



How Can the Objectified Know Their Objectification?

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis/project is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

Kate Maree Phelan

28th January 2016

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¹ Hanya Yanagihara, *A Little Life* (London: Picador, 2015): 573.

For my mother and my father

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Abstract

Some decades ago, Heidi Hartmann lamented that “[t]he ‘marriage’ between marxism and feminism has been like the marriage of husband and wife depicted in English common law: marxism and feminism are one, and that one is marxism.”¹ By this, she meant that attempts at a feminist theory had ultimately collapsed into marxism, and so succeeded only in rendering sex inequality derivative of, hence, secondary to class inequality, and as such to be overcome only by ending class inequality. These attempts were in a sense self-defeating, negating the need from which they had emerged, the need for feminism as such. In 1982, Catharine MacKinnon confronted and attempted to remedy this. She developed a theory of sexuality as to feminism what work is to marxism, and thereby elevated feminism to a theory of the kind that marxism is, parallel rather than subordinate to it. She thus made sex inequality finally *the* issue. But, paradoxically, at the very same time, MacKinnon paralysed feminism, for she revealed men’s oppression of women as unknowable. If men’s oppression of women is unknowable, then feminism, as the movement to end that oppression, is impossible. Susan Bernick recognised this, saying, “MacKinnon’s legacy to feminism is the impossibility of any future feminism. Her account makes feminism theoretically impossible.”² This makes the most urgent task for feminism that of explaining how women can know men’s oppression of them. In this thesis, I attempt such an explanation.

¹ Heidi I. Hartmann, “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union,” *Capital and Class* 3, no. 2 (1979): 1.

² Susan E. Bernick, “The Logic of the Development of Feminism: Or, Is MacKinnon to Feminism as Parmenides Is to Greek Philosophy?,” *Hypatia* 7, no. 1 (1992): 12.

I. Preface

Now that the dust from the first round of this battle has more or less settled, I suggest that it is time to begin again; maybe we can do it better this time.

– Susan E. Bernick

Feminists see a reality that others do not. In this reality, the sexes are socially arranged hierarchically, men are dominant and women subordinate, and this hierarchy is an injustice. It is an injustice because men and women are in truth equal persons. Others do not see this reality because for them, either the social arrangement is not one of sex hierarchy, or, it is one of sex hierarchy, but that hierarchy is not an injustice. For those who believe the first, the social arrangement was in the past but is now no longer one of sex hierarchy. For those who believe the second, sex hierarchy is not an injustice because the sexes are by nature unequal, men are superior and women inferior. Often, this view is presented not as a view of the sexes as unequal, but of the sexes as different. But, on inspection, the ways in which the sexes are said to be different are, in content, the ways in which they are unequal, the ways in which men are higher-order beings and women lower. For example, women are thought to be different from men in that while men are more aggressive, women are more nurturing. But consider an implication of this difference – men are fit for the public sphere, while women are fit only for the domestic.¹ And then consider that, socially, these worlds are not equal worlds, that the public sphere is the real world, and the domestic something of a haven from it.²

Because they see reality as this injustice, feminists see it as in need of being changed. They therefore seek to change it. But because others do not see this reality, they do not see it as in need of being changed. So, feminists find themselves at loggerheads with others, their demands for change gaining no traction. If these

¹ See Susan Moller Okin, "Gender, the Public, and the Private," in *Feminism and Politics*, ed. Anne Phillips (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1998): 116-141.

² See Nancy F. Cott, "Domesticity," in *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (1977; 2nd ed., New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1997): 63-100.

demands are to be taken seriously, feminists must convince others of the truth of their version of reality. It is only by doing this that they will make others see reality as in need of being changed, and thus move them to change it.

So, how are feminists to convince others of the truth of their version of reality? By developing a theory, a coherent explanation, of it. By so explicating their version of reality, they make it plausible. This ought to make it clear that feminist theory is not, as theory is sometimes thought to be, a kind of luxury, something that is interesting but irrelevant, that has no bearing on reality. Rather, it is indispensable. I decided to write this thesis because I felt that this theory was in a state of stagnation, if not crisis. Susan Bernick's essay, "The Logic of the Development of Feminism: Or, Is MacKinnon to Feminism as Parmenides Is to Greek Philosophy," validated this feeling, and helped me to articulate it.³

In 1982 and 1983, Catharine MacKinnon had written a pair of articles, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory," and "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: Toward Feminist Jurisprudence," in which she sought to transform feminism into the theory that, for her, it aspires to be. For MacKinnon, the sexes are socially arranged hierarchically, and this hierarchy is not only unjust but also, crucially, primary, just as, for marxism,⁴ the classes are socially arranged hierarchically and this hierarchy is not only unjust but also primary. So, for her, a feminist theory aspires to be a theory of the sexes as socially arranged hierarchically, where this hierarchy is not only unjust but also primary. As such, it aspires to be a theory of the kind that marxism is.⁵ She says,

³ Bernick, "The Logic of the Development of Feminism," 1-15.

⁴ I follow MacKinnon in writing "marxism" in lower case. She explains why she does this: "I have rendered 'marxism' in lower case . . . and have been asked by the publisher to explain these choices. It is conventional to capitalise terms that derive from a proper name. Since I wish to place marxism and feminism in equipoise, the disparate typography would weigh against my analytic structure. Capitalising both would germanise the text." Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory," *Signs* 7, no. 3 (1982): 516.

⁵ I agree with bell hooks on the need to define feminism. She says, "A central problem within feminist discourse has been our inability to either arrive at a consensus of opinion about what feminism is or accept definition(s) that could serve as points of unification. Without agreed-upon definition(s), we lack a sound foundation on which to construct theory of engage in overall meaningful

Marxism and feminism are theories of power and its distribution: inequality. They provide accounts of how social arrangements of patterned disparity can be internally rational yet unjust. But their specificity is not incidental. In marxism to be deprived of one's work, in feminism of one's sexuality, defines each one's conception of lack of power per se. They do not mean to exist side by side to insure that two separate spheres of social life are not overlooked, the interests of two groups are not obscured, or the contributions of two sets of variables are not ignored. They exist to argue, respectively, that the relations in which many work and few gain, in which some fuck and others get fucked, are the prime moment of politics.⁶

MacKinnon did not arrive at this view of feminist theory independently of feminist work, meaning, she did not think that, whatever other feminists had considered sex hierarchy to be, it was unjust and primary, and so feminist theory should aspire to be a theory of it as such. Rather, she saw this view as on some level held, even if not articulated, by feminists, as motivating and guiding their work, even where that work explicitly contradicted it. Perhaps this is why feminism has been drawn so much to and shaped so much by marxism, because feminists have sensed that sex hierarchy somehow resembles class hierarchy, as understood by marxists, that it is, like class hierarchy, fundamental. And perhaps this is why, however much it has been drawn to marxism, it has ultimately rejected it, and set out on its own, because feminists feel also that sex hierarchy is inexplicable by marxism, that it demands an entirely new explanation.

But if feminism aspires to be such a theory, it was, MacKinnon saw, not yet that. This is not at all to diminish the significance of the feminist work that preceded MacKinnon. It is rather to say that that work, however insightful, had no

praxis." Bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre* (1984; 2nd ed., Cambridge, Massachusetts: South End Press, 2000): 18.

⁶ MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory," 516-517.

thoroughgoing account of sex hierarchy as primary. In place of such an account, it had an incohesive list of crucial sites of men's oppression of women, such as sex roles,⁷ reproduction,⁸ marriage,⁹ the nuclear family,¹⁰ motherhood,¹¹ and sexuality,¹² and some beginning attempts at an explanation for it, none of which ultimately succeeded. MacKinnon sought to transform it into the theory that it aspires to be by developing a theory of sexuality as to feminism what work is to marxism.

If one shares, as others and I do, MacKinnon's view that the sexes are socially arranged hierarchically, where this hierarchy is not only unjust but also primary,¹³ then one sees MacKinnon as, with her theory of sexuality, creating, albeit in beginning form, a feminist theory. Susan Bernick implies something like this when she describes MacKinnon's work as "a logical culmination of radical feminist thought,"¹⁴ and radical feminist thought as "the central trunk of feminist theory."¹⁵

⁷ Andrea Dworkin, *Woman Hating* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1974): 34-46.

⁸ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (London: The Women's Press, 1979).

⁹ Marlene Dixon, "Why Women's Liberation?," *Ramparts* 8, no. 6 (1969): 58-63.

¹⁰ Eli Zaretsky, *Capitalism, the Family, and Personal Life* (London: Pluto Press, 1976).

¹¹ Nancy Chodorow, "Mothering, Male Dominance, and Capitalism," in *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism*, ed. Zillah R. Eisenstein (New York; and London: Monthly Review Press, 1979): 83-106.

¹² Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (1970; repr., Urbana; Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000).

¹³ See, for example: Robin Rowland and Renate Klein, "Radical Feminism: History, Politics, Action," in *Radically Speaking: Feminism Reclaimed*, ed. Diane Bell and Renate Klein (1996; repr., North Melbourne, Australia: Spinifex: 1997): 9-36; Marlee Kline, "Race, Racism, and Feminist Legal Theory," *Harvard Women's Law Journal* 12 (1989): 115-150; Ellen Willis, "Radical Feminism and Feminist Radicalism," *Social Text*, no. 9/10 (1984): 91-118; Iris Marion Young, "Socialist Feminism and the Limits of Dual Systems Theory," *Socialist Review* 10, no. 2/3 (1980): 169-188; Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (1970; repr., London: Women's Press, 1979); and Millett, *Sexual Politics*.

¹⁴ Bernick, "The Logic of the Development of Feminism," 1.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 2.

One thus considers MacKinnon's theory of sexuality a definitive moment in the history of feminist theory.¹⁶

But this is only if one shares her view. And many feminists do not.¹⁷ They object to it, I think, for two reasons. The first is that they take it to imply that sex hierarchy is the most severe inequality, and they disagree that it is. The second is that they see it as theoretically divorcing sex hierarchy from other inequalities, and thus failing to grasp the interconnectedness of all forms of inequality. But by primary MacKinnon means only that this hierarchy exists unto and for itself, that it is not derivative of, hence, secondary to another hierarchy, such as class hierarchy, existing only to serve that, as Engels considered it to be.¹⁸ Or, more simply, she means that sex hierarchy is an issue of its own. And this, that it exists unto itself, means, with regard to its relationship to other inequalities, nothing other than that it does not exist in order to serve them. I think Ellen Willis captures quite nicely what is meant by primary. She says, "I sided with the 'feminists,' who at some point began calling themselves 'radical feminists.' We argued that male supremacy was in itself a systemic form of domination – a set of material, institutionalised relations, not just

¹⁶ Examples of work which sees MacKinnon's theory of sexuality as a definitive moment in the history of feminist theory include: Elizabeth Rapaport, "Generalising Gender: Reason and Essence in the Legal Thought of Catharine MacKinnon," in *A Mind of One's Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectivity*, ed. Louise M. Antony and Charlotte Witt (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1993): 127-143; Teresa de Lauretis, "Eccentric Subjects: Feminist Theory and Historical Consciousness," *Feminist Studies* 16, no. 1 (1990): 115-150; Christine A. Littleton, "Feminist Jurisprudence: The Difference Method Makes," *Stanford Law Review* 41, no. 3 (1989): 751-784; Frances Olsen, "Feminist Theory in Grand Style," *Columbia Law Review* 89, no. 5 (1989): 1151; and Christina B. Whitman, "Law and Sex," *Michigan Law Review* 86, no. 6 (1988): 1388-1403.

¹⁷ See, for example: Martha R. Mahoney, "Whiteness and Women, in Practice and Theory: A Reply to Catharine MacKinnon," *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 5 (1992): 217-251; Celina Romany, "Ain't I a Feminist?," *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 4 (1991): 23-33; Angela P. Harris, "Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory," *Stanford Law Review* 42, no. 3 (1990): 581-616; Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson, "Social Criticism Without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism," *Social Text*, no. 21 (1989): 83-104; and Kline, "Race, Racism, and Feminist Legal Theory," 115-150.

¹⁸ Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2010).

bad attitudes. Men had power and privilege and like any other ruling class would defend their interests; challenging that power required a revolutionary movement of women. And since the male-dominated left would inevitably resist understanding and opposing male power, the radical feminist movement must be autonomous, create its own theory and set its own priorities.”¹⁹ So, the claim that sex hierarchy is primary neither implies that sex hierarchy is the most severe inequality, nor theoretically divorces it from other inequalities.

Moreover, firstly, it seems to me that it is because feminists saw sex hierarchy as existing unto itself, as not derivative of another inequality, and thus as inexplicable by another theory, as demanding an entirely new explanation, namely, a feminist one, that feminism came into being.²⁰ As Iris Marion Young says, “We need not merely a synthesis of feminism with marxism, but a thoroughly feminist historical materialism.”²¹ She goes on, “A feminist historical materialism must be a total social theory, not merely a theory of the situation and oppression of women. That theory will take gender differentiation as its basic starting point, in the sense that it will seek always to keep the fact of gender difference in the centre of its accounts, and will reject any account that obscures gender-differentiated phenomena.”²²

¹⁹ Willis, “Radical Feminism and Feminist Radicalism,” 93.

²⁰ Hartmann expresses this, saying, “Many marxists typically argue that feminism is at best less important than class conflict and at worst divisive of the working class. This political stance produces an analysis that absorbs feminism into the class struggle. Moreover, the analytic power of marxism with respect to capitalism has obscured its limitations with respect to sexism. We will argue here that while marxist analysis provides essential insight into the laws of historical development, and those of capital in particular, the categories of marxism are sex-blind. Only a specifically feminist analysis reveals the systemic character of relations between men and women.” Hartmann, “The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism,” 1. Similarly, Val Burris says, “Efforts to combine feminism and marxism have been unable to transcend the limitations inherent in each of these component approaches. A more radical reassessment of existing concepts and categories is therefore necessary if the theoretical aims of socialist feminism are to be realised.” Val Burris, “The Dialectic of Women’s Oppression: Notes on the Relation Between Capitalism and Patriarchy,” *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 27 (1982): 51-74.

²¹ Young, “Socialist Feminism and the Limits of Dual Systems Theory,” 181.

²² *ibid.*, 184.

Secondly, I think that a theory of sex hierarchy as primary is politically helpful. Such a theory makes sex hierarchy an issue of its own, no longer merely an aspect of another issue, namely class hierarchy. As such, it makes it *the* issue, and so itself worthy of our attention. Or, in MacKinnon's language, it makes "the woman question," which had "always been reduced to some other question," finally "the question, calling for analysis on its own terms."²³ Christine Littleton evokes the helpfulness of such a theory when she says, "It seems to me, however, that 'unmodifying feminism' has little to do with categorisation of pre-existing feminisms and nothing to do with radical feminism. I do not even think that MacKinnon is attempting to uncover an 'essential' or 'core' feminism within feminist strands. Rather, MacKinnon's project is one of searching for a path by which women might become a 'sex for ourselves.'"²⁴

Thirdly, I think that even if we abstractly disagree with the claim that sex hierarchy is primary, we still have reason to keep MacKinnon's theory. This is because it has explanatory force. It makes sense of, for instance, why persons are socially divided into two groups, man and woman, why the word sex refers to both the categories male and female and the sex act, why virility is the measure of manhood, why women are seen as, indeed are, masochistic, why sexual intercourse, the paradigmatic sex act, takes the form of penetration, why rape is rarely seen as such. This is why MacKinnon's theory resonates with feminists, even those who criticise it. Drucilla Cornell, for instance, says,

Before turning to my critique of MacKinnon, I want to pay her the tribute she clearly deserves for her relentless insistence that any theory of equality for women will fall short of its own aspirations if it neglects the question of how sexual identity, and more specifically femininity, is constructed through a gender hierarchy in which women are subordinated and subjected. I share her insistence that we cannot begin to conceptualise a theory of equality that truly envisions the end

²³ Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989): 12.

²⁴ Littleton, "Feminist Jurisprudence," 755.

of female dominance without confronting the relationship between sex and sexuality as these have become constitutive of the gender identity imposed upon women by patriarchy.²⁵

But while MacKinnon's theory of sexuality may be considered a definitive moment in the history of feminist theory, no one, neither critics nor proponents, had taken it any further. As Bernick had observed, critics had overwhelmingly rejected it at the outset, prior to seriously considering it.²⁶ Often they did so because they saw it as a kind of theory that feminism should not want to have, namely, a total theory.²⁷ The belief underlying the rejection of a total theory is, I think, that, as a narrative of how the entire social world is organised, of how things are everywhere, it does not accurately capture the reality of, perhaps even infinitely, multiple realities. To put it another way, it wrongly regards what are in actuality many different worlds as a single world. Nancy Fraser criticises feminist theories that tend toward total theory, saying, "Such theories . . . share some of the essentialist and ahistorical features of metanarratives: they are insufficiently attentive to historical and cultural diversity; and they falsely universalise features of the theorist's own era, society, culture, class,

²⁵ Drucilla Cornell, "Sexual Difference, the Feminine, and Equivalency: A Critique of MacKinnon's *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*," *The Yale Law Journal* 100, no. 7 (1991): 2248.

²⁶ Bernick says, "Instead of trying to untie the conundrum of women, men, feminism, and sex that MacKinnon has bequeathed, her critics . . . have in the main simply walked around her as if she were not there. Rather than analysing the logic of the arguments MacKinnon marshals in favour of her position (and those negative arguments she uses against other interpretations of women's situation), her critics in the main reject her logic without or prior to engaging it. Another tactic that has been employed is to simply redefine the terms used by MacKinnon in her argument." Bernick, "The Logic of the Development of Feminism," 8-9.

²⁷ Donna Haraway says, "MacKinnon's version of radical feminism is itself a caricature of the appropriating, incorporating, totalising tendencies of Western theories of identity grounding action." Donna Haraway, "A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s," in *Feminism/Postmodernism*, ed. Linda J. Nicholson (New York; London: Routledge, 1990): 200. See also: Mary Joe Frug, "A Postmodern Legal Manifesto (An Unfinished Draft)," *Harvard Law Review* 105, no. 5 (1992): 1045-1075; and Jane Flax, "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory," *Signs* 12, no. 4 (1987): 621-643.

sexual orientation, and/or ethnic or racial group.”²⁸ But a theory’s being total does not make it necessarily inattentive to diversity. A total theory does not claim that diversity does not exist, and so disregard it. Rather, it comprehends diversity but rather than taking that diversity at face value, and assuming that its existence means that the same laws cannot be operating, it makes sense of diversity as what, in different contexts, the same laws engender. As MacKinnon says, “Nor did its diversity undermine its reality; it constituted it,”²⁹ or, elsewhere, “Male dominance appears to exist cross-culturally, if in locally particular forms.”³⁰

If suspicions about total theory were initially suspicions about its truth to a reality more multiple than that theory allowed, they have become, in many instances, suspicions about total theory not because of anything about its representation of the world, but simply because it is total. This is clear in the dismissal of MacKinnon’s theory on the grounds that it is total, with no explanation of why its being so invalidates it, and in the acceptance almost without question of that dismissal.³¹ Implicit in this dismissal is the measurement of the quality of theory not in terms of how accurately it describes things, but how much it avoids being totalising. The view of MacKinnon as creating a kind of theory that feminism should not want to have – a total one – is thus based at best on a criticism that does not apply, at worst, on a forgetting of what the point of theory is. Either way, it seems to me untenable.

²⁸ Fraser and Nicholson, “Social Criticism Without Philosophy,” 92.

²⁹ Catharine A. MacKinnon, “Points Against Postmodernism,” *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 75, no. 3 (2000): 689.

³⁰ MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 130.

³¹ Teresa Ebert says, “I believe feminism must be skeptical of the uncritical rejection of totality, of simplistic equations of difference and pluralism, and of celebrations of the concrete. It must refuse to participate in naïve abstractions in the name of concreteness. Certainly many of the most recent developments in feminist theory follow this anti-totality, pluralistic trend . . . But the exemplar of ludic postmodern feminism and its shortcomings is Haraway’s ‘A Manifesto for Cyborgs’ . . . In fact, MacKinnon has become the straw-woman for attacks on feminist totalising.” Teresa L. Ebert, “The ‘Difference’ of Postmodern Feminism,” *College English* 53, no. 8 (1991): 898.

Another reason for which critics rejected it is that they saw it as essentialising women.³² As with that of MacKinnon's theory as totalising, I think this criticism is that in essentialising women, MacKinnon effaces the differences among women, perhaps most significantly differences in race and class, that she reduces all women to the same woman. For example, Angela Harris, speaking of MacKinnon and Robin West's work, says, "I argue that their work, though powerful and brilliant in many ways, relies on what I call gender essentialism – the notion that a unitary, 'essential' women's experience can be isolated and described independently of race, class, sexual orientation, and other realities of experience."³³ But to say simply that there is such a thing as women is just to say that there is in the world a group of people who share some qualities, and that those qualities constitute the being woman. It is not to say anything about the other properties of those people, beyond that those other properties do not negate those that make them woman. Patricia Hill Collins captures this when she says, "I live each day as an African-American woman – a race/gender specific experience. And I am not alone."³⁴ Her race does not negate her womanness. It is certainly not to say that those properties do not exist. It is thus not to efface the differences among women, and so the differences in their experiences of life as women. To put the point more concretely, we can argue that there is such a thing as women, that, for instance, African-American women and white women are both women, without thereby losing our ability to recognise that African-American women are often depicted as sexually voracious, and as such "dirty," while white women are depicted as demure, and as such pure.³⁵ As dirty women are considered

³² See, for example: Ratna Kapur, "The Tragedy of Victimisation Rhetoric: Resurrecting the 'Native Subject' in International/Post-Colonial Feminist Legal Politics," *Harvard Human Rights Journal* 15 (2002): 1-37; Drucilla Cornell, *Beyond Accommodation: Ethical Feminism, Deconstruction, and the Law* (1991; repr., Lanham, USA: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 1999): 126; Harris, "Race and Essentialism," 581-616; and Patricia A. Cain, "Feminist Jurisprudence: Grounding the Theories," *Berkeley Women's Law Journal* 4 (1988): 191-214.

³³ Harris, "Race and Essentialism," 585.

³⁴ Patricia Hill Collins, "Toward a New Vision: Race, Class, and Gender as Categories of Analysis and Connection," *Race, Sex and Class* 1, no. 1 (1993): 28.

³⁵ See Alice Walker, "Coming Apart: By Way of Introduction to Lorde, Teish and Gardener," in *You Can't Keep a Good Woman Down* (1971; London: The Women's Press, 1982): 41-53.

bad women and pure women good, African-American women are thus seen and treated as bad women, while white women are seen and treated as good. Race here clearly alters how women experience life as women. So, to speak of women is not in and of itself to speak of raceless, classless women. This example indicates also that there is no tension between seeing sex hierarchy as the primary inequality and seeing sex-based oppression and race-based oppression as interconnected. Here, race impacts on gender, whiteness and blackness respectively affirming and diminishing womanness. This seems to me just the kind of analysis of the interlocking nature of inequalities that bell hooks encourages us to do: "Feminist thinkers engaged in radically revisioning central tenets of feminist thought must continually emphasise the importance of sex, race and class as factors which together determine the social construction of femaleness, as it has been so deeply ingrained in the consciousness of many women active in feminist movement that gender is the sole factor determining destiny."³⁶

Yet another reason for which critics rejected it is that they saw it as presenting women as victims.³⁷ For instance, Nan Hunter and Sylvia Law, speaking of the

³⁶ Bell hooks, *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (Boston, Massachusetts: South End Press, 1989): 23. She goes on, "Imagine a group of women from diverse backgrounds coming together to talk about feminism. First they concentrate on working out their status in terms of sex, race, and class using this as the standpoint from which they begin discussing patriarchy or their particular relations with individual men. Within the old frame of reference, a discussion might consist solely of talk about their experience as victims in relationship to male oppressors. Two women – one poor, the other quite wealthy – might describe the process by which they have suffered physical abuse by male partners and find certain commonalities which might serve as a basis for bonding. Yet if these same two women engaged in a discussion of class, not only would the social construction and expression of femaleness differ, so too would their ideas about how to confront and change their circumstances. Broadening the discussion to include an analysis of race and class would expose many additional differences even as commonalities emerged. Clearly the process of bonding would be more complex, yet this broader discussion might enable the sharing of perspectives and strategies for change that would enrich rather than diminish our understanding of gender. While feminist have increasingly given 'lip service' to the idea of diversity, we have not developed strategies of communication and inclusion that allow for the successful enactment of this feminist vision." (23-24)

³⁷ See, for example: Kapur, "The Tragedy of Victimisation Rhetoric," 1-37; Wendy McElroy, *Sexual Correctness: The Gender-Feminist Attack on Women* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland,

Antipornography Civil Rights Ordinance,³⁸ say, “[T]he Ordinance perpetuates a stereotype of women as helpless victims, incapable of consent, and in need of protection.”³⁹ But MacKinnon’s theory is an account of how men organise sexuality such that they have power and women do not. So, this is a criticism of her for describing how, on her view, women really are. As she says,

Women often find ways to resist male supremacy and to expand their spheres of action. But they are never free of it. Women also embrace the standards of women’s place in this regime as “our own” to varying degrees and in varying voices – as affirmation of identity and right to pleasure, in order to be loved and approved and paid, in order just to make it through another day. This, not inert, passivity, is the meaning of being a victim. The term is not moral: who is to blame or to be pitied or condemned or held responsible. It is not prescriptive: what we should do next. It is not strategic: how to construe the situation so it can be changed. It is not emotional: what one feels better thinking. It is descriptive: who does what to whom and gets away with it.⁴⁰

1996): 13; Alison Assiter and Avedon Carol, “Introduction,” in *Bad Girls and Dirty Pictures: The Challenge to Reclaim Feminism*, ed. Alison Assiter and Avedon Carol (London; Boulder, Colorado: Pluto Press, 1993): 16; Christobel MacKenzie, “The Anti-Sexism Campaign Invites You to Fight Sexism, Not Sex,” in *ibid.*, 140; Jean Bethke Elshtain, “The Victim Syndrome,” *Society* 28, no. 4 (1991): 31-38; Ellen Carol Dubois and Linda Gordon, “Sexual Ecstasy on the Battlefield: Danger and Pleasure in Nineteenth-Century Feminist Sexual Thought,” *Feminist Studies* 9, no. 1 (1983): 7-25; and Carole S. Vance, “Pleasure and Danger: Toward a Politics of Sexuality,” in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, ed. Carole S. Vance (Boston; London; Melbourne; Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984): 1-28.

³⁸ In 1983, MacKinnon and Dworkin drafted an ordinance that proposed to treat pornography as a violation of women’s civil rights. See Catharine A. MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, eds, *In Harm’s Way: The Pornography Civil Rights Hearings* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998).

³⁹ Nan D. Hunter and Sylvia A. Law, “Brief Amici Curiae of Feminist Anti-Censorship Taskforce, et al., in *American Booksellers Association v. Hudnut*,” *University of Michigan Journal of Law Reform* 21, no. 1-2 (1987): 130.

⁴⁰ MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 138.

For her, to portray women as having power would be not merely to misrepresent their situation, but to deny the reality and so the injustice of men's oppression of women. Sometimes, as in Hunter and Law's quote above, the criticism is not simply that MacKinnon presents women as victims but that, in so doing, she is accepting and perpetuating a stereotype of a woman as feeble, helpless, and in need of being rescued. But as I have indicated, on MacKinnon's theory, it is not because of any innate feminine attributes that women are powerless, but because of how men organise sexuality. So, this form of the criticism also fails.

While proponents had not dismissed MacKinnon's theory, nor had they sought to go beyond it. Instead, they had assumed that it was a fully-fledged theory, in need not of being developed, but only of being applied. Not only this, but they also all too frequently appeared to misunderstand it. As an example, Robyn Rowland and Renate Klein say that "[r]adical feminism makes visible male control as it is exercised in every sphere of women's lives So reproduction, marriage, compulsory heterosexuality, and motherhood are primary sites of attack and envisaged positive change."⁴¹ This is precisely the view that MacKinnon criticises and attempts to correct in her pair of essays, arguing that sexuality is "the primary social sphere of male power."⁴² More recently, in an attempt to address a criticism often levelled at her work, Gail Dines argues that regarding her critique of pornography as a critique of sex is similar to regarding a critique of MacDonald's exploitative labour practices, destruction of the environment, and impact on health as a critique of food.⁴³ Dines implies a sort of bad sex/good sex distinction which misses MacKinnon's point, indeed her theory, altogether. For MacKinnon, sex as such is the violation of a woman. Pornography grows out of that.⁴⁴ This failure connects to the first; perhaps if they had understood it, they would not have considered it a complete theory, and so would have tried to advance it.

⁴¹ Rowland and Klein, "Radical Feminism," 11.

⁴² MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory," 529.

⁴³ Gail Dines, *Pornland: How Porn Has Hijacked Our Sexuality* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 2010): x.

⁴⁴ See MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 138-142.

So, thirty years had passed, but the theory that MacKinnon had begun, a theory of the kind that marxism is, remained just that, begun, a contribution to feminism, yet to be fully realised. As MacKinnon says, “In the context of the women’s movement practice at the time, my thought in taking up method was that women’s situation lacked and needed a full-dress theory of its own, and that the experience of women had a distinctive contribution to make to political theory on the epistemic level. Back then, my view was that the relation between knowledge and power was the central issue that women’s situation and formal theory posed for each other, and that sexuality was where this issue was crucially played out. Almost thirty years later, the discussion launched then is far from finished.”⁴⁵

I therefore decided to return to MacKinnon’s theory, and, by way of beginning, to consider whether it succeeded on its own terms. For this, Sally Haslanger’s essay, “On Being Objective and Being Objectified,” provided an example.⁴⁶ In this essay, Haslanger assesses MacKinnon’s theory of the relationship between gender, objectivity, and objectification, crucially, on its own terms. She accepts MacKinnon’s premise, which is her definition of gender, and considers whether her conclusions follow from that premise. This was, to my knowledge, the first time someone had approached MacKinnon’s work in quite this way. Prior to this, feminists had either rejected MacKinnon’s premise, or they had accepted her claims at face value, so to speak.

MacKinnon had not provided an explicit, step-by-step account of her theory. Instead, she had raced from idea to idea, seeming to have too much to say to have the time to slow down and fully develop each idea, both in her own mind, and in her writing. So, in order to determine whether it succeeded, I had to first reconstruct it. MacKinnon believes that “[s]exuality is to feminism what work is to marxism.”⁴⁷ She thus aspires to create a theory in which sexuality occupies the place of work in marxism. Given this aspiration, I began by reading her work alongside Marx’s, thinking that this juxtaposition might help give shape to MacKinnon’s theory. Doing

⁴⁵ MacKinnon, “Point Against Postmodernism,” 687-688.

⁴⁶ Sally Haslanger, “On Being Objective and Being Objectified,” in *A Mind of One’s Own*, ed. Antony and Witt, 85-125.

⁴⁷ MacKinnon, “Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory,” 515.

this, I came to better comprehend much of what, on a first reading, I had only half understood, crucially, that what MacKinnon meant when she analogised sexuality to work was not that sexuality is simply “that which is most one’s own, yet most taken away,”⁴⁸ but that it is that which organises the social world. The theory that MacKinnon aspired to create was thus a theory in which sexuality organised the social world.

I then began trying to reconstruct this theory, to arrange and flesh out MacKinnon’s ideas in such a way that this theory would emerge. In the process of doing this, I discovered what frankly I had not expected to. At the heart of MacKinnon’s theory lay a contradiction: on the one hand, she argued, very persuasively, that men sexually desire dominance, while, on the other, she argued that a woman is a sex object. If men sexually desire dominance, then a woman cannot be a sex object, or, if a woman is a sex object, then men cannot sexually desire dominance. MacKinnon’s theory did not succeed. Melinda Vadas’s essay, “Pornography and the Manufacture-for-Use of Women’s Inequality” helped me to see this contradiction by clarifying in my mind what a sex act is. Vadas explains a sex act thus: “At the gross level of behaviour and activity, it is the process of a man’s moving from sexual arousal to sexual satisfaction or orgasm that defines and delineates a complete sex act as such.”⁴⁹ Although this may seem obvious, I think that it is not, that sex is so much seen as natural, so much taken for granted, that what it actually is, what constitutes it, which gives rise to its being done the way that it is, is rarely thought about. To put it another way, because sex is seen as natural, and because sex conventionally takes the form of penetration, sex is equated with penetration, thought of as nothing beneath that, rather than being seen as an act, namely, that of satiating one’s sexual desire, which gives rise to that form because it is the means by which that act is done, by which sexual desire is satiated.

I was bothered by this contradiction. There seemed to me to be something in it. I mean to say, it did not strike me as merely formal, as a contradiction only according to the laws of logic, as in need of being resolved only so that MacKinnon’s

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ Melinda Vadas, “The Manufacture-for-Use of Pornography and Women’s Inequality,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 13, no. 2 (2005): 179.

theory might logically succeed. Rather, it struck me as substantive, as a contradiction according to the laws of reality, as in need of being resolved so that her theory might succeed as an accurate explanation of reality. So, I sought to resolve it. Life seemed to affirm the truth of MacKinnon's claim that men sexually desire dominance. One obvious manifestation of this is, of course, the prevalence of rape,⁵⁰ another the popularity of pornography in which men are explicitly violent toward women.⁵¹ If either of these are thought to be exceptional, then consider that men find women who are "hard to get," who resist men's sexual advances, sexually desirable, and women who are "easy," who readily succumb, disgusting. In other words, men desire women where they can overcome them.

But MacKinnon's claim that a woman is a sex object also seemed, in some ways, consistent with reality. It seemed consistent with, for instance, prostitution, which can only exist because women are conceived of as, by their natures, beings who can be bought for sex, beings the buying of whom for sex is, because of what they are, perfectly normal,⁵² the notional impossibility of rape by a boyfriend or

⁵⁰ See: Naeemah Abrahams et al., "Worldwide Prevalence of non-Partner Sexual Violence: A Systematic Review," *The Lancet* 383, no. 9929 (2014): 1648-1654; Elizabeth Dartnall and Rachel Jewkes, "Sexual Violence Against Women: The Scope of the Problem," *Best Practice and Research Clinical Obstetrics and Gynaecology* 27, no. 1 (2013): 3-13; and World Health Organisation, *Global and Regional Estimates of Violence Against Women: Prevalence and Health Effects of Intimate Partner Violence and non-Partner Sexual Violence* (World Health Organisation, 2013), retrieved from <http://www.who.int/en/>.

⁵¹ See, for example: Dines, *Pornland*, esp. "Grooming for Gonzo: Becoming a Man in Porn Culture," 59-78; Meagan Tyler, "Now, That's Pornography!: Violence and Domination in *Adult Video News*," in *Everyday Pornography*, ed. Karen Boyle (Abingdon, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2010): 50-62; and Robert Jensen, *Getting off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity* (Brooklyn, New York: South End Press, 2007), esp. pp. 55-77, 121-129.

⁵² Andrea Dworkin says, "The prostitute is the emblematic used woman, natural in that she most fulfils her sexual function." Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (London: The Women's Press, 1981): 119. Elsewhere, she says, "Prostitution: what is it? It is the use of a woman's body for sex by a man, he pays money, he does what he wants." Andrea Dworkin, "Prostitution and Male Supremacy," *Michigan Journal of Gender and Law* 1, no. 1 (1993): 2.

husband,⁵³ the permissibility of rape in the case that a woman is wearing a short skirt,⁵⁴ and, a woman's attractiveness being the measure of her worth. Moreover, MacKinnon's claim that a woman is a sex object is not hers alone. It is rather a central claim of feminism, a claim which, unlike many others in feminism, seems largely uncontested. As Martha Nussbaum says, "Sexual objectification is a familiar concept. Once a relatively technical term in feminist theory, associated in particular with the work of Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, the word 'objectification,' has by now passed into many people's daily lives. It is common to hear it used to criticise advertisements, films, and other representations."⁵⁵ Indeed, recent considerations of the concept of sexual objectification have been attempts to develop and clarify that concept, attempts which presuppose the validity of it.⁵⁶ The acceptance almost without question of this claim indicates a resonance which speaks of its truth.

But while it seemed consistent in some ways with reality, it also seemed to jar with it. Women who are seen as sexually available, far from being regarded as what women ought to be, are considered whores, which is a derogatory term, something women ought not be. This suggests almost the opposite of MacKinnon's claim, that a

⁵³ See: Mercedes Durán, Miguel Moya, Jesús L. Megías, and G. Tendayi Viki, "Social Perceptions of Rape victims in Dating and Married Relationships: The Role of Perpetrator's Benevolent Sexism," *Sex Roles* 62, no. 7 (2010): 505-519; Sarah Ben-David and Ofra Schneider, "Rape Perceptions, Gender Role attitudes, and Victim-Perpetrator Acquaintance," *Sex Roles* 53, no. 5/6 (2005): 385-399; Jill Elaine Hasday, "Contest and Consent: A Legal History of Marital Rape," *California Law Review* 88, no. 5 (2000): 1373-1505; Mary Kay Kirkwood and Dawn K. Cecil, "Marital Rape: A Student Assessment of Rape Laws and the Marital Exemption," *Violence Against Women* 7, no. 11 (2001): 1234-1253; and Diana E. H. Russell, *Rape in Marriage* (1982, rev ed.; Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990).

⁵⁴ Mark A. Whately, "The Effect of Participant Sex, Victim Dress, and Traditional Attitudes on Causal Judgements for Marital Rape Victims," *Journal of Family Violence* 20, no. 3 (2005): 191-200; and Jane E. Workman and Elizabeth W. Freeburg, "An Examination of Date Rape, Victim Dress, and Perceiver Variables Within the Context of Attribution Theory," *Sex Roles* 41, no. 3/4 (1999): 261-277.

⁵⁵ Martha C. Nussbaum, "Objectification," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 24, no. 4 (1995): 249.

⁵⁶ See: *ibid*; and Lina Papadaki, "What Is Objectification?," *Journal of Moral Philosophy* 7 (2010): 16-36.

woman who is a sex object is in fact a violation of the ideal of womanhood. I was perplexed. If a woman were for sex, then would not a woman be more a woman the more available for sex she were? But why then, in actuality, did a woman fall further from the status of ideal woman the more she was regarded as promiscuous, as an “easy lay”? Why was being regarded a whore social death rather than life for a woman? Why were prostitutes seen as the worst kind of women?

I began to think that perhaps MacKinnon, indeed, feminism, was wrong, that perhaps a woman was not a sex object. The question then became, what was a woman? I started with the observation that had led me to question MacKinnon’s claim in the first place, the observation that women who are seen as sexually available are considered whores, which is something women ought not be, indeed, as women well know, is what women most ought not be. If the whore is what a woman most ought not be, then the virgin is what a woman most ought be. In other words, if the whore is a violation of the ideal of womanhood, the virgin is that ideal. None of this, of course, was new observation; how could it be when these words had defined what a woman should strive to become? Mary Wollstonecraft, Simone de Beauvoir, Marilyn Frye, and Andrea Dworkin had all written about the integrality of virginity to proper womanhood. Pursuing their insights, all the while keeping MacKinnon’s claim that men sexually desire dominance in my mind, I arrived at a conception of a woman as not a sex object, but a sexually violable being. This conception of a woman was consistent with both what that of a woman as a sex object was not, including why women who are seen as sexually available are considered something women ought not be, and what it had appeared to be. It thus made sense of why that conception was compelling, and bettered it without cost. Moreover, this conception of a woman fit perfectly with MacKinnon’s claim that men sexually desire dominance, rendering her theory of sex hierarchy coherent, and thus realising it as a theory. This theory made sense of and reconciled prior feminist insights, dissolving apparent tensions between them. For instance, it explained why women must become sexually desirable to men, why they must resist sex, but also succumb to it, why, in a sense, they do have sexual autonomy, but also why this autonomy is in fact not autonomy.

Not only this, but it inadvertently provided an answer to a question, indeed *the* question, which MacKinnon's theory had engendered, a question which had seemed as unanswerable as it was in need of being answered: how can women know men's oppression of them? For MacKinnon's theory, uncovering the metaphysics of sex inequality, revealing a woman as made in men's image of her, had found men's oppression of women to be unknowable.

Feminists had not confronted this, partly, I think, because they had not fully grasped it, instead reading MacKinnon as saying that oppression was merely difficult to know,⁵⁷ and partly because they took it as in some sense not true, for empirically women have come to know their oppression. But (and setting aside that not all women do claim to be oppressed, and that many women seem to feel oppressed but equally to find that feeling inexplicable and to doubt it), as I will show, the claim that men's oppression of women is unknowable is entailed by the claim that men have epistemic authority while women do not. So, without an explanation of how women can know their oppression, the fact that they do know it will only negate the claim that men have epistemic authority while women do not. It will thus theoretically diminish men's power and women's powerlessness. This means that consciousness will prove the knowability of oppression only at the cost of erasing its severity, and so contradicting the content of that consciousness.

My aim thus shifted once again, or, rather, it became the aim that had guided the thesis all along, that of accounting for, in order to validate, in order to raise,

⁵⁷ Ruth Colker, for instance, says, "According to MacKinnon, 'If women are socially defined such that female sexuality cannot be lived or spoken or felt or even somatically sensed apart from its enforced definition, so that it *is* its own lack, then there is no such thing as a woman as such, there are only walking embodiments of men's projected needs. For feminism, asking whether there is, socially, a female sexuality, is the same as asking whether women exist.' Thus, MacKinnon's work has been crucial for me in exposing the difficulty of a woman's journey toward discovery and expression of her authentic sexuality." Ruth Colker, "Feminism, Sexuality, and Self: A Preliminary Inquiry into the Politics of Authenticity," *Boston University Law Review* 68 (1998): 225. But MacKinnon shows that women do not have an authentic sexuality. She thus does not expose a journey toward it as difficult, but as impossible. Indeed, elsewhere, Colker perceives this. She says, for example, "Catharine MacKinnon and others find the concept of authenticity unhelpful and deny that we even have an authentic self." (220)

feminist consciousness. It was a desire to convince others of the truth of feminists' version of reality, borne of the hope that this would move them to change it, that had motivated the inquiry into MacKinnon's theory in the first place, and it was this desire that the explanation of how women can know men's oppression of them fulfilled. The transformation of the project thus marked less a transformation than a culmination.

What follows is that project, my attempt to answer the question of how men's oppression of women is knowable. I start by reconstructing a history of feminist theory, so as to show what I see to be the place of MacKinnon's theory of sexuality in feminist theory. I then explain that if MacKinnon's theory progressed feminist theory, it did so only to paralyse it, for it found that men's oppression of women is unknowable. Having thereby outlined the puzzle – how can women know men's oppression of them?, I begin my attempt at solving it. This attempt is comprised of five parts. In the first, I consider whether MacKinnon's theory of sexuality succeeds. In the second, I develop a conception of a woman. In the third, I reconsider whether MacKinnon's theory succeeds. In the fourth, I explain in greater detail why men's oppression of women is unknowable, and consider some major attempts to explain how women can know that oppression. Finally, in the fifth, I explain how women can know men's oppression of them.

II. The Creation of a Feminist Theory

By an act of thought, the theorist seeks to reassemble the whole political world.

– Sheldin S. Wolin, “Political Theory as a Vocation”

For MacKinnon, a feminist theory aspires to be a theory of the sexes as socially arranged hierarchically, where this hierarchy is not only unjust, but also primary. As such, it aspires to be a theory of the kind that marxism is. But if it aspires to be such a theory, it was, prior to MacKinnon, not yet that. As MacKinnon says,

[F]eminism offered a rich description of the variables and locales of sexism and several possible explanations for it. The work of Mary Wollstonecraft, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Simone de Beauvoir were examples. It also offered a complex and explosive practice in which a theory seemed immanent. But except for a few major beginnings – such as the work of Kate Millett and Andrea Dworkin – feminism had no account of male power as an ordered yet deranged whole. Feminism began to seem an epic indictment in search of a theory, an epic theory in need of writing.¹

MacKinnon drew upon and revised this work, and in so doing, transformed it into the theory that it aspires to be. She thus created, albeit in beginning form, a feminist theory. So that a sense might be gotten of this, of MacKinnon’s work as owing to, continuing, and completing, however much it criticises, disagrees with, and moves beyond, the work that preceded it, in what follows, I outline, in chronological order, the pieces of feminist work that MacKinnon above indicates and I see as most contributing to the creation of a feminist theory.

This work perhaps begins really, in the sense of emerges most definitively, in 1792, with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of*

¹ MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, xi.

Woman. Wollstonecraft argues that women are seen first and foremost as women rather than human beings, and are educated as such. By this, she means that they are educated, in the sense of informally, socially educated, in how to be women. She argues that this education is one in how to be desirable to men, rather than an education that develops the intellect, and that it prevents women from becoming who they can be. She says,

After considering the historic page, and viewing the living world with anxious solicitude, the most melancholy emotions of sorrowful indignation have depressed my spirits, and I have sighed when obliged to confess, that either nature has made a great difference between man and man, or that the civilisation which has hitherto taken place in the world has been very partial. I have turned over various books written on the subject of education, and patiently observed the conduct of parents and the management of schools; but what has been the result? – a profound conviction that the neglected education of my fellow-creatures is the grand source of the misery I deplore; and that women, in particular, are rendered weak and wretched by a variety of concurring causes, originating from one hasty conclusion. The conduct and manners of women, in fact, evidently prove that their minds are not in a healthy state; for, like the flowers which are planted in too rich a soil, strength and usefulness are sacrificed to beauty; and the flaunting leaves, after having pleased a fastidious eye, fade, disregarded on the stalk, long before the season when they ought to have arrived at maturity. – One cause of this barren blooming I attribute to a false system of education, gathered from the books written on this subject by men who, considering females rather as women than human creatures, have been more anxious to make them alluring mistresses than affectionate wives and rational mothers; and the understanding of the sex has been so bubbled by this specious homage, that the civilised women of the present century, with a few exceptions, are only anxious

to inspire love, when they ought to cherish a nobler ambition, and by their abilities and virtues exact respect.²

In arguing that the education of women prevents them from becoming who they can be, Wollstonecraft depicts women as determined not simply by their biology, but also by men. She expresses this explicitly when she says,

As for Rousseau's remarks, which have since been echoed by several writers, that they have naturally, that is, from their birth, independent of education, a fondness for dolls, dressing, and talking, they are so puerile as not to merit a serious refutation. That a girl, condemned to sit for hours together listening to the idle chat of weak nurses, or to attend her mother's toilet, will endeavour to join the conversation, is, indeed very natural; and that she will imitate her mother or aunts, and amuse herself by adorning her lifeless doll, as they do in dressing her, poor innocent babe! is undoubtedly a most natural consequence. For men of the greatest abilities have seldom had sufficient strength to rise above the surrounding atmosphere; and if pages of genius have always been blurred by the prejudices of the age, some allowance should be made for a sex, who, like kings, always see things through a false medium.³

She thereby outlines sex hierarchy as an arrangement that is made not simply by nature, but also by men.

² Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792; rev. ed., London, England: Penguin Books, 2004): 11. Elsewhere, she says, "[T]he instruction which women have hitherto received has only tended, with the construction of civil society, to render them insignificant objects of desire." *ibid.*, 15. And, "Women are told from their infancy, and taught by example of their mothers, that a little knowledge of human weakness, justly termed cunning, softness of temper, outward obedience, and a scrupulous attention to a puerile kind of propriety, will secure for them the protection of man; and should they be beautiful, every thing else is needless, for, at least, twenty years of their lives." *ibid.*, 28.

³ *ibid.*, 56.

But she concedes that women are in some ways biologically inferior to men. She says,

In the government of the physical world it is observable that the female in point of strength is, in general, inferior to the male. This is the law of Nature; and it does not appear to be suspended or abrogated in favour of woman. A degree of physical superiority cannot, therefore, be denied, and it is a noble prerogative! But not content with this natural pre-eminence, men endeavour to sink us still lower, merely to render us alluring objects for a moment; and women, intoxicated by the adoration which men, under the influence of their senses, pay them, do not seek to become the friends of the fellow-creatures who find amusement in their society.⁴

She thus accepts sex hierarchy as in some ways a natural, and therefore just social arrangement. So, while she begins feminism, she also somewhat undermines it.

In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir wrote *The Second Sex*, in which she describes and attempts to account for the condition of women across time. Picking up and running with the belief at the heart of Wollstonecraft's work – that women are largely made to be the way they are, de Beauvoir critiques the biological account of the condition of women, and argues that "[o]ne is not born, but rather, becomes, woman. No biological, psychical or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilisation as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine."⁵ That is, who a woman is is not who her biology makes her be, but who she is socially made to be. Who this is is just who men see a woman as ("she is nothing other than what man decides"⁶), which is the feminine being ([s]o not every human being is necessarily a woman; she must take part in this mysterious and endangered reality

⁴ ibid., 12.

⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949; London: Vintage Books, 2010): 293.

⁶ ibid., 6.

known as femininity”⁷). Put simply, men make a woman be who they see a woman as, which is the feminine being. What Wollstonecraft had suggested, de Beauvoir stated forthrightly: women are who they have been made to be.

But while de Beauvoir argues that who a woman is is who a woman is socially made to be, she also, like Wollstonecraft, argues that biology partially determines who a woman is, thereby contradicting herself. She says,

Here we hold the key to the whole mystery. On a biological level, a species maintains itself only by re-creating itself; but this creation is nothing but a repetition of the same Life in different forms. By transcending Life through Existence, man guarantees the repetition of Life: by this surpassing, he creates values that deny any value to pure repetition. With an animal, the gratuitousness and variety of male activities are useless because no project is involved; what it does is worthless when it is not serving the species; but in serving the species, the human male shapes the face of the earth, creates new instruments, invents and forges the future. Positing himself as sovereign, he encounters the complicity of woman herself: because she herself is also an existent, because transcendence also inhabits her and her project is not repetition but surpassing herself towards another future; she finds the confirmation of masculine claims in the core of her being. She participates with men in festivals that celebrate the success and victories of males. Her misfortune is to have been biologically destined to repeat Life, while in her own eyes Life in itself does not provide her reasons for being, and these reasons are more important than life itself.⁸

In short, biology destines women to procreate. De Beauvoir does not consider that perhaps women’s biology destines them to procreate only because it is socially said

⁷ *ibid.*, 4.

⁸ *ibid.*, 76.

to do so. She does not consider that the meaning of women's biology is the meaning that is socially assigned to it. Instead, she accepts that biology innately destines women to procreate.⁹ Destining women to procreate, biology thus at least partially determines who a woman is. So, while de Beauvoir argues that who a woman is is who she is socially made to be, she does not seem to wholly believe this. Rather, what she seems to believe is that biology determines the parameters of a woman's being, and society shapes women, within those parameters.

As to why men make a woman be what they see a woman as, which is a feminine being, de Beauvoir has no cohesive explanation for this. Instead, she has suggestions of possible explanations. She says,

History has shown that men have always held all the concrete powers; from patriarchy's earliest times they have deemed it useful to keep woman in a state of dependence; their codes were set up against her; she was thus concretely established as the Other. This condition served males' economic interests; but it also suited their ontological and moral ambitions. Once the subject attempts to assert himself, the Other, who limits and denies him, is nonetheless necessary for him: he attains himself only through the reality that he is not . . . It is the existence of other men that wrests each man from his immanence and enables him to accomplish the truth of his being, to accomplish himself as transcendence, as flight towards the object, as a project.¹⁰

Men make a woman the Other for two reasons: one, because that enables men to realise themselves as subjects, and, two, because doing so is in their economic interest. Both of these explanations are inadequate. This is because they do not

⁹ MacKinnon makes this criticism of de Beauvoir, saying, "She does not ask, for example, whether the social value placed upon 'repetition of life,' the fact that it is seen as iterative rather than generative, or the fact that women are more identified with it than are men, are themselves social artefacts of women's subordination, rather than existential derivations of biological fiat." MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory," 528.

¹⁰ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 163.

account for why men make a woman be the particular being that they make her be – the feminine being. Why must men make a woman the feminine being in order to realise themselves as subjects, or gain economically, how does making her that enable them to do those things? For instance, they do not make sense of why virginity is significant to femininity, why it is, as de Beauvoir says it is, “the highest form of the feminine mystery.”¹¹ De Beauvoir does offer an explanation for this, one that is consistent with her explanation that men make a woman the Other because that enables men to realise themselves as subjects, but it is unsatisfactory. She says,

But woman’s virginity is demanded more imperiously when man considers the wife as his personal property. First of all, the idea of possession is always impossible to realise positively; the truth is that one never has anything or anyone; one attempts to accomplish it in a negative way; the surest way to assert that a good is mine is to prevent another from using it. And then nothing seems as desirable to man as what has never belonged to any other human: thus conquest is a unique and absolute event . . . By breaking the hymen, man possesses the feminine body more intimately than by a penetration that leaves it intact.¹²

This is unsatisfactory because it does not explain why virginity is that which enables absolute conquest, what it is about virginity that makes it be that. The second reason for which men make a woman the Other – because it is in their economic interest – is inadequate also because it is a marxist rather than a feminist explanation of men’s oppression of women. It is an explanation of sex hierarchy, where that hierarchy is just a form of class, in the marxist sense of class, hierarchy. The sexes are classes by another name. It is thus at bottom an explanation of class hierarchy, and as such marxist.

¹¹ *ibid.*, 176.

¹² *ibid.*, 178.

In 1969, Kate Millett wrote *Sexual Politics*. Through an analysis of literary depictions of sexual activity, Millett reveals the originary place of sexuality in the oppression of women. Both Wollstonecraft's and de Beauvoir's work had suggested the centrality of sexuality to the oppression of women; Wollstonecraft created a picture of a woman as made to be an object of male desire, thus intimating the interest – male desire – according to which women were formed and so made inferior, and de Beauvoir, more aware still of the crucial role of sexuality in the oppression of women, returned again and again to it, depicting sexual initiation as a man's conquest of a woman,¹³ and as a crucial moment in the becoming of a woman.¹⁴ Millett pursues and develops de Beauvoir's observations, concretely detailing and making explicit sex, as in sexual intercourse, as a man's conquest of a woman,¹⁵ and illuminating what de Beauvoir had inadvertently pointed to, a relationship between the two meanings of sex, sex as in sexual intercourse, and sex as in male and female being. She says,

Granted that their caricature is grotesque, and Genet himself is fully aware of the morbidity of this pastiche, his homosexuals nonetheless have unerringly penetrated to the essence of what heterosexual society imagines to be the character of "masculine" and "feminine," and which it mistakes for the nature of male and female. Sartre's brilliant psychoanalytic biography of Genet describes the sexual life of the

¹³ She says, for instance, "So for the male lover, the love act is conquest and victory." *ibid.*, 397. See also pp. 176-179.

¹⁴ She says, "In the past, a woman was snatched from her childhood universe and thrown into her life as a wife by a real or simulated rape; this was an act of violence that changed the girl into a woman: it is also referred to as 'ravishing' a girl's virginity, or 'taking' her flower." *ibid.*, 395. See also pp. 394-428.

¹⁵ "The three instances of sexual description we have examined so far were remarkable for the large part which notions of ascendancy and power played within them. Coitus can scarcely be said to take place in a vacuum; although of itself it appears a biological and physical activity, it is set so deeply within the larger context of human affairs that it serves as a charged microcosm of the variety of attitudes and values to which culture subscribes. Among other things, it may serve as a model of sexual politics on an individual or personal plane." Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 23.

pimps and queens, male and female figures, in terms that bear out these distinctions of character and prestige:

This is murder: submissive to a corpse, neglected, unnoticed, gazed at unmindfully and manipulated from behind, the girl queen is metamorphosed into a contemptible female object. She does not even have for the pimp the importance that the sadist attributes to his victim. The latter, though tortured and humiliated, at least remains the focal point of her tormentor's concern. It is indeed she whom he wishes to reach, in her particularity, in the depths of her consciousness. But the fairy is only a receptacle, a vase, a spittoon, which one uses and thinks no more of and which one discards by the very use one makes of it. The pimp masturbates in her. At the very instant when an irresistible force knocks her down, turns her over and punctures her, a dizzying word swoops down upon her, a power hammer that strikes her as if she were a medal: "Encule!"

This is mainly a description of what it is to be female as reflected in the mirror of homosexuality. But the passage also implies what it is to be male. It is to be master, hero, brute, and pimp.¹⁶

Here, Millett suggests that in sex, as in sexual intercourse, a man conquers a woman, and in that conquest he becomes a man and she a woman. This means that in sex the sexes are created, and in being created are arranged hierarchically. This coheres the two meanings of the word sex. As MacKinnon says, "This, the central but never stated insight of Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*, resolves the duality in the term 'sex' itself: what women learn in order to 'have sex,' in order to 'become women' – woman as gender – comes through the experience of, and is a condition for, 'having sex' – woman as sexual object for man, the use of women's sexuality by

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 17.

men.”¹⁷ If in sex the sexes are created, and, in being created, are arranged hierarchically, then sexuality is the locus of sex hierarchy. But Millett ultimately does not fully grasp this. Instead, in what she says might be described as “notes toward a theory of patriarchy,”¹⁸ she lists ideology, biology, sociology, class, economics, education, force, and anthropology as causes of sex hierarchy. Sexuality, then, becomes not the locus of sex hierarchy, but one cause in an incohesive list of the causes of it. As MacKinnon says, “Millett’s analysis is pervasively animated by the sense that women’s status is sexually determined. It shapes her choice of authors, scenes, and themes and underlies her most pointed criticisms of women’s depiction. Her explicit discussion, however, vacillates between clear glimpses of that argument and statements nearly to the contrary.”¹⁹

In 1974, Andrea Dworkin wrote *Woman Hating*. Taking from de Beauvoir, Dworkin argues that the beings men and women are are the beings they are socially made to be, and, taking from and going beyond Millett, she develops the idea that sexuality is a crucial aspect, is perhaps even constitutive of, who this is. She says,

Literary pornography is the cultural scenario of male/female. It is the collective scenario of master/slave. It contains cultural truth: men and women, grown now out of the fairy-tale landscape into the castles of erotic desire; woman, her carnality adult and explicit, her role as victim adult and explicit, her guilt adult and explicit, her punishment lived out on her flesh, her end annihilation – death or complete submission.

Pornography, like fairy tale, tells us who we are. It is the structure of male and female mind, the content of our shared erotic identity, the map of each inch and mile of our oppression and despair. Here we move beyond childhood terror. Here the fear is clammy and

¹⁷ MacKinnon, “Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda For Theory,” 531.

¹⁸ Millett, *Sexual Politics*, 24.

¹⁹ MacKinnon, “Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda For Theory,” 531.

real, and rightly so. Here we are compelled to ask the real questions: why are we defined in these ways, and how can we bear it?²⁰

In her analysis of *Story of O*, she goes on, “*Story of O* is more than simple pornography. It claims to define epistemologically what a woman is, what she needs, her processes of thinking and feeling, her proper place. It links men and women in an erotic dance of some magnitude: the sado-masochist complexion of O is not trivial – it is formulated as a cosmic principle which articulates, absolutely, the feminine.”²¹ Here, Dworkin suggests that who men and women are in pornography reflects at once who men and women are as sexual beings, which is master and slave, or, sadist and masochist respectively, and as sexed beings, men and women. In other words, she suggests that men eroticise their power and women eroticise their powerlessness, and that this is definitive of their sex. If this is so, then sexuality is what gives power to men and takes it from women, which is to say, sexuality is what arranges the sexes hierarchically. Dworkin perceives this. She says, “Sex as the power dynamic between men and women, its primary form sadomasochism, is what we know now.”²²

But while Dworkin does perceive sexuality as what arranges the sexes hierarchically, she undercuts this discovery by, in the tendency of feminist theorists, ultimately falling back into listing sexuality as one of many sites of men’s oppression of women. She says, “We have begun to understand the extraordinary violence that has been done to us, that is being done to us: how our minds are aborted in their development by sexist education; how our bodies are violated by oppressive grooming imperatives; how the police function against us in cases of rape and assault; how the media, schools, and churches conspire to deny us dignity and freedom; how the nuclear family and ritualised sexual behaviour imprison us in roles and forms which are degrading to us.”²³

²⁰ Dworkin, *Woman Hating*, 53-54.

²¹ *ibid.*, 55.

²² *ibid.*, 183.

²³ *ibid.*, 20.

So, at this point in time, while marxism had an account of how the social world was organised as class hierarchy, feminism had no such account of how the social world was organised as sex hierarchy. That is to say, while marxism had identified the organising force of class hierarchy – work, and developed an explanation of how it organised the social world as class hierarchy, feminism had not identified the organising force of sex hierarchy, and developed an explanation of how it organised the social world as sex hierarchy. Instead, it gestured vaguely to spheres of life, institutions, and ideologies as sites of the creation and maintenance of sex hierarchy. Sex hierarchy thus appeared a social arrangement everywhere, so nowhere, organised.

But then in 1982 and 1983, Catharine MacKinnon wrote a pair of articles, “Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory,” and “Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: Toward Feminist Jurisprudence,” and a few years later, in 1989, a book, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*. In this work, she considers the insights of prior feminist work in light of one another, and comes to see clearly and fully what Millett and Dworkin had so nearly, that sexuality is constitutive of sex, that is, that the being man is just the sexual being man is, and the being woman just the sexual being woman is. She then sees that, if, taking from Millett and Dworkin, the sexual being man is one who desires dominance, the sexual being woman is one who desires subordination, then the being man is just a sexual being who desires dominance, the being woman just a sexual being who desires subordination. She says,

If the literature on sex roles and the investigations of particular issues are read in light of each other, each element of the female gender stereotype is revealed as, in fact, sexual. Vulnerability means the appearance/reality of easy sexual access; passivity means receptivity and disabled resistance, enforced by trained physical weakness; softness means pregnability by something hard. Incompetence seeks help as vulnerability seeks shelter, inviting the embrace that becomes the invasion . . . from the same access. Domesticity nurtures the consequent progeny, proof of potency, and

ideally waits at home in saran wrap. Woman's infantilisation evokes paedophilia; fixation on dismembered body parts (the breast man, the leg man) evokes fetishism; idolisation of vapidness, necrophilia. Narcissism insures that woman identifies with that image of herself that man holds up: "Hold still, we are going to do your portrait, so that you can begin looking like it right away." Masochism means that pleasure in violation becomes her sensuality. Lesbians so violate the sexuality implicit in female gender stereotypes as not to be considered women at all.²⁴

MacKinnon thus grasps sexuality, that being the process by which one becomes the sexual being one is, as the process by which men become at once dominant and men, and women become at once subordinate and women. In other words, she grasps sexuality as the process by which the sexes are formed and hierarchically arranged. She says, "According to this revision, one 'becomes a woman' – acquires and identifies with the status of the female – not so much through physical maturation or inculcation into appropriate role behaviour as through the experience of sexuality: a complex unity of physicality, emotionality, identity, and status affirmation. Sex as gender and sex as sexuality are thus defined in terms of each other, but it is sexuality that determines gender, not the other way around."²⁵ If sexuality is the process by which the sexes are formed and hierarchically arranged, then sexuality is not one of many causes of sex hierarchy, rather, it is the organising force of it, it is to feminism what work is to marxism. MacKinnon thus revises prior feminist work. She says,

Informed by these attempts, but conceiving nature, law, the family, and roles as consequences, not foundations, I think that feminism fundamentally identifies sexuality as the primary social sphere of male power. The centrality of sexuality emerges not from Freudian

²⁴ MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory," 530.

²⁵ *ibid.*, 531.

conceptions but from feminist practice in diverse issues, including abortion, birth control, sterilisation abuse, domestic battery, rape, incest, lesbianism, sexual harassment, prostitution, female sexual slavery, and pornography. In all these areas, feminist efforts confront and change women's lives concretely and experientially. Taken together, they are producing a feminist political theory centring upon sexuality: its social determination, daily construction, birth to death expression, and ultimately male control.²⁶

With her theory of sexuality as the organising force of sex hierarchy, as to feminism what work is to marxism, MacKinnon unifies the insights of prior feminist work, and transforms them into a feminist theory.

But at the same time that MacKinnon's theory of sexuality created a feminist theory, it paradoxically paralysed feminism, for it found that men's oppression of women is unknowable. If men's oppression of women is unknowable, then women cannot know men's oppression of them, and so cannot move against in order to end it. Feminism, as the movement to end that oppression, is impossible. Bernick recognises this, saying, "MacKinnon's legacy to feminism is the impossibility of any future feminism. Her account makes feminism theoretically impossible."²⁷ MacKinnon's theory of sexuality thus stopped feminism in its tracks. This makes the most urgent task for feminism that of explaining how women can know men's oppression of them.

This being so, one might expect that feminist theorists since have been busy trying to solve this epistemic problem, to explain how women can know men's oppression of them. But, as I will show, this has not exactly been the case. Feminists have sought to explain how women can come to know men's oppression of them, and in so doing contributed much to both feminism and epistemology. But their attempts to do so suggest that they have not entirely grasped the question, as posed by MacKinnon. These attempts largely presuppose the ontological capacity of

²⁶ *ibid.*, 529.

²⁷ Bernick, "The Logic of the Development of Feminism," 12.

women to experience men's treatment of them as oppressive. They thus fail to recognise the very reason for which the question emerges – that women ontologically cannot experience men's treatment of them as oppressive. In this way, these attempts circumvent, rather than take up, the epistemic problem. So, more than thirty years on, feminism remains paralysed, still no closer to gaining traction on the question of how women can know men's oppression of them.

It might be thought that, as in actuality women do know their oppression, and have forged the feminist movement, MacKinnon's theory of sexuality paralyses feminism on the level of logic but not on the level of life. In this case, we do not need to explain how women can know their oppression in order to make feminism possible. Feminism just somehow is possible. But this ignores the connection between logic and life. If men's oppression of women is logically unknowable, such that knowledge of that oppression is logically impossible, then women's knowledge of their oppression cannot be knowledge. Feminist insistences in the face of this that women really do know their oppression will therefore ring hollow, including, crucially, to women, a fact which is often overlooked. Meaning, if knowledge of women's oppression is logically impossible, then how, if women are logical, can they accept the claim that their knowledge of their oppression nevertheless somehow is knowledge?²⁸ Indeed, as Adrienne Rich perceives, "Women have often felt insane when cleaving to the truth of our experience."²⁹ Perhaps this explains why women feel discontented, but unsure why: "There were days when she was unhappy, she did not know why, – when it did not seem worth while to be glad or sorry, to be alive or dead."³⁰ We need an explanation of how men's oppression of women is knowable

²⁸ Richard Rorty suggests this when he says, "Only if somebody has a dream, and a voice to describe that dream, does what looked like nature begin to look like culture, what looked like fate begin to look like a moral abomination, for until then only the language of the oppressor is available, and most oppressors have had the wit to teach the oppressed a language in which the oppressed will sound crazy – even to themselves – if they describe themselves as oppressed." Richard Rorty, "Feminism and Pragmatism," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 30, no. 2 (1991): 4-5.

²⁹ Adrienne Rich, "Women and Honour: Some Notes on Lying," in *Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (New York: Norton, 1979): 190.

³⁰ Kate Chopin, *The Awakening and Selected Stories of Kate Chopin*, ed. Barbara H. Solomon (New York: The New American Library, 1976): 62.

so that we can account for women's knowledge of their oppression, not just to prove to those who disbelieve us that that knowledge is valid, but also, even more importantly, so that women might be freed of continual and crippling doubt to trust in their knowledge, so that, on firm ground, they can struggle against their oppression.³¹

³¹ MacKinnon suggests that feminism cannot move on without answering this question: "Feminism locates the relation of woman's consciousness to her life situation in the relation of two moments: being shaped in the image of one's oppression, yet struggling against it. In so doing, women struggle against the world in themselves as well as toward a future. The real question, both for explanation and for organising, is what is the relationship between the first process, woman becoming her role, and the second, her rejection of it?" MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 102-103.

Naomi Scheman argues against simply accepting that impossible beings exist as what they know themselves to be because they have privileged access, that they are because they know they are, which they just somehow inexplicably do. She insists that impossible beings need not just our acceptance, but "a language, and a set of stories, that make them intelligible, that let them string together descriptors that add up to something other than an 'impossible being.' Something needs to be there to make one's articulations of identity more than meaningless babble, even in one's own ears – a 'something' that the privileged tend to take for granted." Naomi Scheman, *Shifting Ground: Knowledge and Reality, Transgression and Trustworthiness* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011): 31. She considers part of that something, part of what impossible beings need in order to be intelligible, including to themselves, others' critical engagement. She says, "Simply being left alone, as the ultimate authorities on ourselves, will too often leave us without the resources to figure out just what it is that we are supposed to know." (32) In a way, this is what I am saying here, that instead of just accepting that somehow, mysteriously, women know what it is impossible to know – men's oppression of them, we should try to make sense of the existence of that knowledge, or rather, of the being that can have that knowledge.

III. Is Feminism Yet a Theory of the Kind That Marxism Is?

To answer an old question – how is value created and distributed? – Marx needed to create an entirely new account of the social world. To answer an equally old question, or to question an equally old reality – what explains the inequality of women to men? or, how does gender become domination and domination become sex? or, what is male power? – feminism needs to create an entirely new account of the political world.

– Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*

In the preface to her book, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, MacKinnon describes the development of that work. She explains that her original intention was “to explore the connections, contradictions, and conflicts between the marxist and feminist theories of consciousness, as they grounded each theory’s approach to social order and social change.”¹ Put more simply, she meant to compare marxism and feminism as theories of inequality. This intention, however, presupposed what MacKinnon found did not in fact exist: a feminist theory of the kind that marxist theory is. Consequently, MacKinnon’s aim shifted from comparing marxism and feminism to elevating feminism to a theory of the kind that marxism is, parallel rather than subordinate to it. She says,

My initial strategy assumed that feminism had a theory of male dominance: an account of its key concrete sites and laws of motion, an analysis of why and how it happened and why (perhaps even how) it could be ended. I assumed, in short, that feminism had a theory of gender as marxism had a theory of class. As it became clear that this was not the case in the way I had thought, the project shifted from locating and explicating such a theory to creating one by distilling feminist practice, from attempting to connect feminism and marxism on

¹ MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, ix.

equal terms to attempting to create a feminist theory that could stand on its own.²

She did this by developing a theory of sexuality as to feminism what work is to marxism.

While feminists have discussed MacKinnon's theory of sexuality, with some criticising and rejecting it,³ and others accepting and defending it,⁴ none have analysed it on its own terms. As Bernick perceives, "Rather than analysing the logic of the arguments MacKinnon marshals in favour of her position . . . her critics in the main reject her logic without or prior to engaging it."⁵ It is therefore not clear whether MacKinnon's theory of sexuality succeeds, and so whether feminism is yet a theory of the kind that marxism is. In this chapter, this is what I attempt to determine.

1. MacKinnon's Theory of Sexuality

MacKinnon argues that "[s]exuality is to feminism what work is to marxism: that which is most one's own, yet most taken away."⁶ By this she does not mean that sexuality is to feminism what work is to marxism only in that it is "that which is most one's own, yet most taken away." The parallel between sexuality in feminism and work in marxism runs much deeper than this. This becomes clear as she goes on:

Marxist theory argues that society is fundamentally constructed of the relations people form as they do and make things needed to survive

² *ibid.*, x.

³ See, for example: Laura Kipnis, *Bound and Gagged: Pornography and the Politics of Fantasy in America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999); Linda Williams, *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1999); and Lynne Segal, *Straight Sex: Rethinking the Politics of Pleasure* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1994).

⁴ See, for example: Rowland and Klein, "Radical Feminism," 9-36; Haslanger, "On Being Objective and Being Objectified," 85-125; and Olsen, "Feminist Theory in Grand Style," 1147-1178.

⁵ Bernick, "The Logic of the Development of Feminism," 8-9.

⁶ MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory," 515.

humanly. Work is the social process of shaping and transforming the material and social worlds, creating people as social beings as they create value. It is that activity by which people become who they are. Class is its structure, production its consequence, capital its congealed form, and control its issue.

Implicit in feminist theory is a parallel argument: the moulding, direction, and expression of sexuality organises society into two sexes – women and men – which division underlies the totality of social relations. Sexuality is that social process which creates, organises, expresses, and directs desire, creating the social beings we know as women and men, as their relations create society. As work is to marxism, sexuality to feminism is socially constructed yet constructing, universal as activity, yet historically specific, jointly comprised of matter and mind. As the organised expropriation of the work of some for the benefit of others defines a class – workers – the organised expropriation of the sexuality of some defines the sex, woman. Heterosexuality is its structure, gender and family its congealed forms, sex roles its qualities generalised to social persona, reproduction a consequence and control its issue.

Marxism and feminism are theories of power and its distribution: inequality. They provide accounts of how social arrangements of patterned disparity can be internally rational yet unjust. But their specificity is not incidental. In marxism to be deprived of one's work, in feminism of one's sexuality, defines each one's conception of lack of power per se. They do not mean to exist side by side to insure that two separate spheres of social life are not overlooked, the interests of two groups are not obscured, or the contributions of two sets of variables are not ignored. They exist to argue, respectively, that the relations in which many work and few gain, in which some fuck and others get fucked, are the prime moment of politics.⁷

⁷ *ibid.*, 515-517.

In this passage it becomes clear that what MacKinnon means by “[s]exuality is to feminism what work is to marxism” is that, like work in marxism, it is that which necessarily organises the social world hierarchically. As work in marxism is organised by some for their benefit, namely, those who own the means of production, sexuality in feminism is organised by some for their benefit, namely, men. As the owners of the means of production organise work for their benefit, they make work that which divides people into classes, those who own the means of production into one class and those who work into another, and arranges the classes hierarchically, those who own the means of production as those who profit and those who work as those who are exploited. Similarly, as men organise sexuality for their benefit, they make sexuality that which divides people into the sexes, men and women, and arranges the sexes hierarchically, men as dominant and women as subordinate. As work divides people into classes, and arranges the classes hierarchically, it organises the social world as class hierarchy. Similarly, as sexuality divides people into sexes, and arranges the sexes hierarchically, it organises the social world as sex hierarchy. So, to ask if MacKinnon’s theory of sexuality succeeds is just to ask if MacKinnon succeeds in showing that sexuality organises the social world hierarchically, as work does in marxism. Given the parallel, in order to determine whether MacKinnon’s theory of sexuality succeeds, it will be helpful to first understand how work in marxism organises the social world hierarchically.

2. Marx’s Account of How Work Organises the Social World as Class Hierarchy

Marx begins his theory with a conception of a person. This conception is one of a person as first and foremost a material being, meaning, a corporeal being, a flesh-and-blood being.⁸ This conception is implicit in Marx and Engels’s assertion that “life

⁸ Marx does not conceive of people as only material beings; he argues that the “individual *is the social being*.” Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. Martin Milligan (New York: International Publishers, 1964): 138. Italics in the original. But he does see people as, in the first instance, material beings, that is, as beings who need, in the first instance, material things in order to exist. He says, “[J]ust as on the first day of his appearance on the world’s stage,

involves before everything else eating and drinking, a habitation, clothing and many other things. The first historical act is thus the production of the means to satisfy these needs, the production of material life itself. And indeed this is an historical act, a fundamental condition of all history, which today, as thousands of years ago, must daily and hourly be fulfilled merely in order to sustain human life.”⁹ Elsewhere, Marx says, “The life of the species, both in man and in animals, consists physically in the fact that man (like the animal) lives on organic nature . . . Physically man lives only on these products of nature, whether they appear in the form of food, heating, clothes, a dwelling, etc . . . Man *lives* on nature – means that nature is his body, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die.”¹⁰ Marx thus conceives of what a person first and foremost needs to live, what is the means of her existence, as what she needs to live as such a being. What a material being needs to live are just material things, things such as food and water. Thus, for marxism, what a person first and foremost needs to live are material things. It is in beginning with this conception of a person, in grounding their theory in the materiality of human nature, the primary need of humanity for material things, that Marx and Engels break with previous German thought, turning it on its head. They say, “In direct contrast to German philosophy which descends from heaven to earth, here we ascend from earth to heaven. That is to say, we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process.”¹¹ In other words, while previous German thought proceeded with a view of a person that was abstracted from the reality of her

man must still consume every day, before and while he produces.” Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976): 272.

⁹ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology: Part One, with Selections from Parts Two and Three, Together with Marx’s “Introduction to a Critique of Political Economy,”* ed. C. J. Arthur (New York: International Bestsellers, 1974): 48.

¹⁰ Karl Marx, “Estranged Labour,” in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, ed. Dirk J. Struik (New York: International Publishers, 1964): 112. Italics in the original.

¹¹ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 47-48.

condition, from the earthly demands of her existence, Marx and Engels confront and base their theory upon that reality, those demands. They say, “[T]he first fact to be established is the physical organisation of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature. Of course, we cannot here go either into the actual physical nature of man, or into the natural conditions in which man finds himself – geological, oreohydrographical, climatic and so on. The writing of history must always set out from these natural bases and their modification in the course of history through the action of men.”¹²

One must live before all else. As Marx and Engels say, “Since we are dealing with the Germans, who are devoid of premises, we must begin by stating the first premise of all human existence and, therefore, of all human history, the premise, namely, that men must be in a position to live in order to be able to ‘make history.’”¹³ Thus, one must get material things before all else. But one does not just find in the world what one needs to live, rather, one must make it. Marx and Engels imply this when they say, “Men . . . begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to *produce* their means of subsistence.”¹⁴ Work is the process by which one makes what one needs to live. As Marx and Engels say, “Production creates the objects that correspond to the given needs.”¹⁵ So, as one must get what one needs to live before all else, one must work before all else. On Marx’s view, one must enter into relations with others in order to work. He says, “[H]uman beings . . . produce only by working together in a specified manner and reciprocally exchanging their activities. In order to produce, they enter into definite connections and relations to one another, and only within these social connections and relations does their influence upon nature operate, i.e., does production take place.”¹⁶ As one must work before all else, it is necessarily through work that one first enters into relations with

¹² *ibid.*, 42.

¹³ *ibid.*, 48.

¹⁴ *ibid.* 42. Italics in the original.

¹⁵ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin Books, 1993): 89.

¹⁶ Karl Marx, “The Nature and Growth of Capital,” in *Wage-Labour and Capital* (New York: International Publishers, 1933): 28.

others. This is why “[i]ndividuals producing in society – hence socially determined individual production – is, of course, the point of departure.”¹⁷ This means that work necessarily organises social relations, which is to say, the social world. Anthony Giddens echoes this when he says, “[P]roductive activity is at the root of society in both an historical and an analytical sense.”¹⁸ This is the first half of Marx’s account. I turn now to the second – how work organises the social world as class hierarchy.

Only some people own the means of production, which are the means by which one works, consisting of the instruments of production, such as tools and machines, and the material out of which something is produced.¹⁹ Under capitalism, those who own the means of production are the capitalists. As the capitalists own the means of production, and as those who do not own the means of production must work in order to live, so cannot refuse to work on the terms of the capitalists, the capitalists have control over work. Having this control, they can organise work such that they profit. But that they can so organise work does not explain why they do. Marx does not, as is sometimes thought, believe that capitalists are innately greedy. Rather, he argues that the system of capitalism necessitates that the capitalists profit. This is because the system of capitalism is such that if the capitalist does not make a profit, he will go under, thereby ceasing to be a member of the capitalist class, the ruling class, and losing the status that comes with being a member of that class, of the elite. He will thus no longer be “respectable.”²⁰ Marx says,

Only as a personification of capital is the capitalist respectable. As such, he shares with the miser an absolute drive towards self-enrichment. But what appears in the miser as the mania of an individual is in the capitalist the effect of a social mechanism in which he is merely a cog. Moreover, the development of capitalist production

¹⁷ Marx, *Grundrisse*, 83.

¹⁸ Anthony Giddens, *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory: An Analysis of the Writings of Marx, Durkheim and Max Weber* (Cambridge; London; New York; Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1971): 35.

¹⁹ Marx, *Capital*, 272, 287.

²⁰ *ibid.*, 739.

makes it necessary constantly to increase the amount of capital laid out in a given industrial undertaking, and competition subordinates every individual capitalist to the immanent laws of capitalist production, as external and coercive laws. It compels him to keep extending his capital, so as to preserve it, and he can only extend it by means of progressive accumulation.²¹

In this way, capitalism necessitates that the capitalists organise work such that they profit.

Now to the question of how the capitalists organise work such that they make a profit. To make a profit is just to withdraw more value. But, according to the law of exchange, commodities of equivalent value must be exchanged. This means that the capitalist must buy and sell commodities at their value. So, he can neither withdraw more value from buying nor from selling commodities. Marx says,

The transformation of money into capital has to be developed on the basis of the immanent laws of the exchange of commodities, in such a way that the starting-point is the exchange of equivalents. The money-owner, who is as yet only a capitalist in larval form, must buy his commodities at their value, sell them at their value, and yet at the end of the process withdraw more value from circulation than he threw into it at the beginning. His emergence as a butterfly must, and yet must not, take place in the sphere of circulation. These are the conditions of the problem.²²

How then can the capitalist withdraw more value? Well, Marx argues that under capitalism a commodity has two values: one is the use-value and the other the exchange-value.²³ The use-value is, rather obviously, the usefulness of the product.

²¹ *ibid.*

²² *ibid.*, 269.

²³ See generally Marx, "The Commodity," in *ibid.*, 125-177.

A commodity is a thing of use-value insofar as it is a thing of usefulness, a thing that can serve a person's need or want. Marx says,

A commodity is, first of all, an external object, a thing which through its qualities satisfies human needs of whatever kind . . . The usefulness of a thing makes it a use-value. But this usefulness does not dangle in mid-air. It is conditioned by the physical properties of the commodity, and has no existence apart from the latter. It is therefore the physical body of the commodity itself, for instance iron, corn, a diamond, which is the use-value or useful thing. This property of a commodity is independent of the amount of labour required to appropriate its useful qualities. When examining use-values, we always assume we are dealing with definite quantities, such as dozens of watches, yards of linen, or tons of iron. The use-values of commodities provide the material for a special branch of knowledge, namely, the commercial knowledge of commodities. Use-values are only realised in use of consumption. They constitute the material content of wealth, whatever its social form might be. In the form of society to be considered here they are also the material bearers of . . . exchange value.²⁴

The exchange-value is the proportion at which the commodity can be exchanged for another commodity: "Exchange-value appears first of all as the quantitative relation, the proportion, in which use-values of one kind exchange for use-values of another kind."²⁵ Unlike use-value, exchange-value is not "inherent" in the commodity, rather it is "purely relative,"²⁶ in other words, contingent. This is clear in that exchange-value "changes constantly with time and place."²⁷ If exchange-value is not inherent in the

²⁴ *ibid.*, 125-126. Second ellipsis in the original.

²⁵ *ibid.*, 126.

²⁶ *ibid.*

²⁷ *ibid.*

commodity, as use-value is, then by what is it determined? Marx begins his answer to this question with an example:

Let us now take two commodities, for example corn and iron. Whatever their exchange-relation may be, it can always be represented by an equation in which a given quantity of corn is equated to some quantity of iron, for instance, 1 quarter of corn = x cwt of iron. What does this equation signify? It signifies that a common element of identical magnitude exists in two different things, in 1 quarter of corn and similarly in x cwt of iron. Both are therefore equal to a third thing, which in itself is neither the one nor the other. Each of them, so far as it is exchange-value, must therefore be reducible to this third thing.²⁸

This third thing, this common element, cannot be use-value, for, “[a]s use-values, commodities differ above all in quality, while as exchange-values they can only differ in quantity, and therefore do not contain an atom of use-value.”²⁹ As use-values, commodities differ in what they are, while as exchange-values, they differ in the quantities of what they are. This leaves as the common element only the fact of being a product of labour. That is, the only thing that commodities have in common, aside from having a use-value, is that of being products of labour.³⁰ As Marx says,

If we make abstraction from its use-value, we abstract also from the material constituents and forms which make it a use-value. It is no longer a table, a house, a piece of yarn or any other useful thing. All its sensuous characteristics are extinguished. Nor is it any longer the product of the labour of the joiner, the mason or spinner, or of any other particular kind of productive labour. With the disappearance of the useful character of the products of labour, the useful character of the

²⁸ *ibid.* 127.

²⁹ *ibid.*, 128.

³⁰ Marx says, “If we then disregard the use-value of commodities, only one property remains, that of being products of labour.” *ibid.*

kinds of labour embodied in them also disappears; this in turn entails the disappearance of the different concrete forms of labour. They can no longer be distinguished, but are all together reduced to the same kind of labour, human labour in the abstract.³¹

So, what gives a commodity exchange-value is its being a product of labour. But what exactly does this mean? It might be thought that this means that the exchange-value is determined by the quantity of labour required to produce it. Marx says that this cannot be right, for this would mean that “the more unskilful and lazy the worker,”³² the more valuable the commodity. He says that exchange-value is determined instead by “the amount of labour socially necessary, or the labour-time socially necessary for its production.”³³ Socially necessary labour-time is “the labour-time required to produce any use-value under the conditions of production normal for a given society and with the average degree of skill and intensity of labour prevalent in that society.”³⁴ If the capitalist must buy and sell commodities at their exchange-value, so cannot leverage more value from the exchange-value of a commodity, then the only way in which he can withdraw more value is by withdrawing it from the use-value of a commodity. Marx says,

The change in value of the money which has to be transformed into capital cannot take place in the money itself, since in its function as means of purchase and payment it does not more than realise the price of commodity it buys or pays for, while, when it sticks to its own peculiar form, it petrifies into a mass of value of constant magnitude. Just as little can this change originate in the second act of circulation, the resale of the commodity, for this act merely converts the commodity from its natural form back into its money-form. The change must therefore take place in the commodity which is bought in the first act of

³¹ *ibid.*

³² *ibid.* 129.

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ *ibid.*

circulation, $M - C$, but not in its value, for it is equivalents which are being exchanged, and the commodity is paid for at its full value. The change can therefore originate only in the actual use-value of the commodity, i.e., in its consumption.³⁵

In order to make a profit, then, the capitalist must find a commodity that, in being used, can produce more value than the value that he paid to use it. The capitalist finds this commodity in labour-power, which is the capacity for labour.³⁶ How, through using labour-power, the capitalist produces more value than the value that he paid to use it is as follows.

Firstly, as we have seen, the exchange-value of a commodity is determined by the amount of labour-time that is necessary to produce it. So, the exchange-value of labour-power is the amount of labour-time that is required to produce labour-power. The means of subsistence are what produce labour-power, as they are what render a person in a condition to work.³⁷ Thus, the exchange-value of labour-power is the amount of labour-time that is required to produce the means of subsistence. Marx tells us to suppose that six hours, which is half of a day, is the amount of labour-time that is necessary to produce the means of subsistence that a person requires to be in a condition to work for one day, which is to say, to produce labour-power for one day.³⁸ This means that the exchange-value of labour-power for one day is half of a day of labour-time. For the price of half of a day of labour-time, then, the capitalist can use the worker's labour-power for one day. Marx then tells us to suppose also that six hours of labour-time is embodied in three shillings.³⁹ So, the

³⁵ *ibid.*, 270.

³⁶ Marx says, "We mean by labour-power, or labour-capacity, the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being, capabilities which he sets in motion whenever he produces a use-value of any kind." *ibid.*

³⁷ Marx says, "Given the existence of the individual, the production of labour-power consists in his reproduction of himself or his maintenance. For his maintenance he requires a certain quantity of the means of subsistence; in other words, the value of labour-power is the value of the means of subsistence necessary for maintenance of its owner." *ibid.*, 274.

³⁸ *ibid.*, 276.

³⁹ *ibid.*

exchange-value of labour-power for one day is three shillings. This means that the capitalist must pay the worker three shillings for the use of his labour-power for one day. Marx then tells us to suppose that the worker can spin 20 pounds of yarn over one day.⁴⁰ This means that the yarn is the embodiment of one day of labour-time.⁴¹ As half of a day of labour-time is embodied in three shillings, one day of labour-time is embodied in six shillings. So, the act of labouring for twelve hours alone gives 20 pounds of yarn an exchange-value of six shillings. The capitalist can sell the yarn for six shillings. The capitalist has paid the worker three shillings for the use of his labour-power, but in using his labour-power, receives six shillings. The capitalist thus manages to withdraw more value through the use of labour-power. But it is not just that he makes a profit, he does so by exploiting the worker. He has paid the worker three shillings, as that is an amount that is commensurate with the value of six hours of labour-time, but the worker has produced for the capitalist a commodity which embodies and so has the value of twelve hours of labour-time. The capitalist has paid the worker the value of six hours of labour-time, but the worker has provided the capitalist with the value of twelve hours of labour-time. As Marx says, “[T]he capitalist gets rich, not, like the miser, in proportion to his personal labour and restricted consumption, but at the same rate as he squeezes out labour-power from others, and compels the worker to renounce all the enjoyments of life.”⁴²

If the capitalist must organise work such that he makes a profit, and if he makes a profit through the use of labour-power, then he must be assured of getting labour-power. He is so assured just if labour-power is continually a commodity in the market. It must be specifically *continually* in the market so that the capitalist can continually buy and thus continually use it. If he could not continually buy it, if he could buy it, for example, only the once, then he could not continually use it, and if he could not continually use it, then he would eventually be unable to make a profit, in which case he would go under. Labour-power is continually a commodity in the market just if two conditions are fulfilled. The first condition is that the owner of

⁴⁰ *ibid.*, 301.

⁴¹ *ibid.*, 296.

⁴² *ibid.*, 741.

labour-power continually own his labour-power.⁴³ In order for labour-power to continually be a commodity in the market, the owner of labour-power must continually be able to sell it, which requires that he continually own it. In order to continually own it, “he must always sell it for a limited period only.”⁴⁴ The second condition is that the owner of labour-power be continually forced to sell it.⁴⁵ This assures the capitalist of being able to continually buy it. In order for the owner of labour-power to be forced to sell it, selling it must be the only way that he can get what he needs to live. If he could get what he needs to live by means other than selling his labour-power, he would not be forced to sell it. In order for selling his labour-power to be the only way that he can get what he needs to live, he must be unable to sell anything other than his labour-power. If he could sell other commodities, then he could make the money that he needs to buy the things that he needs to live without selling his labour-power. In order that he be unable to sell commodities other than his labour-power, the owner of labour-power must be unable to own the means of production.⁴⁶ If he owned the means of production, then he could make and sell commodities without selling his labour-power.

The payment of a wage fulfils the first condition. The wage is an amount of money that the capitalist pays the worker for his labour-power over a definite period of time.⁴⁷ In other words, it is the exchange-value of labour-power over a definite period of time. That the wage is paid to the worker for his labour-power means that the labour-power is the worker’s own. This is why the wage-labourer is referred to as

⁴³ Marx says, “In order that its possessor may sell it as a commodity, he must have it at his disposal, he must be the free proprietor of his own labour-capacity, hence of his person.” *ibid.*, 271.

⁴⁴ Marx says, “The second essential condition which allows the owner of money to find the labour-power in the market as a commodity is this, that the possessor of labour-power, instead of being able to sell commodities in which his labour has been objectified, must rather be compelled to offer for sale as a commodity that very labour-power which exists only in his living body.” *ibid.*, 272.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁷ Marx says, “[I]t appears that the capitalist *buys* their labour with money, and that for money they *sell* their labour. But this is merely an illusion. What they actually sell to the capitalist for money is their *labour-power*. This labour-power the capitalist buys for a day, a week, a month, etc.” Marx, *Wage-Labour and Capital*, 17. Italics in the original.

the free labourer; he owns, and so is free to sell, his labour-power. As the wage is the exchange-value of labour-power over a definite period of time, the worker can sell his labour-power only for a definite period of time. This means that the worker always ultimately gets his labour-power back. In this way, the wage makes the worker continually own his labour-power.

The payment of a wage also fulfils the second condition. As the wage is the exchange-value of labour-power, the value of the wage is equivalent to the value of labour-power. As the exchange-value of labour-power is the amount of labour-time that is required to produce the means of subsistence, the value of labour-power is thus equivalent to the value of the means of subsistence.⁴⁸ So, the value of the wage is equivalent to the value of the means of subsistence.⁴⁹ With his wage, then, the worker can buy only that which is equivalent to the means of subsistence.⁵⁰ This means that he can buy only that which produces his labour-power. He cannot buy the means of production, which would enable him to make and sell commodities, and thereby live without selling his labour-power. As he can buy only that which produces his labour-power, he must continually sell his labour-power in order to buy the things that he needs to live.

If the capitalist makes a profit through the use of labour-power, and if he is assured of getting labour-power just through the payment of a wage to the worker, then the capitalist organises work such that he makes a profit through the payment of a wage to the worker. On the surface, the coming into being of the wage-labourer appears a moment of liberation, as the worker is granted ownership of his labour-power, and owning it is free to do with it as he pleases. As such it appears a moment of progression. But in fact, as Marx reveals, it is the capitalist's need for profit that necessitates the existence of the wage-labourer. Marx says, "For the transformation of money into capital, therefore, the owner of money must find the free worker available on the commodity market; and this worker must be free in the double sense that as a free individual he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity,

⁴⁸ Marx, *Capital*, 274.

⁴⁹ Marx says, "*The price of his work* will therefore be determined by the *price of the necessary means of subsistence*." Marx, *Wage-Labour and Capital*, 26. Italics in the original.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*, 31.

and that, on the other hand, he has no other commodity for sale, i.e. he is rid of them, he is free of all the objects needed for the realisation of his labour-power.”⁵¹ If the capitalist so organises work, then work becomes a process by which the capitalist makes a profit, and, as he makes a profit by exploiting the worker, by which the worker is exploited. Work, then, is that which organises people into classes, the capitalists into one class and the workers into another, and arranges the classes hierarchically, the capitalists as those who profit and the workers as those who are exploited. But this is not all, for if, as I have explained, it is necessarily through work that one first enters into social relations, which means that work is necessarily primary in organising social relations, which means that it ultimately organises the social world, then for work to organise people into classes and arrange the classes hierarchically is for work to organise the social world as class hierarchy.

3. MacKinnon’s Account of How Sexuality Organises the Social World as Sex Hierarchy

Like Marx, MacKinnon begins with a conception of a person. But unlike Marx, hers is one of a person as, in the first instance, existing only in society. She says, “The person in radical feminist thought is necessarily socially constituted.”⁵² This means that a person has no existence prior to or apart from his or her social existence, that a person exists only inasmuch as a person socially exists. The being that a person is, then, is just the being a person socially is, which is just the being as which a person is socially defined. This is the being man or woman. This is clear in that a person is born a boy or girl, which means that a person comes into existence as a person comes into existence as a boy or girl, that a person’s being consists in his or her gender. Thus, the being that a person is is just the being man or woman. Judith Butler makes a similar point, saying,

⁵¹ Marx, *Capital*, 272-273.

⁵² MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 46.

The social constraints upon gender compliance and deviation are so great that most people feel deeply wounded if they are told that they exercise their manhood or womanhood improperly. Insofar as social existence requires an unambiguous gender affinity, it is not possible to exist in a socially meaningful sense outside of established gender norms. The fall from established gender boundaries initiates a sense of radical disclosure which can assume a metaphysical significance. If human existence is always gendered existence, then to stray outside of established gender is in some sense to put one's very existence into question.⁵³

If a person is just the being man or woman, then what a person needs to live is just what the being man or woman needs to live. On MacKinnon's account, the being man is just the sexual being man is, the being woman just the sexual being woman is. She conveys this when she says, "Sexuality is that social process which creates, organises, expresses, and directs desire, creating the social beings we know as women and men."⁵⁴ That is, sexuality is the process that creates, organises, expresses, and directs sexual desire, which is to say, makes what men and women sexually desire, which is to say, forms men and women as sexual beings, and, forming them as sexual beings, forms them as the beings men and women. Here, MacKinnon is saying that the being man is just the sexual being man is and the being woman just the sexual being woman is. Perhaps, says MacKinnon, this is why the word sex means both the sexual act and the categories male and female.⁵⁵ If the

⁵³ Judith Butler, "Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig, and Foucault," *PRAXIS International*, no. 4 (1985): 508.

⁵⁴ MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory," 516.

⁵⁵ She says, "Now consider the content of gender roles. All the social requirements for male sexual arousal and satisfaction are identical with the gender definition of 'female.' All the essentials of the male gender role are also the qualities sexualised as 'male' in male dominant sexuality. If gender is a social construct, and sexuality is a social construct, and the question is, of what is each constructed, the fact that their contents are identical – not to mention that the word *sex* refers to both – might be more than a coincidence." MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 143. Italics in the original.

beings man and woman are just the sexual beings man and woman are, then men become men and women women in becoming the sexual beings they are. As one becomes a sexual being in satiating one's sexual desire,⁵⁶ and as one satiates one's sexual desire in sexual acts, men and women become sexual beings, thus, become men and women, in sexual acts. In having sex, in the sense of sexual act, then, men and women have sex, in the sense of male or female being.

What the beings man and woman need to live, then, is just what the sexual beings man and woman need to live. What a sexual being needs to live, in other words, what sustains it, is just what satiates its hunger. The hunger of a sexual being is sexual hunger, in other words, sexual desire. What satiates sexual desire is the object of sexual desire.⁵⁷ Thus, what the beings man and woman need to live is the object of their sexual desire. This means that the sexual occupies in feminism the place of the material in marxism: that which one needs to live.⁵⁸ Perhaps this is why a sexual desire is often seen as a need,⁵⁹ to see it as such is to see the object of it as not merely desirable but as necessary. As one must live before all else, one must get what one needs to live before all else. So, as in marxism a person must get material things before all else, in feminism men and women must get the object of their sexual desire before all else. As in marxism one does not just find in the world what one needs to live, nor does one in feminism. Rather, one must make it. Sexuality is the process by which one does this. This means that sexuality is, as

⁵⁶ I explain this in greater detail below.

⁵⁷ Vadas explains that that which satiates sexual desire must be a sexual object. Of the consumer of pornography, she says, "If his body is in fact and in reality sexually satisfied through the consumption of the presented object, then that object must itself be a sex object and not a mere representation of a sex object. The satisfaction-producing object cannot, *qua* satisfaction-producing object, be a mere representation because, as we have seen, the ontological grammar of appetitive consumption decisively disqualifies representations from playing such a satisfaction-producing role." Vadas, "The Manufacture-for-Use of Pornography and Women's Inequality," 182. See generally pp. 180-182.

⁵⁸ This is why the sexual need not be material in the marxist sense in order to be material in "a feminist sense of materiality." MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, 53.

⁵⁹ "Sex may be studied as a purely physiological need." A. H. Maslow, "A Theory of Human Motivation," *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 (July 1943): 381.

much as work in marxism, the process by which one makes what one needs to live. This is why, on MacKinnon's view, sexuality is, as much as work in marxism, a social process that is "basic."⁶⁰ While MacKinnon does not explicitly state that sexuality is the process by which one makes the object of sexual desire, on her view that sexuality is the process that forms men and women as sexual beings, it must be this process. One is formed as a sexual being as one gets what makes one exist as a sexual being, which I have explained is the object of sexual desire. Therefore, if sexuality is the process that forms men and women as sexual beings, then it is the process by which one gets the object of sexual desire. As one does not find this object but must make it, the process by which one gets it is just that by which one makes it. So, sexuality is the process by which one makes the object of sexual desire. As one must get what one needs to live before all else, one must engage in the process of sexuality before all else. It is, then, necessarily through sexuality that one first enters into relations with others. This means that sexuality necessarily organises social relations, hence, the social world. This is the first half of MacKinnon's account. I turn now to the second – how sexuality organises the social world as sex hierarchy.

On MacKinnon's account, as men have epistemic authority while women do not,⁶¹ men's image of a man is socially accepted as what a man is in truth. Men thus come to see that image as what they must become in order to become men, which is to say, in order to exist. And so they become that. If men so become men's image of a man, then what a man is is just what men's image of a man is. On MacKinnon's view, that image is one of just a masculine being. She says, "Masculinity precedes male as femininity precedes female, and male sexual desire defines both."⁶² This is clear in that a man who is seen as not masculine is seen as not manly, not of the nature of which a man is, not a man. On her view, a masculine being is just a sexual being who desires dominance.⁶³ She says, "Dominance eroticised defines the

⁶⁰ MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory," 517.

⁶¹ I explain why this is below.

⁶² MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 130.

⁶³ For a discussion of the centrality of sexual being to being man, see, for example: Annie Potts, "The Essence of the Hard On': Hegemonic Masculinity and the Cultural Construction of

imperatives of its masculinity.”⁶⁴ So, men’s image of a man is one of just a sexual being who desires dominance. Suggestive of this, a man’s virility is considered the measure of his manhood.⁶⁵ To be virile is to be forceful. It is also to be sexually potent, which is to say, to be able to act as a sexual being, which is to say, to succeed as a sexual being. Thus, for a man to be forceful is for him to succeed as a sexual being, is, socially, for him to succeed as a man.⁶⁶ So, a man is just a sexual being who desires dominance.

On MacKinnon’s account, the erotic is not given by nature, rather, it is that as which society defines it. She says, “I do not see sexuality as a transcultural container, as essential, as historically unchanging, or as Eros. I define sexuality as whatever a given society eroticises. That is, sexual is whatever sexual means in a particular society.”⁶⁷ But this does not mean that the erotic is that as which both men and women define it. As men have epistemic authority while women do not, the erotic is just that as which *men* define it.⁶⁸ Men define the erotic as what they experience as erotic, so that the erotic is, in the first instance, just what is so to men. MacKinnon says, “[W]hat is sexual is what gives a man an erection.”⁶⁹ This is clear in that what is erotic remains so even if it is not so to women: if women do not find erotic what men do, then it is not that what is erotic is therefore not erotic, but that

‘Erectile Dysfunction,’” *Men and Masculinities* 3, no. 1 (July 2000): 85-103; John Stoltenberg, *Refusing to be a Man: Essays on Sex and Justice* (London: UCL Press, 2000); and Alan E. Gross, “The Male Role and Heterosexual Behaviour,” *Journal of Social Issues* 34, no. 1 (1978): 87-107.

⁶⁴ MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 130.

⁶⁵ “Male sexual power is also expressed through an attitude or quality: virility. Defined first as manhood itself, virility in its secondary meaning is vigour, dynamism (in the patriarchal dictionary inevitably also called force).” Dworkin, *Pornography*, 23.

⁶⁶ Havelock Ellis suggests as much: “Force is the foundation of virility . . . The modesty of women – in its primordial form consisting of physical resistance, active or passive, to the assaults of the male – aided selection by putting to the test man’s most important quality, force.” Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, vol. 1 (New York: Random House, 1937): 32-33, quoted in Dworkin, *Pornography*, 148.

⁶⁷ MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, 53.

⁶⁸ MacKinnon says, “Because sexuality arises in relations under male dominance, women are not the principal authors of its meanings.” *ibid.*

⁶⁹ MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 137.

women are frigid,⁷⁰ sexually repressed,⁷¹ or suffering from a sexual desire disorder.⁷² As I have explained, on MacKinnon's view, what men experience as erotic is dominance.⁷³ She says, "Whatever it takes to make the penis shudder and stiffen with the experience of its potency is what sexuality means culturally. Whatever else does this, fear does, hostility does, hatred does, the helplessness of a child or a student or an infantilised or restrained or vulnerable woman does, revulsion does, death does. Hierarchy, a constant creation of person/thing, top/bottom, dominance/subordination relations, does."⁷⁴ Thus, the erotic is just men's dominance: "Male dominance is sexual."⁷⁵ This means that the erotic is erotic inasmuch as it is men's dominance; nothing else about it makes it so.

⁷⁰ "The sexual frigidity of women, the frequency of which appears to confirm this disregard, is a phenomenon that is still insufficiently understood." Sigmund Freud, "Femininity," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XXII, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1964): 132.

⁷¹ "The development of the inhibitions of sexuality (shame, disgust, pity, etc.) takes place in little girls earlier and in the face of less resistance than in boys; the tendency to sexual repression seems in general to be greater." Sigmund Freud, "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality," in *ibid.*, vol. VII, 219.

⁷² "At present, the prevalence of sexual desire disorders is thought to constitute a 'modern day epidemic-level sex problem' that afflicts women at a much higher rate than men. Sandra Leiblum notes that 'in study after study, more women than men report hypoactive sexual desire.' The now widely quoted article "Sexual Dysfunction in the United States: Prevalence and Predictors" for example, reported that women experiencing sexual difficulties are most likely to fall victim to 'low sexual desire' but men are unlikely to suffer a similar fate. Laumann and colleagues found that 22% of women report symptoms meeting the criteria for low or hypoactive sexual desire, making it the most common sexual dysfunction among women. Low sexual desire however, was found to be the least prevalent dysfunction in men, at a rate of only 5%." Meagan Tyler, "No Means Yes: Perpetuating Myths in the Sexological Construction of Women's Desire," *Women and Therapy* 32, no. 1 (2009): 42.

⁷³ The view that what men experience as erotic is their dominance "has grown out of consciousness raising. Recent feminist work, both interpretive and empirical, on rape, battery, sexual harassment, sexual abuse of children, prostitution and pornography, support it." MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 127.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, 137.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, 127.

If the erotic is just what men experience as erotic, then a sex act is just an act in which they get what they experience as erotic. That is, one does a sex act in order to satiate one's sexual desire, as suggested by the fact that if a man does not reach orgasm in sex, then he considers the sex to have been unsuccessful. If in doing that act one did not satiate one's sexual desire, then one would not do that act in order to satiate one's sexual desire, and so that act would cease to be a sex act. A sex act, then, is just an act in which one satiates one's sexual desire.⁷⁶ As what satiates one's sexual desire is just the object of sexual desire, in other words, what is to one erotic, a sex act is just an act in which one gets what is to one erotic. So, by making the erotic just what they experience as erotic, men make a sex act just an act in which they get what they experience as erotic.⁷⁷ Suggestive of this, the act of penetration is sex despite the fact that women often do not reach orgasm in that act.⁷⁸ As what men experience as erotic is dominance, a sex act is just an act in which they get dominance. MacKinnon says, "The male sexual role . . . centres on aggressive intrusion on those with less power. Such acts of dominance are experienced as sexually arousing, as sex itself. They therefore are."⁷⁹

To get dominance is to get dominance over another. As people are socially divided into men and women, that another to men is women. A sex act, then, is just an act in which men become dominant and women subordinate. Hence, sex as conquest,⁸⁰ as suggested by the fact that to have sex is for men to "have" women,

⁷⁶ Vadas says, "At the gross level of behaviour and activity, it is the process of a man's moving from sexual arousal to sexual satisfaction or orgasm that defines and delineates a complex sex act as such." Vadas, "The Manufacture-for-Use of Pornography and Women's Inequality," 179.

⁷⁷ As MacKinnon says, "We had sex three times" typically means the man entered the woman three times and orgasmed three times." MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 133.

⁷⁸ Anne Koedt, "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm," in *Radical Feminism*, ed. Anne Koedt, Ellen Levine, and Anita Rapone (New York: Quadrangle Books, 1973): 198-207.

⁷⁹ MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 127.

⁸⁰ Kate Millett illuminates sex as conquest in her analysis of literary descriptions of sexual activity. See Millett, *Sexual Politics*. See also Andrea Dworkin, "Possession," in *Intercourse* (New York: Basic Books, 2007): 79-100.

which is to say, for men to possess women, for men to make women men's own,⁸¹ which is for men to get dominance over them.⁸²

If a sex act is just an act in which men get dominance, then it is just an act done by men to women against women's will.⁸³ This is because one gets dominance over another only in the precise moment in which he subordinates her to himself. To subordinate her to himself is just to make her subject to his own will. One makes another subject to his own will only by overcoming her will; if he does not overcome her will, then she remains autonomous. One overcomes another's will only by doing something to her against her will. If it were not against her will, which is to say, if she were willing to do that, then he would not be overcoming her will. It might be objected that one need not overcome another's will in order to make her subject to his own will, for she could choose to be subject to his will. But if she is subject to his will only because she has chosen to be so then her subjection to his will is ultimately her subjection to her own will, hence, not to his will. This explains why women are told to resist men's sexual advances (as in, play hard to get);⁸⁴ resisting men's sexual

⁸¹ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 397.

⁸² As MacKinnon explains, that heterosexual sex is sex as conquest does not mean that homosexual sex is not, for "sexuality in that form may be no less gendered." MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, 60. That is, as it is not in being biological beings but in being sexual beings that men and women are men and women, sex between biological males or females, does not thereby cease to be sex between men and women. In it, the one who dominates, for being the one who dominates, occupies the position of the man, the one who is dominated, for being the one who is dominated, occupies the position of the woman. This is indicated by the fact that men are feminised in being raped by other men. Sexually forced, they become women. Homosexual sex thus remains heterosexual sex, in the sense that it is done between beings who are socially men and women, which means that it remains sex as conquest. See also MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 141-142.

⁸³ Robert Dahl seems to express a similar idea of what it means to have power: "My intuitive idea of power, then, is something like this: *A* has power over *B* to the extent that he can get *B* to do something that *B* would not otherwise do." Robert A. Dahl, "The Concept of Power," *Behavioural Science* 2, no. 3 (1957): 202-3.

⁸⁴ "If woman is made to please and to be subjugated, she ought to make herself agreeable to man instead of arousing him. Her own violence is in her charms. It is by these that she ought to constrain him to find his strength and make use of it. The surest art for animating that strength is to

advances, sex can be done by men to women against women's will,⁸⁵ hence, can be an act in which men get dominance, hence, can be sex.⁸⁶ This reveals "[f]orce [a]s sex, not just sexualised; force [a]s the desire dynamic, not just a response to the desired object when desire's expression is frustrated."⁸⁷ It also collapses the distinction between sex and violence, with rape located on the side of violence, that some feminists have made in an attempt to criticise rape while affirming sex.⁸⁸ On MacKinnon's analysis of sexuality, it is force that makes sex sex, not that splits rape off from sex. This exposes rape as, far from not sex, a heightened sex act. As MacKinnon says, "Rape is not less sexual for being violent. To the extent that coercion has become integral to male sexuality, rape may even be sexual to the degree that, and because, it is violent."⁸⁹

If a sex act is just an act done by men to women against women's will, then, as to do something to another against her will is just to violate her, a sex act is just an act in which men violate women. MacKinnon says, "From pornography one learns that forcible violation is the essence of sex. Whatever is and does that is sex.

make it necessary by resistance. Then amour-propre unites with desire, and the one triumphs in the victory that the other has made him win. From this arises attack and defence, the audacity of one sex and the timidity of the other, and finally the modesty and the shame with which nature armed the weak in order to enslave the strong." Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile, or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1979): 358.

⁸⁵ As MacKinnon says, "[T]he appearance of resistance . . . makes overcoming possible." MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 133.

⁸⁶ According to the traditional sexual script, the man pursues and the woman resists. See, for example: Heather L. Littleton and Danny Axsom, "Rape and Seduction Scripts of University Students: Implications for Rape Attributions and Unacknowledged Rape," *Sex Roles* 49, no. 9-10 (2003): 465-475; James V. Check and Neil M. Malamuth, "Sex Role Stereotyping and Reactions to Depictions of Stranger Versus Acquaintance Rape," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 45, no. 2 (1983): 344-356; and Stevi Jackson, "The Social Context of Rape: Sexual Scripts and Motivation," *Women's Studies International Quarterly* 1, no. 1 (1978): 27-38.

⁸⁷ MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 136.

⁸⁸ For a discussion of this distinction see *ibid.*, 173-174.

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, 173. Similarly, Dworkin says, "The reduction of human erotic potential to "sex," defined as the force of the penis visited on an unwilling woman, is the governing sexual scenario in male-supremacist society." Dworkin, *Pornography*, 55.

Everything else is secondary. Perhaps the reproductive act is considered sexual because it is considered an act of forcible violation and defilement of the female distinctively as such, not because it 'is' sex a priori."⁹⁰ Suggestive of this is that men find a "tight" vagina sexually desirable and a "loose" one sexually undesirable.⁹¹ The tighter it is, the more physically forcible sex can be, the looser, the less forcible. Thus, the more forcible sex feels to men, the more pleasurable sex is, which means the more sex sex is.

If a man is just a sexual being who desires dominance, then what men need to live is just what they need to live as sexual beings who desire dominance. This is the object of their sexual desire, their dominance. As sexuality is the process by which one gets the object of sexual desire, this means that men must organise sexuality to the end of getting dominance in order to exist. They do this through the process of sexual objectification. MacKinnon says, "Sexual objectification is the primary process of the subjection of women. It unites act with word, construction with expression, perception with enforcement, myth with reality. Man fucks woman; subject verb object."⁹² How the process of sexual objectification works is as follows.

Masculine qualities are seen as enabling objectivity, while feminine qualities are seen as precluding it.⁹³ That is, men, for being men, are thought to be capable of detachment, hence, of externality to the object of inquiry, hence, of objectivity. Women, for being women, are thought to be emotionally involved, "ruled by

⁹⁰ MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 140.

⁹¹ See Virginia Braun and Celia Kitzinger, "The Perfectible Vagina: Size Matters," *Culture, Health and Sexuality* 3, no. 3 (2001): 263-277. Demand for female genital cosmetic surgeries, one of which is performed to tighten the vagina, is said to be increasing. See Leonore Tiefer, "Female Genital Cosmetic Surgery: Freakish or Inevitable? Analysis of Medical Marketing, Bioethics, and Feminist Theory," *Feminism and Psychology* 18, no. 4 (2008): 466-479.

⁹² MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory," 541.

⁹³ See, for example: Kingsley R. Browne, "Women in Science: Biological Factors Should Not be Ignored," *Cardozo Women's Law Journal* 11 (2004): 509-528; Simon Baron-Cohen, *The Essential Difference: Men, Women and the Extreme Male Brain* (London: Allen Lane, 2003); and David C. Geary, *Male, Female: The Evolution of Human Sex Differences* (Washington, D.C: American Psychological Association, 1998).

subjective passions,”⁹⁴ hence, incapable of objectivity.⁹⁵ As masculine qualities are seen as enabling objectivity, while feminine qualities are seen as precluding it, men are seen as occupying the objective standpoint, while women are not.

Objectivity is considered the right way of knowing. MacKinnon says:

In the Western philosophical tradition, method has sought authority: how to produce an account of knowledge which is certain, which ends speculation and precludes scepticism, which has power that no one else can as powerfully contest. The search has been for an approach to the real on which to base arguments and conclusions that will make one's point of view unquestionable and unanswerable, immortal and definitive and the last word, regardless of time, place, or person. Its thrust has been to end diversity of viewpoint, so that there can be no valid disagreement over what knowing is right knowing. Its history is the history of an attempt to exert such power over reality as comes from methodological hegemony over the means of knowing, validating only those ways of proceeding which advance the project of producing what it regards as requisite certainty. Objectivity has been its answer, its standard, its holy grail.⁹⁶

As the right way of knowing is just the way of grasping the truth, this means that what is seen from the objective standpoint is considered just what is in truth. As Richard Rorty says, “In our culture, the notions of ‘science,’ ‘rationality,’ ‘objectivity,’ and ‘truth’ are bound up with one another. Science is thought of as offering ‘hard,’ ‘objective’ truth: truth as correspondence to reality, the only sort of truth worthy of the

⁹⁴ MacKinnon, “Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory,” 536.

⁹⁵ MacKinnon says, “Socially, men are considered objective, women subjective.” MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 97.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*, 106-107.

name.”⁹⁷ As men are seen as occupying the objective standpoint, their image of a woman is accepted as a woman as she is in truth. As it is so accepted, it is established in men and women’s minds as a woman as she is in truth,⁹⁸ reinforcing to men who they see a woman as being, and creating for women who they see themselves as being. Men’s image of a woman, construed as a reflection of a woman, becomes women’s self-image.⁹⁹ As it becomes their self-image, it becomes to women all of what they must become in order to become women, which is to say, in order to exist. For women, then, to cease to be this image is to cease to exist. Zoe Moss expresses this: “What, fat, forty-three, and I dare to think I’m still a person? No, I am an invisible lump.”¹⁰⁰

If men’s image of a woman becomes to women all of what they must become in order to exist, then women must know what that image is, in order to become it, in order to exist. Men’s image of a woman is what men see women as. So, in order to

⁹⁷ Richard Rorty, “Science as Solidarity,” in *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth: Philosophical Papers*, vol. 1 (Cambridge; New York; Port Chester; Melbourne; Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1991): 35.

⁹⁸ Empirical research indicates that people internalise gender roles. See, for example: Dario Cvencek, Andrew N. Meltzoff, and Anthony G. Greenwald, “Math-Gender Stereotyps in Elementary School Children,” *Child Development* 82, no. 3 (2011): 766-779; Mary E. Kite, Kay Deaux, and Elizabeth L. Haines, “Gender Stereotypes,” in *Psychology of Women: A Handbook of Issues and Theories*, ed. Florence L. Denmark and Michele A. Paludi (2008; 2nd ed., Westport, Connecticut: 2008): 205-236; Alice H. Eagly, Wendy Wood, and Amanda B. Diekmann, “Social Role Theory of Sex Differences and Similarities: A Current Appraisal,” in *The Developmental Social Psychology of Gender*, ed. Thomas Eckes and Hanns M. Trautner (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc., 2000): 123-174; Inge K. Broverman, Susan Raymond Vogel, Donald M. Broverman, Frank E. Clarkson, and Paul S. Rosenkrantz, “Sex-Role Stereotypes: A Current Appraisal,” *Journal of Social Issues* 28, no. 2 (1972): 59-78; and Paul Rosenkrantz, Susan Vogel, Helen Bee, Inge Broverman, and Donald M. Broverman, “Sex-Role Stereotypes and Self-Concepts in College Students,” *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* 32, no. 3 (1968): 287-295.

⁹⁹ As MacKinnon says, “Gender socialisation is . . . that process through which women internalise (make their own) a male image of their sexuality as their identity as women. It is not just an illusion.” MacKinnon, “Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory,” 531.

¹⁰⁰ Zoe Moss, “It Hurts to be Alive and Obsolete,” in *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement*, ed. Robin Morgan (New York: Random House, 1970): 170.

know what men's image of a woman is, women "watch themselves being looked at,"¹⁰¹ seeing how they are seen through male eyes. They observe what of themselves men look at, and do not, taking in what makes them be there to male eyes, and what is counter to that, which is what is to be fostered and what denied if women are to become men's image of woman, if women are to exist.¹⁰² This means that, looking at women, men make women know what women must become in order to exist.¹⁰³ Knowing what this is, women then become just that.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation; Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972): 47.

¹⁰² To me, Emily Dickinson's poem, "A Prison Gets to Be a Friend," beautifully captures this. She says:

A Prison gets to be a friend –
Between its Ponderous face
And Ours – a Kinsmanship express –
And in its narrow Eyes –

We come to look with gratitude
For the appointed Beam
It deal us – stated as Our food –
And hungered for – the same –

Men's look ensnares women and deprives them of self-determination, forcing them to become who men desire them as, and yet it becomes what women seek, what validates them, affirms their existence, sustains them, their food. Emily Dickinson, "A Prison Gets to Be a Friend," in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. Thomas H. Johnson (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1970): stanza 1-3.

¹⁰³ Sandra Bartky describes how men make women know what makes them be there to male eyes: "It is a fine spring day, and with an utter lack of self-consciousness, I am bouncing down the street. Suddenly I hear men's voices. Catcalls and whistles fill the air. These noises are clearly sexual in intent and they are meant for me; they come from across the street. I freeze. As Sartre would say, I have been petrified by the gaze of the Other. My face flushes and my motions become stiff and self-conscious. The body which only a moment before I inhabited with such ease now floods my consciousness. I have been made into an object. While it is true that for these men I am nothing but, let us say, a 'nice piece of ass,' there is more involved in this encounter than their mere fragmented perception of me. They could, after all, have enjoyed me in silence. Blissfully unaware, breasts

If women so become men's image of a woman, then what a woman is is just what that image is. Taking from de Beauvoir,¹⁰⁵ MacKinnon argues that men's image of a woman is one of just a feminine being. She says, "The discovery that the female archetype is the feminine stereotype exposed 'woman' as a social construction."¹⁰⁶ It might be objected that men's image of a woman is no longer one of a feminine being. But if we consider the attributes of a feminine being to be, as MacKinnon says, "docile, soft, passive, nurturant, vulnerable, weak, narcissistic, childlike, incompetent, masochistic, and domestic, made for child care, home care, and husband care,"¹⁰⁷ then we can see that this is not the case, for although women can perhaps be less docile, soft, passive, weak, vulnerable, childlike, incompetent, and so forth, while remaining women, women who are not these things, women who are truly assertive, aggressive, strong, invulnerable, independent, self-sufficient, worldly, ambitious, and so forth, are seen as men.¹⁰⁸ This means that for ceasing to be feminine beings, women cease to be seen as women, which means that men's image of woman is still just one of a feminine being.

If men's image of a woman is one of just a feminine being, then what a woman is is just what a feminine being is. On MacKinnon's view, a feminine being is just a sex object. That is, on her view, contemporary industrial society's version of

bouncing, eyes on the birds in the trees, I could have passed by without having been turned to stone. But I must be *made* to know that I am a "nice piece of ass". I must be made to see myself as they see me." Sandra Lee Bartky, "On Psychological Oppression," in *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (New York; London: Routledge, 1990): 27.

¹⁰⁴ Haslanger summarises this process thus: "The ideal of Woman is an externalisation of men's desire (so-called Woman's Nature is what men find desirable); this ideal is projected onto individual females and is regarded as intrinsic and essential to them. Accepting those attributions of Womanhood, individual women then internalise the norms appropriate to the ideal and aim to conform their behaviour to them." Sally Haslanger, "Ontology and Social Construction," *Philosophical Topics* 23, no. 2 (1995): 103.

¹⁰⁵ De Beauvoir says, "So not every female human being is necessarily a woman; she must take part in this mysterious and endangered reality known as femininity." De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 3.

¹⁰⁶ MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory," 530.

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *ibid.*

the feminine being is “docile, soft, passive, nurturant, vulnerable, weak, narcissistic, childlike, incompetent, masochistic, and domestic, made for child care, home care, and husband care.”¹⁰⁹ She argues that these qualities constitute sexual availability: “[V]ulnerability means the appearance/reality of easy sexual access; passivity means receptivity and disabled resistance, enforced by trained physical weakness; softness means pregnability by something hard. Incompetence seeks help as vulnerability seeks shelter, inviting the embrace that becomes the invasion, trading exclusive access for protection . . . from the same access.”¹¹⁰ She goes on, “Socially, femaleness means femininity, which means attractiveness to men, which means sexual attractiveness, which means sexual availability on male terms.”¹¹¹ That the qualities of a feminine being constitute sexual availability means that a feminine being is a sexually available being. To be sexually available is to be available for sexual use, which is to say, sexually usable, which is to say, sex object. In short, a feminine being is a sex object. Thus, a woman is just a sex object.¹¹² This is how the process of sexual objectification, which, on MacKinnon’s account, is that through which men organise sexuality to the end of getting dominance, works.

4. Does MacKinnon’s Theory of Sexuality Succeed?

At first glance, MacKinnon’s theory of sexuality appears to succeed. But in fact, it does not. It does not succeed because if a woman is a sex object, then men do not sexually desire dominance. To be a sex object is to be an object that has sex as its

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *ibid.* Ellipsis in the original.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*, 530-531.

¹¹² As women become men’s image of a woman, they make what men see a woman as what a woman objectively is, thereby confirming men’s objectivity, and so legitimating their epistemic authority. In legitimating men’s epistemic authority, they reinforce the credibility of what men say a woman is, such that they must accept that, and become it. Put simply, men’s epistemic authority enables men to make who women are, which legitimates their epistemic authority, which enables men to make who women are, which legitimates their epistemic authority, over and over again, with every cycle the truth of each, men’s epistemic authority and who women are, becoming more cemented, more a truth, less questionable.

function, which is to be an object that exists to be used for sex.¹¹³ Thus, a woman exists to be used for sex. As MacKinnon says, “Sex is what women are for.”¹¹⁴ If a woman exists to be used for sex, then having sex with a woman is using her for that for which she exists to be used. To use a thing for that for which it exists to be used is to treat it in a way that respects its nature, which is to treat it rightfully. Thus, sex is the rightful treatment of a woman. As Andrea Dworkin says, “The appropriate use of an object – called cunt, instrument, tool, or woman – can never cease to be appropriate if the use correctly uses the object’s nature and function.”¹¹⁵

If sex is the rightful treatment of a woman, then sex is precisely the opposite to what, on MacKinnon’s view, sex is. On MacKinnon’s view, a sex act is just an act in which men violate women. Rightful treatment is the opposite to violation. The rightful treatment of an object is the treatment of an object that respects its nature. The violation of an object is the treatment of an object that disrespects its nature. As such, it is the wrongful treatment of an object. It is not that MacKinnon does not see this; she does. She says:

From a feminist perspective, what exactly does *Playboy* do? It takes a woman and makes her sexuality into something any man who wants to can buy and hold in his hand for three dollars and fifty cents . . . She becomes something to be used by him, specifically, an object for his sexual use. Think of it this way. A cup is part of the object world, valued according to its looks and for how it can be used. If someone breaks it, maybe that is considered an abuse, or maybe it is briefly mourned and then replaced. But using it does not violate anything, because that is what it is for. *Playboy* as a standard means that to use a woman sexually does not violate her nature; it is what she is *for*.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ As MacKinnon says, “A sex object is defined on the basis of its looks, in terms of its usability for sexual pleasure.” MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, 173.

¹¹⁴ MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 181.

¹¹⁵ Dworkin, *Pornography*, 112.

¹¹⁶ MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 138.

Having sex with women is like using a cup to drink. Here, MacKinnon contradicts her view of sex as just an act in which men violate women. To put it another way, if a woman is a sex object, then women ontologically can only be willing to have sex; they cannot be unwilling. For a woman to express unwillingness would be for her to act in discordance with her nature. As Dworkin says, “[A]n assertion of will on her part – by definition, refusal – is a misrepresentation of her own sexual nature, which is fulfilled when she is sexually used by the male to satisfy him, especially in coitus.”¹¹⁷ This means that if women did express unwillingness to have sex, that is, if they did resist, their resistance would not be able to be seen as resistance.¹¹⁸ If women ontologically cannot be unwilling to have sex, then men cannot have sex with women against women’s will, which means that sex cannot be their violation of women.

As I have explained, if sex is not an act in which men violate women, then it is not an act in which men get dominance. As a sex act is just an act in which men satiate their sexual desire, if it is not an act in which men get dominance, then dominance is not what satiates men’s sexual desire, which means that it is not what men sexually desire. In short, if a woman is a sex object, then men do not sexually desire dominance.

If men do not sexually desire dominance, then they do not organise sexuality to the end of getting dominance. They might unintentionally organise it so that they get dominance, but they do not organise with the aim of, which is to say, to the end of, getting dominance. If it is the case that men unintentionally organise sexuality so that they get dominance, then sex hierarchy is not of the nature that feminism sees it

¹¹⁷ Dworkin, *Pornography*, 198.

¹¹⁸ Sarah Hoagland gives an example of this. “If officially slaves are subhuman and content with their lot and masters are acting in slaves’ best interests, then it follows that any resistance to the system is an abnormality or an indication of madness. Indeed, in recollecting the stories of her grandmother’s slave days, Annie Mae Hunt tells us that ‘if you run off, you was considered sick.’ That is to say, slaves existed in a conceptual framework where running away from slavery was generally perceived by masters and even at times by slaves as an indication, not of (healthy) resistance, but of mental imbalance.” Sarah Lucia Hoagland, *Lesbian Ethics: Toward New Value* (Palo Alto, California: Institute of Lesbian Studies, 1988): 42.

to be.¹¹⁹ That is, it is an unintended social arrangement, persisting accidentally, rather than by design. That men do not organise sexuality to the end of getting dominance means that they do not necessarily make sexuality that which organises the social world as sex hierarchy, which means that sexuality is not that which necessarily organises the social world hierarchically. MacKinnon's theory of sexuality does not succeed. Feminism is thus not yet a theory of the kind that marxism is, sex inequality not yet an injustice of its own.

I can foresee two objections to this argument. The first is that while women are on one level sex objects, they are on another, deeper down level, the level of truth, autonomous beings, such that, on that level, the sexual use of a woman can be the violation of her. But on MacKinnon's view, men's image of a woman wholly constructs who a woman is, such that a woman is nothing other than that image. As she says, "[M]ale power extends beneath the representation of reality to its construction: it makes women (as it were) and so verifies (makes true) who women 'are' in its view."¹²⁰ As, on her view, "Woman through male eyes is sex object," this means that a woman is just a sex object. She does not remain, beneath her sex objecthood, a person, in the sense of autonomous being.¹²¹ To argue that she does is a kind of wishful thinking.¹²²

The second objection is that, on MacKinnon's view, women are not sex objects prior to their sexual use, but only become so through being sexually used. If this is so, then women are not sex objects in the moment in which men have sex with them, which means that sex can be an act in which men violate women. But, as I have explained, on MacKinnon's view, it is through sexual objectification, which is the way that men, looking at women, construct them, not through sex, as in the act,

¹¹⁹ MacKinnon says that "male dominance is perhaps the most pervasive and tenacious system of power in history." MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 116.

¹²⁰ MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory," 539.

¹²¹ MacKinnon expresses this when she says, "If the reality of this damage is accepted, women are in fact not full people in the sense men are allowed to become." MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 103.

¹²² For MacKinnon's critique of idealism in feminist theory, see *ibid.*, pp. 50-51, and pp. 123-124.

that men make women sex objects. This means that, on MacKinnon's view, women are sex objects prior to their sexual use, which means that sex cannot be an act in which men violate women. On MacKinnon's view, the only sense in which women are not sex objects prior to their sexual use is that they are *as yet unrealised* sex objects. That is, if men see women as and thereby make them become sex objects, then, as the sexual use of a sex object is what realises it, the sexual use of a woman is what realises her. Thus, prior to their sexual use, women are as yet unrealised sex objects. But this does not mean that sex can be a violation of them. If the sexual use of a woman realises her, then it is treatment of her that fulfils her nature, which is the opposite to treatment that is violating, that goes against her nature. So, even though there is a sense in which women are not sex objects prior to their sexual use, sex still cannot be a violation of them.

But given how much MacKinnon's theory of sexuality explains, we should not hastily reject it. Indeed, it is not that MacKinnon's theory necessarily does not succeed. It is only if men do not sexually desire dominance that it does not. MacKinnon's argument that men sexually desire dominance is a convincing one. It is, for instance, consistent with the fact that men sexually desire women who are "hard to get," and do not those who are "easy."¹²³ A woman who is hard to get is one who resists men's sexual advances. If she resists, then for a man to have sex with her is for him to violate her, which is for him to get dominance over her. A woman who is easy is one who readily succumbs, which is to say, willingly accepts a man's sexual advances. If she willingly accepts his sexual advances, then for a man to have sex with her is not for him to violate her, thus, not for him to get dominance over her. So, men desire to have sex with women, where sex is an act in which they get dominance over women, which means that dominance is the object of male sexual desire.

But if it is true that men sexually desire dominance, then it cannot be true that a woman is a sex object. I think there is reason to doubt that a woman is a sex object. This is it: for a woman to be considered sexually promiscuous is for her to be

¹²³ "According to folklore, the woman who is hard to get is a more desirable catch than the woman who is too eager for an alliance." Elaine Walster, "Playing Hard to Get": Understanding an Elusive Phenomenon," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 26, no. 1 (1973): 113.

considered a whore.¹²⁴ To be sexually promiscuous is to readily have sex, which is to be available for sex, which is to be available for sexual use, which is to be sexually usable, which is to be a sex object. Socially, the worst thing that a woman can be is a whore: “Young Girls are taught to hate a *Whore*, before they know what the Word means.”¹²⁵ The worst thing that a woman can be is what it is most not in accordance with the nature of a woman to be. For a woman to be most not in accordance with the nature of a woman is for her to be most not what a woman *is*. In short, for a woman to be considered a sex object is for her to be considered most not a woman. This suggests that men’s image of a woman is not one of a sex object, in which case, if, as MacKinnon argues, that image makes who a woman is, a woman is not a sex object.

If MacKinnon’s argument that men sexually desire dominance is a convincing one, and if there is reason to doubt that men’s image of a woman is a sex object, then before abandoning MacKinnon’s theory of sexuality, we ought to reconsider whether men’s image of a woman is in fact one of a sex object.

¹²⁴ “The following activities are generally subsumed under whore dishonour by straight society, i.e., society identified as legitimate . . . engaging in sex with many partners.” Gail Pheterson, “The Whore Stigma: Female Dishonour and Male Unworthiness,” *Social Text*, no. 37 (Winter 1993): 46.

¹²⁵ Bernard Mandeville, “A Modest Defence of Public Stews: Or, an Essay upon Whoring,” in *Women in the Eighteenth Century*, ed. Jones, 65.

IV. What Is a Woman?

In the past, a woman was snatched from her childhood universe and thrown into her life as a wife by a real or simulated rape; this was an act of violence that changed the girl into a woman: it is also referred to as “ravishing” a girl’s virginity, or “taking” her flower.

– Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*.

The notion that men see and treat women as sex objects is central to feminist theory. MacKinnon, as we have seen, takes this notion a little further, or, rather, to its logical conclusion, arguing that if men have epistemic authority, while women do not, such that men’s image of a woman makes who a woman is, then men do not merely see and treat women as sex objects, they make women become, and so women are in fact, sex objects.

This notion, that men see and treat women as sex objects, derives from feminist observations and analyses of the treatment of women in social reality, including men’s use of women in prostitution,¹ the prevalence of men’s sexual assault of women,² men’s general day to day sexual harassment of women,³ the

¹ See, for example, Sheila Jeffreys, *The Industrial Vagina: The Political Economy of the Global Sex Trade* (London; New York: Routledge, 2009); Melissa Farley, *Prostitution and Trafficking in Nevada: Making the Connections* (San Francisco: Prostitution Research and Education, 2007); Christine Stark and Rebecca Whisnant, eds., *Not for Sale: Feminists Resisting Prostitution and Pornography* (North Melbourne, Victoria: Spinifex Press, 2004); and Kathleen Barry, *Female Sexual Slavery* (1979; repr., New York; London: New York University Press, 1984).

² See, for example, Abrahams et al., “Worldwide Prevalence of non-Partner Sexual Violence,” 1648-1654.

³ See, for example: Paula McDonald, “Workplace Sexual Harassment 30 Years on: A Review of the Literature,” *International Journal of Management Reviews* 14 (2012): 1-17; Louise F. Fitzgerald, “Sexual Harassment: Violence Against Women in the Workplace,” *American Psychologist* 48, no. 10 (1993): 1070-1076; and Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Sexual Harassment of Working Women: A Case of Working Women* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1979).

historical legal unrapeability of women by their husbands,⁴ the value men place on sexual desirability in women, indeed, the commensurability of sexual desirability with worth, and the depiction of women in film, literature, advertising, and pornography.⁵ These observations and analyses do seem to suggest that women are seen and treated as ontologically for sex. For instance, in order for men to use women in prostitution, they must conceive of women as able to be bought and sexually used. The prevalence of men's sexual assault of women indicates that men see women not as not sexual beings of their own, but as beings for men to sexually use, for men to have sex with whether women want to or not. The value men place on sexual desirability in women suggests that men see women's function as arousing and satiating their sexual desire.

But other feminist observations contradict, although feminists are yet to perceive this, the notion that men see and treat women as sex objects, hence MacKinnon's claim that a woman is a sex object, most particularly the observation that men consider a woman who is sexually promiscuous a whore, but also, I think, the value men place on virginity in women, and the legal recognition that sex with a woman who has not consented is a violation of her, as in, the crime of rape. In short, while some feminist observations do suggest that men see women as sex objects, others contradict this.

Given that MacKinnon's claim that men sexually desire dominance is convincing, and given that we have reason, in the form of these observations, to question her claim that men's image of a woman is one of a sex object, I think we ought to consider whether men's image of a woman is in fact one of a sex object. In this chapter, this is what I do. I begin by pursuing the observation that men consider

⁴ See, for example: Durán, Moya, Megías, and Viki, "Social Perceptions of Rape victims in Dating and Married Relationships," 505-519; Hasday, "Contest and Consent," 1373-1505; Kirkwood and Cecil, "Marital Rape," 1234-1253; and Russell, *Rape in Marriage*.

⁵ See, for example: Julie M. Stankiewicz and Francine Rosselli, "Women as Sex Objects and Victims in Print Advertisement," *Sex Roles* 58, no. 7 (2008): 579-589; Katharina Lindner, "Images of Women in General Interest and Fashion Magazine Advertisements from 1955 to 2002," *Sex Roles* 51, no. 7 (2004): 409-421; Nussbaum, "Objectification," 249-291; and Jill Hicks Ferguson, Peggy J. Kreshel and Spencer F. Tinkham, "In the Pages of Ms.: Sex Role Portrayals of Women in Advertising," *Journal of Advertising* 19, no. 1 (1990): 40-51.

a woman who is sexually promiscuous a whore. Through doing this, I arrive at an alternative view of what men's image of a woman is, and thus an alternative conception of what a woman is. I then show that this conception of a woman reconciles apparently opposing feminist views.

1. What Is Men's Image of a Woman?

As I have said, I think there is reason to doubt that men's image of a woman is one of a sex object. This is it: men consider a woman who is sexually promiscuous a whore. To be sexually promiscuous is to readily have sex, which is to be available for sex, which is to be available for sexual use, which is to be sexually usable, which is to be a sex object. So, men consider a woman who is a sex object a whore. Socially, the worst thing that a woman can be is a whore. The worst thing that a woman can be is what it is most not in accordance with the nature of a woman to be. For a woman to be most not in accordance with the nature of a woman is for her to be most not what a woman *is*. In short, men consider a woman who is a sex object most not a woman.

So, what then might men's image of a woman be? As the fact that men consider a woman who is sexually promiscuous a whore implies, they consider a woman who has sexual relations with only few men a model woman.⁶ As the phrases used to describe these women, phrases such as "hard to get" and "unattainable," suggest, a woman who has sexual relations with only few men is seen as not available for sex, which is to say, not available for sexual use, which is to say, not sexually usable. So, men consider a woman who is sexually unusable a model woman. This means that men consider sexual unusability the quality that is constitutive of a woman.

But this is only half of the story, for men see a woman as becoming a woman by losing her virginity, as in, "he made a woman of her." This is why they see a

⁶ Feminists have referred to this as the Madonna/whore dichotomy. See Carol Tavris and Carole Wade, *The Longest War: Sex Differences in Perspective* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977).

woman who remains virginal – an “old maid” or “spinster” – as having failed to become a woman.⁷ Sylvia Plath expresses this:

Freely become the sun’s bride, the latter
Grows quick with seed.
Grass-couched in her labour’s pride,
She bears a king. Turned bitter

And sallow as any lemon,
The other, wry virgin to the last,
Goes graveward with flesh laid to waste,
Worm-husbanded, yet no woman;

Inscribed above her head, these lines:

⁷ For a discussion of the spinster as one who has failed to become a woman, see, for example: Deborah J. Mustard, “Spinsters: An Evolving Stereotype Revealed Through Film,” *Journal of Media Psychology* 4 (Winter 2000): 1-9; Maroula Joannou, “Nothing is Impracticable for a Single, Middle-Aged Woman with an Income of her Own’: The Spinster in Women’s Fiction of the 1920s,” in *This Working-Day World: Women’s Lives and Culture(s) in Britain 1914-1945*, ed. Sybil Oldfield (London: Taylor and Francis, 1994): 175-191; and Alison Orom, “Repressed and Thwarted, or Bearer of the new World? The Spinster in Inter-War Feminist Discourses,” *Women’s History Review* 1, no. 3 (1992): 413-433.

It might be objected that a spinster is not a woman who remains virginal, but a woman who has not married, in which case it is not because she is virginal that she is seen to have failed to become a woman. But as its synonymity with “old maid,” a variant of “maiden,” which means virgin, suggests, a spinster is just an older woman who is virginal. An older woman who has never married has been seen as a spinster only because, as it has been socially unacceptable for women to have sex prior to marrying, that she has not married has meant that she is virginal. For a discussion of the spinster as a woman who remains virginal, see, for example: Naomi Braun Rosenthal, *Spinster Tales and Womanly Possibilities* (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 2002): 11; and Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880-1930* (North Melbourne, Victoria: Spinifex Press, 1997): 175. This explains why women who have not married but have been prostitutes have not been considered spinsters. See Micaela di Leonardo, “Warrior Virgins and Boston Marriages: Spinsterhood in History and Culture,” *Feminist Issues*, 5, no. 2 (Fall 1985): 48.

While flowering, ladies, scant love not
Lest all your fruit
Be but this black outcrop of stones.⁸

On the one hand, then, men consider sexual unusability the quality that is constitutive of a woman, but on the other, they see the loss of her virginity as what makes her become a woman. This appears contradictory – if the loss of her virginity is seen as what makes a woman become a woman, then it seems that sexual unusability cannot be considered the quality that is constitutive of a woman.

In fact, it can. If men see the loss of her virginity as what makes a woman become a woman, then they consider sexual unusability the quality that is constitutive of a woman, but *only inasmuch as it is the quality that enables her to be had sex with*. That is, the claim that men see the loss of her virginity as what makes a woman become a woman does not negate the claim that they consider sexual unusability the quality that is constitutive of a woman. Rather, it qualifies it. So, men consider sexual unusability the quality that is constitutive of a woman, but only to the extent that it enables her to be had sex with, and thereby lose her virginity. Sexual usability is the quality that enables one to be had sex with. So, men consider sexual unusability the quality that is constitutive of a woman, but only inasmuch as it is sexual usability.

Sexual unusability that is sexual usability is sexual violability. That is, if sexual unusability is sexual usability, then one's inability to be sexually used is not one's inability to be sexually used but one's ability to be used for that for which one is unusable. The ability to be used for that for which one is unusable is the ability to be violated. Thus, sexual unusability that is sexual usability is sexual violability. If men consider sexual unusability the quality that is constitutive of a woman only inasmuch as it is sexual usability, then they consider sexual violability the quality that is constitutive of a woman. This reveals men's image of a woman as not one of a sex object, but one of just a sexually violable being. As men's image of a woman makes

⁸ Sylvia Plath, "Two Sisters of Persephone," in *Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (London; Boston: Faber and Faber, 1981): stanza 6-8.

who a woman is, this means that a woman is just a sexually violable being. Contra her account of what a woman is, MacKinnon seems to recognise this, saying, “Women are not inviolable. Women’s sexuality is not only violable, it is – hence, women are – seen in and as their violation.”⁹ That a woman is just a sexually violable being is suggested by the fact that for a man to have sex with a virginal woman is for him to *defile* her. To defile means to *violate* the chastity of.¹⁰ As for a man to have sex with a woman is for him to make a woman of her, this means that for a man to have sex with a woman, where sex is an act in which he violates her, is for him to make a woman of her. As we have seen, MacKinnon sometimes describes women as sex objects and other times as sexually violable beings. This interchanging of terms suggests that she sees these conditions as synonymous. But they are not synonymous; they are antithetical. A sex object exists to be sexually used. It exists to be had sex with, where sex is simply the use of it for what it is for. A sexually violable being does not exist to be sexually used, it exists to be sexually violated. It exists to be had sex with, where sex is the violation of it, which is quite the opposite to the use of it for what it is to be used for, is the misuse, the abuse, of it.¹¹

This conception of a woman explains, and in a way that the conception of a woman as a sex object does not and cannot, why men place the value that they do on virginity in women, why virginity is integral to, even constitutive of, model womanhood.¹² Of course, feminists have perceived the integrality of virginity to model womanhood. But, perhaps excepting de Beauvoir and Dworkin, they have not seriously analysed this. Certainly, their analysis of this has not been proportionate to

⁹ MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 191. Elsewhere, she says, “Feminine means violable.” MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, 118.

¹⁰ That to defile is specifically to violate is suggested by the fact that, in defiling a woman, a man is thought to break her hymen. That he breaks her hymen indicates that his sexual penetration of her was physically forcible, which indicates that it was a violation.

¹¹ I think there is an explanation for MacKinnon’s interchanging of terms. This explanation will emerge in the next chapter.

¹² As Wetenhall Wilkes says, “Chastity is so essential and natural . . . that every declination from it is a proportionable receding from womanhood.”¹² Wetenhall Wilkes, “A Letter of Genteel and Moral Advice to a Young Lady” in *Women in the Eighteenth Century: Constructions of Femininity*, ed. Vivien Jones (London; New York: Routledge, 2006): 30.

its role in men's oppression of women. They have not asked why this is, what it is that the possession of virginity implies about a woman, what quality it denotes, such that that possession is synonymous with model womanhood. I think what it implies is that a woman is sexually violable. For a woman to have virginity is for her to not have had sex, for her to be sexually unused. So, the possession of virginity appears to indicate that a woman is sexually unwilling, which is to say, sexually unusable.¹³ It might be thought that this does not fit with the conception of a woman as just a sexually violable being. Indeed, it does not, but that is only because it is not altogether correct to say that virginity is integral to model womanhood, for, if it is integral, so too is its loss. While a woman must remain virginal in order to remain a model woman, she must also, at a certain point, lose her virginity. If she does not, then she ceases to be a model woman, becoming instead a spinster. As de Beauvoir perceives,

But virginity only has this sexual attraction when allied with youth; otherwise, its mystery reverts to disquiet. Many men today are sexually repulsed by older virgins; psychological reasons alone do not explain why "old maids" are regarded as bitter and mean matrons. The curse is in their very flesh, this flesh that is object for no subject, that no desire has made desirable, that has bloomed and wilted without finding a place in the world of men; turned away from her destination, the old maid becomes an eccentric object, as troubling as the incommunicable

¹³ Suggestive of this, in Chaucer's poem, "The Physician's Tale," Virginia, who, as her name suggests, epitomises virginity, "So kepte herself hir neded no maistresse."¹³ In other words, for guarding herself against men's sexual advances, for making herself sexually unavailable, she is the epitome of virginity. Chaucer, "The Physician's Tale," 106. For a discussion of virginity in this poem, see R. Howard Bloch, "Chaucer's Maiden's Head: 'The Physician's Tale' and the Poetics of Virginity," *Representations*, no. 28 (Autumn 1989): 113-134.

Moreover, St. Jerome says that "virginity may be lost even by a thought," meaning, in the act of sexually desiring, one ceases to be virginal. If one sexually desires, then one is willing to have sex. Thus, if one is willing to have sex, then one is not truly virginal. Jerome, Letter 22, in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, vol. 6, 2nd ser., ed. Phillip Schaff and Henry Wace (Michigan: Grand Rapids, 1961): 5-6.

thinking of a madman. Of a forty-year-old, still beautiful, woman presumed to be a virgin, I heard a man say with great vulgarity: "It's full of cobwebs in there . . ."14

So, what virginity, insofar as it is integral to model womanhood, indicates is not sexual unusability but sexual violability, an unusability that is that only to the extent that it enables a man to have sex with her against her will.

2. Reconciling Feminist Views

This conception of a woman, I think, may allow, where MacKinnon's conception of a woman does not, feminists with apparently irreconcilable views, on the one hand, those who view women as not having sexual autonomy,¹⁵ and on the other, those who view women as having at least a degree of it,¹⁶ to speak to each other.

On MacKinnon's conception of a woman as a sex object, a woman does not have sexual autonomy. To be a sex object is to be an object that is for sexual use. An object that is for sexual use does not have control over its sexual use. Thus, it does not have sexual autonomy. But on the conception I have given, there is a sense

¹⁴ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 179. Ellipsis in the original.

¹⁵ See, for example: Miranda Kiraly and Meagan Tyler, eds., *Freedom Fallacy: The Limits of Liberal Feminism* (Ballarat, Victoria: Connor Court Publishing, 2015); Rowland and Klein, "Radical Feminism," 9-36; Dorchon Leidholdt and Janice G. Raymond, eds., *The Sexual Liberals and the Attack on Feminism* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1990); and Dworkin, *Pornography*.

¹⁶ See, for example: Rosalind Gill and Christina Scharff, *New Femininities: Feminism, Neoliberalism and Subjectivity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2011); Rosalind Gill, "Empowerment/Sexism: figuring Female Sexual Agency in Contemporary Advertising," *Feminism and Psychology* 18, no. 1 (2008): 35-60; Feona Attwood, "Sluts and Riot Grrrls: Female Identity and Sexual Agency," *Journal of Gender Studies* 16, no. 3 (2007): 233-247; Linda LeMoncheck, *Loose Women, Lecherous Men: A Feminist Philosophy of Sex* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Kathryn Abrams, "Sex Wars Redux: Agency and Coercion in Feminist Legal Theory," *Columbia law Review* (1995): 304-376; Lisa Duggan, Nan D. Hunter and Carole S. Vance, "False Promises: Feminist Anti-Pornography Legislation," *New York Law School Law Review* 38 (1993): 133-163; Vance, "Pleasure and Danger," 1-28; and Dubois and Gordon, "Seeking Ecstasy on the Battlefield: Danger and Pleasure in Nineteenth-Century Feminist Sexual Thought," 7-25.

in which women do have sexual autonomy. If a woman is a sexually violable being, then she exists to be sexually violated, which means that she exists to be had sex with against her will. If she exists to be had sex with against her will, then she must have sexual autonomy. If she did not, then she would be subject to the will of another, and as such unable to be unwilling, hence, unable to be had sex with against her will. As Rae Langton says, “Reflection suggests that someone violating autonomy not only can at the same time affirm autonomy but must affirm it, when violation is deliberate: autonomy violation is not just compatible with autonomy attribution, but requires it, the one autonomy denial (violation) depending on the absence of the other (non-attribution). Deliberate violation of someone’s choice presupposes attribution of a capacity for choice.”¹⁷

But this sexual autonomy is not true sexual autonomy. If it were, then she would have control over sexual access to her, and so could genuinely refuse a man’s sexual advances, meaning, could refuse a man’s sexual advances, where that refusal would have to be respected. If she could do this, she would be *not to be* violated, rather than *to be* violated. She would be ontologically not sexually violable but sexually inviolable. Rather, this sexual autonomy is limited to her sexual violability. If a woman exists to be had sex with against her will, then she can only resist a man’s sexual advances, and she can only do this so that he can have sex with her against her will.¹⁸ As Havelock Ellis says: “[T]he primary part of the female in

¹⁷ Rae Langton, “Feminism in Philosophy,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Analytic Philosophy*, ed. Frank Jackson and Michael Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005): 249. Similarly, Lina Papadaki says, “[V]iolation implies that there is some autonomy to be violated.” Papadaki, “What is Objectification?,” 21.

¹⁸ Pamela, the protagonist of Henry Richardson’s novel, *Pamela: Or, Virtue Rewarded*, who is, indicatively, a portrayal of the model woman, exemplifies this. She continually resists Mr B.’s sexual advances, saying things like, “I dread of all things to be seduced, and would rather lose my Life than my Honesty,” but cannot finally refuse them. Samuel Richardson, *Pamela: Or, Virtue Rewarded*, ed. T. C. Duncan Eaves and Ben D. Kimpel (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, [1740] 1971): 112. Her resistance can function only to enable him to overcome her will, as suggested when she says, “I know, Sir, by woful Experience, that I am in your Power: I know all the Resistance I can make will be poor and weak, and perhaps stand me in little stead: I dread your Will to ruin me is as great as your Power: Yet, Sir, will I dare to tell you, that I will make no Free-will Offering of my Virtue. All that I can

courtship is the playful, yet serious, assumption of the role of a hunted animal who lures on the pursuer, not with the object of escaping, but with the object of being finally caught.”¹⁹ This explains why a woman’s refusal to have sex with a man is often seen as disingenuous, as in fact not a refusal but consent. Because a woman can resist a man’s sexual advances only so that he can have sex with her against her will, her refusal is ontologically not a refusal, but a refusal *to be overcome*. Suggestive of this is that, in refusing, a woman is seen as “playing hard to get,” which means playing hard to get not in order to not be gotten, but in order to be gotten. If a woman’s refusal is a refusal to be overcome, then it is ultimately not a refusal, but consent to violation, consent to sex. So, Lord Byron writes in *Don Juan*,

A little still she strove, and much repented,
And whispering ‘I will ne’er consent’ – consented.²⁰

This means that she can exercise her sexual autonomy only in such a way that a man can sexually violate her. Her sexual autonomy is thus limited to her sexual violability. If this is so, then she has sexual autonomy only to the degree that she can be deprived of it, in which case she ultimately does not have it. So, while there is a sense in which the claim that women do have sexual autonomy has truth, it has it only in the context of its greater untruth.

This explains, and again what the conception of a woman as a sex object does not and cannot, why, according to the law, sex with a woman who has not consented is a violation – that of rape – of her. If a woman is a sex object, then sex is ontologically the rightful treatment of a woman. It thus cannot be the violation of a woman. In other words, if a woman is a sex object, then she ontologically cannot be

do, poor as it is, I will do, to convince you, that your Offers shall have no part in my Choice . . . and then I can safely appeal to the great God . . . with this Consolation, That my Will bore no Part in my Violation.” *ibid.*, 166.

¹⁹ Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, vol. 1 (New York: Random House, 1936): 68-69.

²⁰ Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, ed. Leslie A. Marchand (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1958): Canto I, stanza CXVII.

raped. It might be objected that, as a matter of reality, sex with a woman who has not consented is not considered a violation of her, that is, that a man is often found not to have raped a woman even if she had not consented.²¹ But he is found not to have raped her not in spite of the fact that she did not consent but only because she is seen as having consented. To be clear, I am not saying that it is because she in truth consented, just that she is *thought* to have done so. MacKinnon observes this, saying, “Rapists typically believe the woman loved it. ‘Probably the single most used cry of rapist to victim is ‘You bitch . . . slut . . . you know you want it. You all want it’ and afterward, ‘there now, you really enjoyed it, didn’t you?’”²² She goes on, “Men’s pervasive belief that women fabricate rape charges after consenting to sex makes sense in this light. To them, the accusations are false because, to them, the facts describe sex.”²³ If a man is found not to have raped a woman only because she is seen as having consented, then he would be found to have raped her if she were seen to have not consented. Thus, as a matter of reality, sex with a woman who has not consented is considered a violation of her. So, the conception of a woman as a sex object is incompatible with the legal recognition that sex with a woman who has not consented is a violation of her.

But if a woman is a sexually violable being, then sex with her without her consent must be recognised as a violation of her. This is because if a woman is a sexually violable being, then she must have sexual autonomy, and in order for her to have sexual autonomy, to be sexually subject to her own will, sex with her without her consent must be recognised as a violation of her. If it were not, if a woman’s consent to sex were not considered necessary to sex being the rightful rather than wrongful treatment of her, then a woman would not have sexual autonomy, she

²¹ Evidence given for this claim would be the low rate at which rape is convicted. See, for example: Jane Kim, “Taking Rape Seriously: Rape as Slavery,” *Harvard Journal of Law and Gender* 35 (2012): 263-310; Heather D. Flowe, Sophia E. Shaw, Ellen Nye, and Joanna Jamel, “Rape Stereotyping and Public Delusion,” *British Journalism Review* 20, no. 4 (2009): 21-25; and Susan Caringella, *Addressing Rape Reform in Law and Practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

²² MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 181. See generally the chapter in which this appears: “Rape: On Coercion and Consent,” in *ibid.*, 171-183.

²³ *ibid.*, 181.

would be sexually at the disposal of others, able to be had sex with whether she wanted to have sex or not, and so not sexually violable.

This, interestingly, creates for feminism the kind of account of consent, meaning, a woman's ownership, so to speak, of her sexual being, that marxism has of free labour, meaning, of a person's ownership of his labour-power. While the recognition that a person owns his capacity for labour, that it belongs to him, and the ensuing transformation of a person from slave labourer into free labourer appears a moment of progress, of exploitation and hierarchy ended and freedom and equality created, Marx perceives it otherwise. He argues that the capitalist can only continually make a profit if the worker owns his labour-power, and that it is so that he can do this, continually make a profit, that this transformation occurs. He says, "For the transformation of money into capital, therefore, the owner of money must find the free worker available on the commodity-market; and this worker must be free in the double sense that as a free individual he can dispose of his labour-power as his own commodity, and that, on the other hand, he has no other commodity for sale, i.e. he is rid of them, he is free of all the objects needed for is the realisation of his labour-power."²⁴ Marx thus theoretically turns this recognition that a person owns his capacity for labour, and ensuing transformation of a person from slave labourer to free labourer upside down, revealing it as a moment in the perpetuation of exploitation and class hierarchy.

But feminism has had no similar account of consent, meaning, no account of the legal recognition that sex with an unconsenting woman is a violation of her as anything other than a moment of progress. Incidentally, this is indicative of a broader failure by feminism, a failure to see and theorise history other than how liberalism does.²⁵ This is to be expected of liberal feminism, but not of a feminist theory, such

²⁴ Marx, *Capital*, 272.

²⁵ When I read Reva Siegel's essay, "The Rule of Love: Wife Beating as Prerogative and Privacy," it stood out to me as a rare example of feminist work which does not do this, which does not see history through a liberal lens, which does not accept what might look like progress as in fact progress, and instead considers how it might participate in perpetuating an injustice. She argues that "[w]hen the legitimacy of a status regime is successfully contested, lawmakers and jurists will both cede and defend status privileges – gradually relinquishing the original rules and justificatory rhetoric

as radical feminism, which has been so critical of liberalism.²⁶ But the conception of a woman as a sexually violable being gives feminism such an account of consent, enabling it to explain this, the legal recognition that sex with an unconsenting woman is a violation of her, which is to say, the legal recognition that a woman owns her sexual being, just as Marx explained the recognition that a person owns her labour power, as necessary to her sexual violability, which is necessary to men's getting power, as thus not an erosion of sex hierarchy, proof that it is receding, but as a preservation, a reinvigoration, of it. More broadly, this account makes it possible for feminism to challenge the ubiquitous belief that things are all the time getting better for women, a belief which has delegitimised feminism, and so made it hard for it to get itself taken seriously.

Perhaps feminists who see women as having sexual autonomy will feel dissatisfied with this account of a woman, as it still refutes that women have sexual autonomy. But at the very least this account makes sense of the existence of two apparently contradictory views, that women do not have sexual autonomy, and that they do, revealing them as, far from mutually exclusive, in fact halves of the whole, women's autonomy part of how they have violability, and so do not have autonomy, or, as MacKinnon says, "women's so-called power[,] the other side of female powerlessness."²⁷ It thus moves feminists toward shared ground.

of the contested regime and finding new rules and reasons to protect such status privileges as they choose to defend. Thus, civil rights reform can breathe new life into a body of status law, by pressuring legal elites to translate it into a more contemporary, and less controversial, social idiom." Siegel terms this process "preservation through transformation." In this essay, she illustrates this process "in a case study of domestic assault law as it evolved in rule structure and rationale from a law of marital prerogative to a law of marital privacy." Reva B. Siegel, "'The Rule of Love': Wife Beating as Prerogative and Privacy," *Yale Law Journal* 105 (1995-1996): 2119. See generally pp. 2117-2206.

²⁶ See, for example: Kiraly and Tyler, eds., *Freedom Fallacy*; Leidholdt and Raymond, eds., *The Sexual Liberals and the Attack on Feminism*; and MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 39-47.

²⁷ MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 94.

V. Is Feminism Yet a Theory of the Kind That Marxism Is?: A Second Attempt

In the third chapter, I showed that MacKinnon's theory of sexuality does not succeed. This is not for any of the reasons for which others have rejected it, but, surprisingly, because her claim, which is one that is central to feminism – that a woman is a sex object – undermines her claim that men sexually desire dominance. If men do not sexually desire dominance, then they do not organise it to the end of getting dominance. This means that they do not necessarily make sexuality that which organises the social world as sex hierarchy, which means that sexuality is not that which necessarily organises the social world hierarchically. But, in the fourth chapter, I showed that a woman is in fact not a sex object; she is instead just a sexually violable being. As it is only if a woman is a sex object that men do not sexually desire dominance and MacKinnon's theory of sexuality does not succeed, it is possible that, on this alternative conception of a woman, MacKinnon's theory does in fact succeed. So, let us see whether this is case. I begin by considering whether this conception is consistent with MacKinnon's claim that men sexually desire dominance. I then consider whether it enables MacKinnon's theory of sexuality to succeed.

1. Is This Conception Consistent with Men Sexually Desiring Dominance?

If a woman is just a sexually violable being, then sex is necessarily an act in which a man violates a woman. To be a sexually violable being is just to be a being that has sexual violation as its function, which is just to be a being that exists to be violated by sex. If a woman is just a being that exists to be violated by sex, then sex is ontologically the violation of a woman. If sex is not the violation of her, then either she must not be a woman, or sex must not be sex. If sex is necessarily an act in which a man violates a woman, then, as I have explained, it is necessarily an act in which men get dominance.

If sex is necessarily an act in which men get dominance, then men do sexually desire dominance. Let us recall that as men have epistemic authority, they define the erotic. In defining it, they make people learn that definition of erotic as what erotic is.

They thereby make what the erotic is. As a sex act is just an act in which one gets what is to one erotic, by making what the erotic is, men make what a sex act is. They define the erotic as what they experience it as, so that the erotic is just what they experience as erotic. A sex act, then, is just an act in which they get what they experience as erotic. So, if sex is necessarily an act in which men get dominance, then men must find dominance erotic, in other words, must sexually desire dominance. This conception of a woman is perfectly consistent with MacKinnon's claim that men sexually desire dominance.

2. Does This Conception Enable MacKinnon's Theory of Sexuality to Succeed?

As it is only if men do not sexually desire dominance that MacKinnon's theory of sexuality does not succeed, and as, if a woman is a sexually violable being, then men do sexually desire dominance, it is possible that this conception of a woman enables MacKinnon's theory to succeed. So, let us return to MacKinnon's theory, and see whether, on this conception, it succeeds.

On MacKinnon's account, as men have epistemic authority while women do not, men's image of a man is socially accepted as what a man is in truth, such that men become that image in order to become men, which is to say, in order to exist. If men so become that image, then what a man is is just what that image is. On MacKinnon's view, that image is one of just a masculine being, and a masculine being is just a sexual being who desires dominance. So, a man is just a sexual being who desires dominance. This means that what men need to live is just what they need to live as sexual beings who desire dominance. This is the object of their sexual desire, their dominance. As sexuality is the process by which one gets the object of sexual desire, this means that men must organise sexuality to the end of getting dominance in order to exist.

On MacKinnon's account, men organise sexuality to the end of getting dominance through the process of sexual objectification. Sexual objectification has

been understood as the perception or treatment of women as sex objects.¹ But, for MacKinnon, sexual objectification is neither the perception nor the treatment of women as sex objects. Rather, it is the process by which men's image of a woman creates who a woman is. MacKinnon expresses this when she says, "Sexual objectification . . . unites act with word, construction with expression, perception with enforcement, myth with reality."² And she reinforces it when she says,

Feminism . . . has a theory of power: sexuality is gendered as gender is sexualised. Male and female are created through the erotisation [*sic*] of dominance and submission. The man/woman difference and the dominance/submission dynamic define each other. This is the social meaning of sex and the distinctively feminist account of gender inequality. Sexual objectification, the central process within this dynamic is at once epistemological and political. The feminist theory of knowledge is inextricable from the feminist critique of power because the male point of view forces itself upon the world as its way of apprehending it.

The perspective from the male standpoint enforces woman's definition, encircles her body, circumlocutes her speech, and describes her life. The male perspective is systemic and hegemonic. The content of the signification "woman" is the content of women's lives. Each sex has its role, but their stakes and power are not equal. If the sexes are unequal, and perspective participates in situation, there is no ungendered reality or ungendered perspective. And they are connected. In this context, objectivity – the nonsituated, universal standpoint, whether claimed or aspired to – is a denial of the existence or potency of sex inequality that tacitly participates in constructing reality from the dominant point of view. Objectivity, as the epistemological stance of which objectification is the social process,

¹ See, for example, Nussbaum, "Objectification," 249-291; and Papadaki, "What is Objectification?," 16-36.

² MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory," 541.

creates the reality it apprehends by defining as knowledge the reality it creates through its way of apprehending it.³

Here, MacKinnon is claiming that as men occupy the objective standpoint, what they see a woman as is taken to be what a woman is (“[t]he perspective from the male standpoint enforces woman’s definition”), and, for being so taken, makes what a woman is (“creates the reality it apprehends by defining as knowledge the reality it creates through its way of apprehending it”), and she is defining this process as sexual objectification (“[o]bjectivity, as the epistemological stance of which objectification is the social process”).

But if sexual objectification is the process by which men’s image of a woman creates who a woman is, why does MacKinnon term it “sexual”? In other words, what about this process is sexual? The answer to this is that, on MacKinnon’s view, men’s image of a woman is just what men sexually desire a woman to be, such that objectification is itself necessarily sexual. That is, MacKinnon argues that men’s image of a woman is one of just a feminine being. She then argues that the feminine being corresponds to the sexually desirable woman to men. What is feminine is what men find sexually desirable in women. She says, for example, “Specifically, ‘woman’ is defined by what male desire requires for arousal and satisfaction and is socially tautologous with ‘female sexuality’ and ‘the female sex.’ In the permissible ways a woman can be treated, the ways that are socially considered . . . appropriate to her nature, one finds the particulars of male sexual interests and requirements. In the concomitant sexual paradigm, the ruling norms of sexual attraction and expression are fused with gender identity formation and affirmation, such that sexuality equals heterosexuality equals the sexuality of (male) dominance and (female) submission.”⁴ Haslanger, in her essay, “On Being Objective and Being Objectified,” corroborates this view of MacKinnon’s conception of sexual objectification. She begins by bracketing “sexual,” and discussing objectification generally, arguing, “[I]f one objectifies something (or someone), one views it and treats it as an object for the

³ MacKinnon, “Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: Toward Feminist Jurisprudence,” 635-636.

⁴ MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 131.

satisfaction of one's desire."⁵ She goes on, "[B]ut this is not all, for objectification is assumed to be a relation of domination where one also has the power to enforce one's view. Objectification is not just 'in the head;' it is actualised, embodied, imposed upon the objects of one's desire. So if one objectifies something, one not only views it as something which would satisfy one's desire, but one also has the power to make it have the properties one desires it to have."⁶ Put simply, objectification is the process by which one views something (or someone) as an object for the satisfaction of one's desire, and thereby makes it become that. Haslanger then introduces "sexual," explaining that "[s]exual objectification adds to each of these two further conditions: The desire in question is an erotic desire, and the desire is for dominance/submission."⁷ Sexual objectification, then, is the process by which one views something (or someone) as an object for the satisfaction of one's sexual desire, where that desire is for dominance/submission, and thereby makes it become that.

MacKinnon's conception of a woman as just a sex object contradicts her claim that men's image of a woman is just what men sexually desire a woman to be, where what men sexually desire is dominance, while my conception of a woman is consistent with it. What men sexually desire a woman to be is just that as which she enables men to satiate their sexual desire. If men sexually desire dominance, that as which she enables them to satiate their sexual desire is just that as which she enables sex to be an act in which they get dominance. Sex is such an act just if it is an act in which they violate women. So, what men sexually desire a woman to be is just that as which she enables sex to be an act in which a man violates her, which is sexually violable. Suggestive of this, men sexually desire women who are "hard to get," and are sexually disgusted by women who are "easy." The former are women who resist men's sexual advances, the latter those who readily succumb. Resisting men's sexual advances, women enable sex to be an act in which men violate them; readily succumbing, women prevent sex from being such an act. So, if men's image of a woman is just what men sexually desire a woman to be, where what men

⁵ Haslanger, "On Being Objective and Being Objectified," 102.

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ *ibid.*, 109.

sexually desire is dominance, then men's image of a woman is one of just a sexually violable being. As men's image of a woman makes who a woman is, this means that a woman is just a sexually violable being. Clearly, MacKinnon's conception of a woman as just a sex object contradicts this, while my conception of a woman is consistent with it, revealing what a woman is and what men sexually desire a woman to be as one and the same.

That men's image of a woman is just what men sexually desire a woman to be makes sense in light of the claim that a man is just a sexual being who desires dominance. If a man is just a sexual being who desires dominance, then what men need to live is just what they need to live as sexual beings who desire dominance. This is the object of their sexual desire, their dominance. This need arranges men's perception of women, making them see women as just what enables them to get that object.⁸ This means that men see women as just that with which they can satiate their sexual desire. MacKinnon says, "In this theory, a woman is identified as a being who identifies and is identified as one whose sexuality exists for someone else, who is socially male. What is termed women's sexuality is the capacity to arouse desire in that someone."⁹

If sexual objectification is understood not as the perception or treatment of women as sex objects, but the process by which men's image of a woman creates who a woman is, termed "sexual" because men's image of a woman is just what men sexually desire a woman to be, then MacKinnon's account of how men organise sexuality is half right and half wrong. It is half right in that men do organise sexuality to the end of getting dominance through the process of sexual objectification. It is half wrong in that, as men's image of a woman is not one of a sex object, but one of

⁸ Marilyn Frye says that men "see with arrogant eyes which organise everything seen with reference to themselves and their own interests." Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory* (Freedom, California: The Crossing Press, 1983): 67. Similarly, Langton says, "[D]esire 'unites' with belief and perception: those who exert power over women see the world as a certain way because they 'want to see' the world that way; they believe the world is a certain way because they 'want to believe' it is that way." Rae Langton, "Projection and Objectification," in *The Future for Philosophy*, ed. Brian Leiter (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004): 289. Italics in the original.

⁹ MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 118.

just a sexually violable being, sexual objectification is not the process by which men make women sex objects, but that by which they make them just sexually violable beings.

If a woman is just a sexually violable being, then she is just a sexual being who desires her subordination. If a woman is just a sexually violable being, then she is fulfilled by sexual violation. As what fulfils one is just what satiates one's desire, this means that she is just a being who desires sexual violation. For her to desire sexual violation, which is to say, violation in acts by which one satiates one's sexual desire, is just for her to sexually desire violation. In other words, if the desire is a desire fulfilled in acts that are sexual, that are done to satiate one's sexual desire, then the desire is just a sexual desire. So, if a woman is just a sexually violable being, then she is just a sexual being who desires violation. MacKinnon suggests this when she asks, "Is masculinity the enjoyment of violation, femininity the enjoyment of being violated? Is that the social meaning of intercourse? Do men 'love death'? Why? What is the aetiology of heterosexuality in women? Is its pleasure women's stake in subordination?"¹⁰ As a violation of a woman is just an act done to a woman against her will, and an act done to a woman against her will is just an act that subjects her to the will of another, which is to say, subordinates her, a woman is thus just a sexual being who desires subordination. This may explain why some women sexually desire to be "taken," which is to say, conquered, by men, even to the degree of being raped.¹¹

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 136. This conception of a woman resolves another contradiction in MacKinnon's theory of sexuality. While MacKinnon argues that a woman sexually desires her violation, if a woman is a sex object, then a woman sexually desires her use. However, if a woman is a sexually violable being, then she does, as MacKinnon says, sexually desire her violation.

¹¹ See, for example: Jenny M. Bivona, Joseph W. Critelli, and Michael J. Clark, "Women's Rape Fantasies: An Empirical Evaluation of the Major Explanations," *Archives of Sexual Behaviour* 41, no. 5 (2012): 1107-1119; Jenny Bivona and Joseph Critelli, "The Nature of Women's Rape Fantasies: An Analysis of Prevalence, Frequency, and Contents," *The Journal of Sex Research* 46, no. 1 (2009): 33-45; Joseph W. Critelli and Jenny M. Bivona, "Women's Erotic Rape Fantasies: An Evaluation of Theory and Research," *The Journal of Sex Research* 45, no. 1 (2008): 57-70; Donald S. Strassberg and Lisa K. Lockerd, "Force in Women's Sexual Fantasies," *Archives of Sexual Behaviour* 27, no. 4 (1998): 403-414; Wendy Maltz and Suzie Boss, *In the Garden of Desire: The Intimate World*

If a man is just a sexual being who desires dominance, and a woman just a sexual being who desires subordination, then sexuality, that being the process by which one gets the object of sexual desire, becomes the process by which men get dominance and women subordination. This means that men do organise sexuality to the end of getting dominance through the process of sexual objectification.

In so doing, they make sexuality not merely that which organises the sexes hierarchically, but that which necessarily organises the social world as sex hierarchy. If a man is just a sexual being who desires dominance, and a woman just a sexual being who desires subordination, then what men and women need to live is just what they need to live as the sexual beings they are. What a sexual being needs to live, in other words, what sustains it, is just what satiates its hunger. The hunger of a sexual being is sexual hunger, in other words, sexual desire. What satiates sexual desire is the object of sexual desire. Thus, what men and women need to live is just what is the object of their sexual desire. As one must live before all else, one must get what one needs to live before all else. So, men and women must get the object of their sexual desire before all else. As sexuality is the process by which one gets the object of sexual desire, this means that men and women must engage in the process of sexuality before all else. It is thus necessarily through sexuality that people first enter into relations with others. This means that sexuality necessarily organises the social world. Combining this with the fact that sexuality is the process by which men get dominance and women subordination, sexuality is that which necessarily organises the social world as sex hierarchy.

MacKinnon's theory of sexuality succeeds. Feminism is thus a theory of the kind that marxism is, sex inequality an injustice of its own. In 1989, MacKinnon wrote that: "To answer an equally old question, or rather to question an equally old reality – what explains the inequality of women to men? or, how does gender becomes domination and domination become sex? or, what is male power? – feminism needs

of Women's Sexual Fantasies (New York: Broadway Books, 1997); Harold Leitenberg and Kris Henning, "Sexual Fantasy," *Psychological Bulletin* 117, no. 3 (1995): 469-496; and Eugene J. Kanin, "Female Rape Fantasies: A Victimisation Study," *Victimology: An International Journal* 7, no. 1-4 (1982): 114-121.

to create an entirely new account of the political world.”¹² Finally, feminism has that account. But if in one sense feminism now parallels marxism, in another, it surpasses it. MacKinnon continues, “Feminism thus stands in relation to marxism as marxism does to classical political economy: its final conclusion and ultimate critique. Compared with marxism, the place of thought and things in method and reality is reversed in a transformation and seizure of power which penetrates subject with object and theory with practice. In a dual motion, feminism turns marxism inside out and on its head.”¹³ In other words, recognising that ideology does not merely mask truth, or mystify it,¹⁴ such that it need only be shattered, and truth thereby exposed, but create it, feminism illuminates the limit of marxism, and moves beyond it. This metaphysics is MacKinnon’s ultimate contribution to feminism, and feminism’s ultimate contribution to political theory.¹⁵

¹² MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 125.

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ Marx seems to see ideology as merely concealing truth. He says, for example: “If in ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process.” Marx and Engels, “Feuerback: Opposition of the Materialist and Idealist Outlook,” in *The German Ideology*, 47. Elsewhere, he says, “Vulgar economics actually does nothing more than interpret, systematise and turn into apologetics the notions of agents trapped within bourgeois relations of production. So it should not surprise us that precisely in the estranged form of appearance of economic relations that involves these *prima facie* absurd and complete contradictions – and all science would be superfluous if the form of appearance of things directly coincided with their essence – that precisely here vulgar economics feels completely at home, these relationships appearing all the more self-evident to it, the more their inner connections remain hidden, even though they are comprehensible to the popular mind. Thus it does not have the slightest suspicion that the trinity from which it proceeds: land – rent, capital – interest, labour – wages or price of labour, consists of a conflation of three things which is *prima facie* illegitimate.” Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 3, trans. David Fernbach (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1981): 956.

¹⁵ Rorty might be read as making a similar point in his lecture, “Feminism and Pragmatism,” which he presented as The Tanner Lecture on Human Values in 1990. He says, for instance, “One of the best things about contemporary feminism, it seems to me, is its ability to eschew Enlightenment fantasies of escape. My favourite passages in MacKinnon are ones in which she says things like ‘we are not attempting to be objective about it, we’re attempting to represent the point of view of women.’ Feminists are much less inclined than Marxists were to fall back on a comfortable doctrine of

immanent teleology. There is a lot of feminist writing which can be read as saying: we are *not* appearing from phallist appearance to nonphallist reality. We are *not* saying that the voice in which women will some day speak will be better at representing reality than present-day masculinist discourse. We are not attempting the impossible task of developing a nonhegemonic discourse, one in which truth is no longer connected with power. We are not trying to do away with social constructs in order to find something that is not a social construct. We are just trying to help women out of the traps men have constructed for them, help them get the power they do not presently have, and help them create a moral identity as women." Rorty, "Feminism and Pragmatism," 237.

VI. The Unknowability of Men's Oppression of Women

Feminism criticises this male totality without an account of our capacity to do so or to imagine or realise a more whole truth.

– Catharine A. MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: Toward Feminist Jurisprudence"

With her theory of sexuality, MacKinnon created, only to render futile, a feminist theory. In the very same moment that she began a theory of the sexes as socially arranged hierarchically, where that hierarchy is not only unjust, but also primary, she revealed men's oppression of women as unknowable. If men's oppression of women is unknowable, then women cannot know men's oppression of them, and so cannot move against in order to end it. If feminist theory undermines the possibility of resistance to, and overcoming of, men's oppression of women, then, it must be asked, what is the good of it? What does it achieve if it ultimately leaves women where they are? In a sense, MacKinnon created a feminist theory at the cost of that theory being one worth having. The question for feminism thus became, how can women know men's oppression of them?

In one way, feminists have been preoccupied with the question of how women can know men's oppression of them. They have put forward different answers. Nancy Hartsock argues that living oppression gives women access to knowledge of it,¹ Patricia Hill Collins argues that the political and economic status of Black women furnishes them with experiences that stimulate a Black feminist consciousness,² Alison Jaggar argues that emotions can form the basis of consciousness,³ Kristina

¹ Nancy C. M. Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint: Developing the Ground for a Specifically Feminist Historical Materialism," in *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodologies, and Philosophy of Science*, ed. Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka (Dordrecht: D. Reidel, 1983): 283-310.

² Patricia Hill Collins, "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought," *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 745-773.

³ Alison M. Jaggar, "Love and Knowledge: Emotion in Feminist Epistemology," in *Gender/Body/Knowledge: Feminist Reconstructions of Being and Knowing*, ed. Alison M. Jaggar and

Rolin argues that a feminist standpoint theory, encouraging attentiveness to power relations as an obstacle to the creation of knowledge, is a methodology for the study of power relations,⁴ and José Medina argues that oppressed groups can have a distinctive set of experiences and epistemic virtues which give them a subversive lucidity.⁵

But in another way, feminists seem to have not quite confronted this question. I say this because their attempts to answer the question often involve failing to perceive the grounds of the question, as posed by MacKinnon, that is, failing to perceive the utter ontological impossibility for women to experience men's treatment of them as oppressive. So, their attempts to answer the question do not comprehend and consequently obscure why that question is one. In that way, they seem to avoid more than address the question. I suspect that this is at least partly because feminists have not perceived the question of how women can know men's oppression of them as a real question, meaning, as a question yet without an answer, instead accepting what they regard as an empirical fact – that women do know their oppression – as proof that their oppression is knowable, and so itself a kind of answer. In other words, the puzzle does not appear so much of a puzzle because the fact of the matter is that women have, somehow, come to know their oppression. But in accepting that women do know their oppression as proof that it is knowable, we inadvertently theoretically undercut men's oppression of women. If, as I will show, the claim that men have epistemic authority, while women do not, entails the claim that men's image of a woman makes who a woman is, and if that entails the claim that men's oppression of women is unknowable, then we cannot accept the empirical fact that women do know their oppression as proof that their oppression is knowable without undermining the claim that men have epistemic authority, while

Susan R. Bordo (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1989): 151-176. See esp. pp. 167-172.

⁴ Kristina Rolin, "Standpoint Theory as a Methodology for the Study of Power Relations," *Hypatia* 24, no. 4 (2009): 218-226.

⁵ José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). See esp. pp. 40-48.

women do not. We thus theoretically diminish that very thing that feminism is attempting to expose, men's power and women's powerlessness. Not only that, we thereby contradict the content of women's consciousness – their powerlessness. Unexpectedly, an embrace, motivated by feminist politics, of women's knowledge of their oppression as proof that they can know it, and as making unnecessary an answer to the question of how it is knowable, turns out to contradict those politics.

This is not to say that we ought not trust women's knowledge of their oppression; it is to say that if we do believe that women know their oppression, then rather than insisting that that displaces the question of how they can know it, we must seek to explain how they can, so as to theoretically preserve the feminist version of reality, men's power and women's powerlessness, and thus the content of women's consciousness. Put simply, believing women imposes on us the obligation to account for their knowledge. In this chapter, I firstly explain how the question of how women can know men's oppression of them arises, and secondly, show that attempts to answer it, while helpful, have not succeeded.

1. Why Is Men's Oppression of Women Unknowable?

Feminists have shown that mutually reinforcing conceptions of right ways of knowing and gender have granted men and denied women epistemic authority, thus allowing men to participate in the creation of knowledge, and preventing women from doing so. Specifically, they have argued that masculine qualities are seen as enabling objectivity, while feminine qualities are seen as precluding it.⁶ That is, men, for being

⁶ For examples of this claim, see: Browne, "Women in Science," 509-528; Baron-Cohen, *The Essential Difference*; Geary, *Male, Female*; David L. Gutmann, "Women and the Conception of Ego Strength," *Merrill-Palmer Quarterly of Behavior and Development* 11, no. 3 (July 1965): 229-240; Sigmund Freud, "Some Psychical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIX, trans. James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1964): 243-260; and Herbert Spencer, "Psychology of the Sexes," *Popular Science Monthly* 4 (1873): 30-38.

For feminist discussions of this claim, see, for example: Helen Longino, "Subjects, Power, and Knowledge: Description and Prescription in Feminist Philosophies of Science," in *Knowledge and Inquiry: Readings in Epistemology*, ed. K. Brad Wray (Peterborough, Ontario; Orchard Park, New

men, are thought to be capable of detachment, hence, of externality to the object of inquiry, hence, of objectivity. Women, for being women, are thought to be emotionally involved, “ruled by subjective passions,”⁷ hence, incapable of objectivity. As Elizabeth Fee says, “We find that the attributes of science are the attributes of males; the objectivity said to be characteristic of the production of scientific knowledge is specifically identified as a male way of relating to the world. Science is cold, hard, impersonal, ‘objective’; women, by contrast are warm, soft, emotional, ‘subjective.’ Even the hierarchy of the sciences is a hierarchy of masculinity: as the language suggests, the ‘hard’ sciences at the top of the hierarchy are seen as more male than the ‘soft’ sciences at the bottom.”⁸

As masculine qualities are seen as enabling objectivity, while feminine qualities are seen as precluding it, men are seen as occupying the objective standpoint, while women are not. As MacKinnon says, “[F]eminism is a critique of the objective standpoint as male.”⁹ This is not to say that women cannot occupy the objective standpoint, but that they cannot do so as women. As only masculine qualities are seen as enabling objectivity, for women to assume the qualities that would enable them to occupy the objective standpoint is for women to assume

York: Broadview Press, 2002): 385-404; Lorraine Code, *What Can She Know?: Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University: 1991); Mary E. Hawkesworth, “Knowers, Knowing, Known: Feminist Theory and Claims of Truth,” *Signs* 14, no. 3 (1989): 533-557; Nancy Tuana, ed., *Feminism and Science* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Donna Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,” *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575-599; Susan Bordo, “The Cartesian Masculinisation of Thought,” *Signs* 11, no. 3 (1986): 439-456; Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1986); Evelyn Fox Keller, *Reflections on Gender and Science* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: ‘Male’ and ‘Female’ in Western Philosophy* (London: Methuen, 1984); and Elizabeth Fee, “Is Feminism a Threat to Scientific Objectivity?,” *International Journal of Women’s Studies* 4, no. 4 (1980): 378-392.

⁷ MacKinnon, “Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory,” 536.

⁸ Fee, “Is Feminism a Threat to Scientific Objectivity?,” 381.

⁹ MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, 54.

masculine qualities, for women to become, in that instant, men.¹⁰ Jaggar suggests this, saying, “In contemporary western culture, emotionally inexpressive women are

¹⁰ But that the qualities that enable objectivity are masculine does not mean that they are constitutive of a man (indeed, MacKinnon does not regard these qualities as constitutive of a man; she regards the sexuality of desiring dominance as constitutive of a man), in which case, it might be wondered why to assume those qualities is to become a man. The reason, I think, is that these qualities derive from the quality that is constitutive of a man, that they are what that quality – the sexuality of desiring dominance – needs and so gives rise to, such that the presence of these qualities implies the presence of the quality that is constitutive of a man. This means that for women to have these qualities is for them to be, implicitly, men, or, as Jaggar says, at least “suspect” as such.

Haslanger, in her essay, “On Being Objective and Being Objectified,” is concerned with a similar question as the one implied here, the question of “whether and to what extent the norms of rationality are specifically appropriate to the role defining the social category of men.” (86) She begins by developing a definition of gender, which is: “[W]omen as a class are those individuals who are viewed and treated as objects for the satisfaction of men’s desire. In short, women are the sexually objectified, men the objectifiers.” (86) She then explains that “a norm is weakly gendered just in case it is appropriate to a gender role, and that it is strongly gendered just in case it is grounded – either constitutively or contextually – in a gender role.” (86) Combining this explanation with her definition of gender, rationality is weakly masculine if it is appropriate to the role of sexual objectifier, and strongly masculine if it is grounded in the role of sexual objectifier. Haslanger argues that it is weakly masculine. But I would take a slightly different approach. As I read MacKinnon, gender is defined only in terms of sexuality: to be a man is just to be a sexual being who desires dominance, to be a woman is just to be a sexual being who desires subordination. This is apparent in her claim that “[s]ex as gender and sex as sexuality are thus defined in terms of each other, but it is sexuality that determines gender, not the other way around.” MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 111. It is not defined in terms of sexual objectification. Sexual objectification is instead part of the process by which gender is formed. Haslanger is fully aware that MacKinnon defines gender in terms of sexuality, saying, “One is a man by virtue of standing in a position of eroticised dominance over others; one is a woman by standing in a position of eroticised submission to others.” (99) But she seems not to want to take this as her definition of gender. Instead, she connects it back to the idea of sexual objectification, so that, I think, her definition of gender as constituted by sexual objectification encompasses MacKinnon’s view of gender as defined in terms of sexuality, saying, “First, if dominance/submission is eroticised, then the submissive participant is both *viewed as* and *treated as* an object of the dominant’s desire. Second, the submissive participant is viewed in functional terms: she is *for* the satisfaction of his desire.” (100) But this explanation seems to me to leave out something crucial, to fail to see what men sexually desiring specifically dominance means for their

suspect as not being real women.”¹¹ Keller, too, says, “A woman thinking scientifically or objectively is thinking ‘like a man.’”¹²

In conjunction with this, feminists have argued that objectivity is considered the right way of knowing. Lorraine Code, for example, says, “According to its self-presentation, the central assumptions of epistemology are neutral and universally applicable. The criteria of objectivity and neutrality that govern its search for truth – together with ‘truth’ itself – are criteria and goals that “most people” would unthinkingly endorse.”¹³ Elsewhere, she says, “[E]ven if no practicing scientist would articulate so pure and simple a conception of objectivity as a regulative ideal, such perfect objectivity is tacitly upheld as the feature that distinguishes knowledge from belief, opinion, and fantasy. Even if no practicing scientist believes it is possible to achieve such perfect objectivity, mainstream epistemologists commonly assume that knowledge properly so-called must be modelled on scientific criteria, construed in these stringent objectivist terms.”¹⁴

If men are seen as occupying the objective standpoint, while women are not, and if objectivity is considered the right way of knowing, then men are seen as right knowers, while women are not. In this way, mutually reinforcing conceptions of right

perception of women: if men eroticise dominance, then they do not merely see (and treat) women as objects of their desire, and as for the satisfaction of their desire; they also see women as that with which sex can be an act in which they get dominance. In other words, it is not just that women are for satiating men’s sexual desire, it is that women are for a desire that is for dominance. As, on my view, gender is defined in terms of sexuality, determining whether and to what extent rationality is masculine is a matter of determining whether and to what extent that norm helps men to function not in the role of sexual objectifier, but in the role of one who sexually desires dominance.

¹¹ Jaggar, “Love and Knowledge,” 157. Similarly, Fee says, “Because science as a whole is perceived as male, women in science are perceived as unfeminine. J. H. Mozans, who celebrated the achievements of hundreds of scientific women in his historical survey of women in science, found it necessary to defend the womanhood of his heroines, repeatedly assuring us that these scientific women could be graceful and feminine, good housekeepers and mothers.” Fee, “Is Feminism a Threat to Scientific Objectivity?,” 380.

¹² Evelyn Fox Keller, “Gender and Science,” in *Discovering Reality*, ed. Harding and Hintikka, 188.

¹³ Code, *What Can She Know?*, x.

¹⁴ *ibid.*, 32.

ways of knowing and gender have granted men and denied women epistemic authority. If men have epistemic authority, while women do not, then what men say is accepted as true, while what women say is not. So, these conceptions have allowed men to participate in the creation of knowledge, and prevented women from doing so.

Quite reasonably, feminist epistemologists have been concerned with contesting these conceptions. In what follows, I provide a brief and simple sketch of the main contestations. Some have challenged the belief that men are objective while women are subjective, arguing that this belief is a piece of ideology, not a fact, that the capacity for detachment and that for emotional involvement belong to the fictional gendered beings, masculine and feminine beings, not to the actual beings men and women.¹⁵ As an example, Elizabeth Anderson argues against the view of some feminist epistemologists that “women have gender-typical ‘ways of knowing.’”¹⁶

¹⁵ Margaret Atherton captures this view: “The concept of reason has been used in a disturbing fashion to mark a gender distinction. We have, for example, on the one hand, the man of reason and, on the other, the woman of passion. It has been the concern of many feminists to reject this distinction and, in particular, to reject the implication that women are irrational or driven solely by their emotions . . . Such feminists accept a general conception of reason as the predominant human characteristic and share the positive evaluation attached to it. They have argued that the problem lies in the stereotypical understanding of the nature of women.” Margaret Atherton, “Cartesian Reason and Gendered Reason,” in *A Mind of One’s Own*, ed. Antony and Witt, 19.

Examples of work that regards the view of women as emotional as a stereotype include: Mary E. Kite, Kay Deaux and Elizabeth L. Haines, “Gender Stereotypes,” in *Psychology of Women: A Handbook of Issues and Theories*, ed. Florence L. Denmark and Michele A. Paludi (1993; 2nd ed., Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2008): 205-236; E. Ashby Plant, Janet Shibley Hyde, Dacher Keltner, and Patricia G. Devine, “The Gender Stereotyping of Emotions,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 24, no. 1 (2000): 81-92; Agneta H. Fischer and Antony S. R. Manstead, “The Relation Between Gender and Emotions in Different Cultures,” in *Gender and Emotion: Social Psychological Perspectives*, ed. Agneta H. Fischer (Cambridge; New York; Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 71-94; Agneta H. Fischer, “Sex Differences in Emotionality: Fact or Stereotype?,” *Feminism and Psychology* 3, no. 3 (1993): 303-318; and Pam Oliver, “What Do Girls Know Anyway?: Rationality, Gender and Social Control,” *Feminism and Psychology* 1, no. 3 (1991): 339-360.

¹⁶ Elizabeth Anderson, “Feminist Epistemology: An Interpretation and a Defence,” *Hypatia* 10, no. 3 (1995): 62.

She says, “[V]arious feminist epistemologists have claimed that women think more intuitively and contextually, concern themselves more with particulars than abstractions, emotionally engage themselves more with individual subjects of study, and frame their thoughts in terms of a relational rather than an atomistic ontology. There is little persuasive evidence for such global claims. I believe the temptation to accept them is based partly on a confusion between gender symbolism – the fact that certain styles of thinking are *labelled* ‘feminine’ – and the actual characteristics of women.”¹⁷

Yet others have not only accepted that women are subjective but have embraced it, claiming that the qualities that make women subjective – emotionality, empathy, and intuitiveness – can in fact aid them in knowing.¹⁸ The argument that is typically made to support this claim is that emotion is not oppositional to reason, that it can aid us in being rational. Jaggar, for instance, says, “[R]ather than repressing emotion in epistemology it is necessary to rethink the relation between knowledge and emotion and construct conceptual models that demonstrate the mutually constitutive rather than oppositional relation between reason and emotion. Far from precluding the possibility of reliable knowledge, emotion as well as value must be

¹⁷ *ibid.* Italics in the original.

¹⁸ See, for example: Deborah K. Heikes, *The Virtue of Feminist Rationality* (London and New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012); Raia Prokhovnik, *Rational Woman: A Feminist Critique of Dichotomy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999); Karen Green, “Reason and Feeling: Resisting the Dichotomy,” *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 71, no. 4 (1993): 385-399; Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990; repr., New York; London: Routledge, 1991): 201-220; Jaggar, “Love and Knowledge,” 151-176; Virginia Held, “Feminism and Moral Theory,” in *Women and Moral Theory*, ed. Eva Feder Kittay and Diana T. Meyers (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1987): 111-128; Sara Ruddick, “Remarks on the Sexual Politics of Reason,” in *Women and Moral Theory*, ed. Kittay and Meyers, 237-260; Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule, *Women’s Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1986); Hilary Rose, “A Feminist Epistemology for the Natural Sciences,” *Signs* 9, no. 1 (1983): 73-90; Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (1982; repr., Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1993); and Carol McMillan, *Women, Reason and Nature* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982).

shown as necessary to such knowledge.”¹⁹ Others still have argued that objectivity is an impossible and as such false pose, and that we should therefore abandon it as the right way of knowing.²⁰

Differently from this, others maintain that objectivity is a right way of knowing, but that our conception of what it entails is flawed. Sandra Harding suggests something like this when she says, “[I]t is reasonable to think that the socially situated grounds and subjects of standpoint epistemologies require and generate stronger standards for objectivity than do those that turn away from providing systematic methods for locating knowledge in history. The problem with the conventional conception of objectivity is not that it is too rigorous or too ‘objectifying,’ as some have argued, but that it is *not rigorous or objectifying enough*; it is too weak to accomplish even the goals for which it has been designed, let alone the more difficult project called for by feminism and other new social movements.”²¹ Harding argues that objectivity, far from requiring aperspectivity, in fact requires that “the subject of knowledge be placed on the same critical, causal plane as the objects of knowledge.”²²

Contesting these conceptions is, of course, a worthy project, and one that has contributed significantly to both feminism, indeed, not only feminism, but perhaps all movements striving against oppression, and epistemology. As Helen Longino says, “As we move forward to continue articulating a distinctively feminist approach to philosophical problems, we should be conscious of the achievements of feminist philosophers, some now so ingrained that we take them for granted. I would urge us to be especially attentive to the kinds of resources feminist epistemological thought can offer other communities facing challenges both similar to and different from

¹⁹ Jaggar, “Love and Knowledge,” 163.

²⁰ For an outline of this argument, see Ismay Barwall, “Towards a Defence of Objectivity,” in *Knowing the Difference: Feminist Perspectives in Epistemology*, ed. Kathleen Lennon and Margaret Whitford (New York: Routledge, 1994): 79-94. See esp. pp. 80-81.

²¹ Sandra Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is Strong Objectivity?,” in *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993): 50-51. Italics in the original.

²² *ibid.*, 69.

those we have taken ourselves to be addressing.”²³ But it does not address a crippling implication of these conceptions: the unknowability of men’s oppression of women. Conceptions of right ways of knowing and gender have not just granted men and denied women epistemic authority, they have, by virtue of doing so, made men’s oppression of women unknowable. It might be thought that if contesting these conceptions succeeds, then there is a sense in which it does attend to this implication, namely, by preventing it from arising. That is, if we manage to show that our conceptions of right ways of knowing and gender are somehow wrong, then we will no longer grant epistemic authority to men and deny it to women, and so this implication will no longer arise. But even if contesting these conceptions succeeds, and prevents this implication from arising in the future, it can do nothing to undo past belief in these conceptions, and so it cannot prevent this implication from having arisen in the past. In other words, the fact remains that prior to this contestation, people did believe these conceptions, and so these conceptions did have this implication.

MacKinnon first grasped this implication. The argument by which she arrives at this is twofold: firstly, if men have epistemic authority, while women do not, then men’s image of a woman makes who a woman is; secondly, if their image of a woman makes who a woman is, then their oppression of women is unknowable. MacKinnon argues that if men have epistemic authority, while women do not, then what men say is accepted as true, while what women say is not. Men’s image of a woman, then, is accepted as a woman as she is in truth. To be clear, as it is rational to accept what one with epistemic authority says is true, irrational to refute it, both men and women accept this image as a woman as she is in truth. If women accept this image as what a woman is, what *they* are, in truth, then they regard this image as all of what they must become in order to become who they are. So regarding it, they become it. This means that what a woman is is just what men’s image of a woman is. Taking from de Beauvoir, MacKinnon argues that that image is one of just

²³ Helen Longino, “Feminist Epistemology at Hypatia’s 25th Anniversary,” *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 (2010): 733.

a feminine being. A woman is thus just a feminine being.²⁴ This is the first half of MacKinnon's argument – that if men have epistemic authority, while women do not, then men's image of a woman makes who a woman is. I turn now to the second – that if their image of a woman makes who a woman is, then their oppression of women is unknowable.

If a woman becomes men's image of a woman, then, as men treat women as who they see women as being, which is, for having made them be that way, now who women really are, men's treatment of women *qua* women is ontologically the rightful treatment of women. As such, it is ontologically quite the opposite to oppressive treatment of women *qua* women. The oppression of a woman *qua* woman is the act of pressing forcefully upon her so as to keep her down, as a woman. Marilyn Frye suggests this when she says,

The root of the word "oppression" is the element "press." The press of the crowd; pressed into military service; to press a pair of pants; printing press; press the button. Presses are used to mould things or flatten them or reduce them in bulk, sometimes to reduce them by squeezing out the gases or liquids in them. Something pressed is

²⁴ Haslanger cautions against "defin[ing] the social categories of gender in terms of conformity to idealised gender-norms – i.e., . . . tak[ing] the social class of women to consist of those who are feminine." Doing this is a mistake, she says, because while it rightly acknowledges that gender differences are the result of social forces, "in taking femininity to be the mark by which one qualifies as a woman, the analysis loses much of its power as a critique of patriarchy's assumptions about women. Delimiting the class of women in terms of the standards of femininity treats unfeminine women as not 'really' women at all and ignores the possibility of women's resistance to the norm." Haslanger, "On Being Objective and Being Objectified," 246. But if men make women be just what their image of a woman is, and if their image of a woman is one of just a feminine being, then it seems to me descriptively accurate to say that a woman is just a feminine being. To insist that women are not this is not only incorrect, but also a denial of the power that men, by virtue of having epistemic authority, have. Contra Haslanger, it is this analysis that, denying the power that men's assumptions about women have, loses its power as a critique of patriarchy's assumptions about women. As to Haslanger's argument that delimiting the class of women to feminine beings ignores the possibility of women's resistance, if men have epistemic authority, then it seems to me that women would have to be irrational in order to resist becoming men's image of a woman, a feminine being.

something caught between or among forces and barriers which are so related to each other that jointly they restrain, restrict, or prevent the thing's motion or mobility. Mould. Immobilise. Reduce. The mundane experience of the oppressed provides another clue. One of the most ubiquitous features of the world as experienced by oppressed people is the characteristic double bind – situations in which options are reduced to a very few and all of them expose one to penalty, censure or deprivation.²⁵

It is thus the treatment of a woman that opposes her, that disrespects and goes against her nature, as a woman. As such, it is wrongful treatment. The only way in which men's treatment of women can be oppressive of women is if it is treatment of women as other than women. But the feminist claim that men oppress women is the claim that men oppress women *qua* women, not *qua* any other identity, for instance, class. As Haslanger says, "What does it mean to say that someone is 'systematically subordinated' or 'privileged,' and further, that the subordination occurs 'on the basis of' certain features? The background idea is that women are *oppressed*, and that they are oppressed *as women*."²⁶

If men's treatment of women is ontologically the rightful treatment of women *qua* women, and thus not oppressive treatment of women *qua* women, then men's oppression of women, in the sense in which feminism means, is unknowable as such.²⁷ This, of course, prompts the question of how it is that women can know their

²⁵ Frye, *The Politics of Reality*, 2.

²⁶ Sally Haslanger, "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be?," in *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012): 230-231. See generally pp. 221-247.

²⁷ Scheman makes a point that tends in this direction when she perceives that the picture women have of what the good life is for a woman can prevent them from interpreting what they feel about their lives as anger. She says, "A third thing keeping us from seeing ourselves as angry is the picture we are likely to have of what the good life for a woman consists in. Anger is 'object-hungry': if there is no one and nothing to be angry at, it will be harder to see oneself as really angry. If the life one has is just what one has expected would be most satisfying and fulfilling, and if one's sacrifices are seen merely as the transcending of childish dreams, then it will be hard to find anyone or anything

oppression by men, how it is that feminist consciousness, and so feminism, can come to be. As MacKinnon says, “The problem of how the object can know herself as such is the same as how the alienated can know its alienation. This, in turn, poses the problem of feminism’s account of women’s consciousness. How can woman, as created, ‘thingified in the head,’ complicit in the body, see her condition as such?”²⁸

This theoretically shifts, or rereveals, the nature of the epistemic injustice done to women. Here, what women face is neither testimonial injustice nor hermeneutical injustice.²⁹ It is something more profound. Testimonial injustice occurs when a “speaker receives a credibility deficit owing to identity prejudice in the hearer,”³⁰ that is, when a hearer has a prejudice relating to the social identity of the speaker, which causes the hearer to attribute less credibility to the speaker. A hermeneutical injustice is “the injustice of having some significant area of one’s social experience obscured from collective understanding owing to a structural identity prejudice in the collective hermeneutical resource.”³¹ It occurs because those with power are able to shape our understandings, to make their understandings our understandings. As they derive their understandings from their experiences, our understandings comprehend only their experiences. Our understandings may thus not comprehend the experiences of those who do not have power. In this way, those who do not have power are deprived of an understanding by which to make sense of

to be properly angry at. It is similarly hard to be properly angry if one thinks one’s life as a woman is ‘natural,’ ordained by biology. The limitations that flow socially from one’s being a woman are seen as on a par with those that flow from physical or biological factors.” Naomi Scheman, “Anger and the Politics of Naming,” in *Women and Language in Literature and Society*, ed. Sally McConnell-Ginet, Ruth Borker, and Nelly Furman (New York: Praeger, 1980): 178. But she does not go quite as far as MacKinnon does; Scheman recognises the difficulty for women in interpreting what they feel as anger, but MacKinnon asks how it is possible for women to even experience a feeling that could be interpreted as anger.

²⁸ MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 124.

²⁹ Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

³⁰ *ibid.*, 28.

³¹ *ibid.*, 155.

their experience. Certainly, at the point at which it is said that masculine qualities enable while feminine qualities preclude objectivity, women suffer testimonial injustice. But this is not the epistemic injustice done to women in what I describe above. Hermeneutical injustice may come a little closer to this injustice, in something of a meta way, which is that we may not have a concept of oppression which would allow us to recognise what is done to women as oppression. We may instead have a concept of oppression which comprehends only shallow oppression, the kind of oppression that does not take hold of every inch of its object's being, and wrench it into its vision of that object, and unmakes itself as oppression, the kind of oppression from which people remain, at their core, unscathed. Certainly, this concept would reflect the experience of the powerful. But this would turn the question of how women can know their oppression by men into the question of what concept of oppression we might develop in order that women's experience one day be comprehensible as one of oppression. This question may be an interesting one, and one worth pursuing, but it ignores and displaces the question I am posing here. The question of what concept of oppression we might develop in order that women's experience one day be comprehensible as one of oppression assumes that women cannot in the past have known and cannot now know men's oppression of them. It assumes that that knowledge exists in the future. But the question, as MacKinnon is asking it, as I am asking it, of how women can know their oppression, is the question of how women have known and do know their oppression, it is the question of how that knowledge has and does exist. Moreover, if that knowledge has and does exist, then our already existing concept of oppression must be at least sufficient for women to comprehend their experience as one of oppression. So, I do not think hermeneutical injustice is quite the injustice done to women here. What MacKinnon's analysis of the metaphysics of men's oppression of women suggests is not that women are deprived of the hermeneutical resources by which to comprehend their experience as one of oppression, but that they are dispossessed of a being that could have that experience in the first place. Here, the epistemic injustice is ultimately an ontological one. The question is how, given this, they have come to know that they are oppressed.

2. Attempts at an Answer

Feminists have sought to answer this question. Their efforts have produced some revolutionary and empowering insights and ideas. But while I think these insights and ideas are crucial to answering this question, I also think that feminists have not as yet succeeded in answering this question, as posed by MacKinnon. In what follows, I outline, more or less in chronological order, some significant attempts to answer this question.

The San Francisco Redstockings argue that women's feelings give them access to the reality of their oppression. They say, "Our politics begin with our feelings . . . Information derived from our feelings is our only reliable information; and our political analysis can be trusted only so long as it does not contradict our feelings."³² But if men's image of a woman makes who a woman is, such that a woman is just that image, then women can only feel men's treatment of them as rightful treatment. MacKinnon expresses this when she asks, "How can dominance and submission violate women when women eroticise it?"³³ She is asking how, given that they come to sexually desire what men say it is proper of a woman to sexually desire, women can experience men's domination of them as anything other than the satiation of their sexual desire. This explanation thus succeeds only by undercutting the claim that men's image of a woman makes who a woman is, and so, as it is this claim that necessitates an explanation of how women know their oppression in the first place, by negating the need for itself. It is an explanation that makes itself redundant.

Sandra Lee Bartky draws on Marx and Engels's explanation of how workers can come to know their exploitation in her attempt to describe how women can come to consciousness of their oppression. Marx and Engels argue that capitalism creates the conditions for workers to come to consciousness of their exploitation. They say,

³² San Francisco Redstockings, "Our Politics Begin with Our Feelings," in *Masculine/Feminine: Readings in Sexual Mythology and the Liberation of Women*, ed. Betty Roszack and Theodore Roszak (New York: Harper and Row, 1969): 285-286.

³³ MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 115.

[W]ith the development of industry the proletariat not only increases in number; it becomes concentrated in greater masses, its strength grows, and it feels that strength more. The various interests and conditions of life within the ranks of the proletariat are more and more equalised, in proportion as machinery obliterates all distinctions of labour, and nearly everywhere reduces wages to the same low level. The growing competition among the bourgeois, and the resulting commercial crises, make the wages of the workers ever more fluctuating. The unceasing improvement of machinery, ever more rapidly developing, makes their livelihood more and more precarious; the collisions between individual workmen and individual bourgeois take more and more the character of collisions between two classes. Thereupon the workers begin to form combinations (Trades Unions) against the bourgeois; they club together in order to keep up the rate of wages; they found permanent associations in order to make provision beforehand for these occasional revolts. Here and there the contest breaks out into riots . . .

Altogether collisions between the classes of the old society further, in many ways, the course of development of the proletariat. The bourgeoisie finds itself involved in a constant battle. At first with the aristocracy; later on, with those portions of the bourgeoisie itself, whose interests have become antagonistic to the progress of industry; at all times, with the bourgeoisie of foreign countries. In all these battles it sees itself compelled to appeal to the proletariat, to ask for its help, and thus, to drag it into the political arena. The bourgeoisie itself, therefore, supplies the proletariat with its own elements of political and general education, in other words, it furnishes the proletariat with weapons for fighting the bourgeoisie.

Further, as we have already seen, entire sections of the ruling classes are, by the advance of industry, precipitated into the proletariat, or are at least threatened in their conditions of existence. These also

supply the proletariat with fresh elements of enlightenment and progress.³⁴

Bartky tries to extend this explanation such that it encompasses how women come to consciousness of their oppression. She does this by adding the mode of reproduction, meaning procreation, to the mode of production, and arguing that just as the mode of production in marxism creates the conditions for class consciousness, so the mode of reproduction does for women's consciousness.³⁵ She says, "First, if we widen the notion of 'modes of production' to include the idea of 'modes of reproduction,' then it is evident that the development of cheap and efficient types of contraception has been instrumental in changing both the concrete choices women are able to make and the prevailing conceptions about woman's function and destiny."³⁶ This argument does not succeed. The concept of the mode of reproduction is in no way analogous to the marxist concept of the mode of production, such that it can be given theoretical equivalence. Indeed, the concept of the mode of reproduction is not a concept at all; it is simply a pun.³⁷ It is not analogous because the meaning of production in marxism is that of the process by which we make the things that we need to live, which for marxism are material things.³⁸ Thus, the meaning of the mode of production is that of the method of producing the things we need to live. So, that the mode of production creates the conditions for class consciousness means that the method of producing the things that we need to live creates the conditions for class consciousness. Reproduction is clearly not the production of the things that we need to live. Therefore, it cannot

³⁴ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. Samuel Moore (1888; Harmondsworth, England; New York, U.S.A: Penguin Books, 1967): 89-90.

³⁵ Sandra Lee Bartky, "Toward a Phenomenology of Feminist Consciousness," *Social Theory and Practice* 3, no. 1 (1975): 427.

³⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷ As MacKinnon says, "Or, the marxist meaning of reproduction, the iteration of productive relations, is punned into an analysis of biological reproduction." MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory," 525-526.

³⁸ See Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 42, 48; and Marx, *Grundrisse*, 83.

create the conditions for women's consciousness of their oppression in the way that Bartky says it can.

Bartky supplements this argument with three others. The first is that the increase in the amount of women entering the workforce helped to render obsolete the conception of a woman as a wife, mother, and homemaker.³⁹ This argument is logically incorrect; women's going to work does not necessarily have the effect of shattering the conception, which is a normative one, of a woman as a wife, mother, and homemaker; it may instead have the effect that women are seen as being able to work alongside being what they ought to be first and foremost, which are wives, mothers, and homemakers, or it may even have the effect that those women who go to work are seen as not what women ought to be. This might explain why this argument is also empirically quite an exaggeration; clearly, the conception of a woman as a wife and mother is not obsolete.⁴⁰ At any rate, this argument does not explain how women come to consciousness of their oppression, rather, it explains how women are liberated from oppression: by being permitted to work. Perhaps the implication is that through being so liberated women come to see their condition prior to their liberation as an oppressed one. But if consciousness comes only after the fact of oppression, then it does not play the liberatory role that feminism, like marxism, sees it as playing. Indeed, it seems inconsequential; what is the need for consciousness of oppression if oppression is no longer?

³⁹ "Second, the rapid growth of 'service' industries has had much to do with the steady rise in the percentage of women in the work force, since the post-World War II low in the early fifties. The older restriction of woman's role to wife, mother, and homemaker, together with the rationale which justifies such restriction is clearly out of phase with the entry of millions of women into the market economy." Bartky, "Toward a Phenomenology of Feminist Consciousness," 427-428.

⁴⁰ See, for example: Stephanie Rich, Ann Taket, Melissa Graham, and Julia Shelley, "'Unnatural,' 'Unwomanly,' 'Uncreditable' and 'Undervalued': The Significance of Being a Childless Woman in Australian Society," *Gender Issues* 28, no. 4 (2011): 226-247; and Elizabeth A. Sharp and Lawrence Ganong, "'I'm a Loser, I'm Not Married, Let's Just All Look at Me:' Ever-Single Women's Perceptions of Their Social Environment," *Journal of Family Issues* 32, no. 7 (2011): 956-980.

The second argument is that technological advances have eased the burden of housekeeping, thereby helping to free women from the confines of the home.⁴¹ But this, much like the first, is not so much an explanation of how women come to consciousness of oppression as it is an explanation of how women are liberated from oppression: by being released from the burden of housework.

The third is that through being made to play subordinate roles in movements against other forms of oppression, such as the civil rights movement, women saw their oppression in juxtaposition to resistance to other forms of oppression, and so became more aware of it.⁴² But, again, if men's image of a woman makes who a woman is, such that a woman is just that image, then women can only feel men's treatment of them as rightful treatment. How, then, can seeing that treatment in juxtaposition with resistance to other forms of oppression make them recognise it as oppression? This argument, I think, explains only how consciousness, which already exists, is exacerbated, not how consciousness comes into being.

Nancy Hartsock, too, takes from Marx and Engels in her attempt at an explanation of how women can know their oppression. She says, "I will attempt to develop, on the methodological base provided by marxian theory, an important epistemological tool for understanding and opposing all forms of domination – a feminist standpoint."⁴³ She argues that as the proletarians, living exploitation, can come to consciousness of their exploitation, so women, living oppression, can come to consciousness of that. She says, "In particular, I will suggest that like the lives of proletarians according to marxian theory, women's lives make available a particular

⁴¹ "The growth and spread of a technology to ease the burden of housekeeping, a technology which is itself the result of a need to ease the burden of housekeeping, a technology which is itself the result of a need on the part of late capitalism for 'innovations' in production, serves further to undermine traditional conceptions about woman's place." Bartky, "Toward a Phenomenology of Feminist Consciousness," 428.

⁴² "No doubt what triggered feminist consciousness most immediately were the social upheavals and student movements of the Sixties, themselves expressions of protest against the growing bureaucratisation, depersonalisation, and inhumanity of late capitalist society. Women who struggle against other people's oppression must sooner or later confront their own; and the denial of full participation in such struggles by one's male 'comrades' can only hasten the process." *ibid.*, 428.

⁴³ Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint," 283.

and privileged vantage point on male supremacy, a vantage point which can ground a powerful critique of the phallocratic institutions and ideology which constitute the capitalist form of patriarchy.”⁴⁴ Hartsock grounds this argument on five claims:

- 1) Material life . . . not only structures but sets limits on the understanding of social relations
- 2) If material life is structured in fundamentally opposing ways for two different groups, one can expect that . . . the vision available to the rulers will be both partial and perverse
- 3) The vision of the ruling class (or gender) structures the material relations in which all parties are forced to participate, and therefore cannot be dismissed as simply false
- 4) In consequence, the vision available to the oppressed group must be struggled for and represents an achievement which requires both science to see beneath the surface of the social relations in which all are forced to participate, and the education which can only grow from struggle to change those relations
- 5) As an engaged vision, the understanding of the oppressed, the adoption of a standpoint exposes the real relations among human beings as inhuman, points beyond the present, and carries a historically liberatory role⁴⁵

Hartsock is here drawing on Marx and Engels’s argument that as the ruling class has control over ideas, its ideas are the prevailing ones.⁴⁶ As its ideas legitimate the

⁴⁴ *ibid.*, 284.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 285.

⁴⁶ Marx and Engels say, “The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships, the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas; hence of the relationships which make the one class the ruling one, therefore, the ideas of its dominance. The individuals composing the ruling class possess among other things consciousness, and therefore think. Insofar, therefore, as they rule as a class and determine the extent and compass of an epoch, it is self-evident that they do this in its whole range, hence among other things rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and

social arrangement, the ruling class cannot see that arrangement for what it is: an unjustly unequal one. So, in the case of marxism, under capitalism, the capitalist class cannot see that it exploits the proletariat class; in the case of feminism, men cannot see that they oppress women. For the same reason, the ruled class, too, initially cannot see the social arrangement for what it is. But because, as opposed to the ruling class, they live, in the case of the proletarians, exploitation, in the case of women, oppression, they know a reality beneath the one that the prevailing ideas projects. So, by struggling, they can penetrate those ideas, and see that reality, see the social arrangement for what it is, an unjustly unequal one. But this explanation, too, undercuts the claim that men's image of a woman makes who a woman is. If women can penetrate the prevailing ideas, and come to see their condition as one of oppression, then men's image of a woman must have remained just that, an image, it must not have made who a woman is; if it had, then women would not be able to penetrate it, to come to see the reality it obscures, as it would not obscure reality, it would be it.

Hartsock's explanation of how women can know their oppression is one formulation of the theory of a feminist standpoint. This theory became and has persisted as prominent in feminist theorising on knowledge. Since Hartsock, many feminists have taken up and further developed this theory. Patricia Hill Collins is one such feminist. She argues that "Black women have a self-defined standpoint on their own oppression."⁴⁷ She argues that there are two connected reasons for which Black women singularly have access to knowledge of their oppression: first, "[T]heir political and economic status provides them with a distinctive set of experiences that offers a different view of material reality than that available to other groups,"⁴⁸ and second, "[T]hese experiences stimulate a distinctive Black feminist consciousness

regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age: thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch. For instance, in an age and in a country where royal power, aristocracy, and bourgeoisie are contending for mastery and where, therefore, mastery is shared, the doctrine of the separation of powers proves to be the dominant idea and is expressed as an 'eternal law.'" Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, 64-65.

⁴⁷ Collins, "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought," 745.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

concerning material reality.”⁴⁹ As an example of how their political and economic status provides them with distinctive experiences, Collins cites Hannah Nelson: “Since I have to work, I don’t really have to worry about most of the things that most of the white women I have worked for are worrying about. And if these women did their own work, they would think just like I do – about this, anyway.”⁵⁰ But this explanation of how Black women come to consciousness of their oppression is in fact not an explanation of how they come to consciousness of their oppression as *women*. In the example just given, women do not have experiences of oppression as women, so much as experiences of oppression as workers, which is a class in the marxist sense of the word. These experiences thus do not foster consciousness of oppression of women as women, so much as consciousness of oppression of women as workers, which is to say, consciousness of class-based oppression. Certainly, it is because of their race and sex that they are in this class, but this is exactly the point – it is not because of their race and sex as such that they are oppressed, but because their race and sex put them in a class, and it is as that class that they are oppressed, in which case their consciousness is not consciousness of race or sex-based oppression as such, but race or sex-based oppressed insofar as that is class-based oppression. Collins’s explanation thus does not succeed in answering the question that MacKinnon raises of how women know their oppression *qua* woman.

Another feminist to have made a major contribution to feminist standpoint theory is Sandra Harding. She briefly explains the theory of a feminist standpoint. She says that this is a theory according to which the social situation of women gives them an epistemic privilege over gender relations.⁵¹ Helpfully, she goes on to summarise the characteristics of the social situation of women, which give them an epistemic advantage.

⁴⁹ *ibid.*, 747.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ Sandra Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?: Thinking from Women’s Lives* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1991): 119.

- 1) Women and men are assigned different kinds of activities in such societies; consequently, they lead lives that have significantly different contours and patterns. As knowledge of the empirical world is grounded in that world, women have knowledge that men do not.
- 2) Women are valuable “strangers” to the social order. The stranger, being both near and far, concerned and indifferent, is more objective. Moreover, “natives” are more likely to tell a stranger some things than they would be to tell one another.
- 3) Women’s oppression gives them fewer interests in ignorance.
- 4) Women’s perspective is from the other side of the “battle of the sexes” that women and men engage in on a daily basis. As the winner writes history, trying to construct the story from the perspective of the lives of those who resist oppression generates less partial and distorted accounts of nature and social relations.
- 5) Women’s perspective is from everyday life. This is scientifically preferable to the perspective available only from the “ruling” activities of men in the dominant groups.
- 6) Women’s perspective comes from mediating ideological dualisms: nature versus culture.
- 7) Women, especially women researchers, are “outsiders within.” It is not enough to be on the “outside” – to be immersed only in “women’s work” or in “black women’s work” – because the relations between this work and “ruling work” are not visible from only one side of this division of human activity. Instead, it is when one works on both sides that there emerges the possibility of seeing the relation between dominant activities and beliefs and those that arise on the “outside.”
- 8) This is the right time in history. The sex/gender system appeared as a possible object of knowledge only with various recent changes in the situation of women and men – changes created by shifts in the economy, by the so-called sexual revolution, by the increased entrance of women into higher

education, by the civil rights struggles of the 1960s, and by other identifiable economic, political, and social phenomena.⁵²

But none of these characteristics address and resolve the ontological impossibility for women to feel oppressed, and so come to consciousness of their oppression. Women may be assigned different kinds of activities, but insofar as they are men's image of a woman, they experience these activities as fulfilling. They may be strangers, but insofar as they are men's image of a woman, the social order is just, and so they cannot see it as oppressive. They may have fewer interests in ignorance, but insofar as they are men's image of a woman, they are not ignorant of their condition, which is one of oppression; they ontologically do not live that condition. That women's perspective is from the other side of the "battle of the sexes" does not explain how women came to consciousness in order to resist oppression in the first place. Women may be outsiders within, but, insofar as they are men's image of a woman, they cannot experience their lives as women as oppressive, and so cannot see them as such. That it is the right time in history presumes but does not explain how recent changes have made the sex/gender system appear as a possible object of knowledge.

Rosemary Hennessy perceives the failure that I have shown of feminist standpoint theorists, although, she describes this failure in slightly different terms. She argues that feminist standpoint theorists "pose 'women's lives' as an empirical point of reference prior to feminism,"⁵³ but do not explain "the material links between feminism as a discourse and women's lives."⁵⁴ Hennessy attempts to correct this. She puts forward the marxist tradition, specifically the marxist materialist theory of ideology, as a means by which to explain this connection. She suggests that it can help to explain this connection because, according to this theory, the ruling ideology authoritatively says what is real, and thus determines what counts as real. So in a sense it produces reality. But, she says, "the *material* structures through which

⁵² *ibid.*, 121-133.

⁵³ Rosemary Hennessy, "Women's Lives/Feminist Knowledge: Feminist Standpoint as Ideology Critique," *Hypatia* 8, no. 1 (1993): 15.

⁵⁴ *ibid.*

ideology works are shaped by . . . material relations.”⁵⁵ This means that women’s lives “can never be separated from the various and often contesting ways of making sense of them; but at the same time, these lives are not exclusively ideological.”⁵⁶ But this theory ultimately cannot help feminism explain how women can know their oppression. For this theory, ideology produces reality only in the sense that it determines what counts as real. Implicitly, it does not actually make reality. But for MacKinnon, men, by determining what gets to count as a woman, make women actually become that. Here, ideology produces reality in the literal, deepest sense. Hennessy also suggests that this theory can help to explain this connection because, according to it, as the few exploit the many, “ideology can never dominate without contradiction.”⁵⁷ This means that “hegemonic discourse invariably has slips or cracks in its coherence. As a result, it contains space for other discourses that are not yet recognised as a social institution or even project. It is the potentially subversive force of these slips and alternative discourses that constitutes the epistemological basis or authority for ideological critique.”⁵⁸ But this theory presupposes what MacKinnon reveals to be impossible: the reality of exploitation. For this theory, the reality of the few exploiting the many persists beneath ideology. But for MacKinnon, men’s image of a woman makes who a woman is, such that a woman is just that image. This makes men’s treatment of women ontologically rightful, and as such not oppressive. Ideology and reality are one. The reality of oppression does not persist beneath ideology. Here, then, there is no contradiction. Crucially, there is no alternate reality that makes hegemonic ideology visible as ideology, and thereby allows us to contest it. Both of these aspects of the marxist materialist theory of ideology reveal it as perceiving ideology as finally constrained, as not constructing reality in its entirety, as instead mystifying it. Therefore, this theory cannot, contra Hennessy, help us to explain how women can know their oppression.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 22. Italics in the original.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

⁵⁷ *ibid.*, 23.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

Louise Antony departs from much prior work in feminist epistemology,⁵⁹ arguing that feminism does not need a “specifically feminist alternative to currently available epistemological frameworks.”⁶⁰ She argues that Quine’s naturalised epistemology “is an approach to the study of knowledge that promises enormous aid and comfort to feminists attempting to expose and dismantle the oppressive intellectual ideology of a patriarchal, racist, class-stratified society.”⁶¹ She explains the helpfulness of this epistemology by way of outlining a contradiction at the heart of much feminist epistemological work, particularly feminist standpoint theory. She terms this problem the “bias paradox.”⁶² On the one hand, feminists seek to expose and criticise the male bias underlying much received wisdom, but on the other, they refute the possibility of objectivity, insisting that all knowledge is socially situated, thereby undermining the value they seem to be upholding in criticising the male bias of received wisdom. A naturalised epistemology offers a way out of this bind. This epistemology recognises that knowing in fact requires bias, and so entails that we abandon neutrality as an epistemic ideal. But it also allows us to critique bias, for it distinguishes between good and bad bias, where good bias facilitates the gathering of knowledge, while bad bias obstructs that.⁶³ But I am not sure that this moves us any closer to an answer to the question of how women can know their oppression. Moreover, to the extent that it is concerned with bias, and attempting to expose bad bias, it seems to me to miss the point: if men’s image of a woman makes who a woman is, such that a woman is just that image, then men’s image of a woman ceases to be biased, and becomes instead perfectly, neutrally, accurate. Bias, then, is not the problem; actuality is.

⁵⁹ She acknowledges this, saying, “Now it is on this point that I find myself in disagreement with many feminist philosophers.” Louise M. Antony, “Quine as Feminist: The Radical Import of Naturalised Epistemology,” in *A Mind of One’s Own*, ed. Antony and Witt, 187.

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

⁶¹ *ibid.*

⁶² *ibid.*, 188.

⁶³ “The naturalised approach can therefore vindicate all of the insights feminist theory has produced regarding the ideological functions of the concept of objectivity without undercutting the critical purpose of exposing androcentric and other objectionable forms of bias, when they produce oppressive falsehoods.” *ibid.*, 218.

Susan Hekman argues that feminist standpoint theory “represents the beginning of a paradigm shift in the concept of knowledge.”⁶⁴ But she is also critical of this theory. Specifically, she argues that while both Hartsock and Harding claim that starting thought from women’s lives will lead to a more objective account of social reality, they provide only self-defeating arguments for this. Addressing Hartsock’s claim that the ruling class’s vision is partial and perverse, while the oppressed class’s vision exposes the real relations among persons, she says that this claim presupposes what standpoint theory denies: a true reality.⁶⁵ Addressing Harding’s claim that “[s]tarting research in women’s lives leads to socially constructed claims that are less false – less partial and distorted – than are the (also socially constructed) claims that result if one starts from the lives of men in the dominant groups,”⁶⁶ she says that this claims presupposes what in her critique of science she denies is possible: a metanarrative.

Alison Wylie addresses this criticism. She argues that if we revise the concept of objectivity, if we consider objectivity not as observer neutrality but as “designating a family of epistemic virtues that should be maximised (in some combination) in the claims we authorise as knowledge,”⁶⁷ then “there would be no incongruity in claiming that contingently, with respect to particular epistemic projects, some social locations and standpoints confer epistemic advantage.”⁶⁸ Determining the epistemic value of a standpoint is, then, a matter of assessing, in an empirically grounded way, “the limitations of particular kinds of knowers, of how likely they are to be partial, and how likely it is that the knowledge they produce will fail to maximise salient epistemic virtues.”⁶⁹ But if men’s image of a woman makes who a woman is, such that a

⁶⁴ Susan Hekman, “Truth and Method: Feminist Standpoint Theory Revisited,” *Signs* 22, no. 2 (1997): 342.

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, 345-346.

⁶⁶ Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?*, 185, quoted in Hekman, “Truth and Method,” 354.

⁶⁷ Alison Wylie, “Why Standpoint Matters,” in *Science and Other cultures: Issues in Philosophies of Science and Technology*, ed. Robert Figueroa and Sandra Harding (New York; London: Routledge, 2003): 34.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

woman is just that image, then women cannot ever experience men's treatment of them as anything other than rightful. So, how can a feminist standpoint even contingently confer an epistemic advantage on women? Wylie's argument thus does not answer the question of how women can know their oppression.

Kristina Rolin argues that a feminist standpoint theory is a methodology for the study of power relations. Picking up and pursuing an argument implicit in Harding's work on a feminist standpoint theory, Rolin argues that, as an object of inquiry, relations of power "pose a special challenge to the methodology of social-scientific research."⁷⁰ This is because they can suppress or distort evidence. They can do this by intimidating potential informants, invoking uncomfortable emotions, inflicting a hermeneutical injustice on potential informants, or undermining a relationship of trust between a researcher and an informant. She then argues that a feminist standpoint can provide a way of dealing with this challenge, saying, "Feminist standpoint theory is a resource for feminist epistemology and philosophy of science because it urges feminist scholars to pay attention to relations of power as a distinctive kind of obstacle to the production of scientific knowledge."⁷¹ This argument contains some important insights, for instance, Rolin recognises that it is not only social scientists but also informants who decide what to tell about, and that informants' ability to tell is limited by the hermeneutical resources available to them. But Rolin's argument presumes that relations of power are finally only concealed, which implies that they do exist, and can be made visible. Indeed, she begins by taking up Harding's argument that "research that begins from the lives of unprivileged groups enables social scientists to reveal 'hidden aspects of social relations between genders and the institutions that support those relations.'"⁷² Here, relations of power are merely "hidden." But if men's image of a woman makes who a woman is, such that a woman is just that image, then men's relations with women are ontologically rightful relations. This is because men relate to women as who they see women as being, which is who women really are. This means that relations of power are not simply concealed, rather, they are ontologically not relations of power,

⁷⁰ Rolin, "Standpoint Theory as a Methodology for the Study of Power Relations," 222.

⁷¹ *ibid.*

⁷² *ibid.*, 219. Quoting Harding, *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge?*, 127.

which means that they do not exist as relations of power. Rolin's argument does not explain how, if relations of power are made not relations of power, a feminist standpoint can uncover them. It thus does not provide an answer to the question of how women can know men's oppression of them, as posed by MacKinnon.

Kristen Intemann has argued that we ought to merge feminist standpoint theory and feminist empiricism. She sees feminist standpoint theory as drawing on feminist empiricism but differing from and bettering it in two ways. First, feminist standpoint theory believes that diversity of social position within an epistemic community is epistemically beneficial because members of marginalised groups are more likely to have had experiences that give them access to knowledge that members of privileged groups do not have, knowledge which helps to identify and contest assumptions that power relations had previously obscured. Second, feminist standpoint theory endorses specific ethical and political values.⁷³ In these ways, feminist standpoint theory is more capable than feminist empiricism of exposing and challenging oppression.⁷⁴

But merging feminist standpoint theory and feminist empiricism brings us no closer to an answer to the question of how women can know men's oppression of them. Intemann takes for granted that women have experiences that give them insight into men's relations with them, access to knowledge of those relations as oppressive. She says, for instance, "What implications does the contemporary interpretation of the situated-knowledge thesis have for the thesis of epistemic advantage? This thesis can now be understood as the claim that epistemic communities that include members of marginalised groups will have epistemic advantages, or more rigorous critical consciousness, than communities that do not (at least in some contexts)."⁷⁵ She elaborates, "To put this another way, standpoint theorists have argued that members of oppressed groups sometimes have special experiences that result from their location as 'insider-outsiders'. Members of oppressed groups must understand the assumptions that constitute the worldviews

⁷³ Kristen Intemann, "25 Years of Feminist Empiricism and Standpoint Theory: Where Are We Now?," *Hypatia* 25, no. 4 (2010): 790-792.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, 791, 792-793.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, 787.

of dominant groups in order to successfully navigate the world. At the same time, they often have experiences that conflict with dominant views and generate alternative views about how the world works.”⁷⁶ But if men’s image of a woman makes who a woman is, such that a woman is just that image, just the dominant view of a woman, then her experiences are perfectly aligned with, and only reinforce, the dominant view. So, it is not at all clear how women can have experiences that conflict with dominant views, that cause them to perceive and question assumptions. Merging feminist standpoint theory and feminist empiricism does nothing to clarify this, to account for these experiences.

José Medina argues that oppression can, perhaps unexpectedly, foster epistemic virtues, namely, those of humility, curiosity/diligence, and open-mindedness.⁷⁷ Combined with the experiences that come with being oppressed, these virtues converge on a subversive lucidity.⁷⁸ This lucidity can “yield new insights that trigger struggles for the redescription of the relevant experiences – the cognitive side of social struggles.”⁷⁹ Medina offers an example to illustrate what he means:

In the women’s movement . . . there have been many experiences that have led to the rethinking of sexual norms and the rearticulation of concepts such as that of sexual abuse. These experiences of course encountered resistances of all sorts; and they themselves, on the other hand, became part of a struggle, and, therefore, of a way of resisting hegemonic conceptions and the form of oppression supported by those conceptions. It is in this sense that Sandra Harding talks about “the struggle we have had to get women’s testimony about rape, wife battering, sexual harassment, and incest

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, 788.

⁷⁷ Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance*, 42-45.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, 44-45.

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, 47.

experiences accepted as reliable by police, psychiatrists, other men and women, etc.”⁸⁰

What, or at least part of what, I think Medina is saying is that lucidity can enable the oppressed to recognise their experiences as something other than what they are said to be, to apprehend a meaning not assigned to them, to perceive, for instance, what was considered flirtation as sexual harassment, consensual sex as rape, what a woman provoked and deserved as abuse. But lucidity can only reveal the nature of an experience; it cannot create it. So, in order for lucidity to yield the kind of insights that trigger struggles for the redescription of the relevant experiences, one must have the experience that comes to be redescribed. As an example, in order for lucidity to enable a woman to recognise a sexual act as a sexual violation, she must first, even if only minimally, experience that sexual act as a violation. But if men's image of a woman makes who a woman is, such that a woman is just that image, then women experience men's treatment of them as rightful treatment, and as such not oppressive treatment. Women may be lucid, then, but they have no experiences that lucidity can reveal as instances of oppression. Their lucidity thus has no subversive potential.

Unlike others, who, in their attempts to explain how women can know men's oppression of them, evade MacKinnon's conclusion of the ontological impossibility for women to experience men's treatment of them as oppressive, Ruth Colker confronts it. She says, “MacKinnon's lifework on behalf of women, in light of her theoretical perspective, raises two questions: (1) how can there be a distinctive feminist perspective under male domination, and (2) how can we use the legal tools of this state to transform society, given the feminist critique of the state and society?”⁸¹ She goes on, “MacKinnon recognises the significance of my first question. She says: ‘Why some women take the step of identifying their situation

⁸⁰ ibid. Quoting Sandra Harding, “Ascetic Intellectual Opportunities: Reply to Alison Wylie,” in *Science, Morality, and Feminist Theory*, ed. Marsha P. Hanen and Kai Nielsen (Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 1987): 77.

⁸¹ Ruth Colker, “Feminist Consciousness and the State: A Basis for Cautious Optimism,” *Columbia Law Review* 90, no. 4 (1990): 1149.

with their status as women, transforming their discontents into grievances, is a crucial unanswered question of feminism (or, for that matter, of marxism).”⁸² Colker says that MacKinnon offers two answers to this question. The first answer is that women come to see that men oppress them through the process of consciousness raising. The second answer is that women come to see that men oppress them “because male domination is not all-pervasive and all-powerful.”⁸³ Colker rejects the first answer and argues for the second.⁸⁴ Unlike other answers to this question, this answer at least accepts the mutual exclusivity of the all-pervasiveness of male domination, as Colker puts it, and women’s consciousness of men’s oppression of them. But insofar as it undermines the claim of this all-pervasiveness, it is unsatisfactory. MacKinnon’s argument demands an explanation of how women can know their oppression, given the all-pervasiveness of male dominance. MacKinnon, as Colker seems to be aware,⁸⁵ does not want to relinquish the claim of this all-pervasiveness. For MacKinnon, to relinquish this claim is to undercut the feminist view of reality, a view of the absoluteness of men’s power. This answer thus accounts for women’s knowledge of their oppression, and thereby unparalyses feminism, at the cost of undermining it on the most fundamental level.

MacKinnon too finally has no answer to this question. Nor does she really attempt to come up with such an answer. Instead, she expresses a belief that consciousness raising is crucial to women’s coming to consciousness of their oppression. Consciousness raising is the process in which women share, validate, and analyse their experiences of life as women. In consciousness raising, “Women’s

⁸² *ibid.*, 1149-1150.

⁸³ *ibid.*, 1150.

⁸⁴ She says, “I would suggest that feminists can only accept the possibility of consciousness raising working and the possibility of men identifying with feminist theory if they describe male domination as *not* being all-pervasive and all-powerful. There must be values present in society that are inconsistent with male domination and can be the basis of feminist consciousness for both women and men.” *ibid.*, 1153. Italics in the original.

⁸⁵ Colker says, “She suggests that women can come to understand their own oppression because male domination is not all-pervasive and all-powerful. Although MacKinnon repeatedly backs off this statement, I find it a much more satisfactory explanation of the possibility of feminist consciousness.” *ibid.*

lives are discussed in all their momentous triviality, that is, as they are lived through. The technique explores the social world each woman inhabits through her speaking of it, through comparison with other women's experiences, and through women's experiences of each other in the group itself."⁸⁶ But if men's image of a woman makes who a woman is, such that a woman is just that image, then women experience men's treatment of them as rightful, and as such not oppressive. If this is so, then how can women's discussion and analysis of their experiences enable them to see those experiences, which are to them not experiences of oppression, as experiences of oppression? Colker grasps this. She says,

MacKinnon seems to be saying that, of course, women can see their own oppression within a world that contains their own oppression because that is exactly what that world looks like, as constructed by men. Women are not seeing from outside of this world, but from within it so we should not be surprised that such insight is possible. There is no circularity because consciousness raising enables women to see the world acutely from within male domination as it does exist.

MacKinnon's explanation is somewhat helpful in that she is reminding us that we do not always need to find logical, rational explanations for human phenomena; we can turn to glimpses from our own life experience to explain something like our theory of knowledge. Nevertheless, MacKinnon's explanation would be more helpful if she drew on more than life experience because her explanation cannot explain the normative judgements that emerge from consciousness raising. Consciousness raising involves women not only describing the world, but also putting *normative judgements* on that world. These normative judgements, to the extent that they are inconsistent with male domination, should be unattainable under male domination. One important aspect of male domination is women's participation in its perpetuation – women's "collaboration" as MacKinnon has aptly noted

⁸⁶ MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 86.

elsewhere. Male domination must necessarily construct the world so that women do not and cannot understand that they are oppressed; otherwise, male domination would lose its collaborators. Thus, if women describe their world from within its self-enclosed vantage point, they would have to reach the conclusions of Phyllis Schlafly – that men and women are different but the difference benefits women as well as men.

Stating my observation somewhat differently, it is not surprising that feminists can identify sex-roles in society within or outside consciousness raising. Most women, especially antifeminist women, can identify sex-roles. We can see sex-roles from within the self-enclosed space of male domination. What is difficult to see under male domination is that some aspects of these sex-roles are wrong, are bad for women. It takes norms outside male domination to provide that meaning. An experiential justification cannot provide us with an explanation of the source of that evaluative judgement.⁸⁷

MacKinnon is fully aware that, her belief that consciousness raising does in some, perhaps inexplicable way, do just that – raise consciousness – notwithstanding, she has no answer to this question.⁸⁸ She asks, “How can male supremacy be diminishing to women when women embrace and defend their place in it? How can dominance and submission violate women when women eroticise it?”⁸⁹ Elsewhere, she says, “If the existing social model and reality of sexuality centre on male force, and if that sex is socially learned and ideologically considered positive and is rewarded, what is surprising is that not all women eroticise dominance, not all love pornography, and many resent rape . . . Given the pervasiveness of such

⁸⁷ Colker, “Feminist Consciousness and the State,” 1151-1152.

⁸⁸ Colker sees this, too. She says, “MacKinnon herself seems to recognise that her previous discussion did not satisfactorily explain how some women can develop a critical perspective on male domination.” *ibid.*, 1152.

⁸⁹ MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 115.

experiences, the truly interesting question becomes why and how sexuality in women is ever other than masochistic.”⁹⁰

In the end, instead of remaining stuck on this question, MacKinnon seems to accept that as a matter of reality women do have experiences of which they are ontologically incapable, experiences which, through consciousness raising, they can come to see as experiences of oppression. As she says, “The fact that consciousness-raising groups were there presupposes the discovery that they were there to make.”⁹¹ But if women do have experiences of which they are ontologically incapable, then must not they be on some level other than men’s image of a woman? Implicitly, MacKinnon too undercuts the claim, the claim that she was first to make, and that is perhaps most the contribution of her work, that men’s image of a woman makes who a woman is.

In sum, attempts at an answer to the question of how women can know their oppression succeed only either as explanations of how women can know their oppression not *qua* women but *qua* class, which is not the explanation that this question demands, or, as explanations of how women can know their oppression *qua* women, where those explanations presuppose that women are ontologically capable of experiencing men’s treatment of them as oppressive, and thus undercut the claim that men’s image of a woman makes who a woman is. If this claim is entailed, as I think it is, by the argument made by feminist epistemologists that men have epistemic authority, while women do not, then they succeed only by negating a claim that is fundamental to both feminist epistemology and the feminist theory of sex inequality more broadly. So, if we want to preserve this claim, as I think we should, then we must concede that feminism yet has no answer to what seems to me the fundamental feminist question, the question most its duty to answer: how can women know their oppression?

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, 149.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, 86.

VII. How Can Women Know Men's Oppression of Them?

The scream
of an illegitimate voice

It has ceased to hear itself, therefore
it asks itself

How do I exist?

– Adrienne Rich, "Cartographies of Silence"

Cohering MacKinnon's theory of sexuality transforms feminism into the theory that it aspires to be, a theory of the kind that marxism is, but it does not answer the question of how women can know men's oppression of them. And so, however much closer it brings us to freedom from oppression, however much further away it keeps us. Cohering MacKinnon's theory of sexuality thus only returns us to the question of how women can know their oppression.

In this chapter, I attempt to answer this question. We have seen that if men's image of a woman makes who a woman is, where that image is one of just a feminine being, such that a woman is just a feminine being, then men's oppression of women is unknowable. But we have not considered whether the content of men's image of a woman, which is the content of the feminine being, which becomes the nature of a woman, alters this. Specifically, we have not considered whether if men's image of a woman makes who a woman is, where that image is, for MacKinnon, one of just a sex object, or for me, one of just a sexually violable being, men's oppression of women is unknowable. So, I begin by showing that, on MacKinnon's conception of a woman as just a sex object, men's oppression of women is indeed unknowable. But, as we have replaced this conception with one of a woman as just a sexually violable being, I then consider whether, on this conception, women can know men's oppression of them.

1. If a Woman Is a Sex Object

On MacKinnon's view, firstly, men's image of a woman makes who a woman is, such that a woman is just that image, secondly, that image is one of just a feminine being, and thirdly, a feminine being is just a sex object. Thus, on her view, a woman is just a sex object. If a woman is just a sex object, then what realises a woman is just what realises a sex object. As a sex object is just an object that exists to be used for sex, its existence is fulfilled, which is to say, it is realised, by its sexual use. So, what realises a woman is just sexual use. As men treat women as who they see women as being, their treatment of women *qua* women is just their treatment of women as sex objects, as objects that exist to be used for sex. Such treatment is sexual use. This means that men's treatment of women *qua* women realises women. It is treatment that respects their natures, and brings them fully into being. It is thus ontologically rightful treatment, and as such not oppressive. Men's oppression of women is therefore unknowable.

2. If a Woman Is a Sexually Violable Being

But on my view, a feminine being is not a sex object; she is instead just a sexually violable being. This means that a woman is not a sex object, but just a sexually violable being. So, let us see whether, if a woman is just a sexually violable being, women can know men's oppression of them. If a woman is just a sexually violable being, then what realises a woman is just what realises a sexually violable being. As a sexually violable being is just a being that exists to be sexually violated, its existence is fulfilled, which is to say, it is realised, by its sexual violation. So, what realises a woman is just sexual violation. This is suggested by the fact that for a man to take the virginity of a woman is for him to make a woman of her. A man is considered to have taken the virginity of a woman insofar as he breaks her hymen,¹

¹ See, for example: Rebecca J. Cook and Bernard M. Dickens, "Hymen Reconstruction: Ethical and Legal Issues," *International Journal of Gynecology and Obstetrics* 107 (2009): 266-269; Jean-Jacques Amy, "Certificates of Virginity and Reconstruction of the Hymen," *European Journal of Contraception and Reproductive Healthcare* 13, no. 2 (2008): 111-113; Deanna Holtzman and Nancy

and thereby makes her bleed.² If he does not break her hymen, hence, does not make her bleed, then she is thought to not have been a virgin, so, he is regarded as not having taken her virginity. That he breaks her hymen, thereby making her bleed, indicates that his penetration of her was physically forcible. So, for a man to have sex with a woman, where sex is his physically forcible penetration of her, is for him to make a woman of her. This means that a man's physically forcible penetration, which is to say, his violation, of a woman is what realises a woman.

But, unlike in the case of a woman's being a sex object, if a woman is just a sexually violable being, then she cannot be realised. To be a sexually violable being is to be a being that has sexual violation as its function, which is to be a being that exists to be sexually violated. So, a woman exists to be sexually violated. If a woman exists to be sexually violated, then sexually violating a woman is using her for that for which she exists to be used. To use a thing for that for which it exists to be used is to treat it in a way that respects its nature, which is to treat it rightfully. So, the sexual violation of a woman is the rightful treatment of a woman.

If the sexual violation of a woman is the rightful treatment of a woman then it is ontologically not the sexual violation of a woman. This explains why it is that "[t]he simple, self-evident equation between the force of the aggressor and the will of the victim – that force means violation of the will – is never plausible when the one violated is a woman."³ Rightful treatment is the opposite to violation. The rightful treatment of a thing is the treatment of it that respects its nature. The violation of a thing is the treatment of it that disrespects its nature. As such it is the wrongful treatment of a thing. So, if the sexual violation of a woman is the rightful treatment of a woman, then it is in fact not the sexual violation of a woman. MacKinnon suggests

Kullish, "Nevermore: They Hymen and the Loss of Virginity," *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 44 (1995): 303-332; and David G. Berger and Morton G. Wenger, "The Ideology of Virginity," *Journal of Marriage and Family* 35, no. 4 (1973): 666-676.

² "The traditional proof of virginity is the occurrence of bleeding as a result of defloration." A. A. Hegazy and M. O. Rukban, "Hymen: Facts and Conceptions," *The Health* 3 (2012): 113. De Beauvoir says, "There are still villages in France where the bloody sheet is displayed to parents and friends the morning after the wedding." De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 178.

³ Dworkin, *Pornography*, 198.

something like this when she says, “How can dominance and submission violate women when women eroticise it?”⁴

This explains not only why women often express feeling “used” by men, but also why they experience this use as a kind of abuse, as a violation. If a woman is just a sexually violable being, then the sexual violation of a woman is the use of her for that for which she is to be used. This means that men’s sexual violation of women is in fact their sexual use of women. And, as women exist to be sexually violated, not to be sexually used, that use is itself wrongful treatment. In explaining why women express feeling “used” by men, and why they experience this use as a kind of abuse, this accounts for the enduring feminist claim that a woman is a sex object: if a woman is just a sexually violable being, then men’s treatment of women *qua* women is their sexual violation of women, which is in fact their sexual use of women. But it also accounts for an experience which, on that claim, is ontologically impossible: if women were sex objects, then they would experience their sexual use as their rightful treatment, not as, what they mean when they say that they feel used, wrongful treatment.

Incidentally, it may also explain why men see women as duplicitous,⁵ and, in particular, why, following sex, they often suspect that the woman was not, as she had said she was, virginal.⁶ “On that occasion, during the defloration, which caused her considerable pain, her husband exclaimed, ‘You have deceived me! You are not a virgin!’”⁷ If a woman is a sexually violable being, then a man expects that sex will be his violation of her. But, as the sexual violation of a woman cannot be the sexual violation of her, in having sex with her he finally does not experience sex as his

⁴ MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 115. Similarly, Dworkin says, “Force does not violate or victimise her because force is nature’s way of giving her what she really wants.” Dworkin, *Pornography*, 198.

⁵ For a discussion of literary depictions of women as duplicitous, see: Susan Gubar, “The Female Monster in Augustan Satire,” *Signs* 3, no. 2 (1977): 380-394.

⁶ For a discussion of the preoccupation with falsified virginity in the eighteenth century, see Tassie Gwilliam, “Counterfeit Maidenheads in the Eighteenth Century,” *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 6, no. 4 (1996): 518-548.

⁷ De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 405.

violation of her.⁸ But instead of perceiving that this is because a woman is sexually violable, he instead thinks that she must not have been sexually violable, and so he sees her as having deceived him into believing that she was. To go further, as the sexual violation of a woman is in fact the sexual use of a woman, he thinks that she was not sexually violable but sexually usable. And this explains men's belief that all women are, at bottom, whores.⁹ I say that it particularly explains why men often suspect that the woman was not virginal because the virgin is regarded as the embodiment of violability, hence, sex with her as a complete violation. So, when, in having sex with a woman, a man does not experience sex as his violation of her, he thinks that she must not have been virginal; if she had, sex would have been his violation of her.

⁸ This gives new meaning to MacKinnon's claim that "[m]ale sexual desire is thereby simultaneously created and serviced, never satisfied once and for all." MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 137. As what satiates men's sexual desire is their dominance, and as they get dominance just in violating women, if men's sexual violation of women cannot be their sexual violation of women, such that men cannot experience sex as their violation of women, then men finally cannot satiate their sexual desire.

⁹ The following passage from Henry Miller's novel *The Tropic of Cancer* evokes this, a man's feeling, following sex, that a woman is sexually usable, and his disgust toward her for that, a feeling which eventually becomes the belief that all women are sexually usable, that all women are whores: "The thing is this – they all look alike. When you look at them with their clothes on you imagine all sorts of things: you give them an individuality like, which they haven't got, of course. There's just a crack there between the legs and you get all steamed up about it – you don't even look at it half the time. You know it's there and all you think about is getting your ramrod inside; it's as though your penis did the thinking for you. It's an illusion! You get all burned up about nothing . . . about a crack with hair on it, or without hair. It's so absolutely meaningless that it fascinated me to look at it. I must have studied it for ten minutes or more. When you look at it that way, sort of detached like, you get funny notions in your head. All that mystery about sex and then you discover that it's nothing – just a blank. Wouldn't it be funny if you found a harmonica inside . . . or a calendar? But there's nothing there . . . nothing at all. It's disgusting. It almost drove me mad . . . Listen, do you know what I did afterwards? I gave her a quick lay and then I turned my back on her. Yeah, I picked up a book and I read. You can get something out of a book, even a bad book . . . but a cunt, it's just sheer loss of time . . ." Henry Miller, *Tropic of Cancer* (London: John Calder, 1963): 140. Ellipses in the original.

If the sexual violation of a woman is ontologically not the sexual violation of a woman. then what realises a woman is ontologically not what realises a woman. This means that a woman, for being sexually violable, for being a woman, cannot be realised. That is, insofar as a woman is a sexually violable being, hence, a woman, the sexual violation of her, what realises her, cannot be the sexual violation of her, cannot be what realises her, and so she cannot be realised. This explains why women pervasively feel an inexplicable sense of being unfulfilled, of being dissatisfied. Betty Friedan encounters over and over again women who feel this way, and so comes to ask, "Just what was this problem that has no name?"¹⁰ She continues,

What were the words women used when they tried to express it? Sometimes a woman would say, "I feel empty somehow . . . incomplete." Or she would say, "I feel as if I don't exist." Sometimes she blotted out the feeling with a tranquilliser. Sometimes she thought the problem was with her husband, or her children, or that what she really needed was to redecorate her house, or move to a better neighbourhood, or have an affair, or another baby. Sometimes, she went to a doctor with symptoms she could hardly describe: "A tired feeling . . . I get so angry with the children it scares me . . . I feel like crying without any reason."¹¹

It may also explain why women seem to connect sex to this feeling. Friedan sees this, too, saying,

I did not do a Kinsey study. But when I was on the trail of the problem that has no name, the suburban housewives I interviewed would often give me an explicitly sexual answer to a question that was not sexual at all. I would ask about their personal interests, ambitions,

¹⁰ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books, 1965): 18.

¹¹ *ibid.* See generally, "The Problem That Has No Name," in *ibid.*, 13-29.

what they did, or would like to do, not necessarily as wives or mothers, but when they were not occupied with their husbands or their children or their housework. The question might even be what they were doing with their education. But some of these women simply assumed that I was asking about sex. Was the problem that has no name a sexual problem, after all? I might have thought so, except that when these women spoke of sex, there was a false note, a strange quality about their words. They made mysterious allusions or broad hints; they were eager to be asked about sex; even if I did not ask, they often took pride in recounting the explicit details of some sexual adventure. They were not making them up; these adventures were real enough. But what made them sound unsexual, so unreal?¹²

If the sexual violation of a woman is what realises her, then sex, as the sexual violation of a woman, is the act in which a woman is realised. So, if the sexual violation of a woman cannot be the sexual violation of a woman, then sex, the act in which a woman is realised, cannot be the act in which a woman is realised. Sex promises to fulfil but never does a woman: "I need sex to feel alive, but I never really feel him."¹³

If a woman, for being a woman, cannot be realised, then the being that a woman is thwarts a woman. That is, if a woman's sexual violability, her womanness, prevents her from being able to be realised, then her womanness thwarts her. On the one hand, this is what feminists have long argued, that the sex role, or in more contemporary terms, gender, namely, the feminine being, assigned to women is oppressive. But, on the other, it is not. Feminists have seen the feminine being as oppressive because it denies and stifles women's full personhood, personhood which, for these feminists, women in truth have. I am arguing that the feminine being is oppressive because it thwarts women's femininity, their womanhood, not because it denies and stifles their personhood, in any abstract sense of personhood, any

¹² *ibid.*, 226.

¹³ *ibid.*

sense other than womanhood. MacKinnon criticises the view that grounds consciousness of oppression in a claim of women's full personhood, and advocates a view like the one I am putting forward here when she says:

Some feminists early in the second wave advanced "feelings" as pure reflection of the external world and therefore unmediated access to truth . . . This intuitionist approach posits feelings, as Proudhon and others posited reason, as outside society, an internalised reference system for measuring social reality that derives its claim to validity from its place beyond social reach. Surely one is more likely to feel bad than justified when confronting difficulties in a situation that social learning supports, such as motherhood. This response may produce the sense that feelings are an independent basis for understanding reality, that thoughts are able to grasp it only derivatively, and that thinking is socially constructed while feelings are not. Yet feminism has uncovered women's social roles in women's actual feelings and society's standards in women's feelings, both in embracing and rejecting their roles. If a woman feels anger at not being treated as a full person, this surely refers to social definitions of personhood, possibly even liberal ones, to which men routinely experience entitlement without being subjected to class-based critique. Similarly, feelings of loss of control over one's life may reflect a social standard of self-actualisation that requires control as a means to it.¹⁴

However, I would argue that just as women cannot have an innate conception of a person, so they cannot have a conception of themselves as persons, where "persons" refers to an abstract notion of a person. They can only have the conception of themselves as the persons as which society conceives of them, which is women.

¹⁴ MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 52.

At this point, it might be thought, in relation to the question of how women can know men's oppression of them, that this just means that it is women's own natures that thwart them, not men that oppress them. But if the being that a woman is thwarts a woman, then it at once is and is not the being that a woman is. It is not in that, thwarting a woman, it is the frustration of, and so not, a woman's being. But it is not the frustration of a woman's transcendental self, a self that somehow inexplicably exists despite never being socially conceived of, much less attended to, it is the frustration of a self that men, in making women sexually violable beings, have created, a self that feminism has believed and legitimated and struggled for, but which it may have mistaken for authentic, in the sense of innate, unsocially created, a piece of a woman that men have not reached. If the being that a woman is at once is and is not the being that a woman is, then in the moment that men's image of a woman becomes true, that women become sexually violable, become women, it becomes false. MacKinnon says something redolent of this. She says,

Male power is real; it is just not what it claims to be, namely, the only reality. Male power is a myth that makes itself true. What it is to raise consciousness is to confront male power in this duality: as total on one side and a delusion on the other. In consciousness raising, women learn they have learned that men are everything, women their negation, but that the sexes are equal. The content of the message is revealed true and false at the same time; in fact, each part reflects the other transvalued. If "men are all, women their negation" is taken as social criticism rather than simple description, it becomes clear for the first time that women are men's equals, everywhere in chains. Their chains become visible, their inferiority – their inequality – a product of subjection and a mode of its enforcement. Reciprocally, the moment it is seen that this – life as we know it – is not equality, that the sexes are not socially equal, womanhood can no longer be defined in terms of lack of maleness, as negativity.¹⁵

¹⁵ MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory," 542.

That in the moment that men's image of a woman becomes true, it becomes false means that the realised form of its truth is its falsity. That image, then, is ultimately false. So, women's own natures do not thwart them, rather, men impose on women an identity that is not theirs, an identity that denies them self-realisation, and treat women as that identity, thus denying them self-realisation. This, I think, explains how women, even as they are nothing other than men's image of a woman, can have the kind of experience that enables them to come to know men's oppression of them.

3. Consciousness Raising

MacKinnon believes that consciousness raising plays an integral part in women's coming to know their oppression.¹⁶ She says, "The key to feminist theory consists in its way of knowing. Consciousness raising is that way."¹⁷ And, "Sexism is seen to be all of a piece and so much a part of the omnipresent background of life that a massive effort of collective concentration is required even to discern that it has edges. Consciousness raising is such an effort."¹⁸ Women confirm this. Pamela Allen, for instance, says,

After sharing we know that women suffer at the hands of a male supremacist society and that this male supremacy intrudes into every sphere of our existence, controlling the ways in which we are allowed to make our living and the ways in which we find fulfilment in personal relationships. We know that our most secret, our most private problems are grounded in the way women are treated, in the way women are allowed to live. Isolation turns frustration into self doubt; but joining together gives women perspective that can lead to action. Through sharing they can see that they have been lied to, and begin to look

¹⁶ See Colker, *Feminist Consciousness and the State*, 1146-1170. See esp. pp. 1150-1153.

¹⁷ MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 84.

¹⁸ *ibid.*, 90.

critically at a society which so narrowly defines the roles they may play.¹⁹

But according to the explanation that I have given, women can, it seems, come to know their oppression individually. They have no need for consciousness raising. So how might consciousness raising fit with my explanation, what part might it play in women's coming to know their oppression?

If a woman accepts men's image of a woman as what a woman is in truth, then she considers what realises a woman on that image to be what realises a woman in truth. So, if what that is does not realise her, as it cannot, then it seems to me that, in all likelihood, she will think that there is something wrong with her, that she is abnormal, dysfunctional, that she is not what a woman ought to be, that she is a failure of a woman. Reflecting this, women feel that there is something wrong with them if they do not find the act of penetration sexually satiating: "I can enjoy sex without orgasm, but psychologically I feel like I'm a failure, like a not totally functioning woman."²⁰ As I have explained, for a woman to be just a sexually violable being is for her to be just a sexual being who desires her subordination. This means that what realises a woman is just what realises a sexual being who desires her subordination. What realises a sexual being, what fulfils it, is just what satiates its sexual desire. So, what realises a woman is just what satiates her sexual desire, which is her subordination. A sex act is just an act in which men violate women. It follows that the paradigmatic sex act, sexual intercourse, the act of penetration, is just an act in which men completely and utterly violate, hence, subordinate women. It is thus the act that completely and utterly satiates a woman's sexual desire. As such, it is also the act that realises a woman.²¹ That women feel that there is something

¹⁹ Pamela Allen, *Free Space: A Perspective on the Small Group in Women's Liberation*, 2nd ed. (New York: Times Change Press, 1970): 27.

²⁰ Shere Hite, *The Hite Report: A Nationwide Study of Female Sexuality* (1976; New York; London; Toronto; Melbourne: Seven Stories Press, 2004): 107. See generally pp. 165-168.

²¹ This may explain why women feel unfulfilled for not having vaginal orgasms: "If I don't orgasm, when intercourse is over I am left frustrated and unfulfilled and bitter/guilty." *ibid.*, 109. "I've tried everything, but I've never had one. I feel that having an orgasm would leave me more satisfied.

wrong with them if they do not find the act of penetration sexually satiating thus indicates that they feel there is something wrong with them if what realises a woman does not realise them. This unshakeable feeling that there is something wrong with her may be what prompts her to seek out other women, and speak to them, to see if they have that feeling, too. In other words, it may be what gives impulse to consciousness raising. Reflecting this, women's experience of sexuality, their discontent and confusion surrounding it, seems often to be what moves women to speak to other women.²²

Then, through consciousness raising, women can come to see that their experience is shared by other women, and so begin to seriously consider that perhaps there is not something wrong with them, that perhaps there is something about being a member of the group women that prevents women from attaining self-realisation.²³ Reflecting this, in consciousness raising, women return again and again to the subject of sexuality. MacKinnon says, "Extensive attention was paid to small situations and denigrated pursuits that made up the common life of women in terms of energy, time, intensity, and definition – prominently, housework and sexuality . . . Intercourse was interrogated, how and by whom it is initiated, its timing, women's feelings during and after, its place in relationships, its meaning, its place in being a

Now I never feel contented when we are finished. I feel very frustrated and insecure without them. It causes me more unhappiness than anything else in my life." *ibid.*, 166. "I have never yet come, so having sex usually ends up a little sour. I have been very excited and feeling very good when the man I'm with comes – which is the end of really active exciting lovemaking – but still I feel very depressed, unloved, and I feel like crying- sometimes I have cried (though I usually tried not to, so I wouldn't upset my lover). It's hard to describe how bad and totally alone and ignored this makes me feel." *ibid.*, 167.

²² One woman, for instance, says, "I need to talk with other women about sex but it is so impossible. I am embarrassed about my not having orgasms and wonder whether my friends share this problem." *ibid.*, 165.

²³ "Through experiencing the common discussion comes the understanding that many of the situations described are not personal at all, and are not based on individual inadequacies, but rather have a root in the social order. What we have found is that painful 'personal' problems can be common to many of the women present. Thus attention can turn to finding the real causes of these problems rather than merely emphasising one's own inadequacies." Allen, *Free Space*, 26.

woman.”²⁴ And, in their discussion of sexuality, they do move from seeing themselves as sexually inadequate or dysfunctional, and therefore as failures as women,²⁵ to seeing sexuality as central to men’s oppression of them.²⁶

On the explanation that I have given here, women can know men’s oppression of them not because they have not wholly become men’s image of women, which implies that men do not have and women do not lack epistemic authority to the degree to which MacKinnon, along with feminist epistemologists, argues. Rather, women can know it precisely because they have become men’s image of a woman, which they do because men have epistemic authority, while they do not. This means that women can know men’s oppression of them not because that oppression is not so severe as feminists maintain, but because it is. This explanation legitimates feminist consciousness twice over: first, by substantiating the claim that women can know men’s oppression of them, and second, by theoretically preserving the severity of that oppression, which is largely what that consciousness expresses.

Cohering MacKinnon’s theory of sexuality thus goes beyond transforming feminism into the theory that it aspires to be, beyond creating for it the account of sex hierarchy that it has sought to have, to explaining how women can know men’s oppression of them, to legitimating feminist consciousness. It thereby reinvigorates feminism, the movement against this oppression, making it not merely possible, but absolutely necessary. “The question then becomes not whether such knowledge is possible, but whether women are such a people and now is such a time.”²⁷

²⁴ MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 87-88.

²⁵ One woman, for instance, says, “When friends and I began discussing our sexuality a few years ago at ‘consciousness raising’ sessions, we found very few of us had orgasms during intercourse, although we had always expected to and been expected to – almost automatically. Being able to admit to each other that we didn’t gave us a sense of relief and elation about feelings about ourselves- that we weren’t abnormal, weird, or ‘different,’ and we began to feel really good about our sexuality for the first time.” Hite, *The Hite Report*, 183.

²⁶ See Alix Kates Shulman, “Sex and Power: Sexual Bases of Radical Feminism,” *Signs* 5, no. 4 (1980): 590-604.

²⁷ MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, 104.