwardly what this fight requires, nor what is required from each black person committed to the cause, without a comprehensive account of what mechanisms (social, cultural, economic, political) perpetuate racial domination.

Let us assume, for the sake of argument, that 'ending racism' requires ending the neoliberal, capitalist mode of production and radically restructuring the distributive structures of society.[44] It is far from clear how the 'principles of anti-racism,' whatever they are, could direct black solidarity in this task, given that black people occupy (albeit disproportionally) the whole gamut of class positions, with some belonging to the exploited working class, some to the middle class and some to the wealthy elite. If the economic analysis of the causal mechanisms of racism were correct, then 'ending racism' would require class struggle. The upshot of this would be twofold: firstly, the fight for a world free of racism would require of some (middle and upper class) black people a choice between their class interests and their commitment to racial equality, since class

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[42] Ibis., p. 252 [both my emphasis].
[43] *Ibid*., p. 254.
[44] In support of this perspective, see Reed (2002): "[T]he familiar juxtaposition of race and class forces in debates about American inequality misunderstands both phenomena by treating them as fundamentally distinguishable. Instead, both are more effectively, and more accurately, seen as equivalent and overlapping elements within a singular system of social power and stratification rooted in capitalist labor relations." (266)

domination would be incompatible with anti-racism; secondly, no straightforward principles for anti-racist action could be easily distilled from whatever common experience of racism is shared by black people across class differences. Shelby shows an awareness of the extent of the refraction of race through class when he cites class disparities as one of the reasons why an anti-racist politics based on a shared racial identity is both implausible and undesirable. Yet in his assertion that "all blacks […] have a vested interest in racial equality" regardless of their class position,[45] he fails to consider that this interest will also be thus refracted – and through the very economic stratifications which serve to perpetuate racial inequality (if the economic analysis of racism is correct).[46] Shelby's account of black solidarity, in other words, comes unstuck through its detachment from an account of what the mechanisms of racial inequality are, and what collective action on the part of black people could do to fight these mechanisms.

In feminist attempts to salvage the notion of solidarity from the problem of essentialism, I believe, we find a similar failure to interrogate rigorously the assumed relationship between the mechanisms of patriarchal oppression and the requirements of collective resistance. Alison Stone, for instance, is at pains to defend the importance of pragmatic coalitions as a basis for collective feminist resistance, without ever explaining what the objectives which bring these coalitions together would be, nor what diverse women acting together to achieve them would consist of:

> Coalitions may be said to arise when different women, or sets of women, *decide to act together to achieve some determinate objective*, while yet acknowledging the irreducible differences between them and the often highly divergent concerns which motivate them to pursue this objective.[47]

To my mind, trying to establish how we can ground feminist solidarity in a way which does not lapse into essentialism, without first giving an account of the mechanisms of

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[45] *Ibid.*, p. 251.

[46] It is worth noting that Shelby does acknowledge in a footnote (n. 28) that the problem of class differences between black people will not be wholly eliminated by grounding anti-racist politics in a shared experience of oppression rather than a shared essence or identity. He says that class differentials amongst black people, even on his model, will continue to "pose a real and serious threat to emancipatory black solidarity," but that this discussion is beyond the limits of the paper. Despite this, however, I believe my criticism still stands; whilst one of the main aims of Shelby's paper is to criticise attempts to ground black solidarity in black identity (a solely negative claim), the other is certainly to show that black solidarity can be grounded in a common experience of racist oppression – and against this positive claim, I believe my criticism is valid.

[47] Stone 2004: 152 [my emphasis].

patriarchal oppression and the way in which collective action in response to them could be practically effective, is putting the cart before the horse. This analytical mis-ordering, I believe, is at the root of the problems encountered by both the ICG and UTA approaches to feminist solidarity; in both cases, the question of identity, rather than being linked systematically with a particular analysis of the oppressive structures to be fought, is taken up only in relation to the need for non-repressive solidary relationships. With the ICG approach, the possibility of further reifying the category of women goes unaddressed, because the issue of identity amongst women is posed only as a necessary feature of fruitful solidary relationships. The UTA approach, by the same token, is unable to say anything about what might be distinct, and important, about feminist solidary relationships between women, because the issue of identity is addressed only as a problem for the possibility of non-repressive solidary relationships. In both cases, there is a failure to address the question of identity in relation to solidarity using an analysis of the mechanisms of oppression to be fought.

There are, it seems to me, two questions about solidary relationships, to which answers must be found in an antecedent account of the oppressive circumstances to be fought. The first question is: what are the mechanisms of oppression that are perpetuating the domination of the group in question? And, further: what is it about how these mechanisms operate that makes collective resistance – in the form of mutual solidary obligations – a necessary or effective tactic for fighting them? The first question, then, asks after the reasons why solidary relationships are an appropriate way to combat oppression. The second question, by contrast, is concerned with how solidary relationships are possible, motivationally speaking: on what grounds might we reasonably expect solidary relationships to obtain between members of a particular group? Or, more specifically: what is it about the particular mechanisms of oppression of a group that is generative of the kind of relationships which can motivate mutual sacrifice in the name of collective resistance?

In beginning any enquiry into the possibility of solidary relationships by asking these two questions, we leave open the possibility that we might discover, in our account of the oppressive circumstances to be fought, the conditions for the generation of bonds of solidarity which are not dependent on any conception of identity between members of the oppressed group. In the final section of this chapter, I will use the theory of sexual objectification that I have articulated in the preceding chapters as an example of how this order of inquiry – beginning with an account of oppression, then turning to consider the

role of collective resistance, and the conditions for the possibility of solidarity - can be used to circumvent feminism's most contentious questions about what it means to *be a woman*, whilst at the same time accounting for why solidary bonds between women are particularly important for feminist aims.

IV. Solidarity *contra* complicity: The case of sexual objectification

We can summarise the account of sexual objectification I have developed in the preceding chapters as follows. The objectifying effects of certain instances of interpersonal behaviour (the kinds of interactions Nussbaum is concerned with) can only be understood in light of the social context in which they take place. This context is what facilitates sexually objectifying acts such as wolf-whistling – it provides the structures of meaning and justification through which these acts can take place. Furthermore, as reinscriptions of the ideals and norms of the social context which facilitates them, sexually objectifying acts and behaviours also contribute to the reproduction of this context; the re-enactment of the norms and ideals of heterosexual masculinity and femininity serves to reproduce the social context which enables women to be treated as objects for sexual use. Understood in this way, sexual objectification is not merely an effect produced by specific acts or behaviours, but also a social process through which the oppressive position of women is maintained, via the reproduction of the sexualised gender norms of masculinity and femininity. This means that the power of gender inequality acts not only *on* women, but also *through and with* women; women's self-understandings - their beliefs, choices and desires – are constructed through the process of objectification, meaning that women themselves play a role in reproducing the norms of the social context which perpetuates their sexualised subordination.

From this reconceptualization of sexual objectification as a process of subjectivisation, it follows that the consent of individual women can no longer be taken to demarcate the limits of feminist critical engagement with the phenomenon of sexual objectification. One reason for this is that once we understand women's choices and desires to be the product, at least in part, of the subjectivising force of normative femininity, it becomes difficult to distinguish cases of genuine or authentic consent from cases where consent is compromised. The other reason, however, is that understanding women's role in

perpetuating gendered norms opens up a new way of engaging critically with women's choices – one which does not require that we paternalistically doubt the authenticity of these choices – as complicit in the continued objectification of women as a group. That is: insofar as the social process of objectification is the making-objective of the male perspective according to which women are defined as sexually usable, and insofar as this process of making-objective is something which women contribute to when they conform with or embrace normative standards of femininity, women are thereby complicit in the oppression of women facilitated by the objectivising of these standards.

Despite the subjectivising effects of heteronormativity, however, resistance is possible. Since masculinity and femininity are contingent identities whose seemingly essential nature is merely an ideological prop, our attachment to them is also contingent – though it is a contingency which is masked by the way in which we develop habits of gender. These habits allow us to navigate with greater ease a world which expects masculinity and femininity of us, and thus constitute some of the main sites through which we interact with the world. Yet our habits of gender do not succeed in insulating us fully from the radical contingency of masculinity and femininity; we confront this contingency whenever we fail, or are at risk of failing, to enact our gender in a convincing manner, and it makes itself known to us in anxiety. This anxiety discloses the possible ways of being and doing from which we are excluded by conforming to heteronormative expectations, and can thus provide the motivation for engaging with practices aimed at relinquishing our existing habits of gender, and acquiring new modes of engaging with the world. Crucially, such practices constitute practices of resistance to complicity: to cultivate new modes of engagement with the world is to contribute to the production of a social world freed from the constraints of heteronormativity, and the oppression of women it facilitates.

With this outline in place, we can now turn to the first of the two questions regarding the possibility of solidary relationships outlined above: what are the mechanisms of oppression that are perpetuating the domination of the group in question and, further what is it about how these mechanisms operate that makes collective resistance, in the form of mutual solidary obligations, a necessary or effective tactic for fighting them?

The answer to the first part of this question, I think, should be clear from the foregoing summary. The mechanism perpetuating the oppressive treatment of women as sexual objects is the reproduction of a social world which defines women according to their

sexual use by men. This reproduction occurs in part through the exercise of male force, through which women are coerced – by individual men, and by the structures and institutions which serve their interests - to comply with the expectations of femininity, and punished when they fail to do so. But it also occurs through the acceptance of these expectations by women – through women embracing the standards of normative femininity and seeking to live up to them.[48]

This offers an answer to the second part of the question, concerning the role collective resistance and mutual solidary relationships between women have in fighting against their sexual objectification. If the social world which facilitates the objectification of women is reproduced, in part, through the complicity of women themselves, then women working together to collectively resist this complicity will be an effective tactic for undermining the sexual objectification of women. That is, by working in concert with others to resist conformity with the expectations of normative femininity, women will thereby contribute *negatively* to the making-real of the male perspective – by cultivating ways of being and doing which do undermine the legitimacy of heteronormativity's claims to necessity. This work must be collective, for a number of reasons. As we have seen, other people provide important inspiration and instruction to us in our efforts to cultivate new ways of being and doing; they also provide us with a crucial source of support in our efforts, creating a community in which our efforts to transform ourselves are acknowledged. Having comrades in the process of disappointing the expectations of heteronormativity also spreads the associated risks and makes us, in a real way, safer. More than simply enabling individual processes of self-transformation, however, resistance to heteronormativity must also be collective if it is to be truly transformative of society. Since the norms of masculinity and femininity are reproduced through the gender performances of individuals, this reproduction will only be undermined or subverted in any substantial way if enough people resist conforming with them, and act out different identities. There must be something like a critical mass of individual self-transformation, in other words, for the heteronormative logic of society as a whole to be affected – otherwise, small scale resistance can be absorbed into the prevailing ideology, explained away as exceptions which prove the rules. If the social logic of heteronormativity is to be fought and overcome, therefore, collective resistance on the

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[48] This is not to deny that part of what secures the reproduction of gender are material requirements of capitalist society; but it is to say that, insofar as gender identities are lived, embodied and deeply ingrained parts of ourselves, they are not reducible the effects of capitalism.

part of women, in the form of cooperative attempts at self (and group) transformation, will be essential.

Having clarified the mechanisms of oppression at play in the sexual objectification of women, and the role of collective resistance on the part of women in fighting it, we can now turn to the second question outlined above. This question, recall, asks after the motivational prerequisites of solidary relationships: what about the specific mechanisms of oppression of a group is generative of the kind of relationships which can motivate mutual sacrifice in the name of collective resistance?

It is at this point that it becomes possible to see how the first premise of the feminist argument against solidarity – that solidarity derives its political potency from some kind of pre-existing affective bonds between group members – can be accepted, without having to accept the second premise – that these bonds must be generated through some substantive, matter-of-fact common ground between group members. The theory of sexual objectification I have developed, I maintain, offers the basis of an account of solidarity-generating relationships between women which are grounded through the mechanisms of oppression, but which do not presuppose any substantive common ground between women. Feminists anxious about the harmful effects of calls for solidarity between women neglect this possible way of approaching the issue, I believe, because they presume that the only way to conceptualise women as bonded through oppression is to posit some common features of women's experience of oppression (thus supposing a false essentialism). My approach, by contrast, suggests a different way of thinking about the bonds oppression creates between women: bonds of complicity – or, more specifically bonds of potential complicity, which can be taken up in a solidary manner.

These bonds, I submit, are implicit in the essentially other-regarding nature of gender performance. Gender identities, remember, are developed through our repeated attempts to perform our prescribed gender according to the ideologically naturalised and essentially unattainable standards of masculinity and femininity. These standards function as unsubstantiated orientation points – empty signifiers, if you will – against which we measure our own gender performance, and those of others; yet they are not embodied by anyone, since they are necessarily unfulfillable; and their content – what counts as the zenith of masculinity of femininity towards which we strive – can change. Because of this, being-gendered is something which only makes sense, is only possible,

when it is done with reference to gendered others in a shared social world; we only develop a sense of our own femininity through the concrete attempts at femininity manifested by other women's attempts to perform their gender. This is a complicated way of expressing what is quite obvious in our own experience: the extent to which I judge my appearance, for example, to satisfy the demands of being a woman is something I assess by comparison with other women's appearances, and the social value placed on them.

Femininity, then, is something which one constitutively has and does, with and through other women.[49] What this means is that women, in their gendered existence, are always already connected to each other; and this connection, moreover, is always already normative. The basis of heteronormativity, after all, is the erection of standards of masculinity and femininity; there is no normative neutrality to being-gendered. This normative interconnectedness, I have argued, is the foundation of women's complicity in their continued sexual objectification. The social norms and expectations which facilitate the day-to-day objectification of women – the norms of femininity and masculinity - gain strength and credibility the more they are conformed with. When women uphold these norms by performing their gender, as far as possible, in accordance with them, this makes them complicit in the objectification of women as a group facilitated by these norms.

Here, however, we come to the crucial point: the very same normative interconnectedness which makes women liable to be complicit in their continued objectification is also, by the same token, the precondition for solidary relationships between women. If women's conformity with the norms and expectations of femininity serves to strengthen their justificatory power when it comes to the objectifying treatment of women, their resistance to such conformity can diminish this justificatory power, and create normative resources through which objectification can be resisted. In other words, insofar as women's success and failures of being-gendered are intimately bound up with one another, these intimate connections can be the source of both complicity – which

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[49] I am not suggesting, of course, that men (and indeed institutions) do not also play an important role in the concretisation of femininity in the world; women (straight women in particular) certainly navigate and assess their femininity with and through the men in their social environment – heteronormative masculinity, after all, is the foil to femininity. What I am saying, however, is that, in terms of the practices of taking femininity up – the movements, styles of embodiment, manners of speaking etc. – other women serve as the principle points of reference for women in this task.

compounds the normative expectations on other women – or solidarity – which mitigates this burden and opens up new possibilities.

It should be possible to see, now, how the premise that solidarity relationships derive their political potency from some kind of pre-existing affective bonds, can be accepted without the having to accept the premise that these bonds must be generated by substantive common ground. On the account I have outlined, there are, indeed, affective bonds between women, which pre-exist any political cooperation. But these bonds are not generated by, nor are they dependent on, any substantive common-ground or shared experience between women. Rather, they inhere purely in virtue of the fact that the activity of being-gendered is one undertaken with, and through, others. This interconnectedness bonds women, and these bonds are affective – insofar as the experience of being-gendered, and of failing to be sufficiently gendered, is, as we have seen, affectively laden from the outset. But it does not follow from this that we must posit any substantive commonality between the *content* of women's individual experiences of being a woman. In other words, we remain free to acknowledge that women's experiences as women will be differentiated by factors like race, class, sexuality and so forth, to such a great extent that there may be no common kernel of 'womanhood' that they all share – whilst at the same time maintaining that, in virtue of their implication in the mechanisms through which the very idea of 'woman' is perpetuated, they share affective bonds with the potential to generate mutual obligations of resistance.

This account, I believe, reconciles the anti-essentialist imperatives of contemporary feminist commitments with the idea that solidary relationships between women have a specific potency – thereby combining the best insights from both the ICG and UTA accounts of solidarity. The anti-essentialist imperative, recall, has two dimensions: we must avoid eliding the differences that factors such as race, class and sexuality make to women's experiences, and we must also avoid reifying the category of 'women' in such a way that strengthens, rather than destabilises, it. The model of solidarity *contra* complicity, I believe, satisfies both these conditions. Not only does it avoid appealing to any idea of a substantive commonality to women's experiences of womanhood, but it secures this avoidance by conceptualising the idea of 'woman' as an illusory and unattainable orientation point which directs women's actions. What this achieves is a shift of focus, from the *content* of being-a-woman, to the *process* of being-a-woman; women are connected through their role in this process, not because there are any necessary universal features of their experiences of the process. This focus on the

dynamics of the social process of gendering thus avoids reifying the category of 'women,' since it is grounded in an understanding of gender as inherently contingent and contestable.[50]

The focus on the role of women in the process of maintaining the idea of 'woman' is also what allows us to account for the fact that there is something especially important, and politically potent, about solidary relationships between women (over and above the simple collective power of any group of people working together for a common cause). What makes feminist solidarity between women distinctive, and efficacious, is their interconnectedness in this process of being-gendered - and the possibilities for collective resistance, in the form of mutual self-transformation, that this interconnectedness affords. In this way, the model of solidarity *contra* complicity explicates the particular political efficacy of solidarity relationships between women in a similar way to the ICG approaches, like Zack's, which posit a purely relational 'essence' of womanhood. The crucial difference, however, is that this relationality is not posited in the model of solidarity *contra* complicity as that which makes women women. It is the connectedness itself which bonds women affectively and has the potential to generate solidary relationships – not any womanly identity, or essence, hypothesised on the basis of this interconnectedness. The model of solidarity *contra* complicity, in other words, focuses exclusively on what women *do* in taking up their gender, and how they do this always with respect to one another; it does not use this account of what women do to posit some kind of account of what women *are*.

Of course, the idea that those who identify with, or are identified with, the label 'woman' are systematically on the receiving end of harmful, unjust, exploitative and violent treatment still forms an important part of this account of sexual objectification; the idea that the widespread sexual objectification of women is a real and pressing social phenomenon is, after all, what generates the normative bite of the charge of complicity in my account. And this most basic intuition that there are real and existing, if varied and diverse, phenomena which are symptomatic in some way of the systematic oppression of women in our social world is amenable to all but the most radical of intersectional

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[50] Indeed, the fact that the model of solidarity *contra* complicity is grounded in Butler's performative theory of gender, in itself, counts against the reification worry, given that Butler herself is one of the foremost proponents of the reification objection to feminist solidarity.

approaches.[51] But this preliminary identification of apparent symptoms of women's oppression need not, I submit, commit us to the claim that all women share a common experience of oppression. To draw on the explanatory framework of critical theory once again, in the process of identifying, diagnosing and ascertaining possible remedies for social pathologies, we needn't take the symptoms which initially draw our attention to be exhaustive of the pathology we diagnose – we can even allow that our preliminary symptomology might miss some important symptoms, or include erroneous phenomena. The benefit of thinking in terms of pathologies of the social world is that it allows us to make a distinction between the manifestations of systematic social problems that we encounter in our world, and the causes or explanations of these problems. This allows us to use the preliminary observation that women seem to regularly be on the receiving end of sexually objectifying treatment in order to diagnose the reproduction of heteronormative gender as the mechanism which facilitates this treatment – and then, importantly, use our diagnosis of these mechanisms to refine our understanding of the kinds of harms generated by them.

This move from symptomology to aetiology has important benefits in terms of doing feminism intersectionally. For example, it might be that my preliminary investigation into the problem of sexual objectification is prompted by my perception of what shows up to me as explicit examples of women being sexualised, such as the display of sexualised images of women in newspapers. Without a systematic investigation into the mechanisms which reproduce this phenomenon, however, my feminist critique of sexual objectification might stay trained onto these kinds of hyper-sexualising phenomena in a way which is uncritical of the fact that my perception of them is inflected by class – an inflection which makes me more sensitive to the objectifying nature of these phenomena and less critical of way in which my own (middle-class) practices also reproduce normative femininity. Our perception of the phenomenon the sexual objectification, in other words, can be refined by the process of inquiring into what mechanisms truly underpin the reproduction of the phenomena which make themselves most immediately apparent to us; this, in turn, allows us to better understand the true diversity of ways in which the imperative to perform femininity affects women differently according to their race, class, sexuality and so on. And this understanding is crucial for navigating

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[51] I am thinking here of something like María Lugones's argument that women are so differentiated by their respective roles in the colonised/coloniser relationship that they have fundamentally different genders (2007).

expectations of solidarity between differently situated women, since it allows us to understand the different spaces (physical and symbolic) for resistance to normative femininity afforded to women by their race, class and so on.

Conclusion:
A lifeline for radical feminist solidarity?

I began this chapter by outlining the objection often levelled against MacKinnon's feminist theory, that despite her repudiation of any biological foundation of femininity, she remains an essentialist insofar as she posits a universal experience of sexist oppression amongst women. Her response to this objection – that her theory is built from women's experiences in all their variance and specificity – does not stand up against the body of intersectional feminism which denies such a cohesiveness to the experience of being a woman. If this is an intractable objection to MacKinnon's radical feminism, then it becomes a problem for the account of sexual objectification that I have developed in this thesis, to the extent that it is grounded in MacKinnon's work – unless I can show either that the objection does not deal such a deadly blow to MacKinnon after all, or that my appropriation of her work is not vulnerable to the same objection. The argument I have presented in this chapter, I believe, establishes the latter - though I hope it goes some way toward establishing the former, too.

In this chapter, I have argued that existing feminist approaches to salvaging the notion of solidarity from the feminist critiques levelled against it are both inadequate to the task of reconciling the need for an account of the particular potency of feminist solidary relationships between women with the requirements of a truly anti-essentialist feminism. The *Inclusive Common Ground* approach grounds political efficacy at the expense of anti-essentialism; the *Unity Through Action* approach prioritises the anti-essentialist imperative at the expense of explicating what is distinctive, and important, about feminist solidarity between women. This seeming double-bind arises, I have argued, because both approaches presume that the kind of affective bonds which underpin appeals to solidarity in the traditional sense can only be grounded in substantive common ground between members of the solidary group. But this presumption is erroneous; it arises because both the ICG and UTA approaches fail to interrogate the question of common ground between women in relation to an account of the specific mechanism of

oppression to be fought. Because of this, they miss the possibility that we can account for the fact that women are bonded through their oppression in such a way which generates no substantive common ground, or essence, between them, but which nonetheless can be the foundation for solidary relationships.

My account of sexual objectification offers one such possibility. On my account, sexual objectification is reconceived as an effect of the social process through which heteronormative gender is created, legitimised and reproduced – a process in which women, as agents who reproduce normative femininity, can be complicit. This allows us to conceive of women as connected not through any particular content of being-a-woman, nor any specific experiences of being oppressed *as* a woman, but rather through the process of reproducing heteronormative gender in which they participate. Women are thus connected through what they *do*, not what they *are*; the specificity of the interconnectedness of women comes from the other-regarding nature of gender – that is, the fact that it is something we do with, and through, other people.

This allows us to posit that there is something specific, and especially politically potent, about the kinds of projects of collective resistance against heteronormativity that women can engage in, and the kind of solidary relationships which undergird these projects, without also positing that women must therefore share some essential experiences of being a woman, or being oppressed as a woman. In this way, I believe, my reconfiguration of MacKinnon's account of sexual objectification in terms of complicity generates a theory of feminist solidarity which explicates the political potency of solidary relationships between women, whilst at the same time accommodating the radical anti-essentialist commitments of contemporary feminism. Whether or not this strategy would also be a viable option for MacKinnon to defend herself and her unmodified feminism against her intersectional detractors depends on whether or not she would be willing to amend her conviction that the experience of sexual objectification is something that all women do, as a matter of fact, share.

Concluding thoughts

> Think the determinism of structural force and the possibility of freedom at the same time […] invent the capacity to act.[1]

In this thesis, I have proposed a new theoretical framework for feminist critiques of sexual objectification. The current paradigm in theories of objectification, I have argued, fundamentally misdiagnoses the phenomenon of sexual objectification as a feature of interpersonal interactions, which means that it can only call upon the individualistic (and much-maligned) standard of consent to demarcate the appropriate limits of feminist critiques of sexual objectification. MacKinnon's socio-structural theory of sexual objectification, by contrast, not only provides a more convincing explanation of the kinds of phenomena with which feminist critiques of objectification have typically been concerned, but also, I have shown, generates a new ground for feminist critique: that is, the fact that women themselves can be, and often are, complicit in perpetuating the sexual objectification of women as a group. The basis of this complicity is conformity with the norms and expectations of femininity; such conformity acts as 'evidence' in support of the ideological construct of a natural gender binary, and thereby contributes to the power this ideology wields against other women. By the same token, however, it is important to acknowledge that women develop deep attachments to normative femininity as a result of this power. In order to account for this, I advanced a phenomenological interpretation of Butler's performative theory of gender, in which our attachment to our gender identities is conceived in terms of our habitual ways of being and doing, resistance to which amounts to a process of self-transformation. In this way, it becomes possible to recognise the difficulty of the task of resisting conformity with normative femininity, whilst at the same time maintaining that it is something which is possible for women to do. Finally, I used the analysis of sexual objectification in terms of complicity to suggest a possible defence for MacKinnon (and myself) against the charge that her account of sexual objectification necessarily presupposes a common experience of oppression amongst diversely situated women.

In making this argument, I have made a number of contributions to specific discussions in the areas of feminist theory, ethics and social and political philosophy. Firstly, my reinterpretation of MacKinnon's theory of sexual objectification reveals a much higher

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[1] MacKinnon 1987: 9.

degree of synergy between her radical feminism and the post-Foucaultian feminism which has gained so much traction in recent years. As such, it not only suggests that a reappraisal of the political potential of radical feminism might be in order, but also that radical feminist insights might be usefully employed to answer some of the questions to which post-Foucaultian feminisms have sometimes struggled to find answers – for example, where does the motivation to resist power come from? How can we think critically about sexuality, and its implication in women's oppression, without reifying it?

Secondly, my account of the nature of women's complicity in their continued sexual objectification makes important contributions to both the existing literature in moral and political philosophy on complicity, and to the diverse range of literature on oppression found in feminism, critical race theory, decolonial theory and Marxist theory. To the literature on complicity, I add an analysis of an important social phenomenon which resists capture by the theories of complicity advanced in existing discussions of the phenomenon, which points to the need for an account of the basis of complicity which is neither fully causal nor wholly teleological, but rather acknowledges the role of both of these elements in the implication of the individual in the reproduction of the shared social world. To the literature on oppression, this new account of the basis of social complicity adds an important means of clarifying the oft-expressed intuition that members of oppressed groups can be complicit in the oppression of their group. The extent to which each of these intuitions can be accounted for using my theory of constitutive complicity also provides a new and interesting way of thinking about the differences between the mechanisms which underpin different forms of oppression.

Thirdly, the phenomenological interpretation of Butler's performative theory of gender that I offer in chapter four provides an important new contribution to discussions in contemporary feminism – and feminist critical theory in particular – about how the possibility of resistance to gender can be reconciled with gender's subjectivising force. Specifically, my re-framing of gender in terms of habit complements Amy Allen's psychoanalytic account of gender in terms of subjection, by providing new insights into feminist resistance to normative femininity – that is, by explaining how practices of collective self-transformation can help us to relinquish our current habits of femininity and cultivate new ones.

Finally, my use of the framework of complicity to analyse the existing feminist literature on solidarity charts a new direction for navigating the anti-essentialist imperatives of

contemporary feminist thought in a way which preserves the insight that solidarity between women is powerful, and important. I have shown that, by refocusing on accurately diagnosing the mechanisms which perpetuate women's oppression, we can derive both an account of the specific role that collective resistance on the part of women has in combatting these mechanisms, and an account of the pre-existing affective bonds between women which motivate this resistance – all without having to appeal to some kind of matter-of-fact common ground between diversely situated women.

In addition to these specific contributions, however, I believe that this thesis as a whole also makes two other important contributions, which indicate areas for future research. The first contribution concerns the intersection between feminist philosophy and critical theory in the Frankfurt School tradition. At points in this thesis, I have made use of the social pathology framework employed by critical theorists to explicate the relationship between different aspects of feminist analysis (observation of symptoms of oppression, diagnosis of mechanisms which perpetuate oppression, identification of remedies for oppression). My analysis of the phenomenon of sexual objectification has revealed heteronormative gender as the social logic whose reproduction facilitates the harm of objectification of women throughout society. Heteronormativity, in other words, is revealed as the social ill – or pathology – of which things like street harassment and hyper-sexualisation are the symptoms. Whilst a number of critical theorists have done a great deal of work on gendering the theoretical insights of the Frankfurt School, however, the idea that heteronormative gender as such could be fruitfully understood as a social pathology has yet to be systematically explored.

Therefore, I believe a future research project aimed at assessing the extent to which gender can be conceptualised as a social pathology, in Frankfurt School terms, could yield important insights for both feminism and critical theory. The framework of symptomatology, aetiology, epidemiology and prognosis could, I think, be usefully employed to capture the constellation of social phenomena associated with gender - as I have shown in this thesis with the specific phenomenon of sexual objectification. Further, I will argue that conceptualising the phenomenon of gender in this way allows us to best understand the way in which a range of social ills are symptoms of a pervasive heteronormative logic, and thus share the same root cause – which gives us reasons for preferring some forms of gender politics – ones which emphasise the need to derigidify, subvert and ultimately overcome gender - over others. Conversely, I believe that critical

theorists can learn some useful lessons for their conceptualisation of social pathology from thinking of gender as social pathology. Feminist theory contains rich resources for answering questions of particular importance for critical social theory and the diagnosis of social pathologies: how is domination internalised, and how is socially caused suffering rendered invisible? What role do our bodies, desires and modes of affectedness play in reproducing social domination? What are the limits of rational remedies for overcoming deeply entrenched forms of domination? Drawing on feminist answers to these questions could enrich critical theory's resources for diagnosing and seeking treatment for social pathologies – and also expose some of the features of the tradition's account of social pathology which may be in need of reconsideration (for example, the idea of pathologies as tending towards catastrophic end-states rather than as enduring over time, or the extent to which pathologies have the capitalist mode of production as their root cause).

The second overarching contribution made by this thesis as a whole is more far-reaching and amorphous, though perhaps even more important for feminist philosophy. It concerns the underlying philosophical framework employed by feminists to theorise women's agential capacities in light of their oppressive circumstances. To bring this contribution into view, I will briefly return to the way I which I situated this project in the Introduction.

At the beginning of the thesis, I set out what I take to be the basic tension animating much feminist thought, between acknowledging the structural, constraining force of oppression on the one hand, and the need to preserve the conceptual space to endow women with the capacity for meaningful agency, on the other. The intersection of these two concerns, I suggested, demarcates four conceptual approaches to understanding agency and responsibility for women under conditions of oppression. The two most easily recognisable of these approaches are typified by the radical feminism of the second-wave and the post-feminist feminism characteristic of neoliberal discourse. For the radical feminist, the undeniable fact of the structural and systematic oppression of women leads to a conceptualisation of female agency as defined by victimhood and powerlessness. For the neoliberal feminist, the need to recognise women as agents who are responsible for their actions rules out the possibility of acknowledging the extent to which sexist oppression limits women's freedoms and affects the choices they make. Thus, although these ideological frameworks are poles apart in most respects, they share the conviction that the fact of structural oppression negates the possibility of meaningful

agency and the capacity to take responsibility for one's actions. Both approaches, then, agree on what Susan Wendell has characterised as the apparent incompatibility of the 'causal picture' and the 'agency picture':

> In the causal picture, we see people (including ourselves) and their actions as part of a larger social system of causes and effects, which includes women's oppression. We can, to some extent, explain and predict people's actions on the basis of our knowledge of this system and of people's positions in it. In the agency picture, we see ourselves and others as capable of change, capable of gaining power in our lives and of choosing the future, which is open and undecided. Many people [including radical feminists and neoliberal feminists] believe that these two pictures are incompatible and that they must choose between them.[2]

I take the third approach I outlined to be typified by the kind of liberal, empowerment-centred feminism which has largely dominated the recent, so-called fourth-wave. This approach seeks to reconcile agency and oppression by affirming women as the authority of their own best interests, whilst refusing to hold them responsible for the political consequences of their choices – that is, affirming autonomy but denying culpability. Whilst this is approach makes some progress on overcoming the polarisation between radical and neoliberal feminists, insofar as it attempts to reconcile systematic oppression with agency in some way, I suggested that feminism would do better to explore the fourth conceptual space demarcated by tension between oppression and agency: that is, an approach which acknowledges the constraining force of oppression on women's choices and actions, but which affirms them as agents in virtue of their responsibility for the political impact of these choices and actions.

The overarching objective of this thesis, then, has been to argue that a proper understanding of the mechanisms which perpetuate women's sexual objectification should compel us to recognise this 'fourth way' as the right account of the situation women find themselves in as agents. Since the basic shape of this approach is so intuitively unappealing – seemingly: deny that women are free, but hold them responsible anyway – the argument of this thesis has been primarily aimed at articulating its plausibility as an account of women's situation, and going some way to defend its political consequences. My strategy, in other words, has been to work immanently; to

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[2] Wendell 1990: 17.

show that the kinds of phenomena feminists are concerned with require us, despite what our political intuitions tell us, to think in these terms. Because of this strategy, I have not been able to offer any substantive philosophical consideration of the kinds of notions of agency and responsibility which underpin the 'fourth way' feminism that I am advocating a move towards, nor an account of the particular reconciliation between oppression and agency that I envisage this fourth way to achieve. By way of conclusion, therefore, I want to offer some brief considerations about how future research might work towards articulating the specific account of agency and political responsibility under conditions of oppression which is set up by this thesis – and, specifically, how the reconciliation between agency and oppression that it points towards differs from other attempts to mediate between the extreme positions characterised by radical feminism and neoliberal 'post-feminism.'

Let me, first of all, briefly recount how the conceptual parameters of the 'fourth way' framework are demarcated by what I have established in the preceding chapters. The two commitments of the fourth way – that women's choices are rendered unfree by their structural oppression, but that they are responsible for the political impact of these choices – are entailed by two of the key claims I have established in this thesis. The first of these claims is that a proper understanding of sexual objectification makes the question of the complicit role women play in their own objectification unavoidable. If the kinds of phenomena with which feminists are typically concerned when they talk about sexual objectification – sexual harassment and cat-calling, for instance – are facilitated, and indeed even partially constituted by, the heteronormative social context in which they take place, then asking after what or who is responsible for objectification must *in part* require asking after who is responsible for this social context. If, then, we understand gender as a social construct perpetuated and entrenched by the continual re-citation of certain norms and ideals, we must admit of the fact that women, as well as men, can play a role in this perpetuation; and we must also recognise that this perpetuation constitutes a kind of complicity in sexual objectification, insofar as a heteronormative social context is the precondition for individual acts of objectification. The second claim is that the nature of gender as a habitual performance is such that women – and, of course, men – develop deep attachments to the ways of doing, being and feeling that are prescribed by their gender identity. Gender identities are thus radically contingent, as Butler suggests, but also deeply implicated in our self-identities and the ways in which we encounter the world. The task of resisting heteronormative

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gender identities, therefore, amounts to a kind of practice of self-transformation - a coming-to-awareness of our habitual ways of being, doing and feeling and a gradual cultivation of new habits.

From these two claims, then, we get an account of the sexual objectification of women which appears to generate two conflicting normative criteria for how, as feminists, we should respond to the phenomenon. On the one hand, we must respond robustly to the normative implications of the fact of complicity; that is, our response must do justice to the role women play in perpetuating the sexual objectification of other women and respond with the appropriate level of ethico-political obligation. On the other hand, our response must be sufficiently sensitive to the *nature* of the way in which women are implicated in the oppression of one another; that is, it must do justice to the complexities of gender as a form of subjectivisation, and the attendant challenges of theorising resistance.

Now, one way to think about the task of constructing a feminist response to the problem of sexual objectification is as one of *balancing* these two considerations. On this approach, the task is to successfully navigate a path between these two criteria, in a way that avoids erring too much on the side of either untenable extreme. If we put too much weight on the imperative to respond normatively to the fact of complicity, we risk falling into the trap of neoliberal feminism– blaming women for their oppression, neglecting the significance of structural factors, failing to pay attention to the ways in which they are drawn into complicity. Conversely, if we emphasise too much the way in which complicity is a product of subjectivisation, we risk failing to accord women any substantive agency, conceptualising them as mere products of their oppressive circumstances – thereby giving up on the possibility of a rigorous ethico-political obligation for resistance. Responding in a feminist way to the problem of sexual objectification, on this interpretation, thus means finding the appropriate middle-point between the 'causal picture' and the 'agency picture' characterised by Wendell. It does not, crucially, mean questioning the idea that these two pictures are essentially in tension with each other.

The problem with this way of approaching the task, however, is that it necessarily means compromising our analysis of the phenomenon in order to fit the pre-determined parameters of our ideas about what it means to have agency. A proper understanding of the phenomenon of sexual objectification, as I have shown, reveals *both* that women can

be complicit in the harm done to other women through objectification, *and* that this complicity is a product of a process of subjectivisation. In order to accommodate both of these claims together within a paradigm of agency which holds that being ethically or politically responsible requires that one's choices and actions be relatively self-determined, we end up having to dilute the strength of one, or both, of the claims. Yet it is unclear why we should take this course of action, instead of questioning the model of agency that we are working with. Why should we shoehorn our thoroughgoing analysis of a complex social phenomenon such as sexual objectification into a pre-existing model of agency, when our analysis seems to suggest that this model is inadequate to the task? To continue to see agency and social constitution as in tension, to my mind, is to cleave to a theoretical framework whose fundamental presuppositions cannot do justice to the phenomena we seek to explain.

A better approach, I suggest, would be to begin by taking seriously the analysis of the phenomenon of sexual objectification developed here, and attempt to reconstruct the account of agency it seems to present us with – bracketing what we think we already know about the tension between agency and social constitution. This means starting with the crucial insight that the two conclusions of the analysis – that women are both complicit in, and victims of, oppression - both result from the same structural account of sexual objectification. That is, understanding sexual objectification as the social process of making gender real is the precondition both of seeing the complicitous role women can play in perpetuating this process, and of understanding the way in which gender as a form of subjectivisation constitutes women as agents, and shapes their desires, choices and actions. Complicity and subjectivisation are co-genetic: they both emanate from the structural, iterative nature of gender.

Tentatively, then, I suggest that we can usefully characterise the situation of women under conditions of oppression as one of being an agent *of* the social world. This formulation conveys both the fact that women's agency is *of* the world – in the sense that it is constituted through, and shaped by, the particularities of the social world – and that women are (some of) the *agents* of this same world – in the sense that they are part of how this world is reproduced. But most importantly, it also conveys the fact that these two meanings are bound up together, as two sides of the same coin. In other words, rather than showing how women have the capacity to act on the world *despite* the fact that they are constructed by this world, this formulation posits that women's capacity to act on the world is *derived from* the fact that they are of the world.

Concluding thoughts

Future research directed towards expanding this insight could, I think, be an important conceptual intervention into feminist philosophy. It would shift quite fundamentally the existing parameters in which feminists seek to reconcile the fact of sexist oppression with the recognition of women as agents. We would no longer have to understand the fact of sexist oppression as something which limits or restricts women's agential capacities; rather, we could understand it as a feature of the social world which structures the specific way in which women are agents of the world, and the particular challenges this concretisation of agency poses. Our primary point of philosophical problematisation, in other words, would not be 'Do women have agency under conditions of oppression?' but instead 'In what way are women agents of the social world in which they are oppressed – and what does this mean for practices of feminist resistance to oppression?'

In this way, I think, the end-point of this thesis presents a promising new starting point from which feminism could renew its long-standing efforts to 'think the determinism of structural force and the possibility of freedom at the same time.'

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