

FEMINIST SPACES

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Feminist Spaces is an online, interdisciplinary academic journal that invites undergraduate and graduate students as well as faculty and independent scholars from institutions worldwide to submit formal essays as well as multimodal and artistic pieces per our biannual Call for Works. Established in March 2014, this journal is sponsored by members from the University of West Florida's Women's Studies Collective, a student-run organization invested in the vitality of Women's Studies at UWF and the larger academic community.

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Letter from the Editors

Dear Readers,

This issue of *Feminist Spaces* is the product of our third open call for works. Once again, we are both surprised and delighted by the diverse content of the submissions we have received. Through this call, we received vast array of works discussing relevant topics such as the ethics of intersex surgery, oppression through the objectification of menstruation as well as feminist readings of literature, film, and art.

We are increasingly thankful for the overwhelming support we continue to receive, without which this journal would cease to grow and expand in the ways that it has. We extend sincere thanks to our contributors. Without your passion and hard work this journal would not be possible; our editorial board, whose work is crucial to the success of this project; and, of course, our readers, whose increasing curiosity and thirst for knowledge provide our endless motivation.

As the area of women's issues continues to expand, opposition and anti-feminist discourse grows as well. As a result, preserving the ability to have an open dialogue on these crucial and timely issues continues to be of paramount importance. It has always been the objective of *Feminist Spaces* to provide an outlet through which feminist voices can engage with, and embrace, one another in the hope that social change may strengthen and continue. We feel that this issue remains true to these goals, while embracing many distinct and controversial challenges that women continue to encounter and resist. We hope that you enjoy the works within this issue and find something that speaks to you.

As always, we invite you to turn the page and explore what lies within and beyond these continually growing feminist spaces.

Our very best,

Erica Miller, Editor-in-Chief
Sydney Stone, Managing Editor
Jordan Thames, Managing Editor



Contributor Biographies

Samantha Earley is a third-year undergraduate student at The University of West Florida. She is currently working on a Bachelor's of Fine Arts in Studio Art. Her passion is in photography. She currently works in Pensacola and plans to move to Asheville, North Carolina, after graduating to continue her education in art and to open her own photography studio/gallery. Her goal is to make art accessible, whether it be owning, making, or learning.

Shawna Guenther, B.Sc. (Hons), M.Sc., M.A., is a Ph.D. candidate in English at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. Her dissertation examines early modern English medical representations of women's breasts. She has published several academic articles and book chapters and has presented at many international conferences including the 2017 "Bowie's Books" at the University of Northampton. She has served as the Secretary of the Graduate Students' Caucus of ACCUTE and as Academic Vice-President of the Graduate Students' Association (University of Regina). Under her pen name Jane Arsenault, she has published several creative non-fiction works about depression and motherhood. She is co-editor of *Mothering Canada: Interdisciplinary Voices* (Demeter, 2010).

Natacha Guyot is a French scholar, author, and public speaker. Her academic background includes two master's degrees, one from Paris III Sorbonne Nouvelle in Film and Media Studies and one from King's College London in Digital Culture and Technology. She currently studies for her Ph.D. in Arts and Humanities at the University of Texas at Dallas. Her main fields of research, which influence her fiction projects as well, are storytelling, science fiction, women, and spirituality.

Didi Hock is how she called herself as a kid. She was born in Germany and has lived half of her life in Spain. She completed professional training in conceptual design, holds a B.A. in Sociology, an M.A. in Gender Studies, and diplomas in different fields of Photography. She has worked (and sometimes earned money) as a temp in construction, in offices and at fairs, as a telephone operator, a waitress, a shop assistant, a German and Spanish teacher, a photographer, an event manager, a social and visual educator, a counsellor, an independent researcher, a curator, a journalist, a translator, a self-publisher, a home-producer of ecological detergent, and as an artist. She refuses the idea of expertise and encourages experimentation. She was reborn in spirit in 2016 when she started to work in text and picture on her personal experience with chronic illness, pain, trauma, sexuality, memory, and auto-history.



Maaïke Hommes is a graduate student at the University of Amsterdam, enrolled in a Research Master's in Cultural Analysis. Holding undergraduate degrees in Philosophy and History, she switched to practice an object-centered approach to culture to address a Deleuzian ethics of complexity. In this pursuit, her research interests include the female sexual body, ethics of desire, relationality, and virtual space.

Darlene Johnston is a Ph.D. student at Bowling Green State University. She has a master's in English and a master's in TESOL. Her research interests include the rhetoric of silence, feminist rhetoric, and the rhetoric of political protest. She has taught at the college level for fifteen years. She currently teaches Legal English to lawyers from Afghanistan working on their LL.M. in Democratic Governance and Rule of Law at Ohio Northern University.

Kristin LaFollette is a Ph.D. student in the Rhetoric & Writing program at Bowling Green State University where she just completed a graduate certificate in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. She received her B.A. and M.A. in English and creative writing from Indiana University (South Bend). Her interests include creative writing, queer and feminist theories, American Indian studies, and transgenre/digital composing.

Christopher Maye graduated from California State University, Long Beach, with a Bachelor's in English Literature and a minor in music in 2015. His research interests include critical theory, gender studies, and political and ethnic literature, but he primarily focuses on 18th century English and 20th Century American literature. While he is currently pursuing an M.A. in English at CSULB, he works as a substitute teacher, a composition instructor for entering CSULB students, and is one of the managing editors for CSULB's graduate academic journal *Watermark*.

Jenna L. O'Connor graduated from MCLA with her B.A. in Sociology, Women's Studies, and English in 2016. From there, she has presented research at a plethora of different conferences, including the American Sociological Association's (ASA) Annual Conference in the Honors Program, the Northeast Popular Culture Association's Annual Conference, and the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges (COPLAC) Annual Conference. In addition, she is also a graduate student member of the Committee on the Status of Minorities through the Eastern Sociological Society (ESS). As a graduate student in the Gender/Cultural Studies Master's Program at Simmons College in Boston, Massachusetts,



her research interests include intersecting and interdisciplinary analyses of gender ambiguity/queer theory/feminist theory, pragmatism, the history and functions of fascism, and how very specific historical analyses of issues surrounding gender/sex/sexuality translate into contemporary, neoliberal times.

Stephen Ohene-Larbi is from Ghana and is a Ph.D. student at Bowling Green State University. He earned his undergraduate degree in communications and two master's degrees (public administration and English with a concentration in ESL) from the University of Toledo. He has taught composition/writing courses at the University of Toledo, Bowling Green State University, and at the American Language Institute. His research interests include ESL, multimodality, and other areas that can help students achieve fluency in writing and speaking.

Diana Pearson holds a B.A. in Women's Studies from Vancouver Island University in Nanaimo, British Columbia, Canada. She is a writer, musician, sex-positive feminist, and holistic nutritionist. She has published non-fiction in *The Hampton Institute*, *Truth-out*, *Earth Common Journal*, and *Compass Rose* and creative non-fiction in *Portal Magazine*. She spent one year as a sex columnist for the VIU undergraduate newspaper, *The Navigator*. Her research interests include feminist analysis of medical literature, critical pedagogy of sexuality, and the politics of sex-positive feminism. In her creative writing, Diana explores existential questions about the role of sexualities in the development of subjectivities.

Felix Reich is a third-year undergraduate from Germany. Having studied in Leipzig, Münster, and at Seton Hall University (NJ), he currently pursues a double major in Political Science and English/American Studies. Before committing himself to academia, he backpacked his way around the world, living for extended periods in Latin America and in the United States. Aside from feminism, his research focuses on power in international relations and the recent refugee crisis in Europe. Apart from that, he works as a student lecturer at Münster University in the area of quantitative research methodology.

Aisling Reidy is currently completing her undergraduate degree at Trinity College Dublin, Ireland. She is studying Political Science and Sociology with a focus on queer issues and comparative politics.



Katie Von Wald is a master's student at Simmons College in Boston, Massachusetts, pursuing her degree in Gender and Cultural Studies. She received a B.A. at Boston University in both history and international relations with a minor in Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. Her research interests focus on the intersections among history, feminism, and sexuality including gender performativity, cultural memory, and sexuality and the state.



Ambiguous Spaces, Nonbinarism, and “World’-Travelling”

Jenna L. O’Connor

Maria Lugones offers a theoretical framework that allows for the confronting and deconstructing of patriarchal structures, arrogant perception, and ignorance. Lugones demonstrates how there must be a fundamental change in the way that we love, as well as a radical change in our ability to become “world-travellers.” In order to “world”-travel, we must understand the four ways (i.e. 1. Being a fluent speaker, 2. Being normatively happy, 3. Human bonding, and 4. Shared history) in which one is made to feel “at home” in their world, the differences between *the logic of purity* and *the logic of impurity*, and finally, how these ideologies combine in order to illustrate how we can begin to understand unintelligible and ambiguous people within a fundamentally set, exclusive, and *pure* society. In addition, in order to begin the process of “world”-travelling fully, we need to address that some people will never have the capacity to feel “at home,” in any world.

Through addressing this homelessness of some, for lack of a better term, we can begin to comprehend arrogant perception on behalf of nonbinary individuals in order to truly and empathetically understand what it means to be nonbinary in a society that systematically and unwittingly invokes relentless binarical modes of oppression. The systematic unintelligibility cast upon nonbinary individuals consequently forces nonbinary individuals into a restless life of “world”-travelling. None of the worlds in which they travel *can* be their own. With observing this arrogant perception enacted on the nonbinary individual daily, a deeper understanding that life outside of the binary structures is not only a creatively *impure* way to live, but a livelihood that is systematically misunderstood and unintelligible while being violently subjected to forcible gendering. In other words, nonbinary individuals, indeed, have an uncharted world, yet the homogenized, heterosexist, patriarchal, capitalist, neoliberal, Western world in which we popularly live does not allow an understanding of this world. I intend to *travel*, intellectually and academically speaking, into the world of nonbinarism in order to fundamentally disrupt and disarticulate *pure* compartmentalized categories that systematically rule our lives.¹ To elaborate, and as a disclaimer, as a nonbinary individual, I do not want to imply that I speak for every nonbinary individual, and certainly do not want to homogenize any experience of nonbinarism; and I certainly do not want to strictly define nonbinarism as this is a fundamental flaw within the philosophical implications of being nonbinary. On the contrary, I am attempting to academically tread an area that has been corrupted by knowable discourse in order to illustrate how binarical thinking allows



for a systemic mistreatment of humans while simultaneously *strategically* defining nonbinarism in a way that runs parallel to *strictly* defined popular discourse on the topic.

The Logic of Purity and The Logic of Impurity

First, in order to unpack nonbinarism I must first unpack Maria Lugones' theories on *the logic of purity* and *the logic of impurity*,² and "world"-travelling.³ Addressing directly the institutions and individuals that categorize, separate, and demystify humans, Lugones theorizes about the differences between the logic of purity versus the logic of impurity, and the "curdled" identity versus the fragmented identity. The logic of purity means that an individual is subjected to institutional, psychic, and intersubjective control, and to be fully controlled by these entities of power. Purity in the social world fragments full citizens. They are broken up and compartmentalized into neat and tidy categories that ultimately work to serve purity, or the widespread homogenization of hierarchal structures. Through such structures, various forms of power can control and maneuver different groups of people in order to serve an oppressive and marginalizing agenda. The definition of the term "purity," means freedom from adulteration or contamination; or, freedom from immorality. Lugones' choosing of the term, then, is not serendipitous; to be pure is to be constructed in a moral and uncontaminated manner, free from anything "immoral" and/or "impure" outside of the homogenous and idealized individual and/or group in power. The logic of purity, then, while operating on a fully reductionist methodology, allows people to become visible within society through accepting the fragmented and compartmentalized identities handed to them through those individuals in power.⁴

This visibility of *some* individuals therefore allows and condones the invisibility of *others*. With this logic, we can see that being visible equates to purity, while invisibility equates to impurity. However, impurity is a complex and paradoxical space by which one is coerced into navigating as the logic of impurity means that an individual can both visible and invisible. Impurity encompasses creative individuals that cannot be intelligible within homogenous society. These individuals and groups of people are often seen as culturally endowed, yet lack full citizenship due to their complexity and unintelligibility in the eyes of institutionalized and individualized power. The impure are therefore rendered invisible but retain the capacity to become visible if one adheres to a strictly fragmented identity by which one can then be understood. As Lugones writes, the impure are defined by the homogenous social world as complex, heterogeneous, and ambiguous individuals.⁵ In addition, the logic of impurity renders, in Lugones' terms, curdled individuals a messy



failure of fragmentation, as the curdled individual cannot be fragmented. The curdled individual cannot be fragmented even though homogenous society consistently attempts to fragment, compartmentalize, and simplify “impure” individuals.

The strategic way(s) in which the politics of oppression logically function is to code various individuals and groups of people as simplified so that the individuals and institutions that harvest power can control the individual. Keeping this in mind, Lugones brilliantly juxtaposes the “curdled” individual to the “fragmented” individual in elaborating on the logic of purity and the logic of impurity. The individual constructed in the light of the logic of purity embodies the easily digestible, neat, and fragmented pieces of a homogenized and constructed identity in order to be intelligible within homogenous society. Contrastingly, the curdled individual is more “messy”; encompassing everything that constitutes impurity (i.e. creativity, culture, non-homogenous bodies, etc.) With this, Lugones insists that those curdled, ambiguous individuals can be a site and/or source of resistance and disruption due to the fact that these individuals are out of place in the fragmented social world. She writes, “If it is ambiguous, it is threatening because it is creative, changing, and defiant of norms meant to subdue it.”⁶ Here, we begin to see how the ambiguous individual is so threatening to society, more so than we already knew. The unraveling of society’s delicate threads at the hands of ambiguity is precisely why the people and institutions in power will not accept anything other than the pure and fragmented individuals constructed in favor of those in power. This is where I believe that the logic of purity is also why nonbinary individuals are widely rendered unintelligible in society due to their inherent and, ironically, unadulterated ambiguity. Here, I can begin to deploy my analysis that nonbinary individuals are forced to unify in the simple, pure world in order to survive and maintain their status as being visibly invisible. First, I must elaborate on Lugones’ writing on “world”-traveling in order to provide a thorough theoretical grounding toward a strategic (rather than strict) theory of nonbinarism.

World Traveling

Lugones’ essay, “Playfulness, ‘World’-Travelling, and Loving Perception,”⁷ goes hand-in-hand with her “Purity, Impurity, and Separation,” essay in emphasizing the need to move toward a “pluralistic feminism” or a feminism that addresses and encourages multiplicity are concomitant within both pieces while simultaneously being judicious with addressing ambiguity at the individual level.⁸ While she deems a need for a pluralistic feminism, Lugones simultaneously incorporated Marilyn Frye’s theory on arrogant perception into the lives of, in her later



words, the impure, messy, curdled individuals.⁹ According to Lugones, one of the many functions of patriarchy is to distort people of color as objects of arrogant perception, but to also arrogantly perceive the society that is constructed around them. She writes, “To the extent that we learn to perceive others arrogantly or come to see them only as products of arrogant perception and continue to perceive them that way, we fail to identify with them—fail to love them—in this particularly deep way.”¹⁰ Lugones further elaborates on how there is a fundamental issue with how people—women in particular—are taught to love; that for a woman, love is methodologically taught so that she identifies with a victim of enslavement without being taught what it means to be a victim. With this in mind, there needs to be a radical change in the way that we love, and the way that love is taught, or else we will never be able to fully understand and embrace ambiguity.¹¹ Lugones believes that through “world”-travelling, we can understand disenfranchised individuals in the pure and homogenous world. The attribute “playfulness” she uses to describe the forcibly oppressing entities within other worlds, how this oppression operates, and how to begin the process of becoming intelligible in a complex, curdled, and messy way without losing any part of one’s identity.

Lugones does not want to define or constitute what is or makes a “world.” However, from my understanding, to “world-travel,” one must be able to transcend the ways in which they were taught to “love” in order to, for lack of a better term, empathetically travel into another’s life so as to experience the ways in which *the other* lives.¹² By participating in this transcendence, one can begin to see how another lives in order begin to fully understand and identify with what it means to be enslaved by the logic of purity and the logic of impurity in the hegemonic system(s) that deem ambiguous individuals unintelligible. Here, I am using the term “understand” facetiously, as we are taught how to “understand” through systems that privilege knowledge which can ultimately be problematic when trying to unpack the heaviness placed on the oppressed, curdled, visibly invisible individual. Through Lugones’ notions of “world”-travelling, we can begin to understand the enslavement of nonbinary individuals in a world that is constructed around systematically misinterpreting nonbinarism. In identifying with and rekindling feelings of community with other nonbinary individuals, there can be hope that a masked form of subversive and disruptive power in nonbinarism is possible through becoming intelligible within the nonbinary community.

Nonbinarism

I do not want to imply or define that there is a set definition to the notion of “world”-travelling.¹³ “World”-travelling should not be understood



absolutely or in *definite* terms because, again, our terms, discourses, knowledge, and understanding are exclusive to hegemonic intelligibility and the logic of purity. Therefore, in order to understand those rendered impure, we must disregard everything we *know* by “world”-travelling into the subversive spaces constructed by those who are curdled, messy, and impure. We need to step outside of “understanding” totally, and let worlds shape us instead; we need to construct knowledge and understanding through the lens of the systematically impure in order to unearth the true complexity of the ambiguous and/or nonbinary individual. We must travel into the intersubjective space in which nonbinary individuals live.

Here, I offer an example in the hopes of explaining what I mean by “travelling into the intersubjective space of the nonbinary individual.” In creating art, one must focus on not only the subject by which one is creatively constructing, but more importantly, focus on the *negative space* by which this subject is created. Though artists debate this topic widely, the fact still remains that the *negative space* is just as important as the knowable, constructed subject that is easily observed. Nonbinary individuals exist in this negative space—visibly invisible to the constructed, observable *pure* subject. However, just as in the philosophical debate between the construction of art, this intersubjective space in which nonbinarism flourishes is lost in translation while complete emphasis is placed on the observable *pure* entities that serve the logic of purity.

Now that “world”-travelling is unpacked, I would like to address Lugones’ four notions of how an individual can feel “at home” in a “world.” The first is “by being a fluent speaker in that world.” The second is “by being normatively happy.” The third is by “being humanly bonded” to those one loves and shares love with, and the last way one can feel at ease in and “at home” is due the “history with others that is shared, especially daily history.”¹⁴ “Worlds” construct and shape who one is depending on the dominant attributes, beliefs, norms, etc., of the “world” based off of who constructed that “world.” One is forced to live double or triple lives in order to be intelligible within the dominant world. The shifting of one’s identity is a method of self-survival implemented in order to fit and survive within the constructed and normative systems. In her later work, this bind is what Lugones means by the logic of purity and the logic of impurity shaping and controlling how we live our lives. One must systematically maneuver their status as a visibly invisible human in order to survive, which in turn causes psychic, emotional, physical, and spiritual trauma on behalf of those rendered unintelligible and impure.



Nonbinarism is a focal point where disruption and impure, curdled living can take place at the individual and collective levels. To define nonbinarism, I must employ a strategic definition. To be nonbinary is to inherently refuse, deny, and break down all gendered structures and institutions within a society by simply being. Being, not in an essentialist, social constructionist, or superficial way, but in just existing inside of the intersubjective space of gender binarism. This is not to say that being nonbinary is being a combination of male and female, that is androgyny; but being nonbinary is being something else that is unknowable. Dictionaries and online platforms alike define nonbinarism as “not relating to, composed of, or involving just two things,” or not fitting into the socially constructed categories of “male” and “female.” The variance of definitions pertaining to nonbinarism is scattered. Some say nonbinary individuals are androgynous; some say nonbinary individuals are trans. While phenomenological accounts may sometimes uphold these varying definitions, I find that it is incredibly important to strategically define nonbinarism, rather than uphold varying phenomenological definitions. Simultaneously, strictly and phenomenologically defining nonbinarism paradoxically places it into a reductionist gender category (when in fact, nonbinarism is denying gender altogether). Kate Bornstein brings up a brilliant point in *Gender Outlaw: on Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*,¹⁵ where she says that

Gender terrorists are those who...bang their heads against the gender system which is *real* and *natural*; and who then use gender to terrorize the rest of us. These are the real terrorists: the Gender Defenders...[The] mere presence [of gender outlaws] is often enough to make people sick...Because gender ambiguity and gender outlaws are made invisible in this culture, and because gender transgressors are by and large silent (and thus invisible)...the defenders of gender rigidity lash out...The acts of a gender defender are acts of violence against gender outsiders.¹⁶

While Bornstein is, in fact, writing about the trans experience, and in an effort to not conflate the trans experience with the nonbinary experience, I do find this particular quote worthy of examination when it comes to writing about the nonbinary experience especially in terms of the visible invisibility of the gender outlaw.

Similarly to the ideologies that Lugones wrote in her essays, the visible invisibility of the gender outlaw (i.e. the impure, curdled lived experience of those who do not fit within the logic of purity) seeks hospitality within a community where one can feel at home.¹⁷ While a



community can exist for an individual with varying intersectional identities, the nonbinary individual can never feel “at home” as the nonbinary individual is consistently “world”-travelling in worlds that universally understand, implement, and uphold the popularized gender binary. Bluntly, the nonbinary individual can never feel “at home” in a world unlike other individuals within the LGBTQ community because this community is constructed in light of the logic of purity. The nonbinary individual is all encompassing of everything that society cannot neatly compartmentalize into a fixed category; the intersubjective, negative space in which nonbinarism flourishes is systematically rendered invisible in order to uphold the logic of purity as established by various institutions and people in power. Comparatively, Amber Ault¹⁸ offers a theoretical framework that supports the pure and systemic categorization organized in the light of the logic of purity when writing about the bisexual experience. She writes,

The category ‘bisexual,’ then, constitutes a social category that depends upon the contestation between the dominant and the marginalized for its own existence, while it is populated by social actors who eschew the binary systems of categorization common to Western culture.¹⁹

Again, in an effort to not conflate bisexuality with the nonbinary experience, nonbinary individuals often “world”-travel in ways that allow them to balance the fine line of being visibly invisible in order to survive—much like bisexuality. Other than the obvious, the difference between bisexuality and nonbinarism is that bisexuality still exists in a *pure* category, comparatively to nonbinarism, which is completely *impure*. This is what I mean when I write that the nonbinary individual cannot feel “at home” in a world because one’s survival trumps the need to disrupt and fully destroy the binary systems that hold us captive. This is where postmodernism fails us; the individual cannot destroy the system by themselves. As Lugones writes²⁰, a pluralistic feminism is needed in order to create a radical (and large) group of strong friendships that is not only all-inclusive, but non-exclusionary as well. In addition, this group must have the power to set, write, and demand strict, conclusive, and agreed-upon goals while simultaneously acknowledging the phenomenological experiences of various intersectional existences. Nonbinary individuals are capable of such collective disruption, as long as radical, collective, and pragmatic action is taking place.

To reiterate, being nonbinary is not the same as being androgynous. Being nonbinary is not the same as being trans. Being nonbinary is not the same as being butch, or femme, or any of the other labels



circumscribed around/identified within the LGBTQ community. Being nonbinary is not the same as being intersexed (something Suzanne Kessler's semi-problematic work²¹ does not directly illustrate. However with that said, it could be interpreted that Kessler certainly illustrates that life outside of the gender binary is feasible outside of the institutional and systematic oppression of bodies under medicalization). The reason why I am writing that being nonbinary is not the same as being any of these other identities is because these other forms of identity are constructed in light of the *logic of purity*. While there is no doubt that these individuals face systematic oppression, and in an effort to not make a case for the worse mistreatment of nonbinary individuals, nonbinary individuals are completely unintelligible within society and there is no effort to "world"-travel into the world of nonbinarism. To reiterate, being nonbinary is *impure*; to be nonbinary is to be curdled, messy, and unintelligible within society. While some nonbinary individuals may subscribe to these fragmented and neat categories, and vice versa, being wholly nonbinary is to be both threatening to society and visibly invisible within society. Merely existing as nonbinary within our Western, white, patriarchal, neoliberal, capitalist, and heterosexist society—similar to what Bornstein wrote about the "gender outlaw,"—is enough to be physically, emotionally, spiritually, intellectually, and psychically neglected and ostracized due to nonbinarism casting a reflection on the moronic gender binary system(s) and institutions that forcibly coerce people into *pure* existences. To be nonbinary is to be the mirror for which society gazes through in order to self-destruct; however, with the logic of purity in mind, nonbinary individuals are rendered unintelligible due to the interjecting livelihood of consistently and forcibly "world"-travelling. I am not saying that one should not "world"-travel, or "world"-travel consistently; on the contrary, I am trying to explain that while "world"-travelling is certainly a positive and empathetic practice in the ideologies Lugones writes, when nonbinary individuals are forced to exist in worlds where they are not welcome, intelligible, or valued members of society, and no one travels into the uncharted world of nonbinarism, a certain relation of power is created where nonbinary individuals are not able to control their livelihoods anymore.

To conclude, this experience of the nonbinary individual can be similarly interpreted within Judith Butler's writing in *Undoing Gender*.²² She writes:

But perhaps we make a mistake if we take the definitions of who we are, legally, to be adequate descriptions of what we are about. Although this language might well establish our legitimacy within a legal framework ensconced in



liberal versions of human ontology, it fails to do justice to passion and grief and rage, all of which tear us from ourselves, bind us to others, transport us, undo us, and implicate us in lives that are not our own, sometimes fatally, irreversibly...On the level of discourse, certain lives are not considered lives at all, they cannot be humanized; they fit no dominant frame for the human, and their dehumanization occurs first, at this level...[We are] becoming gendered *for others*.²³

Here, Butler reiterates that only gendered lives matter, which in turn echoes my argument and Lugones' theories on the logic of purity, and the logic of impurity in terms of purely gendered individuals. There is no room for those who are not gendered, as the gendering process is the forcible filter through which we live our constructed lives, according to Butler. I would have to agree—nonbinary individuals are forcibly placed within gendered discourse, which is a fatal and systematic misunderstanding of the lives of those who are nonbinary. This fatal and systematic misunderstanding is exactly what the logic of purity strives for: revealing that nonbinarism is *not worthy* of complex, curdled intelligibility. Butler goes on to write that “to be ec-static means, literally, to be outside oneself,”²⁴ to exist in duality with oneself in a way that conjugates the double lived reality of those deemed unintelligible. Nonbinary individuals, as aforementioned, exist in a visibly invisible way while also existing and operating within the intersubjective space of the gender binary. Similarly, Miqqi Alicia Gilbert²⁵ writes in regards to the strict gender binary that the

Level of bigenderism [through which we are forced to live] what we might call ‘systemic bigenderism,’ permeates every aspect of our lives and controls and dictates every movement, word, and thought. It is systemic bigenderism that affects every individual and causes stress and anxiety for a multitude who would not consider themselves gender diverse.²⁶

These levels of stress and anxiety are unwarranted feelings on the *gender terrorists* that Kate Bornstein writes about. Placing so much emphasis on reinforcing the gender binary is paradoxically interpolated into everyday life while simultaneously upholding the logic of purity.

In order to deconstruct the gender binary in an effort to begin to understand *impure* individuals on a complex, curdled level, we must, as Lugones originally suggested, implement a pragmatic discourse surrounding a pluralistic feminism, thus avoiding a reductionist, postmodern discourse completely. In addition, by “world”-travelling



completely into the world of nonbinarism, we can begin to understand and implement living within intersubjectivity. Conclusively, nonbinary individuals are consistently “world”-travelling while concomitantly manifesting life in the intersubjective space surrounding the gender binary. Thus, there is a specific type of violence that nonbinary individuals are subjected to and forced to endure everyday. The insidious systems and institutions outlined in this paper are structured with the gender binary to violently displace nonbinary individuals in a way that systematically and psychically causes lethal homelessness.

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¹ As a disclaimer, I personally identify as nonbinary. I do not speak for every nonbinary individual, and certainly do not want to homogenize any experience of nonbinarism. On the contrary, I am attempting to academically tread an area that has been corrupted by knowable discourse in order to illustrate how binarical thinking allows for a systemic mistreatment of humans and/or modes of thinking outside of any binary.

² Lugones. "Purity, Impurity, and Separation." 458-479.

³ Lugones. "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception." 3-19.



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- ⁴ In essence, these fragmented identities ultimately serve the hierarchal, homogenous, and oppressive forces strategically and institutionally put in place in order to serve the reductionist agenda of those in power.
- ⁵ Lugones. "Purity, Impurity, and Separation." 463.
- ⁶ Ibid, 477.
- ⁷ Lugones. "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception." 3-19.
- ⁸ Ibid, 3.
- ⁹ Frye. "In and Out of Harm's Way: Arrogance and Love."
- ¹⁰ Lugones. "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception." 4.
- ¹¹ Ibid, 6.
- ¹² I say, "the other" here not to participate in othering individuals or groups of people, but rather to place emphasis on how society constructs the pure and impure through the logic of purity and impurity; the systematic placement of visibility/invisibility onto certain individuals.
- ¹³ Ibid, 9.
- ¹⁴ Ibid, 12.
- ¹⁵ Bornstein. *Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, 70-74.
- ¹⁷ To feel at home one must, again, refer back to Lugones' four key points regarding feeling welcome and "at home" in "world"-travelling.
- ¹⁸ Ault. "Ambiguous Identity in an Unambiguous Sex/Gender Structure: The Case of Bisexual Women." 449-463.
- ¹⁹ Ibid, 451.
- ²⁰ Lugones & Elizabeth Spelman. "Have We Got A Theory For You."
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- ²⁶ Ibid, 97.



**“My G-spot is Not a Myth!”:
Unpacking the (Controversial) Vaginal Orgasm
Debate in Recent Medical Journals**

Diana Pearson

Abstract: Some medical researchers say the G-spot does exist, but many insist it does not. The question as to its valid existence is being hotly debated in recent medical journals. This is no surprise, since the clitoris was marginalized in modern medical documents until 1971 when the Boston Women’s Collective finally took it upon themselves to produce new knowledges about women’s orgasms with self-examination as a method. In a scientific search for the “true” G-spot, medical researchers use approaches that inadvertently obscure the complexity and variability of sexual pleasure. In addition, many of their findings are steeped in the cultural baggage that prioritizes the Victorian ideal of feminine sexuality. This paper argues that self-examination and testimony (feminist approaches to knowledge-building) are an effective way to push back against “epistemologies of ignorance” about sexual pleasure. It is organized in three parts: part one is a short genealogy of 20th century literature on the G-spot and the clitoris; part two is an analysis of three recently published medical studies, all of which seek to definitively prove or disprove the G-spot; and part three discusses the problem that the search for Objective Truth can impose on research subjects, particularly subjects who have historically been excluded from practicing medicine.

Keywords: G-spot, vaginal orgasm, sexuality, clitoris, women and gender, medical research

“Our bodies, ourselves: bodies are maps of power and identity.”
—Donna Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto*

Introduction

Some medical researchers say the G-spot does exist, but many insist it does not. This is no surprise; women’s bodies have been a controversial space since modern medicine practices began in North America. As modern medicine became professionalized in the late 1800s, doctors often confused moral and religious judgments with medical practice.¹ A few examples include the harsh protocols developed for cis-gendered women and hysteria, PMS and menopause,² sexuality, abortions, and birth control,³ and



female ejaculation.⁴ Moral judgments have caused the medical profession to wrongly conflate sex and gender (as well as sex and gender with sexuality), a mindset that translates into medical practices that have negatively impacted trans,⁵ gender non-conforming, and intersex people,⁶ as well as people who are gay and bisexual. Bodily knowledges can be obscured by hegemonic voices of authority; this is what feminist philosopher Nancy Tuana calls the “epistemology of ignorance,” wherein discourse (particularly as it pertains to sex and gender) is “frequently constructed and actively preserved, and is linked to issues of cognitive authority, doubt, trust, silencing, and uncertainty”.⁷ Some gynecological researchers are squabbling about the G-spot; it has been called a “P-spot” (P for placebo),⁸ “a modern gynecological myth,”⁹ the “female penis,”¹⁰ the clitoral complex,¹¹ as well as the clitourethrocomplex.¹² Few of the methodological approaches employed in the contemporary medical field have included a broad collection of women’s voices as evidence.

The medical definitive truth as to the G-spot’s existence, or lack thereof, influences popular discourse about women’s sexuality. Despite pornographic excess and hypersexuality of media in the Western world, public discourse, informed by evidence-based approaches to women’s sexual well-being, is rarely available. When I refer to ‘woman,’ I do not aim to use it solely as a biological category but also as one influenced by cultural, social, and psychological norms. However, as I will show, so far, the contemporary medical literature has not kept pace with gender studies literature. This lag by the medical community in adapting to gender diversity causes tension in my discussion as I move back and forth between a review of the medical literature and my critique. I am attempting to critique the discourse of Victorian feminine sexuality that has permeated medical practices and has been perpetuated by medical practitioners for more than 200 years.¹³ I recognize that sex and gender are not mutually exclusive, and so I use the term ‘woman’ with sensitivity: I am aware that not all women have female genitalia, and not all people with female genitalia refer to themselves as women. An early reviewer of this article was concerned that the language I used could be misunderstood as cis-sexist, so whenever possible, I changed the wording from “woman” to “vaginal,” and sometimes removed the sexed language altogether. However, completely disconnecting medical conversations of vaginal pleasure from cultural attitudes towards women could obscure the fact that medical views have, in fact, been influenced by a history of prudish ideals of women’s sexuality. With this in mind, I have done my best to use language that is sensitive and inclusive.



By deconstructing recent medical studies about the G-spot, this paper will show that attitudes towards the cultural category 'woman' are pervasive and compel us to critique standard methods of medical research that are not as neutral and objective as they claim to be. They are another example of "Euroscience's so-called neutral search for truth"... better understood as an ethnocentric justification of self-interested and exploitative colonial actions."¹⁴ These practices, as have been acknowledged in other critical discourses, are used to maintain ideologies of domination. In this paper, I argue that "standard" truth-pursuing medical research practices that exclude a wide range of women's experiences are a form of domination. This paper is organized into three parts: 1) a literature review of 20th century attitudes towards the G-spot and the clitoris; 2) an analysis of three recently published medical articles that argue about the G-spot's existence which ultimately marginalize testimony/accounts of bodily pleasure as a valid form of knowledge; and 3) a critical pedagogy-oriented explanation of how the scientific pursuit for universal Truth has forced bodies into compartmentalized boxes, a practice that essentially puts the Vitruvian man as the ideal, which in itself is a mythical and oppressive category.¹⁵ To conclude, I argue that a feminist epistemology is a useful technique to liberate bodies from medical discourses that repress knowledge of sexual and bodily pleasures. This feminist epistemology was enacted in consciousness-raising circles of second-wave feminism; techniques of testimony and self-examination are necessary to raise awareness of how forces of domination impact our ways of knowing and being in the world (epistemologies). Our epistemologies are intimately connected to our bodies in terms of sex, gender, and sexual intimacy.

Part One: A Short Genealogy of the G-spot and the Clitoris

The G-spot is the common term used in the Western world for the erogenous zone described as a "sensitive area felt through the anterior vaginal wall."¹⁶ It was documented in ancient Indian texts as far back as the 11th century.¹⁷ The G-spot was also documented in 13th century Chinese texts where in "Wondrous essays of the bare woman" by Su Nu "Miao Lun, female ejaculation and the enlargement of the G-spot because of stimulation are explained."¹⁸ In 1672, Regnier de Graaf further documented the G-spot in a medical text.¹⁹ The clitoris was also "discovered" by Renaldus Columbus in 1559.



The G-spot was “discovered” again in 1950 when Ernst Grafenburg²⁰ wrote, “an erotic zone always could be demonstrated on the anterior wall of the vagina along the course of the urethra”.²¹ This was a post-Freudian discovery; Freud famously argued that clitoral orgasm was juvenile and thus only vaginal orgasm could be considered the mature orgasm for women.²² This argument evoked justifiable rage in Ann Koedt who, in 1970, published, “The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm”. This piece was key in “the celebration of the clitoris during the sexual revolution.”²³ In this article, Koedt argues the opposite of Freud’s claim; she insists that clitoral stimulation is the only possible way for women to orgasm. Her article responds to the general public’s “epistemology of ignorance” of the clitoris, which was marginalized and obscured in modern medical texts – “rendered a simple nub”²⁴ until 1971 when the Boston Women’s Collective took it upon themselves to write *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, a feminist text that could contribute significantly to a feminist critical pedagogy in both content and method. In this now-famous text, the Boston Women’s Collective authors “expanded in size and configuration” the description of the clitoris to include the shaft, the glans, and the crura.²⁵ But in the 1980’s, the G-spot re-gained the spotlight as an erogenous zone for women “to commemorate the research of Ernst Graefenberg, a German-born obstetrician and gynecologist.”²⁶ Although today the clitoris is understood as a point of orgasmic stimulation, the G-spot region is still under scrutiny amongst gynecological researchers.

Part Two: Analysis of Recent Medical Research on the G-spot

A cursory “g-spot” search in Google brings up hundreds of media articles that claim to prove or disprove the G-spot’s existence, with scientists quick to contradict one another. This section deconstructs the discourse of three published articles in conversation with one another as to the existence or non-existence of the G-spot. It is worth keeping in mind the extent to which this debate in the scientific community spills over into popular press and fuels public misunderstanding of vaginal pleasure.

Study #1

In 2012, Amichai Kilchevsky, Yoram Vardi, Lior Lowenstein, and Ilan Gruenwald published a study in *Journal of Sexual Medicine* entitled “Is the G-Spot Truly a Distinct Anatomic Entity?” which doubts the existence of the G-spot. The study begins with a male:female binary, locating all bodies with a female genitalia as gendered ‘female.’ This article is brimming with problematic language that characterizes female participants as having a



belief in their G-spot without being able to locate it.²⁷ The authors dismiss Grafenburg's "popular" discovery, stating that it is "based purely on anecdotal evidence."²⁸ Little generosity was given by the researchers to the cultural weight of the past hundred years of argument around vaginal orgasms, reducing the argument to "[r]eports in the public media [which] would lead one to believe the G-spot is a well-characterized entity capable of providing extreme sexual stimulation, *yet this is far from the truth.*"²⁹ By trivializing the G-spot, claiming its existence is merely supported by a "socially driven desire for its existence,"³⁰ the authors argue that "objective investigative measures... still fail to provide irrefutable evidence for the G-spot's existence... this mythical location does not exist."³¹ Ultimately, the authors depict the research participants as "not knowers."³² This is a term used by Tuana to refer to subjects whose embodied experiences discovered by "self-examination" (a feminist learning practice) are dismissed by dominant epistemologies. This study's language plays into cultural ignorance of female genitalia and weakens the validity of reports from those who do in fact experience pleasure from vaginal stimulation.

The objective investigative measures noted in this review to seek out the G-spot utilize scientific technologies and studies, wherein "The literature cites dozens of trials that have attempted to confirm the existence of a G-spot using surveys, pathologic specimens, various imaging modalities, and biochemical markers."³³ The authors state, "radiographic studies have been unable to demonstrate a unique entity, other than the clitoris, whose direct stimulation leads to vaginal orgasm."³⁴ But it is possible, as it is for me, that my G-spot is active only when I am turned on. It is not a mechanical apparatus, a simple button that when pushed creates pleasure. The array of survey methods fails to account for the psychological and psychosocial aspects of erotic stimulation. The authors do not seem to prioritize comfort and arousal as a factor in the functioning of vaginal pleasure.

This study impacts popular cultural knowledge about the G-spot. The authors' published findings were further reduced as fact in online media reports, contributing to a cycle of ignorance about vaginal pleasure. For example, one headline reads "The G-spot and Vaginal Orgasm are 'Myths'," and another reads, "G-Spot Does Not Exist, 'Without a Doubt,' Say Researchers."³⁵ The latter contains an opening line that states: "Many women swear they have one, but a new review of 60 years of sex research shows science still can't definitively find the G-spot."³⁶ This statement effectively erases women's testimony as an authoritative voice in their experience of sexual pleasure.



Study #2

“G-Spot Anatomy: A New Discovery” published in *Journal of Sexual Medicine* is a recent article that *does* confirm the existence of the G-spot, however, it should be read with caution.³⁷ In this article Dr. Adam Ostrzenski claims to have “discovered” the G-spot as a distinct anatomical structure. Rather than using the inconclusive screening techniques noted in Kilchevsky et al.’s review, Ostrzenski cut a bluish-grape like structure with a rope-like vessel out of an 83-year old “fresh cadaver,”³⁸ and called it a G-spot. Ostrzenski presents this “discovery” as proof and posits: “women have held the unwavering position that there are distinct areas in the anterior vagina which are responsible for a sensation of great sexual pleasure.”³⁹ However, his procedure, findings, and conflict of interest raise considerable doubts about Ostrzenski’s ethics.

Other researchers in his field heavily criticize Ostrzenski’s “discovery”. Barry Komisaruk, Beverly Whipple, and Emmanuele Jannini state that his study “provides no histological evidence to support his assessment that the tissue is erectile and not glandular,” that he “assumes that the tissue is normal,” but most of all that it “betrays the rich complexity of what others have appreciated and characterized as the G-spot—a variable anatomical and functional zone of erotogenic complexity, not a single structural entity.”⁴⁰

In a second published critique, Terry Hines and Kilchevsky condemn Ostrzenski, stating “his article claiming to have found the anatomical basis of the G-spot is flawed on logical, anatomical, pathological, and evidential grounds.”⁴¹ The authors insist that Ostrzenski’s claim be “definitively rejected.”⁴²

A third critique focuses on Ostrzenski’s conflict of interest: he “has an interest in proving the presence of a G-spot that should have been declared, since he runs a cosmetic plastic gynecology clinic where the list of the procedures includes G-Spot Augmentation or G-Spotplasty.”⁴³ Adding to his lack of ethical consideration, he does not declare this conflict of interest in his publication. Despite rejection from colleagues, he boasts his so-called discovery as “ranked #1 [scientific article] in the world for 2012” by BioMedLib on his website, <http://www.cosmetic-gyn.com>. It is strange and unnerving that his unethical claim got past the *Journal of Sexual Medicine*’s peer review and has been swept up by media reporters who are eager to contribute to the epistemology of ignorance surrounding the G-spot.



Study #3

Many researchers in this field acknowledge that whether it's named the G-spot, clitoral complex, or clitourethrocomplex, there is an erogenous zone on the anterior wall of the vagina that can be a zone of intense pleasure. Yet in "Anatomy of Sex: Revision of the New Anatomical Terms Used for the Clitoris and the Female Orgasm by Sexologists" published in *Clinical Anatomy*, Vincenzo and Giulia Puppo aim to prove that this erogenous zone does not exist at all.⁴⁴ A major heading within the article reads "VAGINAL ORGASM DOES NOT EXIST."⁴⁵ They back up this claim citing Thomas Laqueur's observation that "the anterior wall [of the vagina] is so insensitive that it can be operated on without much pain to the patient," a rather questionable piece of evidence.⁴⁶ Puppo and Puppo say that women have a right to sexual pleasure, but that in order to find that sexual pleasure women must use "correct" anatomical terminology.⁴⁷ The authors insist that the "correct and anatomical term to describe the cluster of erectile tissues (i.e. clitoris, vestibular bulbs and mars intermedia, labia minora, and corpus spongiosum of the female urethra) responsible for female orgasm, is a 'female penis.'"⁴⁸ It is unfathomable that all people who have biologically female genitalia be asked to re-name their parts in imitation of the male model; furthermore, this re-naming would not help to facilitate erogenous pleasure. However, the authors seem to be deeply concerned with male performance anxiety; they are concerned that premature ejaculation (PE) is seen as a male sexual dysfunction that could be eradicated "if both partners agree that the quality of their sexual encounters is not influenced by efforts to delay ejaculation."⁴⁹ The authors state that because "the vaginal orgasm does not exist, the duration of penile-vaginal intercourse is not important for a woman's orgasm," and that "long intercourse is not helpful to women and some females may be grateful to get it over with quickly."⁵⁰ The authors' authoritative claims that the duration of intercourse does not matter to a woman, and that some women would prefer to "get it over with quickly", play into a Victorian ideal that women lack sexual desire. The authors' statements also reduce sexual experiences to a functional (heterosexual) exchange that excludes all the psychological and emotional dimensions of sexual activities, not to mention the variety of sexual partners.

Part Three: Politics of Knowledge and the Construction of Ignorance

The G-spot controversy presents a problematic situation wherein, on the one hand, there is a claim of a scientific search for Objective Truth, while on the other, personal testimonies that claim its existence are dismissed and



mythologized instead of being incorporated as evidence. There is also little awareness in medical literature of what is well known in critical literature; for centuries, women's sexuality has been feared and women's bodies determined by political, economic, and social marginalization. The scientific debate of the G-spot shows a clear preference for medical methods over "self-knowing" and reports of bodily experiences. There are underlying problems in these articles that are facilitated by the medical model. As critical pedagogue Joe Kincheloe suggests: "All texts should be read suspiciously – especially the ones that claim an objective and neutral truth."⁵¹ He explains that the politics of knowledge – the power structures embedded in knowledge – are one of the key aspects of Western colonial domination the scientific method "invalidates ways of knowing that had been developed by all peoples around the world."⁵² Indeed, scientifically produced knowledge has historically been the basis of production for "hierarchies of human worth."⁵³ Recognizing the relationship between power and knowledge involves recognizing the production of discourse which also produces silences, prohibitions, and "mistaken beliefs and misconceptions to circulate."⁵⁴

Overt scientific denial of the G-spot produces discourse that perpetuates an epistemology of ignorance.⁵⁵ This active ignorance is evident in Puppo and Puppo's conclusion: "the majority of women worldwide do not have orgasms during intercourse: as a matter of fact, female sexual dysfunctions are popular because they are based on something that does not exist, i.e. the vaginal orgasm."⁵⁶ They mistake a history of ignorance of the woman's body (a consequence of patriarchy) as scientific evidence, thus confusing ignorance with knowledge. This active ignorance is a vicious circle, where *because* people in positions of authority mythologize and dismiss the possibility of vaginal orgasm, women's knowledge of their own bodies can be misguided by inadequate knowledge about sexual pleasure, which in turn minimizes sex positive education that includes orgasms.

Conclusion: Reclaiming Feminist Epistemology in Consciousness-Raising

Top-down research techniques that claim neutrality and objectivity can quickly become oppressive when they do not prioritize the research subjects' experiences. Research about human sexual experience, because of the interconnection of physical, psychological, and neurological systems, must prioritize embodied experience. Objective testing methods, in an attempt to reduce complexity and variability, can do more to obscure than



to illuminate. Feminist Kate Millett said: “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.”⁵⁷ This is why a feminist epistemology of self-examination, much like the method used by the Boston Women’s Collective, could be valuable in developing new knowledge about the G-spot, much the same way it was done to write new knowledges about the clitoris.⁵⁸ Second-wave feminists took it upon themselves to create new knowledge that cut through the ignorance constructed around women’s orgasms through consciousness-raising circles. This article shows that the search for Objective Truth is not neutral. Yet adopting an anti-science ideology is not the answer.⁵⁹ Instead, it is necessary that medical researchers develop methods that, in the production of knowledges, account for the complexity of bodily experience, the influence of culture and discourse upon bodies, and the history of sexism in modern medicine. Because feminist praxis prioritizes personal experience, testimony, and self-examination, it is a valuable starting point in better understanding the often, mysterious complexity of sexual experience. This complexity might well be explored by bridging feminist practice with the scientific method in order to produce knowledge that does not contribute to a constructed ignorance about women’s bodies, but instead prioritizes pleasure, testimony, and experience when it comes to the G-spot, no matter what we call it.

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⁴ Barmak, *Closer: Notes from the Orgasmic Frontier of Women's Sexuality*.

⁵ Devor and Dominic, "Trans* Sexualities," 181.

⁶ Reis, *Bodies in Doubt: An American History of Intersex*.

⁷ Tuana, "Coming to Understand: Orgasm," 195.

⁸ Kingsberg et al., "Who's Afraid of the G-spot?"

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¹⁰ Puppo and Puppo, "Anatomy of Sex: Revision of the New Anatomical Terms," 297.

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¹² Jannini et al., "Beyond the G-spot: Clitourethrovaginal Complex Anatomy."

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¹⁴ Kincheloe, *Knowledge and Critical Pedagogy*, 5.

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¹⁶ Jannini et al., "Female Orgasm(s): One, Two, Several," 956.

¹⁷ Syed, "Knowledge of the Gräfenberg Zone," 171.

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¹⁹ Tuana, "Coming to Understand: Orgasm," 200.

²⁰ Grafenberg also invented an early model of the IUD and was an early advocate of birth control.

²¹ Grafenburg, "The Role of Urethra in Female Orgasm," 144.

²² Jannini et al., "Who's Afraid of the G-spot?," 28.

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²⁶ Whipple, "Female Ejaculation, G spot, A spot," 59.

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²⁸ *Ibid.*

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³³ Kilchevsky et al., "Is the Female G-spot Truly a Distinct Anatomic Entity?," 719.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Cox, "G-spot Does Not Exist, 'Without a Doubt,' Say Researchers."

³⁶ *Ibid.*, para.1.

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³⁸ *Ibid.*, 1356.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1358.

⁴⁰ Komisaruk et al., "Commentary on Dr. A. Ostrzenski's 'G-spot Anatomy,'" 1954.

⁴¹ Hines and Kilchevsky, "The G-spot Discovered," 887.

⁴² *Ibid.*



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- ⁴³ Puppo and Puppo, "Anatomy of Sex: Revision of the New Anatomical Terms," 299.
⁴⁴ Ibid.
⁴⁵ Ibid., 300.
⁴⁶ Ibid.
⁴⁷ Ibid., 293-294.
⁴⁸ Ibid., 296-297.
⁴⁹ Ibid., 301.
⁵⁰ Ibid.
⁵¹ Kincheloe, *Knowledge and Critical Pedagogy*, 9-10.
⁵² Ibid., 6.
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⁵⁵ Tuana, "Coming to Understand: Orgasm," 195.
⁵⁶ Puppo and Puppo, "Anatomy of Sex: Revision of the New Anatomical Terms," 302.
⁵⁷ Millett, "Theory of Sexual Politics," para. 1.
⁵⁸ Tuana, "The Speculum of Ignorance: The Women's Health Movement."
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Mad Marge Making Spectacular Spectacles of Spectacle

Shawna Guenther

Samuel Pepys famously called Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, “a mad, conceited, ridiculous woman”¹ in reaction to her published biography of her husband William. What could Cavendish write that so infuriated Pepys? In a text that purportedly honors the Duke of Newcastle, Cavendish writes more about her own ambition and self-fashioning than she does about her husband and his life. Furthermore, in 1667, she became an infamous spectacle for her visit to the Royal Society where she observed a series of experiments made for her viewing.² Despite her allegedly debilitating shyness,³ Cavendish was becoming famous for her eccentricities, which included outlandish (often masculine) clothing,⁴ her desire for fame, her forays into experimental science and natural philosophy, and her writing in which she developed her own ideas, many of which were contrary to contemporary social and gender conventions. Much to Pepys’ dismay, Cavendish was a lady of spectacular transgression.

However, despite the large quantity of scholarship on Cavendish, her writings, and her metaphysics, little analysis exists of the problematical position Cavendish created for herself in terms of her place as a spectator, writer, and experimenter of science, and as a spectacle. I contend that, as a creator and critic of spectating and as an object of spectating, Cavendish confounds the restrictions placed upon her as woman and aristocrat in terms of appropriate public and private behavior, literary convention, and exclusions from education and scientific discourse and experimentation in her *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy* and its companion fiction *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World* (hereafter referred to as *Observations* and *The Blazing World*, respectively), published as one volume in 1667.^{5, 6} In Part I: Spectacular Selves, I examine Cavendish’s disruption of social restrictions through her self-representations as spectator, spectacle, and producer of spectacle. Beginning with her self-fashioning as ambitious and transgressive intellectual and author, I delineate the arced trajectory that Cavendish employs in *The Blazing World* to create successively interiorized reproductions of herself as the Empress, the (fictional) Duchess, and the Spirits, all of whom are interconnected hermaphroditic spectacles, dubious spectators, and creators of spectacle. My analysis of this text (with digressions from *Observations*) also illuminates Cavendish’s occupation with materiality and embodiment, reality and fiction, and gender hierarchy.



In Part II: Experimental Spectacles, I focus on Cavendish's encroachment on the male sphere of natural philosophy, and on her critique of the Baconian scientific paradigm of experimentation and observation. In *Observations*, Cavendish immediately establishes her own tenets of natural philosophy and argues against those established by male scientists, particularly destabilizing their dependence on perception, interpretation, and optic technologies such as telescopes and microscopes. Cavendish's reconfiguring of spectacle and spectating within natural philosophy, and its re-enactment in the fictional realm in *The Blazing World* illustrates her political and protofeminist strategies. Taken together, these two streams of investigation demonstrate Cavendish's unique perspective of the intellectual complexities she faced as a transgressive, spectacle-making, aristocratic woman who projected an outward image that was spectacularly outrageous.

Part I: Spectacular Selves

As a seventeenth-century aristocratic woman, Margaret Cavendish was bound by social conventions of both class and gender, obliged to behave according to her high-ranking status, and obliged to be silent and obedient because of her sex. Being "shy to the point of speechless[ness],"⁷ Cavendish easily could have surrendered to the limited roles assigned to her by patriarchal social constructions, because, as Smith writes, Cavendish herself "was a product of discourse ... the narrative of feminine goodness, a silent plot of modesty, naivité, virtue, dependency, innocence and self-concealment."⁸ Or, at least she should have been. Instead, Cavendish set about re-defining herself in her own terms, making herself a public spectacle and imagining a new discourse in which she could re-fashion herself *ad infinitum*.

As part of her self-construction as spectacle, Cavendish played her aristocratic card to its fullest. Indeed, Harris notes that Cavendish "had taken advantage of wealth, rank, and an indulgent husband to flout every norm of accepted female behavior in her unseemly pursuit of singularity and fame."⁹ In the Preface to *The Blazing World*, Cavendish writes, "I endeavor to be *Margaret the First*."¹⁰ The audacity of such a claim (pursuing a title equivalent to "Queen") places Cavendish in a difficult position, for it suggests that she, being aristocratic, being woman, would be (and should be) an effective monarch. Her desire to be "the *First*," definitively establishes her desire for fame and immortality. Her two texts illuminate this determination through her multiple fictional and real visually-spectacular images. In *Observations*, Cavendish's driving force is



revealed in the dedicatory poem to her husband: “this will give you *eternal fame*” (emphasis added).¹¹ Cavendish herself affirms this in *The Blazing World*, writing, “I am not covetous, but as ambitious as ever any of my sex was, is, or can be.”¹² Kate Lilley confirms that Cavendish intentionally and self-consciously reconstructs herself for this purpose: “her overt and frequently asserted desire for fame, has long made her an exemplary instance of woman as spectacle.”¹³ Cavendish certainly does not disappoint. In her own life, she accomplished this goal by being the most visually spectacular gentlewoman in the kingdom. Hutton suggests that “Cavendish cultivated a histrionic self-image ... famous for the audacity of her dress.”¹⁴ Indeed, Cavendish not only presented herself as excessive and outlandish, but confounded social gender boundaries as well: her “idiosyncratic dress combined masculine and feminine elements ... while her rare and highly theatrical public appearances never failed to draw an audience.”¹⁵ Thus, Cavendish, as public spectacle, trumped the limitations of appropriate class and gender conventions by using her high social rank and her husband's leniency to her advantage.

In addition, Cavendish self-fashioned another “first” in her life: her desire to be an intellectual in a world that barred women from education and knowledge. As the first women invited to visit the Royal Society, the physical space for experimental philosophy that institutionalized the denial of women's scientific education, Cavendish created an infamous spectacle. During her visit, Cavendish “attracted a great deal of attention with her flamboyant dress and eccentric manner,”¹⁶ wearing “masculine garb for a masculine occasion.”¹⁷ Neither was she accompanied by her husband—a definite (and defiant) transgression of social convention. Thus, Cavendish situated herself, through her display of cross-dressing and independence, as a person ready to participate in the developing scientific community.¹⁸ Furthermore, Cavendish sent her philosophical writings to both Cambridge and Oxford Universities, expecting to be welcomed into the scientific conversation.¹⁹ But mere polite responses were returned (in deference to her rank), without an invitation to join the discussion. Nevertheless, Cavendish used their responses to her advantage, deliberately misinterpreting their silence as tacit approval. In *Observations*, she addresses the universities, writing, “by your civil respects, and understood commendations, you were pleased to cherish rather, then quite to suppress or extinguish my weak endeavours.”²⁰ Yet she also acknowledges their sleight, writing, “*I will not deceive the world, nor trouble my conscience by being a Mountbanck in learning; but rather prove naturally wise then artificially foolish,*”²¹ making a mockery of the learned men who would refuse her entry into the scientific community.



Cavendish continues her declaration of rights to knowledge by establishing herself as a capable professional author. In *Observations*, Cavendish derides detractors, writing, “Tis probably, some will say, that my much writing is a disease,”²² as sign of an ill mind. But Cavendish pre-emptively silences her naysayers by advocating women's writing as a suitable pastime because women are excluded from other intellectual and political pursuits: “if all women that have no employment [sic] in their worldly affairs, should but spend their time as harmlessly as I do, they would not commit such faults as many are accused of.”²³ Strategically, Cavendish writes *Observations* as a dialogue between two minds, each presumably a partial representation of Cavendish as she deliberates philosophical questions in her own mind. In the text, she aligns herself with the greatest philosophers: Seneca, Plinius, Aristotle, Galen, Paracelsus and others.²⁴ Then she re-affirms herself as an established and professional writer by cataloguing her previous works in *Observations*: “Since it is the fashion to declare what Books one has put forth to the publick view, I thought it not amiss to follow the Mode.”²⁵ In doing so, Cavendish’s “laureate self-representation provided [her] with a means of resisting the limitations of [her] social groups.”²⁶ Cavendish configures herself as object to be seen by women who might emulate her, by men who might allow her some leeway, and by aristocrats who might allow for less leisurely endeavors.

Cavendish’s project of self-fashioning spectacle takes a further step towards her desire to be famous and a first through her fiction. While her philosophical writings make clear that she is capable of applying knowledge and reason to create narrative, *The Blazing World* illustrates her intrusion into another male foray, but one in which she is singularly in control. She constructs her narrative as a triptych, employing three different styles of narrative exemplifying her command of (male) language, convention, and imagination: “the first part whereof is *romantical*, the second philosophical, and the third is mere *fancy*, or (as I may call it) *fantastical*.”²⁷ Just as she does in *Observations*, Cavendish circumvents her gender-conscious detractors, stating, “I have made a world of my own: for which no body, I hope, will blame me, since it is in every one's power to do the like.”²⁸ This Blazing World (the fictional place) is hers alone, her own creation, but it is also anyone's world as a readable text. Poignantly, she presents a female utopian vision of singularity, a world in contrast to the real one ruled by men: “I have made my Blazing world, a peacable world, allowing it but one religion, one language, and one government.”²⁹ Cavendish uses utopia, the “no place,” to enact the opinions developed in her *Observations*. Spiller argues that “Cavendish uses the utopia ... to make this critique precisely



because utopias are structured to represent a disparity between an 'actual' and an 'ideal' world.”³⁰ *The Blazing World* is one that cannot exist, in reality, for an aristocratic woman. Cavendish employs another narrative strategy as she presents her readers with a verbal exchange of metaphysics between the Empress and her human-animal philosophers in the city appropriately named Paradise. Sutherland asserts that “Cavendish was attracted to the genre of orations because it was a specifically masculine one.”³¹ Again, Cavendish chooses to transgress the boundaries that are supposed to contain her feminine wit.

Referring to the closing concentric circularity of *The Blazing World*, Spiller defines the text as one “that replicates the structure of the telescopic vision,”³² ironically employing a technology about which Cavendish was dubious, to represent worlds that are increasingly distant from reality and characters that can fold into each other (like a collapsed telescope). But Cavendish's doubts about the Baconian paradigm of experimental philosophy centers on her contention that observation cannot penetrate the exterior of objects to reach the truth about the workings of nature. I would suggest that the structure of *The Blazing World* functions more like an arrow's path, an arced trajectory moving from reality to fiction, and from realistic corporeality to idealized disembodiment. The arced path, however, ultimately must return the arrow to its terrestrial place, unable to escape the gravity hindering its flight. It is along this trajectory that Cavendish's created world, a spectacle of light and wonder, that allows the creation of herself in a multiplicity of self-reflexive characters—the Empress, the Duchess as scribe, and the Spirits. Sarasohn explains that “by the curious device of introducing herself as a character in her own fiction, Cavendish not only castigates the prejudice male philosophers feel for women, but repudiates them in taking refuge with herself.”³³ Thus, unwillingly submitting to the inevitable downward trajectory, Cavendish can, at any time, relaunch her self-referential arrows.

The Empress, the closest representation of Cavendish, appears in all three sections of *The Blazing World*, initially appearing as a “young Lady”³⁴ of some rank and wealth. In traditional romantic style, the Lady “by the light of her beauty, the heat of her youth, and protection of the gods, remained alive”³⁵ at the North Pole, while her kidnappers died. It is only because she is such a beautiful spectacle that she is taken to the Emperor of the land who “rejoicing, made her his wife and gave her an absolute power to rule and govern all that world as she pleased.”³⁶ The Empress is a self-constructed enactment of Cavendish's desire to be, as she claimed “*Margaret the First*.”³⁷ As absolute ruling monarch, the Empress can act as Cavendish



could not. She immediately demands “to be informed both of the manner of their religion and government,”³⁸ and her male subjects happily oblige her. Finding that women are excluded from both government and religion, “she resolved to build churches, and make also up a congregation of women, whereof she intended to be head herself, and to instruct them in several points in her religion.”³⁹ Furthermore, as “her Majesty had such great and able judgement in natural philosophy,”⁴⁰ she founds her own Royal Society in which she is not only welcome, but respected and authoritative. The Empress becomes the only show in town—the ruler, educator, and preacher—the central spectacle of the entire *Blazing World*. Thus, Cavendish “finds compensation in creating a world in which a woman (the Empress) is in charge of the whole of scientific research,”⁴¹ and, indeed, everything else.

Cavendish further develops her new philosophy in *The Blazing World* by demanding that knowledge be disseminated orally and in plain language. The Empress informs her orators, “I desire you to consider more the subjects you speak of, than your artificial periods, connexions and parts of speech, and leave the rest to your natural eloquence.”⁴² Here, Cavendish chastises learned men for subordinating their research to the complexities of rhetoric, thereby obfuscating their meaning. Then the Empress tells her logicians, “your chopped logic ... disorders my reason ... your formal arguments are able to spoil all natural wit ... natural rational discourse to be preferred before an artificial.”⁴³ Cavendish understands that language need not be inflated for intellectual discourse unless such inflation serves a purpose such as preventing outsiders access to knowledge. Cavendish is also certain to mention that the women of the *Blazing World* are quite capable: “the women, which generally had quick wits, subtle conceptions, clear understandings, and solid judgements.”⁴⁴ As Wiseman puts it, the *Blazing World*, “moved from the architecturally imagined enclosures of academics and convents to the intercommunicating and self-transforming worlds of the utopia, the ruling female is given better swag and more philosophical as well as political power.”⁴⁵ Unfortunately, the *Blazing World* that the Empress rules is two degrees of separation from Cavendish's real world.

By giving the Empress, the spectacle, absolute rule, however, Cavendish both inverts the real world's gender hierarchy and subsumes it. Siegfried argues that Cavendish's “stance is meant to figure an intellect that is self-conspicuously female, yet aggressively masculine in ambition and capability.”⁴⁶ Put another way, Lilley refers to the Empress as “a kind of hermaphrodized warrior queen.”⁴⁷ This fits in with Cavendish's aggressive pursuit of fame and immortality, as well as her tendency to don masculine attire and enjoy masculine intellectual activities. Furthermore, like



Cavendish, the Empress desires to be first: “I endeavour, said she, to be as singular as I can; for it argues but a mean nature to imitate others ... I should choose to be imitated by others,”⁴⁸ just as Cavendish did. Yet, “Cavendish's imperialism requires the subjection and the admiration of men, including the Emperor (who becomes wifely consort) and her hybridized male-animal courtiers.”⁴⁹ The Emperor and the men in the Blazing World see the Empress as a lovely spectacle. In addition, Cavendish fashions the Empress as a spectacle of majestic light to deceive the enemies of her home country and to procure the loyalty of her countrymen for their king. Again, the Empress must be a spectacle and be seen as such by men. Yet the Empress's glorious appearance confuses the men: “some said she was an angel; others, she was a sorceress; some believed her a goddess; others said the devil deluded them in the shape of a fine lady,”⁵⁰ and, indeed, that bears witness to the questions Cavendish raises about vision, truth, and nature in *Observations*. The eyes can deceive and male reason can be overcome by fancy and emotion.

Curiously, the objects that create this powerful spectacle are gems that exist in the Blazing World. They are substances with natural internal splendor that appears externally, unlike the gems in the real world that require human intervention (cutting and polishing) to reflect an external source of light. These lights of the Blazing World, therefore, also represent the Empress, the interior representation of Cavendish, with exterior radiance. In defending her country, the Empress employs the spectacle and lack of spectacle to destroy the enemy. Carried by the fish-men, the Empress's “ships seemed to swim of themselves ... which sight put them into a great image.”⁵¹ Then she uses the illumination of the jewels to conceal the fire stones that she uses to burn the enemies' ships. The Empress uses the natural spectacles of the Blazing World to confound the senses of the men from her home world. The blazing light also represents Cavendish herself as a person who recognizes her own interior worth and spectacularly displays it externally despite any objections from her society.

The next level of interiority is Cavendish's creation of the Empress's scribe, the Duchess of Newcastle who comes from a fictional country outside the Blazing World. In choosing a scribe, the Empress believes her authority and position entitle her to the best mind of the ages. Thus, she asks for “the soul of some ancient famous writer, either of Aristotle, Pythagoras, Plato, Epicurus, or the like.”⁵² The Spirits who offer to re-animate a soul for her indicate that such men are too singular in mind, preferring only their own opinions. Then the Empress requests the assistance of famous scientists: “Galileo, Gassender, Descartes, Helmont, Hobbes, H. More, etc.”⁵³ but the



Spirits argue that they are “so self-conceited”⁵⁴ they would not scribe for a woman. These refusals attest to Cavendish's feelings of exclusion from formal education in her gendered world. Having eliminated the male philosophers of the past and present, the Empress must choose a woman scribe who is as intelligent, as knowledgeable, and as skillful as a man. Of course, the Spirits recommend the Duchess of Newcastle. Not only does the Duchess become scribe, but she becomes main council for the Empress, herself becoming a powerful and important government aide. If the Empress, as a representation of Cavendish, cannot rely on patriarchal cultural, political, and philosophical structures, she can turn inwardly to the Duchess, a re-representation of herself, and consequently of Cavendish. Furthermore, their association emulates that of the traditional male friendship as epitome of natural companionship: the “friendship between them, that they became platonic lovers, although they were both women.”⁵⁵ Even in the fictional world, women must depend on other women, and themselves. However, unlike the Empress, the Duchess does not seem to have male aggression, and she laments that “I had rather die in the adventure of noble achievements, than live in obscure and sluggish security; since by the one, I may live in glorious fame, and by the other I am buried in oblivion.”⁵⁶ Because of her sex and her inability (or unwillingness) to transgress that boundary, she is destined to remain a silent spectator in her homeland.

Perhaps most importantly for the Empress is the Duchess as Cavendish's spokesperson for women's writing as an escape from male domination and alienation and as an internalization of her own needs and desires, for, as the Duchess avers, “by creating a world within yourself, you may enjoy all both in whole and in parts, without control or opposition, and may make what you would please.”⁵⁷ Further, the Duchess tells the Empress that “every human creature can create an immaterial world fully inhabited by immaterial creatures and populous of immaterial subjects.”⁵⁸ In keeping with the Cavendish's conflation of male and female boundaries, the Duchess structures this advice in terms of a male creator, despite its female listener and orator. In reflection of the blurry division between nature and artifice raised in *Observations*, the Duchess adds, “he may alter that world as often as he pleases, or change it from a natural world, to an artificial.”⁵⁹ She can attain the sort of greatness for which Cavendish strives because “although she is not one of the most learned, eloquent, witting and ingenious, yet is she a plain and natural writer, for the principle of her writings is sense and reason.”⁶⁰ With sense and reason inside, the Duchess can create external spectacle. Realizing that the options left open to her by her home's patriarchal system cannot be hers, the Duchess does visualize a new mode



of fantastical existence: “At last, when the Duchess saw that no patterns would do her any good in the framing of her world; she resolved to make a world of her own invention.”⁶¹ Having experienced the Blazing World in which women hold freedoms and authority, the Duchess cannot happily return to her patriarchal world, the type of world that Cavendish inhabits in reality.

The innermost beings of Cavendish's fiction are the disembodied Spirits. Unlike Cavendish, the Empress, and the Duchess, the Spirits are immaterial beings, freed from corporeal, and hence gender, restrictions: without corporeality, the Spirits are neither male nor female. Through the aid of these Spirits, the Empress and the Duchess are able to travel in soul only and, in fact, to inhabit the bodies of men, and within the Duchess's husband they discuss all matter of nature without gender bias, a reflection of the freedom that William Cavendish seems to have afforded his wife. Lilley confirms that “Instead of cross-dressing and masking, female freedom in this text is generated through various strategies of disembodiment and secular self-presentation.”⁶² The division between materiality and immateriality enabled by the Spirits is another aspect reaching back to Cavendish's *Observations*. Within *The Blazing World*, however, the discourse and the non-corporeal entities of the fictional Empress, Duchess, and Spirits allow Cavendish the voice and authority that she must fight for in *Observations* and in seventeenth-century England.

Part II: Experimental Spectacles

Intruding upon the male world of the new experimental science, Cavendish, perhaps because of her alleged shyness (and perhaps because of the ostensible authority of the textual), fights her philosophical battles in narrative. In *Observations*, she explains that she intends “*to explain and illustrate my own Opinions*.”⁶³ However, she is careful to situate herself within the debate as an equal, rather than as an inferior (or woman), while challenging the claims made by learned men. She argues, “*I will not deceive the world, nor trouble my conscience by being a Mountbanck in learning; but rather prove naturally wise then artificially foolish*.”⁶⁴ Next she sets up her “ARGUMENTAL DISCOURSE” as a discussion between her thoughts, disparaging women's lack of education as the source of women's practical inferiority, at least in natural philosophy, rather than their supposed biologically-determined non-capacity. In fact, she claims that error comes “from want of exterior particular knowledg [sic] ... and Ignorance was like wise a want not of interior, but of exterior knowledg [sic].”⁶⁵ Finally, she refutes the contemporary philosophical position that everything about the



world and nature can be understood and explained: “since no particular Creature or part of Nature can have an infallible, Universal, or thorow [sic] perception of all the parts, it can neither have an infallible or universal knowledg [sic].”⁶⁶ Cavendish demonstrates that “the ‘toys’ of contemporary scientific observation and measurement can only record the least meaningful of nature’s processes and functions.”⁶⁷ Consequently, “she voiced her opposition to the Baconian enterprise as a whole.”⁶⁸ These are the basic tenets upon which Cavendish constructs her natural philosophy.

Expanding to particulars, Cavendish maintains that perception is “*the chief and general action of Nature*.”⁶⁹ Accordingly, Cavendish considers perception to be what confounds the experimentalists of her day. She laments that “oftentimes objects were obstructed and hidden from their perception”⁷⁰ and they “may err in searching and enquiring after the causes of natural effects, and many times embrace falsehoods for truths.”⁷¹ Even learned men are subject to faulty perception. It is not surprising, then, that in both *Observations* and *The Blazing World* she deliberates the merits and detriments of perception enabled (or disabled) by optical devices. Furthermore, Cavendish claims that observational examination of any object in nature is useless, because the results neither contribute to practical uses (or manipulations) of the objects nor illuminate the interiors of them. In *The Blazing World*, the Empress gathers her natural philosophers and tells them, “busy yourselves with such experiments as may be beneficial to the public.”⁷² As discussed in Part I, Cavendish is concerned with interiority and immateriality, which are difficult to observe and decipher, and the Empress’s philosophers cannot produce such results.

It is here that, I think, Cavendish’s lack of formal education shows, for she does not quite understand the doctrine behind observational investigation. The Empress claims that the philosophers’ language is meant for “obscuring truth, rather than clearing it.”⁷³ And it is true that, in the real world, complex language can be a strategy to keep the gates of knowledge closed to all but those already trained to understand it. Thus, it can be inferred that Cavendish found the scientific texts she encountered too difficult to understand.⁷⁴ Cavendish also seems to misunderstand that an easy path to the so-called scientific truth is not probable, and it is the disagreements and contestations, the discourses between philosophers, that lead to clarity, reproducible results, and, ultimately, scientific truth. The Empress’s philosophers try to tell her that “were nothing but truth, and no falsehood, there would be no occasion to dispute,”⁷⁵ but she insists, along Cavendish’s line, that failure to perceive interiors and inward functions, with or without optical devices, is a failure of the Baconian experimental paradigm. Just as



the Empress will have one religion, one language, and one government to maintain peace in the Blazing World, so will Cavendish have one avenue for scientific discovery. Cavendish's conception of competing interpretations of observation result in "what she considers a false confidence in both the tools and the usefulness of measurement as proposed and exercised by several prominent natural philosophers of the day."⁷⁶ Although Cavendish arranges her *Observations* as a discourse, the two minds (the speakers) are both her own, and opine with little actual debate.

Another problematical aspect of Cavendish's philosophical design also illustrates her disenfranchisement from contemporary philosophical discussions. As Keller indicates, Cavendish, as a result of her alienation from the official space and discourse of science, has "to offer a 'stranger's account' of the new science and thereby to displace epistemological problems and social pretensions in the claims of the experimentalists ... from the intellectual margins."⁷⁷ As an outsider with no experience or formal education, Cavendish is unable to differentiate between interpretation of observation and fanciful creation, or, as Siegfried writes, "To Cavendish's mind, the experimentalist's inductive practices rely on and produce artifact, and is thus more akin to painting ... than reasoned exposition .. natural expressions of art."⁷⁸ Cavendish's misunderstanding leads her to mistakenly perceive philosophical deduction as falsehood, as an act of fancy.⁷⁹ It makes sense, then, that Cavendish should present *The Blazing World* as an attachment to her *Observations*, allowing herself several discursive tools to work through her conflicted understanding of science and art, nature and artifice, reason and fancy, and truth and fiction.

Further, Cavendish contends that reason, not the interpretation of observations, must be the core of philosophy and that one's reason can be educated through oral and written discourse. Hence, "the Empress comes to an understanding of the nature of things through dialogue."⁸⁰ She does not have to see to know: she has to be told. It seems to escape both her and Cavendish's attention that the tellers and writers of such knowledge have themselves learned from observation. Likewise, Cavendish forgets that discourse and writing are arts derived from both reason and fancy, as she continues to insist that "the arts of the experimental philosopher are generally productions of deception rather than truth, owing to the unreliability of the senses."⁸¹ Cavendish's need to separate reason from the senses betrays her underlying unease with embodiment and materiality, two elements that mark her as woman, and, therefore, as an intellectual inferior in her world. But the senses are requisite for mediating human understanding of the universe.



It is within these tenets, boundaries, and misinterpretations that Cavendish bases her caustic assault on the instruments of contemporary optic technology. For Cavendish, seeing is *not* believing. She prefaces her *Observations* stating that she intends “to examine the Opinions of some of our Modern Microscopical or Dioptrical Writers”⁸² because device-enabled observation is a “brittle Art,”⁸³ one that can be shattered easily. She continues in her diatribe, stating, “I have but little faith in such Arts, little in Telescopical, Mircoscopical, and the like inspections, and prefer rational and judicious Observations before deluding Glasses and Experiments,”⁸⁴ implying the carelessness with which these devices are used and their growing popularity as investigative tools. Part of her argument against the optical instruments coincides with her overall distaste for contemporary natural philosophy because of its limitation to exterior inspection. She compounds this failing with the fact that the devices themselves are not well made: the glasses are “deformed and misshaped”⁸⁵ or “a Glass that is flaw’d, crack’d, or broke or cut ... will present numerous pictures of one object.”⁸⁶ Again she fails to differentiate the effects and purposes of different types of instruments (convex, concave, cylindrical, and flat glasses) some of which are intentionally made to distort, reflect, and refract light. Cavendish clearly has either not read, or has misunderstood, the contemporary discourses on optics. Finally, Cavendish concludes that if glasses were reasonable devices, they would neither present a distorted image nor require interpretation, and so glasses “are mere deluders.”⁸⁷

Despite her inflammatory arguments against optical instruments, Cavendish is indecisive about the usefulness of telescopes. She does not consider the implications of celestial observations and elides the usefulness of telescopes for other purposes. Furthermore, she does not understand the mechanics of the device, and she admits that she is unsure of the veracity of what observers perceive: “Some affirm, that they have discovered many new Stars, never seen before, by the help of Telescopes; but whether this be true, or not, or whether it be onely [sic] a delusion of the glasses, I will not dispute.”⁸⁸ Yet she does concede that telescopes do show objects “being too far off to be discerned by our optic perception, except we use very good telescopes, by which skilful astronomers have often observed”⁸⁹ celestial objects. She unwittingly contradicts herself here stating that there is an art to using the devices, an art that must be learned and practiced and mediated by the senses. In *The Blazing World*, when “these telescopes caused more differences and divisions amongst them, than ever they had before,”⁹⁰ the Empress denounces their use: “now I do plainly perceive that your glasses are false informers, and instead of discovering the truth, delude your senses;



wherefore I command you to break them, and let the bird-men trust only to their natural eyes.”⁹¹ Despite this command, however, it seems that the telescopes remain intact, for, during the invasion, “the bear-men through their telescopes discovered a great number of ships”⁹² and subsequently use the telescopes to see which towns would not submit to the king.⁹³ The telescopes are useful in a limited way in the *Blazing World*, a fitting compromise for Cavendish if she cannot definitively denounce or accept the use of the telescope.

In light of her experience as a mere spectator at the Royal Society,⁹⁴ and her dislike of Robert Hooke's *Micrographia*,⁹⁵ Cavendish's critique of microscopy is much harsher than that of telescopy. Regarding micrography (magnifying and multiplying glasses), she admits she is unfamiliar with the technology, but states “yet of this I am confident, that this same Art, with all its instruments, is not able to discover the interior motions of any part or creature of Nature.”⁹⁶ Again, Cavendish repeats her criticisms of the new science: the necessity of art and interpretation, the limits of the technology, the inaccessibility of the tool, and the impossibility of discovering interiorities and universal truths. In *Observations*, she writes, “I cannot perceive any great advantage this Art doth bring us ... if Microscopes do truly represent the exterior parts and superficies of some minute Creatures, what advantages it our knowledg [sic]?”⁹⁷ Cavendish determines that microscopy is even more fallacious than telescopy because she knew that Hooke had to manipulate the images under the microscope to make sense of them: “it meant that the much-touted instruments simply did not perform as advertised.”⁹⁸ The microscope did not provide clear images that could be viewed without subjective interpretation. Thus, in *The Blazing World*, when the philosophers tell the Empress that microscopes “never delude, but rectify and inform their sense ... the world would be blind without them,”⁹⁹ she is quick to point out the limitations of the devices, asking if microscopes can magnify whales or make objects smaller.¹⁰⁰ Microscopes never again appear in the *Blazing World*. Without access to this new technology, the Empress, Cavendish, and all here sex, remain, as the philosophers in the *Blazing World* say, blind.

Despite, or perhaps in spite of, her incomplete knowledge of optics and observational experimentation, Cavendish doggedly contemplates natural philosophy to transgress social and gender restrictions, and uses different forms of narrative to create the spectacle of the female scientist. Wallwork avers that the development of the laboratory and the creation of the Royal Society made “science an activity that has a *legitimate place* of enactment, [and] prevented any real participation by women.”¹⁰¹ The development of



technology within this space further distances women from privileged knowledge. Even though Cavendish visited the Royal Society, she was a “spectator not a witness, a *visitor* to the main site of experimental science but not a member.”¹⁰² She observed results, but did not partake in any experimentation there. Thus, Cavendish continues to promote women's rights to knowledge and action in her texts. She writes that the modern experimenters “will perhaps think myself an inconsiderate opposite, because I am not of their Sex,”¹⁰³ implying their gender bias while defiantly challenging men's right to exclusive knowledge. She also dignifies women by asserting that “*many of our Sex may have as much wit, and be capable of Learning as well as Men*”¹⁰⁴ and by placing the blame of female ignorance squarely on the shoulders of ill-conceived social conventions: “*But as for Learning, that I am not versed with in it, no body, I hope, will blame me for it, since it is sufficiently known, that our Sex is not bred up to it.*”¹⁰⁵ In the *Blazing World*, “the duchess's science has triumphed over all other natural philosophies,”¹⁰⁶ but, in the real world, Cavendish's philosophy cannot. Finally, she proposes that in the future, a woman may not be alienated from natural philosophy. In *Observations*, Cavendish imagines her young student: “*for her Ground being Sense and Reason, She may meet with an age where she will be more regarded, then she is in this.*”¹⁰⁷ There is a tacit sadness in this comment implying Cavendish's realization that her age is not that age of equality.

Conclusion

In *Observations* and *The Blazing World*, Cavendish uses narrative to dismantle the patriarchal apparatus that bars her, and all women of her time, from the study and practice of natural philosophy. Cavendish's positioning of spectacle and spectating in the texts allows her to criticize the alienation of women from intellectual discourse and political action, paralleling her own self-representation as spectacle and creator of spectacle in reality. The successive interiorizations of self-representations in *The Blazing World* (the Empress, the Duchess, and the Spirits) function as an arced trajectory along which women reach their ambitious goals of having absolute power and knowledge, but must eventually privatize those goals within the fictional worlds of their minds' creations. The text also delineates Cavendish's concerns with materiality and embodiment (the alleged causes of women's inferiority), as well as with nature and artifice.

Cavendish's female defiance centers on her interest in, and her desire to enter, the male sphere of natural and experimental philosophy. However, Cavendish clearly finds fault with the Baconian scientific paradigm. With



limited access to technology, knowledge, and scientific language, Cavendish marks out her perceptions of natural philosophy, arguing against the conflation of reason and the senses in scientific exploration. Her insistence on the inability of nature to reveal its universal truths, coupled with her distrust of optical technologies and her inability to acknowledge the importance of scientific debate, illuminates her lack of formal education about which she is complaining. Her two texts function co-operatively as Cavendish fictionalizes her argument to further illustrate the potential for women's intellectual and social advancement, while lamenting the unprivileged state of her female contemporaries. In reality, her self-fashioning as outrageous spectacle, professional author, and hermaphroditic transgressor of social rules, Cavendish herself projected the protofeminism and political ideas that she establishes in her texts.

Samuel Pepys' censure of Cavendish led to her being known as "Mad Madge," but anyone who understands the motivations behind her ambition and spectacular self-fashioning will surely see her as "*Margaret the First*."

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¹ Pepys, "Samuel Pepys Diary: 18 March 1668," np.

² Wallwork, "Disruptive Behaviour in the Making of Science: Cavendish and the Community of Seventeenth-Century Science," 43.

³ Bowerbank and Mendelson. Introduction to *Paper Bodies: A Margaret Cavendish Reader*, 12.

⁴ Hutton, "Anne Conway, Margaret Cavendish and Seventeenth-Century Scientific Thought," 218-20.

⁵ Cavendish, *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy*.

⁶ Cavendish, Margaret. *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World and Other Writings*.

⁷ Bowerbank and Mendelson, 12.

⁸ Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation*, 89.

⁹ Harris, "Living in the Neighbourhood of Science: Mary Evelyn, Margaret Cavendish and the Greshamites." 199.

¹⁰ Cavendish, *The Blazing World*, 124.

¹¹ Cavendish, *Observations*, Line 3.

¹² Cavendish, *The Blazing World*, 124.

¹³ Lilley, Introduction to *The Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World and Other Writings*, ix.

¹⁴ Hutton, 200.

¹⁵ Lilley, Introduction, xii-xiii.

¹⁶ Wallwork, 44.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.



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- ¹⁹ Keller, "Producing Petty Gods: Margaret Cavendish's Critique of Experimental Science," 172.
- ²⁰ Cavendish, *Observations*, sig c verso.
- ²¹ Ibid., sig e recto.
- ²² Ibid., sig c recto.
- ²³ Ibid., np.
- ²⁴ Ibid., np.
- ²⁵ Ibid., "Catalogue," np.
- ²⁶ Scott-Douglas, "Self-Crowned Laureatess: The Examples of Margaret Cavendish and Jane Lead," 66.
- ²⁷ Cavendish, *The Blazing World*, 124.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 124.
- ²⁹ Ibid., 224.
- ³⁰ Spiller, "Reading Through Galileo's Telescope: Margaret Cavendish and the Experience of Reading," 212.
- ³¹ Sutherland, "Aspiring to the Rhetorical Tradition: A Study of Margaret Cavendish," 266.
- ³² Spiller, 196.
- ³³ Sarasohn, "A Science Turned Upside Down: Feminism and the Natural Philosophy of Margaret Cavendish," 145-46.
- ³⁴ Cavendish, *The Blazing World*, 125.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 126.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 132.
- ³⁷ Cavendish, *Observations*, 124.
- ³⁸ Cavendish, *The Blazing World*, 134.
- ³⁹ Ibid., 162.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 155.
- ⁴¹ Sutherland, 268.
- ⁴² Cavendish, *The Blazing World*, 160.
- ⁴³ Ibid., 161.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 162.
- ⁴⁵ Wiseman, *Conspiracy and Virtue: Women, Writing, and Politics in Seventeenth Century England*, 268.
- ⁴⁶ Siegfried, "Anecdotal and Cabalistic Forms in Observations upon Experimental Philosophy," 57.
- ⁴⁷ Lilley, Introduction, xxvi.
- ⁴⁸ Cavendish, *The Blazing World*, 218.
- ⁴⁹ Lilley, "Blazing Worlds: Seventeenth-Century Women's Utopian Writing," 119.
- ⁵⁰ Cavendish, *The Blazing World*, 211.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., 208.
- ⁵² Ibid., 181.
- ⁵³ Ibid., 181.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid., 181.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid., 183.
- ⁵⁶ Ibid., 185.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid., 186.
- ⁵⁸ Ibid., 185.



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- ⁵⁹ Ibid., 186.
⁶⁰ Ibid., 181.
⁶¹ Ibid., 188.
⁶² Lilley, Introduction, xxiii.
⁶³ Cavendish, *Observations*, np.
⁶⁴ Ibid., sig e recto.
⁶⁵ Ibid., sig e recto.
⁶⁶ Ibid., sig q recto.
⁶⁷ Siegfried, 63.
⁶⁸ Keller, 176.
⁶⁹ Cavendish, *Observations*, np.
⁷⁰ Ibid., np.
⁷¹ Ibid., 123.
⁷² Cavendish, *The Blazing World*, 155.
⁷³ Ibid., 162.
⁷⁴ Prieto-Pablos, "The Disease of Wit and the Discourse of Reason in Margaret Cavendish's *Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy*," 270.
⁷⁵ Cavendish, *The Blazing World*, 142.
⁷⁶ Siegfried, 62.
⁷⁷ Keller, 174.
⁷⁸ Siegfried, 62.
⁷⁹ Keller, 179.
⁸⁰ Hutton, "Science and Satire: The Lucianic Voice in Margaret Cavendish's *Description of a New World Called the Blazing World*," 165.
⁸¹ Dear, "A Philosophical Duchess: Understanding Margaret Cavendish and the Royal Society," 132.
⁸² Cavendish, *Observations*, sig b recto.
⁸³ Ibid., sig b recto.
⁸⁴ Ibid., np.
⁸⁵ Ibid., 7.
⁸⁶ Ibid., 8.
⁸⁷ Ibid., 141.
⁸⁸ Ibid., 154.
⁸⁹ Ibid., 126.
⁹⁰ Cavendish, *The Blazing World*, 140.
⁹¹ Ibid., 141.
⁹² Ibid., 208.
⁹³ Ibid., 213.
⁹⁴ Wallwork, 43.
⁹⁵ Campbell, Mary B. *Wonder and Science: Imagining Worlds in Early Modern Europe*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004. ACLS. Web. 23 Nov 2014, 182.
⁹⁶ Cavendish, *Observations*, 7.
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⁹⁸ Keller, 178.
⁹⁹ Cavendish, *The Blazing World*, 143.
¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 144.
¹⁰¹ Wallwork, 42.



¹⁰² Ibid., 43.

¹⁰³ Cavendish, *Observation*, np.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., sig e verso.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., sig e verso.

¹⁰⁶ Sarasohn, 145.

¹⁰⁷ Cavendish, *Observations*, np.



PAIN-FEAR-NEGLECT-REPUGNANCE
Socio-psychological side effects

Didi Hock

This personal supplement to the information leaflet of a morning-after pill I voluntarily took in April 2016 represents the final point of the lonely fight I struggled out with my own body and mind after abundant pain, bleedings, and friendship related disillusionions.

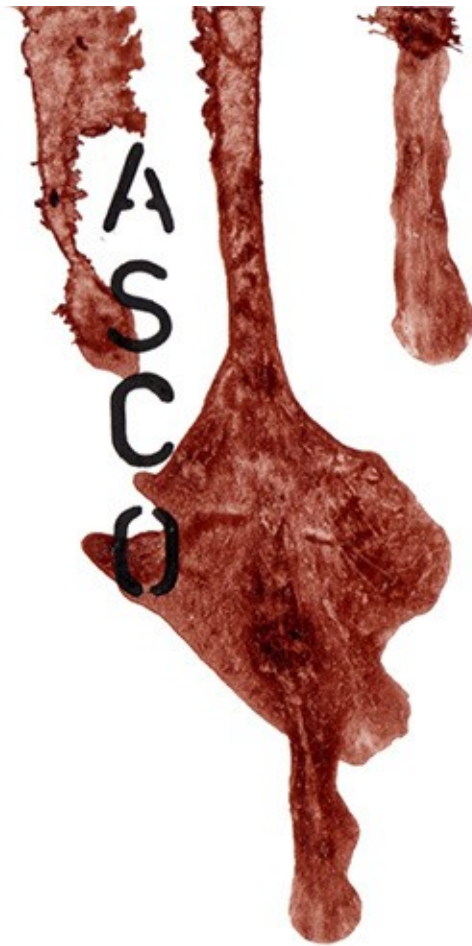
PAIN-FEAR-NEGLECT-REPUGNANCE is the first piece of a series of paintings done with my (pseudo-)menstrual blood. With this practice, I do not search for any link to my supposed femininity. I neither connect with my cyclic rhythm, nor do I embrace my menstruation with pleasure. Loads of people criticize me when I talk like this. They correct me, they judge me, they make fun of me. But I cannot follow the rules of the essentialist game, not of the patriarchal nor of the feminist one. My so-called sex organs are a strange body inside my own body. They are pain, they are alienating. I cannot use them to empower myself.

To paint with my blood does, hence, not represent a gesture of honoring my menstruation but my resistance to cyclic bleedings and to those off-site the script. Finally, they are good for something. Ejecting them over some pan, paper, or piece of fabric. Smoothing this thick and stretchable liquid. Tarnishing a drawing in process (or the floor around it) with randomly falling drops—observing how the saturated red turns into an opaque and incrustated brown—distract myself during a moment of suffering. These paintings are agency not naturalness, they are mental and social cleaning, they are alleviation of pain.











Dana Scully's Empowerment as a Bio-Terrorism Survivor

Natacha Guyot

Since its creation in the 1990s, the science fiction and supernatural *X-Files* franchise has focused on FBI agents Mulder and Scully, and their journey dealing with unexplainable cases and alien conspiracies. Of the two, the female agent and medical doctor, Dana Scully, has appeared in most storylines. Her character arc has proven to be complex, touching on aspects ranging from science and spirituality to career and motherhood. One dimension of her development that has tied into all parts of her life, both professional and personal, is her experience as a bio-terrorism survivor. This entails Scully enduring an alien abduction, having her reproductive material harvested, being rendered infertile, and gaining a hybrid DNA. The long-lasting arc emerges during the second season of the show and has kept a regularly preeminent role in Scully's story up to the 2016 revival.

While violence against women is a common narrative trope, including but not limited to the horror genre¹, it is significant to note that Scully is given space and time to work through the trauma, which is not always provided to female characters. The *X-Files* thus allowed Scully to have agency in how she struggled and eventually gained power despite the violence inflicted upon her. Although it is not flawless storytelling, Scully's arc nevertheless gives ground for her survivor experience. Examining how the trauma affects first her professional life and then her personal one permits an in depth-analysis of Scully's complex portrayal over the *X-Files'* numerous seasons and both feature films.

Re-evaluating Scientific Evidence

Although Scully's identity is partly shaped by her work as a federal agent, a more foundational aspect is her scientific background and expertise, which establishes her as the rational voice². The pilot episode³ introduces her medical education, and the franchise often features her performing autopsies – which become a recurring motif – and conducting other scientific tests. She also maintains her work as a medical doctor even when she no longer works in the X-Files department, both at the beginning of season nine and in the succeeding stories. Scully's rational and skeptical approach to what she encounters proves to be an element that helps her cope with the violence she experiences when she is abducted and later deals with the health issues caused by it, including the terminal cancer she faces



during the fourth season and the beginning of the fifth one, and her eventual infertility.

Sexualized violence is a common trope in stories and occurs in the *X-Files* on multiple occasions, including from a psychopath, Donnie Pfaster, who targets Scully in both 2.13 *Irresistible*⁴ and 7.07 *Orison*⁵. Yet, it is important to note that not only such things happen in “monster-of-the-week” episodes as isolated cases but also in the larger-scale mythology which is the catalyst for Scully’s empowerment as survivor of bio-terrorism, as well as other female characters. The sexualized aspect of the abusive experiments is notably marked by flashbacks and memories displaying that all victims are women, and the doctors using them male. The fact that Scully eventually learns that her eggs were used to create a hybrid child, Emily, who dies shortly after mother and daughter meet, also adds to this level of female-targeted bio-terrorism. While Scully’s motherhood arc is rooted in suffering for the most part, the child whose existence she did not choose or know about until it was too late, was a daughter, not a son. It is thus difficult not to ponder on the reason behind such a narrative choice.

Even by the end of the first season, Scully confronts unnatural experiments, such as the deformed frozen fetus she discovered in 1.24 *The Erlenmeyer Flask*⁶ and out-of-the-norm cases she had to analyze and investigate from the start of her partnership with Mulder. Yet she remains very involved in studying what is directly related to her traumatic experiences and its consequences, including in 5.01 *Redux*⁷ where she battled cancer and found the time and energy to continue to research and uncover connections between her illness and a conspiracy that involves agents from the Bureau. Although she does not personally obtain the chip that eventually cures her cancer nor succeed in saving her daughter Emily in 5.06 *Christmas Carol*⁸ and 5.07 *Emily*⁹, Scully nevertheless remains directly involved in the scientific processes pertaining to the changes of her body, relying on her medical background to help her survive the trials. Lisa Parks considers that Scully’s scientific work in the series relies on “her ability to move through the continuum of scientific rationality / monstrosity”.¹⁰ This observation published in 1996 anchors the earlier character development that continued to expand over the subsequent seasons and films of the franchise.

The 2016 revival takes such matters to a new level. The first strong element is that Scully has the scientific evidence to believe and prove that the alien experiments are real. The opening episode 10.01 *My Struggle*¹¹ exposes this suggestion after comparing her blood analysis to a young woman’s after the latter claimed to have been abducted and gone through the same abuse as



Scully. Both blood samples carried similar markers. Although Mulder was always the believer in alien life, and Scully was originally the skeptic, roles are reversed at that point, not because of an ideological change of heart but because of scientific evidence.

Scully's hybrid nature brings to her a heroic role as she becomes one of the key leaders working to save humankind against the spreading virus that appears in the finale of the season 10.06 *My Struggle II*¹². She also begins to develop a vaccine to save victims of the worldwide outbreak. Scully's personal long-term struggle with DNA hybridity allowed her to take the most active role during the finale. Should more episodes or movies appear, she could retain a significant role in saving humankind.

Hybrid Wild Feminine

The conspirators who orchestrate Scully's abduction and cancer, and later in the 2016 revival activate the worldwide virus outbreak, are mostly men. That, combined with the general hierarchy of the FBI, provides a patriarchal order Scully must fight against throughout the franchise. Lacy Hodges argued in her Master's thesis that Scully is represented as a diminished and monstrous woman, especially because of her new hybrid nature, and that it adds to how her value is not always considered as important¹³. While Scully was abused, it is important to note that her male counterpart, Mulder, also personally suffers multiple times, through torture and even abduction. As displayed in *I Want to Believe*¹⁴ and the 2016 revival, Scully retains the greater resilience, proved through her ability to continue her medical practice and use what she had earlier been subjected to as an opportunity to grow both professionally and in her personal life. These trials provide greater independence to Scully. It would be a lie to consider she has broken all chains from external threats; having to give up her son for adoption in 9.16 *William*¹⁵ shows a different depth to the psychological struggle a mother has to endure. Yet it is a conscious choice to protect him, so she could continue to fight not only for him but for the greater good, regardless of how brokenhearted she remained over that. The duality of this pain along with an acceptance of a decision that she made of her own volition is explored in several episodes of the 2016 revival.

Scully is not only a very intelligent being whose scientific works is central to the franchise's storyline. Her spiritual and emotional drives also magnify her capacity to persist throughout the years, regardless of explanations and warnings. One of the elements that emerges from her cancer is her return to faith, though it is something she approaches on her own terms, as a fully



individual decision. Her struggle with her Catholic faith was shown in prior episodes, but her continued faith helps her remain combative in following seasons, whether through her cancer and the loss of her daughter or when Mulder is taken away by conspirators in 7.02 *The Sixth Extinction II*¹⁶. Scully can be compared to a figure of the wild feminine, through the “practice” of the “knowing of the soul”¹⁷, for she is willing to unite nature and what she can learn from and about it, and spirituality, which appears in multiple forms. While Scully mostly exhibits a Christian faith, she is a tolerant and spiritually-seeking soul, placing her at the heart of the complex supernatural world of the *X-Files*¹⁸. Her multilayered spirituality is evident when she joins with Native American Albert Hosteen in 7.02 *The Sixth Extinction II* to pray with him for Mulder; later in the same season, in the Scully-centric episode 7.17 *All Things*¹⁹, she visits a Buddhist temple. At the end of the ninth season, in 9.19 *The Truth*²⁰, she tells Mulder that their spiritual beliefs have aligned. Mulder reaches out to touch the cross pendant she wears around her neck, but he never specifically mentions Christianity in his words. In that respect, Scully can be characterized as a figure of feminine divine²¹, who gives birth not only in a physical way – both with her son William and using her blood to develop a vaccine in the 2016 revival – but also in a spiritual way, with her influence on Mulder.

There are isolated elements pointing to Scully’s immortality, such as the Ouroboros tattoo she gets in 4.13 *Never Again*²² and bluntly being told she is immortal in 3.04 *Clyde Bruckman’s Final Repose*²³. These scenes contribute to the idea of a Wild Feminine, ancient goddess notion even more, but they are not necessarily required when arguing for Scully’s transformation. Instead of harping over her traumatic experiences over the seasons she strengthened her resolve to fight for herself, her family, and all victims from similar threats, many of them being fellow women. Tragedy and sacrifices permeate her life but even when she finds herself unable to win against the patriarchy, Scully stands her ground to the best of her abilities, even when it causes her to lose people she loves, not only in aforementioned episodes but also her sister Melissa in 3.02 *Paper Clip*²⁴, and must reinvent herself professionally (beginnings of season 6, 9, and 10, and in *I want to Believe*). While men try to turn her into a victim, strip her from her humanity and bodily agency, Scully overcomes adversity on multiple accounts, although scholars such as Wilcox and Williams argue that “Scully’s gaze is disempowered by the text,”²⁵ while analyzing earlier seasons of the show. Scully still has fears and concerns, which are even showcased in the revival with her nightmares about her son’s health in 10.02 *Founders’ Mutation*²⁶, as well as her imaginary reflection in the mirror displaying her face turning from human to alien. Yet Scully never



gives up and presses on, as a complex educated, skilled, emotional and spiritual woman.

Conclusion

There is no denying that Scully was subjected to bio-terrorism because she was a fertile woman. The sexual dimension of her trauma is obvious but she was given time and space in the narrative to not only process the abusive experience but thrive regardless of the encountered violence. There was no Stockholm Syndrome included or even implied, as Scully never idolized or supported the people who assaulted and wounded her. Instead, she chose to work through the trials by continuing her work, both as a FBI agent and above all as a medical doctor. She devoted her duty to her country, which included fellow victims of similar circumstances, most of them being women. While Scully's transformation can include a monstrous aspect, this participates to the journey that empowers her, consolidating her as a feminist character who provides a resourceful role model.

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Who Deserves Protection? Understanding the Legal Silence on Intersex Surgery

Aisling Reidy

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is widely condemned across modern societies as an archaic, harmful act of violence which has no medical benefits against a non-consenting child. International efforts to end this practice have resulted in the criminalization of FGM in many western societies and condemnation under international law. However, intersex people routinely receive potentially harmful, medically unnecessary genital reshaping surgery in infancy. Similarly, male circumcision for non-medical reasons is widespread and legal across the world. These procedures escape much of the criticism and legal opposition that the first action faces, despite being similarly rooted in cultural-religious preference rather than health concerns. The differences between these procedures and the justifications for them have been discussed at length in legal and medical literature, yet there is still much ambiguity surrounding these inconsistencies. In many countries, the line between what is and is not legal in this area is carefully drawn to allow the surgical alteration of some infant genitalia, but outlaw the surgical alteration of ‘normal’ female genitalia.

Does this constitute sex-based discrimination? Why is the difference between these practices so highly politicised? The relative silence on male circumcision and intersex surgery compared to the significant outcry against FGM raises questions about the construction of what is ‘normal’ in our society and who deserves protection.

This paper intends to investigate the treatment of intersex people in our society, in law, and medicine. Through this examination, it becomes clear that there is systematic harm done to intersex people which is further compounded and entrenched by their lack of visibility in law. Comparing to male circumcision and female genital mutilation, the social meaning of these contentious practices and the complex barriers to regulating them will be explored.

Defining Contested Terms

To provide a comparative approach, these three terms (female genital mutilation, intersex surgery and male circumcision) will be understood in their broader sense. There are various conditions to which the label intersex applies, and these occur when “genetic and/or hormonal patterns cause an



embryo to exhibit a pattern of sexual differentiation that combines elements of both male and female developmental pathways.”¹ In some cases, a child is born with sex-ambiguous genitalia, most commonly an enlarged clitoris or a micropenis. This occurs when there are unusually high levels of certain hormones in the womb, or when the fetus cannot respond to them, for example Androgen Insensitivity Syndrome (AIS)². Intersex also includes people who do not have common chromosomal composition, such as ‘mosaic genetics’, where a person has both cells with XX chromosomes and with XY chromosomes, making them neither ‘male’ nor ‘female’ in a strict biological sense.

These conditions do not always result in ‘abnormal’ genitalia, and some people only discover they are intersex at a later age, such as when puberty does not occur or when medical tests reveal chromosomes not in accordance with the sex that person was assigned at birth. As this paper focuses on intersex surgery and physical/sexual norms, I will mostly be focusing on intersex conditions diagnosed at birth.

A large issue with the legal and medical literature on intersexuality is the reliance on normative, non-objective terms such as normal versus abnormal. The surgery performed on intersex infants is usually referred to as “gender normalizing surgery.” In the interests of breaking down the stigma around intersexuality, these terms will be avoided. Intersex surgery will be used to refer to all surgical genital modifications done for cosmetic reasons on infants diagnosed as intersex.

Similarly, FGM is used to refer to a number of surgical actions of varying invasiveness, from a small “nick” of the clitoral hood to infibulation, the removal of the external part of the clitoris and the joining of the labia minora or majora³. The United Nations definition of FGM “comprises all procedures that involve altering or injuring the female genitalia for non-medical reasons and is recognized internationally as a violation of the human rights of girls and women.”⁴ Following international academic, legal and popular discourse, I will be using this broad UN definition of FGM to include the full spectrum of surgeries. Male circumcision is used to mean any removal of the foreskin, usually performed on infants for religious or cultural reasons.⁵

The Effects of Stigmatization

From the moment of birth, intersex people are placed in a bubble of misinformation and secrecy. Doctors commonly believe they are acting in



the best interests of the child by performing surgery as endorsed by mainstream medical literature.⁶ Parents are routinely misinformed about the necessity of this surgery, presented to them as the only solution available, and are often warned never to tell their child about what has been done to them.⁷ The idea that the child will face social stigma and identity crises by not conforming to the gender binary is so strong that the fact that sterilization, enforced silence about their body, and ongoing invasive medical procedures have a similarly damaging psychological effect is not discussed. In fact, Ehrenreich cites research that finds that “medical manuals and original research articles almost unanimously recommend that parents and children not receive a full explanation of an infant’s sexual status.”⁸ With such an absence of adequate medical explanation and the inaccurate framing of the surgery as a time-sensitive “emergency,” it is questionable whether parents can truly give informed consent to these procedures.⁹

These procedures often involve the removal of fully functioning sex organs for the sake of achieving a “normal” genital appearance which can take away an individual’s ability to have children naturally. For example, for a child assigned female but born with functioning male genitalia in the form of testes and a micropenis, medical practice is to remove these in order to prevent the child developing male secondary sex characteristics, such as facial hair.¹⁰ In the pursuit of ‘normalizing’ this person, they have been subjected to de facto sterilization – the avoidable, unnecessary removal of healthy, functional testes and penis when they are deemed ‘too small.’ While there can be a risk of cancer in unusual genitalia, this risk is often so low it does not justify surgery and the risk of sterilization.¹¹ Although this is an extreme example, intersex people commonly lose the right to reproduce through these surgeries, either at birth or during puberty, when they do not have the capacity to consent.¹²

This approach from medicine has been attributed to John Money, a Johns Hopkins psychological researcher who from the 1950’s forward claimed that there is no harm in surgically reassigning the sex of infants, as before the age of two and a half, sex identity is fluid. He argued that “healthy psychosexual development is dependent on the appearance of the genitals,” therefore not performing surgery on genitals deemed ‘abnormal’ is dangerous.¹³ These conclusions were based on the infamous “John/Joan case,” the story of David Reimer, who suffered enormous psychological and physical harm from the ‘treatment’ he received from Money when reassigned as female after a failed circumcision left him without a penis.¹⁴ ‘Joan’ rejected his assigned sexual identity and suffered enormous



psychological and physical trauma through this process. The misrepresentation of David Reimer's case as a success by Money to the medical community established the credibility of intersex surgery. While Money's research on this is now known to be an inaccurate retelling of a tragic and horrifying case, his findings on sex identity malleability have still not be refuted by the American Pediatric Association.¹⁵

This misinformation continues throughout the lives of intersex people, with little acknowledgement of the prevalence of these surgeries and denial of access to their own medical records.¹⁶ Data on the number of intersex surgeries performed within the United States alone ranges from 100 surgeries a year to upwards of five per day.¹⁷ It is estimated that between thirty and eighty percent of intersex surgeries require multiple follow-up procedures.¹⁸ The breath of the estimates in statistics such as these further emphasizes the lack of accurate information available for intersex people. The number of intersex people is itself hard to quantify, with many intersex people not knowing that there is anyone else with similar experiences for years as a result of the stigma around discussing it.¹⁹

Again, there is a huge lack of balanced, dispassionate research centered on the experiences of those affected by FGM. Just as faulty research has been used to justify intersex surgery, inaccuracy and misinformation lie behind the dominant Western attitudes to FGM. The Western anti-FGM movement began in the 1920's during campaigning against the practice in British-controlled Kenya. Observing female genital cutting ceremonies, British colonists and missionaries feared it would reduce birth rates and thus, the labor force available to generate colonial profits, claims Shweder.²⁰ The invasiveness and long-term harm of the procedure were exaggerated in a fearmongering attempt to protect colonial interests. These hyperbolized dangers of FGM continue to be taken as fact in modern discourse despite evidence to the contrary. A study of over 1,000 women in Gambia by the British Medical Research Council shows that women who have undergone FGM show no statistically higher instance of infertility, anorgasmia (inability to orgasm) or pain during sex than 'uncut' women.²¹ However, alternative studies focusing on more invasive forms of FGM provide opposite results, as Berg and Denison's review of 15 empirical studies finds.²² Most studies of the long-term health effects of FGM call for further investigation into the topic, as despite widespread interest the available evidence is contradictory and not without flaws.



Law, Analogies and Unequal Protection

However, the aim of this essay is not to advocate for or to admonish circumcision of men or women, nor to debate the comparability of these surgeries in their various forms. It is to point out that in all of these cases; FGM, male circumcision and intersex surgery; healthy tissue is removed from non-consenting infants with no clear medical necessity. Yet somehow, popular opinion and the legal stance on these issues do not acknowledge this. I have taken a range of examples from various countries, which may harm the strict comparability of the cases, but the gender and sexuality norms which motivate these laws is common across Western states despite the differing legal frameworks.²³

As has been discussed, intersex surgery is not a medically necessary procedure and can lead to great harm for the individual. The majority of intersex surgeries involve reassigning and reshaping ambiguous genitalia to female, “defined by the capacity to be penetrated by a penis, since, as one physician rather crassly put it, ‘you can make a hole but you can’t build a pole’.”²⁴ Intersex surgeries rely on heteronormative, loosely defined standards of normal sexuality. The meaning of ‘normal’ genitalia is highly subjective, within one culture or even, one hospital.²⁵ Excepting a Colombian high court decision to ban the surgery, it is widely unopposed and undiscussed.²⁶ Even though awareness of intersex conditions is growing, the law has been slow to reflect this change. When compared to FGM and circumcision in terms of lack of medical necessity, absence of consent and the ambiguity of long-term effects, it is striking that no international or state law (except Colombia) sees the analogies.

In May 2012, the Cologne regional appellate court in Germany banned male circumcision, on the grounds that it amounted to grievous bodily harm.²⁷ By the end of December, the Bundestag (German parliament) had overturned the ban and explicitly legalized male infant circumcision.²⁸ The outrage from local and international religious groups between May and December was fierce enough to force the government to overturn the regional court ruling amidst cries of the ban’s antisemitism and Islamophobia.²⁹ A similar response occurred when a San Francisco anti-circumcision group attempted to ban the practice by sponsoring a ballot initiative in 2011.³⁰

By contrast, the UN General Assembly’s resolution on intensifying their anti-FGM campaign was met with no similar outrage.³¹ Religious freedom barely featured in the debate, and the document contains only



recommendations to include religious leaders in eradication strategies. Despite being commonly acknowledged as a “cultural practice,” respecting cultural-religious differences seems not to extend to even the least invasive forms of FGM.

In her book *Justice, Gender and the Politics of Multiculturalism*, Sarah Song presents the example of Somalian women living in Seattle seeking circumcisions for their daughters in American hospitals. The doctors involved felt their choice was severely constrained, given the threatened alternative of ‘back-door’ operations if the surgeries were not performed by the hospital. After negotiations, they agreed to perform a modified, less invasive form of the procedure— a ‘nick’ of the clitoral hood— which would be a compromise between the meaningful cultural preference for ‘cut’ female genitalia and medical concern for the girls’ health. The backlash to this from women’s rights groups was enormous with many arguing that regardless of the modified procedure, this deal was enabling and legitimizing a harmful and barbaric practice.³² On the other side, the doctors argued they were adopting a harm-reducing approach that could facilitate cultural movement towards the abolition of the practice completely. In the end, the scandal forced doctors to take back their offer of a compromise surgery, and any form of FGM counts as child abuse under Washington state law.³³

Culturally meaningful performances of femininity and the degree of surgical invasiveness were deemed irrelevant against the broader goal of protecting those seen as vulnerable. Compared to the example regarding male circumcision, cultural meaning and the parent’s right to choose dominated the discussion and eventually defeated health and development concerns. Similarly, in cases of intersex surgeries, social norms under the guise of the ‘normal’/‘abnormal’ dichotomy are respected above progressive medical research and the advocacy of intersex individuals. Medical science remains deeply influenced by a traditional sex binary approach that leads to a highly arbitrary and hypocritical practice of genital surgeries on infants.

Intersex surgery relies on a strict, binary view of sex normality. Taking the analogy to FGM further, Ehrenreich argues that the idealized sex norms underlying FGM and intersex surgery are self-perpetuating through these surgeries: “just as proponents of FGC [Female Genital Cutting] base their conduct on the need to protect women from harmful social stigma, so do practitioners of intersex surgery base their position on protecting their patients from social ostracism.”³⁴ Yet this support for intersex surgeries is



flawed, as with or without surgery intersex people are consistently silenced. These norms are replicated through surgery that ‘fixes’ any perceived deviation, thus further entrenching them as such. The circularity here further undermines the legitimacy of intersex surgery; even as the analogous circularity in pro-FGM arguments has been tackled by widespread proposals for better health education and social reform.³⁵ As seen by the contradictions within the debate around FGM, resolving the conflict between socio-cultural beliefs and progressive medical science is no simple task.

Erasure of Analogies in Law

The erasure of these analogies is further entrenched in law through the silence surrounding intersexuality.

In the case of *M.C v. Aaronson*, M.C was a 16-month-old child in state care when he underwent medically unnecessary intersex surgery.³⁶ He was born with both male and female sex characteristics, and the surgery reassigned him as female. M.C’s foster parents later filed a lawsuit claiming that the state of South Carolina had violated M.C’s 14th Amendment rights to due process by performing this surgery which removed his phallus and created female-appearing genitalia. They also claimed medical malpractice as the surgery was performed, as most intersex surgeries are, “without notice or a hearing to determine whether the procedure was in M.C.’s best interest.” The case was dismissed when the 4th Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that “the defendants could not be held liable for constitutional claims because the law in this jurisdiction in 2006 did not provide sufficient notice that they were violating the Constitution.”³⁷ The court did not doubt M.C’s claims of injury, but the intention of the doctors involved. How was a medical professional to know that intersex surgery was harmful and damaging, when both mainstream law and medical literature assert otherwise? Again, the misinformation around intersex issues leads to the silencing of those hurt by these surgeries.

The case of *DiMarco v. Wyoming Institute of Corrections* illustrates this point further. DiMarco was an intersex woman convicted of fraud for issuing almost \$700 of bad checks.³⁸ She was brought to a women’s prison, where during the initial medical exam, officials discovered that she had been born with a micropenis, but no testes nor female reproductive organs. The officials’ reaction was enormously disproportionate. She was transferred to a maximum security unit and was kept in isolation for the next 438 days. Despite having received a low-risk score on admittance, the



deputy warden decided that long-term isolation was the only appropriate way to deal with someone who “appeared to be a male in a female institution.” DiMarco sued on grounds of 14th Amendment Due Process rights and 8th Amendment cruel and unusual punishment violations.

However, the court found no grounds for an equal protection claim, as there was no precedent for treating intersex people as a ‘suspect class’ for equal protection procedures. The judge concluded that the Wyoming correction institute had violated due process, but in the end damages of only \$1,000 plus legal expenses were granted.

The Aaronson and DiMarco cases both demonstrate how the silence around intersex issues are self-perpetuating. Those who are oppressed do not have access to legal recourse because of lack of precedents. Lack of precedents defeat potential cases. In this way, legal mechanisms for protecting intersex people’s rights are caught by the same circularity as that justifying intersex surgery.

There are some arguments that legal protection that could include intersex people already exists, it just has yet to be applied in a specific case. Anne Puluka, focusing on the US legal system, argues that states already intervene in cases where a parent’s religious or personal beliefs oppose medical best practise for children unable to give consent personally. Drawing an analogy to blood transfusion operations, Puluka cites cases where the mechanism of ‘*parens patriae*’ has been employed.³⁹ The parent’s right to put their personal preferences before the child’s medical treatment can be stopped. While this analogy could theoretically extend to circumcision and FGM, it is not entirely accurate for intersex children, as it is usually the doctors advocating this surgery to parents who have little or no previous knowledge of intersex issues. More convincingly, Anne Tamar Mattis compares intersex surgery to the forced sterilization of people with intellectual disabilities in 20th Century USA and the California state law that emerged to prevent this practice as attitudes changed.⁴⁰ This example demonstrates that, at least in the US, there is already a legal framework preventing the sterilization of people unable to consent. Infants born with intersex characteristics could easily be afforded this protection too.

Colonialism & “Othering”

Many authors also drawing these analogies focus on the West-centric nature of anti-FGM discourse. Ehrenreich explains the lack of acknowledgement of the analogies above by claiming: “the dissimilar



treatment those activists accord to such similar practices is based upon, among other things, a racially privileged North American exceptionalism underlying their thinking.”⁴¹ This way of thinking assumes superiority of Western knowledge over African and obscures the patriarchal realities these analogies show in Western culture to avoid uncomfortable self-scrutiny.

However, this counter-discourse accusing anti-FGM movements of being colonial and culturally insensitive often fall into the same West-centric approach. The analogies between the anti-FGM movement and intersex surgery go deep. Shweder and Ehrenreich both fail to mention that there is local opposition to genital cutting within Africa as well. This continuous, albeit accidental, shutting out of local voices reflects the enforced silence of intersex voices in the medical sphere, as discussed above. Those at the heart of the issue are not at the heart of the discussion. Prominent Gambian anti-FGM activist Jaha Dukureh asked, “Is it because we are black, because we are African or because we are women that our organisations aren’t seen as worthy of the support from the big international donors [compared to American-run organisations]?”⁴² The West-centric criticisms focus on European and American anti-FGM organizations and ignore non-Western governmental action such as by the African Union.⁴³

Thus, there is a huge need to include the voices of those who are being affected in any future solution to the problems detailed above. To improve legal recourse and medical treatment for intersex people, the silencing of intersex people must be rectified.

The Constraints of Identity Movements

If the analogies between these various practices is so evident, why have they not overcome the inconsistencies discussed? Various responses to this have been given, mainly regarding deference to cultural sensitivity around male circumcision or the prevalence of inaccurate medical information regarding health.⁴⁴ However, I propose that this is due to the constraints imposed by identity-based rights movements. Identity movements necessarily need to carve out a definition of themselves in order to achieve their goals.⁴⁵ This necessarily excludes others who may be similarly systemically disadvantaged. In a complex, multifaceted society, promoting certain rights can marginalize others. This is apparent in the resistance of the anti-FGM movement to include campaigning against intersex surgery and male circumcision as well.⁴⁶ Sceptics hold that these are pragmatic choices that ignore logical ideological equivalences in favor of achieving a



smaller goal.⁴⁷ While this is an understandable approach, especially given the much larger number of women at risk of FGM than there are children born with intersex conditions, it harms the movement for intersex rights.

Furthermore, defining intersex people is problematic itself, as any definitions depend on seeing them as ‘outside’ the traditional sex binary and therefore not protected by many existing legal frameworks, as seen in the *DiMarco v. Wyoming* case. Here we can draw one final analogy, to the Queer movement within the gay rights movement as described in Gamson’s *“Must identity movements self-destruct? A queer dilemma”*. While the gay community used identity building as a path towards recognition in society, the queer movement is founded on deconstructing identity and traditional binaries.

Queer theory is an ideological and normative lens through which one can assess ideas, actions, and structures. It has its origins in the queer movement, which sought recognition for transgender and bisexual people and all those who fell outside the traditional dichotomies of gay or straight, man or woman.⁴⁸ Therefore, queer theory strongly rejects these binaries, seeing them as oppressive, socio-historical constructs and not innate human subcategories. It champions the anarchic freedom in destroying these restrictive boundaries, and therein, according to Gamson, lies the fundamental problem of a “queer movement”. If the success of rights-seeking movements depends on the construction of collective identity, how can there be a movement that is anti-identity?

Similarly, the movement for intersex rights challenges the established sex identity categories in medicine, society, and law. As discussed, attempts to seek greater rights within these frameworks have been largely unsuccessful. However, operating outside these frameworks risks the further alienation of intersex people and any causes aligned to them as the FGM campaigns feared. By presenting a similar united front of difference, the intersex rights movement faces further ‘othering’.

However, the benefits of group alignment can overcome this quandary. MacKenzie et al.’s short qualitative study reports that social networks of intersex people gave people who are overwhelmingly silenced and isolated a stronger sense of identity, empowerment and normality.⁴⁹ The interviewees reported the difficulty of meeting other intersex people when the condition is such a taboo; one candidate had never met another intersex person. Gamson’s puzzle about identity movements may hold true for legal



rights, but on an individual level, greater peer networks would be an immediate way to improve the experiences of intersex individuals.

Conclusion

While there is a growing literature condemning intersex surgeries, clearly there are strong legal and medical barriers to the advancement of intersex rights. The circularity of exclusion and sex norms, chronic misinformation and the problems of identity construction make positive, widespread change difficult to achieve. The first step should be challenging the stigma and misinformation around intersexuality. Peer support networks and intersex advocacy groups need to be better funded. With stronger support and access within the intersex community, the external taboos in medicine and law can be better challenged. Progressive, patient-focused care should be implemented in the place of automatic resort to surgery. Previously silenced categories of oppression should be acknowledged, and those at the heart of the issue should be placed at the heart of the discussion.

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¹ Ehrenreich, "Intersex surgery, female genital cutting, and the selective condemnation of cultural Practices," 99.

² Intersex Society of North America [<http://www.isna.org>]. A comprehensive list of intersex conditions and how they are typically medically treated can be found here.

³ Berg and Denison, "Does female genital mutilation/cutting (FGM/C) affect women's sexual functioning? A systematic review of the sexual consequences of FGM/C," 42.



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- ⁴ UN, 2015.
- ⁵ Smith, “Male Circumcision and the Rights of the Child.”
- ⁶ Tamar-Mattis, “Sterilization and Minors with Intersex Conditions in California Law,” 128.
- ⁷ Ehrenreich, 102.
- ⁸ Anne Fausto-Stirling, as cited in Ehrenreich, 102.
- ⁹ Ford, “First, Do No Harm’: The Fiction of Legal Parental Consent to Genital-Normalizing Surgery on Intersexed Infants,” 470.
- ¹⁰ Tamar-Mattis, 128.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 129.
- ¹² Ibid.
- ¹³ Ford, 472.
- ¹⁴ Ibid, 471.
- ¹⁵ Ehrenreich, 103.
- ¹⁶ Mackenzie et al., “The experiences of people with an intersex condition: a journey from silence to voice,” 1778
- ¹⁷ Ford, 169; Intersex Society of North America [<http://www.isna.org/node/181>].
- ¹⁸ Ehrenreich, footnote #193.
- ¹⁹ MacKenzie et al.
- ²⁰ Shweder, “The goose and the gander: the genital wars,” 359.
- ²¹ Ibid., 360. Results from: Morison et al. (2001). “The Long-Term Reproductive Health Consequences of Female Genital Cutting in Rural Gambia: A Community-Based Survey.” *Tropical Medicine and International Health* 6(8).
- ²² Berg & Denison. However, as they admit themselves, the studies included in this research did not display strict internal validity in the comparability of their control and study groups, 43. Furthermore, ten out of the 15 studies are classed as having a “low” methodological study quality, 45-46.
- ²³ See Ehrenreich, for a similar assumption of common Western sexuality and gender norms.
- ²⁴ Ibid., 101.
- ²⁵ Shweder, 352; Ehrenreich, 98.
- ²⁶ High Court of Colombia, SU-337/99, May 12 1999 and T-551/99, Aug 2, 1999. This was the first time a court had considered intersex surgeries as a human rights abuse.
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- ²⁸ §1631(d) German Civil Code.
- ²⁹ Scholz.
- ³⁰ Shweder, 351.
- ³¹ UN A/RES/69/150. Intensifying global efforts for the elimination of female genital mutilation. Passed 17 February 2015.
- ³² Song, *Justice, Gender, and the Politics of Multiculturalism*, 167.
- ³³ Ibid.
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⁴⁰ Tamar-Mattis.

⁴¹ Ehrenreich, 75.

⁴² O’Kane and Daly, “We Got This’: Africans Call on Western Donors to Trust Them on FGM.”

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⁴⁴ Smith, “Male Circumcision and the Rights of the Child.”

⁴⁵ Gamson, “Must Identity Movements Self-Destruct? A Queer Dilemma,” 391.

⁴⁶ Smith.

⁴⁷ Ibid.; Ehrenreich, 74.

⁴⁸ Gamson, 393.

⁴⁹ MacKenzie et al., “The Experiences of People with An Intersex Condition: A Journey From Silence to Voice,” 1779.



Students, Teachers, Scholars, Storytellers: Exploring Embodiment through Social Constructs

Darlene Johnston, Kristin LaFollette, and Stephen Ohene-Larbi

Stories, like good scholarly monographs, explore connections underlying surface diversity.

—Julie Cruikshank, *The Social Life of Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in the Yukon Territory*

Katie Manthey and Maria Novotny begin their 2014 article “Telling Our Stories: Women’s Studies and Embodied Rhetorical Subjectivities” by stating the following: “Katie Manthey is a fat girl. Maria Novotny is infertile. We choose to start our piece about why women’s studies is important with these personal statements because they are powerful; these statements contain subjectivities that we, as the authors of this piece, currently embody.”¹ At first, reading these statements can be uncomfortable. The authors continually point to these aspects of their identities as simultaneously bringing grief, becoming part of their scholarship and scholarly identities, and “viewing the intersections of the personal and the professional as a unique methodological framework.”² As scholars, teachers, and professionals, what we embody impacts our experiences with ourselves, our students, and our colleagues, and this understanding is what led us to tell these stories. Manthey writes that “everyday rhetorical practices of fat and (in)fertility are areas of scholarship that have been viewed as ‘unscholarly.’ However, as graduate students participating in these communities, we understand that our own ways of knowing are informed from these community experiences.”³ We are graduate students. We are teachers. We are scholars. And we are also human beings with unique backgrounds, families, experiences, and bodies. The ways we think about and relate to our bodies come through in our scholarship, in our classrooms, and in our day-to-day lives. Our relationships and experiences with our bodies influence our teaching and scholarship just as much as our education and field of study. We are studying and teaching rhetoric and writing, but we inhabit those spaces and perform those roles with our backgrounds and bodies in mind.

Currently, we are third-year graduate students in a doctoral program at a university in rural Ohio. We write and research and present our scholarship. During a graduate seminar on research methodologies, our professor asked us to get into groups and talk about the ways we saw embodiment impacting



our teaching and scholarship. What started out as a low-stakes class discussion developed into an in-depth time of sharing past experiences of our embodiment (our ethnicity, gender, etc.) and the ways culture and society dictated how we should look and act. These expectations have affected us in the present as we are constantly thinking about how to best portray our professional selves and maintain ethos in the classroom where we are the centers of attention. We learned that, while there are many similarities among the three of us, we come from diverse backgrounds, and our unique identities and bodies affect the ways we *do* research and *perform* in the classroom. In addition to exploring identity, this piece examines the traditional scholarly genre of the research article by using story as methodology. Using story as a method, we appeal to feminist theory and women's studies with discussions of gender roles and expectations and issues of race and ethnicity. While this piece works toward examining the ways we have been told to act out our ethnicities, genders, and professional roles, it challenges long-held ideologies, standards, and expectations and ultimately argues that there is no right way to be a man or woman (of color) in academia.

Kristin

Kristin is a girl with dark features. She is ethnically ambiguous. In August of 2012, I was scheduled to teach my first college composition course. I was a second-year master's student in English and creative writing, and my university needed instructors to teach at their new campus branch about twenty-five minutes away from the main campus. As a graduate student who was desperate for teaching experience, I agreed to take on teaching a course at that branch. The week before our first class meeting, I drove to the one building that constituted the campus and walked around, familiarizing myself with the layout, finding my classroom, and seeing where my new office space would be. On the first day of class, I got there early to try out the audio/video equipment. Students started filing in as I was fumbling with the computer at the front of the class, sweating and shaking while I arranged my attendance sheet and the syllabus on the small podium on the front desk. A usually shy and introverted person, I suddenly felt at the center of attention, unable to hide myself from the glares of my students. Could they see how nervous I was? Did I look as young and inexperienced as I felt? Did I appear professional? How did they *perceive me*?

As I continued my education into my PhD work, I studied embodiment and became more aware of the relationship I have with my body, especially as I walk into a classroom and withstand the stares of numerous young people.



I cringe just thinking about it, and I want to use this space to navigate why I feel this way. Are women more prone to this kind of thinking, especially professional women, or women in academia? What about women of color?

Growing up, I was the middle child and the only girl between two boys, one three years older and the other eight years younger. My mother stayed home with us until I was in high school, and my father was a commercial pilot. We moved a lot, and my childhood was split between a small town in Iowa and various cities in Indiana. My father encouraged my brothers and I to play sports, and much of my time spent with my father when I was young was often in the backyard playing catch or kicking a soccer ball, riding bikes, or going with him to the woods as he was an avid outdoorsman. I was close with my mother, but I liked the feeling of fitting in with my brothers and showing my father that I wasn't a "girly girl," but a girl who could "keep up with the boys," play in the dirt, and be tough. This mindset has carried with me into adulthood, but has also led me to question my body and its portrayal of femininity. Do I convey my womanhood/femininity well? I am feminine *enough*? My upbringing in mostly rural, conservative communities told me that I needed to better enact my woman-ness, but my experiences in the university had me questioning the gender constructs I had been raised with. In the women's studies and feminist theory courses I took as a graduate student, I learned about Judith Butler and her claims that gender roles and expectations are social constructs and that there isn't one "right" way to perform one's gender. I latched onto this concept, but I realized that while I control how I portray myself, I'm not in control of how I am perceived.

My relationship to my body as a professional in academia is complicated by two factors: my gender and my (perceived) ethnicity. In their article "Embodiment: Embodying Feminist Rhetorics," Maureen Johnson, Daisy Levy, Katie Manthey, and Maria Novotny write, "Scholars of rhetoric, particularly those in feminist rhetorics, have worked to reveal the inequitable distributions of power across groups. We echo these scholars' concerns about the ways women and their bodies have been obscured in conventional scholarship."⁴ Women's bodies are constantly criticized and judged, and power is denied to women; we are taught as young women to be critical of our bodies. As if they don't belong to us. As if we have no rights to our own bodies. Even in our contemporary society where we had Hillary Clinton as a female presidential candidate in a major political party, women still are not allowed to be in charge of their bodies. We are hyper-aware of our size, our clothing, and the way we convey ourselves. Hillary Clinton is continuously criticized for her "masculine" dress, but I understand her motives in a society where femininity is equated with being incompetent



and conveying a masculine persona is one of the only ways to be taken seriously. As a woman, I feel like my authority in the classroom is always in question. On the other hand, I question my femininity and the conservative values I was brought up with (which seem to be constantly in conflict with my current role as a teacher and scholar). Why can't I be more feminine? However, at the same time—is to be feminine to lack authority? In “Telling our Stories,” Manthey notes that “the decisions I make every day are a constant bricolage of my identity: I do things that hide or reveal certain physical parts of myself in order to have an ‘outside’ that matches my ‘inside’ (or at least what I want that to be).”⁵ Reconciling the “outside” with the “inside” is a constant struggle for me; I feel the need to “match” the feminine expectations society places on me by wearing skirts, dresses, and jewelry, but I feel like this is a gender performance that doesn't quite fit how I feel on the inside. Why is it so difficult for the “outside” and the “inside” to align the way we want it to?

This questioning is only further complicated by my ethnic background. The mix of diverse backgrounds in my family led to me, a woman with dark features and an untamed head of curly hair, which has attracted uninvited touching by strangers and acquaintances who touch the dark ringlets, turning them over in their fingers and saying, “Wow, your hair is so *interesting*.” Am I even in charge of my own body? What makes people think they can touch me without permission? I am ethnically ambiguous and, as a result, my identity is assumed. My grandfather was Cherokee Indian and my father has my grandfather's deeply tanned skin. My own dark features are a reflection of that heritage. While I have dark features, my younger brother, however, has light hair, skin, and eyes. We have the same parents but have had very different experiences and interactions as a result of the unique blend of family features we portray. On one hand, I regret not knowing more about my Native American heritage and, as a result, feel “inauthentic.” During an independent study on queer theory, my professor let me borrow a copy of *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature*. A poem in this collection called “authentically ethnic” by Luna Maia helped me cope with my feelings of lacking authenticity when it came to my background. Maia writes,

No I don't think that is an
AUTHENTICALLY-ETHNIC TRADITION EITHER.
it was survival. / the history of my ancestors is about survival,
not being authentically ethnic.⁶

The author goes on to say,
How can I call myself a REAL Indian, when I have



tortillas and pan dulce in my vocabulary?
how can I call myself a REAL Mexican, when I have
French and German blood running through these veins?⁷

This is my struggle; my body is perceived as ethnic, but my mind doesn't feel authentic. How can I call myself a real Native American when I have German and French blood running through my veins? My mind and body are at war; I *appear* one way and *feel* another. But what exactly does it mean to be authentically ethnic? Were my ancestors authentically ethnic?

On the other hand, I question my appearance and the way my ethnicity affects how I'm perceived in my classroom. In the past, people have incorrectly assumed my ethnicity, which seems to downplay my actual background and reminds me of the ways my body betrays me and portrays me as something that I'm not, only adding to the anxiety I feel while standing at the front of a classroom space. This anxiety is heightened as research shows that women receive lower scores on teaching evaluations, especially women of color, so that these evaluations aren't even accurate portrayals of a teacher's performance. An article entitled "How Student Evaluations Are Skewed Against Women and Minority Professors" by The Century Foundation states that "SETs [Student Evaluations of Teaching] do not measure professor quality as well as they claim. Studies repeatedly show that students are biased against racial minorities and female professors in their evaluations. According to a study published by Innovative Higher Education, students perceive their male professors as 'brilliant, awesome, and knowledgeable,' while the same teaching styles, when thought to come from a woman, are 'bossy and annoying.'"⁸ It's no wonder I question my body—it has a very clear impact on my ethos. To be male and white is to not be questioned. To be female and to appear as "other" is to lack authority.

There are many similarities among our three narratives. Stephen and I both came from families dominated by the opposite sex and thus had to navigate taking on, defending, and grappling with characteristics that are traditionally associated with the opposite gender. Darlene and I have both been called "tomboys" because people couldn't understand a female who didn't inhabit the gender expectations placed on her by society. I feel like it's worth noting that, during this collaborative writing process, we typed in three colored fonts to differentiate our narratives: Darlene chose blue, Stephen chose purple, and I chose green. We never discussed these color choices; we just started writing, collaborating, and telling our stories. In telling my story and hearing the stories of my colleagues, I've seen and experienced firsthand how our upbringing influences the way we see and



relate to our bodies and how the subjectivities we embody affect the ways we write, teach, and act as scholars and teachers. This process has, at times, been uncomfortable, but in reflecting on the ways my body is perceived and how I think about my body, I can tackle the discomfort and work toward accepting my body and creating a classroom space that accepts diversity and challenges the dominant ideologies in our culture that claim that only one type of body is acceptable. I don't have to apologize for the way I am, which is a serendipitous combination of my family heritage, my upbringing, my choices, and my experiences. Instead of questioning my body and feeling ashamed of the way I appear and the way I am perceived, I can be a voice for changing the way women and people of color view their bodies or feel discounted because of their bodies. I have had to change my mindset—woman is *not* equated with inferiority. The way I act out my gender is *my own*. The color of my skin *does not* affect my authority.

Darlene

Darlene is, and has been since she was ten years old, a very curvy female, who grew up in a small town in Ohio, close to a city where she frequently escaped.

I suppose I could have been classified as a tomboy growing up, but only insomuch as certain activities that I enjoyed were prescribed as masculine instead of feminine. I was the youngest of two girls. My older sister was obsessed with being “fancy” and playing with makeup. I liked to play in the dirt. I loathed going shopping with my mom and my sister, so when they went on shopping days, my dad and I would go fishing, watch Babe Winkleman on Saturday mornings, car races on Sundays, and best of all, we would watch the *Star Wars* trilogy on VHS over and over again. My aunt used to babysit us, and since, at the time, I was the youngest of everyone, I spent a lot of time playing with her sons' (my cousins') toys while everyone else was at school. At their house, I watched *Voltron*, *Thundercats*, and *He-Man*. I played with their awesome *Star Wars* and *Voltron* toys. When we stayed the night, I was allowed to stay up and watch *V*, *Knight Rider*, or the *A-Team*. My next door neighbor, Richie, and I spent hours together and I loved playing with his Castle Grayskull or running around his backyard pretending to be the Skeletor to his He-Man. At the time, I never thought that the things I enjoyed were “boy shows” or “boy toys.”

Around my sixth birthday, three events made it very clear that I was not supposed to do or like the things that I did. First, we went camping on a hot August day, and I decided that I wanted to walk around with my shirt off



like my dad, grandfather, and cousins. So, I took off my shirt, hopped on my bike, and headed for the creek. My sister saw me, ran up to me, grabbed me off of my bike, and dragged me to our pop-up camper. She was furious, and I was so confused. She began to yell at me that I was a girl, and I should always have a shirt on and that I should be ashamed of myself. I watched my cousins fly around on their bikes, shirtless and free as I tugged on my cotton Care Bear shirt. I didn't know I was supposed to be ashamed of myself and cover up; I felt so constricted the rest of the day and moped around the campsite. A few weeks later it was my sixth birthday. I had begged and begged for a Castle Grayskull toy. I woke up early on my birthday and opened countless Barbies and My Little Ponies but no Castle Grayskull. When my sister noticed I was sad at the end of the day, she asked me why. I told her, and she responded "That's a boy toy. You are a girl. Stop being so weird and act like a girl. You're embarrassing." Once again, I was reminded that I should be ashamed of the things I enjoyed. A week after my birthday, school started. I was finally a kindergartner. Kindergarten only met for half a school day, so in the morning, I spent time at a daycare and then rode the bus to school. I was so excited because my neighbor and best friend, Richie, was there too. He was in first grade, so we only saw each other for a little bit in the morning. One day, I asked Richie if we could play He-Man. His other friends laughed, but he agreed. I started to play my usual role of Skeletor when his friend said, "No stupid, you have to be She-Ra because you're a girl. You can't be Skeletor." I punched him. I had never been, and have never since been, in so much trouble. I was informed that girls are supposed to act like ladies, and ladies don't get into fights. Richie ignored me anytime he was around his friends after that and then moved away a year later. Within the span of a month, I had learned that I had to change the things I liked to fit in. I befriended Jennie, a girl who always wore flouncy dresses and never ran around the playground because it would mess up her shoes. By the end of kindergarten, my friend Jennie and I had boys pulling us around the playground in a wagon during recess while Jennie played Madonna's "Material Girl" on her cassette player. I had been indoctrinated, but I still found ways to play *Star Wars* with my cousins even if I was told I had to play C3PO since my sister insisted on being Princess Leia.

Around the age of ten, it became even more obvious to me that, because I was a girl, I needed to be ashamed of my body. I began to develop breasts at ten. With an August birthday, I had to wait until I was six before I entered school. I was the oldest student in my class *and* I was developmentally ahead of the other girls. My mom insisted that I wear a training bra because "it looks very bad that you don't have a bra on with your clothes." Once



more, I felt constricted. I hated wearing the training bra and would often sneak into the bathroom, take it off, and hide it in my bag until the end of the day when I'd put it back on before seeing my mom. One day, a boy in my class wanted to borrow a pencil. I told him there was one in my bag without thinking. He opened my bag and found the bra. I had forgotten it was in there. He yelled "Ew!" and began swinging it around his head yelling, "Darlene has a bra in her bag! Darlene has boobies!" Everyone began laughing and looking at my chest. I was mortified and from that day forward, I kept the training bra on. Even to this day, I feel very uncomfortable without a bra and am hyper-aware when people look at my chest.

My chest continued to grow, and unlike my petite sister who had the "Kate Moss body" everyone wanted in the 90s, I continued to grow more and more curves. I'm very aware when looking for clothes for work that button-down shirts do not work for me and that outfits that would not give other people visible cleavage make me look like I'm showing off my chest. This was also a major struggle for me when I was in speech and debate in high school. One of the speech and debate coaches constantly criticized my outfits. It was difficult to find a suit jacket and skirt that wasn't "too tight," "too revealing," or "too slutty" because of how it fit my body. Today, girls are being sent home from school for showing a bra strap, showing shoulders, or wearing leggings. They are being shamed because others find their bodies attractive. Sometimes, it is impossible to keep bra straps hidden. In middle school, my friends and I even had a code ("there are clouds in the sky") to tell each other when a bra strap was showing, because it was a struggle and we were all still embarrassed that we were wearing bras. Our bodies were shameful secrets we both had to hide and couldn't speak about in case someone else may hear us.

It also became apparent in my developing years that I had little control when it came to society's expectations of touching. As I began to develop at the age of ten, my dad started to hug me at arm's length. It wasn't the same. He kissed me on the head instead of the lips and avoided touching me as much as possible. We still went fishing and watched car races but from opposite sides of the room. I was still expected, however, to give uncles hugs when we met for family gatherings, but as I continued to grow more aware of my changing body, I began to feel uncomfortable doing so. If my own father didn't feel comfortable hugging me, why should I feel comfortable hugging uncles that I only saw twice a year at Thanksgiving and Christmas? When I was in high school, once more my sister (and this time my mother) pointed out when I was being "weird." At every awards



ceremony, our band director would shake the hands of each boy and hug each girl who went up to receive their chevron for the year. I did not want to hug my band director. I did not feel comfortable doing so. I always offered my hand and shook his hand instead. I did this twice a year for four years. It embarrassed my mom and sister. They would ask me why I couldn't be normal like the other girls and give him a hug. They asked me why I always had to be different and difficult. Other girls in the band made comments about it, too. I wasn't allowed to decide what to do with my body. I was an outcast because I didn't follow social protocol and allow a grown man that I was not related to or dating to embrace me. Just writing about it now, I can feel both the discomfort of the idea of hugging him and the pressure from everyone else to "just be normal."

To this day, I still have no idea when I'm expected to hug people, friends, relatives, and colleagues and when I'm not. This led to an awkward situation at work. I once had a female boss who would come up behind me when I was sitting at my desk and hug me, play with my hair, or occasionally kiss my head. This always made me extremely uncomfortable. I would tense up. I didn't know what to do. When I changed jobs, and she was no longer my boss, I mentioned it to my husband. He was appalled. He couldn't believe it happened and that I didn't do anything about it. "That's not okay," he said. "That's not normal." I had no idea. I thought I was being my "weird self" by being uncomfortable. I didn't think I had a right to ask her to stop.

Like Kristin, I also struggled to figure out how I should look in the classroom. When I was working on my master's degree, it struck me how easy it was for my male colleagues to have professional ethos. They could wear jeans, a blazer, and Chuck Taylor shoes and be perfectly acceptable and comfortable trekking across campus. They could have friendly conversations with their students. At the time, I felt (as a young female) that my every move was being closely watched. I took on a battle uniform of sorts. I often wore knee-high heeled boots and felt a strong connection to my mother when I walked down the halls. It reminded me of when I would be waiting for her in her classroom after school and I could hear her coming down the hallway. I knew the sound of her walk. I heard her walk in my own one day when I was heading to class and wrote a poem about it called "My Mother's Footsteps," yet even reenacting the femininity of my mother didn't work for me. I couldn't get away with wearing comfortable clothing, but my boots were not safe either, and I had to keep a distance from my students. For example, my male colleagues shared their phone numbers in case students needed anything, but I found out after the first semester when I received harassing phone calls that I could not put my personal phone



number on my syllabus. My first set of student evaluations included comments like “I like her boots, they’re very sexy” and “she wears cute outfits.” There were no comments on my teaching.

In my career path, I have worked in many different capacities at the university level. Katie Manthey created a gallery to showcase various ways in which people dress professionally. Her goal is “to collect images that, together, will reveal that ‘professional’ is not a monolithic idea—and that the idea of ‘professional dress,’ like any dress code, is inherently racist, sexist, abelist, sizeist, etc.”⁹ Dress codes in universities seem to vary by position and college. When I worked in the law school, the dress code was strict. It was even more strict for support staff who made far less money than the tenured faculty who could walk around in jeans, sweatshirts, and ball caps. My first job was as a full-time administrative assistant and a part-time adjunct faculty member on my lunch hour. I was making \$20,000 a year and spending a lot of money on professional clothing while the professors who made six-figure salaries wore jeans. Carmen Rios addresses this in her article “You Call It Professionalism; I Call It Oppression in a Three-Piece Suit,” which appears in *Everyday Feminism*: “Often, these dress codes make ‘professional’ realms exclusive to people who can’t afford to look a certain way when they leave the house, and often those dress codes are meant to create a visual hierarchy between ‘professional’ people and the rest of the world.” One day, one of the law professors that I was a secretary for told me that I should make more effort to style my hair (I let it air dry so it was wavy) and put on makeup (I almost never wore makeup) because women who do not do their hair or makeup appear lazy. I was told by a coworker that I needed to wear lipstick more often. From that point on, I never came to work without makeup. When I moved from working as a secretary to working at multiple schools as an adjunct, I found that the English department was more relaxed on dress codes. When I became the director of the English Language Program, how I dressed and presented myself had to change again. One day, I did not wear any makeup, and my boss said to me, “You look terrible. Are you really tired or something?” I was reminded that makeup was a required part of my uniform.

I am now back in the law school as an English language professor for law students from Afghanistan. After working my way up for ten years at the same university, I still do not know how I should dress, and I still am hyper-aware of my appearance when I walk into a classroom for the first time, but I have found the clothes that allow me to feel both comfortable and in charge. I still prefer my boots, so I can hear my mother’s footsteps, and I put together outfits that make me feel strong and confident. If I wear makeup,



it's me putting on my "war paint" and not trying to prove myself to my coworkers. I also know not to judge my students on their appearance based off of my own experiences. Some people will complain about students wearing pajama pants to class, or make fun of leggings and Ugg boots, but I listen to what they say because as Rios points out, "After all, none of the work that I do is impacted by what I'm wearing, and the work I do should speak much more loudly than how I look."¹⁰

Stephen

Stephen comes from Ghana, and he grew up in Agogo, a small town in the Asante Akim district of the Ashanti region. He later moved to Bolgatanga in the northern part of the country with his mother who was transferred to work as a nurse at the government hospital.

Growing up in a family of boys in a culture where gender roles were assigned, and above all, in a neighborhood where competitiveness was necessary, I had to be tough. "Survival of the fittest" would be another way to describe the kind of environment I grew up in. In one word, "movement" might be the right word to describe my body because I was/am always in constant motion to cope with the constant hustle, struggles, and challenges of life. I was a very active teenager; I spent most of my time on the soccer field or in four-square arenas that we would often call "our Wimberley," a reference to England's famous soccer arena. There was no way I could go to Wimberley to play, but in the mind of a twelve-year-old boy, having fun on the playground and playing with my friends was enough for me to visualize exerting my soccer skills on the same turf as the professional soccer players did. This gave me the encouragement and motivation to play the game I loved and enjoyed. At home, the cultural prescription of male and female roles were not applicable in our household because the only female in the house was my mother; she was a working mother with two boys and was thus compelled to assign traditional female chores to my brother and I such as washing dishes, sweeping, doing laundry, and warming and cooking simple meals. It was fun doing such chores because, as a big brother, I had to set a good example for my younger brother to emulate, and I had no choice but to help in the daily demands of the home. These movements from school, home, and the playground exposed me to the realities of life and how the "real world" operates when different bodies come into contact. In *Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process*, Gesa E. Kirsch and Liz Rohan refer to the importance of physical, real, and in-person experiences in the research process; what is seen or learned about from afar rarely has the same impact of something that has been lived and/or experienced



firsthand.¹¹ Narrating the experiences of my body here have helped me to establish connections between the past and the future.¹²

When I was younger, I spent time at a boarding school, and my body was given a new identity with a dual function. For the first time, I had to watch paid staff perform activities such as washing dishes, putting food on the table for students to eat, sweeping, scrubbing the bathroom, doing laundry, and general cleaning. Apart from the cleaning, the rest of the household chores were assigned to women. I felt very comfortable doing these “female chores” unlike the others boys; it was uncomfortable for them because, at home, their sisters completed those chores. My body, in performing these activities, became an “entity with its own rhetorical agency” in the sense that I was able to use my body and my cultural experiences to perform my gender.¹³ I gained confidence, and I began to spend time with girls because I had no problem performing the same activities assigned to them by society. I became very close to the majority of the girls at my school. Sometimes, they would braid my hair while telling stories about what their typical day at home was like, which involved working while their brothers were playing. I was sometimes jealous because I had to do the work at home since I had no sisters. However, my friendships with these young women developed, so they became like sisters to me. I recall my overconfidence with the girls which led me to go to the dining hall with my hair braided, and I was immediately spotted by the “senior on duty” (elected student officials performing administrative roles). I was made to stand on my chair so that the whole school could look at what I had done with my hair, my own body.

The braiding of hair was done by women, and this experience led me to question how to use my body and express myself and if I should follow the societal demands of gender roles and expectations. In braiding my hair, I unknowingly questioned gender roles using my body as a vehicle. I was alone, naïve, and did not know how to properly enact the gender expectations placed on me by society. Johnson, Levy, Manthey, and Novotny assert that our bodies possess rhetorical power, and I wish I would have had the courage to defend my body and my braided hair as a young student at boarding school.¹⁴ Later in the year, I had to transfer from my old school in the north to a new school in the south. It was a tough moment for me because I was not only going to live with my father but I was also going to live with my half-siblings who were mostly girls. I remembered my “adopted sisters” at my previous school and their stories about doing everything for their brothers, and this made it easier for me to accept my new life. On the other hand, the quest to fully understand my body was put to the test when I decided to live with my father in Accra, the capital city. At



home, life was different because I was the only boy in the midst of many girls. I was treated like a king; I enjoyed that lifestyle because my half-sisters did everything for me based on gender expectations. However, I remembered how the girls at my former school had resented their brothers for having to do all of the “domestic” chores for them. My body’s dual identity was again manifested, but this time in a different way. Unfortunately, my “kingship” did not last long, and I was confronted when a school friend visited me at home during vacation to find out that my sisters basically did everything for me. On my return to school, the news spread quickly, symbolizing that, after all, I was not as tough as people thought I was. I was unhappy about this, and I felt like I had to prove that I was even tougher. As a result, I excelled in sports, committing my body to playing soccer, volleyball, running, and boxing. I worked hard in school and became very popular; soon, my classmates forgot about my “other body,” which had braided hair and had been pampered by my sisters at home.

Our bodies do not only serve as a rhetorical means of expressing ourselves but also offer us the opportunity to use them to engage in research. I come from a country that follows strict gender roles, and I have the experience of being a man inhabiting female gender expectations and being a man fulfilling male gender expectations. I went from living with a brother to growing close with many “adopted sisters,” and then to living with my father and my many half-sisters. These experiences with fulfilling various gender expectations led me to question my body and to feel like I had to be more masculine so that I would be accepted by my peers. I had been ridiculed for being too culturally feminine and for being too culturally masculine. I have had to develop a view of my body that is solely my own and that exists outside of the expectations of culture and society. Now, as a scholar and researcher, I’m able to discuss these experiences, using a storytelling approach to talk about the ways my body impacts my role as an academic and a teacher. Like Darlene and Kristin, I have had to overcome expectations placed on me, but our bodies can be a way to enact change by existing outside of strict social constructs.

Conclusion

In *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Gloria Anzaldúa talks about her experience of being both an outsider and an insider (being in the “borderlands”) because she is a member of more than one community. Despite the struggle of her dual identity, she discusses finding a place in those borderlands. In the second chapter of her book, Anzaldúa discusses a woman who is referred to as “mita y mita” or “half and half,” an identity that



each of us relates to and understands. After the three of us explored our stories by working on this piece, we realized that we were very much in our own borderlands. Similar to what Anzaldúa writes, “What we are suffering from is an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other. It claims that human nature is limited and cannot evolve into something better.”¹⁵ We remix “normative” and “non-normative” behaviors; we are “inauthentic.” We don’t fit the prescribed societal expectations of our gender, but we also don’t fit into the mold of the opposite gender. While Kristin and Darlene were somewhat “safe” as “tomboys” because it is more socially acceptable for women to take on masculine qualities, Stephen was more at risk because of behaviors considered “feminine,” especially since he grew up in an environment where toughness wasn’t only valued, it was also a necessity. However, our “otherness” has informed each of us in our scholarship and pedagogy. While this began as a low-stakes exercise, we decided to follow Manthey and Novotny’s lead and embrace the uncomfortable nature of embodied storytelling. There is a vulnerability in sharing our stories, a fear in exposing ourselves to possible future collaborators or employers, yet through our experience, we have gained a deeper understanding of how our experiences with our bodies inform the ways in which we approach our roles as teachers and scholars.

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¹ Manthey and Novotny, "Telling Our Stories," 8.

² Ibid., 9.

³ Ibid., 9.

⁴ Johnson, et al., "Embodiment: Embodying Feminist Rhetorics," 39.

⁵ Manthey and Novotny, "Telling Our Stories," 11.

⁶ Maia, "authentically ethnic" in *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature*, 124.

⁷ Maia, "authentically ethnic" in *Sovereign Erotics: A Collection of Two-Spirit Literature*, 124.

⁸ Lilienfeld, "How Student Evaluations Are Skewed Against Women and Minority Professors."

⁹ Manthey, *Dress Profesh*.

¹⁰ Rios, "You Call It Professionalism; I Call It Oppression in a Three-Piece Suit" in *Everyday Feminism*.

¹¹ Kirsch, "Beyond the Archives: Research as a Lived Process," 1.

¹² Cruikshank, *The Social Life of Stories: Narrative and Knowledge in the Yukon Territory*, 2.

¹³ Johnson et al., "Embodiment: Embodying Feminist Rhetorics," 39.

¹⁴ Johnson et al., "Embodiment: Embodying Feminist Rhetorics," 40.

¹⁵ Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 59.



Docile Cycles: Bleeding and the Embodiment of Oppression

Katie Von Wald

I remember the exact outfit I wore on my first day of sixth grade. A long, maxi, jean skirt from the Old Navy and a hand-me down Michelle Branch t-shirt from a much cooler, older cousin. I remember the feel of anxiety when I entered my new school, when I found my first-ever locker, and when I sat down in what felt like a very grownup middle school classroom. I also remember the gut wrenching fear that started midway through my second class. The slow-burning panic that set in as I came to realize that something was terribly wrong. I could feel it seeping, spreading, marking me every long minute that passed. When class finished, I rushed to the bathroom, hot with shame, to find I had gotten my long-prophesized first menses. I had bled through my layers of clothing and stared at the bright patch of wet redness that stained my skirt. It was nothing if not cliché and horrifying.

I use this example, from the archives of my own embarrassment, at once to illuminate the often fraught and complicated relationship between menstruators and menstruation, but further to show that the experience of our bodies is foundational for our understanding of the world. All of this, becomes additionally troubling when such bodies are targets of oppression. These intersections along the boundaries of the body intertwined with cultural and social constructions so as to make up the body from pieces of individuated experience, habituated cultural practices, and discipline. Oppression embodied then objectifies the body characterizing experiences as the constant molding, shaping, and hiding of undesirable, non-normative functioning. Menstruation, and the management of it, becomes an example of the overall structures of power working through the body as a means for social and cultural hegemonic control. In this way, menstruation can be a lens through which to examine the experience of oppression as a constant and objectifying project working on the body and shaping the subjectivities of the oppressed.

I will begin by providing a general context for situating the body and experience as a productive site for knowledge and discourse. From this background of the body within theory, I will use Michel Foucault's book *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison*, as a means to lay out a framework for understanding the body as a site for the enactment of social control and power. Here the body becomes regimented and disciplined as a means to justify modes of structural oppression. I will then go on to



investigate menstruation as a material example for such networks of power, complete with cultural constructions and body technologies which codify normative experiences. I will lastly, address how such disciplining of the body affects the embodiment of oppression, and makes the body a constant project for individual containment and management. Ultimately, this paper intends to discuss not only the importance of bodily knowledge but how the experience of oppression cannot be separated from the confines of the body.

Background

The experience of the body is crucial to the understanding of both individual social positions and overall cultural constructions. As such, we must understand how the body transacts the world, produces discourse, and experiences knowledge. In this way, the body is situated as crucial to our formations of reality and therefore should take precedent in breaking down oppressive structures. Focusing on the experience of the body provides some context for an investigation both of the body as a site for the enactment of social power, and of the effects on the subjectivities of those managing such targeted bodies. The work of feminist phenomenological scholars Linda Alcoff and Shannon Sullivan provide a grounding for appreciating the body not merely as a container for the mind but as a constitutive force for knowledge.

Linda Alcoff, in her essay *Phenomenology, Post-structuralism, and Feminist Theory on the Concept of Experience* (2000), explains how the body was rejected in the strive for “objective” truth, as it was not considered a reliable source of knowledge. Here, the body signified emotionality and irrationality and could somehow be separated from a truly impartial mind. Alcoff explains that, “the body was conceived as either an unsophisticated machine that took in data without interpreting it, or it was considered an *obstacle* to knowledge in generating emotions, feelings, needs, desires, all of which interfered with the attainment of truth.”¹ For Alcoff, ignoring the experience of the body is more than bad scholarship; it casts a shadow over the greater picture of an individual’s subjectivity, obscuring the fact that the body is foundational to our understandings of ourselves. Instead, Alcoff argues that the body and experiences around it “are the product of structural forces that shape the meaning of events, and in this way construct subjectivities as sets of habitual practices.”² Alcoff helps resituate the body in theory and explains that the body is a crucial tool in producing modalities and discourses of knowledge (be it gender, sexuality, or philosophy). This relation between the body and discourse is constantly evolving; its boundaries are fluid because “experience sometimes exceeds language; it is



at times inarticulate.”³ Thus, it is, as Alcoff argues, helpful to view the body and discourses of knowledge as “imperfectly aligned, with locations of disjuncture,”⁴ where the body cannot explain all experience, and yet discourse cannot ignore the experience of the body.

While Linda Alcoff argues for a re-introduction of body knowledge in theoretical understandings of subjectivity, it is Shannon Sullivan who creates a framework for investigating bodies within cultural contexts. In line with the work of Alcoff, Sullivan in her book, *Living Across and Through Skins* (2001) discusses the full richness with which experience produces knowledge defined by the “personal and engaged, rather than impersonal and detached.”⁵ However, Sullivan takes this notion of experiential knowledge further by imagining bodies as transactional. In her words, knowledge is a “method of experimental inquiry in which one investigates the problematic situations with which one is confronted in order to develop possible solutions to them.”⁶ These experimentations are conducted and tested through lived experience and come to constitute a negotiation between the self (as individual and insular) and an outside environment. The focus of this paper will trace interactions between the socio and cultural contexts that compel people to confront problematic, and oppressive situations of managing the body. As Sullivan explains this kind of focal point allows for “felt difficulties in life [to] generate the problems of knowledge.”⁷ For Sullivan, then, because “there is no self apart from the world in which it exists,”⁸ it is the point of negotiation, of transaction that provides the road map to not only the production of knowledge but to the way in which subjectivities are formed and molded in a greater cultural context.

Alcoff and Sullivan are feminist theorists continuing in the tradition of understanding both how we are constituted by culture and how we produce cultural organization, and furthermore, investigating how all of this colors the ways in which we experience ourselves. This kind of background provides context for the boundaries of the body and the experiences which plays across our skins as foundational to the production of knowledge.

Section 1: Foucault and the Constructions of the Body

The work of Michel Foucault in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1977) provides some of clearest theoretical tools for untangling the varied dimensions of the body, culture, and power. Influenced by his work, theorists such as Alcoff and Sullivan posit that the body produces knowledge. For Foucault this has an even greater influence, as it is through



knowledge and discourse that power is enacted, and “power and knowledge directly imply one another.”⁹ Thus, bodily knowledge translates to bodily power, or modes of controlling, disciplining, and punishing bodies. It is through these powers, as we will see, that not only is the body constructed and imbued with cultural meaning, but that patterns of comportment and habit are formed.

Foucault investigates the transition from public, sovereign-inflicted torture and execution to the modern conception of secluded, institutionalized, criminal confinement. Focusing on the body of the condemned, Foucault traces how technologies of power come in contact with the individual and what this interaction symbolizes for the overall power networks that structure society in a given historical context. For Foucault, this transition is marked by a relinquishing of the physical body for the symbolic body, or the interplay between the body and subjectivity. Public execution in this analysis can be seen as the punishment of the physical body of a criminal; the executioner stands in as the hand of the sovereign, and the torture of his body symbolizes the punishment of the individual. Criminality had an almost linear cause and effect as the sovereign enforced their power through shows of force on the body. As Foucault goes on to demonstrate, this is no longer how bodies are treated by the modern criminal justice process, and as such, modes of controlling and disciplining these have bodies become complicated labyrinths of power.

The Symbolic Body

By the nineteenth century, the spectacle of this kind of sovereign power largely disappears and makes way for a new form of penal system that aims to systematically target the symbolic body of the criminal as the site for enforcing power. Here, the body is not meant to showcase the effects of power (like hanging or whipping would) but rather is confined, imprisoned; and taught modes of comportment as a means to “to neutralize [the criminal’s] dangerous state of mind, to alter his criminal tendencies and to continue even when this change has been achieved.”¹⁰ In other words, the symbolic body is the “‘soul’ of the criminal,”¹¹ and the system works to cure it. As such, an entirely new structure forms in which the body is caught up in what Foucault will explain as “constraints and privations, obligations and prohibitions”¹² as a means to enforce a judiciary determined construction normality. This gets to the crux of Foucault’s overall argument, that in fact systems of discipline such as the penal system use technologies of power as political tactic. These technologies are made up of various mundane aspects of lived experience which all work or the overall assessing, diagnostic and managing of targeted criminal bodies. In this way, “the body itself is



invested by power relations,”¹³ which mark it symbolically through formations of subjectivity but also physically in the ways that will be habituated into normalcy. Thus, for Foucault this shift of criminality and punishment works towards a greater social control over the political body (meaning the body as a political force) as the body is constructed to be a site for the enactment of social power and habituates power relations.

Docile Bodies

These technologies of power, as Foucault understands, then encompass everything from the very practical and tactile to the abstract, yet, all work to further construct a “docile” or normative, governable physical body. Side-stepping slightly, Foucault uses the examples of soldiers who, in the late 18th century, are trained and virtually mass produced. These bodies are made “out of formless clay [in which] posture is gradually corrected; a calculated constraint runs slowly through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times, turning silently into an automatism of habit.”¹⁴ Here, Foucault points out the various ways in which institutions, cultural constructions, and expectations invent technologies which act to change the body and adapt the understandings of bodily comportment. Simply, through technologies that work on the body, the body can be manipulated, shaped, and trained. These malleable bodies are in the grips of both social and cultural power and of systematic pressures for embodying hegemonic normalcy. Foucault’s list of such regulations on the body is long and complicated; he cites the meticulous scheduling of school children to the hierarchical establishing of rank in the military as examples of how bodies are both ordered and organized in order to control their expressions and, further, to “guarantee the obedience of individuals.”¹⁵ Thus, Foucault provides a framework for imagining the body as docile; as under the constant supervision of a system which oppresses and manipulates its movements. Thus, even the slightest gestures or attitudes of the body must work towards the socially constructed ideal of a useful and intelligible body, and only through discipline can this type of bodily construction occur.

We see in Foucault’s analysis that the body is enmeshed in a very messy display of subjective experience and powerful social forces, both of which work to habituate modes of comportment based on the expectation of docility. While using criminality to expose the workings of these technologies of the body, Foucault’s larger argument points to how our bodies sit at the nexus of political and social power and as such influence not only cultural constructions but our constructions of ourselves. Using this understanding of technologies of power, the rest of this paper will trace the construction of menstrual stigmas and products of menstrual



management as examples of how the menstrual body is meticulously organized and controlled or, as Foucault describes, “no longer seen.”¹⁶ Thus, paradoxically, menstruation is inherently tied to a physical feminine body and yet symbolically disciplined to be a kind of bodiless, bloodless reality through technologies of power.

Section 2: Making Menstruators and Docile Bleeding

This Foucauldian framework has been adapted by feminists to explain the material pressures that the feminine body faces on a mundane, daily level. These feminists understand that Foucault’s docile body most accurately captures the experience and pressures of those who are expected to exhibit femininity. In her work, Susan Bordo, who primarily focuses on body studies, discusses the body as a site for the reproduction of femininity in Foucauldian terms. She understands, as Foucault does, that the body is both a “text of culture” and a “direct locus of social control.”¹⁷ She argues that, “female bodies become what Foucault calls ‘docile bodies’- bodies whose forces and energies are habituated to external regulation, subjection, transformation, and ‘improvement.’”¹⁸ Femininity in this analysis is a force which controls and regulates the body and habituates cultural practices. The prime target for enforcing docility is through the feminine body.

Docility comes at a high price as Bordo explains that women (who most often, but not exclusively, feel the pressures femininity) “spend more time on the management and discipline of [their] bodies.”¹⁹ The docile body coded by femininity in this way then becomes a project for women to continually upkeep and organize based on hegemonic standards. Ultimately, this works to naturalize gender divides and places the pressure of conforming on individual habits. There emerges a larger picture of what Foucault names as the “networks of practices, institutions, and technologies that sustain positions of dominance and subordination within a particular domain.”²⁰ In this way, femininity and the oppressive forces that shape it become imprinted on not only the social construction of femininity and its expectations but on the individual understanding of feminine coded bodies as inferior. Feminine phenomenological experience is thereby entrenched in these “amazingly durable and flexible strategies of social control.”²¹ Thus, the discipline of the feminine body through techniques of power contribute to an overall experience of oppression distinctly tied to the body as it is the site where many of these technologies take hold. Those under the influences of such pressures, as Bordo explains, “memorize on [their] bodies the feel and conviction of lack, insufficiency of never being good enough,”²² creating a dissidence between docile expectations and experiential reality.



Investigating these techniques for controlling the feminine body acts as a critical look into the ways in which the experience of oppression influences not only the constructions but the texture and movement of such bodies.

The menstruating body is an example for understanding the meticulous and continuous project of containing the feminine body. Menstruation has been routinely coded as a dangerous weakness which marks women as outside the coherent, organized and useful. In this way, menstruation is under the management of not only the individual but of the various avenues of power. Menstruators are expected to hide the realities of their bleeding, leaking selves as menstruation itself seems to signify a rejection of normalcy. Thus, menstruators are in the grip of strict social powers, and as such their menstruating body is put under the pressure of manipulation to become characteristically docile. Such technologies of the body in this example include social stigma, feminine hygiene products, and oral contraception. Continuing to use Foucault's framework, we will see how each mode of control works to construct menstruation as needing not only intervention but curing. Further, through these technologies the menstrual body becomes a site for the enactment of different versions of social control staining the experience of menstruating through various means of gender oppression.

Social Stigma and the Constructions of the Menstrual Body

No matter how you seem to slice it, regardless of historical context and social-economic position, menstruation has been constantly described as *the curse*. In her work *New Blood: Third-Wave Feminism and the Politics of Menstruation* (2010), Chris Bobel identifies that menstruation is almost unanimously discussed as a “shameful form of pollution”²³ and so must be contained. Menstrual blood often invokes a kind of fear and disgust, treating it less like bodily fluid and more like inhumane, unhealthy, toxic waste. These comparisons depict menstruation as an abomination and the menstruating body as sick or diseased. Conceptions, often coming from non-bleeders, work to mark menstruators apart, as other.²⁴ The baseline, the norm is non-bleeding, and thus such stigma against bleeding works to enforce a kind of secrecy so as not to exposes the dangerous condition. The bloody scourge of menstruating becomes the inevitable betrayal of the body exposing the subordinate, demonized status of the individual as a bleeder.

In this way, stigma, both social and cultural, works to discipline menstruating bodies in two distinct ways. The first is by homogenizing and defining menstruation as uniquely feminine. Variation of the menstrual experience, as well as differences of the menstrual body are entirely



assumed to be strictly experienced by gendered women. Stigma is used to not only code an identity but to subsume the identity as tied specifically to a construction of the body and bodily process (something I will challenge in a later section.) The second is to distribute individuals through space in a specified hierarchy. The most subordinated are those bleeding (assumed women), those who have been outed as menstruating or betrayed by their bodies as to expose their menstruating status. Those next categorized are those who have the potential to bleed and yet are successfully concealing their status as non-bleeding and docile bodies, and at the top of such distribution are those non-bleeders. This partitioning of individuals as Foucault argues, “isolates and maps”²⁵ individuals making overall surveillance an easier accomplished task.

Thus, stigma works to successfully define not only who is in need of supervision over their bodies but justifies the kind of self-discipline that is required for maintaining and managing the containment of the bleeding body. Constructions of menstruation which cast it as a feminine curse thereby work to naturalize the existing power structures which assume the subordination of women by distinctly categorizing menstruation as a specifically female experience but also describing it as a project in need of handling. Further, in valorizing successful containment, stigma makes bodies obedient through a kind of perpetual avoidance.

Feminine Hygiene Products and Containment: The Danger of Queer Periods

Another central technology for the containment and therefore control of the menstrual body is “feminine hygiene” products. Stigma essentially constructs the ideal menstrual body that is at once unseen, feminine, and subordinated. This docile body though is necessarily under a constant threat of deviance, of leaking and emerging. It is then menstrual products that keep such disagreeable uselessness under wraps. Discourse surrounding “feminine hygiene” is essential to the ways in which menstruation is experienced and in which those who menstruate interact with their bodies. Menstrual products, primarily pads and tampons, are then technologies of passing, which at once encourage the maintenance and surveillance of and inflict a violent isolation on the menstrual body.

If stigma works to sustain the idea that modes of seepage be regulated, then it is through narrow options of pads or tampons that it is materially expressed. In fact, the technologies allowed for menstrual management give the illusion of a plethora of choice but can be seen as another mode through which a subtle coercion of taste occurs. In other words, while there seems



to be a variety of brands, there only emerge two distinct options for containing menstrual flow, the focus of which is not providing menstrual care but fostering brand loyalty. This illusion of choice when it comes to flow management not only reinforces hegemonic assumptions about periods but works to produce a kind of knowledge about menstruators themselves. Good, healthy menstruators are seen as effortlessly hiding menstruation through the manipulation of their bodies with such products. Advertisements for tampons show happy (young) women enjoying such off-limit activities as swimming, sports, or hanging with friends. These women are supposedly liberated through their use of products, but they continue to assume that periods are incapacitating. Often times menstrual blood itself is sanitized in these commercials and tampons are shown pooled in viscous blue liquid, rather than anything resembling natural menstruation. In other words, this creates a discourse that (sanitized) bleeders are more themselves through the use of such hygiene products, while consistently coding menstruation as disgusting.

This portrayal of menstruation as needing hygienic intervention works as a form of discipline. Foucault explains this gentle punishment places bodies as dependent upon objects, where the exploitation of the body is intrinsic to the apparatus of production. The menstrual body is then caught in another form of regulation which shapes not only consumer choices but codes menstruation as having a viable (buyable) normative solutions. Normative feminine hygiene products then work to create “disciplined” menstruators, who unquestionably are caught in a binary choice of unsustainable technologies of hiding.

The regulation of “feminine hygiene” products, or rather the production and discourse surrounding normative hygiene products, remains astoundingly damaging to the bodily experience of menstruation. These products again and again reinforce the idea that only women menstruate as they only take into account the assumptions of femininity and assumptions of female bodies. Tampons and pads (covered in pink and floral packaging), for example exhibit multiple challenges for masculine menstruators who either feel uncomfortable inserting products or face an even heightened pressure for concealing their menstruating status.²⁶ This kind of erasure of trans and queer periods brings up a serious lack of care and attention to the variation of menstruation. For such identities, adhering to a docile conception of menstruation is not merely compulsory but a means of ensuring bodily safety as exposure of their menstruating status could affect the exposure of their identity. However, there are products (that go largely under-advertised or untaught as options) which could provide better care for queer



periods. Such products include highly absorbent period underwear which can be styled like boxer-briefs and do not require any form of insertion, or silicon menstrual cups which are safer and more easily concealable than tampons. Thus, discourse surrounding menstruation continues to target the feminine body in such a way as to manage socially acceptable bleeding.

These products then work to isolate the menstruator from an “authentic engagement with [their] own body.”²⁷ These disposable products can be flushed, trashed, ignored, and discarded without any real engagement with individual measures of menstruation. Expertise is then granted to companies who create menstrual products, rather than those who experience it monthly. And while this is obviously not a mutually exclusive group, this kind of intervention showcases the kind of isolation necessary for maintaining the docile body. As Foucault describes, the body becomes a machine, broken down and rearranged not on the basis of experience but on the needs of a political economy of control. Docility can be compartmentalized, products can be invoked, and the illusion of non-bleeding can continue. Engagement with both blood and other bleeders (whose own experience would subvert hegemonic knowledge) would threaten this docility. Thus, feminine hygiene products are a crucial access point for the enactment of social and cultural power that works to homogenize and subordinate the menstrual body.

Contraceptives and Suppression: Racial Targeting

If containment is not a viable option for menstrual supervision, then suppression through contraceptives is the next best option for the confinement of the condemned menstrual body. While one could argue that contraceptives are primarily used for reproductive freedoms, a close investigation of the ways in which contraception is prescribed, advertised, and discussed reveals that contraception can more accurately be conceived of as a way in which an uninterrupted regulation of period management is habituated daily. Contraception is then a means to “establish rhythm, impose occupations, [and] regulate the cycles of repetitions”²⁸ and thereby shape the functioning of menstrual bodies into docile utility. This kind of discipline eliminates the period and neutralizes the chaotic threat that menstruation symbolizes, while again reinforcing dependence upon organizations of power.

Contraceptives, in particular the pill, are the most widely prescribed medication in the world.²⁹ In the United States alone 82% of women are on or have been on the pill at some time, and nearly 100 million women worldwide take some form of contraceptive daily.³⁰ The effects of such



medical intervention into the daily lives of so many menstruators cannot be underestimated. In her book, *Plastic Bodies: Sex Hormones and Menstrual Suppression in Brazil* (2016) Emilia Sanabria discusses the social relations that legitimize such widespread hormonal usage. In her investigation, she illustrates how medical institutions construct the menstrual body as useless, and thereby naturalize (and valorize) menstrual suppression. Using slogans such as “menstruation is a useless waste of blood” or “Eve did not menstruate,”³¹ medical professionals teach women to view their periods as both defective and unnatural. Contraceptives, specifically combined with habitual skipping of the placebo pill week (which produces an artificial bleeding period) eliminate menstruation fully in most cases. Sanabria, argues that this intervention (particularly in Brazil) is “integral to producing the body and its delimitations.”³² In other words, it is through this repetitive pill-taking that the menstrual body is at once created and eliminated, solving the problem of the menstrual body and implementing feminine docility.

This kind of intervention would be what Foucault describes as time-table discipline. In this way, the discipline of useful bodies occurs through strict regulation of habits and rhythms. The entire industry of medical examinations, prescribing, pill-taking, re-examination, adjustment, etc.. works to shape the body and its gestures towards the constant surveillance of suppressing and shaping the body. I do not intend to argue that contraceptives have not had profoundly positive impact on some people’s lives. In fact, for many trans menstruators cycle-surprising contraception can make expressing their gender identity much more easy and comfortable. The pill has also contributed to greater opportunities outside of parenthood along with greater reproductive control. In her study, Sanabria acknowledges the importance of such menstrual suppression drugs for working class and medically underserved women, arguing that they often ease women’s working lives as they do not have to miss work or buy expensive menstrual products.

However, this illuminates only a small path of an otherwise dark and tumultuous contraceptive journey. Imposing social control through medical intervention, rather than primarily focusing on women’s healthcare and empowerment, makes debates around these drugs specifically fraught. First tested on working/lower-class Puerto Rico women, early trials of contraceptives were not only dangerous (causing widespread negative health outcomes that continue to surface today)³³ but have consistently enforced racial surveillance. Similarly, throughout South and Central America, long-acting hormonal methods of contraception, the long-term



health effects of which we know very little, have been used as a form of population control. In the United States, the systematic and government endorsed use of contraceptives to control African American women's reproductive freedoms has a long and convoluted tradition. Thus, the construction of the menstrual body as a disease has too often justified racial political policies. This widespread targeting of communities of color illustrates a breach in the integrity of the body's boundaries and effectively severs individual rights over their own bodies and body knowledge. Medical intervention, through "ignoring the local needs of specific users,"³⁴ showcases the ways that technologies support hegemonic racial power structures. The pill and other such contraceptives then stand as examples of how certain bodies and particular populations are regulated. They are technologies of the body, produced as a means to support racial subordination and supervision.

These are the technologies, the avenues of power both mundane and institutional that menstruators must transact with daily. In these flexible and durable methods- through stigma, "feminine hygiene" products, and contraception- knowledge of the menstrual body is both produced and enforced. The menstrual body becomes a target invested with power dynamics that continue to support the naturalized justification for the subordination of femininity. Non-bleeding is the goal, the norm and in these ways, discipline creates habits of hiding in order to produce a bloodless reality. The menstrual body becomes docile, manageable, and more importantly, oppressed. What then is the experience of such bodily oppression? How do we, as menstruators, experience menstruation in the light of such regulated, systematic power? How do we understand and produce knowledge of our own bodies that has been so distinctly colored by our constant interaction with expectations of docility?

Section 3: Embodying Oppression

Yet to be explored are the effects of such technologies of oppression and power on the subjectivities of those confronting them. In fact, it is in this constant relation to systems of intervention that we, as individuals, come to understand ourselves embodied. This mixture of authentic experience (our real-world interactions) and cultural constructions comes to make up our own expectations about ourselves and our bodies. Because we do not live isolated, the knowledge produced through our bodies is necessarily coded by modes of power which work on us. Thus, such interactions with constructions of the menstrual body and technologies of containing it work to objectify, segregate, and mark our experience of the body as a project.



How we come to collaborate in the compartmentalizing and suppression of it shapes the very knowledge of our bodies as distant.

In her work on the phenomenological female experience, *Throwing Like a Girl* (2005), Iris Marion Young describes this objectification of the female body and further the feel of this objectification.³⁵ For Young, “woman’s experience of her body as a thing,”³⁶ occurs through the constant interactions with structures which target the body as an object. If, for example, the menstrual body is an unnatural abomination in need of containment, we come to delineate the menstrual body within confining boundaries. It becomes a focus, an object, of analysis and supervision. This then leads to an overall distancing of the objectified body as Young argues that “women tend not to put their whole bodies into engagement,”³⁷ with the world around them. These bodies that we drag around month after month, cycle after cycle, are both a burden and a hindrance to our fully actualized, uninterrupted attachment to the world. For Young, this is characterized (or possibly causes) and distrust deeply engrained into the make-up of the oppressed body. Rather than depending on our bodies to transact the world, those targeted by these modes of social control, “often experience our bodies as a fragile encumbrance,”³⁸ too often unpredictable and uncontrollable. Young then provides an understanding for how with these networks and structures imbued with powers and technologies imprint a kind of subjectivity characterized by experienced dissidence. Because our bodies are constructed as weak, ill and undependable; because they are under constant supervision; because they are at the nexus of intervention; because of all of this, our attention is directed at shaping our bodies into utility, rather than productively utilizing our bodies experientially. Thus, our dissidence in subjectivity and identity comes from pressures which construct our bodies as objectified burdens and enlist us to foster such constant and objectifying labor.

We can then see how such modes of constructing docile bodies, whether docile bleeding bodies or any other targeted marginalized bodies, actively work to sever the body in ways which shatter coherent embodiments. Thus, embodying oppression can be characterized as management of various selves. The shaping of habits and modes of being is based on the continuous project of both hiding and presenting aspects of an objectified norm. Such standards make our bodies feel less like congruent homes and more like unstable straw effigies. What we are told of ourselves, our identities, and our experiences stands in for the authentic experience of the body. We are not experts in our own body knowledge. We have been made to self-police the boundaries of such fragile and damned embodiments.



Challenges

The intent of this research was not to demonize individual choice of menstrual products or argue against certain kinds of menstrual management but to disrupt the often unquestioned assumptions of such technologies. Menstruators should be able to deal with menstruation in whatever way they find most comfortable; I contend that this is not an open and free choice but rather a regimented and highly regulatory compulsory performance. These technologies are invested with power and as such work to build oppressive dwellings out of the menstrual body. How the menstrual body is shaped is in some part outside of the reach of the individual as it is through the body that cultural and political tactic play out.

More needs to be done in order to fill out the extent to which bodies become warzones of social control. Mentioned only briefly in this essay is the harm that the tying of menstruation to the female body inflicts upon the menstrual health of the trans community. This is a project of its own, that needs intensive care and research. Disrupting avenues of power can start with confronting the assumptions around menstruation. Similarly, it cannot go unsaid that certain bodies face greater targeting and marginalization than others. Mentioned briefly in regards to contraception, the ways in which communities of color are systematically differentiated and made docile should be of the utmost concern for the understanding of embodied oppression. Again, bodies become targets, their boundaries often contested and objectified.

Thus, menstruation is only one example used to explicitly describe the isolation and objectification of the feminine body as a site for social power. Through the making of normalized docile bodies, narratives of gendered division flourish. However, this is not the only example of such productive knowledge, but rather is a small case of the larger network of various structures. The ways in which our bodies are avenues for the enactment of power occur in pervasive and intersecting transactions that need intensive further care and investigation.

Conclusion

After discovering my terrible fate that first day of school, I remember being utterly paralyzed with fear. Fear of embarrassment and shame, but more importantly fear that my body could do something so unpredictable. I sat in the bathroom, well-passed the time I was supposed to, not really sure what to do. Finally, an older girl found me. She gave me her sweater to wrap



around my waist and walked me to the nurse's office, where my dad was promptly called to pick me up.

When we are told our bodies are ill, we begin to view them as sick. When we are told of the inevitable betrayal of our bodies, we stop depending on them, we appease them, and directing all our attention to calming the disruptions they cause. These ideas of our bodies come to us through complicated routes of oppressive networks; they influence us, shape us, and construct who we are embodied. We cut ourselves up, becoming constellations of objects strung together by the various means of discipline and hiding. Menstruation stands as an example of how the body through stigma, and technologies of power is shaped and habituated into docile normality. However, these forms of social and cultural control go beyond issues of menstruation, and rather illustrate a much larger structure of transactions involving knowledge, power, and the boundaries of the body. Thus, the experience of oppression is one of constant supervision, self-policing, and containment, which at its most basic ensures that those oppressed take on the burden of making normative and intelligible their condemned bodies. Bodies which are once distant and objectified, and yet curtail to the experience of our world.

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- ¹ Alcoff, "Phenomenology, Post-Structuralism, and Feminist Theory on the Concept of Experience," 41.
- ² Alcoff, "Phenomenology, Post-Structuralism, and Feminist Theory on the Concept of Experience," 43.
- ³ Alcoff, "Phenomenology, Post-Structuralism, and Feminist Theory on the Concept of Experience," 47.
- ⁴ Alcoff, "Phenomenology, Post-Structuralism, and Feminist Theory on the Concept of Experience," 47.
- ⁵ Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins*, 133.
- ⁶ Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins*, 141.
- ⁷ Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins*, 142.
- ⁸ Sullivan, *Living Across and Through Skins*, 143.
- ⁹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 27.
- ¹⁰ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 18.
- ¹¹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 19.
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- ³³ Sanabria, *Plastic Bodies*, 8.
- ³⁴ Sanabria, *Plastic Bodies*, 6.



³⁵ I must note here that Young specifically uses gendered terms, collapsing the experience of compulsorily femininity and the female body, effectively erasing non-normative identities that continue to feel the pressures of femininity from her work. In my analysis, I have tried to challenge these assumptions of bodies and would rather suggest a more nuanced look at maintenance of femininity on a variety of bodies. Thus, although Young refers to “women” specifically, this can more accurately be read as menstruator, or oppressed subject for my argument.

³⁶ Young, *On Female Body Experience*, 35.

³⁷ Young, *On Female Body Experience*, 33.

³⁸ Young, *On Female Body Experience*, 34.



Venus of ____ . 1 & 2

Samantha Earley



This piece was influenced by ancient stone carving of women. The painting on the surface is a mixture of a variety of possible skin tones that overall resemble a weathered stone. I wanted to create a sculpture that can be interpreted as the lasting impact women have had over time, throughout all cultures. Even though the piece looks eroded from natural elements, it still stands tall and strong. The female body has also been a strong subject in art and going back to a non-idealized form, that borders on biomorphic, can let the viewer imagine and connect with more personal ideas.





The Ubiquity of Power: When Foucault Meets Feminism

Felix Reich

I would like my books to be a kind of tool-box which others can rummage through to find a tool which they can use however they wish in their own area...I don't write for an audience, I write for users, not readers.

– Michel Foucault, 1974

Starting from the eighteenth century, modern Western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species. This is roughly what I have called bio-power.

– Michel Foucault, 1978

Although women make up more than half of the world's population, many societies underwent major political movements in order to unveil and discuss the structural oppression under which this majority has and is suffering. Feminism has provided a platform to analyze oppressive structures and come up with a social diagnosis that may lead to vicissitude. Besides many other accomplishments, feminism's idea that "the private is political" stands as an exceptional mantra within this movement. In order to understand ongoing forms of oppression, we must analyze power relations within society. In this paper, I will apply the methodological approach of Michel Foucault's discourse analysis to the existential realities presented by various recent studies. The significance of a feminist analysis on these studies becomes manifest with the insight of omnipresent power relations that work derogatory for women. The variety of subjects which contribute to feminist analysis suggests the ubiquitous nature of discourse and the usefulness of Foucault's "tool-box."

In the first part of this paper, I will outline Foucault's interpretation of power, especially the notion of *the docile body*. Using this concept, I will show how international fashion standards work as disciplinary measures to transform bodies into objects of power. Combined with the notion of the *male gaze*, and applied to a recent study conducted by the European Commission on gender and sexual abuse, this analysis will suggest that misogynist slants are by no means restricted to rural, traditional cultures. The omnipresence of misogyny provides ample research relevance to foster a more open-minded and gender-neutral discourse. Following this theoretical introduction, I will present recent studies to show the topicality



of this problem. Here, I will work out and discuss the *ideology of normality* and the *ideology of dependence*. Working through discourse and under the radar of many eyes, both concepts sketch an image of female suppression by social regimes. In order to be able to grasp the various ways in which power makes its mark upon the individual, it is vital to thoroughly analyze societal discourse from a micro-perspective. My thesis is that feminism proves the capillary nature of power relations.

Theoretical Approximation

Power and Docile Bodies

In one of his most famous books, *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault elaborates on the relation of power and knowledge. He coins the term “micro-physics” of power to illuminate the capillary ways in which power relations function.¹ Departing from former theorists, he sees power not as something to be owned and executed upon those “who do not have it” but rather as a strategy or tactic. Power does not solely serve one exclusive group but is applied by many. In modern societies, there is no monarch anymore that demonstrates and reinstitutes his or her power by publicly executing delinquents. In fact, nowadays, power has emerged onto a more comprehensive, individual level. Power and knowledge imply one another. Henceforth, the agencies of power influence, constrain, and control knowledge. Power, thus, operates within the bodies themselves rather than upon them.

These power relations are constantly in tension and never one-sided; where there is power, there is resistance. There is no power relation between a slave in chains and his master – only violence. Analyzing contemporary discourse can lead to conclusions regarding the power relations within a given society. One must dig deep into “the depths of society” and decipher values and norms to lay bare the power and knowledge relations within a society.² Foucault departs from Marxism when he states that “they [the power relations, F.R.] are not localized in the relations between the state and its citizens or on the frontier between classes and that they do not merely reproduce...the general form of the law or government.”³ Power, in a modern society, exceeds the level of state vs. population and encroaches the individual in equivocal ways so that it is sometimes opaque to determine who exercises power upon whom.

One way of showing how power is manifested on a micro-level is to look at the physicality of women. The modern state developed certain techniques to control and limit the body, to create the “docile body”: “A body is docile



that may be subjected, used, transformed, and improved.”⁴ Foucault observed a shift of state attention towards the body and biological features. Beginning with demographical statistics, a few centuries ago, and continuing until today with new body regulations and control measurements targeting reproductive rights, the state directed its attention on the body. Drawing upon Foucault, Susan Bordo identifies the human body “as itself a politically inscribed entity, its physiology and morphology shaped by histories and practices of containment and control.”⁵ This idea of the human body as the field whereupon matters of politics are fought will form the basis of this chapter’s analysis. Clearly referring to Jacques Derrida and his dialectic of Western languages, Angela King sums up feminism’s deconstruction as follows:

Feminists identified how women have been subjugated primarily through their bodies, and how gender ideologies and sexist reasoning stem from perceived biological differences between the sexes which are supported by dualistic paradigms that have been characterized western thought.⁶

The key word here is “perceived” differences because it stresses the point that by no means women became suppressed because of real, self-evident differences but rather because of a constructed and literal man-made dichotomy: man (normal) vs. female (abnormal). Deconstructing seemingly natural discourse is exactly where Foucault meets feminism. Simone de Beauvoir’s key phrase “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” stands in line with Foucault’s deconstructive discourse analysis.⁷ Just like gender, the female body is socially constructed. This anti-essentialist view challenges the predominant male-centric, patriarchal narrative of essential, natural genders.

Standing in line with de Beauvoir’s notion of the constructed nature of the female body and Foucault’s elaboration on capillary power, John Berger goes further and includes the soul as an agent of power, depicting a constituting self-division within women:

From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually. And so she comes to consider the surveyor and the surveyed within her as the two constituent yet always distinct elements of identity as a woman... Man survey women before treating them. Consequently how a woman appears to a man can determine how she will be treated. To



acquire some control over this process, women must contain it and interiorize it.⁸

He sees the soul as a twofold entity with one part being the supervisor and one part the subjected. Berger asserts that “to look is an act of choice,” and suggests that the gaze is not gender-neutral but unambiguously phallogocentric.⁹ This distinction is made clear by Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman who distinguish between “the look (associated with the eyes) and the gaze (associated with the phallus).”¹⁰ Because women observe themselves being watched, they often do not oppose this kind of objectification. On the contrary, objectification has been internalized and, through patterns of acceptance, gets perpetuated: the gaze becomes a seemingly natural phenomenon. A woman’s own uncritical behavior, her observatory self-control becomes part of her soul. The internalized oppression gets manifest on the body. Contrary to the common notion that the soul is somehow trapped inside the body, Berger and Foucault consider the body a prisoner of the soul.¹¹

A recent study conducted by the European Commission highlights the vast consequences this development implies. In more stringent patriarchal societies, acts of rape will either not be penalized or regularly relativized or excused because of “provocative” appearance of the female. This recent study conducted by the European Commission reveals prodigious attitudes even within the allegedly liberal and equal societies of Europe. Out of almost 28,000 participants 21 percent stated that women often exaggerate or make up claims of rape. An astounding 17 percent indicate that violence against women is often provoked by the victim with big countries like Germany (24 percent) and the UK (30 percent) leading the way in this regard.¹² Almost 60 percent of all interviewees from Latvia saw the female victim as the cause of violence.¹³ Furthermore, one in ten participants agrees that sexual intercourse without consent is justified under certain circumstances. These legitimizing circumstances include voluntarily going home with someone, wearing sexy clothing, and not physically fighting back. One in ten interviewees in the EU, according to this study, deem it legitimate to force sexual intercourse without consent if the woman wears revealing clothes. This recent study suggests that the ubiquity of misogyny has persisted even within the now more liberally-minded societies in the West as evidenced by the high percentages of rape-tolerant citizens in countries such as France, Belgium, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, and Portugal. If the surveyor part within a woman allows the surveyed part to wear a short skirt, high-heels, and make-up, those in power of the majoritarian narrative may interpret her behavior as a signal of permission. The rationale behind this action



draws on the premise that a woman's action cannot stand for its own sake—the way a woman dresses *has* to imply something. How a woman behaves reveals the way she treats herself and, therefore, how she would like to be treated. Berger applies this insight on another, seemingly pettier, situation: “If a woman makes a good joke this is an example of how she treats the joker in herself and accordingly of how she as a joker-woman would like to be treated by others. Only a man can make a good joke for its own sake”.¹⁴ The fundamental difference how people of different genders dress and look at each other reveals power relations within society. While men's clothing can be limited to a functional aspect, female dresses include a declaration of her own self-image. Hence, the male gaze is a means of controlling and patronizing the female body; it transforms the body into a battlefield of politics, an instrument of power.

Technologies of Femininity

For centuries, the female body has been controlled and subordinated by technologies of femininity. Clothing and fashion have long been serving as a tool for this end. Bordo depicts the corset as a prime example of how fashion norms not only caused women actual physical pain but also “served as an emblem of power of culture to impose its designs on the female body.”¹⁵ King agrees, identifying the multivalent function of fashion as it eroticizes and simultaneously constrains the female body.¹⁶ De Beauvoir also developed the idea that woman's fashion is a constraint as she saw in it a male precaution to the “potentially unruly, too-physical female body.”¹⁷ To further popular fashion's constraints, dietary measures were forced upon women to fit into dresses that were in vogue. To achieve the “best version” of oneself, women's hunger must be monitored, limited, and suppressed. Constant surveillance of women's behavior, amplified now through apps and social media, transforms the female body into her worst enemy. Slender supermodels serve as the living proof that this idealized body image is feasible, for if only one's discipline is adamant enough, one's will strong enough, and one's commitment big enough, then one supposedly can achieve such a body. To become the “best version of oneself,” you have fight the own body which has, in many cases, led to life-threatening degrees of eating-disorders: “Anorexia nervosa, which has now assumed epidemic proportions, is to women of the late twentieth century what hysteria was to the women of an earlier day.”¹⁸ Beauty standards and fashion norms accelerate this destructive process and stylized bulimia and anorexia into a mania.

Fashion is, however, by no means limited to a textile nature. The beauty regime has encroached on ever more spheres of pharmaceutical and



medical practices all in the name of body enhancement. Fashion intrudes in a range from make-up, artificial nails, hairpieces, eyelashes, breast augmentation, and other surgical interventions, to the doomed task of preventing one's skin from showing any sign of "wear, experience, age, or deep thought."¹⁹ Ageing and its effects have become an exclusive burden for women: "While both sexes dread ageing, it is the woman who is expected to prevent it."²⁰ Especially a woman's face must be "made-up." While the phrase "make-up" implies a certain stand-alone quality, and promises some sort of enhancement, it has turned into "a highly stylized activity that gives little reign to self-expression" and ultimately serves as "if not a card of entrée, at least a badge of acceptability in most social and professional contexts."²¹ The function and social necessity of make-up, its promise to "improve" one's appearance results in a devastating conclusion: that women's faces must be improved because there is some essential inferiority, some generic degeneracy inscribed on them. Women's bodies, in this case their faces, must be altered to be socially appropriate. Therefore, putting make-up on is an often undisputed ritual in many women's lives in the West.

All the phenomena described above have no claim to comprehensiveness. The complex issues surrounding femininity and its relation to cosmetics and fashion are broad reaching and disputed. However, the struggle becomes clear. Because woman is defined as body, "it is a losing battle against the inevitable... a struggle against life itself."²² The bodily restraints that fashion poses upon women illuminate Foucault's view of capillary power. Power is not total or monolithic but fluid and permeable; it is executed on "micro-levels." The modern age is characterized by these "new techniques of power" that target the body of individuals vis-à-vis the body of the population.²³

An Ideology of Normality

In the following paragraphs, I will elaborate on what Foucault and others have coined as the ideology of normality. In order to illuminate the ways in which this ideology works and to show specific consequences, I will present a study published in the *Women's Studies International Forum* by Peter Hayes. Hayes elaborates on the medicalization of girls who experience early puberty. Girls who mature relatively early are given hormone treatment (gonadotropin-releasing hormone agonists, GnRHa) to delay their development. Main objectives of this treatment include increasing final height, reducing psychosocial difficulties, delaying sexual activity, and (connected with the latter) decrease the risk of abuse.²⁴ Guaraldi et al. (2016) have found out that the majority of children treated for GnRHa are



girls, manifesting in the overwhelming ratio of 947 females to 90 males.²⁵ Although this treatment is spreading throughout the globe, Hayes argues that there is no scientific proof of its necessity.²⁶ Nor is there any statistical evidence that early puberty is a predominantly female phenomenon.²⁷ In fact, the reason for its enduring popularity in medical discourse can be found in an “ideology of normality” in which the “rights of girls treated for precocious puberty are being infringed.”²⁸

Being normal stands as the ultimate goal of this process. Diversity is sacrificed in order to come as close as possible to socially defined norms. The pharmaceutical industry joins this ideological impulse to utilize the “normalizing discourse of modern medicine” in order to become more credible.²⁹ Justification for the treatment lays in the “comprehensive medicalization of healthy girls who happen to mature early.”³⁰ The core abnormality of a relatively early puberty is then linked with other phenomena that are equally medicalized to create a pseudo-scientific urge that consequently looks like necessity. Following Foucault, this process of linking a core abnormality with various other peripheral abnormalities is typical for an ideology of normality.³¹ Once implanted in the midst of medical discourse, this ideology leads to a series of “intrusive tests” and medical procedures targeting the girls’ bodies ranging from blood samples to brain imaging.³²

As Paul B. Kaplowitz shows, however, “no tests whatsoever are necessary.”³³ Oftentimes, these tests get misinterpreted to arrive at a predetermined conclusion that sheds a teleological light on the issue. Other physicians have used associations between early puberty and early sexual debut, abuse, and delinquency to create an air that justifies GnRHa treatment to prevent socially “inappropriate” behavior.³⁴ Guaraldi et al. reach a similar conclusion:

The avoidance of potential psychosocial problems derived from experiencing precocious puberty and undesirable behaviors like early sexual intercourse and substance abuse reported in some cohorts of patients may also be acknowledged as objectives of the treatment.³⁵

It is peculiar that on the one hand, social norms are justifying treatment to delay puberty in girls but, on the other hand, the rationale concerning boys and their early puberty changes entirely. Findings from Brown et al. suggest that “sexually precocious males are often perceived as more mature, attractive, and smart, and are often given more leadership roles than later



developing boys.”³⁶ Hence, girls are supposed to remain a child as long as it is socially acceptable whereas boys’ early maturation poses an advantage; growing early into a man is favored to growing early into a woman. An all-too common image becomes manifest: the virtuous virgin vs. the wild daredevil.

Another interesting instance of how medicalization works is terminology. Here, the term *risk* becomes associated with girls’ experiencing early sexual activity. However, a medical risk is not to be confused with a personal choice. Intermingling these two perspectives is how medicalization works and ultimately transforms the “moral into the medical.”³⁷ Furthermore, it is questionable whether prescribing drugs is the preferable way of coping with prematurity, because of the danger of jeopardizing the importance of counseling in a familial environment: “Even if there is a valid statistical relationship between early puberty, relatively early sexual debut, and other forms of censured activity, these are matters for advice not medical control.”³⁸ Medicalization, thus, mimics misogynist patterns which are embedded in a discourse of gendered normativity that works in a dichotomous continuum (normal/abnormal).

In addition, a Dutch study suggests that it might be possible that such hormone treatments may lead to a reduced IQ. Mul et al. compared mean IQ scores of children before and two years into the treatment with GnRHa. They discovered a significant drop of mean IQ scores of more than 7 points (from 100.2 to 93.1).³⁹ However, the study was relatively small-scaled and, hence, these findings have to be interpreted with due precaution. No further research was done which might have enabled them to draw more substantial results. Subsequently, their findings are bound to stay elusive. Yet, they concluded that “one hypothesis for the decrease in verbal IQ scores is that withdrawal of exposure to the brain to sex steroids brings the child back into a more age-appropriate IQ range.”⁴⁰ However, “the initial IQ score ... was not different from normal.”⁴¹ Confronted with these rather contradictory statements, Hayes protests:

Given the lack of any further published research on GnRHas and IQ, and in the absence of information given to patients, this explanation appears to have been accepted. It should not have been. Describing the effect of a GnRHa as making child’s IQ ‘more age-appropriate’ is an unjustified euphemism for making IQ lower.⁴²



To conclude, mostly girls are diagnosed with the “condition” of early puberty although there is no evidence of it being a specifically female occurrence. Moreover, early puberty of boys is not only far less diagnosed, but even if it is medically recognized, it gets fortified because of social advantages. Society sees young girls as a group which have to be protected in the face of early sexual debut whereas common side effects may even include a declining IQ score. The ideology of normality did not only pave the way for medical intervention but also pressed a research agenda that frames normalities and abnormalities that far exceed the medical necessities. Thus, the ideology of normality has even “framed the lines of inquiry that are followed, the questions that are asked, and the areas of silence.”⁴³ Hidden under a medical surface, power works steadily derogatorily to girls.

An Ideology of Dependence

To get a hold on the discursive image of women portrayed in everyday media outlets, a recent study by Tandoc and Ferrucci scrutinized weekly periodicals in the United States.⁴⁴ More specifically, the researchers conducted a textual analysis on three women’s magazines, each with a distinct readership. The authors were interested in the horoscopes which appear in each of these magazines and the subtext of its content. How is the ideal woman portrayed? What should be the focus of a woman’s social and love life? And what should a woman spend her money on? Besides others, these were the questions typically answered in those horoscopes, and their results are representative of a wider phenomenon.

One magazine focused on white women as their main target group; another focused on teenage girls; and the last focused mostly on African-American women as its demographic. Generally, all three magazines advocated a lifestyle in which “life is better with a man.”⁴⁵ Another advice that all magazines have in common includes to generously overlook your man’s iniquities. The magazines put it concisely that if a woman wants to keep her man, which is without alternative, it is her job to keep the relationship going. The horoscopes show meticulous fervor to make sure one point gets transmitted: “Men are not only necessary, but they transform lives.”⁴⁶ According to these horoscopes, a girl or a woman should always keep in mind that, ultimately, the goal of her social life is finding “the One,” a perfect husband. For those who already are in a committed relationship, the horoscopes advise women to revolve their entire life around the needs of the man. The authors identify the construction of an “identity of dependence.”⁴⁷



In case there is a conflict of interest between work and home, a “good wife” always chooses home:

[A] woman’s priority is her home life, and balancing that with work is not always easy. For Glamour readers, work is something women do, but keeping their man happy is more important...The woman must delicately balance success in both venues, but always aim for the most success in the home.⁴⁸

The magazines convey an attitude of absolute conformism and obsequiousness: women are not to let their emotions compromise their performance at home. Women are expected to accept their role: “A common dilemma for women is boredom. The routine of work is boring. But boring is okay. Work is important. Love is important. The less drama you create, the better. You just have to conform.”⁴⁹

What the discourse analysis has shown is, first, that women and girls are encouraged to conform, rather than confront, gender stereotypes: marriage is their life’s focal point. Once they have “achieved” that end, they will keep the man happy by putting themselves second even if doing so means cutting down on expectations for their own career. Secondly, most importantly, this attempt to conform to patriarchal expectations finds foundation in the common ideology of dependence. It is the woman’s job to put up with her man’s flaws because it is still better to conform and keep one’s man than not having a man, for according to these horoscopes, “Life would not be complete without a man.”⁵⁰ Foucault’s idea of power working on micro-levels gets manifest in these horoscopes. The magazine’s perception about how the “ideal” woman behaves divulges misogyny. Since discourse mirrors power relations in society, there is nothing like an innocent horoscope within a woman’s magazine. Because power is capillary, misogyny proves ubiquitous.⁵¹

Conclusion

This paper’s aim was to show how Foucault’s capillary concept of power can be applied to recent feminist studies. As the research has shown there are several points of contact, most strikingly the idea of the body as a powerful, political battlefield. The notion of the “docile body” can be transmitted to feminist analysis and, especially, the idea of constant surveillance, control, constraint, and improvement that makes the “docile body” idea evident in everyday life. Seemingly innocent magazines turn out to be an agent of misogyny in the way they perpetuate oppressive patterns. The presented



studies have shown that Foucault indeed provides us with a flexible, open, and variously applicable conceptualization of power.

However, this study's limited scope prohibits me to elaborate on certain issues. For example, there is an influential group of feminist authors around Bartky who point toward patriarchal aspects within Foucault's work. Although his concepts of power and discourse analysis might be applicable to various feminist issues, Foucault lacks a distinguished and separate account of female suppression. There are certain voices within the literature that accuse his work of a male-centric perspective. It would have surpassed this paper's limitations to address these concerns with the length and comprehensiveness they demand and deserve. Further research could be directed toward a comparative analysis which considers cultural differences among a variety of traditions and languages coming full circle with Derrida and his dialectic of Western languages.

There are numerous examples that show how micro-physical power makes its mark on the female body. The exceptional utilization of the body as political material stands out as one of feminism's many accomplishments. Only by unveiling oppressive patterns can power relations in a society become tangible to the majoritarian narrative. Foucault's analytical toolbox, flawed as it may be, proves to be a viable method of scrutinizing the opaque discourse of our current society's state of mind.

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¹ Michel Foucault, "The Body of the Condemned," 174

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Foucault, "Docile Bodies," 180.

⁵ Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*, 21.

⁶ Angela King, "The Prisoner of Gender," 31.

⁷ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 295.

⁸ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 46.

⁹ Ibid., see also Sandra L. Bartky, "Foucault, Femininity." Bartky observes that Foucault is often accused of not addressing or even actively ignoring the phallo-centrism of the gender-neutral gaze.

¹⁰ Caroline Evans and Lorraine Gamman, "The Gaze Revisited," 15.

¹¹ Foucault, "The Body of the Condemned," 177.

¹² European Commission, *Special Barometer* 449, 58.

¹³ Ibid., 59.

¹⁴ Berger, 47.

¹⁵ Bordo, 143.

¹⁶ King, 34.

¹⁷ De Beauvoir, 189-90.

¹⁸ Bartky, 28. See also Bordo, *Unbearable Weight*.

¹⁹ Ibid., 31.

²⁰ Efrat Tseelon, *The Masque of Femininity*, 82.

²¹ Bartky, 71.

²² Elizabeth Wilson, *Adorned in Dreams*, 126.

²³ Foucault, "Truth and Power," 66-7.

²⁴ Peter Hayes, "Early puberty."

²⁵ Guaraldi et al., "Long-term outcomes," 81.

²⁶ Hayes, 10.

²⁷ Ibid., 16.

²⁸ Ibid., 10.

²⁹ Bartky, 32.

³⁰ Hayes, 10.

³¹ Foucault, *Abnormal*.

³² Hayes, 11.

³³ Paul B. Kaplowitz, *Early puberty*, 116.

³⁴ Hayes, 14; See also E.M. Ritzén, "Early puberty," 33.

³⁵ Guaraldi et al., 80.



³⁶ DeAnna Brown et al., 108.

³⁷ P. Conrad, "Medicalization," 223.

³⁸ Hayes, 15.

³⁹ D. Mul et al., "Psychological assessments," 968.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 970.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Hayes, 16.

⁴³ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁴ Another striking study concerning broad everyday media, in this case newspapers, was conducted by Easteal et al. Here, they discover that newspapers, when depicting murderous women, tend to highlight irrelevant factors like sexuality. Simultaneously, crucial background information which might help the reader to contextualize the events were downplayed. Again, a core abnormality gets linked with peripheral abnormalities (e.g. lesbianism). For further information, see Easteal et al., "How are women who kill portrayed."

⁴⁵ Patrick Ferrucci and Edson C. Tandoc Jr., "So Says the Stars," 37.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 38.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 39.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Another stunning aspect of their research shows vast discrepancies between White and African-American women. In this regard it gets clear that the horoscopes in *Essence* put emphasize on saving. In particular, they are told not to lend money to friends or family. The subtext of this suggestion is that African-American women are acquainted with other African-Americans who cannot be trusted with money. This division shows intersectionality and double oppression for women of color. Moreover, it exemplifies that women are not a monolithic bloc that acts united.



Curing Sexual Desire with the Lust Enhancing Pill for Women: Where Medicine Meets Normality

Maaïke Hommes

Charmaine's Story

They met in college, and the sexual chemistry was amazing. In an interview in *Shape Magazine* conducted by Kaitlin Menza (2015), which appeared online under the headings of “Lifestyle” and “Sex and Love,” an anonymous woman (whom I will call Charmaine) recounted how she and her husband would have sex multiple times a day, every day of the week. Sex was one of the most wonderful parts of their relationship and a key aspect of Charmaine's identity.

Her sexual energy changed after the birth of her first son. Not only was she too tired after feeding the baby until 3 a.m., but Charmaine also felt no need to have sex again. She tried to make love every two weeks or so but did so more out of obligation than desire. When her husband started to feel more like a co-worker than her lover, she contemplated a divorce. However, in the end, they did not want their marriage to fall apart, and Charmaine started to experiment with herbal supplements, antidepressants, and testosterone injections to help rejuvenate her sexual desire. Sadly, none did the trick.

When Charmaine and her husband found out about a series of clinical trials for flibanserin, which was to be a new lust-enhancing drug for women, she did not think there was “a chance in hell this was going to work,” but by this time, she had promised her husband that she would try anything to save the relationship. Upon signing up, she half-expected to be rejected for the trials because her lack of libido had occurred after giving birth to two sons. Charmaine thought “clearly” that was the issue and motherhood had diminished her libido, not her body. However, the doctors in the test trials selected her, and she was diagnosed with Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder (HSDD). After roughly a month on flibanserin, she felt renewed energy. She started running and lost a few pounds. Feeling sexy again, Charmaine then realized that she and her husband had had sex twice in one week. “It might be the drug after all,” Charmaine said, “It wasn't as if I was suddenly horny around the clock. We weren't doing it on the kitchen table or missing work. I just felt like myself again—a woman who enjoys sex and is attracted to her husband. It was normal life.”¹ For Charmaine, regaining her desire was regaining normal life: a re-claiming of her identity as a normal woman who is attracted to her husband.



Part of the trial studied the effects of withdrawal, and within a month of stopping flibanserin, Charmaine and her husband returned to their old pattern of occasional sex every few weeks. After these trials, it took the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) five years to approve the drug. Charmaine was crushed. Even so, the drug proved to the couple that Charmaine had not been lying. She did love and wanted to be with her husband; she was still attracted to him. Her relationship did suffer; however, it was not because of their wonderful sons but because something had happened to her chemically.

For Charmaine, this placement of the loss of desire in the chemistry of the brain clearly brought about relief. At first, she almost could not believe there was “an actual name for this.” Now, she was not simply “bad at life and bad at marriage” but rather “just had this health issue”—a health issue that allowed her to hold on to an identity as a sexual being, if a disordered one.

In this article, I analyze Charmaine’s relief by connecting it to discursively constructed views on normality and abnormality in relation to health and medicine. These notions, the interconnectedness of which has been of great relevance ever since Michel Foucault’s *Birth of the Clinic* (1963), have acquired a new significance in the age of the neurosciences. According to Nikolas Rose and Joelle Abi-Rached in *Neuro* (2013), the advancement of the neurosciences has led to a growing popular belief that “the brain holds the key to who we are.”² When Foucault characterized the nineteenth century shift taking place in medicine, he did so by describing a change in a type of question. Doctors no longer asked, “what is the matter with you?” but rather “where does it hurt?”³ In 2015, Charmaine’s answer is “in my brain.” Framed as a “health issue,” her lack of desire is not an integral affliction or a disease of the soul but is the result of a simple, limited, and malfunctioning organ.

In this case, the organ is the brain. This organ makes a difference. Rose and Abi Rached note how, by emphasizing the influence of brain functions as an explanatory factor, the neurosciences have effectively reshaped the way we think about ourselves, our social relations, and ethical values, grounding them in “that spongy mass of the human brain.”⁴ For Charmaine, this material grounding of her lack of desire has two main consequences: it constitutes her disorder and offers, at the same time, a comforting and explanatory function.

This article is an attempt to discern the structures that conjoin in Charmaine’s relief. I review their conditions along the lines of systematization, reductionism, and the practices of biopower on the



biomediated body. On a theoretical level, I understand her relief to take place through three different instances that accumulate in intensity. The first is the localization of female sexuality in the brain, which I consider by giving a brief account of physiological research on the sexual body conducted in the 1960s, as well as by analyzing the visualization of brain scans in an article authored by Sprout Pharmaceuticals (the company that makes and markets flibanserin). The second instance concerns the neuromolecular gaze, which penetrates individual experience in a reductionist manner. By drawing upon this term, coined by Rose and Abi Rached, and following Bruno Latour's argument against reductionism as developed in "How to Talk about the Body" (2004), I connect a more differentiated view of the body to Charmaine's simplified "health issue." In doing so, I consider the possibility that Charmaine's "cure" is facilitated by this reductionism as this simplification of desire relieves some of the tension around her loss. Following up on this inquiry, I explore the normative dimension of Charmaine's relief. Why does she feel that marriage is a job in which one can be good or bad? How does sex fit into this scheme, and what is its relation to what Charmaine calls "normal life"? Taking up Lauren Berlant and Sara Ahmed in their related accounts of the intimate political way that attachments are shaped, I explore Charmaine's experience of relief as an attachment to a conventional good-life fantasy.

By bringing medicine and neuroscience together with the affective conditions of Charmaine's description of normality, I hope to discover exactly what, for Charmaine, is gained with the placement of the loss of desire in her brain and what might be lost through this reduction.

HSDD: The Formulation of a Disorder

When Charmaine learned from television that the drug had been approved, she and her husband looked at each other with delighted glints in their eyes. However, they were annoyed by the way people talked about it. "The female viagra! As if women were just lacking an erection this whole time. Please. There is so much more to this drug than being horny, and there's so much more to sex than having an erection."⁵ Observing that half of all marriages fall apart, Charmaine noted how many say the turning point was when they had children. Before her experience with flibanserin, Charmaine would have agreed. However, after being diagnosed with HSDD, she realized that she wasn't horny because "something has happened to her chemically."⁶ Apparently, the "so much more" that there is to sex can also be easily and exactly described in chemical terms.



These chemical terms are what flibanserin's marketing taps into. Until the fall of 2015, there were no fewer than twenty-six varieties of Viagra prescribed for men. By contrast, there were no medicines intended to treat sexual problems in women. Numerous companies have sought to fill this gap in the market of lust-enhancing medication for women and competed in the race for FDA approval. In August 2015, Sprout Pharmaceuticals won the race and went to market with flibanserin. Dubbed the "Pink Pill" by the North-American media, flibanserin is sold under the sexier brand name of Addyi.

In various media outlets, the pill is referred to as "female Viagra."⁷ However, flibanserin works quite differently than its male counterpart, for it does not merely enable the flow of blood to the genitals but instead targets the brain chemicals that are, according to Cindy Whitehead, CEO of Sprout Pharmaceuticals, known to facilitate sexual activity. Women have to take the pill daily, and the effects are only noticeable after roughly a month. This usage stands in stark contrast to Viagra, which—according to its commercials—is only taken "when you need it."⁸ Flibanserin requires a longer commitment from its users. Therefore, it is mainly targeted to women in long-term relationships.

More specifically, according to Addyi's website, flibanserin is prescribed for pre-menopausal women who suffer from HSDD, who have not had problems with low sexual desire in the past, and who have low sexual desire no matter the type of sexual activity, the situation, or the sexual partner. Women with HSDD have, according to Sprout's statement, "low sexual desire that is troubling to them."⁹ According to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders-IV (2000), HSDD is a persistent or recurrent deficiency or absence of sexual fantasies and desire for sexual activity, characteristics which cause marked distress or interpersonal difficulty.¹⁰ Additionally, the definition requires that the instance of low sexual desire cannot be accounted for by another Axis I disorder and is not exclusively due to the direct physiological effects of a substance (e.g., drug abuse or medication) or a general medical condition. As a disorder, HSDD is grouped under the larger heading of "Female Sexual Dysfunction," covering a wide range of sexual issues such as painful intercourse, the inability to achieve orgasm, and low sexual desire.

Multiple psychological studies on HSDD state that the disorder is the most commonly reported form of sexual dysfunction in women.¹¹ A study funded by Sprout Pharmaceuticals, found that 24% of premenopausal women aged 20-49 reported persistent low desire or reduced interest in sex.¹² While these studies stress the pervasiveness of the disorder, the guidelines for clinicians lack a precise demarcation.¹³ Furthermore, the conceptual haziness surrounding the notion of sexual desire, an essential



aspect of the disorder in the DSM-based definition, continues to thwart a clear delineation of the disease.¹⁴ Sexual desire, it seems, is not easy to catch. Where sexual desire is ephemeral and fleeting, these scientific approaches try to catch and pin it to the functions of the brain. The influence of the loss of desire on quality of life is compared to “that seen in women with diabetes or chronic back pain.”¹⁵ Sexual desire then becomes a matter of simple physiology.

According to Lori Brotto, the formulation of sexual desire disorders is still largely based on the research conducted by Masters and Johnson in the 1960s.¹⁶ This infamous physiological study on what happens to the body during sex resulted in the formulation of the four-phase sexual response cycle, moving from excitation and plateau to orgasm and resolution. In the 1970s, Helen Singer Kaplan revised this strictly physiological ordering of sexual response to incorporate the state of sexual desire as well.

For Kaplan, who was a well-known sex therapist in the 1970s, desire was ultimately rooted in the brain while excitement and orgasm involved autonomic reflexes of the genitals.¹⁷ These genital reflexes can be observed objectively and can therefore be accurately described and defined. In contrast to this data, the measurements regarding a “normal” libido in men and women are incomplete and largely anecdotal.¹⁸ In other words, the physiology of desire cannot be precisely delineated. For Kaplan, however, this unknowability was mainly related to an incomplete state of knowledge.¹⁹ When desire is definitely rooted in the brain, all science has to do is get to an understanding of how this works, and then all problems with desire can be solved. In what follows, I argue that this rather utopian approach does not in fact ‘cure’ an absent libido, but works to construct a new illness as it tries to fit the complexity of desire into a simple brain-based material condition.

However, this research laid the groundwork for the two main consequences for Charmaine that I have highlighted above. It shows both the hope that is invested in neuroscience (capturing desire and measuring its contents) and the way in which the localization of desire allows for the formulation of a new disorder. With Kaplan's reformulation of Masters and Johnson's four-phase cycle into a “triphasic” one (desire, excitement and orgasm)²⁰, desire becomes the main element of female sexuality.²¹ When desire is rooted in the brain, sexual motivation becomes a conscious affair of the mind rather than the physiological drive for pleasure or a bodily instinct.



Flibanserin: Cure for a Disorder

Following Kaplan's research in the 1970s, contemporary scientists working on flibanserin have continued to localize female desire in the brain. When Sprout Pharmaceuticals announced that it was resubmitting the drug for FDA approval, it circulated a press release on *PR Newswire* (a news agency that allows companies to distribute their own content). This press release repeatedly asserted the neurological basis of sexual desire.

The brain plays an important role in regulating a woman's sexual desire, and one of the root causes of persistent and recurrent low sexual desire, or HSDD, stems from an imbalance of neurotransmitters in the brain, said Stephen Stahl, ... flibanserin is believed to work by correcting this imbalance and providing the appropriate areas of the brain with a more suitable mix of brain chemicals to help restore sexual desire.²²

The press release constructs a language of right and wrong brain chemistry by raising notions of “imbalance,” “correction,” and “restoration.” This language is visualized on brain scans (fig. 1). Sprout Pharmaceuticals suggests that there are two types of brains: those in which the yellow or greenish bits light up when there is sexual stimulation and those which remain dark and inactive. The latter are said to qualify for the label HSDD.

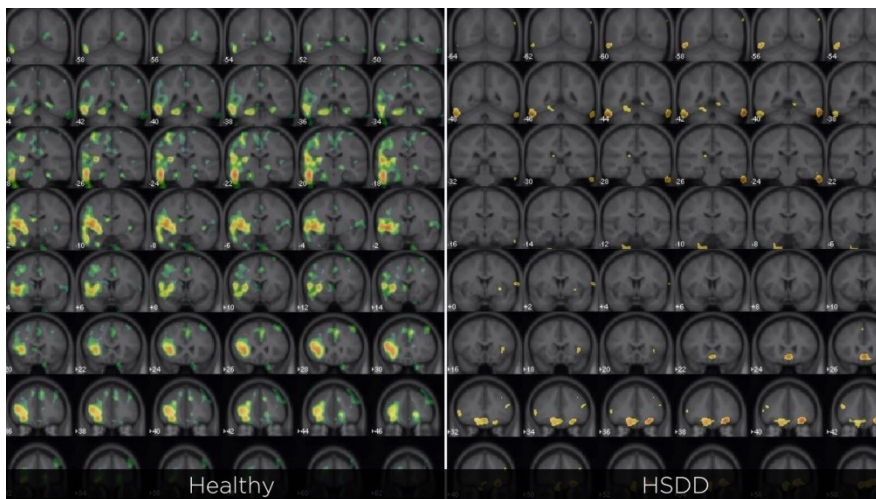


Fig. 1 [caption figure 1: Brain Imaging as published by Sprout Pharmaceuticals showing their stated “fundamental difference” in “prefrontal brain circuitry response to sexual stimuli between women with HSDD and those without.”]



The scans reveal an apparent explanation for a lack of desire. Hence, those places where desire manifests itself in the brain need to be helped by way of flibanserin: the chemical cure that will make the right parts yellow.

Supplementing this account is a video, posted along with the press release, in which a narrator says:

Sexual stimulation typically shuts down the parts of the brain involved with information analysis, the parts that keep up with your day to day tasks. Shutting down these parts of the brain allow women with healthy sexual desire to focus on the sexual experience. This sensory deactivation, or “cooling off,” is what you see here in blue. A dramatic contrast occurs in the brain of a woman with HSDD. Her brain does not deactivate. She is not able to shut down the distractions that would allow her to focus on the sexual experience the same way as her healthy counterparts. You see clearly the limited deactivations. Less cooling, less blue.²³

When the narrator speaks of healthy sexual desire, the video shows happy white couples making love (fig. 2 & 3). These images portray sexuality as it takes place in the functional brain (the blue one). The dysfunctional brain (the red one) is not able to shut out distractions (fig. 4 & 5). This happens in the brain of the busy mom or the career woman who is more concerned with email than with her husband. These images tend to portray that dysfunctional distraction consists of paying attention to one’s child or being focused on work. Of course, this marketing does not promise to turn women into sex-crazed beings who neglect their children and leave their jobs; rather, it promotes the medicalization of low libido.

Fig. 2 The Functional Brain

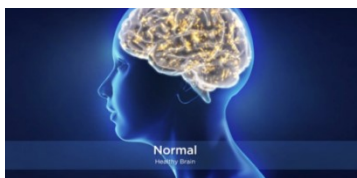
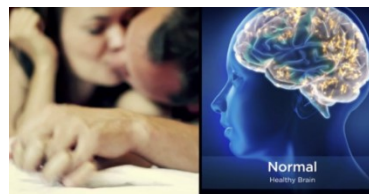


Fig. 3 Happy Normal Lovemaking



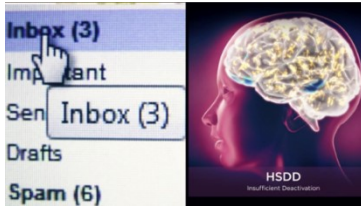


Fig. 4 The Dysfunctional Brain



Fig. 5 The 'Distracted' Busy Mom

Together, this material shows first how a lack of sexual desire is problematized and medicalized and second how this lack is localized in the brain according to the idea that managing the appropriate type and amount of focus denotes healthy sexual desire. Being less calculating and less concerned with information analysis and other distractions while also allowing oneself to be fully immersed in the sexual experience is shown to be the healthy way. The video also works to reaffirm the version of “normal life,” to which Charmaine so much wanted to return: a normality in which women are not busy but attain the proper focus on their husbands. I will return to this last notion later in this article. First, I wish to have a closer look at the way in which desire is pinned down chemically.

Thought Caught in Matter

The issue of localization is addressed by neuroscientists John Van Horn and Russell Poldrack, both of whom comment on the frequent misuse of fMRI scans in the media. For them, the exciting possibility of examining the brain “in vivo” leads to the tendency to believe that certain patterns reveal more than that which is actually possible to measure.²⁴ In simply localizing a physical marker of brain activity, one has not yet understood its dynamics. According to the authors, there are well-known examples of cases in which “regions that are activated during a task are not necessary for the task.”²⁵

In relation to the “limited deactivations” stressed by Sprout Pharmaceuticals, Van Horn and Poldrack’s observation is an interesting one. The fact that certain parts of the brains of women experiencing low sexual desire are not activated does not mean that science has captured the physiology of desire. Rather, the “limited deactivations” could just be among the physical markers of what can happen in a body during sex, comparable to a leg or an arm that needs to be in a specific position in order to perform. Like a leg, the brain is not an actor on its own. To assume that an imbalance of neurotransmitters is the root cause of recurrent low sexual desire is, therefore, a causal misunderstanding, which tries to separate the chicken from the egg.



To avoid such confusion, I will take a brief look at the chemistries involved in sex. In 2004, Michael Lemonick published an article in *Time* magazine in which he spells out the chemistry of sexual desire. He describes how in men, a hormone directs the expansion and contraction of smooth muscles. Another chemical called nitric oxide activates the muscles that control the expansion and contraction of blood vessels. “When the mind is in the mood – or when you pop a nitric-oxide-boosting drug such as Viagra...the body responds.”²⁶ Without testosterone, however, none of these chemicals work. This is the first of many complex interactions involved in sexual desire.

Secondly, the effects of testosterone on levels of libido in both men and women contests a simple hormone-based gender division, showing that sexual desire is not limited to one particular spot in female brains. As dominant scientific thought suggests, testosterone is what makes a man and estrogen is what defines a woman.²⁷ According to Lemonick, empirical research has shown that when testosterone levels go down in men, sexual desire declines with them. When a woman experiences decreased desire, increasing levels of estrogen will not boost her libido, but the administration of testosterone *will*.²⁸ Furthermore, Lemonick notes that for men, higher levels of estrogen also trigger desire. This increase suggests that the merging of the hormone-based categories of “man” and “woman” could be the foundation for a kind of *hyper-desire*. Following this thought, a hybrid interaction of both sexes could boost desire in a post-gender chimera of horniness. This chimeric figure shows how the hormone-based gender category is a simplification that is constructed in dominant scientific thought that limits the possibility to extend sexual desire beyond a gender-binary.

There are still more chemical messengers involved in this process. Hormones like testosterone and estrogen also trigger neurotransmitters like dopamine (a pleasure-triggering substance), serotonin (involved with feelings of satisfaction) and oxytocin (“the cuddle hormone”). Being high on dopamine can increase arousal while the administration of serotonin alone (as used in antidepressants) can limit the ability to achieve orgasm. However, dopamine and serotonin (pleasure and satisfaction) “interact with each other in a complicated way to impact desire.”²⁹ One needs the other. Together, these multiple interactions show how the chemistry of desire cannot be adequately pinned down in one part of the brain, but takes place in a network of entangled processes.

As this brief excursion suggests, even popular scientific writing understands that the mapping of the brain is the mapping of a complex network. For things to exist, they need to exist simultaneously. It is at



this point that the chemical narrative used to describe flibanserin specifically misses the point. In an attempt to localize and simplify female sexuality, Sprout Pharmaceuticals has not described the workings of sexuality in the brain but merely given an incomplete account of physiology.

Penetration and the “Molecular Rationale”

In itself, such incompleteness is of no importance. We cannot always account for the whole network of relationality. However, as Sprout Pharmaceuticals’ narrative makes claims on “imbalanced” brains that need to be “restored,” we enter a different arena. Here, we are not only dealing with physiology but with an accompanying account of normativity.

The tendency to systematize human sexuality, separating it from the totality of human existence, is an aspect that Masters and Johnson already problematized in the 1960s. “Without the context of the total being and his environment,” they write, “a sex history would be as relatively meaningless as a heart history or a stomach history.”³⁰ It is “relatively meaningless” because while this history provides us with some knowledge of physiological functions, it fails to give an account of sex in its entangled complexities.

However, for Masters and Johnson, when any area of clinical investigation is constituted, “standards must be devised in the hope of establishing some means of control over clinical experimentation.”³¹ Following Masters and Johnson’s account, the dysfunctional sexual body is situated somewhere between existential complexity, methodological order, and the ways in which knowledge production demands a certain control over its object. Different aspects of sexuality can be studied in various disciplines such as neurology, psychology, and psychiatry. At the same time, however, the inseparability and interconnectedness of biology and what we name “the social” calls for a different approach—one that maps interactions and complexities.

Even though brain research opens up a new bodily conception of networks, chemical messengers, neuronal paths, and linkages, Nikolas Rose and Abi-Rached note how the current popularity of the neurosciences does not allow for a thinking of complexity, instead leading to a new kind of reductionism. A new “molecular rationale” has been developed in which an organism is seen as “reducible to traits, behaviors, cells, genes and brain processes.”³² This type of neuroscience has led Rose and Abi-Rached to coin the term *neuromolecular gaze*,



which describes the neurological clinical way of looking that penetrates the individual all the way down to the molecular level.³³

In their warning against a reductionism that dissects the human into molecular parts, Rose and Abi-Rached's concept signals the correlation between manners of looking and the formation of normative constructs of identity. This reductionist gaze functions as a material reification of the separation between the healthy and the diseased. These manners of looking are the technologies of biopower about which Foucault had already warned us and whose possibilities have only increased with scientific advances. To heed this warning and to counterbalance the neuromolecular grip on sexual desire, I now turn to Bruno Latour's political epistemology as a possible counter-biopower.

Localizations and Articulations

Since Latour comes from a family of vintners, he knows about the multitude of words one can have for similar things. While sampling, spitting, mumbling, and drafting, one develops a vocabulary to describe a particular taste, sight, or phenomenon. In doing so, the body learns to be affected and to register differences. It becomes sensible to the ways in which a particular wine is unlike the others, and that particular feelings are different.

For Latour, expanding the language to talk about the body is an essential exercise of free speech in a time of bio-power.³⁴ Instead of wishing for direct access into objects "as they are," Latour argues for a way of relating to the world that is embodied and articulated. Through more words and more controversies, we can become sensible to more differences.³⁵ Contrary to clinical investigation as argued for by Masters and Johnson, categorical labeling does not produce new knowledge but merely attempts to repeat an original in a model.³⁶

With regard to the social/biological split that is crucial to many feminist theorists and other theories of emancipation, Latour's view of learning as training the body to become sensible allows for a way of including different experiences without objectifying them. What I take to be crucial in this approach is the way in which Latour stresses the impossibility of the reductionism that is often present in the natural sciences by stating that when the body enters a new realm of knowledge—such as the neurosciences—it is not reduced to that strand of thinking but only becomes richer and better articulated. "Far from being less, you become more!"³⁷



This attitude, which resists the molding of subjective experiences into frameworks of knowledge, is crucial in understanding human sexuality. As sexuality exists somewhere at the intersection between the biological, social, political, and affective realms of being, Latour's argument shows how the reduction to a locality of the brain can only be counterproductive. When "captured" in a framework of knowledge, the means with which to understand can expand, rather than decrease.

When applied to Charmaine's supposed "health issue," such an approach would look at the way in which desire is located in the brain as part of the story, but not as its main explanation. With this critique of reductionism in mind, we can return to Charmaine's story and ask why the attribution of her low libido to HSDD grants relief.

The Good Life

Before she started taking the pills, Charmaine recoiled every time her husband tried to touch her. Even when it was just to cuddle or show affection, Charmaine was no longer drawn to physical contact. Her husband felt rejected, and she felt incredibly guilty. They were pleasant to each other, Charmaine states, but their romance was over.

The fact that their once passionate marriage had turned into a child-raising facility, where they only communicated about schedules and daycare, accounted for a large part of Charmaine's considerable distress. She did not want her marriage to fall apart. More than anything else, it was this wish that led her to experiment with different remedies. When Charmaine found her cure in flibanserin, she felt like her normal self again: a woman who enjoyed sex and was attracted to her husband. Her attachment to sex was an attachment to her idea of a normal life.

Now there is no shame in wanting to be normal. And to feel abnormal certainly feels off. However, as Lauren Berlant argues in *Cruel Optimism* (2008), there are things one may desire that at the same time provide an obstacle to one's well-being. Berlant explains these kinds of attachments by separating the story I can tell about wanting to be near x , from the emotional habit I have constructed as a condition for having x in my life.³⁸ Certain habits or ideals can get stuck in individuals' heads. For Berlant, the emotional construct follows the fact that x (in this case: sex) is in one's life. This chronology is a crucial, for it shows how such a construct is not bound to x (having sex) in any inevitable or fortified manner. Even so, a desire to lead a 'normal' life becomes a goal for many individuals. If certain desires do not contribute to our well-being, why do we remain invested in them?



The specific nature of an attachment and the assumed causality between an object and a feeling is also stressed and politicized in Sara Ahmed's writings on happiness. Ahmed shows how we tend toward certain objects rather than others when we believe they embody "the good life."³⁹ Both for Ahmed and Berlant, the fantasy or promise of lively, durable intimacy⁴⁰ and marriage⁴¹ are important contributors to that idea of the good life. However, the good life is not always lived.

Sometimes, individuals appear not to dwell in happiness or to live the supposed good life. Sometimes we are confronted with what might be called 'the reality of life' as opposed to the good life fantasy. In reality, sometimes, marriage fails. Sometimes we are not up for it. Passion fades. It is only sometimes, but when those moments arise, Ahmed urges us to attend to bad feelings as well. "Not in order to overcome them but to learn by how we are affected by what comes near, which means achieving a different relationship to all our wanted and unwanted feelings."⁴²

To learn to be affected by what comes near is also to make room for the unhappy. Maybe Charmaine simply does not want sex anymore. But instead of making room for an unwanted feeling or blaming her children for the lost desire, the neurological reductionism offered by Sprout Pharmaceuticals allows Charmaine to blame her unhappiness on the brain.

Of course, this reductionism is not the fault of a single pharmaceutical company, but rather part of a larger system of attachments in which normal life is bound up with expectations of sex, durable intimacy, and lasting passion. Letting go is not always easy. Berlant notes how people "often choose to ride the wave of the system of attachment that they are used to, to syncopate with it, or to be held in a relation of reciprocity, reconciliation, or resignation that does not mean defeat by it."⁴³ To let go of the system of attachment is a risky task. It involves jumping onto another wave in the spirit of flexibility and self-reflection. But, for Berlant, the pain of paying attention pays one back in the form of eloquence; it is "a sound pleasure."⁴⁴

The way in which the acknowledgment of bad feelings—the ones that divert, and wander off from the good life—involves, for Berlant, a pleasure of eloquence reminds us of the call for more words and better articulations in Latour's political epistemology. Where Latour is concerned with scientific knowledge, Berlant speaks out against the ideology of a capitalist and heteronormative ideal of the good life. However, both are focused on finding a way to expand our articulation of reality. Rather than positing a homogenized subject, both in regard to the body in science and to the wishes and demands of culture, theirs is a



shared plea for more words to enable us to describe the diversity of our experiences.

In Charmaine's use of flibanserin, both of these homogenizing tendencies come together. Therefore, the possibility of a language outside scientific or culturally normative frameworks would allow her to relate to her loss of desire in a richer manner. It would perhaps release her from the disorder or help to lighten the burden she experienced marriage to be. With the placement of her loss of desire in the brain, Charmaine also loses the potential for a richer and more articulate version of her experience. She loses the possibility of being affected in different ways. "What happens when the fantasy of the good life starts to fray?" Berlant asks.⁴⁵ Where biomedical neurological reductionism meets a heteronormative attachment to durable intimacy, a medicine is developed to cure abnormality.

The Normal Life

Charmaine is not alone in finding relief in her diagnosis. In a series of interviews that writer Katherine Sharpe conducted with people who take antidepressants, she found that about half responded to the diagnosis of depression with tremendous relief.⁴⁶ Some specifically acknowledged that they took comfort in the biomedical view that facilitated their diagnosis. The concrete physicality of mental states allowed people like Charmaine to reframe their suffering as just a "health issue," enabling them to say, "It's not my fault!"⁴⁷

This attribution of an unwanted feeling to a biological process recalls the traditional separation of mind and body. If it is my faulty brain, then maybe I am not to blame? Charmaine's expression of relief shows how a limited account of neurobiology and a normative account of the good life combine to provide a reductive explanation for a feeling. Charmaine's understanding of her low libido as a simplified health issue reduces it to a normatively and neurologically underpinned dis-order that needs to be put in its right place by way of flibanserin. Thinking back on Foucault's shift in the question that defines modern medicine, the current age of techno-biopower takes control over a different type of subject—a neurological and molecular being.

For Charmaine, the localization of her lacking libido in faulty brain chemistry helped to regain her relation to normalcy. However, in reducing her lost desire to simplified brain chemistries, she lost the possibility to relate to her feeling outside the oppressive and constraining limitations of biomedicine. And while Charmaine resides



comfortably in her filbanserin-assisted version of normalcy, her cure to normality might be less suited to a more unconventional person.

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¹ Kaitlin Menza, "It's Not Female Viagra."

² Nikolas Rose, Joelle Abi-Rached, *Neuro*, 1.

³ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, xviii.

⁴ Rose and Abi-Rached, *Neuro*, 1.

⁵ Menza, "It's Not Female Viagra."

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¹¹ Joana Carvalho and Pedro Nobre 1807; DeRogatis et al. 566; R. Segraves and Terri Woodard 408; Arnow et al. 484. Six out of the eight articles written by psychologists on HSDD that I reviewed for this research reported a conflict of interest and were sponsored by a pharmaceutical company, either Pfizer, Sprout Pharmaceuticals, or Boehringer Ingelheim Pharmaceuticals. All of the studies supported by pharmaceutical companies stress the need for a deeper understanding of HSDD as a neglected area of research (Maserejian et al. 3440; Arnow et al 500; DeRogatis et al. 566; Clayton 305; Kingsberg 817; Thorp and Palacois 1328), and most do so in regard to physiological (Kingsberg 817; Thorp and Palacois 1328) and neurological (Arnow et al. 484; Clayton 305) accounts of sexual desire. The other authors point to the difficulty of clinical (or chemical) treatment following the immeasurability of sexual desire (Maserejian 2446; DeRogatis 566). This shows how, when sexual desire is believed to be based in physiology or neurology, it is considered to be explained fully. The authors who wish to look at HSDD itself and factor in relational or emotional contributors to the loss of desire have not yet found an exhaustive approach.

¹² J. Thorp et al., "Improving Prospects," 1328.

¹³ J. Gayle Beck, Larry E. Beutler, and Mark D. Ackerman, "Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder" 919; R. Segraves and Woodard, "Female Hypoactive Sexual Desire Disorder," 414; Carvalho and Nobre, "Original Research-Psychology," 1813."

¹⁴ Lori Brotto, "The DSM Diagnostic Criteria," 221; Marita McCabe and P. Goldhammer, "Prevalence of Women's Sexual Desire Problems," 1074; Marta Meana, "Elucidating Women's (hetero)sexual Desire," 104.

¹⁵ Thorp et al., "Improving Prospects," 1321.

¹⁶ Brotto" 221; see also M. Ross, *Sex Research and Sex Therapy; A Sociological Analysis of Masters and Johnson*, 2.

¹⁷ Helen Singer Kaplan, "Hypoactive Sexual Desire," 3.

¹⁸ Helen Singer Kaplan, *Womens Sexual Experience*, 3.

¹⁹ Ibid, 4.

²⁰ Ibid, 3.

²¹ This triphasic sexual response cycle, centered on desire, serves as the basis for the categorization of sexual disorders in the DSM. These are clustered as Sexual Desire Disorders, Sexual Arousal Disorders, and Orgasm Disorders. Within this scheme, a malfunctioning in the course of, or the disability of successfully completing, the cycle can become disorders.

²² Sprout Pharmaceuticals, "Sprout Pharmaceuticals Resubmits."

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ John Darrell Van Horn, and Russell A. Poldrack, "Functional MRI," 3.

²⁵ Ibid, 4.

²⁶ Michael D. Lemonick, "The Chemistry of Desire."

²⁷ This hormonal basis for the explanation of sex differences is contested by scholars such as Nelly Oudshoorn and Celia Roberts, pointing to the biological essentialism with which these hormonal categories are fixed. See Oudshoorn *Beyond the Natural Body : An Archeology of Sex Hormones*, 21-23; C. Roberts, "'A Matter of Embodied Fact': Sex Hormones and the History of Bodies," 21. Furthermore, Anne Fausto Sterling already argued for the understanding of sex as a "vast infinitely malleable continuum" in 1993. See Anne Fausto-Sterling, "The Five Sexes," 21. Even so, popular speech and writing still constructs the male/female dichotomy on the basis of testosterone vs. estrogen.

²⁸ This creates the (rather suggestive) situation in which more of what makes women "women" does not get them more aroused: more men in women does.

²⁹ Michael D. Lemonick, "The Chemistry of Desire."



³⁰ William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson, *Human Sexual Inadequacy*, 24.

³¹ *Ibid*, 1.

³² Rose and Abi-Rached, “Birth of Neuromolecular,” 24.

³³ In obvious reference to Foucault’s medical gaze, Rose and Abi-Rached’s neuromolecular gaze stresses the contemporary molecular underpinning of this way of looking. What it takes from Foucault is that such an epistemological shift was made possible through institutional building and, most importantly, how it allows for a new kind of governance. See Foucault, *Birth of the Clinic*, 17. As technological means develop, the possibilities for governance over life itself increase, leading to the necessity of new concepts, myths, and narratives that adequately answer this new and techno-logical society. See Nikolas Rose, *Politics of Life Itself* and Rosi Braidotti, “The politics of Life as Bios/Zoe.”

³⁴ Bruno Latour, “How to Talk about the Body,” 206, 227.

³⁵ *Ibid*, 212.

³⁶ Latour’s call for more words—which includes a risky, brave, and self-reflective attitude—is grounded in his political epistemology, in which science is denied the status of simply subtracting phenomena from the world a view that resonates with his other writings on the social construction of scientific facts. Latour’s “material-semiotic approach” in his Actor-Network Theory (ANT) and the STS tradition is also to a certain extent shared by Donna Haraway. However, in an interview with Lykke et al., Haraway states that she considers other contributors more important in her feminist version of the story of science studies. See Nina Lykke, Randi Markussen, and Finn Olesen, “There Are Always More Going on Than You Thought!: Methodologies as Thinking Technologies. Interview with Donna Haraway,” 39. Rather than staying with Affect Theory or Haraway’s works on the deconstruction of fixed categories, I call upon Latour because his argument against reductionism allows a better entrance into the articulations of a rich bodily capacity.

³⁷ Latour, “How To Talk About the Body,” 227.

³⁸ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 25.

³⁹ Sarah Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 33.

⁴⁰ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 3.

⁴¹ Ahmed, *Promise of Happiness*, 6.

⁴² *Ibid*, 217.

⁴³ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 28.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 123.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 2.

⁴⁶ Katherine Sharpe, *Coming of Age on Zoloft*, 67.

⁴⁷ Kaitlin Menza, “It’s Not Female Viagra.”



Subjectivity in Narrative Space: The Lack of Female Agency in Daniel Defoe's *Roxana*

Christopher Maye

With its revealing character dialogues and strategic plot endings, reading eighteenth-century texts without connecting it to notions of character subjectivity and agency is difficult. While these ideas seem in opposition, is it possible to appear as an agent but actually be a victim in a much larger framework? Principally, an individual can be in control of his or her actions but still be victimized and controlled by social constructs allowing some individual freedom but only in accordance with societal expectations. Allison Case extends this concept in discussing the difference between the male and female voices in narratives; women must assume a heightened form of submissiveness and impotency, and overall, their voices and narratives are either directly or indirectly shaped by men and male expectations of femininity.¹ This observation of the discrepancy between these gendered narrative voices prompts us not only to understand how eighteenth-century English society functioned and what it deemed as acceptable but also to surmise that its delegation of patriarchal power existed in seemingly private textual spaces. With this perspective, it is necessary to view eighteenth-century English women as existing within a confined space where notions of agency are dictated by a hegemonic patriarchal society.

Daniel Defoe's *Roxana The Fortunate Mistress* alludes to these observations through the novel's heroine. While current scholarship primarily views Roxana's supposed self-prescribed prostitution as a form of empowerment, Roxana's femaleness and Defoe's depiction of his protagonist survey diverse but convergent aspects of confinement. The selling of her body connotes a material existence and her seducing men for status and financial security limits her to the male gaze. From a broader perspective, Roxana's actions stem from the very social ideas that characterize the historical ideologies of that time: the commodification of the female body, male domination, and the inability to escape social expectations. In having her continuously determine her next move, Defoe gives Roxana the appearance of an agent, yet I argue she is more accurately a paradigm of Defoe's overarching didacticism and a victim of male dominated social forces.

While Defoe focalizes Roxana's identity as a seductress, there are various moments in the text that indicate a connection between Roxana's



seductiveness and her status as a merchant's daughter. But through this, Defoe's text does not create a female heroine but a product of exchange. In the beginning of the text, Defoe introduces the concept of business:

My Father and Mother being People of better Fashion, than ordinarily the People call'd Refugees at that Time were; and having fled early, while it was easie to secure their Effects, had, before their coming over, remitted considerable Sums of Money, or, *as I remember*, a considerable Value in *French Brandy, Paper, and other Goods*.²

Because Defoe begins Roxana's acquaintance with trade, it suggests a foreshadowing of trade's importance throughout the novel. Through the phrase "*as I remember*," Defoe creates a female character whose memory is founded on notions of worth; since the goods were of a "considerable Value," this suggests a conflation of value about what is worth remembering. Principally, this problematizes Roxana's identity as a character because the text induces readers to view Roxana as an amalgamation of products; even so, she is quite literally a "product" of her education, and the difference in value between French and English products allows Roxana the ability to witness the source of the commodity's power. Yet, in italicizing the word "*French*" and through the quotation "and these selling very much to Advantage here..."³ Defoe places value not on the product itself but on its foreignness to suggest an extrinsic value associated with imported products, signifying the status of the exotic. In part, this connection between the product and Roxana serves to characterize her.

Not only is she a witness to her parents' mercantile success, but through Defoe's design, she is also compelled to assess her own value as a French girl. The text extends this claim in Roxana's statement: "Being French Born, I danc'd, as some say, naturally, lov'd it extremely, and sung well also...it was afterwards some Advantage to me..."⁴ Despite the mentioning of Roxana's English education and customs, Defoe's use and capitalization of the word "Advantage" with Roxana's French qualities strategically links Roxana to "*French Brandy, Paper, and Other Goods*"⁵. Their "Frenchness" proves advantageous, and Defoe appears to conflate the two subjects to allude to an intrinsic relationship and present Roxana as a commodity that is both controlled and contained. This apposition allows for a broader understanding of Roxana's exoticism and how it functions within the text. Felicity Nussbaum opens the concept of exoticism to analyze it historically; in questioning the masculine desire for empire and conquest, Nussbaum states, "Some rather questionable claims have been made that the impulse



for empire is a masculine sexual impulse that can be quelled only by the conquest of territory and peoples.”⁶ Even though Roxana is not exotic in eighteenth-century standards, her status as “foreign” grants her the position as someone to be conquered. Later, Nussbaum claims, “In the logic of empire these formulations imply that for men to satisfy women sexually, they must participate in raiding foreign countries to prove their manliness.”⁷ Because Defoe creates a narrative where a French-born woman serves as his character, Nussbaum’s assertion resonates with the relationship between Defoe and his Roxana. In being a foreign woman, Roxana is a symbol of the “other,” but this otherness allows Roxana to be a valuable and significant means of domination. While Nussbaum primarily dissects the reasoning for eighteenth-century Englishmen’s propensity for imperialism, her analysis does help expand our understanding of control within Defoe’s text as well as Roxana’s teleological role within the text. The ability to control and dominate her reinforces and proves the masculinity to which Nussbaum alludes. Roxana’s existence is more than an object of exchange but also a tool to support the text’s moral premises of virtue. Here, Defoe’s “raiding” comes in the form of authoring a text with a female protagonist or gendered other. In a sense, this male centered perspective of a supposedly female narrative reveals the extent of Defoe’s control. The very fact that he has the ability to penetrate these female spaces underscores and gratifies patriarchal masculinity and its tenet on female propriety. Rather than concretely “[satisfying] women sexually,”⁸ Defoe grants another form of satisfaction in educating English women on what constitutes virtuosity and its counterpart.

After marrying, Roxana’s husband disappears, and she and her children fall into a state of financial and emotional destitution; nevertheless, in this portion of the text, Defoe coalesces Roxana’s economic upbringing and subsequent hardship and brands notions of material and commodity through and onto her body. Ann Kibbie extends this analysis in observing the transformation of capital from the external to the internal:

As she sees her body gradually consuming itself, Roxana despairs: “little remain’d, unless, like one of the pitiful Women of *Jerusalem*, I should eat up my very Children themselves” (50-51). This image of the mother eating her offspring, an act of cannibalism that is also devouring of the self, anticipates the horrific language of consumption that comes to dominate Roxana’s disintegrating narrative.⁹



While Defoe introduces the commodity as a singular object, the text, like Roxana, undergoes a metamorphosis. In exploring Roxana's existence, Kibbie forces readers to visualize how the commodity is no longer a separate entity but a representation of the female body and, from a broader scope, female dependence on men for economic stability within the eighteenth-century. Because marriage was the only definitive source of financial security for eighteenth-century women, Roxana's extreme behavior compels readers to visualize the importance of marriage and thus the benefits associated with the male sex. In turn, Roxana's hyperbolic consumption can be read as a surrogate husband; the absence of an actual husband results in attributing forms of love and dependence on the very thing that a man could offer: sustenance. Thus, after falling into economic disrepair, Roxana's pawning goods for money suggests something further as evidenced in Kibbie's statement: "Pawning is a wasting away of the material self, as is evident when Roxana moves immediately from a description of her changed physical state—'thin, and looking almost like one Starv'd, who was before fat and beautiful.'"¹⁰ Here, Roxana's body begins to embody the material. In stating "I should eat up my very Children themselves,"¹¹ Roxana is unconsciously showcasing the commodity's status as a valuable resource.

The change from Roxana's beginnings as a merchant's daughter to an object raises key issues pertaining to the text as a whole. This change disrupts Roxana's sense of agency within the novel. Despite her later actions of seduction and sexual debauchery, it is clear that these actions stem from past experiences and her victimization within a male-controlled space. As Defoe's novel progresses, she appears to have power over her exploitation..However, the fact that she resorts to self-exploitation after her husband abandons her shows how, while being separate from men, they indirectly control her actions within the text. Additionally, in having a skill set that gives her certain advantages in men's eyes, Roxana is equipped with the ability to be an object of desire. However, as I have argued that Roxana's modes of consumption simultaneously replace and function as her husband, Roxana soon realizes her dependence on material goods and similarly on marriage. The two become organically linked. Kyung Eun Lo's discusses the issue of consumption within the text to argue

If Roxana depends on the close connection between the individual and the world of goods for her survival, she also exploits this marketplace logic by consciously presenting herself as a commodity. When she finally decides to become



the landlord's mistress, she successfully controls her transactions with careful calculations.¹²

Lo's assertion assumes a broader scope of Roxana's position as a commodity to observe the free credit-based system that Defoe's novel projects. As Lo later states, "the language of business dominates the novel, in which terms like 'business,' 'advantage,' 'profit,' and 'loss,' are insistently deployed to describe people and their relationships."¹³ This deduces Defoe's novel into a work where finance and business serve as a means of accurately depicting the novel's characters. Roxana and Amy both act as products and merchants, while Roxana's landlord and the prince serve as recipients of the transaction. While Lo's essay notes the freedom associated with this consumerism, her observation overlooks the oppressive aspects of a consumer-based society and the possible oppression and subjectivity within it. Despite the freedom to sell her body, Roxana is caught within a cycle of materialism and consumerism. In spite of her financial affluence, Roxana continues to consume and be consumed. She is not only an object in terms of her association with the commodity, but she is also a victim of consumerism, positioning her as an object to be obtained through the male gaze. To read Roxana's exploitation of "marketplace logic" and her commodification as self-inflicted¹⁴ is difficult in that such a reading provides a thorough perusal of Roxana, but it does not trace how her self-infliction is male influenced.

In depicting the narrative as a man's report of Roxana's story, Defoe underscores notions of masculine control and Roxana's consequent victimization. The preface states,

If it is not as Beautiful as the Lady herself is reported to be; if it is not as diverting as the Reader can desire, and much more than he can reasonably expect; and if all the most diverting Part of it are not adapted to the Instruction and Improvement of the Reader, the Relator says, it must be from the Defect of his Performance; dressing up the Story in worse Cloaths than the Lady, whose Words he speaks, prepared it for the World.¹⁵

In spite of the fact that the story is meant as a retelling of Roxana's memoir, it is necessary to note that a man is telling it, which questions both Roxana's agency and the narrative's authenticity. Defoe's repetition of "if" calls us to interrogate the story's validity and equates it to a disclaimer in that the Relator discusses the possibility that the story may not live up to fact. The phrases "adapted to the Instruction and Improvement of the Reader" and



“Defect of his Performance” extend this claim by characterizing the Relator as more of an actor performing as a storyteller. As a result, how much control could eighteenth-century and modern readers say Roxana actually has? If Roxana is not in control of her narrative, does she even have agency? Even so, the inherent didacticism in “Instruction” and “Improvement” concomitantly justifies this claim and points to the ways in which eighteenth-century texts were more than narratives by informing women on social and sexual propriety.

This analysis resonates heavily in Alison Case’s observation of female voices in eighteenth-century texts. While Case discusses the concept of the female narrator and male master narrator through Defoe’s *Moll Flanders*, her observation of Defoe’s preface in his earlier novel precedes and overlaps with his later text:

The status of Moll’s narration after such a preface is ambiguous in important ways. While the reader is assured that the actual experiences on which the narrative is based are Moll’s own, the mass of silent emendations to which the preface confesses leaves open the question of how much hand Moll has had in shaping of that experience into a meaningful narrative...¹⁶

Similarly, Roxana’s voice is under the control of a master narrator, which, as Case’s word “shaping” suggests, depicts the extent of Roxana’s position as a female narrator. Her voice is severely limited. As evidenced by the culmination of Roxana’s immoral actions and the terms “Instruction” and “Improvement” in the preface, Defoe’s novel defines virtue for the eighteenth-century woman. Moreover, Defoe’s use of Roxana as the female narrator gives him the ability to “construct a narrator with access to all the tantalizing experience of female deviance.”¹⁷ The novel works as this palimpsest where the reader sees Roxana but also glimpses a much larger and influential male voice. While moving through the novel, Roxana is under the supervision, control, and gaze of Defoe, the master narrator.

Largely, this foregrounds the conflict between male dominance and female subjectivity within Defoe’s *Roxana*. When she ponders whether to sleep with her landlord, Amy lays bare Roxana’s choices in the statement “Your Choice is fair and plain; here you live pleasantly, and in Plenty; or refuse him, and want a Dinner, go in Rags, live in Tears.”¹⁸ Even though Amy’s statement is hyperbolic, she does present a genuine truth. In conjunction with products serving as a proxy husband, the text connects significant



forms of sustenance, here represented through eating and living, to the patriarchy. Roxana has the choice, to decide between two alternate lifestyles. However, the pronoun “him” reveals how the outcome is tied to men. Her fate is dependent on her submission to male desire, and in refusing the male gaze, Roxana would be pulling herself from under patriarchy’s umbrella into ostracism. To live in accordance with male expectations means a life of acceptance as a means of survival within a male-dominated social structure.

When discussing her views on marriage, Roxana discloses such ideas: “That the very Nature of the Marriage-Contract was, in short, nothing but giving up Liberty, Estate, Authority, and every-thing, to the Man, and the Woman was indeed, a meer Woman ever after, that is to say, a Slave.”¹⁹ This idea explains Roxana’s desire to remain unmarried. In singlehood, Roxana finds the ability to operate as an agent. She is in control of both her body and her financial status. Yet, Roxana’s words “Liberty, Estate, Authority, and every-thing,” which exemplify what women must sacrifice when marrying men, is conflicting because these are precisely the things she depends on men to obtain. In juxtaposing Amy’s statement, “Your Choice is plain,”²⁰ with Roxana’s phrase, “nothing but giving up,” I observe that both lifestyles, the wife and the whore, are delegated by a patriarchal influence. By remaining unmarried, Roxana seems to convince herself of her own agency by willingly placing herself on the outside. She mentions that “[she] thought a Woman was a free Agent.”²¹ Yet, because her freedom is restricted to male desires, Roxana’s belief is not an actual but rather an idealized truth.. Similar to the wife, the whore is free from the confines of a direct form of male control but is still governed by man’s solicitous eye.

The novel builds on this observation in Roxana’s testimony: “But, I say, I satisfy’d myself with the surprizing Occasion, that, as it was all irresistible, so it was all lawful; for that Heaven would not suffer us to be punish’d for that which it was not possible for us to avoid.”²² In being “lawful” and “irresistible” along with “not possible for us to avoid,” Defoe presents Roxana’s choices as unavoidable and her immorality as seemingly fatalistic. In essence, for someone who has prostituted herself throughout the novel, this fatalism is the end result. However, Roxana’s quotation proves interesting in that it further articulates women’s lack of choice within eighteenth-century society. While her statement correlates with forms of iniquity, it does provide a larger vantage point of female subjectivity within the text. As Amy previously stated, “Your Choice is fair and plain,”²³ Defoe centers the staticity of Roxana’s predicament.



This perspective of the text and Roxana's function within it compel us to reorient our analysis of the ways in which Roxana performs. While the text does present aspects of Roxana's free movement throughout the plot, I endeavor to examine the ways in which her movement is ascribed to preconceived notions of what eighteenth-century society believed was "plausible" for the female sex. In this sense, Roxana works within, as Caroline Levine discusses, the realms of a gendered whole.²⁴ In *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, Levine evaluates the concept of bounded wholes, both gendered and aesthetic. She states, "For Irigaray and many others, the trouble with form is precisely its embrace of unified wholeness: its willingness to impose boundaries, to imprison, to create inclusions and exclusions."²⁵ In light of Levine's observation, Roxana's femininity joined with her control over her finances exudes a sense of bisexuality or a breaking of the bounded whole. Roxana alludes to this in "that it was my Misfortune to be a Woman, but I was resolv'd it shou'd not be made worse by the Sex; and seeing Liberty seem'd to be the Men's Property, I wou'd be a *Man-Woman*; for as I was born free, I wou'd die so."²⁶ Roxana explicitly mentions the dichotomy between the male and female sex or, as Levine states, "inclusions and exclusions."²⁷ Through Roxana, the reader is able to see the boundaries between male and female expectations and possibilities. However, given Roxana's characterization of "Liberty" as "Men's Property," her understanding of these concepts explains freedom and the state of liberty as essentially material and masculine. Consequently, Roxana is more so a bisexual character who, while retaining aspects of her femininity, continuously navigates male dominated spaces. Yet, through this analysis of Roxana, it is clear she assumes an identity that lies outside of the social tenets of eighteenth-century society. Her idealized identity is seemingly beyond form and patriarchal definitions of femininity

As Carl Jung notes in the chapter "The Importance of Dreams: Approaching the Unconscious" in *Man And His Symbols*,

...it was said that 'every man carries a woman within himself'...This 'feminine' aspect is essentially a certain inferior kind of relatedness to the surroundings...which is kept carefully concealed from others as well as from oneself. In other words, though an individual's visible personality may seem quite normal, he may well be concealing from others—or even from himself—the deplorable condition of 'the woman within.'²⁸



The phrase “deplorable condition” highlights society’s conception of gender as distinct. Its “deplorable[ness]” showcases a uniquely patriarchal desire to separate the masculine and feminine spheres. In addition, the fusion between these two genders would not only disrupt definitions of gender but would also demarcate and destroy various patriarchal constructions. From this, Roxana is more than simply a “*Man-Woman*” but a threat to hegemony. While Roxana’s eventual tragedy serves as a symbol for Defoe’s definition of morality and immorality for women, it also works in constructing and solidifying the boundaries of a gendered whole, in preserving the separation between masculinity and femininity. In conjunction with Levine’s words “boundaries” and “imprison,”²⁹ Defoe strategically illustrates the limitations for the female sex by structuring Roxana’s life as a parabola. She moves in an arch exceeding the “boundaries” of her own sex and then falls. Yet, this movement accentuates the “trouble” that Levine mentions.³⁰ Form consists of boundaries, suggesting that gender itself is simply a construct or a means of patriarchal control. Essentially, Roxana works as a liminal-space character whose very liminality, while at moments pushing the pinnacle of prominent eighteenth-century ideologies, serves to exemplify Defoe’s possible intent: the novel and Roxana are a teaching moment for women not to assume more than their sex. In the end, Defoe stabilizes the hierarchy by showing the misfortune of a “*Man-Woman*” who took on what was possible but not plausible.

What can be said of Roxana or Defoe? While my argument aims to highlight the inherent didacticism within *Roxana*, understanding such didacticism and not aligning this novel with the tradition of educational texts that were prevalent in the eighteenth-century is difficult. As evidenced in Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* and Charlotte Lennox’s *Sophia*, the absence of female virtue indicated an absence in morality, character, and reputation, and would eventually lead to the female character’s demise. While these eighteenth-century writers do not preach what is deemed virtuous or immoral behavior, the ways in which they frame their plots indicate important lessons to be learned and compel readers to understand that the binary between virtue and morality, while seeming tenuous, relies heavily upon the various social tenets in which women were and are held. As Levine mentions the various “inclusions” and “exclusions”³¹ to discuss ideologies pertaining to particular genders, these restrictions reveal a certain anxiety—the need to add structure to something truly nebulous. Therefore, I project that we must observe Roxana’s tale as not singular or spectacular but general. Roxana signifies more than a character but serves as a microcosm because truthfully, her tale is much more than her own. While Defoe draws



an arch to case Roxana's exploits, he is simultaneously tracing the many stories and fates of women who pushed against the very limitations that society had imposed.

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¹ Case, *Plotting Women: Gender and Narration in The Eighteenth- And Nineteenth Century British Novel*, 5-6.

² Defoe, *Roxana: The Fortunate Mistress*, 37.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 39.

⁵ Ibid., 37.

⁶ Nussbaum, *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality, And the Empire in Eighteenth-Century English Narratives*, 3.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Kibbie, "Monstrous Generation: The Birth of Capital in Defoe's *Moll Flanders And Roxana*," 1028.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Defoe, *Roxana: The Fortunate Mistress*, 51.

¹² Lo, "The Pleasures and Perils of Female Consumption in Daniel Defoe's *Roxana*," 266.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.



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- ¹⁵ Defoe, *Roxana: The Fortunate Mistress*, 35.
- ¹⁶ Case, *Plotting Women: Gender and Narration in The Eighteenth- And Nineteenth Century British Novel*, 20.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Defoe, *Roxana: The Fortunate Mistress*, 74.
- ¹⁹ Ibid., 187.
- ²⁰ Ibid., 74.
- ²¹ Ibid., 187.
- ²² Ibid., 105.
- ²³ Ibid., 74.
- ²⁴ Levine, "Whole," 25.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Defoe, *Roxana: The Fortunate Mistress*, 212.
- ²⁷ Levine, "Whole," 25.
- ²⁸ Jung, "The Importance of Dreams: Approaching the Unconscious," 31.
- ²⁹ Levine, "Whole," 25.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Ibid.



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