SEXUAL OBJECTS, SEXUAL SUBJECTS AND CERTIFIED FREAKS: RETHINKING 'OBJECTIFICATION'

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Introduction

In 2020 Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion's Summer hit *WAP* entered Billboard's Hot 100 at No. 1. The song's unapologetically bawdy lyrics were amplified in an accompanying video which caused some critics to lose their minds. 'Wet Ass Pussy' had, one claimed, 'set the entire female gender back by 100 years'. (Lorraine 2020) Another noted that the song had made him 'want to pour holy water in [his] ears'. (Bradley 2020) Russell Brand asked whether *WAP* was a 'Feminist Masterpiece or Porn?' and, after musing on contemporary feminism, concluded 'It's still ultimately a sort of capitalist objectification and commodification of, in this case, the female.' (Brand 2020)

Screenshot: Cardi B and Megan thee Stallion in WAP (2020).

There is no doubt that *WAP* is a great tune and the video is trippy, sexy and outrageous. But what interests us, and what fuels our discussion here, are the ways in which its reception revolved around the need to decide whether or not its performance was objectifying—had Cardi and Megan objectified themselves, had they pandered to objectifying stereotypes of female sexuality, had they offered themselves to the male gaze and, in so doing, had they let the [feminist] side down?

We have recently published a book-length study on objectification (Paasonen et al. 2020), and here we summarise some of the arguments explored there, bringing separate elements of the argument about objectification into conversation with each other. In doing this, it is not our intent to adjudicate these questions about *WAP*; more interesting to us is how the complaints from Republican evangelists, reformed 'shagger-of-the-year' Brand and feminist journalists (Gilhooly 2020; Squires 2020) share a range of underpinning themes and concepts which centre on objectification.

Objectification, treating a person as an object or a thing, has become a key term in debates about the sexual and gendered politics of contemporary culture. In particular, it is used as shorthand for sexist practices of media representation in activist, popular and academic commentary alike. Concerns are raised about music videos and advertisements dehumanising women as agentless eye-candy, selfie-shooters self-objectifying themselves and pornography objectifying women as lumps of more or less willing flesh. In this article we examine the origins of the notion of objectification and its uses in feminist scholarship and activism from the 1970s to the current day. We argue that the term presents serious problems for understanding sexual representation, sexual attractiveness, performances of 'sexiness', sexual agency and, indeed, sexism. While holding obvious appeal as a means of critiquing gendered relations of power, the notion of objectification is pervasive in its reach and influence but elusive in its application, and is largely used in ways that make feminist and queer critiques less effective than they could, or need, to be. What space remains for sexual self-representation if all sexy representation is seen to be negative?

We begin by noting that anyone can be objectified in the sense of being treated as an instrument for the gain of others. In Martha Nussbaum's useful definition objectification means 'treating as an object what is really not an object, what is in fact, a human being' (1996: 256-7) in a variety of ways (1995: 251), none of which are linked intrinsically to either gender or sexuality:

1. Instrumentality: The objectifier treats the object as a tool of their other purposes.

2. Denial of autonomy: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in autonomy and self-determination.

3. Inertness: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in agency, and perhaps also in activity.

4. Fungibility: The objectifier treats the object as interchangeable (a) with other objects of the same type, and/or (b) with objects of other types.

5. Violability: The objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary-integrity, as something that it is permissible to break up, smash, break into.

6. Ownership: The objectifier treats the object as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold, etc.

7. Denial of subjectivity: The objectifier treats the object as something whose experience and feelings (if any) need not be taken into account. (Nussbaum 1995: 257)

Yet it is gender and sexuality—rather than, for example, the historical institutions of slavery or the exploitative practices of manufacturing labour within capitalism—that have come to provide the framework within which the term objectification is almost always deployed. Ann Cahill (2011: 84) locates the origins of this in Simone de Beauvoir's critiques of the ways women are reduced to their physical attributes, constrained to compulsory heterosexual attractiveness, and othered on the basis of gender. Nussbaum herself (1995: 249) associates the popularity of the term in feminist thought with the work of Andrea Dworkin and Catharine A. MacKinnon which conceptualises heterosexuality as entailing the sexual objectification, commodification and dehumanisation of women by men. In the following two sections we trace the emergence of a concern with objectification in particular political and theoretical traditions from the beginning of 1970s feminist activism in

Anglophone countries, firstly in film studies and radical feminism, secondly in the disciplines of mass communication and social psychology, thirdly in public debate around sexualization and fourthly in a set of discourses about sex, gender and media that have become commonplace and understood as common sense. Our purpose is to show how a very particular use of the term objectification has become normalised and to highlight some of the problems—both intellectual and political—that this use poses for feminist theory and activism.

The Power of the Male Gaze & Heterosexuality

Given the centrality that critiques of objectification connected to sexuality have acquired in contemporary feminism it is worth remembering that second wave feminism began with a much broader set of goals—equal pay and education, free contraception and childcare, legal and financial independence, freedom from violence and male dominance, as well as the right to determine one's own sexuality. (Segal 1987) In terms of the politics of gendered representation, Anglophone feminists of the late 1960s adopted a relatively broad focus; for example, the 1968 demonstration against the Miss America contest, which described it as a 'cattle auction', used a 'Freedom Trash Can' for the casting off of a range of objects—not only bras, girdles, makeup, and high-heels, but cleaning products and baby diapers. (Redstockings n.d.; Morgan and McNearney 2018) Yet throughout the 1970s and 1980s a growing focus on 'the male gaze' and 'sexual objectification' worked to present sexuality as the key to understanding objectification. In the process pornography (Dworkin 1985), sex work (McKinnon 1983; Wheeler 1985) and BDSM (Linden et al 1982) came to occupy important symbolic roles, though debates about objectification would broaden out again in the early 2000s to consider a more widespread visibility of sex amounting to a 'sexualisation of culture'.

Theories of the 'male gaze' used psychoanalysis to explore issues of representation and the dynamics of looking. The term 'male gaze' was central to the article 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', published by English academic and filmmaker, Laura Mulvey, in 1975. The essay drew on Freud's work on the pleasure in looking —scopophilia—a hypothetical drive that takes 'other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze' (Mulvey 1975: 8) and on Lacan's theory of 'the

mirror stage' which posits that the moment at which a child encounters and recognises its reflection in a mirror is fundamental to the formation of the self. Mulvey argued that Hollywood cinema offers a mirror and a way of looking to the spectator, an opportunity to identify with a character and a means of looking at others as objects, and that both of these processes are gendered—it is male characters who are presented for our identification and female characters who are offered as objects providing visual pleasure. In this sense, the film spectator is only ever offered a 'male gaze', made up from the view of the camera, the director and the male characters within film. There is no position for female viewers other than to identify with this gaze or to take masochistic pleasure in the face of their own objectification. Mulvey wrote

> pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be looked-at-ness. (Mulvey 1975: 11)

It is important to note that Mulvey only intended her analysis to apply to a very particular set of Hollywood films of the 1930s-1950s and that she went on to acknowledge that 'the gaze' is not only-ever male, nor does it always represent male power over women, especially in the light of the technological changes that have increased viewers' ability to control images and mobilise more diverse ways of seeing and being seen. (Mulvey 2006) Mulvey's analysis can be situated in a wider critical context that includes *Ways of Seeing*, the 1972 book and television series by the English art critic John Berger, which had already popularised critiques of gendered forms of looking. According to Berger's influential and oft-quoted summary, 'men act and women appear … the surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object—and most particularly an object of vision: a sight'. (1972: 47)

The notion of the male gaze has since become part of a broader popular vocabulary of objectification in ways that conflate Mulvey's and Berger's different accounts of

gendered forms of seeing and being seen, and it is currently mobilised in debates connected to the #MeToo movement internationally. Popular and activist uses of the male gaze have also drawn on the radical feminist thought of North American writers such as Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon. In English speaking feminist circles of the 1970s and 1980s concerns with sexual abuse, harassment and violence and critiques of the significance of media in the gendered politics of everyday life were drawn together in a growing consensus that sex and the media played a central role in establishing women's subordinate social position. In this approach, heterosexuality was seen as key to the organisation of society. MacKinnon argued that

> the moulding, direction, and expression of sexuality organizes society into two sexes—women and men—which division underlies the totality of social relations. Sexuality is that social process which creates, organizes, expresses, and directs desire, creating the social beings we know as women and men, as their relations create society. (1982: 516)

Sexuality was presented as the dehumanising terrain of domination with objectification a process of world-building that 'creates reality and types of beings' (Cahill 2011: 4) while heterosexual sex was identified as an expression of male supremacy in the society at large;

> The male … forces the female to conform to his supremely ridiculously definition of her as sexual object. He fetishizes her body as a whole and in its parts … In practice, fucking is an act of possession—simultaneously an act of ownership, taking, force; it is conquering; it expresses in intimacy power over and against, body to body, person to thing. (Dworkin 1989: 22–3)

Dworkin argued that male heterosexual desire was premised on the objectification of women (Dworkin 1989: 101–2) and that male supremacy depended 'on the ability of men to view women as sexual objects'. (Dworkin 1989: 113) For MacKinnon it was 'women's intimate experience of sexual objectification' which was 'definitive of and synonymous with women's lives as gender female'. (1982: 535) Heterosexuality was understood as depending on the oppression of women, with female sexual desire necessarily involving a desire to be objectified and to find pleasure in a subservient

position. Media were believed to play an important role in this process. Pornography in particular served as a template for men's behaviour—as in Robin Morgan's famous slogan 'Pornography is the theory, and rape the practice', resulting in men pushing women to 'perform sexually in ever more objectified and objectifying fashion', while the media's extolling of 'the virtues of anal intercourse', 'fist-fucking', and other 'kinky freedoms' (Morgan 1980: 139) was seen to mainstream male-centered, violent and harmful sexual practices in women's lives.

As with Mulvey's conceptualisation of the 'male gaze', this approach was based on a binary view of gender, of heterosexuality as the norm and on reactionary understandings of sexual practices as either 'good, normal, natural, blessed sexuality' or 'bad, abnormal, unnatural, damned sexuality'. (Rubin 1989: 281) For example, radical feminists thought BDSM glorified 'unequal relations of power fundamental to a patriarchal society'. (Bronstein 2011: 285) Meanwhile, all kinds of sex work were understood not as labour but as a form of gender-based exploitation—a site where women are inevitably dehumanised and turned into 'things'. (Russell 1993; Wynter 1987; Dworkin 1987) Issues of race, class, sexuality and ability were also rendered invisible in this framework which, by focusing on and prioritising heterosexuality and binary gender, obscured the different contexts within which social and cultural practices and social exchanges took place. (Snitow, Stansell, and Thompson 1983; Collins 1990) Complex questions about representations, practices and experiences of sex and sexuality were reduced to sloganeering.

This framework crystallised the use of the term objectification to indicate a very particular set of concerns with heterosexual relations and media representations of women—a curious narrowing of analysis, especially given the earlier feminist concern with the broader politics of gendered representation and their siting within a constellation of feminist demands. What about the broader range of instances where objectification might be considered to occur where people are bought and sold, treated as interchangeable, violated, used as instruments, or denied self-determination, agency and subjectivity? A slave is the paradigmatic subject of objectification as a person used as a thing and we surely see such dehumanisation in the ways refugees and migrants aiming for Europe are allowed to drown on the Mediterranean, or when

their camps are attacked and destroyed. None of this is necessarily to do with gender or sexuality, except insofar as, in patriarchal cultures, gender and sexuality inform all social relations. The specifics of the ways in which male and female refugees and migrants are objectified may differ, but male and female refugees and migrants are all objectified, and in ways that need not relate to being perceived as sexy. Despite the centrality of intersectional analysis in contemporary feminist activism and scholarship, the complexity of simultaneous and differently powerful categories of identity are effaced in critiques of objectification which operate primarily through a gendered lens. They truncate the political potential of feminist critique to address the intermeshing relations of privilege, power and oppression, factors such as race, age, social class, sexual identification, body size, abilities, religion, occupational or citizenship status— not to mention gender identifications not confined to binary, organic models, as discussed below.

Into the Academy

These interconnected ideas about objectification, initially quite marginal in terms of their impact, became steadily more mainstream since the 1980s. One reason for this was their integration into the fields of mass communications and social psychology which helped to legitimate them as scientific concerns and to broaden their appeal beyond activist circles. Simultaneously, they became anchored more firmly to a particular set of ideas about media content as having clear fixed meaning and impact, and about the role that media play in social life more broadly. Pornographic content in particular has come to be presented as inherently violent and harmful (Bridges et al 2010; Dines 2010), with a determining impact on men's expectations of sex and of women (Lindsay 2016; Sun et al 2016), while 'internalisation' has come to account for the impact of a range of media on women's experience and understanding of themselves in terms of sexual attractiveness. (Papadopoulos 2010; Coy et al 2011; Peacock & Barnett 2013) A framework of 'good' and 'bad' sex, as compellingly critiqued by Gayle Rubin (1989) in the context of US 'sex wars' of the 1980s, has continued to underpin these accounts and the methods of analysis they deploy: for example in the development of 'indicators of sexual objectification' in pornography such as 'stripping, cumshots, aggression and genital focus' in contrast to indicators of

agency that include 'self-touch, orgasm and directing and initiating sex' (Fritz and Paul 2017: 639) or of 'positive sex acts' such as 'kissing, hugging and/or giving one another compliments' which can be contrasted with negative acts such as biting, pinching, pulling hair, spanking, choking, and name calling. (Bridges et al 2010: 1072)

The idea that consuming pornography makes men more likely to objectify and act violently towards women in real life draws together the concept of sexual objectification with those of media effects, sexual scripts and social learning to produce accounts of the relation between pornography, power and gender relations, suggesting that 'prolonged exposure to pornography can lead to sexually permissive attitudes' (Braun-Colville & Rojas 2009: 157) or to 'beliefs that women are sex objects'.(Peter & Valkenburg 2007: 381) Elsewhere the focus has been on the impact of a variety of cultural practices on women themselves and an attempt to explain 'the behaviors and attitudes [that] contribute to women's negative body experience'. (McKinley & Hyde 1996: 182) For example, McKinley and Hyde outlined a set of variables relevant to identifying 'objectified body consciousness' (1996: 183)—the degree to which women think of themselves, and value themselves, as objects to be looked at, the degree to which they see 'themselves as others see them' (McKinley & Hyde 1996: 183) and the 'internalization of cultural standards and body shame'. (McKinley & Hyde 1996: 183) They wrote that

> Internalization of cultural body standards makes it appear as though these standards come from within the individual woman and makes the achievement of these standards appear to be a personal choice rather than a product of social pressure. Women themselves want to be 'beautiful'.(McKinley & Hyde 1996: 183)

While a concern with media content and its effects and the notions of scripting and social learning played an important part in developing the vocabulary and frameworks for exploring objectification, it was this last kind of work that most explicitly worked to crystallise the notion of 'objectification theory'. McKinley and Hyde focused on women's relationship with their bodies and dieting practices, suggesting that women who are strongly concerned with their weight feel shame if their bodies do not match

the cultural ideal of slenderness, believe that it is their own fault if they do not do so, and are more likely to have a problematic relationship with food, eating and their bodies.

But it was the work of Barbara L. Fredrickson and Tomi-Ann Roberts that came to provide the most commonly used theoretical framework for objectification (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997) with an 'objectification theory' firmly focused on sexual objectification (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997: 173) and 'physical appearance'. (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997: 177) More specifically it became focused on women who wear high heeled shoes and tight clothing, shave their legs and wear makeup— that is, women who want to appear sexy in accordance with mainstream codes of femininity. From this point onwards, the two issues of objectification and sexualisation have been increasingly collapsed together. At the same time, analyses of objectification have moved away from testing ideas through empirical inquiry towards an overarching and much fuzzier idea of the relationship between women's objectification and forms of 'self-objectification' in which women come to see themselves as objects or 'sights' to be appreciated by others (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997: 179–80) in ways which echo the earlier accounts of Mulvey and Berger. Self-objectification is identified with various negative mental health outcomes, including eating disorders, sexual dysfunction, and depression. (Fredrickson and Roberts 1997: 186, 189 & 190) Mulvey's notion of a male gaze has become entrenched elsewhere in academia – moving from its initial analysis of a particular type of Hollywood studio-era film to become a much broader theory of women's relationship with culture, applied to a range of media including advertising, music video, gaming, women's magazines, social media and selfie culture.

As a set of approaches to understanding the content of media 'texts' and their 'effects' on consumers, these academic takes on objectification have offered a simple yet apparently convincing model for understanding the relation between gender, sex and the media. Gradually, the various elements that we have come to associate with ideas of objectification—the gaze, feminine preoccupations with fashion and beauty, media as a source of psychic and social scripting and learning, and internalisation—have coalesced as though they add up to a coherent theory, though in reality it is one

cobbled together from a range of methods and disciplines. (Driesmans et al 2015; Wright & Tokunaga 2016; Seabrook et al 2019) By the early 2000s, the model was to be deployed ever more widely, with concerns clustering around the 'sexualisation of culture' on the one hand (Horvath et al 2012; Gunter 2014), and on the perceived mass self-objectification of women through social media practices on the other. (Bell et al 2018, Mills et al 2018; Yellowlees et al 2019)

Pornification

By the early 21st century, the various sites of objectification—porn, 'bad' (aka kinky, queer and non-monogamous) sex, feminine preoccupations, popular media—were increasingly brought together in a generalised concern with mainstream sexiness, becoming prominent throughout academia, policy debates and media commentaries of all kinds. This was often expressed in terms of a range of media genres (alongside various leisure practices) as operating as a kind of pornography and contributing to the objectification of women—and with contemporary culture thereby being 'pornographicised' (McNair 2002; McNair 2013) and 'pornified'. (Paul 2005) The idea of culture being pornified in this way links to another key term in the developing debates about objectification, namely that of 'sexualisation'. In its original use, sexualisation was a neutral term understood as a necessary part of healthy human sexual development. (Egan & Hawkes 2008; 2010) In the first decade of the twenty-first century, however, it came to be broadly understood and acknowledged as a negative process, synonymous with being objectified. (Levy 2005; Rush and La Nauze 2006; American Psychological Association (APA) 2007; Durham 2008; Papadopoulos and Home Office 2010; Bailey and Department for Education 2011) For example, the influential APA Report focuses on 'sexualization' as occurring when girls 'see themselves mostly or exclusively in sexual terms and when they equate their sexiness with a narrow standard of physical attractiveness', or when they 'think of themselves in objectified terms…as objects to be looked at and evaluated for their appearance'. (APA 2007: 17) This conceptualisation became the most visible site and source of discussions about gender, sexuality and media during the period.

Objectification remains a central term for thinking about gender oppression in current public debates on an international scale. It is a term deployed by cultural

critics, activists, students, and senior academics alike and its appeal has increased since the #MeToo movement broke in the autumn of 2017. We have traced the histories of ideas that have led to sexy representations and self-presentations being theorised as instances of objectification. What is striking in these histories is how very specific kinds of practices become the main focus of debate—a focus on sex, appearance, 'feminine' interests and appearances, the media and popular culture, and very particular, heteronormative conceptions of gender and sexual relations.

We argue that claims about the male gaze, sexual objectification, internalisation and self-objectification offer forms of 'strong theory', a mode of inquiry that, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003) suggests, promises a simple account that claims to uncover the hidden workings of power. (Sedgwick 2003: 130) Yet strong theory does not really constitute 'inquiry' because it begins with the a priori assumption that we know what needs to be proved before we begin to gather data (if indeed data is gathered at all). And such theory only works by ignoring, dismissing or reinterpreting evidence that doesn't support its founding assumptions. Its clarity depends on adopting a focus that shuts down other kinds of approaches, questions and issues, conflating distinct processes or appealing to common sense. Objectification 'theory' does not and cannot account for ambiguities and contextual nuances and is, ultimately, incapable of grasping the complexity of contemporary life that it purports to examine.

By the 2000s, in the context of debates about sexualisation, the notion of objectification in fact worked to obscure rather than illuminate the concerns it helped to raise (Paasonen et al. 2007; Smith 2010; McKee 2010; Egan 2013; Attwood 2017), to the extent that those debates presented 'a disorienting context in which to think about contemporary gender relations'. (Evans and Riley 2015) Feminist critique and activism, we further argue, cannot afford confinement in the binary logic that structured 1970s and 1980s accounts of objectification, despite their continuing popular appeal. According to their logic, all people can be divided into one of two groups—men who are powerful and women who are powerless and where power is exerted through sex; 'Man fucks woman; subject verb object' as Catharine MacKinnon puts it. (1982: 541) This overwhelmingly simplistic view of gender, sexual practices

and power is of little practical, political or philosophical use in academic work, activism or daily living. Furthermore, the conceptualisations of media production and consumption drawn on in this approach do not offer much in the way of theorising the increasingly important ways in which diverse media provide structures for knowledge, communication, relationships and the development of subjectivity, identity and community.

Though debates about sexualisation are perhaps not as urgently expressed as they were in the early 2000s, the tangle of ideas they are based on and their links to notions of objectification continue to underpin a range of contemporary ideas about sex and media. They are present, for example, in the use of the term 'porn sex' as the opposite of 'healthy sex' and the view that mediated or commodified sex is 'false' —something that 'renders all authentic desire plastic' and has 'seeped into and distorted our genuine sexual identities'. (Dines 2011) They underpin the dramatic spread of the discourse of porn addiction and its premise that addiction is tethered to practices of dehumanisation in which artificial stimuli such as pornography attack the natural functioning of the human brain and the ability to enjoy 'real' (penetrative, heterosexual) sex with a human partner. This stance has been adopted by numerous sex therapists, the Reddit-based NoFap movement and sites such as Your Brain on Porn which recommends a process of 'rebooting' to restore natural and healthy sexuality through abstinence from 'artificial sexual stimulation'. Concerns over sexualisation and objectification further permeate claims that porn represents a public health crisis. They meander through campaigns against sex work, draw in alarmist predictions about the implications of sex robots, and are woven into complaints that particular groups—such as celebrities, fashion models, porn performers and pop stars—glorify objectification. (Berg 2018) Meanwhile, objectification has become normalised as a way to describe a diversity of practices in mainstream media and is entrenched in academic accounts of gender and the media across a range of disciplines, providing the starting point for thousands of student essays and projects.

Me, Not You

The problem with the legacy of objectification as an organising concept is not just that it has resulted in simplistic accounts of important political issues, but that these

have frequently been reactionary in the way that they present social practices and relations. The objectification debate has permitted the politics of exclusion and conservatism to appear as feminist positions which are supposed to support all women. These have played out in alliances between groups of feminists and conservative groups, beginning with those developed between Dworkin and MacKinnon and Christian coalitions fighting pornography during the Reagan presidency (Segal 1993; Vance 1997), and continuing more recently, in feminist attacks on trans rights and on the rights of sex workers. A feminist campaign against objectification explicitly articulates this contemporary development; the UK group OBJECT! 'campaigns against the sexual objectification of women and the oppression of women as a sex class'. The campaign focuses on pornography (in which 'real women are abused and used as sex objects'), prostitution ('the practice in which men are able to purchase women to use as sex objects'), sex encounter venues ('premises where men can pay to gain sexual satisfaction, or feelings of superiority, from viewing the objectification of women on display'), surrogacy (which turns women into 'walking wombs') and transgender (an ideology which 'stipulates that 'gender' (aka sex roles / stereotypes) is innate and that, inexplicably, biological sex is a social construct').

The first three targets of OBJECT's campaign recycle older reactionary positions on commercial sex in which sex workers are presented as objects for penetrative pleasure or for the male gaze. The fourth—surrogacy—adopts a similar stance in relation to reproductive labour, isolating this as a service that should not be performed for money. The fifth—transgender—appears very different at first sight but is linked to the others through a sexual politics anchored quite literally to the perceived authenticity of particular bodies. Here, transgender is cast as a kind of 'false' gender alongside the inauthentic forms of sexual and reproductive relations that pornography, prostitution, sex encounter venues and surrogacy represent. OBJECT fights for 'women's sex-based human rights' and claims that 'the discrimination and oppression of women all over the world is based upon biological sex, and not the postmodern concept of "gender identity"'. (OBJECT! 2019)

The dismissive reference to gender identity here insists on rooting social relations in

biology, refusing decades of feminist, queer and postcolonial scholarship by women from diverse racial and class backgrounds that has challenged binary understandings of gender and sexual desire, foregrounded the complex intersectionality of social hierarchies and relations of power, and provided useful and inclusive approaches to understanding identities, subjectivity, the material and embodiment, ways of looking, sexual representation and self-presentation.

We argue that it is not coincidental that a concern with objectification is found in campaigns which exclude and even attack some groups of women, or refuse to acknowledge them as women. As Sally Hines notes, in feminist attacks on trans rights 'the key area of contention is that of gendered authenticity, or the question of what, or who, constitutes "woman"' (2019: 146); a notion that, like objectification, draws on 'reductive models of biology and restrictive understandings of the sex/gender distinction'. Not only does this work to flatten out ideas of what gender is, it also marginalises many women, with the authenticity of woman located in white cis bodies, in forms of sexual practices associated with the 'charmed circle' of sexuality, and in respectable expressions of femininity.

As Alison Phipps argues (2020), reactionary feminism erases the sexual trauma of the very groups who are the most vulnerable to violence, presents them as enemies of feminism and creates further risks of violence for them by supporting policies that endanger them in the name of protecting other women from sexual objectification and abuse; a strategy that Melissa Gira Grant (2013) has called feminism's 'war on women'. And this position is not only found in the reactionary feminisms that openly attack sex workers and trans women, but throughout much mainstream feminism which fails to 'tackle the intersections of heteropatriarchy, racial capitalism and colonialism that produce sexual violence'. For example, it permeates the #MeToo movement in its concern with heterosexual encounters and reproduction of a normative binary division between aggressive male sexual desire and its passive feminine recipients, despite the degrees of sexual harassment and abuse faced by sexual and gender minorities. The overwhelming attention paid to the accounts of white women draws attention away from the sexual, physical and emotional violence faced by black cis- and transgender women, and by LGBTQ+ youth internationally

(see Williams 2015; 2016; Mitchell et al. 2014), further adding to their marginalisation in debates on social equality.

In this kind of feminism 'privileged women use their own pain as capital, or co-opt that of others, to advance their political agendas' and 'to foreground their own preoccupations' such as online misogyny and banning topless models 'over others such as austerity and hostile immigration environments'. What began as 'me, too' is turned into 'me, not you', drawing on a figure of feminism that embodies the 'respectable' norms of white bourgeois gender. (Phipps 2020) This dynamic is also evident throughout debates on sexualisation which focus on white girls, downplay issues of ethnicity and class, ignore the experiences of gender and sexually diverse people and frequently pit caricatures of 'innocent' and 'self-objectifying' girls against one another. The issue, then, is not that #MeToo's focus on sexual violence against women is a trivial concern, or that battling online misogyny is not an issue of gravity. The problem is with the inclusivity and exclusivity of forms of feminism that fail to address misogyny in relation to racism, homophobia or transphobia that it intersects with. As Sarah Banet-Weiser (2018: 13) argues in her analysis of popular feminism, its subjects remain predominantly 'white, middle-class, cis-gendered, and heterosexual'.

Both mainstream and reactionary forms of trans-exclusionary and anti-sex-work feminism pursue power 'by policing the borders of feminism and womanhood' (Phipps 2020), a strategy that only intensifies 'the surveillance and the regulation of the female body'. (Hines 2019: 154) Speaking of feminist attacks on trans women as a way to 'create the edges of feminist community', Sara Ahmed (2017) reminds us that this form of border policing always works against women, regardless of biology; 'Many women who were assigned female at birth, let us remind ourselves, are deemed not women in the right way, or not women at all, perhaps because of how they do or do not express themselves (they are too good at sports, not feminine enough because of their bodily shape, comportment, or conduct, not heterosexual, not mothers, and so on)… There can be violence at stake in being recognizable as women; there can be violence at stake in not being recognizable as women'. (Ahmed 2017: 15) As Ahmed also notes, the 'mechanisms for excluding trans women from feminism are mobile',

sometimes drawing on the argument that it is biology that makes women women, at other times arguing that trans women cannot be women because they were socialised as men, or that transgenderism depends on essentialist notions of gender. (Ahmed 2017: 269) In each case an ill-defined and largely impressionist notion of authenticity is drawn on to police the boundary, a strategy that 'has never not been disastrous for feminism'. (Ahmed 2017: 270)

Ideas about objectification underpin many ways of making women unrecognisable as women; when they are used to reduce women to their biology or present them as inauthentic – 'as "pornified" representations of femininity rather than "real women"' (Phipps 2020) or as human beings who have turned themselves into things by self-objectifying or by allowing themselves become objects of a 'male gaze'. (Brand 2020) And these ideas operate as strategies of objectification in themselves, at least as Nussbaum has defined them; for instrumentalising groups of women for political purposes, treating them as lacking in agency and self-determination, denying their experiences and feelings and positioning them in ways that make them vulnerable to violation.

Conclusions: 'Some Whores in This House'

So back to *WAP*. Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion join a long rollcall of women (often, and not coincidentally, women of colour) who have combined uninhibited lyrics and dance moves in challenge to the iconographies of the 'regulated' sexy body—Lizzo and CupcakKe, for example, have both been extremely clear (aurally and visually) that they love their curves ('my ass is not an accessory') while refusing to shame other body types. Cardi B's record-breaking rap achievements follow a period working as a stripper, a career choice and ethic she forcefully embraces in the video for *Money* all while breaking what might be the last taboo – breast-feeding her new-born in a music promo. Megan Thee Stallion has previously deployed pornographic tropes such as the pizza delivery guy and the fancy French maid to rework them, in the video for *Freak Nasty* as rejection of the standard assumptions that display is an indicator of sexual availability. In *Big Ole Freak,* Megan romps in bubble baths, rubber outfits, thigh length boots, flaunting her sexual libido and spectacularising her control of it. (Dunn 2008) The same exhibition of control is offered in *WAP* as both Cardi

and Megan engage archly and playfully with the camera, dressed in campy costumes and placed in a trippy mise-en-scene, imaginaries of independent, empowered and sexually demanding womanhood spectacularly reposition black women's bodies in the face of beauty standards which place whiteness and white bodies at their apex. All this played against a lyrical backdrop that emphasises wetness and the materiality of the aroused female body.

As we have argued elsewhere (Paasonen et al. 2020), our intentions here are not just to debunk or refuse concepts such as 'the male gaze', or to prove theories of 'objectification' wrong. Rather, we argue for a more provisional and expansive analysis of what is currently happening in visual cultures, one which does not fall back immediately into designations of sexism at the presence of exposed breasts. So, what might an analysis of *WAP* pay attention to? We note that while some white feminist writers are appalled by the 'pornographic performances' of black women in music videos (Coy 2014: 4), feminist writers of colour (Hill Collins 2008; Miller-Young 2008; Durham 2014; Sastre 2014) have powerfully argued for the possibilities that such performances are agentic and epitomise women taking control of the ways they are represented. Additionally, intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991) draws our attention to the fact that there is not one single 'feminist' perspective on the representation of women, that there is more complexity at play than a simple division into empowered/disempowered. For sure, *WAP* is a mainstream musical product and that has impacts on its potential for radicalism. And yet, beyond identification of such shortcomings, what considerations can we make as to the kinds of spectacle Cardi and Megan are offering? This is not to slide into the relativism of 'kinda subversive, kinda hegemonic,' depending on context (Sedgwick and Frank 1995: 17; Cvetkovich 2001: 287) but to recognise the importance of multiple interpretations, to ask what the video and its rollcall of celebrity women, dressed in fantastic designer outfits, grinding to the 'brazenly graphic anthem of lubrication' (Sisario 2020) might do to understanding performances of femininity, ethnicity and sexuality, particularly across different audience groupings.

[1]

Screenshot: Flowers and fountains in WAP (2020).

First, we would want to recognise that music videos, like films, have their own generic and representational vocabularies, structured by aesthetic principles and traditions. Any analysis of *WAP* needs to start from acknowledgement that the lyrics and music and the visuals are edited to work together to create meaning and that much of that meaning is steeped in traditions of hip-hop and rap video-making. Hence, it matters that *WAP* begins at a fancy wrought iron gate, tracks through a tunnel of flowers past enormous fountain statuary of Cardi and Megan (naked), up to a mansion house. The 'player's' mansion is familiar to rap fans as the backdrop to the fantastical lifestyle videos of celebrity rappers such as Snoop Dogg and 50 Cent. *WAP* references the 'abundant consumption and sexual permissiveness… fantasy world and real-life sexual economy' (Miller-Young 2014: 143) of early hip-hop productions but its referencing reconfigures the mansion as a female space. As the camera zooms towards the house, water pours down the marble staircase from under the door. We enter a hallway, painted in candy shades of blue, pinks and gold – reminiscent of the Hall-of-Doors in Alice in Wonderland and, and, as Al 'T' McLaran intones 'there's some whores in this house' (from Frank Ski's 1992 club classic), Cardi and Megan hove into view dressed in Nicolas Jebran off-the-shoulder bodysuits with long trains and matching feathered

gloves in hot pink and sunflower yellow. Tiptoeing down the hallway, touching the various life-size gold butts and water-spouting breasts that adorn the walls, Cardi identifies herself as 'a certified freak seven days a week' while Megan takes her hand and points to a door where a snake door-knocker unfurls itself.

Behind the door Cardi and Megan are pictured prone amongst ruined plinths, sand and snakes. Dressed in Bryan Hearns' army green and mustard yellow moulded snake leather bras and cage corsets, they begin to sing and rap of what they require to achieve 'wet ass pussy'. The video and the song progress through cuts between these different presentations of the two women—from the snake pit back to the wonderland hallway to a cartoon industrial interior and back again. In each location, designer fashion complements the backdrop—in the industrial space the women wear sheer lime green and purple Mugler bodysuits and over-the- knee boots; in a boudoir Cardi sports another custom Mugler leotard in leopard print with what must be the most amazing nipple covers ever featured in a popular media video, while Megan sports a Zigman corset to match the Bengal tigers in a bathroom scene. Latex outfits from fetish couturier Venus Prototype adorn the singers and their backing dancers in the waterpool, and vintage Alaia makes an appearance when Normani dances her solo. Alongside Normani's cameo, four other female artists—Rosalía, Mulatto, Sukihana, and Rubi Rose—are featured. Their appearances are important statements of connection and collaboration in an industry which has pitched female artists as perpetually in competition with each other. Plus, and somewhat incongruously, Kylie Jenner struts the hallway dressed in a leopard print gown by Puerto Rican designer Rey Ortiz.

Screenshot: Cardi B and leopards in WAP (2020)

In her examination of the connections between pornography and hip hop, Mireille Miller-Young explored how black women were characterised as 'the ho', 'a figure of moral corruption, social deviance, and economic drain, especially in the field of hip hop influenced sexual media' (2014: 146) but that crucially, 'some women of color are engaging the iconic force of the ho, with its inescapable, panoptic, and destabilizing presence in black women's lives, by using it as an aesthetic or symbolic site from which to operate' (2014: 174) Miller-Young's 'ho theory' offers ways of thinking through the *WAP* video which does not collapse its visual layerings into merely overt sexualisation, 'salacious gesturing' (CeeLo Green quoted in Taysom 2020), or 'just disgusting... vile trash poisoning youth.' (Starbuck 2020)

Watching *WAP* presents us with a duo whose dance stylings are strong, energetic, skilful, aware of their intense physicality, sexiness, desirability and who are themselves unquestionably desiring. Sociologist Matthew Oware has argued that female artists often reproduce hegemonic masculine control of the genre by 'borrow[ing] from mainstream Black male rapper aesthetics... present[ing] female 'attitude', but 'convey[ing] a 'hyper-femininity,' which is sexualized (2018: 85) and commodified. Where male artists have celebrated the sexual marketplace that gives them access to women's bodies, *WAP* unashamedly speaks back to the idea of the 'ho'—for example:

> Out in public, make a scene
> I don't cook, I don't clean
> But let me tell you how I got this ring (ayy, ayy)

And later:

He got some money, then that's where I'm headed

Pussy A1, just like his credit

Feminist frameworks would usually label such lyrics self-commodifying and therefore equate them with objectification, but Miller-Young's conceptualisation allows for understanding black performers' negotiation of the image of hypersexuality 'for personal profit *and* pleasure'. (2014: 178) There is no doubt that *WAP* offers sexual lyrics and visuals but its elements of parody, indeed its pop-cultural surrealism alongside the literalism of gushing fountains and running water, mitigate against the idea of merely borrowing male rapper aesthetics. And paying attention to the lyrics cements the presentation of a black-female-orientated imaginary in which the unabashed non-conformity of foregrounding vaginal lubrication and demands for satisfaction harks back through myriad female luminaries of hip hop to barrelhouse. (Harrison 1990; Watson 2006)

Throughout *WAP*, Cardi B and Megan sing and rap of what they want, what they need, there are none of the (perhaps) usual pop promises to do what a man would like, instead there are demands and assertions that emphatically speak command of sexual desire. The designer outfits, the candy and fluorescent colourings of the various backdrops all point to the playfulness of Cardi's and Megan's negotiations of stereotypical tropes of black female hypersexuality (from the knowing choreography of their exaggerated posing in the Hall of Doors and the athletic and skillful dancing in the waterpool, to their deliberately explicit lyrics) pointing to their intentions to perform up to those tropes in order to disrupt them. Drawing from Miller-Young, we suggest that *WAP* presents a refashioning and rehoning of the sexual economies of popular music video, the re-evaluation of the hypersexuality of 'the whores in this house' in order to capitalise on it, both financially and pleasurably.

Even so, and despite its clear and sheer revelling in the delights and pleasures of voluptuous black female bodies, stylings of clothing and dance, the trippy mise-en-scene of the video suggests acknowledgement that the Hall-of-Doors is other-worldly, a fantasy—alive to the complexities and inequalities of the real-world spaces in which women's desires and pleasures are still not so easily articulated. Such observation is

not to return us to the despondencies of objectification—rather it is to note the importance of fantasy as space for articulating sexual interests and subjectivities. Jennifer C. Nash's bold redirections of theories of representation deserve more discussion than we can give here but her call to recognise the importance of fantasy 'as a tool of imagination, as a space of freedom, and as a critical locus of play and performance for minoritarian subjects' (2014: 151) chimes absolutely with our all-too-brief analysis of *WAP*.

The notion of objectification holds obvious appeal as a means of critiquing gendered relations of power, but it has become pervasive in its reach and influence and at the same time evanescent in its application. Nowhere more so than in connection with specifically sexual depictions, and in ways that make feminist and queer critiques less effective than they could, or need, to be. The structural contexts within which we work and the effects of patriarchal power are real. Institutions and discourses work to divide men and women into separate groups and to allocate those groups with different characteristics and different values. Bodies (female, male, non-binary) exist in, live in, and are made sense of, in relation to those institutions and discourses. Inevitably any theoretical concept which insists that only men look and are powerful, while women are only looked at and are powerless, lacks the intricacy to recognise how bodies are lived and experienced or what negotiations, argument and power struggles are carried out against, and through, representation.

Notes

[1]

WAP has been produced in various less-explicit formats thereby reaching mainstream broadcast outlets as well as social media platforms to maximise different revenue streams and, crucially, reach those audiences who might be thought (by some) to be in need of 'protection' from its suggestive audio and visual imagery. The controversy that greeted its original release in 2020 was reignited when the pair performed live on stage at the Grammys in March 2021.

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