

INTERVENTIONS IN WOMAN AS SPECTACLE: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF
DESIRE IN LATE CAPITALIST SOCIETIES

by

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A THESIS

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ABSTRACT

How do we discuss female sexual empowerment *as feminists* in this third wave political moment given the multiplicity of female sexual desires and the multiplicity of women's identities? To what degree can women make spectacles out of themselves and such a project be read as transgressive? This thesis examines debates surrounding feminist visions of female sexualities. The project questions the concept of desire as a self producing entity resistant to social critique in late capitalist contexts and examines how desire has replaced labor as commodity in late capitalist societies. It shifts the discussion on desire away from conceptions of it as autonomous performance and towards materialist feminist understandings of desire as materially produced. Must desire be historicized in the third wave political moment? Besides addressing these questions, this thesis attempts to radically divorce desire, lust, and pleasure from biological, ahistorical, free-standing conceptualizations and view them as historically and culturally constructed rather than as natural, trans-cultural phenomena. This thesis is a nexus of conversations between materialist feminists and poststructuralist feminists to better understand critiques of western sex radical movements as well as the tension regarding where the economic and the discursive belong in politics of revolt. This thesis attempts to reclaim a radical sense of sexual ethics in feminism. To this end, this project engages feminist discussions concerning sexual freedom and sexual justice.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, my grandparents, and the rest of my family. I thank my mother for her unconditional love, advice, and friendship. To Nanny, you continue to be the inspiration for all of my academic work. I love and appreciate you infinitely. And to Daddy, you taught me to refuse to give up or give in, to be compassionate and value myself. You primed me for feminism and rendered me receptive to all movements for social justice whether that was your intention or not. Without the love, encouragement, and sacrifices of these people, this thesis would not have been possible.

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INTRODUCTION

A feminist analysis of sexuality begins with the assumption that “all human interaction is gendered, such that any understanding of sex, as well as art, science, law, education, and the family requires an analysis of how such institutions are influenced by femininity and masculinity” (Lemoncheck 10). Sexuality—our desires and the pleasures we experience in the satisfaction of those desires in this context are not natural, ahistorical phenomena but instead should be located within institutional structures that are regulated and regulate subjects. Dominant culture treats heterosexual male desires as natural, ahistorical phenomena. This rhetoric and ideology of “naturalness” is how male heterosexual desire gets situated as the dominant desire around which all other “deviant” desires must pivot. Luce Irigaray describes the currently under-theorized ground of female sexuality in the following way: “Woman, in this sexual imaginary, is only more or less an obliging prop for the enactment of man’s fantasies. That she may find pleasure there in that role, by proxy, is possible, even certain. But such pleasure is above all a masochistic prostitution of her body to a desire that is not her own, and it leaves her in a familiar state of dependency upon man” (Irigaray 250). It is my contention that feminine and queer desires have yet to be fully and richly articulated, represented, and valued in dominant culture and media to provide a counterpoint to naturalized male desire. As Irigaray points out, “if woman is asked to sustain, to revive, man’s desire, the request neglects to spell out what it implies as to the value of her own desire. A desire of which she is not aware. . . . But

one whose force and continuity are capable of nurturing repeatedly and at length all the masquerades of ‘femininity’ that are expected of her” (Irigaray 251). This “her” that Irigaray addresses need not necessarily engage the heterosexual female subject of desire, for the ways that lesbian bodies and sexuality have been manufactured for the male gaze has at length been documented (Jenefsky 375-376).

While it may be argued that one male culture does not exist, I argue that in the United States although different races and classes of men have different access to power due to racism and classism in a racist capitalist system, the perceived male right of access to women’s bodies transcends racial and class lines, although which women’s bodies are available to which men does vary along racial and class lines (Dines 90). This does not mean, however, that males are able to have their desires satiated in the same ways because they have differing degrees of racial and class privilege (90). Also differences in race and class can translate into differences in desires as both Gail Dines and Laura Kipnes point out in their respective articles “King Kong and the White Woman: *Hustler* Magazine and the Demonization of Black Masculinity” and “(Male) Desire and (Female) Disgust” (Kipnis 102-105). Working class men may utilize *Hustler* (marketed to blue collar men) over *Playboy* (marketed to White collar men) and may be less likely to afford an escort service than their wealthy male counterparts for example, but would still be socialized to believe that it is their male right to be able to buy access to female sexual services as a result of male privilege (Dines 90 and 93). This male privilege to sexual satisfaction does not extend simply to the exchange of sexual services but manifests also in heterosexual marriage and non-marital relationships. Sexual services will be defined broadly as the right to gaze as in soft or hard core pornography or stripping to the right to engage sexually as in prostitution. Melinda Veda states that “[i]f there is... a necessary connection between

pornography and women's inequality, the call for pro-equality or pro woman is a call for the impossible" (Vedas 175). For this thesis I hope to illuminate the ways that such a connection does exist. Although multiple forms of sex work are addressed in this thesis, I will be expanding Vedas' following definition of pornography to cover any condition of sex work, since her definition logically need not apply just to pornography. Vedas describes pornography as "any object, whether in appearance male, female, child, or transsexual, or part of these, or variations of these, or combinations of these, that has been manufactured to satisfy sexual desire through its sexual use or consumption as a woman" (Vedas 187). To be treated "as a woman" is to be treated as penetrable both emotionally and sexually.

It is necessary to define terms for the purpose of this thesis. The terms used to describe those feminists who are advocates of the sex industry versus those who view the sex industry as an industry that exploits women as a class, are fraught with contradictions in the fact that no term can adequately capture the complexity of either so called "side" of the debate. For example, anti-sex has been used historically to describe the feminists focused too narrowly on the danger aspects of sexuality, but this term also implies that these feminists are prudish, critical of radical female pleasure, and closed to the possibilities of exploring alternative forms of female sexuality. In contrast the term sex radical connotes a radical, politically transgressive position that replaces "outdated" feminist theories on sexuality. Pro-sex and sex positive fare no better, because they both euphemistically imply feminists who are advocates of sex which is a vague category to position oneself in. It can be argued that no feminists are anti-sex; they simply differ on what types of sex they will or will not endorse as feminist, or at least as disrupts "business as usual" to borrow Naomi Wolf's characterization of effective protest in her televised address to the Hudson Union Society (Wolf). Therefore, for the purposes of this thesis, I will use "anti-sex" when

discussing the historical feminist perspective that stresses not only suspicion of the sex industry, but also suspicion of sado-masochism, butch/femme roles, Man/boy love, and dildonics. I will use “anti-sex industry feminism” when referring to a new feminist perspective that I hope to outline which differentiates the sex industry from these other points of contestation within feminism. Only in chapter four will there be a shift in terms from “anti-sex industry feminism” to “sex-positive anti-sex industry feminism,” for I anticipate forging a space that can reconcile many of the insights of both pro-sex feminism and anti-sex industry feminism. The term “sex radicalism” will be used to describe the theoretical position within feminism that advocates sado-masochism, butch/femme roles, Man/boy love, dildonics, anonymous sex, polygamy, and sex work. The term “pro-sex” is used to emphasize specifically the pro-sex industry portion within sex radicalism. Therefore, I will use pro-sex and pro-sex industry feminism interchangeably in this thesis while differentiating between “pro-sex” feminism and “sex-radical” feminism. “Sex-positive” is used in this thesis to encompass any feminist perspective that privileges female pleasure, a position, I would argue that is ironically an agenda in both pro-sex industry and anti-sex industry feminisms. Therefore, I will not be using pro-sex and sex-positive interchangeably as is often done in pro-sex industry writings, because both anti-sex and pro-sex can claim a sex-positive perspective, although both can fail at achieving this agenda depending on context.

The literature is divided into two broad categories although subcategories that illustrate the nuances within each category will be provided as well. The first category includes sex radical writings that are informed by a post-structural theoretical underpinning. For example, Judith Butler and Luce Irigaray’s work on performativity and mimesis inform sex radical writings in *Whores and Other Feminists* and *Jane Puts it in a Box: Third Wave and Television*. Therefore, in order to deconstruct the argument made in this body of literature, the theoretical underpinnings

of this body of literature must also be challenged. The second broad category of literature will be what has historically been known as anti-sex. This body of literature is most often informed by materialist feminist accounts of sexuality such as Catherine MacKinnon's "Sexuality, Pornography and Method: Pleasure Under Patriarchy" and Rosemarie Hennessey's "Desire as a Class Act."

Chapter one provides basic background on the sexist, racist, and classist elements of the sex industry. This chapter explains that both "sides" interpret the same statistics differently. The literature in anti-sex, and pro-sex thought will be introduced in this chapter. Finally, I employ psychoanalytic theory to expose the way the sex industry naturalizes male desire, a naturalization of which is a basic tenant of anti-sex industry feminism.

Chapter two outlines the two bodies of literature for the reader, including the subcategories of sex positive and pro-sex within sex radicalism. The reason why I make the theoretical distinction between pro-sexuality and sex-radicalism is because I argue that the former, such as that presented in *Stripped* and *Loose Women, Lecherous Men: A Feminist Philosophy of Sex* often envisions various configurations of women's articulation of their individual desires without neglecting to recognize the continued importance of challenging sexist institutions in all of their manifestations. In contrast, sex radical texts such as *Bare, Whores and Other Feminists*, and *G-Strings and Sympathies* often attribute sexual empowerment on a purely individual level and mobilize politically around sexual practices, rather than other axes of difference such as gender, race, and class which can be problematic for a feminist intervention in a radical vision for a post-patriarchal world. This chapter will also refrain from presenting the anti-sex category of literature as embodying a monolithic perspective. For example, anti-sex industry feminists that believe the sex industry must always be exploitive are differentiated from

those who believe that it can be liberating in a post-patriarchal world in chapter two. Iconic anti-sex figures of the second wave such as Catherine MacKinnon are contrasted by modern reinterpretations of the anti-sex industry position that focus on the relationship between sex radicalism and queer theory.

Chapter three explores the development of pro-sexuality through the lens of queer theory. It argues that queer theory undergirds pro-sexuality and exposes the blind spots of queer theory. Another purpose of chapter three is to analyze and critique the arguments made on both so called “sides” provided in chapter two. Chapter three takes the arguments from chapter two and complicates them in order to lay the ground work for a pro-sex, anti-sex industry perspective that is informed by a collective materialist theory of sexuality in chapter four.

Chapter four moves away from the traditional pro-sex/anti-sex binary and towards a synthesized sex positive anti-sex industry perspective. Therefore, in chapter four I will attempt to sketch a brief outline of what a sex positive, anti-sex industry feminist account of sexuality might look like in order to inspire future feminist work in this direction. This collective materialist sexuality, I argue, is better described as a sex-positive, anti-sex industry perspective because it articulates the position that being sex-positive is diametrically opposed to the sex industry, contrary to what current pro-sex industry feminists espouse.

Methodologically, this thesis is a nexus of conversations between post-structuralist feminism that stresses performance, masquerade, and locates the feminist struggle within discourse, and materialist feminists who engage the political economy of desire. Whereas pro-sex feminists are indebted most often to post-structuralist theories of gender, anti-sex perspectives are generally motivated by materialist feminist concerns with the social and historical context in which sexual acts of exchange are being performed. In summary, this thesis

will move from an introduction of the literature in chapter one to arguing with the literature in chapter two and three, and concluding with my conclusions in chapter four. I anticipate arguing that the anti-sex position of claiming S/M, femme/butch lesbian roles, and dildonic play is essentially anti-feminist, is thoroughly anti-feminist in and of itself. I will argue that sex-radicalism naturalizes male desire at the expense of women's sexual empowerment and has the tendency of discounting materialist feminists' view of sex as a material construct that should be analyzed in historical context.

CHAPTER ONE

Sex work in particular is a divisive issue for feminists. According to Laura Shrage if one adopts Gayle Rubin's view of sex workers as "sexual minorities" or sexual outlaws who are fighting against the normalizing discourses of, "respectable sexualities, middle-class marital sexuality, and male sexuality" then one may be tolerant of or supportive of sex work (Shrage 81). Laura Shrage complicates Rubin's characterization of prostitution as a "less respectable" sexuality: although "prostitution is not fully respectable, some forms of it reflect or imitate mainstream sexualities in ways that are of concern to feminists. And one reason for this is that while prostitutes are marginal figures in many societies, their clients are usually not" (81).

Sex work remains of interest to feminists because there is the expectation that however male desire manifests itself there will be a subclass of women to satisfy these desires because sex work manifests itself trans-culturally. Sex work perpetuates itself through rhetoric of inevitability, the "naturalness" of human desire which completely de-genders the sex industry, ignoring the fact that the sexual desires that are satisfied are mostly male, and finally promotes itself as simply good business for women. Although prostitution is a cultural construct, as is sex, society interprets it as inevitable, because it has always existed: "as long as a patriarchal ideology prevails according to which women exist for-men, men will continue to demand prostitutes and women will continue to meet this demand [because] women are socialized to meet male sexual wants and needs" (Tong 51). As for the johns, they get a cultural nod, for, according to dominant cultural scripts, they are only satisfying their innate and insatiable male sexual desires: "Constant pop cultural references teach us that men's pornography [and

sex work] use is both inevitable and completely legitimate, and the way to be a cool, modern, liberated woman is not only tolerate it but join in” (Whisnant 16). We have never lived in a non-patriarchal society and therefore, it is difficult to imagine a world whose economic system and gender relationships do not pose the exchange of women as natural or necessary.

The Stratification of the Sex Industry

The sex industry is also stratified along racial and class lines on both the levels of supply and demand. The third wave movement was created supposedly as a rebuttal to the limitations of the second, especially the racist and classist elements supposedly overlooked by our feminist predecessors of the first and second waves. It is ironic, therefore, that the sex industry, which sex radical feminists in the third wave generally support under the umbrella term of freedom of expression, is stratified grotesquely along the lines of gender, race and class. For example, the criminal justice system discriminates by disproportionately arresting prostitutes over johns. According to Rosemarie Tong, this is because “Anglo-American thought has always expressed special sympathy for the sexual wants and needs of men, and the law’s desire to punish bad girls has often been moderated by its wish to save nice boys from harm, inconvenience, or embarrassment” (Tong 39). Further, the rhetoric of sexual liberation that is currently circulated within feminism is only applicable for a privileged few, most frequently those female sex workers that are heterosexual, feminist, educated, White, and middle-to upper class. In other words, street prostitutes are viewed as lacking intellectual capital to elitist prostitutes’ rights groups, and are therefore left out of the discourse on prostitution: “one of the major barriers to success in decriminalizing prostitution is that C.O.Y.O.T.E. [Cast Off Your Old Tired Ethics and other groups] do not generally communicate with the street prostitutes due to the stratification

between high and low-level prostitutes” (Arnold 119). Moreover, on a practical level, they do not evaluate the differences between regulating outdoor or street prostitution and indoor varieties. Juxtaposition of working class, most often street level workers, with high-class call girls as illuminated in the prostitution ring bust of which Elliot Spencer was a client, illustrate the ways that the privileged few make riches, at the expense of the impoverished.

The Emperor’s Club, an exclusive high priced escort service made famous by New York governor Eliot Spitzer’s solicitation of the prostitute Ashley Dupree, charged up to \$31,000 per day or \$1000 to \$5000 per hour (Emperors Par. 1 and 6). Its “call girls were rated with diamonds on the club’s website” and were priced accordingly with fifty girls to choose from (Par. 2). The website exposes the class stratification inherent in the sex industry, positing their prostitutes as better than the common variety available to men with “common” tastes. Men willing to pay an extravagant amount will not receive a low end street worker, but rather will be able to choose from a range of women that will be able to perform their gender in ways that appeal to the glamorized, romanticized, and exoticized fantasies of the male buyer. The binary opposition between street and indoor prostitution is perpetuated not only in the criminal justice system but in the media as well by demonizing street workers and glamorizing indoor sex workers such as those who pose for pornography or work for escort services. Potential buyers are therefore primed to be susceptible to the website’s advertisement. Street prostitutes “are at the bottom of the hierarchy of prostitutes, with women working for more commercial and organized forms of prostitution at the top” (Arnold 119). The Emperor’s VIP Club, now formally dismantled, marketed itself as “introducing the most impressive models to leading gentlemen of the world is our expertise. We specialize in introductions of: fashion models, pageant winners, and exquisite students, graduates and women of successful careers to gentlemen with exceptional standards”

(Emperors Par. 12). The advertisement continues, our “meticulous standards of beauty, intelligence and charm ensure that you always encounter the quality you’ve come to expect in a woman” (Par. 14). The government was depicted as taking action against the prostitution ring known as The Emperor’s Club due to the agency’s violation of the Mann Act; another interpretation is that the government went against the norm and targeted the Emperor’s Club, because it involved high ranking government officials and therefore became visible to the public eye in the way that street prostitution normally is. This police bust is an aberration from the norm, because research consistently shows that indoor prostitution, dominated by White women, is usually overlooked by government sanction and carries less social stigma than its street worker counterpart.

Authorities are more likely to arrest the unsightly, visible street prostitutions, largely ignoring the upper class, elitist escort services, online, “indoor” forms of prostitution that are more represented by White prostitutes. Ronald Weitzer of George Washington University encapsulates the common but erroneous view held by the largely male dominated law enforcement community: police should go after “street prostitution [because it] victimizes host communities and leaves prostitutes themselves open to victimization” and should ignore “indoor prostitution” which he argues has “has little effect on the surrounding community [and] enforcing laws against such practices involves time consuming operations that waste police resources” (Nichols Par. 12). Street prostitutes who are women of color are cheaper for law enforcement to arrest and are believed also to be “more likely to be involved in crack” (Par. 6). It is much easier to “find, arrest, and identify the street trade” because the higher-priced call girls “and their agencies employ techniques, both on the Web and in person, to make it difficult to convict them” (Par. 11).

The criminal justice system currently discriminates against prostitutes, especially those of color rather than the johns and pimps. Prostitutes comprise somewhere between 70 and 90% of arrests whereas johns comprise between 10 and 30% of arrests and pimps comprise only 1% of all prostituted related arrests (Hughes Par. 4). Chair and Professor of the women's studies department at the University of Rhode Island Donna Hughes writes that 55% of American arrests for prostitution are African American females (Par. 5). This means that all other races, minority ones and Whites included, make up the remaining 45% of arrests. Further evidence for discrimination against street prostitutes may be found in arrest rates: "Although street prostitution accounts for only 10 to 20 percent of prostitution in major cities, an estimated 80 to 90 percent of prostitution arrests are street prostitutes" (Arnold 119).

Womanist Jacqueline Monroe exposes the class differential that exists between the purchaser and the purchased. The transaction starts out between two members of unequal privilege: "The typical 'John' or customer is a White, married, male who is employed in a white collar job or a skilled trade. He also usually resides in a suburban community. The privileges that result from being White, Male, and middle class have resulted in the accomplice being granted exceptions to the law, favoritism, and the 'benefit of the doubt'" (Monroe 78). The John contrasts starkly with the prostitute that the criminal justice system focuses on punishing. She is typically poor, a member of a racial minority group, a single parent and/or of immigrant status (78). According to national statistics, in 1999, "prostitution arrests average around 100,000 per year. On average, 70% of those arrested for prostitution offenses are females and a disproportionate of this percentage tend to be African American" (78).

Jacquelyn Monroe describes the classist and racist elements of the sex industry with a focus on street level prostitution. The lived realities of street level prostitutes stand in stark

contrast to those of the relatively privileged women in higher end escort services such as the Emperor's Club, but with the latter a businessman takes a large cut of the call girl's earning whereas pimps take most or all of the street level prostitute's profit. Monroe maintains that "it has long been established that financial motives are the main reasons for many women resorting to street prostitution" (Monroe 70). She says that the realities for motivations into sex work for lower level workers do not reflect the pro-sex industry argument that prostitutes enter suddenly as adults or that they enter because street prostitution "is a profitable occupation that women freely choose" (70). Instead, "[m]ounting financial responsibility including those related to being primary providers for children appear to be a chief motivator [as well as] being unemployed, underemployed and young and homeless" (70). Moreover, "Africana-womanists contend that street prostitution is the result of a three-prong oppressive infrastructure that is racist, classist, and sexist" (71). Not all sex workers are equally stigmatized in society, in criminal justice practices, or in the media, because each sex worker starts from a different position of privilege depending on education, family background, race, and age. As Monroe states, all "sex workers are not treated the same... Enforcement strategies tend to target the most vulnerable, economically disadvantaged, and lowest ranking member of the sex trade—the street prostitute" (75). Although "street prostitutes comprise only 20-30% of the prostitute population, they are invariably pursued over the indoor sex worker" defined as massage parlors, strip clubs, escort services, or brothels (75). What's more, the social class a prostitute belongs to tends to corresponds loosely with her race. The lower class sex workers are more likely to belong to a racial or ethnic minority group. To be exact, "the majority of women chosen as escorts and brothel workers are White females. Asian women dominate massage parlors, while Latina women are found in large numbers in social clubs like strip joints and bars. African American

women, however, are disproportionately found among street sex workers” (75). Monroe concludes that a first step in resolving the gender, racial, and class inequalities endemic to prostitution would be to criminalize pimps and johns while decriminalizing prostitution for female prostitutes (83).

It is sometimes argued that the class of prostitutes itself is a minority group. However, those who argue most fervently for prostitutes’ rights are not working class prostitutes on the streets, but are rather educated, feminist theorists with little to no experience in prostitution or former prostitutes turned academic (Jeffreys 72-73). Those writing on behalf of *all* prostitutes who are prostitutes or former prostitutes are highly over-representative of educated white, wealthy call girls who self identify as feminists from middle to upper class backgrounds. However, both pro-sex and anti-sex industry feminists use the same aforementioned statistics on race and class stratification and arrive at different conclusions. The former cite these statistics as evidence for decriminalization specifically and for mainstreaming of sex work generally. In some cases the sex worker is cited as the model for today’s sexually liberated woman. The question then is by what logic has the pro-sexuality argument arrived at the conclusion that sex work is a model of sexual liberation for women? Anti-sex industry feminists often misinterpret the statistics of classism and racism to mean that feminists should support censorship or criminalization of pornography (Tong 7 and 13). The dominant response of anti-pornography feminists in modern times is education rather than government censorship. Therefore, the legal intricacies concerning whether or not sex work should be legal is considered beyond the scope of this thesis. If sex work is the best economic choice for women then that is evidence that the economic system systematically excludes women from succeeding in other ways, because clearly men who have historically had more options do not see sex work as the best choice for

them. A failing economy where “[t]hirty million Americans earn less than \$8.70 per hour which translates into an official level of poverty for a family of four” as of 2004, sets the stage for street level prostitution (Monroe 72). Most women who enter the field are not doing so out of a desire for sex, let alone from motivations to re-script gender narratives, a tactic of which is rarely even considered outside academe. Regardless of intent, women who participate in the sex industry are not breaking gender stereotypes but instead are perpetuating gender stereotypes. Most are exercising limited agency in a climate of desperation. If participating in sex work is the best choice for many individual women, then a closer examination of Andrea Dworkin’s assertion that “pornography accelerates and promotes the sexual and economic exploitation of women as a class” is necessary (Dworkin 153).

The reason sex work is a topic that continues to spark debate is because society’s hopes and anxieties about what female sexuality could be, how it is circumscribed, and its redefining potential gets displaced onto the body of the sex worker. If asked why I want to explore a topic like sex work, my response would be that sex work is the site where the battle over how women’s sexuality should be defined and who should define it becomes most obvious. For example, sex work is paradigmatic of the larger phenomenon of hypersexualization or pornification (to borrow the language of William Todd Schultz) that permeates all aspects of late capitalist western cultures. Constant pop cultural references to it (quick examples include *House*, *Moonlight*, *Satisfaction*, *Secret Diary of a Call girl*, *Heroes*, *Girls Next Door*) remind us that what some women do is increasingly glamorized as a professional choice. This is done without a critical examination of the personal choice politics behind women’s economic options in this economy or the class dynamics that might make the sex industry glamorous for a time to some women and seriously oppressive to others. These television shows portray sex work as just

another job choice equal to all other career choices, and glamorize this choice by portraying sex workers as beautiful, rich, cultured material girls who reap great rewards via their enthusiasm for pleasing men. The media typically show sex workers neatly as victims or as exploiting men. Neither representation is complex enough to capture the lives of sex workers nor why women enter sex work.

The inevitability of sex work captured by the “boys will be boys” rationale is normalized within mainstream society. Now women are represented as “choosing” to go along with their role as sex objects (see *Dreamworlds III* for example), or at least that is the story we are told in increasingly graphic music videos, music, and songs. Is this evidence of the real female sexual revolution here finally? What is interesting to note, is usually when we talk about a sexually graphic movie or music video, it is still a particular kind of female sexuality, the female body as spectacle that is on display. While grotesque female bodies on display have been named as potentially progressive, it is noteworthy that the only female bodies that are culturally sanctioned for display, appropriate traditional femininity in specific ways. The male body as vulnerable, on display, penetrable, visible is still taboo for mainstream audiences. Two questions central to unraveling the politics of performance behind arguments in favor of pro-sexuality are: Are women “always risking self-contempt when they put on ‘the feminine?’” Secondly, “in what sense can women really make spectacles out of themselves?” (Russo 322). Is the mainstreaming of sex work further indication of the modern sexually liberated woman or has male sexuality re-appropriated female sexuality to reproduce its own privilege under rhetoric of liberation? In order to answer this question fully in Chapter three, it is necessary to denaturalize male desire first.

While strands of post-structuralism, most notably queer theory, are often used in support of sex radicalism, here I would like to show by incorporating psychoanalytic theory that movements within post-structuralism need not necessarily support pro-sexuality. While my endeavor in this chapter thus far has been to outline the way that differences in social class feed the ideological agenda of mainstreaming sex work, I now transition from larger institutional manifestations of misogyny in sex work to the psychological struggle that sex work invokes. The weak economy in which women have been disproportionately exploited, has actually been used, I argue, to reinforce the Lacanian construction of desire. In other words, the ever increasing pornification in society that is based on a perceived lack in the consumer that he or she believes a product will fulfill, actually connects intimately with Lacan's construction of sexual desire. Psychoanalysis can help explain why we believe that products, and woman as product in particular, can fill a perceived lack of power, love, beauty, and success. I hope to show with psychoanalytic theory that sex work and pornography in particular, naturalizes male desire. Without evidence that sex work reifies male desire as the norm, sex work remains on the border of neutrality as a predictable consequence of natural male desires. This process of naturalization of male desire must first be exposed to set up the larger goal of the thesis, which is to deconstruct the binary opposition between anti-sex industry and pro-sex feminism. In other words, although post structural theory is often used in support of the pro-sex position, it can also be used to prop up Third World, materialist feminist critiques of the sex industry, as I hope to illustrate here.

Lacan and the Naturalization of Male Desire

According to Jacques Lacan all desire stems from man's desire to return to the Real, back to pre-subjectivity, the only time that the unconscious and conscious existed in unity rather than in tension. Lacan calls the initial attraction to the other (Imago) that was a part of us before the

split the “primary narcissism” meaning that our first infatuation is with our mirror image before we recognize that we are not the world (Lacan 1289). The end of the Mirror Stage “tips the whole human knowledge into mediatization through the desire of the other” (1289). Our desire is never our own but only what we imagine the other’s desire to be and ultimately that imagination, that vision of what we come to believe the other wants is consigned and regulated by the Symbolic. Our conception of what we imagine the “other” to want is increasingly regulated by a pornographic imagination. Pornography, I argue, is a regulatory function of the symbolic, with the institutional capacity to instruct, punish, and reward. Major companies, a few notable examples include Yahoo, AT&T, Marriot, Westin, Hilton, and other companies we usually perceive to be “neutral” are actually financial allies of the pornography industry (Mainstream Par. 2-12). Pornography reinforces the status quo, approving the phallus as the signifier around which all desire revolves, but the phallus is not, according to Lacan, the penis as Freud imagined, but rather is a symbol of male power stemming from “a deviation of man’s needs from the fact that he speaks, in the sense that in so far as his needs are subjected to demand, they return to him alienated [as] the turning into a signifying form as such, from the fact that it is from the locus of the Other that its message is emitted” (Lacan 1307). This is why there is “no sexual relationship between man and woman.” Man always lacks and desires that lack to be filled but woman desires to be that which she never was in the first place. She desires to be his desire and man never desires her for herself because he can’t imagine what she is; he can only desire what he imagines she desires of him. The issue is that such “imagination” especially in the realm of the sexual, is always that of male fantasy. This is because the male unconscious rather than the female is the focus of a phallogocentric society.

Pornography is a product of the Lacanian construct of desire that helps re-indoctrinate each new generation into the accepted, decidedly non-female language of sexuality. Woman never was man's imago or other self and yet within the phallic economy she will always strive to be that. The desire of the male is to desire the other and her desire is to be his desire as he interprets it via language/symbolic. Lacan assumes that because language is the matrix that births our phallogentric society, there is no sense in imagining an alternate system. Laura Mulvey explains that woman "then stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker, of meaning" (Mulvey 2182). Our lives revolve around trying to fulfill a fantasy that has no real counterpart. Our imaginary is informed by the symbolic; our fantasy of the opposite sex consists of what we learn it should be through language.

Pornography is one of the main ways we are socialized into this dominant discourse on sexuality. Once we recognize this psychic struggle we are, however, free to choose within these confines which man or woman we will be with, which one, in other words, we can heal the tragic parting from our double within the most bearable terms. Pornography, a practice that complicates intimacy, makes this psychic healing all the more difficult. It takes us even further away, in other words from making Lacan's statement that there is "no sexual relationship between men and women" untrue.

To make the above statement untrue, the "other" would have to be able to desire the "other." What Lacan does not give us the free will to do is for the other to choose the other rather than the other choose the One. In pornography, the woman can never choose the other, she must choose the man and whatever his fantasy might be again and again, reinstating the dominant

male fantasy as *the* rather than *a* manifestation of desire. If part of the feminist agenda is to create a space where the other can desire the other, unhampered by the Law of the Father, then pornography pushes us farther from this goal. Lacan does believe heterosexuality is normative rather than natural but nonetheless, within his cognitive schema there is no room for the desire of the other. Pornography cannot disrupt this trap; it may only perpetuate it.

Lucy Irigaray attempts a move beyond Lacanian theory to imagine what feminine desire might consist of as well as ways to express and articulate female pleasure in a way that will not revert back to phallogocentrism. The former term is meant normally to be a governed construction, or psychic forces whereas the latter can occur naturally within the phallogocentric order. In regards to feminine pleasure Irigaray states, “[i]f there is such a thing—still—as feminine pleasure, then, it is because men need it in order to maintain themselves in their own existence....It is quite obvious who has to assume responsibility for preserving the fantasy” (Irigaray 96-97). Her goal of disrupting phallogocentrism is utterly crucial for our success because as long as female pleasure is repressed, we will remain no more than mere objects to supplement male desire. The pro- sex feminists, a minority of which work in the sex industry themselves, such as Nina Hartley may in fact receive *pleasure* on her job as she insists, but the issue is that her participation in an institution that regulates all desire by naturalizing male desire to the point that it is universal, means that such participation does obfuscate what feminine *desire* could be. Whether or not women can or cannot receive pleasure within the male fantasy is irrelevant to this argument. Feminine desire, in terms of how the phallogocentric system was constructed, cannot be anything but an unrepresentable threat. The only *real* threat to the pornography industry is one that the industry can’t fully represent.

Linda Lemoncheck writes, “women’s and men’s sexuality examined through the lens of contemporary Western culture requires an examination of how, when, where, and with whom of erotic arousal and satisfaction are influenced by the relations of dominance and submission that characterize the traditional gender roles of Western culture” (Lemoncheck10). Any time female sexuality is analyzed from a feminist viewpoint, and then complicated further by critiquing some feminist viewpoints on sexuality over others, one is quickly confronted with the problem of trying to locate an “authentic” female sexuality. As Lemoncheck notes, “if a feminist philosophy of sex is being constructed within a patriarchal context, how free of male bias and female misrepresentation can it be?” (10). Part of the tension between pro-sex feminism and anti-sex industry feminism is due to the suspicion that pro-sex feminists are colluding with patriarchal interests at the expense of transformation and women as a collective. Anti-sex industry feminists are suspicious that the pro-sex position is classist and part of the dominant discourse on sexuality itself. It is much easier in a patriarchal society that values sexual pleasure as a natural good in and of itself to discount the exploitive aspects of sex work and downplay the exploitive aspects. Anti-sex industry feminism relies on the “recognition that women’s sexuality can be exploited as a powerful tool for the social, economic, and political subordination of women” (10). On the other hand, sex radical feminists reason that anti-pornography feminism renders violence onto women because it requires sex radical women to be self sacrificing, to subsume their personal desires for the greater good, whatever that may be. Identity politics have largely become an impasse in feminism and talking about what harms or benefits women as a group cannot be done because women are divided based on race, nationality, ability, class, and age, sexual identification and more recently sexual practice. However, this is precisely the argument that both anti sex industry feminists and sex radical

feminists attempt to make in some cases. Some theorists on both sides of the debate argue that sex work can either empower or dis-empower women as a group and so I want to explore these issues, but I want to attempt to navigate their arguments as they impact different classes, races, and sexualities of women. Perhaps the most noteworthy argument put forth in support of the sex industry is by a strand of feminist thought that argues that sex work should be supported by other feminists not only because it can contribute to the sexual empowerment of the sex workers themselves but that it can contribute to the sexual empowerment of women as a group.

Rebecca Whisnant counters, “[t]hat something is chosen or consensual is perfectly consistent with its being seriously oppressive, abusive, and harmful—to oneself and/or to a broader group of which one is a member (e.g. women)” (Whisnant 23). In response to those women who report tolerable or empowering experiences in the industry Rebecca Whisnant asks, “What of it?...[O]n whose backs are they having this tolerable-to-empowering experience? What are the costs to women in general, and to the overwhelming majority of prostituted women in particular, of allowing this opportunity to those few (by definition relatively privileged) women who might freely and sincerely choose it for themselves?” (24) Sex work’s “broader social harms of gender subordination, commodified sexuality, and eroticized dominance *do not depend* on whether the persons depicted are participating voluntarily” (24-25). Their consent or lack thereof is irrelevant to the industry in her view. It does not exist “because of women’s choices. Rather it exists because men, as a class, demand that there be a sub-class of women (and children, and men, and transgender people—but mostly women) who are available for their unconditional sexual service” (25). Therefore, both pro-sex and anti-sex industry feminists claim to speak in support of women’s sexual empowerment but arrive at very different conclusions. The question then becomes, can both groups come together across

differences to articulate sexual empowerment for all women? Is this even possible considering that multiple theoretical and philosophical divisions exist within pro-sexuality and anti-sex rhetoric? As Linda Lemoncheck points out “women’s sexuality is both a function of women’s sexual oppression under conditions of individual and institutionalized male dominance and a function of women’s sexual liberation under those same conditions” (Lemoncheck 11). Offering a theory on women’s sexuality that does not collapse into identity politics or rest too heavily on an assimilationist vision of the highly individualist sexual agent divorced from social and historical context depends on looking at sex work as has been described by feminists rather than analyzing the individual lives of sex workers for answers which is a common method employed in *Stripped, Bare*, and many anthologies by sex workers.

Pro-sex rhetoric is now an acceptable discourse in feminist circles. Considerable attention has been paid especially in the 1980s onward in Western feminist discourse concerning what has been called “minority sexual orientations” including those “that tolerate playful sexual violence, cross-generational sex, sex devoid of all personal attachment (e.g. bathhouse sex), and mercenary sex, such as prostitution (‘pay per sex act’) or pornography (‘pay per graphic mass media sexuality’)” (Shrage 78-79). The question, for women identifying with minority sexual orientations became how best to articulate these desires in spaces they perceived to be hostile to them. Put another way, pro-sex feminism set out to carve out a safe space within feminist discourse for women to experiment with what was perceived to be “non-normative” “taboo” sexual practices. Because of this historical development, queer theory and sex radical feminism have developed in tandem as close allies. One objective of this thesis is to explore the positive, mutually benefitting relationship between queer theory and sex radical feminism in chapter two, and look at some of the directions queer thought is taking such as expanding the elasticity of

“queer” to include non normative practices and sexual acts, including mercenary sex. On one hand, there is a shift away from identity politics, away from unifying politically around the basis of identifying as gay or lesbian and towards “queering” identity altogether. Another trajectory of queer thought is to shift away from identity categories and towards sexual practices (Corber 4). “Sexuality” in this sense does not mean one’s sexual orientation but one’s preferred sexual practices, although a political coalition based on shared practices is assumed. I contend that it is not possible to interrogate sex radical feminism without also turning a critical eye towards the aforementioned trends in queer thought.

In chapter three, I challenge the notion endorsed by poststructuralist pro-sex feminism that traditional femininity can be redeployed strategically within the context of sex work. I contend that hyperbolic femininity even when viewed through the lens of masquerade theory still has the practical consequences of enforcing the gender stereotypes that perpetuate rather than undermine hetero-patriarchy. This view does nothing to rob individual sex workers of the agency to choose sex work. Nor does it support censorship.

Desire, pleasure, and appearance are class issues. Many women choose sex work for survival. A concomitant issue that needs to be addressed in order to understand the conflicting assumptions behind anti-sex and pro-sex feminist rhetoric, is the very different conceptualizations of personal choice politics. For example, I argue that it is a fair estimate of pro-sex feminism to claim that sex radicalism privileges individualistic conceptualizations of sexuality in efforts to make visible individual articulations that are perceived to at one point to have been silenced and that are in constant threat of being silenced by other feminists and also larger mainstream society (Hartley 59-60). For example, Nina Hartley, describes herself as a “trailblazer” who stresses each woman’s personal right to explore their natural desires, and

encourages women to confront their “innate ‘animal-ness,’” for “birthing and orgasm are both profoundly physical phenomena that change a woman forever” (59-60). On the other hand, anti-sex and anti-sex industry feminism stress the collective aspects of sexuality, the ways that sexual experiences, whether paid or unpaid cannot be divorced from the historical, social, and political realities of being female in patriarchal societies. To this end, what might a collective vision of female sexuality look like that doesn’t reduce itself to the realization of individual desires?

What can be said about the transformative potential of pro-sex feminism? Concomitantly, I am also asking whether or not using female sexuality to transform patriarchy is a tenable goal. Should we accept that heterosexual male desire is a natural human condition no different than the need to eat that demands a global economic market to exist in order to satisfy it? Under what conditions is it beneficial for women to capitalize on this pervasive male expectation? What impact do these practices have on women as a group? Are there differences between sex work done for the sake of survival and sex work done for pleasure or aesthetic purposes? What is the relationship between pro-sex feminism and queer theory? How has the elevation in the academy of the latter also elevated the former? I attempt to attend to these questions in the following chapters.

CHAPTER TWO

History of the Sexuality Debates

Two years after the 1982 Barnard Conference on Sexuality, a forum on the sexuality debates was published in *Signs: The Journal for Women in Culture and Society*. This document outlines the schism within second wave feminism between radical feminists or those who tend to condemn “sodomasochism, pornography, cruising, . . . adult/child sexual relations, and sexual role playing e.g. butch/femme relationships” and libertarian feminists (later known as pro-sex feminists or sex radical feminists)¹ who “tend to be heterosexual or lesbian feminists who support any sort of consensual sexual activity that brings the participants pleasure including sodomasochism, pornography, role-oriented sex, cruising, and adult/child relations” (Ferguson 107). According to Anne Ferguson, “[h]istorically, radical feminists have been those who are members or who identify with a lesbian-feminist community that rejects male-dominated heterosexual sex” (107). In contrast, Libertarian feminists reject the moralism of the radical feminist perspective and maintain that this perspective “legitimizes ‘vanilla’ sex only for lesbians and returns to a narrow, conservative, ‘feminine’ vision of ideal sexuality” in which women are passive recipients of sexuality (107). The radical feminist perspective can be summarized as “sexual freedom requires the sexual equality of partners and their equal respect for one another both as subject and as body. It also requires the elimination of all patriarchal institutions” (108-109). Hence, the sex radical ideal of sexual freedom cannot be realized until “the pornography

¹ See chapter 1 for distinction between pro-sex and sex-radical.

industry, the patriarchal family, prostitution, and compulsory heterosexuality) and sexual practices (sadoomasochism, cruising, and adult/child and butch/femme relationships) in which sexual objectification occurs” are eliminated (108-109). Also, from this perspective, human sexuality should ideally create intimacy (109).

Underlying the libertarian perspective is the belief that, “heterosexual as well as other sexual practices are characterized by repression. The norms of patriarchal bourgeois sexuality repress the sexual desires and pleasures of everyone by stigmatizing sexual minorities, thereby keeping the majority "pure" and under control” (109). Libertarian feminists believe that “sexual freedom requires oppositional practices, that is, transgressing socially respectable categories of sexuality and refusing to draw the line on what counts as politically correct sexuality” (109). This view claims to privilege pleasure whereas radical feminism privileges intimacy but there is no logical reason why pleasure and intimacy need be radically separated. If the rallying cry of pro-sex feminism is pleasure for the sake of pleasure, it stands to reason that some women will be unable to achieve maximum potential pleasure without intimacy. Therefore, privileging anonymous sex over intimate sex can be just as anti-pleasure for some women as the reverse. Furthermore, pro-sex feminists argue that one may have intimacy in anonymous sexual encounters, or in mercenary sex: “Thus we must reject both the radical-feminist view that patriarchy has stolen our essentially emotional female sexuality and the libertarian-feminist view that sexual repression has denied women erotic pleasure. Both of these positions are essentialist” (110).

Libertarian feminists, or pro-sex feminists “are ingenuous in their insistence that any consensual sexual activity should be acceptable to feminists” (Ferguson 110). Ferguson continues, “any feminist position has to examine the concept of *consent* itself in order to explore

hidden power structures that place women in unequal (hence coercive) positions. That some avowed feminists think they consent to sadomasochism and to the consumption of pornography does not indicate that the true conditions for consent are present" (110). Ferguson explains that Libertarian feminists have yet to "show why these cases differ from the battered wife and "happy housewife" syndromes—something they have not yet convincingly done" (Ferguson 110). In other words, they insist that they are not internalizing oppression, but neglect to explain why internalized oppression does not apply to them specifically. Late capitalist societies are caught in a double bind where the ideal of romantic love in which both parties receive pleasure is still espoused while juxtaposed constantly with the idea that men pursue and women submit to sex (110). One step towards resolving this paradox, according to Anne Ferguson, is that feminists should encourage the development of "erotica and sex education that aims to make people conscious of these contradictions in order to encourage new forms of feminist fantasy production. This...education must emerge in a variety of contexts (high school courses, soap operas...Harlequin novels as well as avant-garde art) and be geared to all types of audiences" (110).

Note, however, that Ferguson lumps sadomasochism in with sex work in a highly problematic way that is typical of historical anti-sex perspectives. Because S/M lacks the element of economic exchange, one cannot question women's "consent" to sadomasochism in the same way as one can sex-for-profit. Sex radical feminists are correct in their assumption that feminists who characterize S/M, transsexuality, dildonics, and butch/femme roles as replicating existing patriarchal social structures are positing a "right" way and a "wrong way" to be sexual that is based on heterosexual norms in a way that is reminiscent of Freud's insistence on female frigidity. Sex work should not be lumped in with other sexual practices, because S/M and

dildonics, for example, do not reinforce the binary gender system in the way that sex work does. These other practices are not motivated by a question of profit on a systemic level.

In the same forum responding to the Bernard Conference, Ilene Philipson critiques the libertarian feminism outlined by Anne Ferguson: “in place of an ahistorical understanding of violence against women, they posit an unchanging social repression of sexual drives. They view repression as the most salient social and political problem in regard to sexuality today, and see it as having changed insignificantly since the nineteenth century or before” (114). Pro-sex feminist Mary Pally summarizes accordingly, “Linda Gordon and Ellen DuBois spoke [at the conference] about nineteenth-century, middle-class feminists who associated sex with unavoidable pregnancy, difficult deliveries, incurable VD, rape and wife-beating, and therefore felt that sex was more a danger than a pleasure to women” (Pally Par. 3). Because these nineteenth century feminists were “economically dependent on marriage, they reasoned that the way to protect women would be to make marriages attain the purported standards of middle-class respectability. The resulting "moral purity" political program called for temperance, an end to prostitution, improvements in the condition of marriage, and strict control of sex” (Pally Par. 3). While Pally’s characterization of first wave feminism as too reliant on essentialist, traditional gender roles is well taken, her insistence that “with the availability of birth control and employment, one might think that twentieth-century feminists would be less fearful and puritanical” assumes that anti-sex feminist reservations about embracing pro-sex formulations of sexuality are based on conservative principles, specifically that women need to be protected (Pally Par. 3).

Philipson in contrast argues that “a central flaw in the pro-sex argument is the assumption that society today is just as sexually repressive as it has been in the past. Pro-sex thinkers thus repeatedly invoke the specter of nineteenth-century social purity movements as warning”

(Philipson 114). Philipson in 1982 and Levy later in 2000 are referencing an inherent contradiction in the development of pro-sex thought: How can it be argued that sexuality is repressed amidst a culture that surrounds us with constant images and references to sex? Such a saturation of sexuality speaks to the cultural anxieties surrounding women's sexual empowerment. Put differently, one can make sense of this paradox only through recognizing that such images naturalize male desire at the same time that the pornification of culture points to the repression of female sexuality. Pamela Paul defines pornification as the way that "pornography is so seamlessly integrated into popular culture" (Paul 5). It speaks volumes that the majority of men interviewed for Paul's book, *Pornified: How Pornography is Damaging our Lives, Our Relationships, and our Families*, do not consider *Playboy* pornography at all (5). Only hard core pornography fits their definition of pornography (5). We have become desensitized to sexual imagery to the point that it takes more and more graphic representations to qualify for out of the norm sexual representation. Historically, pro-sex theorists have seen the procreative, nuclear family as the norm to be resisted, whereas anti-sex feminists viewed raunch culture as the norm to be resisted. It could be argued, however, that both norms require feminist critique. The question that feminists need to answer is whether the desires that are proliferated by raunch culture are masculinist sexual values. Pro-sex thought poses men's and women's sexuality as equally repressed, a contention that the pornification of culture complicates. Therefore, the pro-sex position ignores the raunch cultural phenomenon that Ariel Levy outlines in her book *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*.

Raunch Culture

Levy explains that raunch culture is highly compatible with the politics of the conservative Right despite pro-sex claims that anti-sex feminists are in bed with moral

conservatives. For example, “*Playboy* is...far more popular in conservative Wyoming than in liberal New York” and the Bible Belt has the highest divorce rate in the United States, around 50% above the national average, this despite the same areas' rallying cry against gay marriage based on moralist rhetoric (Levy 29). These statistics complicate Gayle Rubin's understanding of sex as "itself...not a legitimate activity or goal" (Philipson 114). Philipson disagrees with Rubin, for “sex as a legitimate activity in its own right is extolled” throughout American culture (114). Philipson explains that one need only look to popular culture or go to a singles' bar “to realize that sex for its own sake is widely accepted among people who see themselves as neither deviant nor in any way outside the norms of cosmopolitan, middle-class behavior” (114). Sex "without the ties of emotional commitment became the goal of millions of men in the 1950s, as the *Playboy* ideology became as American as apple pie” (114). Philips is speaking to the notion of the “pornification” of culture as described by William Shultz.

William Shultz writes, “because just like playing video games, or tuning into hours of nonstop TV, or texting, or commenting on facebook, porn is an experience, and that experience would seem to--given its repetitiveness--have a cumulative effect on human consciousness, our emotional and psychological life” (Shultz Par. 1). He questions the effects the pornification of culture has on expectations in relationships, considering that common characteristics of pornography include, “an absence of genuine relationship; a relentless onslaught of high-intensity imagery; a certain formulaic-ness; a mechanicalness; anonymousness; compulsivity (some claim to be sex-addicts); visualness as opposed to narrative story; both men and women reductively stereotyped; intermittent violence and degradation” (Shultz Par. 2). It would seem that Shultz' concerns regarding the relationship between pornification and how men view actual women is well founded. Consider Chris Mitchell's praise of “Real Dolls” in “Idollotry: Why

Real Dolls are Better than Real Girls.” For \$6500 plus \$500 shipping one may order a Real Doll, a sex doll that is meant to simulate the look and feel of a woman better than an actual woman. Mitchell writes, “As much as I complain about women, I never really considered giving up on them altogether – until now” (Mitchell Par. 1). He explains that “fully articulated skeletons allow realistic movement and positioning (including those advanced Kama Sutra techniques you’ve been dying to try) and custom features like skin tone, eye color, hair color, fingernail color and three pubic configurations” (Par. 2) . There are also “ten female body types, with breast ranging from AA to G cup and 15 face types including an anime head with enormous round eyes” (Par. 2).

Matt Krivicke, the CEO of RealDoll adds that the most popular reason for purchasing a RealDoll “is as a sexual companion,’ ‘But there are many reasons...ranging from the sexual aspect to a domestic partner to art pieces enjoyed simply for their beauty. Some people develop strong connections to these dolls – they care very much for them as it is a very intimate process to pick all of the features they desire” (Mitchel Par. 3). This new piece of technology brings MacKinnon’s insight about men having sex with their preconceived image of woman, rather than the woman herself, into harsh relief: ““The most popular features seem to be the interchangeable faces,’ says Krivicke. ‘One doll body can be made to seem like a number of girls by buying several faces and wigs to change the look completely. The breasts of RealDolls are also very popular as they are perky, come in a range of sizes from AA to G” (Par. 17). Mitchell continues, ““The inside of the vagina and all orifices for that matter are ribbed and provide suction when using the doll so that is also quite popular”” (Mitchell Par. 17). It is interesting to look at the connection between the pattern of women getting vaginoplasties or designer vaginas at increasing rates during the same time period that we see the creation of these dolls. Feminists

have long lamented the way the system of compulsory heterosexuality sets women up to compete with each for the attention of men and provides men with what Adrienne Rich calls “exclusive sexual and economic access to women” (Rich 50). Given this, we should seriously ask how sexually free women really are when they are competing not just with each other still, but with inanimate objects that many men believe are superior to “nature” (Rich 50).

Mitchell explains that RealDolls are truly making an entrance into our culture, and he sees this as an excellent, freeing experience for men. These dolls are making appearances on television, including MTV (Par. 17). In summary, the pornification of culture ensures a climate in which RealDolls are a welcome addition to expanding the sexual freedom of heterosexual men. Their popularity is a direct response to how some men view women and potential relationships with them. Expanding consumer choices under a rhetoric of sexual freedom can be very compatible with misogyny: a “doll fills many basic needs without the entanglements of a real relationship. [It doesn't] compete with you; it is there to do with as you please....The dolls are beautiful in a way that some men might not achieve with a real woman. They are always there to listen...and no matter how much or little you care about them, they will not be offended” (Mitchell Par. 18). It has become less important that these dolls cannot desire or love back.

I contend that the cultural apathy towards intimacy points to a crisis in intimacy occurring in the third wave that feminism is currently ill equipped to deal with. Pro-sex and queer theory both view intimacy as colluding with heteronormative, reprocentric interests in a way that second wave feminism and gay and lesbian studies did not. Intimacy could be antithetical to feminist values but was not conceived of as necessarily so. The only type of intimacy that is worth reclaiming to pro-sex and queer theorists is typically “alternative” or casual intimacies (such as cruising.) Demonizing intimacy seems just as antithetical to feminist values as uncritically

romanticizing intimacy for the purposes of heterosexual marriage and reproduction. One of the leading anti-pornography scholars in the third wave, Gail Dines, summarizes accordingly,

To collapse porn and sex into one is to allow the porn industry to control the discussion on the role of porn in shaping our sexual landscape. We need to develop a critique of porn that sees it as a major form of sex education in a society awash with misogyny and violence against women. Above all, we need to stop letting the pornographers define our sexuality in ways that serve their industry but undermine our human capacity for connection and intimacy. (Katz Par. 9)

Dines argues that critiquing MacDonaldis would not be seen as anti-eating or anti-food.

Therefore, it is illogical for feminists who challenge the sex industry to be dismissed as “sex negative” or worse, anti-women’s pleasure (Par. 8).

Pornography, it can be argued, reinforces the devaluation of women’s pleasure that is already rampant in patriarchal culture. For example, Ariel Levy notes that the trend of women opting for vaginoplasties or “designer vaginas” in order to emulate the genitals of popular pornography models is not an example of new technology empowering women. In fact, these surgeries can cause “painful scarring and nerve damage” that can hinder women from achieving orgasm at all (Levy 23). Breast augmentation is yet another example of a cosmetic surgery women “choose” to get, in a climate that demands they have large breasts that can lead to decreased nipple sensitivity and painful medical complications. Clearly, as a culture, our concern is not with women enjoying themselves sexually regardless of the rhetoric of “expanding choices for women.” Therefore, because of the pornification of culture, we might do well to question the validity of the pro-sex claim that “pornography [is] one of the few outlets for sexual liberation and rebellion. Ellen Willis, for example, suggests that porn is ‘a protest against the repression of non-marital, non-procreative sex’” (Philipson 114). Pornography, according to the anti-sex perspective, is conforming to rather than rebelling against a culture that can only reproduce women’s sexuality as a form of heterosexual male fantasy.

Ariel Levy deconstructs buzzwords like “hotness” and sexiness by revealing that these terms actually have very little to do with sexuality in the third wave: “Hotness doesn’t just *yield* approval. Proof that a woman actively *seeks* hotness is a crucial criterion for hotness in the first place” (Levy 33). According to Levy, Paris Hilton, who claims she does not enjoy sex, and uses her cell phone during sex, is still considered a sex icon because “[s]he is the perfect sexual celebrity in this moment, because our interest is in the appearance of sexiness, not the existence of sexual pleasure” (Levy 30). Today, for something to be “noteworthy it must be sexy” but sexy does not really have much to do with sexual pleasure; it is really about the power women have access to in society. In sexualizing non-sexual, inanimate objects (cars, clothes, jewelry, technology, locations such as beach and resort destinations), we as a culture essentially project the illusion that everyone in society has access to equal power through sexuality despite gender, race, and class differences.² Within late western capitalist societies, consumers buy products that have been sexualized, so that the buyer may then further sexualize the self, and then offer one’s self as an object choice to others. As Levy puts it, “raunch culture is not essentially progressive, it is essentially commercial” (Levy 29).

Javacia Harris explains, “If more industries objectify women for profit and use ‘female empowerment’ as part of their marketing strategy, what could this mean for women as a gender and feminism as a movement?” (Harris 53) Harris responds to the charge that women feel powerful when exerting sexual influence over men: “A *Playboy* spread is not an example of a woman embracing or enjoying her sexuality. Women are in these magazines to help ‘readers’ enjoy themselves sexually. The woman is not a participant, only a tool, and...there’s nothing

² Check out any random E-Bay auction geared towards a female audience. Regardless of if the product for sale is jewelry, a boat, a ticket to a resort, or nail polish, chances are that the listing will repeatedly invoke hotness, describing the product as sexy, or “hot, hot, hot!”

empowering about that” (Harris 56). Business managers use rhetoric of female empowerment to sell products. For example, Dennis Riese, CEO of the Reise Organization explains that there is nothing wrong with women using their physical attributes “to get ahead in life” and adds that this is not about exploitation (Harris 57). Harris contends that although she understands that she has “no right to define a person’s feminism for them” such business rationales not only “imply that ‘beautiful women’ should use their bodies instead of their brains to get ahead in life, but also reduce today’s feminist movements to nothing but a fight for a woman’s right to show off her boobs” (Harris 57).

In her article “Girls Gone Anti-Feminist,” Susan Douglas also laments the third wave, girl power ideology that furthers the idea that girls and women are already personally empowered sexually in a post-feminist era. While the national mentality may be that women have made it, and as a nation, Americans are more likely to focus on the gains women have made, the fact remains that as of 2007, the top five jobs for women were “secretaries, retail and personal sales workers (including cashiers,) managers and administrators, elementary education school teachers and registered nurses. Farther down among the top 20 were bookkeepers, receptionists, cooks, and waitresses” (Douglas Par. 4). With the exception of managers, these positions have a generally low salary in comparison to male dominated fields and tend to be care oriented. The feminization of poverty, especially in regards to women’s service and care labor demonstrates that a major shift in who owns the majority of the country’s wealth has not occurred. Additionally, in 2008 women’s median income was \$36,000 a year, 23% less than the median income of men (Par. 7). Further, as of 2008, a year “out of college, [women] earn 80% of what men make. 10 years out? A staggering 69%” (Par. 5). Douglas makes sense of the tension between the images of sexy, empowered corporate executives in the media and the economic realities of most women’s lives:

“Yet the images we see on television, in the movies, and in advertising also insist that purchasing power and sexual power are much more gratifying than political or economic power” (Par. 7). Consumption is conflated with empowerment: “Buying stuff—the right stuff, a lot of stuff—emerged as the dominant way to empower ourselves. Women in fictional settings can be in the highest positions of authority, but in real life [it’s] maybe not such a good idea” (Par. 7). Douglas views the media as providing “escapist fantasies” or illusions of power in fictitious settings women do not really have in society. She calls “enlightened sexism” the idea that it is precisely through women’s calculated deployment of their faces, bodies, attire, and sexuality that they gain and enjoy true power—power that is fun, that men will not resent, and will indeed embrace” (Par. 13). Enlightened sexism, “takes the gains of the women’s movement as a given, and then uses them as permission to resurrect retrograde images of girls and women as sex objects, still defined by their appearance and biological destiny” (Par. 24).

Douglas explains that many “reality” shows, “elbow the viewer in the ribs, saying, ‘We know that you know that we know that you know that you’re too smart to read this straight and not laugh at it’” (Douglas Par. 23). And I would add that this implied relationship between media and viewer need not only refer to reality television, but could expand to include satirical shows like *Family Guy*, stand-up comedy and other battlegrounds over cultural anxieties regarding gender, race, class, and sexuality. We are not immune to marketing like we think we are: “For media-savvy youth, bombarded their entire lives by almost every marketing ploy in the book, irony means that you can look as if you are absolutely not seduced by the mass media, while then being seduced by the media, wearing a knowing smirk” (Par. 23). This is especially true when humor is involved. As Laura Kipnes notes, “jokes themselves are an important anxiety-assuagement technique, especially jokes about boundaries: incest jokes, toilet jokes, bestiality

jokes—try to think of a social boundary that isn't prime material for comedy" (Kipnis 86). Ironically enough, "it is precisely because women no longer have to exhibit traditionally "feminine" *personality* traits—like being passive, helpless, docile, overly emotional, dumb and deferential to men—that they must exhibit hyperfeminine *physical* traits—cleavage, short skirts, pouty lips—and the proper logos linking this femininity to social acceptance" (Douglas Par. 27). Lara Kipnes sums up raunch culture and women's complicity in it: the "real question about the phallus these days is whether it's something men try to put over women or whether women endow men with phallic prowess in order to keep desiring—and disdaining them" (Kipnes 148).

Philipson contends that sex radicals "posit two kinds of sexuality—repressed and unrepressed among individuals. In this case, women represent the more sexually repressed and men the less repressed. And because pro-sex feminists believe that repression is the fundamental cause of our sexual unhappiness, they regard women's sexuality as deeply problematic" (115). Ellen Willis articulates this position clearly: "Women who do not suppress their lustful feelings...or sublimate them into disembodied romanticism...usually feel free to express them only [in the] safe and socially validated context of marriage or...commitment. [W]hat looks like women's superior ability to integrate sex and love is only a...hidden... alienation" (115). This position, as Philipson explains, seems anti-women's sexuality: "When they claim that women's aversion to depersonalized sex is caused by alienation, weakness, and fear, they do so from a normative position that extols such sexual activity and renders women's needs for intimacy aberrant" (115). Not all women value intimacy and men are not "naturally" programmed to be more sexual than women. Philipson's explanation not only devalues intimacy, a quality that is culturally coded as feminine, but also casts sexuality in an essentialist way. This view sees human sexuality as a series of either repressed or unrepressed desires, which because of the

masculine tendency to have sex sans attachment privileges male sexuality over women's sexuality, setting up the former to be the liberated model for the latter. As Philipson notes, ironically enough, "[t]his, of course, is nothing different from what men have been telling women for years—but it is remarkable that a number of feminists concur in the assertion of male sexual superiority" (115). The sex radical position has the effect "of labeling every woman who has serious questions about depersonalized sex and pornography a 'good girl,' a prude, an unrebelling and repressed woman. It describes the world and its female inhabitants in only dichotomous terms: there are repression and liberation, bad girls and good girls" (117). While pro-sex feminists argue that sex work offers the possibility of rescripting the epithet 'whore,' and deconstructing the Madonna/Whore complex, from Philipson's view pro-sex ideology does the exact opposite.

In the same *Signs* forum, pro-sex vanguard Carol Vance elaborates on what she sees in 1982 as the crisis in women's sexuality:

Sexuality as it is understood today is, according to Foucault, a historical phenomenon that emerged in the seventeenth century as a mechanism of the new ways of organizing knowledge. This confluence of science, sex, and power produced and continues to produce an intensified focus on the body as the instrument of truth, creating what we call the "sexuated body"—a body situated in, satiated with, and standardized by sex. Paradoxically, in a society that sees privacy as the realm for the deepest expression of individuality, even so-called diverse innovative sexual practices have been processed for us. (Vance 121)

Referencing Foucault, Vance sees such "processing" of sexual practices for sexuated bodies as a mechanism of sexual repression. A long standing critique of the anti-sex position is that it focuses too heavily on the dangerous aspects of sexuality: "if pornography leads to violence, or is violence, as the antipornography movement argues, and if sexuality can be reduced to pornography, then sexuality is violence or violent. Such logical collapsing of categories is an important feature of the antipornography analysis" (130). It could be argued that whether or not

sexuality is violent in essence cannot be truly known, because in a patriarchal culture sexuality appears through masculinist vision. Patterns of violence do exist in popular pornography and it is dangerous to explain this phenomenon through an insistence on the “naturalness” of male sexuality. If anti-sex theorists argue that certain representations of women contribute to their oppression, the relationship between sexuality and violence would be cultural not essential. As previously mentioned, Gail Dines argues that a critique of pornography should not be conflated with a critique of sex. Dines represents the modern anti-sex industry perspective that differs from the classic anti-sex perspective. The latter argued that heterosexual sexuality is constructed in a way that naturalizes violence. The modern position focuses on a critique of sex work apart from other configurations of heterosexual sex. Vance aptly points out the double bind experienced by feminists in a quest for sexual empowerment: “it is difficult to combine a critique of gender with a defense of women. But feminism must ultimately be a critique of gender since the gender system is the basis for inequality. To alter gender one must consider abolishing woman, or at least the woman who is made and not born” (131). Vance continues with a useful point, “[the] political task of feminism is to work for concrete material changes that enable women and men to experience sexuality that is less attached and less informed by gender” (131).

Anti-sex industry feminists are not against female sexual empowerment. However, these feminists see that just because a desire is expressed by a woman does not mean that the proliferation of that desire will be a feminist endeavor. Furthermore, anti-sex feminists question this culture’s insistence that all desires should be equally valued. No desire can be named as essentially female in contrast to the desires of men. Normalizing women’s desires is not transformational unless women’s sexual desires are theorized in a way that has a collective, political sexuality in mind. By a “collective, political sexuality” I mean a sexuality that resists

re-appropriation by male sexuality. In other words, the reason why theorizing sexuality in a highly individualized way does not work is because as individual women, our sexual choices including our reproductive choices and erotic preferences are always judged by the dominant group, not on a case by case basis, but rather we are always judged as women. We cannot divorce our choices from the group from which we are a part because we are viewed as part of that collective by those who are not part of that collective. We are not judged by mainstream society on an individual basis; we are judged as women.

Wittig and the Separation of Women from Femininity

Monique Wittig advocates such a materialist approach in her essay, “One is not Born a Woman.” A materialist feminist “approach to women’s oppression destroys the idea that women are a ‘natural group’...By its very existence lesbian society destroys the artificial (social) fact constituting women as a ‘natural group’” (Wittig 309). Feminine is automatically coded as female in this culture, and, as such, hegemonic femininity is constructed around essentialist ideas about femininity: “We have been compelled in our bodies and in our minds to correspond feature by feature with the *idea* of nature that has been established for us” (309). By “admitting that there is a ‘natural’ division between women and men, we naturalize history, we assume that “men” and “women” have always existed and will always exist” (310). Here, one might read this as saying that she is advocating for the eradication of actual men or women, but she is arguing for the deconstruction of “man” and “woman” as social categories. This naturalization of history, (as the naturalization of “men” versus “women”), “naturalizes the social phenomena which express our oppression, making change impossible” (310). Wittig uses childbirth as an example of an event that is coded feminine, and marked as natural to women’s experiences. She points out that the naturalization of this event ignores the fact that women are compelled to reproduce in a

heteronormative system and that childbirth is regulated by the state just like other attending accessories to femininity: beauty, motherhood, and marriage. A materialist feminist approach shows “that what we take as cause or origin of oppression is in fact only the *mark* imposed by the oppressor: the ‘myth of woman,’ plus its material effects and manifestations in the appropriated consciousness and bodies of women” (311). As “long as we will be ‘unable to abandon by will...a lifelong and centuries-old commitment to childbearing as *the* creative act,’ gaining control of the production of children will mean much more than the mere material control of the means of production” (311). Refusing to view childbearing as the creative female contribution requires “women...to abstract themselves from the definition ‘woman’ that is imposed upon them” (311). Hence, it is not enough that in controlling their bodies, women then control in what contexts and under what terms they will create; viewing childbearing as an attendant prop of femininity reveals that the reprocentric logic that undergirds traditional femininity is not natural to women as a group, but rather is a historically constructed practice that has been coded as feminine in order to circumscribe women’s creative potential outside of reprocentric terms.

Wittig then asks, must we separate ourselves from the category of “woman” or from femininity itself as it has been defined in order to undermine the most oppressive aspects of hegemonic femininity? If “woman” is a political category used to determine appropriate behavior for women, then how do we discuss sexual empowerment “as women” when such identification is the source of the oppression the women’s movement is trying to resist? Individuals are seen “as *women* therefore they *are* women. But before being *seen* that way, they first had to be *made* that way” (311). Women who identify as lesbians have a complicated relationship to “woman” because historically those who resisted the oppressive fixtures of a woman’s identity being in

relation to men, were labeled as less “female” than other women, or on the opposite end were accused of trying to be “like men.” She explains that this “double accusation has been taken up with enthusiasm in the context of the women’s liberation movement by some feminists and also by some lesbians whose political goal seems to be becoming more and more ‘feminine’” (311).

Although exaggerating femininity in order to challenge the fear that one is not a real woman may be a historical reaction to such stereotypes, queer theory has recently resuscitated femininity in order to expose the fictiveness of gender. Wittig maintains that to refuse “to be a woman, however, does not mean that one has to become a man” (Wittig 311). How can femininity be used for feminist ends within sex work, when as Wittig points out, femininity was never meant to serve women? Wittig explains accordingly, “some avenues of the feminist and lesbian movement lead us back to the myth of woman which was created by men especially for us, and with it we sink back into a natural group” (311). This then puts us back in a position of dealing with essentialist ideas of women’s sexuality, emotional and mental capacities, and value in relation to men. Although the lure of celebrating femininity, and mistaking this for the celebration of actual womanhood, may be seductive, the reality of women’s situation in dealing with the category woman is: “Having stood up to fight for a sexless society, we now find ourselves entrapped in the familiar deadlock of ‘woman is wonderful’” (Wittig 312). “Woman is wonderful” is dangerous, because “it retains for defining women the best features (best according to whom?) that oppression has granted us, and it does not radically question the categories ‘man’ and ‘woman’ which are political categories and not natural givens” (312). Indeed, Wittig argues against the sex radical desire to “rescue” or rescript femininity. Her argument is that it cannot be rescued, for “it puts us in the position of fighting within the class ‘women’ not as the other

classes do, for the disappearance of our class, but for the defense of ‘woman’ and its reinforcement” (312).

Therefore, the goal of re-evaluating the feminine in a culture that perpetually devalues it, actually does not elevate the feminine, but rather leaves the feminine in immanence as “the other” sex in a world where “the other” is always articulated as inferior. Fighting in defense of the myth that is woman then, risks leaving open the question of how best to arrive at women’s sexual empowerment, stuck in retrograde scripts. Wittig challenges us to “always thoroughly disassociate ‘women’ (the class within which we fight) and ‘woman,’ the myth. For, ‘woman’ does not exist for us: it is only an imaginary formation, while ‘women’ is the product of social relationship” (312). Under this distinction then, Betty Friedan’s rendition of the feminine mystique and Naomi Wolf’s conception of the beauty myth would be examples of the myth of woman while motherhood, marriage, and the way women’s sexuality is organized would fall under the category “women.” While Wittig is saying that the myth of woman should be challenged, it is from within the category women that we challenge it; hence, strategically this opens up the possibility of doing away with the props of femininity by working within the category “‘women’”--only through disassociating “‘women’” from “‘femininity’” as it has historically been defined. It is paradoxically only through a recuperation of identity politics that the binary gender system (and hence the devaluation of the feminine) can be challenged.

As Wittig explains, “Woman is not each of us, but the political and ideological formation which negates ‘women’ (the product of a relation of exploitation.) ‘Woman’ is there to confuse us, to hide the reality ‘women.’ In order to be aware of being a class and to become a class we first have to kill the myth of ‘woman’” (Wittig 313-314). It is important to emphasize that the end goal is to suppress the myth of woman in order that we may become a class based on

something other than exploitation. One of the main reasons we cannot rescue femininity and invert the myth that is woman in order to serve us, is that “what makes a woman a woman is her specific relationship to man, a relation that we have previously called servitude, a relation which implies personal and physical obligation as well as economic obligation” (316). Wittig understands the importance and complexity of reconciling the needs and desires of individual women, while still fighting against the oppression of women as a group. This must necessarily be a strategic move, for we must fight within the category of which we ultimately seek to overthrow: “For women to answer the question of the individual subject in materialist terms is first to show...that supposedly ‘subjective,’ ‘individual,’ ‘private’ problems are in fact social problems, class problems, that sexuality is not for women an individual and subjective expression but a social institution of violence” (316).³

Allan Johnson explains patriarchy as a system that “we all participate in as something larger than ourselves, something we didn’t create but that that we have the power to affect through the choices we make about *how* to participate” (Johnson 69). Since patriarchy is a system, it would be a mistake to reduce it to the people who participate in it (69). When taking what Johnson calls an “individualistic perspective” on the existence of patriarchy, we might ask why individual men rape or why individual men use pornography or why individual women participate in it, “we wouldn’t ask what kind of society would promote persistent patterns of such behavior in everyday life from wife-beating jokes to the routine inclusion of sexual coercion and violence in mainstream movies” (69). Patriarchy is about “the valuing of masculinity and

³ There is a tradition within Marxism of viewing the individual as only “a product of class consciousness” with any concerns outside those relating to the shared oppression of the class i.e. questions of sexuality deemed bourgeoisie concerns. Marxism is charged with naturalizing the relation between men and women, “leaving it outside the social order,” and also naturalized the division of labor, which fails to see women as their own class (Wittig 315 316).

maleness and the devaluing of femininity and femaleness [and] about the core value of control and domination in almost every area of human existence” (73).

Patriarchy, then, requires participation, but one cannot simply refuse to participate on an individual level. Individuals can exercise limited agency in choosing to some degree how they will participate in the current system. Given this arrangement, the sex radical conception of disrupting patriarchal norms by ascribing value to an expansion in women’s sexual choices on an individual level is ineffective because it does not address women as a collective.

Textuality and Revolt

Susan Brison tries to understand notions of women’s consent to sex work under patriarchy. She is critical of the post-structural tendency to reduce social justice issues to issues of textuality. For example, playing on ‘difference’ of meaning opens up endless interpretation; such ambiguity can be refreshing in some contexts, but in others, such as in a scene of violence against a woman, such ambiguities could lead to more leniency or social tolerance of the scene depicted. Brison writes, perceiving of “power as a ‘discursive field’ where we are all constructors and constructed denies—and even conceivably excuses—the very deliberate and coercive power used by many men against women in situations of domestic violence or sexual harassment, as well as in public policies concerning abortion, reproduction, and welfare” (Brison 194). Susan Bordo locates the “postmodern recognition of interpretive multiplicity, of the indeterminacy and heterogeneity of cultural meaning and meaning-production,...as calling for new narrative approaches, aimed at adequate representation of textual ‘difference’” (Bordo 217). As discussed in chapter one, my interest in this trend toward post-structuralism in feminist theory is informed by my contention that pro-sex feminism is undergirded by post-structural feminist theory. The move to locating revolt within the text not only makes feminism less

transformative as a movement, but it enables sex radicals to argue that since all culture is a text, and sex work is a text, that it can be read in many different ways as artistic performance that is immune to social critique and irrelevant to racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism in the “real” world. In this view, “the template of gender is criticized for its fixed, binary structuring of reality and is replaced by a narrative ideal of ceaseless textual play” (217). Bordo critiques this “view from nowhere” for “although it arises out of a critique of a modernist epistemological pretensions to represent reality adequately, [it] remains animated by its own fantasies of attaining an epistemological perspective free of the locatedness and limitations of embodied existence” (218). Hence, post-structuralism is rooted in the transition away from corporeality and materiality.

Brison contends that “one woman’s apparently freely made—and seemingly self-regarding choice—for example, to become a pornography model, can turn out to be neither entirely free nor purely self-regarding” (Brison 194). As Nancy Hirschmann argues, patriarchy “ha[s] been instrumental in the social construction of women’s choices. This recognition leads to the further suggestion that a feminist reconceptualization of liberty must begin from... understanding that the context in which women live constrains women’s choices more than it does men’s” (Brison 195). The pro-sex individual engagement with empowerment can only attend to expanding individual women’s options, but this is only half the battle as Hirschmann explains:

increasing women’s choices also entails engaging the social construction of desire, in order to understand the degree to which the options that women prefer and the choices that women make are themselves the products of restriction, coercion, and force. And this in turn entails understanding the social construction of discursive formations such as ‘the battered woman’ and ‘the welfare mother,’ which in turn constitute the social meaning of ‘women. (195)

Therefore, an attention to unpacking discursive formations such as the "welfare woman" and "the slut" is a particular strength of post-structuralism. Psychoanalytic and queer theories, in other words, does not have to be deployed in the service of pro-sexuality, although that has become an increasingly common practice within women's studies. Brison argues expanding women's choices is not necessarily a good in and of itself: "Expanding women's options for legalized sex work, for example, may end up constraining women more, not less." (195). In order to gauge whether or not expanding this opportunity is positive for women, Brison argues that we must look at how the category "woman" is constructed: "the discursive construction of social meaning—includes not only language, but also representations of all kinds and even actions, and the social meaning of being a woman is constructed by...the use of terms derogatory to women, the visual imagery of pornography, and the buying and selling of women's bodies" (195). She advises, "*Even if* having the option of legalized prostitution enhances the freedom of some women, we need to ask whether it diminishes the freedom of other women" (196). Regardless of if pro-sex feminists claim that women choose sex work, "do their freely made choices enhance or hinder the freedom of other women? Typically, this question translates into: does pornography make rape and other kinds of (so-called "indirect") harm to girls and women more likely?" (196). This question might more productively be replaced with "how does pornography contribute to the social construction of 'women?' Of 'sex'?" Of 'rape?'" (205). Hirschmann argues that "participation in the processes of social construction is necessary for freedom because it is as far as one can go in exerting autonomy in one's life" (205). Brison adds that "freedom" alone does not serve any "interest;" in other words, serving the freedom of some women may impede the liberty of other women. I would add that freedom for the sake of freedom does not have an ethical dimension to it unless feminists attempt to theorize it.

Put another way, freedom itself lacks an ethical agenda apart from having choices for the sake of having choices, which goes right along with capitalist consumer logic sans any ethical responsibility. Putting freedom as the highest feminist value (and valuing this above all else in the debate surround women's sexual empowerment), is problematic because beyond respecting individual women's ability to make decisions despite the context in which they make their choices, no sense of ethics is included in such a model. As Brison explains an ethical dimension must factor into how we conceive of pornography as feminists because of its relationship to the freedom of all women in constructing 'woman.' Thus, "even if we were to suppose (contrary to fact) that *all* participants in the production of such pornography freely choose to participate in it, we would still need to consider how such pornography influences how *other* nonparticipant women are viewed and treated" (Brison 198). Brison explains that the pro-sex claim that "whatever desires I happen to have must, in the end, be accepted as legitimate," ignores Hirschmann's point that there are no purely self-regarding desires or actions. Hirschmann's "account of social construction makes more desires and actions out to be other-regarding than one might have supposed, since what I desire and how I act *as a woman* contribute to the social construction of 'woman,' which, in turn, affects the material circumstances of actual women" (199).

Catherine MacKinnon, a traditional anti-sex radical feminist who arguably, has retained the legacy in the third wave of being "the prudish anti-sex morality activist that feminists now love to hate," questions women's sexuality being equated with the potential to negotiate radical pleasure at the Barnard Conference. She writes, "[a]s if women under male supremacy have power to [negotiate.] As if 'negotiation' is a form of freedom. As if pleasure and how to get it, rather than dominance and how to end it, is the 'overall' issue sexuality presents feminism"

(MacKinnon 140). At this juncture a theoretical difference between pro-sex feminism and the classic anti-sex perspective becomes apparent. MacKinnon has been charged with viewing masculinity as hegemonic and essentialist, as too neatly opposed to femininity and as viewing femininity as necessarily a position of vulnerability. Laura Kipnes critiques the anti-sex position espoused by Andrea Dworkin and Catherine MacKinnon, the “problem is that it’s never entirely clear when reading Dworkin whether intercourse sexually subordinates women in the context of a sexist society, or whether it always will. Is she making a political argument, or describing the eternal feminine condition?” (Kipnis 158). In the case of the latter, Kipnis argues that the feminine is destined to be aligned with passivity (158). Radical feminism then, leads to what she deems victim feminism. Victim feminism, according to this view, requires women to perceive themselves as texts to be written upon, bodies to be appropriated for specific uses in which agency to act and then “be” otherwise is taken from them (162). Kipnes argues that the anti-sex industry focus on the danger aspect to women’s sexuality has led to reinforcement of “conventional feminine fear and vulnerability which also impedes women’s lives” (130-131).

However, in viewing MacKinnon’s actual words, she is clearly pro women’s pleasure. But she does not believe that a radical pleasure that is actually transformative is possible without a feminist politics that is committed to challenging male dominance. Pro-sex feminism leaves male privilege intact. MacKinnon’s version of feminism does not merely pose femininity as vulnerability. The power it offers women is in direct opposition to victim feminism. Women are acted upon by men, but via a feminist consciousness women do have access to empowerment; however, women do not have access to *sexual empowerment* under the current patriarchal system; they only have access to political empowerment via a feminist consciousness. For MacKinnon, sexuality is not a separate, special sphere wherein women can exercise the power they do not have

in other aspects of their existence. She calls for nothing less than revolution and utter destruction of patriarchal norms and interests. She asks, “[h]ow do dominance and submission become sexualized, or why is hierarchy sexy? How does it get attached to male and female? Why does sexuality center on intercourse? Is masculinity the enjoyment of violation, femininity the enjoyment of being violated?” (141). Such questions have yet--if ever--to be fully answered, and how and why dominance and submission gets eroticized in this culture should be explored rather than taken for granted as natural. When we see an image of a bound woman smiling into the camera, and think it is sexy—why is this sexy? MacKinnon is not equating sex with violence in actuality; she is equating heterosexual sex with violence in this particular, i.e., American culture. She implies that heterosexual sex is constructed in such a way as to make the submission of women to male sexual demands seem sexy. Pleasure then, cannot be central to women’s sexuality, until serious systemic changes are instituted that would allow women’s desire to be culturally intelligible. Pro-sexuality is, according to this view, putting the cart before the horse so to speak.

What critics of MacKinnon miss is that, while she does theorize traditional femininity as the enjoyment of being violated and masculinity as the enjoyment of violation, she does not say this arrangement is inevitable. In a different system it could be otherwise. In a non-patriarchal society, alternative forms of femininities and masculinities could gain cultural intelligibility. However, MacKinnon, along with Wittig, questions the efficacy of resuscitating traditional femininity as a strategy to accomplish feminist goals such as the sexual empowerment of women.

MacKinnon’s examination of women’s sexuality in hetero-patriarchy continues, “what is sexual is what gives a man an erection. Whatever it takes...is what sexuality means culturally. Hierarchy, a constant creation of person/thing, top/bottom, dominance/subordination”

(MacKinnon 141). This suggests that “that which is called sexuality is the dynamic of control by which male dominance informs that range from intimate to institutional from a look to a rape...as identity and pleasure. It is also that which maintains and defines male supremacy as a political system” (141). One might object that a look is not comparable to rape. MacKinnon's point, however, is not to make the terms comparable, but to emphasize that sexuality is not just sex; it is everything that references the sexual. The effect of such a system according to this view is that male “sexual desire is thereby simultaneously created and serviced, never satisfied once and for all, while male force is romanticized,...potentiated, and naturalized, by being submerged into sex itself” (141). MacKinnon maintains that the culture sanctions pornography because pornography is equated with male sexuality. Therefore, critiquing pornography is viewed as critiquing male sexuality, and because desire is always filtered through the male gaze, such critiques are dismissed as feminist prudery (143). Pornography creates the illusion that all men, regardless of race or class standing, have equal access to all women. Although this illusion may serve to reinforce men’s entitlement and access to women, the more immediate concern should be that the pornography industry disguises itself as a banner for sexual freedom for all. MacKinnon explains that pornography indoctrinates young men (and I would add women) in what to expect sexually (143). Common themes in popular heterosexual pornography is that sex is over once men achieve orgasm; women are always ready and willing to have sex, especially at work and in public; that lesbian sex is for male enjoyment; and that oral sex should be received by men but not given. The theme of public sex and sex at the woman’s place of employment is especially problematic. Such scenarios are sexy to some men precisely because they reassure them that while it is acceptable for women to compete with men in the public sphere as a result of changes to the political landscape, women are still just masturbatory tools to bring men to

orgasm in the social world.⁴ As MacKinnon explains, “If sex is a social construct of sexism, men have sex with their image of a woman....Women men want, want men” (144).

It is a controversial assertion that sex as it is currently conceived of is a function of sexism, but as feminists we argue that thematically movies, music, the hyper-masculinity of the military, and the institution of marriage, to name a few, are all social interactions that manifest sexism. So why do we (or how can we) view sex itself as a pure social interaction that can be theorized or experienced outside of sexism? The pro-sex (and ironically enough the pornography industry) contention that fantasy is harmless and has nothing to do with the real world can be deconstructed. In pornography, women fake orgasms. In real life, women fake orgasms, because of the phenomenon of frigidity and because of the pressure for “liberated” women to have wild, uninhibited orgasms the “right” way. Men imagine in pornography that women always achieve orgasm through penile penetration although the realities of female anatomy often defy this common misconception that pornography perpetuates.⁵ In pornography, “raped women are seen as asking for it: if a man wanted her, she must have wanted him....Men who sexually harass, say women sexually harass them” (144). The world portrayed in

⁴ Youporn network ranks first in terms of most accessed globally for an online pornography network and ranks 47th of most visited out of all websites (Websites Par. 3 and Most Par. 1). The thematic elements of the pornography shown here sexualizes the feminization of poverty. Female bosses are overpowered by their male employees and “put back into their place.” When students “smart off” to their male professors, the same happens. When female employees assert themselves to male bosses, they are immediately overpowered sexually. Women are shown being “punished” for being caught with another woman by their husbands, via the husband executing a three way with both women. The same can be said for Brazzers Network, which markets itself as “the world’s best porn site.” After the money shot, the copy always says “Punished” on these websites to signify that sex is punishment for women who do not stay in the private sphere, attempt to assert equality with men, or do not honor the heterosexual contract.

⁵ See Anne Koedt’s “Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm” for more on Freud’s pathologizing of female sexuality via “frigidity.”

pornography may be exaggerated, but it does reflect the culture's dominant attitudes towards sex: "the assumption that, in matters sexual, women really want what men want from women makes male force against women in sex invisible. It makes rape sex" (144). MacKinnon provides the following justification for why some feminists report experiencing arousal at watching or participating in pornography: "does anyone think Pavlov's dogs were really hungry every time they salivated at the sound of the bell?" (149). If women as consumers of pornography experience physical response at pornographic cues, it is possible that it is a result of socialization which Allan Johnson defines as the "process, a mechanism for training people to participate in social systems," in this case patriarchy (73). This does not mean necessarily that women are "naturally" turned on by the same images that most men are; indeed, men may not be "naturally" turned on by pornography either. However, it should be noted that far more research reports that women participating in sex work are performing sexuality rather than participating out of actual sexual desire for male customers⁶.

A feminist theory of sexuality, according to MacKinnon, requires capturing sexuality "*in the world*, in its situated social meanings, as it is being constructed in life on a daily basis" (MacKinnon 136). Here I would add that women's experiences are never pure, individuated accounts temporally but are always mediated by gendered, racial, and class histories. As Joan Scott explains, "we need to attend to the historical processes that, through discourse, position subjects and produce their experiences. It is not individuals who have experience, but subjects that are constituted through experience" (Scott 26). Scott insists that we historicize the

⁶See Barton, Bernadette. *Stripped: Inside the Lives of Exotic Dancers*. New York: New York University Press, 2007.

experience of women even as we realize that women's experiences are produced by discourse. Such a move resists the pro-sex position that "my desires, and my experiences" are my own expression of individuality and hence a pure articulation of a good in and of themselves. MacKinnon critiques the pro-sex project as is supported by theories of post-structuralism: sexuality should "be studied in its experienced empirical existence, not just in the texts of history (as Foucault), in the social psyche (as Lacan), or in Language (as Derrida)" (MacKinnon 136). She challenges the efficacy of social revolt against social injustice at the textual level: "Sexual meaning is not made only... in words or in texts, [for] the fact that male power has power means that the interests of male sexuality construct what sexuality as such means in life, including the standard way it is...recognized to be felt and expressed and experienced" (MacKinnon 136). According to MacKinnon, until existing feminist theories account for the way that phallic desire co-opts feminine desire, the way, that it circumscribes the representations of feminine desire to those sanctioned by phallic desire, these theories "will only misattribute what they call female sexuality to women as such, as if [this interpretation of female sexuality is] not imposed on women daily, they will participate in enforcing the hegemony of the social construct 'desire,' hence its product, 'sexuality,' hence its construct 'woman,' on the world" (MacKinnon 136). What we know to be "Woman" is a product of male identified sexuality. How then, can the category "Woman" ever serve actual "women?"

MacKinnon laments mainstream culture's model of sexuality as deeply Freudian in a way that echoes Philipson's concerns. This model is "essentialist, sexuality is an innate primary natural prepolitical unconditioned drive divided along the biological gender line, centering on heterosexual intercourse [and] seen as the expression of something that is...presocial and socially denied its full force" (138). Sexuality "remains precultural and universally invariant to

some extent” (MacKinnon 138). MacKinnon locates the sex radical mentality of deregulating any and all possible sexual behavior as part and parcel with the misinformed belief in sexual “freedom with transgression of social restraints on access, with making the sexually disallowed, allowed, especially male sexual access to anything” (138). Sexual access is a privilege. Who is accessible and who is not, and who has access and who does not, are both implicated in the global political economy. Therefore, viewing sexual access in terms of redefining crip sex (and expanding sexual access as a right for these individuals), would be an exception to MacKinnon's analysis on gendered sexual access. Possibilities of expanding sexual access for sexually marginalized groups outside of the frame of sex-for-profit should be explored further.

With that being said, leaving white, heterosexual, able-bodied, male desire naturalized in the way MacKinnon describes reinforces rape culture for, the “struggle to have everything sexual allowed in society...creates a sense of resistance to, and an aura of danger around, violating the powerless. If we knew the boundaries were phony, existed only to eroticize the targeted transgressable, would penetrating them feel less sexy?” (138). Pro-sex feminists contend that removing the barriers to sexual access will logically reduce the occurrences of taboo sexual behavior. That the act is forbidden is what makes it desirable. This is probably true for many people in some cases. However, for others, laws against pedophilia, incest, or prostitution may be the only thing keeping individuals from participating or being safe. Regardless, a country's laws are said to reflect the country's values. Removing social stigma and proliferating all desires poses too many risks and too few benefits for women. Prioritizing pleasure for pleasure's sake is a feminist value but state or corporate intervention into this feminist value would seem to be a mistake, because institutional intervention into feminist agendas has a historical tendency to co-opt the original project for profit at worst or make a radical project reformist in scope at best.

For example, at the time of this writing, the United States is experiencing a crisis in healthcare. Employers are cutting back benefits while unemployment skyrockets and increasingly fewer people can afford healthcare at all or the healthcare they currently have. Most feminists demand equal access for all as a right, regardless of class, gender, race, age, or sexuality. President Obama uses a rhetoric of equal access for all as well, but political demands compromise his ideals. Mimi Hall writes in *USA Today*, “[t]he battle began in late June, when Stupak and other Democrats who oppose abortion demanded that the bill include specific language banning any taxpayer funding for abortions in new government-funded health insurance exchanges or at community health centers” (Hall Par. 6). Obama settled with anti-choice Democrats and Republicans by promising that “after the health care bill passed, he would sign an executive order affirming that it would not result in any government funding for abortions” (Par. 8).

The healthcare bill that has been passed compromises on reproductive justice and is evidence of limited reform rather than complete overhaul of the healthcare system. The Right strikes fear in Americans by labeling the bill a step towards “communism,” but the bill in fact does not revolutionize the American healthcare system. My point is not to critique Obama’s intentions. Rather, I hope to show the plausibility of the claim that the sex industry incorporates feminist rhetoric of freedom and liberation to dodge responsibility to women. This is not much different from certain politicians on the Right and Left using the healthcare crisis to further their misogynist agenda on abortion. Briefly, *The Dove Campaign for Real Beauty* would be an example of a corporation making profit off of feminist principles. Democratic beauty ideals may be a step in the right direction, but as long as beauty is coded as feminine, beauty culture will perpetuate inequality by implying that women need products in order to appear acceptable.

Hence, feminist rhetoric can be co-opted to sell products or get a bill passed that needs to be radicalized before passing.

The normative assumption in society is that “whatever is considered sexuality should be allowed to be ‘expressed’ and any feminist intervention in the deconstruction of naturalized male desire is deemed “anti-sexuality” (MacKinnon 138). One issue with the pro-sex tendency of viewing sexuality as “repressed” is that it is male sexuality that becomes the model that female sexuality should emulate. In other words, sexual equality comes to mean sexual freedom for both genders. Although at first glance this sounds promising, sexual freedom with this model means women being allowed “to behave as freely as men to express this sexuality” (139). Not only is this model necessarily phallic and essentialist but it also poses male sexuality as superior. Female sexuality is in need of “catching up.” Even if women and men were “free” to be sexual however they pleased, this would not mean that sexual equality has been achieved. Gender equality is a prerequisite for sexual equality.

MacKinnon also writes post-Barnard conference that the pro-sex argument that women “choose sexuality as definitive of identity” is naïve, insisting that choosing sexual expression “is as much a form of women’s ‘expression’ as it is men’s. As if violation and abuse are not equally central to sexual [identity] as women live it” (140). Whatever is sexual in this culture, or whatever has the appearance of sex, even in advertising, gets a positive nod as “natural, healthy, positive, appropriate, pleasurable, wholesome” (138). Beauty is formulated as feminine which is itself an inequality considering that as a culture we are obsessed with the appearance of sexiness rather than with women’s sexual pleasure . In other words, a scantily clad woman in a music video gets conflated in this culture with female sexual empowerment. There is no distinction between representations of female beauty and female sexuality. Considering that beauty is a class

and race issue, wherein those women who have the currency of beauty are placed at the top of the hierarchy in relation to those women who do not, feminists should question any definition of “sex positive” that conflates expressions of sexuality with racist and classist definitions of beauty. In American culture, the ideal image of beauty has historically been “built on a Caucasian model. Fairy-tale princesses and Miss Americas have traditionally been white” (Freedman 115).

Beauty and the Impossibility of Rescuing Femininity

Rita Freedman explains in “The Myth in the Mirror” that beauty rituals were originally used to cover up a flaw, but now as “the real face becomes fused with fantasy and myth gives the illusion of truth, women end feeling ashamed when caught unadorned” (Freedman 117). She calls makeup, plastic surgery, hair removal, and other beauty rituals women perform to exaggerate their difference from men, “props and paint”: “once grounded in anatomy, these beauty symbols acquire the illusion of biological truth, and we start to think of them as fixed and permanent gender differences” (117). Beyond furthering the binary gender system, the beauty myth perpetuates the belief in female moral inferiority: “beauty transformations maintain female deviance by associating femininity with phoniness. Props and paint may undermine credibility, evoking suspicion and mistrust [aligning] women with the false and the trivial” (117). This culture’s worship of female beauty is not a celebration of being female in patriarchal culture. It is the opposite: “Because beauty is asymmetrically assigned to the feminine role, women are defined more by their looks than by their deeds” (112). According to Freedman, there is a “strong belief that what is beautiful is also good” (113). This is problematic because female identity is intimately wrapped up in appearance as studies show that when asked to describe who they are, women are far more likely than men to judge themselves and describe themselves based

on how they perceive others perceive their appearance (114). If as a culture we believe that beauty is an intrinsic good, then when a woman goes on a job interview, it stands to reason that regardless of if there are laws against it, she could be judged based on how acclimated she is in beauty related performances. Beauty culture is actually an example of the devaluation of the feminine: “Women are crowned with beauty precisely because they are cloaked in difference. The idealization of female appearance camouflages an underlying belief in female inferiority....It disguises her inadequacies and justifies her presence” in the workplace and in the public sphere generally (114).

Beauty masquerades as female sexuality in this culture. A natural connection is assumed when none logically exists. Beauty is a special consolation prize for women: “At the same time, beauty clearly distinguishes woman as different, as a member of the other half of humanity. But beauty is only a temporary equalizerUltimately, it exposes the fair sex once again as the other sex” (114). Props and paint is a feminine disguise that “elevates woman onto a pedestal while paradoxically defining her separate role. In lieu of equality, beauty serves as a kind of prop... In the end, props and pedestals make poor equalizers. They cannot substitute for full personhood” (114). Woman, “camouflaged as lovely enigma, becomes unrecognizable. Unknown and unknowable, she is all the more desirable....Beauty maintains the erotic mystery of a woman by concealing the human being beneath” (114). The more beautiful a woman is, the more mysterious, the less knowable she becomes, including perhaps to herself.

One might counter that beauty culture does serve women because it provides women pleasure and helps make them feel more desirable. The scented creams and fragrances, the play and experimentation that these products provide, may in fact provide women pleasure. Women may enjoy the colors, smells, experimenting with makeup application, and experimenting with

self presentation. Failing to acknowledge this would be failing to acknowledge women's limited agency within a racist hetero-patriarchy. However, that women choose to wear makeup, opt for plastic surgery, or choose to enact any other sort of gender based performance still is a result of anticipating the gaze. Freedman explains one possible reason why women are so quick to justify beauty culture: "Though a woman may feel powerless in many ways, her body is an arena she can try to control" (Freedman 116). Success at conforming to social norms brings many rewards and privileges, and so using props and paint successfully can bring women pleasure. How then can feminists critique an industry that on the surface benefits women's lives? Irigaray would suggest that women may find pleasure in the role of fulfilling male desire, but women did not create the system that codes beauty as feminine. What's more is that regardless of if many women do experience pleasure in participating in beauty rituals, this system does not exist to give women pleasure. It exists to help women conform in outward appearance to the male defined standard of sexuality, and woman is in the male construct of sexuality, accessory to his desire, a prop, to enact his fantasy upon. Beauty culture also exists to exact profit from the female consumer, a consumer of which is always already disproportionately disadvantaged by the capitalist system. One might also say that by squandering scant resources on beauty, women further disadvantage themselves by seeming less than serious in the economic realm of education and careers.

The message is that women's empowerment comes through their appearance and that women's only access to being "sexy" also comes from outward appearance. "Feeling" sexy in this culture is a direct result from how one looks. Some women think the way for women to be powerful is to exert some sort of sexual power *over* men. We know via understandings of how rape culture operates that women are responsible for male and female sexuality. Women are

blamed for being unattractive and for being too attractive. Women are blamed for “tempting” men when they appear too sexy but paradoxically are always expected to be sexy, in the kitchen, in class, in the board room, and in the bedroom. Therefore, the problem with empowering women through sexuality over men is that it offers an illusion that women can ever have power over men of any sort, much less sexual, as long as patriarchy is still in operation. Since when did feminism make the mistake of believing that reversing the binary could be transformative? The point is supposed to be equality, not to garner power over men. It also takes the focus off of other, arguably more useful areas that feminists could be targeting, such as the criminal justice system, the economy, and the educational system. This approach also creates the illusion that how women have sex can have far reaching political consequences. Now, the personal is always political, but this does not mean that disrupting patriarchal norms is possible by women exercising temporary power over individual men.

Pro-sex feminists, it would seem to me, are under the impression that when a woman arouses male lust, especially in cases of economic transactions, she is put in a position of power while he is rendered vulnerable to her. Logically, this makes no sense. If arousal makes one vulnerable, it is only temporary vulnerability, and if the female participant becomes powerful it is because the client grants her that power for a specified period of time, because she meets his sexual qualifications and fantasy. Sex radicals argue that sex work may be viewed as a space where the participants can “play” with gender roles and power dynamics. If it is play only and just performance there is no transformative potential. If there is a power exchange it is fictive because it is constructed or fashioned outside of reality. The money exchanged on the microcosmic personal level is no equalizer for the very sizable power difference on the macro systemic level once the play space has been left.

Pro-sex theorists emphasize that articulating female desire is critical even more so because of the very fact that we live in patriarchy. Anti-sex feminism, on the other hand, agrees that female desire should be valued, but would counter that we cannot value women's pleasure when only men's desires are culturally intelligible. Women can and do certainly experience pleasure, but this is not the same as desire. Female desire is not just devalued according to this view. It is invisible and cannot be represented, because of phallogocentrism. Therefore, when women attempt to speak their desire, it falls on deaf ears, because the imagined male audience is "seeing" her perform what he expects her to perform and contorting what she is saying her fantasy is into his fantasy. The media, the sex industry, and any institution that can make profit off of human need, sexual satisfaction being one of these needs, caters to the fantasies of heterosexual white males. Queer desire and women's desire gets left out because it is not profitable. It only becomes profitable when it gets re-narrativized as part of the straight male fantasy. Pro-sex feminism tends to theorize sexuality based on the way it is now—in other words, women express their desire to strip, etc., while within the constraints of living in a racist hetero-patriarchy. Whereas anti-sex perspectives tend to theorize based on the way they perceive sexuality should be or could be in a post-patriarchal world. One could argue then that anti-sex feminism is too utopian and that sex radical feminism is too reformist in scope.

CHAPTER THREE

The Relationship Between Pro-sexuality and Queer-theory

I have problematized not only the inevitability of sex work but also sex itself as a natural occurrence stimulated by innate human drives. I will now engage queer-feminist thought that accepts sex work in its various manifestations as actually working against heteronormativity. In this view sex work “stands at the crossroads of feminism and queer theory, providing a unique vantage point from which to critique the regime of heterosexuality [because it] proliferates sexual deviances thus undermining the mechanisms under which women and queers continue to be subordinated” (Pendleton 73). In some specific instances, in particular erotic spaces exchange of sex labor may thwart heteronormativity, but I contend that the large effect of the industry is to reinforce it.

Jill Nagle, editor of the anthology *Whores and Other Feminists* describes “whore feminism” as a new untapped possibility within feminism: “The advent of postmodernism and queer theory presents both more possibilities and more challenges for feminism. In forging more whore feminisms, we might well begin by looking at what purposes are served by using *any* sexual categories to describe women” (Nagle 4). I agree with her position that removing sexual categories from the category “woman” or removing sexual practices from gender itself as Carol Vance also advocates, has radical potential in disrupting the binary gender system. Disrupting the binary gender system frees women from the most oppressive aspects of femininity. However, I contend that whore feminism does not disrupt the binary gender system.

Former sex worker turned academic, Eva Pendelton, attempts in “Love for Sale: Queering Heterosexuality,” to “queer” heterosexuality through the act of heterosexual women taking money for sex. She argues lesbian women “playing” heterosexuality at work is another queer aspect of sex work. Pendelton exposes the trend in the academy of embracing post-structuralism as the theoretical groundwork for what she calls “whore feminism.” She writes,

Judith Butler’s work on performativity has a particular relevance for sex worker feminism... We know that the time for utopian feminist revolution is over. The forms of opposition we create are necessarily impure and draw from the very systems of oppressions that wish to overthrow us. We continue to find innovative ways to fuck with heteronormativity from within the sex industry. (81)

Pro-sex feminism is most interested in working from within existing power structures to enact change, whereas anti-sex, though critiqued as utopian, looks forward to what sexuality could be in a post-patriarchal world. Whore feminism, according to Pendelton, exposes the constructedness of heterosexuality as an institution: “Heterosexuality...depends on the specter of unchastity in order to constitute itself; the ‘good wife’...cannot exist without the ‘whore’ whether she takes the form of a prostitute, an insatiable black jezebel, a teenage mother, or a lesbian” (74). She rationalizes, then, that sex work is transformative because it combats reprocentrism. Pendelton continues, “[e]ach of these othered positions exists to reinforce the norm of white procreative heterosexuality” (74). My question becomes, is combating reprocentrism (scripts of mothering and reproduction as the motivating force behind linear notions of history) *the* central battleground in the feminist struggle for toppling patriarchy? Queer scholars often treat it as if it is. Reprocentrism is part and parcel with the system of compulsory heterosexuality, which in turn props up hetero-patriarchy. However, assuming that challenging reprocentric logic will, by itself, deconstruct femininity, is focusing on a very narrow aspect of the overall problem of gender subordination. After all, challenging reprocentrism

deconstructs only one form of femininity, that of the monogamous, reproducing mother, while leaving other problematic scripts of femininity intact. Combating reprocentrism may help remove scripts of reproduction from the category of woman, but reproductive scripts are but one of the problems feminists must contend with when approaching the issue of women's sexual empowerment.

Eva Pendleton views Gayle Rubin's landmark essay "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality" as an effort to bridge queer and feminist theories. In it, Rubin "wishes to consider the persecution of sexual deviants as an issue separate from the oppression of women" (Pendleton 74). Many men who use sex work are married and their choice to go to "bad girls" for sexual pleasure does not disrupt the procreative marriage contract for them. Sex work is very much compatible with reprocentric logic and is not a radical indictment to the institution of marriage. The system expects that men can and will use women differently for certain purposes, some for marriage and others for pleasure. Sex work does not challenge marriage as an institution or disrupt the Madonna/whore complex. Instead, it reinforces the expectation that women exist to serve (differing) male needs that are context specific.

Rubin calls for a separation of gender and sexuality. According to Teresa Ebert, such a strategy breaks "off gender and sexuality from the material conditions of production [and] advocates a form of postgender feminism founded upon self-signification and the autonomy of what Rubin identifies as 'lust'" (Ebert 51). Ebert calls the reclamation of lust "a strategy of crisis management in late capitalism" (51). Lust, in Rubin's model, "becomes the allegory for the sovereignty of the subject of desire whose excess is uncontainable within a historical category such as gender. The subject of lust is truly the deregulated subject of late capitalism where there are no limits to her practice of desire" (51). While separating sexuality from gender may

illuminate the way that a gay male is marginalized by his sexuality, it also assumes that women are sexual agents in control of their own authentic desire to the degree that men are.⁷ The struggle for equality reduces to being free to desire and have those desires respected and satisfied. Rubin's distancing of gender from sexuality is "symptomatic of a larger move in postmodern theory that is aimed at theorizing a transsocial space in which the freedom of the subject—beyond the regulations of the state (and its ideology) are guaranteed" (51). Positing women as free agents, "erases any necessary connection between subject and system, desire and history" (51).

Pendleton further supports the sexual minority model based on "stigmatized" sexual practices as outlined by Gayle Rubin. As discussed in Chapter one, the sexual minority model highlights the trajectory within queer thought of moving away from sexual identities, i.e. I am lesbian or gay, and towards identity based on sexual practices. Pendleton summarizes accordingly, "[s]ince both lesbianism and sex work destabilize heteronormativity linking the two practices is a critical political and theoretical move" (74). Living one's life as a lesbian challenges compulsory heterosexuality, because it disrupts the false idea that women are innately attracted to men, that men have exclusive economic and sexual access to women, and that women should compete for the attention of men. There is no natural alliance between lesbians and sex workers as Pendleton claims. There is nothing in being a sex worker that necessarily means one will have a feminist or queer consciousness or that one's time at work will radically alter the perceptions of mainstream society in the way that living one's life as a lesbian has the potential to. Pendleton continues, "the recasting of 'whore' from a stigmatized identity to a job

⁷ While men, arguably, are not in control of what they deem to be their "authentic" desires either, American culture sanctions male sexual access and experimentation as a necessary condition for national freedom. This connection between sexual access and freedom is not applied to women in the same way.

not wholly unlike other jobs has been a major project of the sex workers' rights movement. However, [lesbian sex workers'] work lives are also described as separate [from their] untouched lesbian 'core'" (75). This is an example of the transition from sexuality being central to identity, to sexuality being empty performance devoid of meaning. This is also evidence that the connection between Judith Butler's theory of gender performance (as opposed to performativity) has been stretched to validate whore feminism:

They do not *go* straight, they *play* straight...[S]ex work...represents a *performance of heterosexuality* regardless of the self-identity of the performer. Its defining characteristic is the exchange of money for a sexual service, which is...a queer act. Selling sex is quite outside the normative codes of sexual conduct whereby sex is privileged as something you do for love...or for fun. (76)

Pendleton notes the tension a queer-whore feminism coalition attempts to reconcile "between notions of sexuality as identity and sexuality as performance" (76). Therefore, the queer element in sex work is also the element that is anti-monogamy and anti-romantic love in this viewpoint⁸. However, the argument could be made that some monogamous relationships can be queerer than some sex worker performances; after all in the former relationship some participants may queer typical gender roles whereas in the latter job, sex workers can be reinforcing traditional gender roles. The theoretical underpinning of sex work as performance, or mimetic play can be summarized by the following Foucauldian description: "Within a matrix of power that constitutes what it means to be 'female' and 'sexual,' paid sex performers put on the trappings of femininity in order to reap material gain. [S]ex work *is* drag in that it is a mimetic performance of highly charged feminine gender codes" (78).

⁸ See the work of Leo Bersani and Lee Edelman to read more about the queer investment in anti-monogamy and anti-romantic love

If sex work is drag, or performance only, then how can these actors be actual sexual agents? How can sex work be about women's pleasure at all if women are doing nothing more but "performing" a sexual service or pretending that sexual pleasure is present? The rhetoric is contradictory. One cannot argue that sexuality has little to do with women's identity and that sex as work can be utterly divorced from sex as pleasure *while at the same time* also arguing that sex workers take on a minoritarian, rebellious, sexual identity that has radical political potential. It either is an identity or it is a performance.⁹ Sex positive feminists attempt to have it both ways by emphasizing the "ambiguities" in sex work in order to avoid taking a position on what affect sex work has on re-perpetuating an oppressive category of woman. Sex workers, following Irigaray's mimesis, engage in "mimetic play, an overt assumption of the feminine role in order to exploit it... We purposefully engage in an endless repetition of heteronormative gender codes for economic gain. Using femininity as an economic tool is a means of exposing its constructedness and reconfiguring its meanings" (79). Sex workers use "heteronormative gender codes" in order to expose them as heteronormative supposedly, but even if the sex worker believes she is disrupting heteronormativity, the male audience will more than likely see nothing different from what they came to see and what they expected to see.

The following point should lead pro sex feminists to heavily critique the paid labor force, and the feminization of poverty, as well as question how sex work may be in part a product of the feminization of poverty. Instead the following point gets counted as proof that sex as work is somehow less oppressive for women than other jobs. Pendleton writes, "rather than face sexual

⁹ Note that this section draws on Butler's notions of performance and drag and does not speak to her conception of performativity. While the former references intentionality and the potential to disrupt gendered scripts, the latter is more about the performative aspects of gendered identity, in which we are compelled to perform gender correctly. The latter term is less concerned with volition except through iterability.

harassment in the underpaid straight work place, sex workers give men limited permission to play out their sexual fantasies and desires” (79). Of course women dominate the lowest paying positions across the board, but we should be targeting all aspects of a capitalist system that disadvantages women rather than somehow arguing that getting paid to be sexually harassed is any less sexist than having to endure it when you are not being paid for it. We cannot differentiate between the corruption that creates sexual harassment in the board room at a corporate office and the entitlement men feel to sex workers. Both practices are fueled by male sense of entitlement, regardless of if the woman is getting paid or not for the treatment. For many women, however, the honesty in such a system is refreshing, because one knows up front what the clients are after. Pendleton explains, “[s]ex workers provide a powerful indictment of gender roles by demanding payment for playing them” (Pendleton 81). What matters more than the fact that these women feel some sort of empowerment via their paycheck, is that the “gender roles” they have to draw upon, even when “playing” feminine tropes, are still the retrograde, stereotypical gender codes that have hitherto, prior to the pro-sexuality movement, been perceived as oppressive. Deconstructing gender roles *is* in fact a queer act, the motivation for which is illustrative of a queer-feminist future. However, if sex work is solidifying some of the most oppressive aspects of traditional femininity, then saying that it is all an act, is not enough to make this practice “queer” or “feminist.” On the other hand, viewing sex workers as offering an intimate part of their identities for sale, of which there is limited supply, “diverts attention from the ways in which *all* women are forced to negotiate various forms of sexual stigmatization, leaving the ‘real whores’ marked as feminism’s (and heteronormative culture’s) other” (78). It is true that sex workers should not be stigmatized, but they should not be glamorized as the model for liberated women’s sexuality either.

Sexuality, according to Meri Lisa Johnson, another former sex worker turned academic, is not part of the “deep essence of one’s identity” (Johnson 160). Sexuality is not “special” and deeming it so,

connotes romance, fantasy, and fairy-tale, but it operates in real women’s lives to limit how we may deploy our sexual bodies, inscribing our sexual bodies as the locus of possible loss, something to defend and disguise. In contrast, sex radical feminism proposes an economy of plenty—we do not use up our sexuality by displaying it at the strip club. We do not render it cheap. [...] There is always more where that came from. (161).

Although pro-sex theorists like to stress the playful aspects of sex work, they do not mention the real violence that occurs to women when they actually are perceived as no longer usable in the sex industry as discussed in Chapter one¹⁰. Motivation for many women according to Johnson is “adventure or dare” which is feminist, because “adventure has historically been gendered male, stripping can feel like a masculine transgression for women, a conscious break with the social contract of self-discipline or repressive caution” (162). Again, we see the insistence on a linkage between lesbian women and sex workers: “‘stripper sexuality’ could be considered as something akin to other nonnormative sexual preferences or orientations such as homosexual, bisexual, or polyamorous” (163). If queer theory is supposed to be about deconstructing damaging binary oppositions, might Johnson not be in danger of erecting a master-binary of normative sexual practices/ non-normative sexual practices, in a very simplistic good sex (feminist sex?) versus bad sex (anti-feminist sex?) binary? Ironically, this charge of positing some sex as anti-feminist has historically been leveled against anti-sex feminists. Johnson adds that, strippers become comfortable with public nudity, and with their own bodies on display in a way that most women never are (163). How disruptive of beauty culture (or good for women’s body images) can this

¹⁰ See also Robert Jensen’s book *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity*. Cambridge: South End Press, 2007.

be when only some women are afforded the offer to capitalize on sex work? In a field where plastic surgery is almost a job requirement, not only could one be more comfortable with public nudity as a stripper, but one would likely be more comfortable with one's body in society clothed or unclothed, at home or at work.

Thomas Miller argues that the current patriarchal culture is based on the commodity model of sex. The flaw in this position is that it "protects virginity" as the only asset women have to give. Under such a model, the woman, as object of desire only has so much sexuality, and women are put in the position as the gatekeepers of sexuality that only the "nice guy" is deserving of (Millar 34). The problem is that "entitled men who believe that sex is a commodity and that they have been denied it wrongfully see rape as repossession" (35). Millar points out that "we live in a culture where sex is not so much an act as a thing: a substance that can be given, bought, sold, or stolen, that has value on a supply and demand curve. In this 'commodity model' sex is like a ticket; women have it and men try to get it" (30). In this model sex is always only a transaction in which "women may give it away or may trade it for something valuable" (30). Because the participants in the transaction will enter the transaction on an unequal playing field as a result of gender, race, and class differences, it is likely that the transaction will disadvantage some participants over others. If a pitfall of the commodity model is that sex becomes a thing that belongs to a transaction, then we should question whether or not Miller's insistence that we should change to the performance model of sex actually changes sex from a thing to an act. In other words, even if Pendleton and Johnson are correct and sex work is the performance of sexuality, a transaction of a commodity (sex as a thing) is still being bought and sold in the case of sex work. Sexual performance becomes the commodity. These women are still selling a product, even if that product is a performance of a fantasy, and these women are still the

gatekeepers of sexuality: Men want it and men must get “it” from the women. It is unclear how the performance model would radically alter this limiting formula.

The epithet “slut” is used for a “woman whose commodity is used up and worn out, whose commodity nobody would want except as a cheap alternative at a low price” (Millar 31). Therefore, in a climate of scarcity each time a woman “uses” herself to engage in a sexual transaction, degradation of the product occurs. Under this model of sex, each sex act must necessarily be a transaction of some sort, whether it be marriage, pay-per sex act, or social approval in exchange for sex. Hegemonic masculinity is constructed in such a way that men learn to believe that that they are entitled to sex, that it is their birthright, and that certain cultural scripts, most notably those of the nice guy, will reap the prize. “It,” meaning, the sex, “becomes elevated in culture above the woman herself, and the sexual act with the woman is established as more important than relating to her” (35). Women are divided into “types of women” based on “what levels of access they will grant which men and it is as if the woman is standing between them and the pussy is an irrelevance, a hindrance” (35). Millar argues that the commodity model is “inherently heteronormative and phallogentric. If two men have sex, who is the supplier and who is the demander?...When nobody in the equation has an actual vagina, the model either imposes a notion of one or presupposes unlimited consumption” in the case of gay males (36).

Since no actual woman is present in gay male relationships, gay men are often stereotyped as promiscuous, whereas because no man is involved in lesbian relationships, often lesbians are perceived as incapable of “real sex” or being promiscuous “like men.” Millar suggests that with the commodity model, femininity is imagined and displaced when no woman is present, because nothing outside the gender binary of male/female can be imagined sexually in this model. Millar perceives sexuality as performance as a plausible alternative to the commodity

model. The performance model, according to Millar, is more fluid and can incorporate different sexualities and more than one partner at a time which could be seen as a queer endeavor. In this view, what arises from the commodity model “is a tendency of property transactions: They are often not equally advantageous, and depend on bargaining power” (37). In this perspective, rape is a property crime that happens in the “absence of no” (36). A performance model of sex is offered as feminist because “it centers on collaboration” and that “consent is not the absence of ‘no’ but affirmative participation” (38).

However, the performance model is not without its faults. Collaborative art, is offered as an alternative model for sexuality. Such a model relies on musical collaboration as an analogy for sexuality. This model supposedly disrupts ageism, or the way that women’s sexuality is less valued with age and repeated use: “But a musician’s first halting notes at age thirteen in the basement are not something of particular value....She gets better by learning, by playing a lot, by playing with different people who are better than she is. She reaches the height of her powers in the prime of her life, as an experienced musician” (39). This model undermines the construct of slut, which constricts the behavior of all women, regardless of where they fall within the Madonna/Whore complex, according to Millar. One potential flaw in Millar’s analogy of music-as-sexuality is that it focuses on the playful aspects of sexuality at the exclusion of the more serious aspects of how sexuality helps shape our identities. The model also seems to imply that the more sex one has, the more valuable one’s sexuality becomes. This may appear to be a welcome transition to some women considering that currently, this culture privileges virgins, or those seen as sexually and hence morally pure, as the only female subjects deemed “rapable.” Women of color, poor women, and women who embrace their right to pleasure, are viewed as “not-rapable” while disabled women and older women are labeled asexual. With all this being

said, reversing the binary to the point that virgins or sexually “inexperienced” women are perceived of as less valuable than their more experienced counterparts, appears to be problematic as well.

However, can a model of sexuality that purports to be unconcerned with what each partner hopes to get from the encounter be feminist? For Millar states, “[u]nder a performance model, the sexual interaction should be creative, positive, and respectful even in the most casual of circumstances and without regard to what each person seeks from it” (39). If we seek to envision a model of sex that emphasizes the play aspect of sexuality, or the way that we perform sexuality for a specific period of time with one or more persons, the benefit is that sex is no longer a commodity that can be used up with repeated use because sex is performed and perfected over time. Rape is no longer a property crime, but one of violence likened more closely to kidnapping. It would be strange to think of forcing someone to play music with another, or to paint with another, or to act on stage with another. While the performance model of sex can be a negotiation on how to play, a transaction in which one party is necessarily compromised in order for the other to maximize profit is not necessarily part of the process. However, as Millar points out, such a model need not be concerned with what each party seeks from the sexual encounter regardless of how casual the encounter. If both partners do not communicate on how to play, the respect necessary to create the most successful artwork does not manifest. While, the performance model does make headway in forging a queer-feminist future in which pleasure for the sake of pleasure is valued, the risk of failing to recognize sexuality, both the dangers and pleasures, as a crucial part of women’s identity and not just a meaningless performance, needs to be more closely considered. Furthermore, what happens when pro sex uses the performance model to justify misogynist stereotypes that are circulated within play space, as “harmless” or

just-for-fun parodies? In stripper communities, sex is viewed as “play” rather than as burdened with the “cultural script of emotional obligation and feminine restraint” (Johnson 164). Viewing sex as play or performance distracts us from the exploitation that happens to women while engaging in sex work, or the violence verbal or physical that happens to non-participant women who try to resist raunch culture in their sexual lives. Lesbian bating and the caricature of the ugly feminist are but two examples of limits placed on female behavior via language. If stripping supposedly gives women the “sexual freedom” that mainstream culture takes from them, then it is time that feminists ask again, why we are only getting the sexual freedom to remain sex objects for the satisfaction of the male gaze.¹¹

Raunch feminism, often equated with sex radical feminism, attempts to rescript traditional femininity, to imbue it with new meaning by borrowing from queer investments in performance. When sexuality is viewed as performance, reduced to the realm of play, the alleged benefit is that whatever sexual performance a woman enacts says nothing about any essential characteristics of female sexuality or women as a category. A stripper acting out an audience’s school girl fantasy then says nothing about how such a fantasy is coded as feminine, and is unconcerned with why the infantilization of women is such a thematic element in male fantasy to begin with. There is a distinct division between the real world and the world of sexual play, the latter of which is thought to say nothing about actual gender roles. Lust, when viewed in this highly personalized, ahistorical vacuum misses the point that if a white woman scribbles the epithet “slut” across her chest during a show this will mean something different than if a woman

¹¹ There has been a recent surge in "how to strip" home videos for women that claim, emulating stripper will "unleash" every woman's inner sexual being. Again, sex workers are being cast as emblematic of female sexual liberation. See Carmen Electra's *Aerobic Striptease Series*, *Exotic Dance: the Irresistible Art*, and *The Art of Exotic Dance: Striptease Series--Lap Dancing and Entertaining your Man*. Sexual freedom is formulated as removing barriers to stripping.

of color attempted the same thing. The same could be said for a woman in her twenties and a woman in her sixties. Different histories are invoked based on where the actor lies in relationship to power. This is why sex work, when excused as artistic expression, most notably in exotic dance, i.e. stripping, becomes viewed as possibly libratory.¹² After all, how can one properly criticize art in a generation that is utterly convinced of “art for the sake of art” mentality? In order to dodge this, sex work must be removed from the definition of art and reassigned to the role of “job.”

Elisa Glick writes that her work is “a critique of those contemporary pro-sex and queer theories that encourage us, as feminists and sexual minorities, to fuck our way to freedom” (Glick 19). Glick questions the “usefulness of discourses that glorify ‘destabilizing’ sexual practices, those which are seen to ‘trouble’ – to borrow Judith Butler’s formulation– the categories of sex and sexuality” (20). Although she is not arguing against the practices of drag, S/M, butch/femme or any other gender play, she does want to question the assumption that such cultural practices are in essence, transformative (19). Glick convincingly undermines the pro-sex tendency to align or see a natural connection between sex workers and lesbian: “although feminists comprise a large segment of the pro-sexuality movement, some pro-sex activists, including transgender, gay, bisexual, and S/M radicals, do not align themselves with feminism at all” (20). Glick’s project is to “distinguish between these two movements historically, politically, and as modes of social critique...to theorize their continuities” (20). Glick writes, “I am conceptualizing pro-sex feminism and queer theory as two faces of ‘sex positivity’ in order to

¹² See Bree Robert’s thesis, *Feminists and G-Strings?: Finding the Female Gaze in the Heterosexual Strip Club* at the University of Alabama for a history of stripping as a libratory art form, especially 26-29 and 57-68. Roberts argues that the presence of heterosexual women in the audience can disrupt male privilege and trouble the gendered subject/object dichotomy.

investigate the politics that emerge from various kinds of pro-sex arguments” (20). Glick sees pro-sex as part of a Neo-liberalist reform effort that is in bed with capitalist consumer logic: “I trace pro-sex theory and practice to the ideology of the ‘sexual revolution’ and the consumerist social logic of contemporary capitalism” (20).

Considering that pro-sex aims to “proliferate desire” no matter what the desires are, and such a proliferation of desires is also a capitalist project, we can see a necessary connection between the two ideologies. Glick writes, pro-sexuality’s “promotion of transgressive sexual practices as utopian political strategies can be traced to...identity politics: the personal is political. The pro-sexuality movement of the 1980s still...imagined its audience as...a feminist collective, the queer theory of the 1990s was more interested in ‘individual sexual practices’” (Glick 21). Both movements are invested in asking what kinds of sex can be progressive. Glick argues that we cannot reach a revolution from our beds one orgasm at a time, and so the question both movements ask concerning what sex counts as queer-feminist is moot. This question misses the point that although individuals can and should look for avenues of resistance, the problem of patriarchy is bigger than each of us and bigger than women as a collective. Hence, any move that does not at least strategically address women as a collective will lack political cohesion and momentum: “both camps have a liberatory view of sexuality that is grounded in an ahistorical and individualistic concept of freedom as ‘freedom from repressive norms.’ While radical feminists see ‘female sexuality’ as repressed by ‘the patriarchy,’ the pro-sexuality movement sees repression as produced by heterosexism and ‘sex negativity’” (21). Pro-sex feminists view heterosexism and sex-negativity as cultural problems that gain momentum through and within feminism. Sex radical feminism sets up “mother feminism,” i.e. radical feminism as its other, whereas radical feminism/ anti-sex feminism posit patriarchy as its other (21).

As Glick explains, the pornography industry, the pro-sexuality movement, and capitalism have more in common than we often think: “For *Playboy* founder Hugh Hefner and other proponents of sexual freedom, the ‘liberation’ of sexuality meant that sex was liberated to become ‘a commodity, an ideology, and a form of “leisure”’ (Glick 26). In the 1960s the sexual revolution implemented an uneasy coalition between the “‘playboys’ and ‘cosmo’ girls of the singles culture – who eagerly embraced the commodification of sex that characterized the new consumerism of the era – and the hippie counterculture, which promoted sexual freedom as a form of rebellion against this very same materialistic and consumerist culture” (26). In essence the differences in the agenda of the women’s movement and that of the sexual revolution eventually became more pronounced, revealing that the sexual revolution benefited men more than women in that it offered them greater sexual access with fewer consequences. However, a shift occurred in which “the political [was displaced] onto the sexual by framing the pursuit of sexual pleasure in the vocabulary of revolutionary social change” (26). It is this underlying belief from the sexual revolution in freeing sex from repression, and so introducing it as play and commodity, that undergirds both the sex radical and queer movements. Glick locates an “important trend to valorize a politics of performance that inverts regulatory regimes while deflecting claims to authenticity” (27). This passage illuminates the trend of using a theory of performance within women’s studies as evidence that patriarchal norms can be disrupted from within patriarchal norms. Such a trend follows the post-structuralist logic that culture operates on an illusion of fixity in meaning. This fixity only appears to exist because of inattention to plays on difference in the construction of meaning. Femininity, in this view, can never be “authentic” because it cannot have a single, authentic meaning. Therefore, femininity cannot be “redefined” as liberatory or oppressive, because femininity resists definition. Indeed, because power is

productive and subjectivates as well as subjugates subjects, revolt can only be enacted within the empty signifier that is femininity.

A flaw in this formulation is that femininity is never a truly empty signifier. The idea that we can rescript femininity through hyperbole or parody hinges in on some post-structuralist beliefs that meaning is constantly deferred without taking into account materialist feminist considerations of economic and historical legacies that cling to the feminine. The purpose of rescripting femininity is to illuminate the ways that “masculinity” and “femininity” are really empty constructions. But once femininity is exposed as illusion, prop, or enactment, there is no guarantee that the result would be a decrease in misogyny. I argue that the reverse is more likely. In other words, if femininity is taken to mean nothing substantive about actual women, then why would people take seriously the need to reform sexist policies, jokes, or language? While it is naïve to argue that femininity can be resuscitated in the service of women, it is also risky to pretend that femininity has nothing to do with women. The strategic move of distancing women from gender or woman from women, still must recognize that such moves are necessary precisely because of the current essentialist links between femininity and women. Such a link cannot be ignored because it does real damage in women's lives.

Anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and materialist feminists point out that this strategy of believing personal erotic transgression can disrupt larger systemic power structures “reflects the power and privilege of institutionalized racial and class differences” (Glick 27-28). According to Susan Bordo, “the absolute conquest of hunger and desire (even in symbolic form) can never be tolerated by a consumer system” (Bordo 202). We cannot conquer, we must proliferate desire. The “axis of production/consumption is gender-overlaid...by the hierarchal dualism that constructs a dangerous, appetitive, bodily ‘female principle’ in opposition to a masterful male

will” (212). The regulation of female desire becomes pronounced in advanced capitalist cultures, and our anxieties about an “out of control” femininity that desires too much gets displaced onto the female body. Paradoxically, we simultaneously construct femininity as a deficiency, and so women have perpetual desire to fill a lack in themselves with consumption. Exercise, plastic surgery, diet products, and to some degree sex work, can all be viewed as women’s struggle to control the self and the limits of the male gaze. In other words, if a woman cannot control being viewed as a sex object under patriarchy, then a common trend of thought within pro-sex feminism is at least women can control the terms under which they will be sex objects in sex work.

Glick responds to the question of performative sexuality with this comment: what “counts as subversive [within camp] depends upon who performs the acts in question, as well as the conditions of reception in a society dominated by a ‘white bourgeoisie imaginary’” (28). Glick calls the possible ethnocentrism and elitism of pro-sexuality into question: “how do sexually dissident styles reproduce relations of domination? Before promoting such cultural practices as forms of political resistance, we must consider how these practices operate in a system of racist and capitalist social relations” (28). Post-structuralist sex radical feminist theory functions as hyper-simulation “that undermines the principle of reality, embraces a purely discursive construction of reality...which reduces lived experience to the signs and symbols of representation” (28). When femininity is utterly removed in this way from social reality “[women] become linguistic and discursive objects in semiotic play” (28). Violently, the female body is erased from view once again. Glick summarizes accordingly, “[a]s the contemporary co-optation of the struggles of ‘gender outlaws’ suggests, we have emptied the political and economic content of our analysis only to legitimate a commodification of lesbian culture for both

gay and straight consumers” (28). She argues that sex radical feminists have replaced sexual, gender, and race identity with a politics that is organized around an identity of shared sexual practices (29). According to Glick, this focus on revolt within discourse translates into “what was once ‘the personal is political’ has become ‘the political need only be personal’” (29). When “self-transformation is equated with social transformation, the new identity politics has valorized a politics of lifestyle, a personal politics that is centered upon who we are – how we dress or get off – that fails to engage with institutionalized systems of domination” (29). While “some might argue that the valorizing of transgressive sexual practices by queer theorists like Butler...is precisely *not* invested in this kind of identitarian logic...what [Glick is] suggesting is that this brand of queer theory reinscribes itself in the logic of identity through the very mechanisms by which it claims to challenge it” (29). That is to say that, although queer theory claims to be an indictment to identity politics, the trend toward privileging sexual practices over identity only erects a different category of identity based on practices. Glick reasons that, “‘minority’ populations must question whether the enactment of fantasies can alter material social, political, and economic realities” (41). In other words, if female power is only available in theatrical space, then how transformative is sex work that masquerades as performance art in disrupting systemic structures of oppression?

Carnival Theory in Sex Work

Carnival theory, as described in Mary Russo’s “Female Grotesques: Carnival and Theory” has the potential to proffer a space in which some of the goals of pro-sexuality may be met while still attending to the concerns of anti-sex industry feminism. Russo explains that carnival is not gender neutral territory: “Making a spectacle out of oneself seemed a specifically feminine danger. The danger was an exposure. Men... ‘exposed themselves,’ but that operation

was quite deliberate” (Russo 318). Aging, having fat and cellulite, and smudged, exaggerated makeup are “blameworthy” exposures for women (319). Russo is interested in “how the relations between the symbolic and cultural constructs of femininity and Womanness and the experiences of *women* (as variously identified and subject to multiple determinations) might be brought together toward a dynamic model of a new subjectivity” (320). How can actual women, queer, disrupt, or make strange the category of woman, and with it the most oppressive attending accessories of femininity? As soon as one targets carnival as a potentially transgressive space, one realizes that “[t]here are especial dangers for women and other excluded or marginalized groups within carnival, though even the double jeopardy... may suggest an ambivalent redeployment of taboos around the female body as grotesque (the pregnant body, the aging body, the irregular body) and the unruly when set loose in the public sphere” (320). Only certain female bodies are sanctioned as fodder for the public sphere; others are required to remain covered, or in the private sphere. Does deconstructing the private/public binary in the question of woman as spectacle provide more adequate spaces for women to feel at home in their bodies? Or is this an assimilationist move that cannot transcend the constraints of the attending accessories of femininity? The theory of carnival, i.e. masquerade, including but not limited to counterculture, “experimental theater, and multimedia art” can be potentially transformative beyond the stage, because carnival theorists see “the human body [as] the prototype of society, the nation-state, and the city, and in the social dramas of transition and ‘rituals of status reversal, [the human body is] evidence of the reinforcement of social structure, hierarchy, and order through inversion” (320).¹³

¹³ While I realize that I have been arguing against sex work as art, it is precisely because pro-sex feminists often argue that it is in fact art, that I contend that carnival theory can reconcile

Sex work is often offered, especially in the case of erotic dance or stripping, as masquerade. In order to argue that masquerade is not always disruptive of larger social structures, I will first establish the logic behind carnival as transformative. Russo writes, “[i]n liminal states, temporary loss of boundaries tends to redefine social frames and such topsy-turvy and time-out is inevitably set right on course” (320). Russo’s characterization of the way femininity is articulated in carnival is reminiscent of pro-sexuality’s insistence on playing femininity in sex work: “as a form of representation, masquerade of the feminine...has its distinct problems. The carnivalized woman...whose comic female masquerade of those ‘feminine’ qualities...is an image that, however counterproduced, perpetuates the dominant (and misogynist) representation of women by men” (322). The carnivalized woman may enact a power reversal on stage, but such a reversal “embodies the most despised aspects of ‘strong’ femininity, and her subordinate position in society is in part underlined by the power reversal” as is played on stage (322). When pro-sex theorists say it is socially transformative for a woman to “top” a man by having sexual power over him, we see that society only thinks such pseudo female aggression is “hot” not because women are truly in power; they are playing like they are in power.

Why, however, can women not put themselves on display like men can? Why are such acts interpreted as offering oneself to the gaze as an object under scrutiny? Elite college men have the power in the “real world” to more adequately play with camp although it is to ‘poke fun’ at real power dynamics rather than to expose them as corrupt or false. For example, “the contemporary ‘straight’ drag by college boys in the amateur theatrics of elite universities, [offers] a clear case of sanctioned play for men, while it is something always risking self-

some of the concerns of both groups. Even if sex work is art, we need to look to carnival theory to see that even performance art has limits.

contempt for women to put on ‘the feminine’” (322). Russo offers a very convincing argument for why women cannot make spectacles out of themselves: “are women again so identified with style itself that they are estranged from its librating and transgressive effects as they are from their own bodies as signs in culture generally?” (323). In other words, the feminine is style par excellence, so she cannot, as a body, move beyond ornamental concerns with the display of her body.¹⁴ Others argue in direct contrast that the “marginal position of women” in the “topsy-turvy world of the carnival...in certain public framings, in certain public places, are always already transgressive—dangerous, and in danger” (323). In other words, it is by virtue of the fact that she does not have “real” power in the “real” world that her position as a carnivalesque character makes her automatically call attention to herself as “the other,” a position that, outside of carnival, is simply naturalized. The carnivalesque “body politics ingest[s] the entire corpus of high culture and in its bloated and irrepressible state, releases in fits and starts all manners of recombination, inversion, mockery, and degradation” (325). This heterogeneity and resistance to the boundaries imposed by the dominant, “sets carnival apart from the merely oppositional and reactive; [it] suggests a redeployment or counter production of culture, knowledge, and pleasure” (325). Non-normative bodies, i.e. aging bodies, pregnant bodies, fat bodies, bodies that fall under the category of “grotesque bodies” can be disruptive of patriarchal norms. We expect only certain female bodies to be on display, because we only sanction certain bodies as worthy of the male gaze. However, eroding the private (unbeautiful)/ public (beautiful) binary distinction could have drastic radical potential for a feminist intervention in woman as spectacle. Refusing to

¹⁴ Although this is the case with sex work and at times with queer investments in camp, I would argue that women’s sports is one possibility where women can use their bodies in a way that is not perceived as ornamental, or “style” only. This is despite the known sexism in women’s sports, particularly the way female athletes are “made up” for the camera in order to qualify as adequately ‘feminine’.

cover up what one should on the beach for a woman who is the average size of twelve or fourteen, refusing to hide bulges, blemishes or other bodily non-conformities could produce the following effect.

Consider *Slate* columnist Seth Stevenson's reaction to the *Dove Campaign for Real Beauty* billboards: "When I first saw one of these smiley, husky gals on the side of a building, my brain hiccupped...Here I was staring at a 'big-boned' woman in her underwear, but this wasn't an Adam Sandler movie, and I wasn't supposed to laugh at her. It felt almost revolutionary" (Taylor 953). His brain hiccupped because such bodies are not perceived in this culture to be beautiful. However, through repeated exposure and insistence that these bodies have value, such representations of womanhood could eventually become codified as just one more type of beauty among a whole spectrum of beauties. In other words, as feminists we should be forcing queer-feminist spaces into dominant culture whenever possible—offering bodies as potentially beautiful that could have more than one interpretation. Imagine a heterosexual male audience that has chosen to attend a strip club in order to ogle busty, thin women with long hair willing to cater to solidifying the male clientele's perception of proper femininity. Instead our fictive male audience is shocked to find four topless women on stage scribbling slut across their chests—one woman is older, one is African American, one has a shaven head, and one is larger than strip clubs would traditionally hire. One could argue that beyond shock and outrage this audience could be faced with how the epithet slut translates differently for women based on age, class, race, sexuality, and ability. Therefore, the question of 'to what degree can woman make a spectacle out of herself' is truly complex. Whether or not a woman's intentional, hyperbolic performance of femininity can make a remarkable feminist political statement or not must attend to questions of audience as well as the identity markers of the female participants. The pro-sex

position that sex work is by nature carnivalesque, artistic, and hence politically significant for its audience seems naïve when taking into consideration that when one gives the audience exactly what the audience expects, no attitudes concerning women are challenged. However, when the anticipated or expected performance of femininity is shattered, some potential for disrupting business as usual exists. Seeing a woman with a disability insist that she is in fact a desiring, sexual agent could have potential. Could woman as spectacle disrupt some of the more marginalizing scripts attached to femininity regarding menstruation, childbirth, aging, or disability?

It is important to note, however, that without the audience's understanding of what they are seeing, a peep show that boasts displaying non-normative bodies, risks merely becoming a space for the audience (as voyeurs) to intimately view individuals typically cast as "others" for pay. This exoticization of the other does not differ from the way the sexuality of these groups is normally treated. The latter event does nothing to disrupt beauty norms or the conflation of beauty with women's sexuality nor does it unhinge the current mechanisms of subject/object phallic desire. For example, one critique of sex work as political performance is that it aligns women yet again with the "hysterical" for "women circulate as signs but are not theorized as sign producers" which means practically that "men look but they do not hear" a new message about what women are or could be. Rather they hear, see, and fit her performance into their preconceived expectation of it.

Kimberle Springer points out that the question over whether or not women can be sexual agents in patriarchal culture is even more complicated for women of color, given that the sexuality of women of color "is used as the dark specter to keep white women in line. Can black women be sexual actors in a drama of our construction? Will black women act on our own behalf

even if doing so includes fantasies that incorporate racist or sexist scenarios?” (Springer 85). Alternatively, “are black women destined to always be victims of a sexual and racial history that overwhelms hope for transformation and liberation?” (85). Such questions aptly summarize the complexity behind the question of woman as spectacle. Can words like “whore,” “cunt,” and “nigger” be reclaimed? Springer argues no: “Is it a revolutionary act of reclaiming an oppressive word? Or does it make us merely minstrels performing in a white man’s show? Older and younger feminists debate the merits of embracing the labels of ‘bitch’ and ‘dyke’ as a bid for taking the malice out of the words” (87). She questions the efficacy of reclamation as a political strategy: “There are some black women who say, ‘Yes, I am a black bitch’ or, ‘Yes, I am a ho.’ These claims do little to shift attitudes. If nothing else we merely give our enemies more artillery to continue to shoot us down” (87).

CHAPTER FOUR

Towards a Pro-sex Anti-Sex Industry Feminism

Rosemarie Hennessy challenges conceptions of desire that take “desire to be the foundation for social activity and meaning” in which “desire is not produced by, but produces reality” (Hennessy 195). She argues that “knowing desire as freely mobile, indiscriminate micro-energies is itself an effect of late capitalism” (196). Sex positive anti-sex industry feminism recognizes that sex work cannot be lumped in with questions of S/M, cross-generational sex, and butch/femme roles. While the latter are ways that individuals express themselves sexually, sex work cannot be conceived of as merely a form of sexual expression. Sex work must be differentiated from these other categories, because sex work is entangled with the feminization of poverty on a global scale. In other words, it engages materiality in a way that the other sexual practices do not. While S/M for example, can be said to engage virtual materiality, or the way materiality operates in discourse, sex work, in contrast, can never be relegated to the semiotic realm. It is therefore possible to occupy a feminist position that is pro-pleasure and supportive of alternative sexual identities, while still being critical of the rhetoric that is deployed by, as well as the causes and effects of the sex industry. A sex-positive anti-sex industry feminism is interested in elevating women’s pleasure in culture at the same time that it looks for ways to make women’s desires culturally intelligible. It demands that we can do better than offer pornography and raunch culture as sex education for America’s youth. It creates alternative feminist-centered sex education that is oriented towards women’s pleasure rather than focused on the reproductive aspects of some forms of sexuality.

This version of feminism situates itself within a discourse on global capitalism that recognizes that the continuation of the western exploitation of the earth, depends on the exploitation of women's labor. Sexuality cannot be divorced from questions of women's labor. Hennessy states, one "of the conditions that makes possible and encourages...the notion of desire as energy flows is a new regime of capitalist accumulation whereby labor and capital itself have become increasingly abstracted" or made invisible (196). Women in late capitalist societies are in a curious position, for they are "contradictorily positioned in capitalism as free workers and citizens, yet devalued as females" (5). Put differently, "in many developed and overdeveloped sectors of the world, the traditional mandate that women serve others [in the paid and unpaid labor sectors] is contradicted by capitalism's prescriptions that we ourselves, be in control, and compete with others as fully autonomous individuals" (5). This passage describes the inherent contradiction in sex work. Although the job itself is a traditional rendering of service to others, it is framed as a way for women to position themselves as masters of their own destinies. We might do well to question whether anyone really has this type of freedom in a late capitalist patriarchal society. Women's labor is invisible in late capitalist societies because capitalism continually "reproduces ways of knowing and feeling that conceal the exploitive human relations that the accumulation of profit requires" (6).

Technological interventions into the proliferation of male desires, in cases such as digital imaging or air-brushing, video-game pornography, and all other portrayals of sexuality on the World Wide Web, effectively obscure that "real women" are working. It, in other words, is a "feel good ideology" that tells people to do what feels good, because what feels good is a good in and of itself. The mandate to "buy products because it feels good" is problematic, because it conditions consumers to be apathetic to how products are made and who makes them. It also

codes desire as positive and productive, which removes desire from the realm of ethics. Even when women are viewed as products to be traded in the market, such practices will be protected, because this culture frees all desires from value judgments, which neatly eschews the capitalist consumer logic undergirding our culture's framing of sexuality.

Neo-liberals, argue that we are beyond Marxist concerns, because, according to Post-Marxists, "social life is only knowable through discourse and [so] the social as such is a discursive effect...[A]ll social antagonisms are fluid and reversible, and power does not function through top-down hierarchies...but through diffuse forces...[C]lass and relations of labor have no objective existence outside the discourse that constitutes them" (Hennessy 11). The departure from materialist feminist concerns can be interpreted as a critique of the way that Marxism is believed to ignore human agency and the existence of ideology (15). All, it has been countered, cannot be reduced to the economic. While this may be a valid critique of some Marxist feminist accounts, retreating from Marxism completely when we are living in a time of economic crisis wherein the gap between the rich and poor is steadily expanding, seems to be a reactionary move. Hennessy argues for a theory of sexuality that does not reduce to corporality, that is not grounded in ahistorical libidinal energies, but instead "integrates sexuality into theories on global capitalism" (45). The question should not be whether to "allow" or "celebrate" women's sexual desires, but should be rather to address "how to understand the production of desire and subjectivity as a dialectical historical possibility, and how to intervene in the way that it works—often unevenly—in concert with capitalist advancement to open libratory possibilities for some women at the expense of others" (199).

Teresa Ebert calls "a feminism that is founded upon poststructuralist assumptions about linguistic play, difference, and the priority of discourse [that] substitutes a politics of

representation for radical social transformation” ludic feminism (Ebert 3). Ludic feminism creates a climate in which “needs [become the] effects of desires [which] constructs a post-al political economy in which consumption (desire) is the productive force and source of profit, thereby suppressing production and labor” (Ebert 56). Desire is substituted for production and labor which not only cuts “desire off from need and then reappropriates need as the product of autonomous desire, [but also] frees desire from actual historical needs (use value) and posits desire itself as a self-propelling social force” (56).

The sex wars of the 1980s may have opened up doors for some marginalized subjects to express their desires within the safety of feminist space. However, according to Hennessy, another legacy of the sex wars is the foreclosure of Marxist feminist thought in the academy. A transvaluation has occurred post-Barnard conference wherein “the sex radical’s ‘bad girl’ rejection of bourgeoisie respectability transcodes the negative valence once associated with (non-white, non-middle class) female sexual agency” (Hennessy 201). Simultaneously, the sex radical “has the mobility and freedom to flaunt her being bad, to choose her sex partners, and to buy her sex toys. The class and race components of this transvaluation are hidden behind the history of the sex wars” (201).

In Search of Sexual Justice

John Stoltenberg asks in “Pornography and Freedom,” “why has sexual freedom come to look so much like sexual repression? Why has sexual freedom come to look so much like unfreedom?” (Stoltenberg 453). Outside of the realm of sexuality, it is understood that “there can’t be any freedom until justice has happened, until justice exists” (453). Pro-sex advocates “have cast the issue only in terms of having sex that is free from suppression and restraint” (453). Stoltenberg counters that sex that is free from value judgments is also “sex that is free from fear,

guilt, and shame...sex that is free from responsibility, sex that is free from consequences [and] ethical distinctions, sex that is essentially free from any obligation to take into account that the other person *is a person*" (453). This model of sexuality that is based on sexual freedom, "is only freedom for those in power [because] the sexual freedom represented by pornography is the freedom of men to act sexually in ways that keep sex a basis for inequality" (454). Sex work should not be perceived as outside the realm of ethics, because pornography "keeps sexism sexy. It keeps sexism *necessary* for some people to have sexual feelings. It makes reciprocity make you go limp" (454). Sexual freedom "has never been about sexual justice between men and women. It...has been about preserving a sexuality that preserves male supremacy" (455). We look to pornography as a cultural icon for sexual freedom and empowerment, but pornography is one medium that naturalizes sexual injustice (455).

Audre Lorde's conception of the erotic is a fruitful starting point for advancing sexual justice as Stoltenberg defines it. Sexual justice would be actively sought in a pro-sex anti-sex industry feminism. Lorde conceptualizes the erotic in contradistinction to the pornographic imagination that currently overwhelms this culture's perception of women's sexuality. Pornography exaggerates gendered differences through pedestrian scripts, and posits these differences as grounded in the conflicting natures of men and women. In contrast, the erotic "forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, *and lessens the threat of their difference*" (Lorde 56 emphasis mine). Fear of difference engenders social inequality. Lorde writes, the erotic "is a reminder of my capacity for feeling" (57). The erotic empowers women, through its challenge to "scrutinize all aspects of our existence, forcing us to evaluate those aspects honestly in terms of their relative meaning" (57). The erotic emphasizes "meaning" and "feeling" in our experiences and

connections with other people over plasticized “sensation” (54). While the erotic need not be sexual, it reclaims the centrality of intimacy in a culture that devalues intimacy along with most values that are traditionally coded as feminine. The capitalist system exists in opposition to the realization of women’s erotic knowledge, because desires are co-opted for profit. Lorde explains, the “principal horror of any system that defines good in terms of profit rather than in terms of human need...is that it robs our work of its erotic value” (55). Work based on the erotic, or work that has meaning in terms of human relationships, cannot be satisfied as long as profit is the highest national value.

In conclusion, questions of how to empower women sexually cannot be addressed until we commit to empowering women politically and economically. This is not to put sexuality on the backburner. Rather this argument recognizes that sexuality, as a crucial part of identity, is constructed within a climate of inequality. Hence, whatever sexuality a woman claims to be her own, will be tinged with women’s collective sexuality.

While we may strive for spaces in which to safely express what we name as pleasurable, speaking our pleasure does not carve a space for women’s desire that is separate from masculinist narratives on women’s sexuality. In seeking to theorize women’s sexuality for the future, we should not separate women’s sexuality from women’s labor within the global market. This thesis, then, calls for a reexamination of feminism’s investment in questions of sexual freedom, and ultimately re-centers the issue of women’s sexual empowerment around how to reach sexual justice. Sexual justice, as we have seen, requires justice in all other areas that affect women’s lives. A sex-positive anti-sex industry feminism seeks to reclaim intimacy as pleasure under a framework of transnational lust, wherein people are not free to dehumanize others, or trade one another in transactions in order to satisfy desires, because such transactions would be

antithetical to justice and therefore freedom. Trading or selling an aspect of one's sexuality, even when that sexuality is performed, would be unacceptable, because sexuality is part of the collective identity of women. Caring must be incorporated into our national values. Only then would the possibility of war, sex work, or denial of health care be seen as an unacceptable ploy by corporations to make profit off of human need.

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