

Reconsidering Radical Feminism

*Affect and the Politics
of Heterosexuality*

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Introduction

Radical Attachments

I became a feminist at age fourteen. I didn't yet know what such a person was called, but, in retrospect, that's what I was. I spoke out against the differential treatment I received as a girl; I corrected damaging gender stereotypes reproduced by teachers and classmates; I questioned the idea that boys were supposed to fall in love with girls, that girls were supposed to fall in love with boys, and that marriage was the inevitable outcome. As I grew older, I developed more of a language through which to express my thoughts and ideas. I became interested in the notion of patriarchy. Here, I found a way to critique multifaceted systems of oppression that devalued women and compromised female autonomy. But I wanted to learn more. Near the end of high school, I began reading feminist books on summer break. At that time, comprehending the relatively accessible prose of social activist and writer bell hooks was nearly impossible, but I continued on, eventually finding works by radical feminists Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon. And so, as it happened, I adopted the label "radical feminist." My particular brand had a couple of defining features: I believed male supremacy was a global, transhistorical phenomenon aimed at the control of female sexuality and that a radical overthrow of the prevailing social order would be necessary to achieve equality. But, of course, things changed again, as they often do. During my undergraduate and master's studies, I was

introduced to socialist, sex-positive, and poststructural feminism. Socialist feminism taught me that gender is not the only axis of oppression. Sex-positive feminism enabled me to investigate gendered sexual practices without an obsessive focus on injury. And poststructural feminism provided relief from the political weight of structural analyses of patriarchy's "truth." I was untethered from radical feminism's fury and given opportunities to enjoy theoretical experimentation in my work life and sexual experimentation in my personal life without the constant worry of proper feminist comportment.

I am, of course, not the only feminist who has shifted away from radical feminism. Due in part, no doubt, to the feminist sex wars, many academics and activists have. The heated debates of the feminist sex wars dominated the 1980s and 1990s, creating the impression of a false polarization between feminisms deemed anti-sex and those deemed more sex-positive. Radical feminism, seen as archetypal of the anti-sex camp, was vocal in pointing out the wrongs of sexuality as practised under patriarchal social relations. Heterosexual intercourse was too often an exercise in male hedonism, sexual assault was all-pervasive, and pornography and sex work, as reflections of unequal social relations, served male pleasure no matter the costs to women. Sex-positive feminism, conversely, frequently focused on the wrongs of radical feminism. Here, the concern was erasures of female sexual pleasure through an overemphasis on sexual danger. When patriarchy is seen as an all-encompassing system of male power and control, the agency women do in fact exercise under unequal relations is overlooked. Although many different feminisms were involved in the sex wars, all with varying views of the matters under consideration, the focus crystallized around debates between feminists who thought women needed to be protected from oversexualization on social terms that were never of their own choosing and those who felt women needed to be liberated from social and sexual paternalism. It is my view that sex-positive feminism eventually won the day and that this marked the near unanimous defeat of radical feminism in many activist and academic circles.¹

Yet my own interest in radical feminism had not been completely extinguished; it reemerged for me while I was pursuing my doctorate. I was fortunate to receive a scholarship that enabled me to make art that

complemented my academic work. Focused on performance and video, I made art that dealt with feminist themes pertaining to sexuality. I was, or so I thought, creating sex-positive imagery that adhered to the post-structural understanding that texts have no inherent meaning. But to my disappointment, my work was sometimes interpreted against my intentions. Nonfeminist viewers did not always recognize the intervention I was making in dominant representations of female sexuality and instead read the videos and performances as alternative erotica. I was left to reflect on my work. What I found was a feminist politics different from what I had previously recognized; my work, it appeared, was explicitly addressing patriarchal representations of female sexuality. More specifically, my imagery had what I identified as a radical feminist sensibility. But how could this be the case given my self-confessed sex-positive feminist commitments? It seemed that I was unconsciously expressing an attachment to a radical feminist politics – that I was acting out commitments to an antiquated feminist framework that was already defunct.² Or was it? This was the question I was left to explore.

Reconsidering Radical Feminism contends that reducing radical feminism to little more than a flawed moment in feminist history is shortsighted.³ More specifically, this book revisits the feminist sex wars through the use of queer, poststructural, and affect theory to examine how readers develop passionate attachments to particular feminist theories. Understanding passionate attachments benefits from queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's question of what knowledge "does." This approach is concerned less with the truth of knowledge than with its performative effects and affects. I ask not only how feminist knowledges *do* theoretically and politically but also how they *do* affectively through the theoretical frameworks they employ and the politics they profess. The focus here is on the implications of feminist knowledges. In part, the labour that feminist arguments perform is to position readers as gendered subjects; feminist arguments, we might say, interpellate readers in particular kinds of ways. This focus moves away from a continued concern with the rights and wrongs of seemingly oppositional feminist theories in order to explain how readers become invested in conflicting political and theoretical frameworks.⁴ Because passionate attachments are developed through psychoanalytic processes of identification that

mirror those at play in subject formation and because subject formation is never complete, I conclude that we develop ambivalent investments in the confused particularities of our feminist existence. Here, we begin to answer the question of how seemingly contradictory political and theoretical feminist frameworks might be emotionally and intellectually attractive.

By using queer, poststructural, and affect theory to revisit the politics of heterosexuality through the legacy of the feminist sex wars, I also maintain the poststructural position that heterosexual practices have no inherent or fixed universal meaning while validating radical feminism's claim that they are often deployed as gendered strategies of stratification. Because queer and poststructural feminisms are interested in un-hinging identity from fixed, overdetermined social structures, the focus tends to be on future possibilities opened up by nonheterosexual, non-dualistic sexualities and gendered identities. As a result, heterosexuality is often displaced as an object of political and theoretical study. *Reconsidering Radical Feminism* redirects the tools developed by contemporary feminisms to investigate important questions asked by radical feminists of heterosexuality while further disrupting some of the ways that radical feminism has been unfairly characterized.⁵ This project is unique in its endeavour to sanction a stigmatized feminist framework – at least when speaking about the writing of Dworkin and MacKinnon – through work that tends to enjoy more academic legitimacy. The project also destabilizes many sex-positive critiques of radical feminism and begins the work of bridging generational divides constructed and reinforced through the feminist sex wars.

Radical Feminism and Its Discontents

My argument that radical feminism still has something to offer to a politics of heterosexuality is perhaps strange given that I propose to use poststructural feminism, along with queer and affect theory, in order to prove it. Exploring the seemingly irreconcilable political and epistemological differences between radical and poststructural feminism can serve to demonstrate the benefits of my project. For starters, radical and poststructural feminism employ different theories of knowledge. Modernist discourses, like radical feminism, tend to rely on conceptions

of ideology. Originally a Marxist concept, ideology is defined by philosopher Louis Althusser as “a ‘representation’ of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.”⁶ In this way, it is a false set of ideas used to conceal unjust material relations in the interests of the ruling class or, in this case, the ruling gender. Ideology is placed in opposition to knowledge, which is equated with freedom, progress, or liberation.⁷ When questions of heterosexuality are viewed in terms of ideology, we speak of representations of sexual relations between men and women that obscure the manner in which heterosexuality is practised in ways that privilege male partners. The purpose of critical inquiry, in this schema, is to expose structures, causalities, and truths that underlie ideology so that heterosexuality might be practised more equitably. Poststructural theory, conversely, is interested in narrative and genealogy. Here, the focus becomes the social *implications* of the stories we tell and the ideas we hold rather than fixed structures and truths. The lineage of concepts, institutions, and social practices becomes more important than discovering their cause. It is not surprising, then, that poststructuralists favour discourse over ideology. Discourse does not attempt to discover the truth about concrete material conditions underlying representation since, for discourse, representation *is* what shapes material reality.⁸ This is to say that discourse has the *effect* of truth; it exists as the means through which all knowledge is produced, whether it be liberatory *or* in line with the powers of domination. Again, it is not that some discourses are true and thus knowledge and that others are false and thus ideology. Rather, different discourses, including heterosexuality as pleasure and heterosexuality as oppression, compete for the status of truth.

We find further irreconcilable differences between radical and poststructural feminism in their conceptualizations of power. Power, for modernists, is top-down. It is something that is held by the few and used against the many for the purposes of domination. According to this approach, men hold sexual power and exercise it on women. In opposition to the view that power is located within and disseminated from particular institutions and persons with abilities to effect influence, poststructural feminists take their direction from philosopher Michel Foucault’s position that power is productive. For Foucault, power does not simply

operate as a prohibition against those without it; it is not an external force that acts upon the subject. Power is instead transmitted by and through all subjects regardless of social location.⁹ The subject is formed through power or, as queer theorist Judith Butler articulates it, “what ‘one’ is, one’s very formation as a subject, is in some sense dependent upon ... power.”¹⁰ Here, there is no distinction to be made between power as “acting on” subjects and power as “acted by” them; power simultaneously produces subjects and their agency.¹¹ In contrast to radical feminism, poststructural feminists disagree that woman can serve as both the subject and object of sexual liberation.

These differences concerning epistemology and power are tied to irreconcilable approaches to questions of identity. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler explains these differences vis-à-vis the politics of representation: “On the one hand, *representation* serves as the operative term within a political process that seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy to women as political subjects; on the other hand, representation is the normative function of a language which is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true about the category of women.”¹² Radical feminism resides in the first camp; it holds onto the category of “woman” as a means of identifying and correcting political inequities. This is to say that radical feminism is aligned with an identity-politics position in presupposing the category of woman as a site from which to conduct research and forward political demands. Here, feminist analyses of heterosexuality must begin and end with how such practices affect women. Poststructural feminism, conversely, believes that this identity-based strategy continually reinvents woman as an object of misrepresentation.¹³ As a result, poststructural feminism takes a post-identity-politics position that remains conscious of how analyses of gender and sexuality can reproduce identity categories according to disadvantageous terms.

These two contradictory views of representation have been hotly debated because they hold important implications. Emphasizing contingency, relationality, and intersectionality enables postidentity or poststructural feminists to investigate the lived implications of social identity without fixing gendered subjects within identity categories they did

not themselves choose. In other words, the self-reflexivity of postidentity thinking provides tools to disrupt the naming function of its own theorizing; it provides tools to guard against the manner in which feminism can inadvertently assume and thus reproduce particular kinds of gendered subjects as a by-product of its own thinking. Here, postidentity thinking opens possibilities for new social constructions of gender. Identity-based thinkers, such as radical feminists, might offer the rebuttal that in focusing so heavily on the political implications of gendered codifications, postidentity feminisms lose sight of the socio-economic contexts that have produced these codifications to begin with.¹⁴ Here, beginning with the category of woman is not a problem if doing so helps to disclose gendered violence and encourages social transformation.¹⁵ It is argued that because gender and sex have been used as a strategy of stratification, eliminating this stratification necessitates that it first be identified. In addition, identity-based feminism necessitates the identification not only of patriarchal social relations but also of female subjects as bounded and distinct entities who are separate from men and who can work toward the transformation of sexist practices and institutions to ameliorate their situation. Refusing to do so runs the risk of leaving gendered stratification, along with the social, political, and economic structures that support it, uncontested. For this reason, identity-based thinkers, like radical feminists, sometimes criticize poststructural feminism as a demobilization of feminist thought.

Based on these differences between radical and poststructural feminist theories of knowledge, power, and identity, it seems impossible to hold both positions simultaneously. Likewise, it seems impossible to use one as a methodology for studying the other as an object of analysis. But that is what I intend to do. My intellectual and political commitments to sex-positive feminism, as well as to poststructural feminism, do not dull what I perceive to be the seductiveness of radical feminism despite its shortcomings. Reconciling these theoretical and, more importantly, emotional contradictions is difficult. As a result, this project begins from within this discrepancy, where conflicting political and theoretical frameworks hold intersecting and contradictory intellectual, political, and emotional investments.

The Psychic Life of Feminist Theory

Popular thought assumes that we adopt or reject arguments and frameworks on the basis of their theoretical and political validity alone. I contend that our allegiances are far more complicated, that we develop passionate attachments to feminist theories due in part to how they position readers as gendered subjects. We are able to hold contrary investments in seemingly incompatible feminist frameworks because investments are not rational; they are emotional. The attachments we form to feminist arguments and frameworks can be understood through what Sigmund Freud termed “cathexis” – libidinal investments in persons, places, ideas, and things.¹⁶ Cathexis gestures toward an inherent intimacy between knowledge and the emotional or psychological. As literary critic Shoshana Felman explains, psychoanalysis and learning are always closely intertwined; when we do one, we are necessarily doing the other even if we are unaware that this is the case.¹⁷ When we learn new or relearn old knowledges, we engage in the work of reorganizing our psychic selves, just as the therapeutic process is a means through which we are reoriented toward our understandings of self and the world around us.

When cathexis is examined specifically in relation to questions of academic theory, we see that we develop attachments to theory in response to personal sites of significance and that theory is itself productive of personal significance. Theorist, curator, and artist Natalie Loveless concurs: “the locations that we theorize from are always grounded in what moves us most deeply, in that which we are driven by and to which we are driven.”¹⁸ Feminist theorist Robyn Wiegman makes a similar argument when she writes that academic knowledges, particularly those pertaining to questions of identity, are “inseparable from the projections, attachments, and affects that propel them.”¹⁹ Indeed, our “objects of study are as fully enmeshed in fantasy, projection, and desire as those that inhabit the more familiar itinerary of intimate life.”²⁰ Theory, Loveless and Wiegman might concur, is constitutive of how we experience the world insofar as theory shapes how we feel within and in relation to the world, and we develop attachments to theory on the basis of how we have experienced the world thus far. As a result, our relationships to theory are often passionate whether they are based on love or

hate. Psychoanalytic theorist Deborah Britzman uses the language of theory kindergarten to describe this personification of knowledge wherein knowledge is experienced as “either friend or foe.”²¹ The problem arises, she continues, when the complexity of this relationship goes unacknowledged. When the psychological significance of theory is not recognized, an important segment of our knowledge remains unthought – an entire realm of relations between affect, ideas, and objects.²²

Much of the psychic significance of theory is shaped by how texts position us as readers. We accept and reject arguments and frameworks on the basis of how we are interpellated, or brought into social existence, by them. The manner in which the subject is formed in relation to the text can be theorized through Butler’s important work *The Psychic Life of Power*. In explicating her theory of gender constitution, she builds on Althusser’s idea of the interpellative hail that inaugurates individuals into a “certain order of social existence.”²³ She cites his famous example of a police officer’s halt of an individual walking down the street. The hail of the individual being apprehended by the law is made concrete through the individual’s ability to recognize the hail as addressing him or her according to a particular set of terms. This is to say that the meaning of the hail is confirmed by the individual’s response to it. The gendered, raced, and classed subject, like Althusser’s criminal, is also produced through an inauguration along particular discursive lines that often preclude the possibility of being inaugurated along others. But the performative call produces us as social agents based on the terms of discursive formations that were already always prior to our social existence; “to persist in one’s being means to be given over from the start to social terms that are never fully one’s own.”²⁴ Here, we see that the inauguration of the subject is always an epistemic process wherein existence itself is produced through discursive codifications.

Because we are brought into social existence according to terms that precede our being and because there is no space for social existence outside discourse, Butler contends, we develop a dependency on the law that marks our inauguration into sociality. But this inauguration is also the mark of our subjugation. We yield to the law as a kind of “narcissistic attachment” to our existence because we would “rather exist in subordination than not exist.”²⁵ And insofar as theory carries its own

interpellative effects, we can think of the attachments we form to theory in a manner similar to how we think of our attachments to law. Feminist theory produces gendered subjects according to those terms made available by the text.²⁶ But how do we as readers turn toward and develop attachments to different feminisms? We do not simply become particular kinds of feminists through our encounters with particular kinds of feminist texts (although this is no doubt significant). We must first recognize ourselves as being in line with the call to feminism – which often remains unnamed in our early feminist encounters but becomes increasingly discriminatory as we pick up and discard different frameworks of analysis. In other words, becoming a feminist – this kind of feminist and not that – requires that we already recognize ourselves as being in accordance with political, theoretical, and epistemological orientations as they are embodied in texts. When we cannot recognize ourselves as being in line with the text, the text is rejected. This is to say that our acceptance or rejection of feminist texts, frameworks, and arguments has more to do with how we recognize ourselves in and through them than it does with the actual texts, frameworks, and arguments themselves.

This theory concerning the psychic significance of texts vis-à-vis their interpellative effects is further complicated by the workings of affect. Affect has been understood in different ways by different theorists; here, I borrow queer literary scholar Ann Cvetkovich's openness to ambiguity between affect, emotion, and feeling.²⁷ Affect theorist Sara Ahmed takes a similar tack in writing about emotion as a cultural practice that is active in the constitution of social movements and national identities.²⁸ This approach lends itself to an argument that emotion is constitutive of attachments to arguments and frameworks of analysis. It is true that intellectual subjectivities come into being through texts, but feminist readers only sometimes turn toward the feminist "name." More often, we turn toward the affective orientation of the arguments and frameworks we encounter.²⁹ And because "affect can be understood as a dynamic relationship between the text and the reader," as media sex scholar Susanna Paasonen contends, a text's affective significance lies less with the text itself than with the reader's relationship to it.³⁰

When affect is understood to be relational, as for Paasonen, and thought is understood to acquire meaning only when steeped in feelings, as argued by psychoanalytic theorist Ruth Stein, we are given a framework through which to view attachments to feminism.³¹ Our desiring investments and unconscious identifications affect how we receive texts. In other words, texts acquire meaning, both in content and significance, through the manner in which our psychic attachments shape our affective relations to them. We are the ones who create the affective dependencies to which we turn. But since this process is always mediated in part by the unconscious, our access to the text is further enabled or disabled in ways that are often outside our conscious control. The very act of being drawn to a particular body of literature for the purposes of meaning making, our reading and writing practices, and our interpretive habits all constitute their own attachments in ways that mean beyond the scope of the theories we are thinking through.³² The presence of affect as mediating the reader's and writer's interactions with theory indicates, as argued here, that reading and writing are never simply cognitive processes but are always passionate, whether these attachments are positive or negative. Or, as Britzman concludes, "we reside in theory from the inside out ... through a theory of affect."³³

The Feminist Sex Wars and the Politics of Heterosexuality

Each chapter in *Reconsidering Radical Feminism* investigates the complex relationships readers form to feminist arguments and frameworks of analysis by looking at different heterosexual practices hotly debated during the feminist sex wars. Focused primarily on disagreements between radical and sex-positive feminisms, this book starts from the premise that it is difficult both to draw clear lines between different feminist frameworks and to attribute unified political positions to any particular feminism. Feminist frameworks and the political positions attributed to them are often contested. Although there might be very little overlap between radical and sex-positive feminisms, that is not always so with other feminisms. Some radical and socialist feminisms find significant similarities, as do some sex-positive and poststructural feminisms.³⁴ Another complication in focusing on debates staged during the feminist sex wars is that I

am placed in the position of looking backward. As Wiegman argues, “histories of feminist theory are ... attuned more to the anxious needs of the present than to an exploration of the distinctions that attend academic feminism’s complex political and intellectual inheritances.”³⁵ Feminist theorist Sharon Rosenberg similarly argues that public memory, whether it resides in popular culture or within the walls of gender studies programs, transmits “particular versions of the past from the perspective of current socio-political struggles, mobilizing attachments and knowledge that serve specified present-day interests.”³⁶ In this way, I must acknowledge that discussing radical feminism’s limitations and continued possibilities is necessarily a compromised endeavour. These hesitations aside, I map out debates as I am best able from my current historical location.

Radical feminists are consistently concerned with the coercive conditions under which heterosexuality is practised and reproduced. The most frequent objects of examination are intercourse, sexual assault, pornography, and sex work, as they are seen to be explicit expressions of the gendered political and economic inequalities produced through and productive of heterosexual practice. Catharine MacKinnon’s classic radical feminist text *Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State*, for example, focuses on how women are positioned in heterosexuality. Echoing Marxist conceptions of class, wherein many work for the economic benefit of a few, she asks whether heterosexuality is organized around a division of labour between those who “fuck” and those who “get fucked.”³⁷ This position is summarized in her now famous phrase “man fucks woman; subject verb object.”³⁸ For MacKinnon, this arrangement arises because heterosexuality and heterosexual practices have been shaped by unequal gender relations. Patriarchy does not simply provide the context within which intercourse is practised but has also been constitutive of intercourse itself. In this way, there is no clearly defined boundary that divides heterosexual sex from violence. Forms of sexual violence, including sexual assault, sexual harassment, incest, pornography, and sex work, become “abuses of sex” for MacKinnon; “they are not the eroticization *of* something else; eroticism *itself* exists in their form.”³⁹ Often working closely with MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin holds a similar position. For her, heterosexuality has been

figured according to terms that render it an act of degradation for women; it is a gendering practice that subordinates female subjects by stigmatizing them as female within a patriarchal context. That is why prohibitions exist against male homosexuality; “as long as sex is full of hostility and expresses both power over and contempt for the other person, it is very important that men not be declassified, stigmatized as female, used similarly.”⁴⁰ Prohibitions against penetrating men, then, become necessary to the maintenance of male power.

For radical feminists who think in terms of a continuum of heterosexual violence, the politics of heterosexual intercourse are closely connected to the politics of sexual assault. Positioning heterosexual sex on one end of the continuum and full-scale sexual assault on the other, continuum theories are able to account for sexual encounters that defy clear-cut classification; they are able to address how power and violence operate in unethical but seemingly nonviolent sexual encounters. For both MacKinnon and Dworkin, these grey areas emerge from heterosexuality’s situatedness within patriarchal social relations. As argued by MacKinnon, assault is part of a compulsory heterosexuality that normalizes and sexualizes coercion and force.⁴¹ For Dworkin, it is closely tied to the institutionalized power men hold over women through religion, law, and the rules of cultural production.⁴² But although continuum theories are most common, not all radical feminists take this approach. Anti-rape activist and writer Susan Brownmiller, for instance, distinguishes sharply between sex and sexual assault by characterizing sex as passion and assault as nothing more than gendered domination.⁴³

In contrast to radical feminism’s views of heterosexual intercourse and sexual assault, sex-positive feminism draws clear divisions between the two. Sex-positive feminists often assert that radical feminism’s overemphasis on sexism is sex-negative or anti-sex. Understanding all heterosexual encounters as heavily contextualized, or even determined, by patriarchal social relations overshadows possibilities for pleasure and play. In this way, according to sex-positive feminists, radical feminism provides a continuation of repressive social norms that need to be lifted if women are to achieve full sexual liberation and equality. It is for this reason that, in addition to focusing on affirmative possibilities for

heterosexuality, sex-positive feminists lend strong support to BDSM and queer sexual practices.⁴⁴

Clearly identifying a sex-positive position on assault is more difficult.⁴⁵ The discussion of contested feminist theorists and frameworks inevitably turns to the common characterization of social critic Camille Paglia as anti-feminist despite her self-identification as sex-positive.⁴⁶ Her position on sexual assault makes this tension obvious. She argues that sexual assault is wrong and punishable but criticizes the feminist tendency to include within the category of assault far too many sexual experiences that are better understood as “bad sex.” Furthermore, she argues that instead of acting like victimized children, women must take responsibility and learn to properly protect themselves by being careful not to place themselves in positions where they might be forced to have sex against their will.⁴⁷ Taking a rather different sex-positive position on sexual assault are the authors in the anthology *Yes Means Yes*.⁴⁸ Here, the argument is that rape culture can be dismantled through widespread societal appreciation for female sexual pleasure. They assert that the only way to ensure sex is sex, and not assault, is by celebrating affirmative enthusiastic consent.

Heterosexual intercourse and sexual assault are the focus of Chapters 1 and 2. In Chapter 1, “Radical Deconstructions of Heterosexual Practice,” I look at radical feminist theories of heterosexual intercourse. More specifically, I defend Dworkin’s reading of penetration through the use of poststructural and queer theory. My argument is that Dworkin’s work on the codification of heterosexual intercourse – her point that intercourse is often read as synonymous with violation – is valid. This hidden but pervasive representation of heterosexual practice constitutes actors in damaging ways. The validity of Dworkin’s argument, combined with its political importance, raises the question of why she is so frequently dismissed. The reason, I argue, is her text’s interpellative effects; Dworkin is rejected on the basis of how her text *Intercourse* positions readers as gendered subjects.⁴⁹ I conclude with an attempt to recuperate Dworkin through queer theorists Leo Bersani and Ann Cvetkovich. By looking at butch-femme relations that embrace contradiction, ambiguity, and sexual powerlessness, we find an alternative to heterosexist codings of the relation between “fucker” and “fuckee.”

Chapter 2, “Naming Experience, Experiencing a Name,” looks at the relationships feminist readers form to continuum and either-or theories of sexual assault. I argue that continuum theories are useful in accounting for ambiguous sexual experiences and for the role that sexual discourses play in complicating thinking/feeling responses to sex and assault. In doing so, however, continuum theories further complicate how readers make sense of and name personal experience. Conversely, clear-cut either-or distinctions serve a useful function in dissociating heterosexuality from injury to affirm female sexual agency. These conceptualizations are attractive because of how they position gendered readers to avoid the naming functions of assault. The problem is that sexual experiences are forced into one of two dichotomous camps through processes of exaggeration or erasure in a way that does not always reflect one’s thinking/feeling response to the sexual encounters in question. This chapter also looks at different ways that affect can be incorporated into a theory of sexual assault. Feminists sometimes use affect as though it can provide direct access to political truth. But affect does not serve a clear interpretive function; what one experiences as good the other experiences as bad. Affect does, however, continue to be one of the primary means by which individuals distinguish between sex and assault. That is why I argue for a theory of consensus; in explicitly considering how emotion operates in the politics of sex and assault, consensus performs a kind of affective labour that theories of consent simply cannot.

The differences between radical and sex-positive feminism are particularly apparent in how they approach pornography and sex work. As popularly known, radical feminists take an abolitionist position on these two practices. Pornography is understood to be the product of a capitalist, patriarchal society that subordinates and victimizes women. Dworkin’s book *Pornography*, for instance, is dedicated to exposing the hypocrisy of this gendered violence in a supposedly free and equal society. “The private world of sexual dominance that men demand as their right and their freedom,” she explains, “is the mirror image of the public world of sadism and atrocity that men consistently and self-righteously deplore.”⁵⁰ MacKinnon concurs. For her, “sexual objectification,” as seen in pornography, “is the primary process of the subjection of women.”⁵¹ This damage is only compounded by pornography’s power to rewrite a

woman's "no" as "yes," thereby reducing her access to meaningful consent.⁵² In a more recent article, "Unmasking the Pornography Industry," anti-pornography activist Gail Dines takes a similar radical feminist position. She argues that pornography is a teaching tool for male violence against women. It operates as a how-to manual for objectifying women "as fuck objects" and for normalizing sexualized violence.⁵³ Like radical feminist Robin Morgan, who takes the position that "pornography is the theory, and rape is the practice," Dines conceptualizes sexual assault as a by-product of misogynistic pornography.⁵⁴

Radical feminists take a similar position on sex work, which they argue is produced by and productive of unequal gender relations. For MacKinnon, sex work is part of an all-pervasive system of gender domination, including battery, harassment, incest, and assault. In positioning women as commodities, sex work, like pornography, makes women into objects.⁵⁵ Relatedly, radical feminist Kate Millett argues that "prostitutes are in the business not of selling sex but of self-degradation."⁵⁶ In this way, they are forced to support "ideological representations of female inferiority."⁵⁷ Abolitionist Sheila Jeffreys directly rails against sex-positive approaches to the issue. She rejects the sex-worker rights movement's use of the terms "sex work" and "client." This vocabulary normalizes sex work and "makes it difficult to conceptualise prostitution as a form of violence, a crime against women."⁵⁸ Instead, she uses the word "john" because it is contemptuous. Even better than "john," for Jeffreys, is "prostitution abuser" because the term focuses on violence and is equivalent to "batterer" or "rapist."⁵⁹

Sex-positive feminists, not surprisingly, take a very different approach. They espouse an anti-censorship position on pornography, arguing that it is actually *radical feminism* that violates women's rights to free speech by silencing the pleasures of producing and consuming explicit sexual images.⁶⁰ Whereas some sex-positive feminists celebrate pornography as an end in itself, others feel that, when properly deployed, it can function to disrupt gendered binaries and proliferate sexual differences.⁶¹ Sex-positive theorists who have been influenced by poststructural feminism sometimes argue that anti-pornography feminism's understanding of the relationship between sexual representation and social and economic

inequality is totalizing and deterministic.⁶² Not only is the meaning of the image never singular, but it is also difficult to verify absolute causality between explicit sexual representations, including those deemed sexist, and the status of women.⁶³ Pornography, rather, exists in a complex, ambiguous relationship to social reality.⁶⁴

The sex-positive position on sex work stresses destigmatization and decriminalization. For some sex-positive feminists, this approach means celebrating sex work as a self-determining labour of pleasure.⁶⁵ For others, it means treating sex work as any other occupation mediated by gendered and racialized discourses. As emphasized by the Toronto-based sex-worker organization Maggie's, sex workers are entitled to labour rights, including "the right to form unions or professional associations; the right to work independently, collectively or for a third party; and the right to occupational health and safety."⁶⁶ Again, we sometimes find similarities between sex-positive and poststructural feminist positions. In line with performance philosopher Shannon Bell's poststructural argument in *Reading, Writing, and Rewriting the Prostitute Body*, sex-positive feminists occasionally hold that the "flesh-and-blood female body engaged in sexual interaction for payment has no inherent meaning and is signified differently in different cultures or discourses."⁶⁷ This is to say that rather than uniformly signifying patriarchal domination, the selling of sexual services can have many different meanings.

Chapter 3, "Heterosexist Pornographies and Sex Work," takes aim at sex-positive feminist theorizations of pornography and sex work to better understand how they operate for readers. I argue that sex-positive feminism's fixation on resisting repression relies on Foucault's repressive hypothesis. In doing so, sex-positive feminism engages in a valuation of transgression that works to create divisions between itself and other feminisms while overlooking the specificity of what comes to be known when conservative social norms are overturned. This chapter also examines how desire in pornography and sex work sometimes contributes to a reification of biological difference. This argument, however, needs to be made with caution insofar as desire arises through fantasy and is only loosely connected to the objects toward which it is directed. Continuing with a discussion of affect, I look at how shame

enacts attachments to and detachments from pornographic images and commodified sexual practices, as well as attachments to and detachments from the feminist frameworks we use to understand them.

Chapter 4, “Paranoid Witness and Reparative Disengagement,” takes a meta-theoretical approach to the issues discussed in the book thus far. I use poststructural and psychoanalytically inflected affect theory to examine radical and sex-positive feminist reading and writing practices – both their affordances and their theoretical limitations. Although radical feminism does a good job of bearing witness to gendered violence, it tends to fall into Sedgwick’s reading of psychoanalyst Melanie Klein’s paranoid position. As a result, it runs the risk of inciting trauma in the reader through an overemphasis on gendered difference, an uncomplicated emotional resonance, and a tendency to think in terms of the part-object. Sex-positive feminism, conversely, tends toward manic-reparation. Instead of relating to the object of analysis as a contradictory whole, the focus is on positive affect alone, which aligns the theorist with the part-object. This discussion can be tied to an examination of how paranoid and reparative reading and writing practices relate to feminist narrations of subject formation through the notions of past, present, and future.

The book’s Conclusion takes a brief look at the question of ambivalent attachments. I review how we develop theoretical and political attachments to feminist arguments and frameworks of analysis in the same way that we do to the discursive laws that constitute our social existence. But the formation of the subject is never complete; we remain unfixed and contradictory. As a result, the attachments we form to theory are equally incomplete. The ambivalence that this situation entails, however, is not of concern; ambivalent attachments signal a reparative positionality.

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