Beside Our/Selves: Suffering and Agency in Feminist Political Theory

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**Abstract**

Examples of women’s suffering are commonplace in contemporary feminist theory; however, few authors thematize it as an explicit topic. This dissertation fills this gap in the literature by studying the relationship between suffering and women’s political agency. Based on close readings of four representative texts, I posit that suffering is an experience of subjective disruption that can, for different theorists, either antagonize the realization of women’s political agency or contribute to it. The former approach, treating suffering as an antagonist to agency, is by far the more common one. For these authors, suffering must be contained to inaugural stages of a woman’s becoming agentic, or else to those women who are unable to become agents. We see this, for example, in Betty Friedan’s description of “the problem that has no name”, as well as in contemporary feminist theories of relational autonomy. In contrast, we can see in the arguments of Catharine MacKinnon and Susan Stryker a different relationship between suffering and agency. For these theorists, women’s suffering helps them critically understand and take action against the institutions and norms that oppress them, and so to form the basis for their agency as part of a larger feminist political movement. It is in such situations, I conclude, that we can find room for a more inclusive and egalitarian feminist politics, especially one that seeks to address racial hierarchy and white privilege within feminism.

Les illustrations de la souffrance des femmes apparaissent à maintes reprises dans la théorie féministe contemporaine, bien que peu d’auteurs choisissent d’en faire une analyse distincte. Cette dissertation vise à combler ce vide dans la littérature en faisant valoir le lien entre la souffrance d’une part, et d’autre part la capacité des femmes d’agir politiquement. En traitant de près quatre textes représentatifs, je postule que la souffrance constitue une expérience de perturbation subjective qui, du point de vue de nombreux théoriciens, serait susceptible soit de miner la capacité des femmes d’agir politiquement, soit d’y apporter une contribution positive. Traiter la souffrance comme étant préjudiciable à la capacité d’agir est de loin l’approche la plus courante. Selon ceux qui prônent une telle approche, il faudrait contenir la souffrance aux étapes inaugurales par lesquelles une femme devient capable d’agir, ou bien la contenir aux femmes qui ne deviendront jamais capable d’agir. À titre d’exemple nous pensons à la réflexion de Betty Friedan sur « le problème sans nom » ainsi que les théories féministes contemporaines de l’autonomie relationnelle. Par ailleurs, les arguments de Catharine MacKinnon et Susan Stryker établissent un lien très différent entre la souffrance et la capacité d’agir. Selon elles, c’est précisément la souffrance des femmes qui les aide à comprendre d’un œil critique les institutions et les normes qui les oppriment et même à s’y confronter, et ainsi de soutenir leur capacité d’agir au sein d’un
mouvement politique féministe plus large. De telles circonstances nous permettent
d’encadrer une approche politique féministe plus inclusive et égalitaire, en faisant état de
l’hiérarchie raciale et du privilège blanc au sein du féminisme même.


**Preface**

As discussed in greater detail in the Introduction to this thesis, the thematization of suffering and its relationship to agency in feminist political theory constitutes the basis for its contribution to knowledge. The means by which I go about defending the two central claims of this project has also required me to produce original scholarship in the form of new readings of important feminist texts.

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**INTRODUCTION**

For many of its theorists and participants, feminism as a political and theoretical movement has arisen out of women’s experiences. Much of the work of feminist scholarship and activism has centered on bringing women’s experiences to light, developing and critiquing the meanings of those experiences, and using them to challenge the hierarchical system of sex and gender. For these feminists, such acts of articulating and valorizing women's experiences are acts of agency that are necessary for any feminist politics that will follow. Others have denied the possibility of using anything other than experience as the basis for feminist understandings of women's situation. Yet at the same time, many feminists have recognized the inadequacy of these experiences, both as the basis for an understanding of sex/gender hierarchy beyond individual experiences of it and as a means of political movement-building. The first position arises because individuals are not simply extant subjects who experience sex/gender, but rather are creations of that system, and so are limited in what they can experience and how they understand those experiences.¹ The second position arises out of the fraught history of feminism, especially

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as practiced and theorized in North America; because of the increased weight and voice
given to certain women's experiences, from which generalizations about the nature of
women and the feminist program were wrongly made, and that had the effect of
perpetuating the marginalization of women with intersecting oppressions such as race,
class, disability, and geography. If we (as I do) take both claims seriously, then, we end up
at a paradox: women's experience is at once the only suitable basis for feminism and
inadequate to that project.²

² The role of women's experience in feminism is at least implicitly addressed in nearly every feminist text,
given that feminism arose in part from taking women's experiences and their knowledge about those
experiences seriously. For a brief history of women's experiences as a motivating factor in the development of
U.S. feminism, see, Lydia Sargent, "New Left Women and Men: The Honeymoon is Over", in Lydia Sargent, ed.,
Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism (Boston: South End
Press, 1983): xi–xxxi. For elaborations on women's experience as the basis for feminism, including the
paradox it generates, see: Cressida J. Heyes, Line Drawings: Defining Women Through Feminist Practice
(Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2000); Chanda Talpade Mohanty, Feminism without Borders:
Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2003), esp. ch. 4, "Sisterhood,
Coalition, and the Politics of Experience"; Uma Narayan, Dislocating Cultures: Identities, Traditions, and Third-
World Feminism (New York: Routledge, 1997); Joan Scott, “'Experience'”, in Judith Butler and Joan Scott, eds.,
Feminists Theorize the Political (New York: Routledge, 1993): 22–40; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, A Critique of
Postcolonial Reason: Toward a Vanishing History of the Present (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999);
This project takes up this paradox as it relates to a specific kind of women’s experiences, namely, suffering. In so doing it seeks to address the problem of experience as it relates to feminist political agency, and as it is mediated by questions of subjectivity and epistemology. While this project is oriented toward these problems of experience and agency, and the often heated debates over them, its overarching claim is a modest one: suffering is compatible with and can contribute to women’s political agency. To make this claim, I will also defend a second claim, that feminism has often held suffering to be an antagonist of women’s political agency. Despite the centrality of suffering to accounts of women’s experience of sex/gender hierarchy,\(^3\) suffering itself, that is, a concept and


Rubin preliminarily defines a “sex/gender system” as “the set of arrangements by which by which society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied” (34), although later in the text she expands this definition to note that “a full-bodied analysis of women in a single society, or throughout history, must take *everything* into account: evolution of commodity forms in women, systems of land tenure, political arrangements, subsistence technology, and so on” (65). According to Rubin, these social structures build upon some ontological but otherwise undefined sexual needs and they assign people into different sex/gender roles on various bases, including sometimes (but not always) their anatomy. This point, which Judith Butler will echo almost twenty years later in *Bodies That
category of experience, has not often been foregrounded in feminist thought. The first four chapters of this dissertation, then, address four representative feminist works that, while not about suffering per se, place suffering into a certain relationship with agency. Teasing out the relationships between suffering and agency in these four works is how I support the two overarching claims I make in this project. The first two chapters will support the second claim by looking at works by Betty Friedan and Jennifer Nedelsky, respectively; and the third and fourth chapters will support the first claim through analysis of work by Susan

* Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex" (New York: Routledge, 1993), is one that does not assume that biology is the natural basis for gender, but rather that both sexual difference and gender roles are constituted by social systems that then have society-wide repercussions: “sex as we know it—gender identity, sexual desire and fantasy, concepts of childhood—is itself a social product” (Rubin, 39). I have appended “hierarchy” to “sex/gender” (I will also refer to it as the “hierarchical sex/gender system”) because I want to stress that the man–woman distinction, regardless of which kinds of anatomical human beings one assigns to it, nevertheless is premised on a hierarchy between those assigned to “man” and those assigned to “women.” “Any society will have some systematic ways to deal with sex, gender, and babies. Such a system may be sexual egalitarian, at least in theory, or it may be ‘gender stratified,’ as seems to be the case for most or all of the known examples” (Rubin, 40). I will thus also refer to women’s oppression and their marginalization (terms I will generally use interchangeably) as components and consequences of the sex/gender hierarchy, fully recognizing that it also constructs people as women and men. Others later took up Rubin’s language of “sex/gender system”, but often burdened it with more essentialist content than Rubin permitted in “The Traffic in Women”; see, for example, Sandra Harding, “Why Has the Sex/Gender System Become Visible Only Now?”, in Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka, eds., *Discovering Reality: Feminist Perspectives on Epistemology, Metaphysics, Methodology, and Philosophy of Science* (Boston: D. Reidel, 1983): 311–24.
Stryker and Catharine MacKinnon, respectively. In the fifth chapter, I will look at feminist discussions of racial hierarchy and white privilege to argue for the value of spreading suffering, from women marginalized within feminism to those privileged within it, as a means of increasing the agency of both groups.

Given the paucity of discussion by feminists about suffering, I first must define what I mean by that term, and thus what I searched for in the texts I draw upon. I will also specify what I mean by "women’s political agency". Following that, I will situate my argument in the feminist literature about experience and suffering, agency and politics, and epistemology and subjectivity. The Introduction will conclude with an overview of the remainder of the dissertation.

**Suffering: What I mean and Related Concepts**

I understand suffering as a *negative experience of a disruption of one’s own subjectivity*. In this way, I think of suffering as a sensation with two necessary component aspects: (1) negativity and (2) disruption to one’s own agency, or what I will also call “subjective disruption”, “crisis of subjectivity”, and “subjective crisis”. The second aspect is, as we shall see, important to the work of politics, and I will hold it in contradistinction to *subjective integrity*. It is the coincidence of these two aspects, negativity and subjective disruption, that separate out suffering from other phenomena with which it is often grouped, for example: trauma\(^4\), pain, despair, victimization, and unpleasantness (although

\(^4\)There is a vast literature on trauma that I have chosen not to engage with at any length, although as one can see below, I have found it helpful for thinking about the issues this dissertation raises. I have not drawn much on trauma in part because I think that the trauma that trauma-studies scholars deal with is different than
these are all terms that I took as indicators for the possibility that suffering was at work in a given text. It is through aspect (2), subjective disruption, that suffering can play a central role in bringing about the kind of subjective reorientation, both in terms of knowledge and disposition, that is necessary for women’s political agency. Indeed, as we shall see, many feminists have relied on some notion of subjective disruption in their formulations of women’s political agency, although they have not usually included suffering as one of the forms of disruption in their accounts.

what I mean by suffering, or perhaps, is a specific form of suffering. For example, Cathy Caruth, who was central to developing trauma studies, is interested in trauma that operates beneath or outside consciousness: “trauma is suffered in the psyche precisely, it would seem, because it is not directly available to experience.” (Cathy Caruth, Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996], 61.) In contrast, I am interested in experiences of suffering that appear to their experiencers as disruptive, that is, suffering as both an experience of the world as well as an experience of the subjective self in the world.

As a result of their focus, much of the work on trauma, including Caruth’s, addresses the relationship between historical events, such as the Holocaust; issues of memory, both individual and common; and the present struggles to make sense of them: “trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on.” (Caruth, 4.) While I find Caruth’s development of traumatic experience as “experience that is not fully assimilated as it occurs” (Caruth, 5) useful, especially in its disruption of both individual narrative and historical narrative more generally, I also find that her emphasis on unknowability touches closely on the treatment of suffering as inimical to humanity that we see in, for example, Elaine Scarry’s work (which I will discuss below).
My attribution of positive political effects to suffering first depends upon our recognition that not all suffering is bad or in need of elimination, or only tolerable as a “necessary evil”. This runs counter to much received wisdom on suffering, reflected in many popular and academic treatments of the subject. For example, in his *Suffering and Moral Responsibility*, Jamie Mayerfeld asserts that it suffering intrinsically bad and must be eliminated: “We have a prima facie duty to relieve suffering, because suffering is bad and ought not to occur. Suffering is bad...not only for the individual whom it afflicts, but bad from an impersonal point of view. Its occurrence makes the world that much worse.”\(^5\) It is to this arguably commonplace attitude that I will turn, after this brief caveat. In claiming that suffering is not always bad, not always in need of elimination, and potentially productive for feminist politics, I am not trying to redeem the most atrocious sources or forms of women’s suffering, especially rape and other forms of sexual and gendered violence. And I certainly am not trying to present them as something that feminism *should* lead to, or as “necessary evils” for the feminist project. Instead, I understand much of women’s suffering under the hierarchical sex/gender system to be an unavoidable outcome of the violence that constitutes and helps perpetuate that system. In other words, women are going to suffer as long as there is sex/gender hierarchy; the question remains what, if we take this as a starting point, feminism should do *with* and *about* that suffering. As we shall see below, if or when feminism *is* able to minimize certain forms of suffering, it is nevertheless the nature of both human social life and of politics that there will be further

\(^5\) Jamie Mayerfeld, *Suffering and Moral Responsibility* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 111. See also 85–6 for Mayerfeld’s own admission that the intrinsic evil of suffering for the sufferer is only an assertion.
suffering produced. It is this latter kind of suffering that I do not think it either possible or desirable to try to eliminate; nonetheless, I take all forms of suffering to be possible contributors to political agency.

Mayerfeld’s belief in suffering’s intrinsic badness is a belief that is also commonplace in society at large, including in attempts to eliminate suffering from people’s lives. For example, many who have studied the burgeoning happiness industry have noted the ways in which the emphasis on happiness as an assumed social and individual good demands that people be positive, to think positive thoughts and have a positive, even cheerful, outlook on their lives. This insistence on positive thinking is partly meant to help people overcome the suffering in their own lives by changing their orientation toward negative events, even those as serious and painful as, for example, cancer or the death of a loved one. In one particularly horrifying example of this approach, Barbara Ehrenreich notes that the emphasis on “positive thinking” in the pink ribbon industry of support for breast cancer patients has required that patients themselves approach their disease as a life-transforming opportunity instead of a painful, potentially disfiguring and even lethal disease. “In the most extreme characterization, breast cancer is not a problem at all, not even an annoyance—it is a ‘gift,’ deserving of the most heartfelt gratitude.”6 This avoidance of suffering is not only reflective of its assumed intrinsic badness; it also assumes

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suffering’s instrumental badness. It is thus up to each patient to ensure that they approach cancer with a positive attitude in order to improve their prognosis—indeed, to save their own lives. There is no room for suffering or a sense of victimhood, and those who cannot overcome these reactions to realize positivity are effectively held responsible for their own bad outcomes, as well as being a drag on other patients. The most perverse result is that “some women have reported being expelled by their [support] groups when their cancers metastasized and it became clear they would never graduate to the rank of ‘survivor.’”⁷ These women, says Ehrenreich, were treated as threats to the other members’ ability to overcome their own suffering through positive thinking, and so had to be exiled.

The assumed badness of suffering has resulted in the marginalization of displays of suffering from public spaces and interactions. For example, in her account of her grief following the death of her mother, Meagan O’Rourke chronicles the ways in which she felt disallowed from mourning in public. In her memoir, O’Rourke describes the “privatization of grief” in contemporary U.S. society, which exacerbated her grief with a sense of loneliness and isolation from her significant others, at the same time that it left those others, people who genuinely cared about her, without a way of expressing that care.⁸ And when people did engage with O’Rourke’s loss, it was often in an attempt to transmute it from suffering into relief, which only exacerbated her sense of loss: “I found no relief in the worn-out refrain that at least my mother was ‘no longer suffering.’ Mainly, I thought one

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⁷ Ehrenreich, 27.

thing: *My mother is dead, and I want her back.*9 In O'Rourke’s and Ehrenreich’s examples, we can see the assumption of suffering’s badness particularly clearly; though they are not able to affect the underlying sources of the suffering, disease, death and loss, people nevertheless seek to end suffering by changing the sufferers’ responses to those events. As we shall see below, I think this is not only a result of the assumption that suffering is bad, but also a desire to contain suffering, lest its assumed ill effects spread to others.

Despite the popular treatment of suffering of the person bereaved at the loss of a parent, this is an example of suffering that may actually be good. Grief over the loss of a loved one is central to the fact of our necessarily social nature, in addition to our understanding of that fact. We need that suffering to feel, beyond knowing, that we loved that person, and to be able to conceive that there is a part of ourselves that was lost with our loss of them.10 The suffering of grief is the condition of possibility of human life,

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9 O’Rourke, 12.

10 I am reminded here of Bernard Williams’s claim that the regret that results from the resolution of a moral dilemma may actually be a positive sign of our own morality. I think that feelings of grief operate in a similarly revelatory way. See Bernard Williams, *Moral Luck: Philosophical Papers 1973–1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), esp. 3 and 5; and Bernard Williams, “A Critique of Utilitarianism”, in J.J.C. Smart and Bernard Williams, *Utilitarianism: For an Against* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973): 77–150. Bonnie Honig argues that, though William’s “account of moral life stress its unruliness, putting contingency, moral luck, and struggle at the centre of moral theory, and finally focusing considerable attention on the phenomenon of tragic situations—those radically undeniable situations in which there is no right thing to do, in which whatever one does will be horribly, awfully wrong.” (Bonnie Honig, “Difference, Dilemmas, and the Politics of Home”, in Seyla Benhabib, ed., *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the*
including and especially, love and connection with others. As Judith Butler summarizes: “What grief displays... is the thrall in which our relations with others holds us, in ways we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notions of ourselves as autonomous and in control.”\textsuperscript{11} Given the necessarily social nature of human beings and our constitution by others—especially those with whom we are intimately connected—any attempt to end human suffering in the world is an attempt to defy the social ontology of human life. That is, to try to even imagine humans without suffering is in actuality to imagine a non-human life. Butler notes the ways in which attempts to escape suffering necessarily involve attempts to close oneself off from the world; because this is impossible, it always involves the illusion of such closure simultaneous to our enactment of suffering upon those we wish to shut out. Any attempt to overcome suffering does so “at the price of denying its own vulnerability, its dependency, its exposure, where it exploits those very features in others, thereby making those features ‘other to’ itself.”\textsuperscript{12} Thus, not only is

\textit{Boundaries of the Political} [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996], 259). Honig argues that ultimately regret in Williams’s work serves an anti-political purpose of trying to restore the people to the safety of home in which their moral system is not subject to challenge. While I agree with that reading, I also want to point out the value of both regret and grief in demonstrating to the subject the kind of person she believes and desires herself to be, even if circumstances demonstrate the inadequacy of our actual selves, as Honig seems to want regret to do.


\textsuperscript{12} Butler, \textit{Precarious Life}, 41.
suffering good, but attempts to overcome it can become violently enacted fantasies. “Let’s face it”, summarizes Butler. “We’re undone by each other. And if we’re not, we’re missing something.”

**Suffering’s Two Components**

As I stated above, I define suffering as having two parts: negativity and subjective disruption. The first, negativity, is perhaps the most intuitive part of suffering to grasp—indeed, for many who write about suffering, that is all there is to it—even as it remains the most difficult to pin down linguistically. Jamie Mayerfeld, for example, defines an experience of suffering as one of “disagreeable overall feeling,” which is “intrinsically worse than unconsciousness.” Although I do not find disagreeability synonymous with negativity, and certainly inadequate as a definition of suffering, it nevertheless is helpful for thinking around suffering as a negative sensation. Similarly, though (as we shall see shortly) pain and suffering are not equivalent, thinking about pain—or, at least, unwanted pain—is another way of getting at the negativity of suffering. For example, Elaine Scarry describes the aversive response that, according to many who study the topic, is definitive of pain:

> The first, the most essential, aspect of pain is its sheer aversiveness. While other sensations have content that may be positive, neutral, or negative, the very content of pain is itself negation. If to the person in pain it does not feel aversive, and if it does not in turn elicit in that person aversive feelings toward

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14 Mayerfeld, 15.
it, it is not in either philosophical discussions of it or psychological definitions of it called pain.\textsuperscript{15}

I do not find that what Scarry says here about bodily pain applies to all instances of it (there can be experiences of pain that people enjoy and even seek out), but the notion of aversiveness, like that of disagreeability, is one way we can think about suffering. There are other such terms, including unpleasantness, displeasure, and discomfort, that similarly express negativity without being synonymous with it.

What makes suffering distinctive from negativity alone is the second feature: the disruption of subjectivity. It is easy to think of negative experiences, disagreeable feelings, that do not rise to the level of suffering as most people think of it. A stubbed toe, an awkward encounter with a former friend or lover, indigestion, a disappointing meal, and a particularly stultifying lecture or paper are all unpleasant, even unpleasant enough to make us aversive, but they do not necessarily qualify as suffering.\textsuperscript{16} What is required is an intensity of the experience that brings about a qualitative shift from mere displeasure to suffering: what I am calling an experience of the disruption of or crisis in subjectivity. We can see this second feature in an example Mayerfeld uses: Oliver Sacks’s description of Miss R, a Parkinsonian patient:


\textsuperscript{16} This is not to claim that these experiences \textit{cannot} be ones of suffering; anyone who has stubbed their toe severely enough may well suffer, even if briefly, especially if one has a tendency to stub that same toe on the same piece of furniture and becomes deeply frustrated at a lack of adequate proprioception or an ability to remember that that piece of furniture is always there.
Miss R.’s capacity to speak or move, minimal at the best of times, would disappear almost entirely during her severer [oculogyric] crises, although in her greatest extremity she would sometimes call out, in a strange high-pitched voice, perseverative, and palilalic, utterly unlike her husky “normal” whisper: “Doctor, doctor, doctor, doctor... help me, help me, help, help, h’lp, h’lp... I am in terrible pain, I’m so frightened... I’m going to die, I know it, I know it, I know it...” And at other times, if nobody was near, she would whimper to herself, like some small animal caught in a trap. The nature of Miss R.’s pain during her crises was only elucidated later, when speech had become easy: some of it was a local pain associated with extreme opisthotonos, but a large component seemed to be central—diffuse, unlocalizable, of a sudden onset and offset, and inseparably coalesced with feelings of dread and threat, in the severest crises a true angor animi. During exceptionally severe attacks, Miss R.’s face would become flushed, her eyes reddened and protruding, and she would repeat, “It’ll kill me, it’ll kill me, it’ll kill me...” hundreds of times in succession.17

I want to say that Miss R is suffering not merely because she is in pain; nor, contra Mayerfeld, only because her pain is disagreeable. Her expressions of fear and imminent death, her “feelings of dread and threat”, all point to the crisis of subjectivity that Miss R is undergoing as a result of and in addition to her physical pain. We read in the account of Miss R a subject in crisis, confronting a body that antagonizes her and a world in which she may no longer have a place. This crisis is one in which the world does not exist as the subject previously believed that it did, in which her own limitations and construction as a subject are made clear to her. This awareness comes not just from her mortality, but from

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17 Sacks, qtd. in Mayerfeld, 2; italics added.
her constitution by and reliance on people and things in the world that escape her ability to
fully know and control, including the constant capacity of these people and things to betray,
harm, and even destroy her.

In arguing for subjective disruption as a necessary component of suffering, I first
need to clarify how I understand the subject and what it means for it to be disrupted or in
 crisis. I take the subject to be socially constructed, that is, as the product of certain social,
discursive and material relationships, institutions, and structures, rather than pre-existing
them. This construction takes place in and through the sex/gender system (in addition to
other social structures) and produces subjects who are ontologically sexed and gendered.
Sex/gender is ontological in that, “at least for some of us, it constitutes such a core
structure of the self, and of the self–world relation—that its undoing is the self’s undoing.”
18
Unlike many feminists who see the problem of gender as one of oppressive socialization, I
assume that gender constitutes all persons’ subjectivities, leaving no experience, desire, or
affect ungendered.19 Nancy Hirschmann uses “social construction” to express the means by
which the system of gender operates to create subjects rather than acting upon pre-
existing ones: “The idea of social construction is that human beings and their world are in
no sense given or natural but the product of historical configurations of relationships. Our

18 Bonnie Mann, Sovereign Masculinity: Gender Lessons from the War on Terror (Oxford: Oxford University

19 There are, of course, other constitutive hierarchical systems that are similarly constitutive of human
subjects, most notably race, class, and ability. As feminist theorists of intersectionality have shown, this
means that experiences of gender are always racialized, and vice-versa, as are class and ability.
desires, preferences, beliefs, values—indeed, the way in which we see the world and define reality—are all shaped by the particular constellation of personal and institutional social relationships that constitute our individual and collective identities.”

This eliminates the possibility of agency premised simply on liberating an inner self, as has been the goal of many liberal feminists, because,

by suggesting that people are produced through social formations, and not simply limited by them, the idea of social construction thereby calls into question the idea of what is genuine or true to the self and what is false.... Who we are—the “choosing subject”—exists within and is formed by particular contexts; the ideal of the naturalized and unified subject utilized by most freedom theory is thus deeply problematic and simplistically overdrawn.

Despite this fact, the “choosing subject” remains central to academic and popular accounts of freedom and agency, and is arguably the primary way that people in contemporary industrialized societies experience their own actions and those of others, with experiences of suffering being the exception. Revealing the depth and universality of social construction, to be put to politically valuable use, first requires a disruption of experiences of oneself as a choosing subject—something that suffering can do.

Though often conflated with postmodern and poststructural theories of the late twentieth-century, feminists have relied on a wide range of theoretical approaches to

\[20 \text{ Nancy J. Hirschmann, } \textit{The Subject of Liberty: Toward a Feminist Theory of Freedom} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 10.\]

\[21 \text{ Hirschmann, 12. Italics in original.}\]
question the unified subject as a given. Kelly Oliver summarizes the origins of the subject’s deconstruction in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries:

As we know, since Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud, the unified “subject” hangs perilously close between quotation marks that both protect and threaten it. Nietzsche suggests that “the subject” is a fiction of grammar. Marx suggests that it is a historical product. And Freud suggests that it is a construct set up against the unconscious.  

While Oliver focuses on “poststructuralists’ attempts to explode ‘the subject’” that grow out of these earlier approaches, and to locate in them new forms of agency, others have grounded their challenges to subjectivity in Marxist-feminist standpoint theory, in psychoanalysis, and in an ethics of care. “Exploding the subject” into the non-unitary product of social structures has been important for many feminists from a variety of theoretical approaches because, as Oliver observed, the notion of the stable, pre-existing subject is one that serves sex/gender hierarchy. It does so not only by equating subjectivity with maleness, but also by denigrating relationality and embodiment, both of which are feminized.  

But while many feminists have focused on the status of the subject following its explosion, my interest in this project is how to make people of aware of their own  

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constructed natures, and how this awareness can contribute to rather than threaten women’s political agency, understood collectively. This is a challenge because while the subject may be a socially constructed and fragmented product of social structures, as we will see, individuals nevertheless live as though their subjectivity, including their sex and gender, was ontologically given. We experience ourselves as Hirschmann’s “choosing subjects”, and this informs many contemporary political debates. Disabusing ourselves of this notion is important for feminism because it enables people to better understand the nature of sex/gender hierarchy and to better think about how to act to challenge it. In other words, becoming aware of one’s own subjectivity as the product of sex/gender hierarchy is going to contribute to one’s political agency, especially as part of a larger, collective movement.

Thus, despite the value of understanding the subject as constructed, the liberal model of subjectivity still retains a hold on people most of the time, defining how we experience ourselves, including as sexed and gendered persons. Linda Zerilli highlights the tenacity of our settled ways of understanding gender on our practices, and the challenge this poses to feminism; simply criticizing gender as constructed, and subjects as products of that construction, “does nothing to bring particulars into an unexpected, critical relation with each other such that we can see any particular object, not to mention our own activity, anew”. Similarly, Sara Ahmed notes the ways that Second Wave feminist “degendering

\footnote{On the issue of choice and choosing subjectivity to contemporary feminism, see, for example, Michaele L. Ferguson, "Choice Feminism and the Fear of Politics," Perspectives on Politics 8, no. 1 (2010), 247–253.}

\footnote{Linda M. G. Zerilli, Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 34.}
programs” were naïve because they “seemed to underestimate the attachments that govern the reification of gender as an attribute,” and that they “may even seem complicit with the liberal assumption that we can will away power simply through recognizing its force.”

Not only does this problem of tenacity include sex and gender’s social constructedness and thus mutability, but so too does it include our selves as subjects and our own capacity to participate in and change our relationship to sex/gender hierarchy. It is not enough simply to argue for the sexed and gendered subject as socially constructed; it is also important to make people aware of that construction and the opportunities this creates for political action. Given the ontological status that sex and gender have in our lives, as Mann observed above, it is likely that such an awareness will not just disrupt the subject, but that this disruption will be negatively experienced. In this project, I argue that this suffering as a form of subjective disruption is a potentially valuable way that this awareness, and with it political agency, is brought about.

In the passage cited in the previous paragraph, Butler refers to grief as interrupting the “self-conscious account of ourselves”. Following Butler’s lead, of the different approaches to “exploding the subject” discussed above, I have found one useful way we can think of subjective disruption is as an interruption in or challenge to the autobiographical narrative that both produces and constitutes one’s sense of oneself as a subject. Narrative approaches are not the only, or even the only useful, way of thinking about subjectivity as an effect of language, power, or material arrangements. Yet I have chosen to present subjectivity, including subjective integrity and disruption, through her discussion of story-

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**Subjective Integrity**

As Adriana Cavarero observes, “through the unreflecting knowledge of my ‘sense of self’, I know that I have a story and that I consist in this story”.\(^\text{28}\) For Cavarero, this sense of self is this fact of having an autobiographical narrative:

in personal experiences, the narratable self is at once the transcendental subject and the elusive object of all the autobiographical exercises of memory. Subject and object are, moreover, ambiguous terms. It is enough to say that each one of us lives him or herself as his/her own story, without being able to distinguish the I who narrates it from the self who is narrated.\(^\text{29}\)

While we know that we are selves through our narratability, regardless of our story’s contents or of conscious activities of remembering, we know the qualities of that self—who we are—through the contents of our autobiographical tale, what Cavarero refers to as the text of our story.\(^\text{30}\) Much of this autobiography occurs “in the spontaneous narrating structure of memory itself”.\(^\text{31}\) But our own memories are inadequate; our autobiographical

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\(^{28}\) Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, trans. Paul A. Kottman (London: Routledge, 2000), 35. For Cavarero, the constitution of the self by narratability is a transhistorical phenomenon, ontological to persons *qua* persons. I am agnostic about this feature of her theory, but I also do not think that the aspects I am relying on here would be undone if the narratable self turns out to be specific to, say, Western modernity.

\(^{29}\) Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 34. Italics in original.


\(^{31}\) Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 34.
tale can only exist through exposure to the biographies of one’s self received from others. “The relational status of identity indeed always postulates an other as necessary” to tell the story of the self.32 “Autobiography and biography, while being different genres of the story, do not seem to be able to manage without one another within the economy of a common desire.”33 That desire is not just to hear the other’s tale of us told to us, it is, “above all, the unity, in the form of a story, which the tale confers to identity.”34 We desire a coherent story of our selves, “the unity of the self in the form of a story”, which will depend in part on the agreement between our own extant autobiographical tale and others’ biography of us.35

As the self’s narrative develops from the unity of others’ biographies and our own autobiography, our lives come to have meaning for us. The result is the production of a self that is familiar to itself both because of the narrative and because of its capacity for narratability.36 For this narratability to persist, the narrative must be made coherent, and thus the self-narrating memory selectively takes up those observations and stories from others into its own autobiography: “the memory claims to have seen that which was

32 Cavarero, Relating Narratives, 24. This is the element of Cavarero’s account that Butler focuses on; see Judith Butler, Giving an Account of Oneself (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 30–5.

33 Cavarero, Relating Narratives, 37.

34 Cavarero, Relating Narratives, 37.

35 Cavarero, Relating Narratives, 40.

36 Cavarero, Relating Narratives, 35.
instead revealed only through the gaze of another."\textsuperscript{37} Cavarero's description of the coherent and familiar narrative is an apt way to think about subjective disruption's opposite, what I am going to term "subjective integrity". "By bringing together the \textit{auto}, the \textit{bios}, and the \textit{graphein}, the self conquers for itself an absolute unity and self-sufficiency."\textsuperscript{38} Subjective integrity would be, in Cavarero's terms, the satisfaction of the desire for a familiar, coherent story in which there is an alignment of autobiography and biography that enables the I to experience itself as a unified whole with a meaningful and familiar life: a "self-sufficient unity" in Cavarero's terms.

\textit{Subjective Disruption}

Our subjective integrity is also linked with our capacity to see ourselves as certain kinds of actors in the world, which is valuable, as Cavarero argues—but also potentially politically dangerous. According to Bonnie Honig in her discussion of Bernard Williams: "integrity consists in her being the sort of person who refuses or is unable to dissociate herself from her emotions, feelings, principles, or projects even for the sake of a larger moral good."\textsuperscript{39} Williams, Honig summarizes, wants to reassure us that this is the usual form that moral dilemmas take, that he posits an "agency that is not really at risk from the

\textsuperscript{37} Cavarero, \textit{Relating Narratives}, 40.

\textsuperscript{38} Cavarero, \textit{Relating Narratives}, 40. For Cavarero this does not entail a permanent satisfaction of the self's desire for unity, "because she has the sense that she is being deluded" by her memory's own partiality (Cavarero, \textit{Relating Narratives}, 40.)

\textsuperscript{39} Honig, "Politics of Home", 263.
ordinary conflicts in encounters".\textsuperscript{40} For her, in contrast, this promise of integrity is
dangerous and at best illusory, “a phantasmic yearning for a clear, central principle,
commitment or disposition upon which a singular (individual or group) subjectivity can be
grounded and secured.”\textsuperscript{41} The desire to preserve subjective integrity leads to a desire to
exclude experiences that issue strong challenges to a person’s desires, obligations, projects,
and commitments that deeper conflicts may disrupt. The result may be that a person will
“withdraw from the scene of conflict, his integrity intact—shaken, perhaps, but not
stirred”.\textsuperscript{42} Given the illusory nature of integrity, according to Honig, or its dependence upon
our incorporating others’ accounts of us into our autobiographies according to Cavarero,
subjective integrity is more an experience of unity and self-sufficiency than an actual state
of self-sufficiency and unity. This experience masks the fact that “the contents of this text
are necessarily discontinuous”, cobbled together by an untrustworthy memory which
claims others’ stories of the self as its own, and discards information that does not fit into
the story.\textsuperscript{43} As a way of experiencing the self as unified and self-sufficient, subjective
integrity is often expressed as a feeling of autonomy, self-fulfillment, self-satisfaction, and
self-realization; these will play a prominent role in those theories that hold suffering to be
antagonistic to agency that I engage with in this project.

\textsuperscript{40} Honig, "Politics of Home", 272.

\textsuperscript{41} Honig, "Politics of Home", 271.

\textsuperscript{42} Honig, "Politics of Home," 272.

Cavarero also gives us an example of subjective disruption, perhaps the extreme example,
in the case of traumatic amnesia. The unfortunate one who finds that she has forgotten her story does not know who she is, having lost the text of her identity. She nonetheless has no doubt about being a narratable self; or rather she has not forgotten at all that narratability—the self’s unreflective sense for recalling itself—belongs to the existent.\(^44\)

The amnesiac loses the contents of her life’s story, but she retains awareness of her narratability, and thus knows that she is a who, even if not which who. To satisfy her need for an identity, but having lost her autobiography, she must rely entirely on others’ biographies of her. “By making others recount her own story, she is in fact attempting to stitch her narratable self together with the story into which she was constitutively interwoven.”\(^45\) But, Cavarero continues,

until the text regains its original union with the narratability of the self, it indeed takes on that performative valence of which post-modern theory is so fond. That is, the text produces an identity that the forgetful one is forced to take upon herself only externally—without that familiar self-sensing recognition.\(^46\)

We see here both dimensions of subjective integrity that I discussed above, the narrative and the spatial, disrupted: the narrative is broken by the amnesia, and the spatial integrity


of the individual is disrupted by that narrative’s external location to the self. I want both to extend Cavarero’s example of the amnesiac to other experiences of externally adopted stories and the resultant lack of self-sensing recognition, and to claim some political value for them. It is not only the amnesiac that will experience discord between others’ stories of one’s life and one’s own, that there will be some irreconcilable difference between them, or that the internal self and the external world are “out of place” relative to one another. I also do not think that this discord must come only from others’ stories of us. If, as Cavarero claims, the memory automatically and unconsciously incorporates new experiences and new stories from others into an autobiography and thus into the self, what happens when experiences or stories simultaneously are unassimilable into the extant autobiography, yet the memory cannot simply, unconsciously elide from that story? As with the amnesiac, the desire for unity persists, but must go unfulfilled, and the new information will seem alien to the self: subjectivity is disrupted.

Subjective disruption, then, reveals to us the illusory nature of the subjective integrity experienced in the normal course of the memory’s self-narration. It reveals to us the necessarily partial perspective the subject had formed itself upon, and demands accounting for disruptive new information. There are several features of disruption I want

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47 This may also be a disagreement with Cavarero, who seems to worry that “it is above all unity that becomes demonized within the post-modern or post-structural horizon” (Cavarero, Relating Narratives, 70; italics in original), in part because it seems to threaten the possibility of the individual’s uniqueness in the world: “This unity lies precisely in this insubstitutability that persists in time because it continues to present itself in time” (Cavarero, Relating Narratives, 72; italics in original).
to point out now, before moving on to the question of its relationship to agency. First, suffering is only one form that subjective disruption takes; subjective disruption can also be experienced positively, for example, through the thrill of discovery, through sexual pleasure, or in certain religious or spiritual experiences. As I will discuss momentarily, pain is one means by which these positive experiences of disruption can be effected (as well as negative experiences); and for that reason, I distinguish between pain and suffering. The second feature of subjective disruption I want to posit is that there are degrees of disruption, depending on the degree of disjunction between the extant autobiography and the new information that confronts it. As we saw in the example of Miss R or of the amnesiac, the disruption can be so extreme as to make the restoration of coherence impossible. The extant narrative may be lost or simply broken. Alternatively, the outcome of disruption may be restoration of the subject’s integrity, she having either altered the autobiography in light of the new information, or else having discarded it. In light of the subject’s desire for unity, as well as the normativity of subjective integrity that both Honig and Hirschmann allude to, restoration seems the most likely outcome, something with which Cavarero agrees: “even the text that puts into words a biography of discontinuous and fragmentary characters (even in the most radical ‘postmodern’ sense) still ends up unable to flee from the unity, which, listening to the tale with the ear of its desire, is conferred upon it by the narratable self.” Moreover, as we shall see, this restoration of subjective integrity is one way that suffering is made into the antagonist of agency. In such

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48 Cavarero, Relating Narratives, 42.
accounts, suffering has a role to play in the agent’s development, but cannot exist simultaneously to agency.

**Suffering**

Like Cavarero, Judith Butler also uses narrativity to think about the subject, and her description of the outcomes of loss and grief is useful to understand the way that suffering can be a politically valuable experience for its challenge to our previous self-understanding: “I might try to tell a story here about what I am feeling, but it would have to be a story in which the very ‘I’ who seeks to tell the story is stopped.”49 For Butler, this creates the possibility of a new understanding of the subject’s own constitution by her relationship with others:

What grief displays... is the thrall in which our relations with others hold us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control.50

Experiences of suffering such as grief, Butler says, “bind us to others, transport us, undo us, implicate us in lives that are not are [sic] own, irreversibly, if not fatally.”51 This can be socially and psychically good, as in the case of grief; or it can be awful, as in the case of disease or violence. But in both cases the suffering itself is an experience and reminder of

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the ways in which we are worldly and social beings constructed by, through, and for others; a *disruption* of our senses of ourselves and our previously assumed relationship to the world. As we shall see in Chapters 3, 4, and 5 of this project, in addition to revealing or reminding us of the fact of our construction, suffering can also reveal to us the machinations of power that determine (at least partly) our social construction. We can see, briefly, an example of this in Terry Tempest Williams’s “The Clan of the One-Breasted Women”. Through her experiences with breast cancer—her own and those of many of the women in her family—Williams came to understand the ways in which their very bodies were constructed through the U.S. government’s disregard of them during nuclear-weapons testing: “when the Atomic Energy Commission described the country north of the Nevada Test Site as virtually uninhabited desert terrain, my family members were some of the ‘virtual uninhabitants’.” 52 It would obviously be better had that declaration never been made, had that testing never occurred, and had Williams and her family members not had breast cancer. But this does not mean that the suffering is not valuable to Williams’s understanding of and capacity to challenge the U.S. government’s nuclear-weapons policies. Instead, those capacities are born from her suffering: they do not exist despite or from overcoming her experiences.

My understanding of suffering also speaks to recent literatures in social and political theory on phenomena such as “passions”, “affects”, and “emotions”—though I am not sure

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that suffering fits easily into any of those categories. I nevertheless want to draw on the important work this literature has done to expand our thinking about sensation, its relationship to politics, and its opposition to the predominant, masculinist models of personhood and citizenship. For example, out of the multitude of definitions of “emotion” throughout Western history, Leonard Ferry and Rebecca Kingston nevertheless find a “growing consensus” around a three-fold definition: feelings in response to a situation or event, beliefs or judgments about the nature of situation itself, and a normative evaluation of that event or situation.\(^5\) This triad captures the necessity of bodily sensations and cognition that lies at the heart of much contemporary theorizing about emotions, and that I likewise observe as at work in experiences of suffering. One important difference, however, between suffering as I understand it and Ferry and Kingston’s conception of emotions is that suffering challenges the basis by which we make judgments and normative evaluations, insofar as it disrupts the narratives and meanings on which they are based. However, work like Ferry and Kingston’s is still valuable, because it points to the ways in which emotions simultaneously challenge the rational model of citizenship, even as they are necessary parts of decision-making processes.

Sharon Krause also observes that “psychologists typically define affect capaciously to include all mental states that take the form of feeling as opposed to mere belief or understanding. Specific emotions such as anger, sadness, and joy are forms of affect, but so

are desires, aversion, and attachments."\textsuperscript{54} In particular, Krause highlights "affects as concerns", or "passions", which "provide important conditions for practical judgment and deliberation in the sense that the latter always transpire within particular horizons of concern."\textsuperscript{55} The first quality that Krause observes, affects’ opposition to belief or understanding, has resulted in the formers’ marginalization in decision-making processes. This marginalization is also gendered, as Sara Ahmed summarizes:

It is important that the word “passion” and the word “passive” share the same root in the Latin word for “suffering” (\textit{passio}). To be passive is to be enacted upon, as a negation that is already felt as suffering. The fear of passivity is tied to the fear of emotionality, in which weakness is defined in terms of a tendency to be shaped by others.... The association between passion and passivity is instructive. It works as a reminder of how “emotion” has been viewed as “beneath” the faculties of thought and reason. To be emotional is to have one’s judgement affected: it is to be reactive rather than active, dependent rather than autonomous. Feminist philosophers have shown us how the subordination of emotions also works to subordinate the feminine and the body. Emotions are associated with women, who are represented as “closer” to nature, ruled by appetite, and less able to transcend the body through thought, will, and judgement.\textsuperscript{56}


\textsuperscript{55} Krause, 8.

The equation of emotions with femininity has meant that feminists have taken up much of the work recuperating them, arguing for their value and necessity to human life. I seek to extend this argument to suffering, perhaps a difficult task given the understandable aversion people have to it.

For Ahmed, emotions are also part of the means by which subjects come to be constructed: “emotions are not ‘in’ either the individual or the social, but produce the very surface and boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects.” This is true for pain, too, which Ahmed includes among other emotions. “The affectivity of pain is crucial to the forming of the body as both a material and lived entity”, because “pain involves the violation or transgression of the border between inside and outside, and it is through this transgression that I feel the border in the first place.” This border is made manifest not just when I feel pain, and it is not just the border of my body that pain delineates; Ahmed also observes how encountering others’ pain effects a difference between us that we may wish to overcome or to maintain. In the former case, especially, “empathy sustains the very difference that it may seek to overcome: empathy remains a ‘wish feeling’, in which subjects ‘feel’ something other than what another feels in the very moment of imagining they could feel what another feels.” Despite the impossibility of feeling another’s pain, it still has an effect on us:

57 Ahmed, Cultural Politics, 10.

58 Ahmed, Cultural Politics, 24; 27.

59 Ahmed, Cultural Politics, 30.
The impossibility of feeling the pain of others does not mean that the pain is simply theirs, or that their pain has nothing to do with me.... I realise my pain—it seems so there—is unliveable to others, thrown as they are into a different bodily world.... In other words, the ungraspability of my own pain is brought to the surface by the ungraspability of the pain of others.... In the face of the otherness of my own pain, I am undone, before her, and for her.\textsuperscript{60}

This brings us to the first feature of suffering as I define it: negativity. Thus, though pain and suffering are not equivalent, thinking about pain—or, at least, unwanted pain—is another way of getting at the negative and disruptive aspects of suffering.

Given the qualities I have attributed to suffering, it is not difficult to see how suffering could also be seen as a state of being in which people are trapped and from which they must escape if they are to resume being subjects, including if they are to have any agency. This treatment of suffering is related to its conflation with victimization on the one hand, and the conflation of suffering with object-status and womanhood that Ahmed observes. This return to a state of passivity is particularly clear in Elaine Scarry’s discussion of pain:

As the body breaks down, it becomes increasingly the object of attention, usurping the place of all other objects, so that finally, in very very old and sick people, the world may only exist only in a circle two feet out from themselves; the exclusive content of perception and speech may become

\textsuperscript{60} Ahmed, \textit{Cultural Politics}, 30–1.
what was eaten, the problems of excreting, the progress of pains, the comfort or discomfort of a particular chair or bed. 61

For Scarry, this destruction of the world is an inevitable and essential fact of pain that eliminates the sufferer qua (formerly) social subject and agent. 62 As I read it, however, Scarry has not uncovered some truth about pain itself, but instead is simply describing how society already treats people in pain as non-subjects, most notably the elderly and ill. As such, she is only reproducing the very processes that lead to the making of ill and elderly people into our conceptions of them. This is particularly troubling, because it then deprives the ill and elderly of any capacity and opportunity to participate either in making meaning of their afflictions, or from the intimate and public political processes that determine their treatment. This is troublingly ableist and ageist and, given the historical link between women and embodiment in contrast to men, sexist. It can, moreover, have disastrous and inhumane consequences for public policymaking. 63

61 Scarry, 32–3.

62 This is similar to Caruth’s approach to trauma as inassimilable to individual experience, and thus at the boundary of human understanding, though Caruth does not position trauma as a threat to human sociality and agency as Scarry does.

63 Iris Marion Young provides one example from the state of Oregon, which decided not to cover certain benefits for persons with disabilities because respondents to a poll argued that they should be excluded, since if they were disabled they would “rather be dead” (Iris Marion Young, “Asymmetrical Reciprocity: On Moral Respect, Wonder, and Enlarged Thought”, Constellations 3, no. 3 [Jan 1997], 340–63.). This case is especially apt when juxtaposed to Scarry’s assertion that “physical pain always mimes death” (Scarry, 31).
There is more going on in Scarry’s take on pain that is politically problematic (e.g.,
the assumed opposition between bodies and civilization, the assumption that personhood
rests on the capacity to extend oneself into the world, the treatment of torture and war as
the paradigmatic instances of bodily pain) than I can cover here. I do, however, want to
discuss one additional passage, because it is instructive of what political work I think the
treatment of suffering as a threat to the human does. For Scarry, while war is a exemplar of
the puzzle of pain—somehow it is both overwhelming for those in pain, but it is impossible
to experience for those nearby—military service is also baffling because she believes it
rests on the voluntary submission to injury, pain, and death. This puzzle cannot, moreover,
be solved through recourse to the political nature of all bodies: “But the fact that the human
body is political in peace as well as in war... does not mean that the body–state relation is
in the two conditions continuous. The nature of that relation in ordinary life, far from
normalizing what occurs in war, makes compellingly visible by contrast the exceptional
nature of going to war.” (112) Again, here we have claims about the nature of pain as an
extraordinary state of being, lying in contrast to the normalcy of painless life, serving to
disavow the violence and pain on which peacetime and its physical comforts are premised.
This peacetime violence includes the penal system, what Scarry refers to as the “direct
imposition of the state on the offender’s body and the separation of that unpolitical or
uncivil presence from contact with the citizens” (111); as well as all the private forms of
violence that go unprosecuted or even condoned by the state; and finally those forms of
violence, like wage-labor, proletarianization, and undocumented migration, that are not
usually categorized as violence. Finally, it is only by ignoring these other forms of
“peacetime violence” that Scarry is able to call military service “agreed to” rather than
structurally compelled, and to find it “remarkable, genuinely awesome.” (112) What Scarry is doing in her assumption of war’s exceptionality and the remarkability of military service is partly to ignore the suffering and violence of everyday life, especially for the classes who tend to join the military and for whom military service may be a rational means of escape. But she is also separating out the sufferers, in this case members of the military, from the larger system of which military service is a part and in which the violence, injuries, and pains of war are complicit. This is an example of the containment of suffering and its potential for disruption that we see, too, in feminist accounts of suffering as antagonistic to agency. Scarry’s treatment of pain as a discontinuous with the agency of those who join the military effects a bifurcation of the soldier’s life: all the agency and none of the pain are prior to going to war, all the pain and no agency are afterward. This narrows the kinds of questions that we tend to ask, for there is no need to enquire who is joining the military or why, because it is agreed to, nor is there any need to engage with injured veterans, because their pain renders them aphasic.

As we will see below, I think this way of thinking of suffering is especially important for and prevalent in feminist approaches to the topic. For such versions of feminism, suffering is the inaugural state that demands feminism and to which feminism responds by helping the women in question overcome their suffering into full, agentic personhood. However, just like Scarry’s approach to war, so too does this approach to women’s suffering ignore the larger ways in which that suffering is essential to the entire system of gender, with both its good (for some) and bad (for many) consequences. Such efforts to contain the disruptive effects of suffering have allowed the perpetuation of hierarchies within gender, including the perpetuation and even licensing of continued violence and
marginalization of certain classes of women. What is needed to counter that is a different approach to suffering that does not assume that it is a state that excludes the possibility of agency and subjectivity, but instead seeks to overcome that way of thinking and produce new possibilities for agency through and despite suffering.

Despite my attention to both Ahmed’s and Scarry’s accounts of bodily pain, my insistence on the combination of subjectivity in crisis and negativity as components of suffering leads me to separate bodily pain from suffering. As I base this separation in part on the fact that bodily pain is not inimical to either subjective integrity or pleasure, it also enables us to consider the possibility of disrupted subjectivity without negativity. For example, one purpose of pain in Christian practices of self-mortification or in sadomasochistic sex is the annihilation of the self, an experience that many practitioners of either often describe in pleasurable, even ecstatic terms. As the literatures on different religious and sexual practices indicate, the whip is not only a tool for punishment, but can also bring one closer to another entity, whether divine or intimately human. Niklaus Largier, in his history of flogging, describes its results in language strikingly similar to that which Scarry uses to describes all bodily pain, but absent her assumption of necessary aversiveness and undesirability: “erotic and spiritual torture signify more than a prayer or declaration of love. In all these cases, the boundary of what is utterable becomes the basis of a deed that consists in actualizing something that words cannot reach—something on which words run aground.”64 What words cannot effect is the elimination, at least

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temporarily, of the subject and its transformation into an object for the use of another, either God or a lover, “the beloved to whom she will submit.”

Despite the pain they may feel, it strikes me that those who engage in erotic flagellation have sensations that are categorically different than those, say, who are whipped as punishment, or for people like Miss R above, whose pain is the result of disease.

Both constituents of suffering are subjective in nature; that is, there are no objective conditions that determine whether a person is suffering. My definition of suffering is thus different from either harm or victimization, two other concepts with which it is often linked and even conflated (and that, again, I shall look for as potential indicators of suffering in the texts I read for this project). Although suffering often occurs because of victimization or erotic practices, see Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 31–87; Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 47–53; and Tania Modleski, *Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a “Postfeminist Age“* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 145–58. For Pat Califia, by contrast, BDSM practices are not disruptive of the self, but rather are the objects of a choosing subject that mark its success; see Califia, *Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism* (Berkeley, Calif.: Cleis Press, 1997).

65 Largier, 39.

Leo Bersani believes that this loss of the self inheres in many sexual activities, especially sex between men, and that the attempts of feminists like Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin to overcome it are attempts to purge that which is valuable about sexuality (In addition to Bersani and Phillips, see also Leo Bersani, *Is the Rectum a Grave?* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009], 3–30). However, as Tania Modleski comments, this claim ignores the power relationships between sexual partners that structures all heterosexual sex (and much homosexual sex, too) that trouble the feminists Bersani criticizes (Modleski, 136–52).
harm, and although I will touch on both of these latter two concepts throughout this project, they can occur despite an absence of suffering or even awareness of the person in question. Similarly, people can suffer despite the absence of either harm or victimization; people may even suffer from acts that actually benefit them. For this reason, suffering poses a different set of theoretical and political challenges than either harm or victimization.

The distinction between harm, victimization, and suffering brings up questions of other agents, their intentions, and responsibility for the harmful or victimizing actions. These are questions that I wish, for the most part, to avoid. I do not differentiate between suffering that comes about because of another’s actions or that which comes about through forces of nature, such as disease or disaster, just as I do not differentiate between suffering from experiences of one’s own pain and that which results from the pain or loss of another. My reasons for making suffering as capacious a category as possible are several. First, given the two facets of experiences of suffering that I use to define it, it is not clear on what basis such a distinction could be made. While torture, grief and the pain of disease may well be different kinds, forms, or experiences of suffering, insofar as all are negative experiences of the limitations of one’s subjectivity, they are all experiences of suffering. Second, it is unclear on what basis we should make such distinctions as anthropogenic/natural, intentional/unintentional, happening to oneself/happening to another. As Butler makes clear, it is exactly the separation between self and other that grief and other forms of suffering call into question. And I think that defining suffering more generally is useful for breaking down other such distinctions. For example, while it is tempting to treat disease as a natural occurrence, doing so not only reifies the body, it also mystifies the social
processes that are responsible for many diseases, including cancer, as we saw above in the example of Terry Tempest Williams. The same is true of natural disasters, which as many have pointed out are always also political disasters. Finally, and related to the previous point, the artificiality of these distinctions is not politically innocent. They serve important political work in creating categories of victims and perpetrators, the responsible and the innocent, which let the rest of us too easily off the hook, despite our complicity in the systematic perpetuation of those problems.

"Women’s political agency"

"Agency" most often refers to the capacity of a given person to intentionally engage in a chosen action; I have appended “political” to the term in order to get at something


more specific than simply the whole of human capacity to act, or even all actions women can perform under conditions of oppression.⁶⁸ Women’s political agency, for the purposes of this project, is *their capacity to act in concert to undermine, challenge, and ultimately change or (even) destroy the hierarchical sex/gender system that constitutes and oppresses them as women.*⁶⁹ As I understand it, this capacity is always a collective and shared endeavor, one that can only ever occur through collaboration with other persons, especially (but not exclusively) women who are likewise constructed by the sex/gender system. It also requires that the bounds of the collective, its conceptions of sex/gender hierarchy, and its proposed actions be contestable by members and non-members alike. Because I want to characterize it as collective, women’s political agency as I understand it depends not only on their capacity to challenge sex/gender system, but also to challenge their fellow feminists’ understanding of sex/gender hierarchy, the nature of “women” as an identity, and the means by which women are oppressed. This better enables women to

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⁶⁸ According to Carisa Showden, agency is a combination of autonomy and freedom that enables “women’s self-conscious resistance to sexist gender norms”, which leads her to surmise that “agency is thus better thought of as a dynamic expression of pieces of the subject rather than being conflated with subjectivity”. (Carisa R. Showden, *The Choices Women Make: Agency in Domestic Violence, Assisted Reproduction, and Sex Work* [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011], xiv; 13.)

⁶⁹ In this sense, women’s political agency is feminist, and I will use “women’s political agency” and “feminist political agency” interchangeably, though in so doing I do not mean to assume that all women are feminists, or that the only form of political agency that women can have is feminist in the sense of being directly primarily at challenging the sex/gender hierarchy.
collaborate on shared actions by starting from a shared, yet always contestable, understanding of sex/gender hierarchy.

The political aspect to agency as I am using it in this project, then, is twofold. First, drawing on the work of Sheldon Wolin, women’s agency in feminism is political because it deals “with subjects of common concern, and because all of the members [are] implicated in a common life.”  

70 The second, evident in Wolin’s work as well as that of later agonistic feminists like Bonnie Honig, is that agency is political in the sense that “the task of defining what is political is a continual one.”  

71 In feminism, this means that, as Honig says, “nothing is ontologically protected from politicization, that nothing is necessarily or naturally or ontologically not political.”  

72 Part of women’s political agency, then, is to politicize that which had been seen either as not political, or not of common concern for feminism.

My conception of women’s political agency differs from more individualistic understandings of agency that are interested more in women’s capacity to make choices and undertake actions in their own lives. For Carisa Showden agency is primarily directed at the individual’s life; the goal of an agency-oriented politics is “to make both possible and


71 Wolin, 11.

desirable a life plan that is open to new experiences and possibilities".\textsuperscript{73} This means that agency only “additionally contains a self-reflective, critical consciousness about the productive workings of power”, but that it explicitly eschews “the questions of collective political struggles to transform society.”\textsuperscript{74} Showden hints at a link between women’s capacity for agency in their own lives and their political agency, though the critical consciousness of power; thus the issues of individual agency and political agency are not separate and I do not want to claim any greater importance for the latter over the former. However, my interest in this project is in the relationship between critical consciousness and political agency.

Despite understanding agency as collective, I nevertheless want to persist in my use of “individual agency”, and to claim that individuals can have more or less agency. In part, this is short-hand for saying that the collective feminist agent has more or less agency; but it is also a means of saying that the individual has more or less capacity to participate in that collective agency, both in shaping its understandings and goals, and in helping to bring about those goals. Because participation entails shared action, I also want to think of agency as the capacity to be acted upon and changed by others’ participation; especially important is the capacity for change to one’s understanding of sex/gender hierarchy and the actions one wants to take to challenge. This has to do with the “critical consciousness” that Showden discusses. In placing individuals’ experiences, especially their suffering, into the

\textsuperscript{73} Showden, 2. See also Angela Campbell, \textit{Sister Wives, Surrogates, and Sex Workers: Outlaws by Choice?} (Farnham, U.K.: Ashgate, 2013).

\textsuperscript{74} Showden, 2; 9.
context of collective agency instead of individual agency, the critical consciousness—which Showden places as secondary in the context of individuals’ agency over their own lives—become more central. Being acted upon by others’ experiences enables one to come to a better critical understanding of sex/gender hierarchy and proposed actions to challenge it.

In characterizing individuals’ agency as participation in a collective feminist agency, then, I am pointing to two aspects of agency that we can attach to the individual as part of the collective. The first is individual women’s capacity to know and effect challenges to sex/gender hierarchy, and to do so with minimal unforeseen consequences that would reproduce sex/gender and other hierarchies. The second is their capacity to challenge feminist understanding of sex/gender hierarchy and the challenges they propose to challenge sex/gender hierarchy. Ignorance, both willful and not, of aspects of sex/gender hierarchy—including intersections with other hierarchies and unforeseen, hierarchy-reproducing consequences of actions—are threats to the first; silencing, marginalization, appropriation, and exclusion are threats to the second. Insofar as the two are related, because preventing people from meaningfully shaping feminism produces ignorance and permits sex/gender hierarchy to be reproduced, threats to the second are also threats to the first. This also means that hierarchies within feminism that prevent full participation decrease both the agency of dominant and marginalized women, even if the former still have more agency than the latter.

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75 Showden also includes something like a requirement to minimize unforeseen consequences in her conception of individual agency: “the primary criterion for whether one is an agent must be whether one’s actions foreclose other possibilities.” (Showden, xiii.)
This conception of agency and its relationship to individuals and their experiences and understandings is in part a way of reconciling the relationship between social-constructivist models of subjectivity and the desire for a collective agency built on a shared-yet-revisable understanding of sex/gender hierarchy. Donna Haraway summarizes this challenge as

76 Drawing on Rubin’s “The Traffic in Women”, the idea of a sex/gender system also has implications for feminism and its constituencies:

We are not only oppressed as women; we are oppressed by having to be women—or men as the case may be. I personally feel that the feminist movement must dream of even more than the elimination of the oppression of women. It must dream of the elimination of obligatory sexualities and sex roles. The dream I find most compelling is one of an androgynous and genderless (though not sexless) society, in which one’s sexual anatomy is irrelevant to who one is, what one does, and with whom one makes love. (Rubin, 61)

One implication of Rubin’s empirical work in “The Traffic in Women”, as well as the normative/political ends to which she directs it in this passage, is that “women” is not a transhistorical category, but that there are others who occupy positions of alterity in a sex/gender hierarchy, including in our own, current hierarchy. In contemporary society, these include gay, lesbian, and bisexual people; transgender and other non-gender-conforming persons; sex workers; unemployed and working poor men; and male prisoners (see, for example, Jeannie Suk, "Redistributing Rape", American Criminal Law Review 48 [2011], 111–19). What I would argue (contra Rubin’s argument in her later work, most notably “Thinking Sex”, in Rubin, Deviations, 137–81) is that these oppressions take place through feminization. That is, it is not just that, say, gay men or transgender people are oppressed as outside heterosexuality or a gender binary, respectively. Instead, their oppression often occurs through their denial of normative masculinity and their relegation to femininity. This is at work, for example, in the rape of transgender teen Brandon Teena, which Judith Halberstam describes as an act that “properly returned Brandon to the [female] body he denied.” (Judith Halberstam. In a Queer Time and Place:
How to have *simultaneously* an account of radical historical contingency for all knowledge claims and knowing subjects, a critical practice for recognizing our own ‘semiotic technologies’ for making meanings, *and* a non-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a ‘real’ world, one that can be partially shared and friendly to earth-wide projects of finite freedom, adequate material abundance, modest meaning in suffering, and limited happiness.... We need the power of modern critical theories of how meanings and bodies get made, not in order to deny meaning and bodies, but in order to live in meanings and bodies that have a chance for a future.\(^77\)

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*Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* [New York: NYU Press, 2005], 66.) Thus, for transgender people, oppression is more than just the product of a gender *binary*, it is also the product of a binary in which the two poles are hierarchically related to one another, and in which all but a select few are forced into the lower pole, and often kept there violently. This would expand on Talia Mae Bettcher’s claim that it is only male-to-female trans people who are vulnerable to female oppression (Talia Mae Bettcher, “Trapped in the Wrong Theory: Rethinking Trans Oppression and Resistance”, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 39, no. 2 [Winter 2014], 383–406). Thus while I retain the use of the language of “women” and “female”, much of what I argue in this project could likewise be applied to other feminized persons.

Haraway is building on feminist standpoint theorists’ call for a successor to both the falsely universalized “majority theories” of modernity, and “a postmodern insistence on irreducible difference and radical multiplicity of local knowledges.” For example, Nancy Hartsock believes that, “at their worst, postmodernist theories merely recapitulate the effects of Enlightenment theories—theories that deny marginalized people the right to participate in defining the terms of their interaction with people in the mainstream.”

78 Haraway, 187.

79 Hartsock, 191. The rise of postmodernism is not just dangerous for marginalized people, Hartsock claims, it is also suspect:

Somehow it seems highly suspicious that it is at this moment in history, when so many groups are engaged in ‘nationalisms’ which involve redefinition of the marginalized Others, that doubt arises in the academy about the nature of the “subject,” about the possibilities for a general theory which can describe the world, about historical “progress.” Why is it, exactly at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subject rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subject becomes “problematic”? Just when we are forming our own theories about the world, uncertainty emerges about whether the world can be adequately theorized? Just when we are talking about the changes we want, ideas of progress and the possibility of “meaningfully” organizing human society become suspect? And why is it only now that critiques are made of the will to power inherent in the effort to create theory? I contend that these intellectual moves are no accident (but no conspiracy either). (Hartsock, 196)

Ania Loomba engages with Hartsock’s worries about postmodernism and suspicions about its timing in the context of post colonialism. She calls for ways of thinking about “split and agonistic subjectivity” at the same time that “we cannot abandon thinking about capitalism altogether.” (Ania Loomba, Colonialism/Postcolonialism [Routledge, 1998], 247; 250. Italics in original.) For similar worries about the effects of postmodern theories on Third World women, especially the appropriation of her own work by postmodern feminists, see Mohanty, ch. 9.
There is a risk that the postmodern challenge to the modern subject represents a threat to the knowledge and agency of marginalized groups, and that it will permit the dominant groups to continue their politics-as-usual. The solution, Hartsock counters, is “to develop our understanding of difference by creating a situation in which hitherto marginalized groups can name themselves, speak for themselves, and participate in defining the terms of interaction, a situation in which we can construct an understanding of the world that is sensitive to difference.”80 I find that suffering, including its spread across feminism, can create just such a situation.

In this dissertation, then, I will argue that suffering can help remedy the two threats to women’s political agency that I just outlined; I will also show that those theorists who limit suffering to an antagonistic relationship to women’s agency will end up reproducing those threats. These arguments build on and challenge those accounts of subjectivity that I discussed above. I want to return briefly, then, to Cavarero’s discussion of storytelling and its production of subjectivity to relate subjective integrity to agency and sex/gender hierarchy. This will enable us to see how, within a theory that takes subjectivity as a product of language rather than as a given, subjective disruption like suffering can actually contribute to agency.

*Political Agency and Subjective Integrity*

Recall that, for Cavarero, each individual knows that she is narratable, and that she knows others to be other individuals because she knows them to be narratable, too. But it

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80 Hartsock, 189.
is not simply that we know the other to be narratable; we also know that their story is
unique, different from our own—even if we do not know the specifics of the story that differ
from ours and everyone else’s. “The other always has a life-story and is a narratable
identity whose uniqueness also consists, above all, in this story.... We will therefore say not
only that who appears to us is shown to be unique in corporal form and sound of voice, but
that this who also already comes to us perceptibly as a narratable self with a unique
story.” 81 This uniqueness is also related to unity, Cavarero says, as “from the beginning
uniqueness announces and promises to identity a unity that the self is not likely to
renounce.” 82 As we shall see in this section, through their uniqueness, subjects’ unity in the
form of their narrative self-understanding and familiarity makes possible political agency.

Cavarero, modifying Arendt, sees the revelation of the unique who of the narratable
self as taking place in the political sphere, even as those self-revealing actions, performed
in front of others who can narrate them back to him, constitute politics itself. Thus politics
is “the interactive space for exhibiting [one’s] uniqueness”, and the individual, “performing
actions in a shared political space, reveals who he to his peers. The life-story that results
from these actions corresponds with a specifically human existence in so far as it is
political.” 83 Thus the capacity to engage in politics is in part dependent on access to the
interactive space of politics, but it is also dependent upon the capacity to formulate oneself

81 Cavarero, Relating Narratives, 34. Italics in original.

82 Cavarero, Relating Narratives, 37.

83 Cavarero, Relating Narratives, 57.
into a unique unity. Thus, the problem of the amnesiac is not just the self-alienation she experiences by having only a biography but not an autobiography, it is also that this lack of memory means she cannot project herself forward as a unique unity: “The identity that materializes in a life-story has no future that is properly its own, if it has no past in the present of its memory.” She cannot act as herself because that self is disrupted. In the language I am adopting in this project, Cavarero postulates a relationship between political agency and subjective integrity, insofar as subjective integrity—the sense of a unique self that can be revealed—is necessary for political, self-revealing action; but insofar as access to the scene of interaction is one of the means by which we display that self for others, who then repeat our biography back to us, politics is itself a means of coming to have subjective integrity.

Turning to the question of sex and gender, Cavarero observes that it is often the case that a woman “has had no public scene of reciprocal and interactive exhibition.... As happens with many women in Italy (and elsewhere), [she] has probably had the domestic scene as the setting for her existence.” This has had negative effects on women’s capacity to develop themselves as unique persons, instead tying them to the social roles they play:

For women, the absence of an interactive scene, where uniqueness can be exhibited, is historically accompanied by their constitutive estrangement from representations of the subject, which rule in the patriarchal symbolic order.... Whether on the level of expression or on the level of representation, women find themselves trapped between a double powerlessness that

84 Cavarero, Relating Narratives, 37.

85 Cavarero, Relating Narratives, 57.
concerns both *uniqueness* and *quality*. In other words, for women—in addition to the general absence of political spaces where each human being can show to others who she or he is—there is the pervasiveness of a symbolic order where the androgynous subject is what defines *what* they are: mothers, wives, care-givers, bodies to be enjoyed... the list goes on.\(^8^6\)

For Cavarero, then, women’s lack of access to a public, political arena doubly denies them political agency by preventing the formation of a life-story that they can then project forward—so the woman is like the amnesiac—while tying them firmly to a set of constraining roles in the domestic sphere that exist for the service of men.

The solution that Cavarero identifies is female friendship in the private sphere, which then forms the basis of a specifically feminine politics: “It is first of all in the private sphere that the relations of feminine experience become a friendship.... We women know how the habitual side of feminine friendship consists in this reciprocal narrative exchange—continuous though interrupted, intense though diverting—of our own life stories.”\(^8^7\) Oriented toward politics, this becomes “the practice of ‘consciousness-raising,’ [in which] the female custom of self-narration thus finds a political scene, that is... a shared and interactive one.”\(^8^8\) This marks the beginning of women’s political agency, because they are simultaneously creating themselves and a political sphere, separate from that of men, but no less valuable because of that: “Nothing, in fact, is lacking, because this experience


\(^{87}\) Cavarero, *Relating Narratives*, 58.

can... define itself as political: a shared, contextual, and relational space is created by some women who exhibit who they are to one another.”

This also pushes against the distinction between “women’s agency” and “feminist agency” that, for example, Showden makes on the grounds that “not all women are feminists”. Showden prefers the former because it is more inclusive than the latter; in her understanding, “feminist agency would be that specific form of women’s agency that has a self-conscious orientation to left (some would say ‘progressive’) politics.” But while Showden may be correct that agency can tend toward either right/conservative or left/progressive political ends at the individual level, Cavarero shows how women’s political agency in the context of politics as a collective and shared endeavor, in its defiance of the masculine monopoly on politics and its creation of women’s own form and sphere of politics, is also feminist. Additionally, if we believe that the collective politics that Cavarero sketches out must also be open-ended and egalitarian to be effective, then women’s maintaining their political agency must also engage in the kinds of politics that are usually

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90 Showden, 223n.3.

91 Showden, 223n.3.
thought of as “left/progressive”, such as anti-racism, anti-capitalist, and anti-sex/gender hierarchy.\footnote{This holds true even if one disagrees with Cavarrero that feminine politics takes place separately from masculine politics, and instead seeks redress for “the well-known historical phenomenon of women’s exclusion from political institutions.” (Cavarrero, \textit{Relating Narratives}, 57.)}

Consciousness-raising is, Cavarrero says, perhaps even \textit{more} agentic than the male-dominated public political sphere, because “in the practice of consciousness-raising, the narratable self, pushed by the justifiable fear that the partially unexposed is partially non-existent, comes by herself to satisfy her own desire for a narrated story.”\footnote{Cavarrero, \textit{Relating Narratives}, 59.} This narration also leads to a better understanding of the nature of women’s situation in contemporary society, for consciousness-raising “renders simultaneously visible not only the concrete sensation that pertains to the uniqueness of each one; but also the sexual difference which is shared, and which shows itself capable of working as a point of view that is independent of the masculine one.”\footnote{Cavarrero, \textit{Relating Narratives}, 60.} This notion that women come to feminist political agency by telling their stories (whether in consciousness-raising groups or elsewhere) is a common one in feminist theory, for example, in feminist standpoint theory, which argues that women’s descriptions of their own experiences are also acts of becoming agentic: “For women to name and describe their experiences in ‘their own terms’ is a crucial scientific and epistemological act. Members of marginalized groups must \textit{struggle} to name their own
experiences for themselves in order to claim the subjectivity, the possibility of historical agency, that is given to members of dominant groups at birth.”

Now, despite consciousness-raising being the product of a woman’s self-narration, it is nevertheless still a political activity that takes place with others. “The fact remains that the meaning of a life-story is for her always entrusted to biography, to the tale of another.” This reliance on others opens the possibility that subjective disruption—in the terms of narrative, a biography that disrupts our autobiography and cannot be easily internalized to that story or our sense of who we are—could contribute to agency as much as stories that contribute to one’s extant autobiography. That is, agency may also come from revealing the meaning of our lives and actions to us in ways that seem alien to us, or that we had not previously accounted for and that require serious revision, if not an entire re-telling, of our life-story. And it is not just our own agency that can emerge in this way,


96 Cavarero, Relating Narratives, 24. Italics in original.

97 It is unclear how amenable Cavarero is to this way of thinking, especially in those passages in which she criticizes postmodernism’s emphasis on fragmentation:

This everyday certainty of the self, which comes from sensing oneself to be ‘this and not another,’ indeed continues to resist... the more refined enticements of contemporary theory—which continue to impose upon the self the pleasure, if not the necessity, of the infinite dissolution of her internal and multiple alterity.
but also the agency of those who tell our stories to us, who force us to countenance those aspects of ourselves that we had previously ignored or been ignorant of, who in the telling change how we can act in the future.

Although I have turned to Cavarero’s account of narration to sketch out my understanding of subjectivity, including its integrity and disruption, I do not want to say that only stories that we hear have disruptive capacity—although, as we shall see in the subsequent chapters, it is often how our lives are reported back to us that has especially keen disruptive effects. There are also events that we experience directly that disrupt us, that cannot be incorporated into our autobiographies, and we can also encounter others’

Significantly, with this spontaneous resistance—which seems, at first sight, to be based upon the banality of good sense—the narratable self ends up doing a good service for philosophy. Indeed, philosophy ought to be more cautious in playing around with the endless game of the other. By continuing the category of alterity into the intimacy of the self, contemporary philosophy in fact produces the inevitable consequence of impeding every serious naming the other in so far as he/she is an other. (Cavarero, Relating Narratives, 43. Italics in original)

This exclusion of alterity from narrative is evident in Cavarero’s take on friendship among women; “contrary to the widely held opinion that maintains that feminine friendship is founded above all on the solidarity of misery and oppression, we are here offered a friendship that has conspicuous narrative characteristics.” (Cavarero, Relating Narratives, 58.) This rests on the distinction between the who, the product of narrative, and the what, one’s sociological characteristics, and Cavarero’s assertion that sex is part of a person’s who and not their what: “being born, there always appears to the world a sexed who. Sexual difference does not qualify the existent, it does not specify the what, but rather embodies the newborn’s uniqueness from the moment of this inaugural appearance.” (Cavarero, Relating Narratives, 38.) Cavarero takes the who/what distinction from Arendt; see also Linda M. G. Zerilli, Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).
life-stories that disrupt the meanings of our own stories, most notably for my purposes here, experiences of sexual and gender violence.

*Political Agency and Subjective Disruption*

Kathi Weeks, in contrast to Showden, posits feminist agency as a collective endeavor. For Weeks, beginning with the subject as the constructed product of social forces has presented feminists with certain challenges in their attempts to theorize women’s agency:

Many of us want to move beyond models of the human subject organized with reference to a natural core, authentic humanity, or enduring metaphysical essence to trade the older focus on the unified subject of feminism for a multiplicity of feminist subjects. At the same time, we want a theory of feminist subjectivity that can acknowledge feminism’s antagonistic force and cultivate its subversive potential, one that does not simply attach to a theory of social determinacy a vague evocation of voluntarist refusal. For us, then, the puzzle has been to understand how it could be that subject so systematically constructed and well prepared to submit to the existing order of things can also collectively defy it.  

The result, according to Weeks, is that “the subject constituted in and through an accumulation of enactments, the subjectivity that coheres around the relative stability of practices and is manifest in the relative continuity of memories, habits, desires, and interests, is both limiting and enabling.”

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99 Weeks, 133.
transforming subject positions”, which for Weeks “involves an active intervention, a
conscious and concerted effort to reinterpret and restructure our lives.”\textsuperscript{100} This
intervention may take the form of subjective disruption, which in Weeks’s account
(drawing on the work of Kathy Ferguson) can occur through irony and “self-laughter”:
“ironic self-laughter slips among our different identities to disrupt their unity and ‘to serve
as an antidote to the longing for completion.’”\textsuperscript{101} As I read her, then, Weeks posits ironic
self-laughter as a form of subjective disruption that conduces to women’s agency, in
particular by making us aware of the internal conflicts and multiplicities that constitute our
selves, but that we may not previously have been aware of or required to countenance.

Weeks and Ferguson are not the only feminist theorists to argue for the importance
of forms of subjective disruption to feminist agency. For example, Donna Haraway argues
that “the split and contradictory self is the one who can interrogate positioning and be
accountable, the one who can construct and join rational conversations and fantastic
imaginings that change history…. ‘Splitting’ in this context should be about heterogeneous
multiplicities that are simultaneously necessary and incapable of being squashed into
isomorphic slots or cumulative lists.”\textsuperscript{102} In many of these accounts, the form of subjective

\textsuperscript{100} Weeks, 135.

\textsuperscript{101} Weeks, 138; the passage Weeks quotes is from Kathy E. Ferguson, The Man Question: Visions of Subjectivity

\textsuperscript{102} Donna J. Haraway, Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature (London: Routledge, 1991),
193. See also Nancy Hartsock, "Rethinking Modernism: Minority vs. Majority Theories", Cultural Critique 7
disruption developed is one that is positively experienced; for example, Iris Marion Young argues for the role of wonder in feminist encounters with others’ experiences, while Linda Zerilli argues for the pleasure and disruptive potential of imagination. Subjective disruption is also one way of addressing the concern among agonistic democrats and feminists over political agents’ ethical relations and practices towards others and the political education to train them in such an ethics. Nancy Luxon summarizes the problem confronting agonistic politics qua political practice: “Even as agonists have some pedagogical intent—to encourage people to be more responsive, attentive, open—it

103 Young; and Zerilli, Abyss of Freedom, 25–30.

remains unspecified how such ethical dispositions are to be cultivated.\textsuperscript{105} While I do not address the question of cultivation \textit{per se}, I do find that part of such cultivation is going to depend on rethinking suffering in the way I discuss in this project, and one form of such cultivation is to begin to open oneself to disruption and even suffering through others.

\textit{Containing versus Spreading Suffering’s Disruption}

While the authors above have focused on ways that subjects can be disrupted, and the importance this has for challenging their self-understanding and their understanding of sex/gender hierarchy, they have tended to focus on positively experienced subjective disruption, such as wonder and laughter, and have ignored suffering. And those who have attended to suffering have tended to be critical of its role, characterizing it as an antagonist in the development of women’s political agency, rather than as another form of subjective disruption with the potential to promote agency. These authors tend to present suffering as an antagonist in the narrative sense, as a challenge for the agent-in-the-making to overcome. Often, the antagonistic challenge suffering presents is held to be necessary for a woman to become an agent; conversely, this becoming is only a success once she has overcome it. In such accounts, the need for disruption exists, but it must be located firmly in the agent’s past, serving only an inaugural role in her development. For those women who continue to suffer, their failure to overcome the antagonism of suffering means that their agency continues to be underdeveloped, and this lack of agency comes to be a defining

\textsuperscript{105} Nancy Luxon, “Risk and Resistance: The Ethical Education of Psychoanalysis”, \textit{Political Theory} 20, no. 3 (Jun 2013), 383.
feature. Their failure is often attributed to some essential aspect of who they are that will continue to prevent their becoming agentic. I shall refer to both of these as efforts to contain suffering, either to a certain stage of the agent’s development, or to a certain subset of women whose continued suffering undermines both their agency and their full participation in feminist politics. (As we shall see in Chapter 1, it may be the case that these two forms of containment accompany one another.) In contrast, I propose that by understanding suffering as a contributor to agency, its disruptive effects can be dilated across time, so that continuing to suffer can contribute to an agency with which it coexists; and that it be spread across people, so that when the suffering of one woman or group of women disrupts another woman’s subjectivity, it contributes to their shared agency, rather than antagonizing it.

Wendy Brown is perhaps the most notable critic of the role suffering has played in feminism, and she portrays the focus on suffering and victimization within feminist theory as a threat to the development of women’s full agency. Her States of Injury remains one of the clearest and most frequently cited feminist arguments against feminism’s perceived over-reliance on victim status, work she continues in later writings, most notably
Edgework. The “wounded character of politicized identity’s desire”—especially feminism’s cleaving to suffering and victimization—arises, she says, because feminists have discursively entrenched them in women’s identity. The result is a simultaneous depoliticization of identity claims, which are instead channeled into resentment, and the disciplining of identity claims into claims of injury or victimhood. This leads to a situation in which the identity at stake requires the perpetuation of both its own injury and its oppressive ideal, in order to survive as identities: “politiced identities generated out of liberal, disciplinary societies, insofar as they are premised on exclusion from a universal


For more on anxieties around “victim politics” in feminism, and a criticism of Brown’s work specifically, see Alyson M. Cole, The Cult of True Victimhood: From the War on Welfare to the War on Terror (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2007).

107 Brown, States of Injury, 55.

108 “Identity politics may be partly figured by a peculiarly shaped and peculiarly disguised form of class resentment, a resentment that is displaced onto discourses of injustice other than class, but a resentment, like all resentments, that retains the real or imagined holdings of its reviled subject as objects of desire.” (Brown, States of Injury, 60).
ideal, require that ideal, as well as their exclusion from it, for their own continuing existence as identities.” That is, even as identity politics such as feminism denounce women’s victimization and suffering, they also depend on and so reproduce them. The result is that feminism overrepresents suffering and victimization, and is unable to comprehend a more diverse set of experiences in its grasp of “woman”:

The porn star who feels miserably exploited, violated, and humiliated in her work invariably monopolizes the feminist truth about sex work... as sexual abuse and violation occupy the feminist knowledge terrain of women and sexuality. In other words, even as feminism aims to affirm diversity among women and women’s experiences... [it] tends to reinstate a unified discourse in which the story of greatest suffering becomes the true story of woman.110

This is especially problematic when it leads feminists to seek legal redress for women’s victimization, because “such legal ‘protection’ for a certain injury-forming identity discursively entrenches the injury–identity connection it denounces.”111 According to Brown, this both repeats and codifies into law exactly that which feminism should be fighting against: women’s unfreedom. Moreover, this perpetual revisiting of suffering “overwhelms not only the experiences of others but also alternative... zones of one’s own experience.”112 Thus, suffering threatens to take over one’s identity, and with it one’s


110 Brown, Edgework, 92.

111 Brown, States of Injury, 21.

112 Brown, Edgework, 92–3.
potential for agency, rather than remaining as Brown thinks it should be: an aspect of experience that women must work to contain “in order to reconfigure the trauma and the traumatized subject.” For Brown, then, suffering antagonizes women’s political agency, and obstructs both functions of it I identified above: their capacity to challenge sex/gender hierarchy itself, as well as to challenge feminism’s understanding of that hierarchy and its means of operation. For Brown, the overrepresentation of suffering in feminist accounts of women’s lives prevents feminism from being open to all women’s experiences. This openness is necessary for a feminism that is more inclusive, as well as to better understand the potential it has for complicity in the very system it seeks to challenge.

While I find Brown’s criticism of the fixity and disciplinarity of feminist politics useful, I disagree that suffering must represent only a threat to such agency. I also disagree with the solution that she proposes. As Alyson Cole summarizes, for Brown, “true freedom entails liberation from the fixity of identity; individuals should engage in

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113 Brown, *Edgework*, 94.

continuous and uninterrupted recomposition." In *Edgework*, Brown characterizes those free practices, expressions of agency, as private and thus outside "compulsory discursivity". These practices are free of the disciplinariness of identity-politics injury discourse, as well as being pleasurable:

Consider the pleasures of writing and other artistic practices, therapeutic work intended to fortify or emancipate rather than discipline (femininity) or ‘cure’ (homosexuality), relatively uncoerced sexual lives, and some modicum of choice in reproductive and productive work. When all such experiences are put into discourse—when sexual, emotional, reproductive, and artistic lives are all exhaustively chronicled and thereby subjected to normativizing discourses—might this imperil the experiences of autonomy, creativity, privacy, and bodily integrity so long denied those whose subjugation include, *inter alia*, sexual violation or other deprivations of privacy?"  

There are, however, several aspects of Brown's proposal that remain unclear. First is why we should assume that it is only or even primarily suffering and victimization that are responsible for the disciplinariness of identity politics and its complicity in sex/gender hierarchy. Especially given the developments in Third Wave feminism, for example in its prioritization of sexual agency and positivity, it is possible that an identity politics organized around pleasures are just as likely to face the problems that Brown identifies as

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“wounded attachments”.\textsuperscript{117} It is also unclear why Brown singles out suffering, given its potential to disrupt exactly these kinds of disciplining understandings of sex/gender hierarchy at the level of the individual and of the group that Brown also pushes to have disrupted. Sara Ahmed moves in this direction when she comments that “one can be invested and open to those investments being challenged through the contact we have with others. That contact keeps us open; being affected by others is crucial to the opening up of feminism to the uncertainty of the future.”\textsuperscript{118} But, she notes, being affected can come from others’ pain: “Through the work of listening to others, of hearing the force of their pain and the energy of their anger, of learning to be surprised by all that one feels oneself to be against; through all of this, a ‘we,’ is formed, and an attachment is made. This is a feminist attachment and it is moving.”\textsuperscript{119}

In arguing that suffering belongs in the agent’s past, Brown is calling for the containment of suffering. Containment has two aspects: first is an empirical containment in which the suffering is limited to a certain group of people (those trapped by their victim identity, those who cannot be or are not yet fully agentic) and/or a certain time and place (in the past, in places far away). This then licenses the second aspect of containment, a temporal containment. In this form, suffering exists exclusive of and prior to liberation into

\textsuperscript{117} In addition Gill, see Astrid Henry, \textit{Not My Mother’s Sister: Generational Conflict and Third-Wave Feminism} (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2004); and Shelley Budgeon, \textit{Third Wave Feminism and the Politics of Gender in Late Modernity} (Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

\textsuperscript{118} Ahmed, \textit{Cultural Politics}, 188.

\textsuperscript{119} Ahmed, \textit{Cultural Politics}, 188.
agency. That is, those who suffer have yet to become full agents (if they can indeed become so); those who are agents have already overcome their suffering, thus bringing it to an end. These two aspects effect a separation between agency and suffering in which suffering only ever occurs at the beginning of feminist politics, and is then cast outside it. Consequently, suffering can only ever be a threat to agency, so that those who escape suffering into agency risk backsliding should they return to their former state. Those who still suffer need (possibly with the assistance of formerly suffering, now successfully agentic feminists) to overcome that state and reach agency themselves, or else to be characterized as the permanently tragic and outside the purview of feminist agency. The result is that in most feminist literature that does address suffering, suffering is that which can at most occupy an inaugural role for feminist politics, after which it must be overcome and contained. Who or what effects that containment, and by what means, varies across theoretical projects, but the outcome is the same: the foreclosure of the possibility of disruptive knowledge out of sufferings and the reproduction of hierarchical relations.

*Complicity and Self-Alienation*

I want to summarize the two forms of suffering that I think are especially important to generate the kind of political agency that will lead to the kind of open-ended, politicizable feminism that I, like Brown and Ahmed, value. The first is a subject’s *complicity* in sex/gender oppression of other people and herself. The limitations on an individual’s awareness necessarily leave her at least partly ignorant of the machinations of sex/gender hierarchy, including the limitations on her capacity to change it, the effects it has on her life, and the effects of her agentic participation in attempts to challenge it. We should expect these effects to escape the knowledge, desires, and intentions of the agent in question,
sometimes making her complicit in her perpetuating, or even redoubling, her own oppression and/or that of other people. This complicity may arise out of her ignorance, or it may arise out of the non-existence of any non-complicit actions. Similarly, her ignorance of her complicity, or its possibility, may arise from inadequate information, or it may arise from an exclusion of available pertinent information in order to maintain the narrative of herself she has already crafted. Suffering—her own or others—can disabuse such a person of her ignorance, forcing her to account for, say, the actions she had performed, or the power of the sex/gender system in her life. While she may have been able to exclude that aspect of her biography from her autobiographical narrative, suffering can be a disruption in that narrative that forces the agent to countenance this new information. It is thus not only that suffering can create awareness of one’s complicity; this awareness may itself be disruptive and negatively so; that is, increased understanding of one’s role in reproducing sex/gender hierarchy, including its potential unavoidability, may be experienced as suffering.

This awareness of one’s own complicity may also deal a serious blow to a person’s sense of herself, including her desires, commitments, and her most deeply felt, ontologically gendered identity. Knowledge of one’s deeply held sexed/gendered identity and desires as the socially constructed products of sex/gender hierarchy can also be profoundly disruptive and negative (indeed, one witnesses this with regularity in teaching feminism to undergraduate students). This (what I am calling) self-alienation: becoming aware that one’s ontological gender, that which had felt so deeply internal to oneself, in fact is the product of a system that is oppressive and often violent disrupts the previously stable locations of external and internal. That which was “out there”—gender oppression—
is also found to be “in here.” For Mann, because gender is often a key in forming the self-world relation, “when gender is shattered... the person is broken, a world is lost.”120 But, Mann goes on to say, “perhaps gender simply has less weight for us, at certain moments or in certain context, and perhaps this lightness of gender is something to aspire to.”121 Too often this breakdown of gender occurs through violence, and its victims are forced to realize just how much they had internalized an oppressive structure that has been turned against themselves or those they care about.122 Nevertheless, such suffering of self-alienation can also do important work in attenuating the value of those commitments, identities, and desires, the sacrifice of which may be necessary for forming the kind of collective agent capable of participating in the kind of shared agency that feminist politics also requires.

**Chapter Outline**

In Chapters 1 and 2—the first part of this dissertation—I make my critical argument that feminism often treats suffering as exclusive of agency, and instead assigns it an inaugural role for the process that *results* in women’s political agency by overcoming that originative suffering. I also show how this temporal containment of suffering also entails containing it to still-suffering, non-agentic women in ways that perpetuate hierarchies

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120 Mann, 1.

121 Mann, 2.

122 For Mann, the exemplar of this, one that motivates her problematization of social construction approaches to gender, is U.S. soldiers’ forced feminization of male prisoners at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. See Mann, ix–x.
among women, while failing to account for the agentic women's complicity in those hierarchies and in their own oppression. I have chosen two different, yet ultimately strikingly similar, texts that are representative of this approach, in addition to being key texts to the development of feminist theory and practice in North America: Betty Friedan's _The Feminine Mystique_ and Jennifer Nedelsky's _Law's Relations_.

_The Feminine Mystique_, the focus of Chapter 1, is an important text not just in the history of feminism; it also continues to inform popular and academic debates about the nature of women's oppression and the development of their agency in the face of it. At the same time, the book has received criticism for its focus on the experiences of a small group of women, suburban housewives, to the exclusion of differently situated, and so differently oppressed, women, especially working class women and women of color. I find, instead, that Friedan does not ignore these women, but rather includes and depends upon them for the realization of suburban housewives' agency. She does so in a way that she gives suffering an inaugural role, with women realizing agency by overcoming that suffering and attaining subjective integrity in the form of self-realization. Those who are unable to experience such a subjective change are essentially disabled from agency, and thus their continued lives of drudgery are justified.

While Nedelsky's _Law's Relations_, the topic of Chapter 2, is a markedly different text—being much more recent and academic as well as less openly allied with liberal individualism—than _The Feminine Mystique_, I nevertheless find that it relates suffering and agency in similar ways. Like Friedan, Nedelsky gives suffering an inaugural role in the process of realizing agency, but denies that they can coexist. I find not only that this problematically reinforces hierarchies among women, but also that _Law's Relations_ clearly
reveals the way that such a treatment of suffering fails to address the problem of women’s complicity in their own oppression, as well as the need for self-alienation that addressing this problem requires.

In Chapters 3, 4 and 5, the second part of the project, I turn to advancing my positive claim that suffering can contribute to women’s political agency, and to describing how it can do so.

In Chapter 3, I turn to Susan Stryker’s articulation of transgender theory in “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix” for a first-person account of suffering in the development of agency, in addition to the need for other feminists to be open to disruption in order to develop their political agency and to address the problem of complicity in sex/gender hierarchy. To draw out the relationship between suffering and agency, I place Stryker’s story back into the novel that she positions it in, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. By noting the ways that Stryker’s self-identification as the unnamed monster from Shelley’s novel changes the outcome of the novel, and with it the monster’s fate, my reading reveals the ways that Stryker constructs a version of her own agency that develops through suffering while not requiring its overcoming into subjective integrity, but instead, expands upon her disruption through her expressions of rage—including the article itself.

In Chapter 4, I take up a still-controversial text, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* by Catharine MacKinnon, in which I see an argument for the possibility of victims’ agency and an outline and practice of the means by which feminists can help realize it. She makes this through an analysis of the ways in which victims of rape and other gendered violence actually have knowledge of the operations of the sex/gender hierarchy, and that this knowledge comes about through their suffering, for example, during the legal process
by which rape is prosecuted. *Contra* those readers who accuse MacKinnon of essentialism and over-emphasis on victimization, I read *Toward* as MacKinnon’s political argument about the kinds of experiences that feminism must address if it to successfully challenge sex/gender hierarchy. She makes this claim not simply through the substance of her argument, but also through the angry, even shrill tone that so many of her critics dismiss her for.

Chapter 5 will break with the form of the first four chapters; instead of focusing on a single text, it will engage with the questions of racial hierarchy, racism, whiteness, and white privilege through numerous texts by white women and women of color. Based on these resources, it will argue that spreading suffering beyond marginalized women to privileged women can contribute to the agency of members of both groups, rather than being a threat to the agency of the privileged. It finds that certain experiences of suffering by privileged women, such as white guilt and white racial self-alienation, can not only contribute to their agency, but also help challenge racial hierarchy within feminism by decentering whites’ experiences and understandings of sex/gender hierarchy that continue to dominate North American feminism.
CHAPTER 1

BETTY FRIEDAN: SUFFERING AND THE SOLIPSISM OF SELF-FULFILLMENT

INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I take Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* as my first example of a text in which suffering is cast as an antagonist of women’s political agency. In this relationship, suffering can *inaugurate* the process of realizing agency, but then must be *contained* in order for that agency to be realized in the form of self-fulfillment. Suffering’s inaugural aspect arises when women who experience the kind of suffering that Friedan describes as “the problem that has no name” are able to gain a critical awareness of their oppression. But they fail to become fully aware of its implication: that the kind of agency that Friedan theorizes—that is, self-fulfillment through the pursuit of a world-impacting career outside the home and family—must contain suffering, for elite women, to the initial stages of their becoming agents; while it perpetuates suffering for other kinds of women, especially working-class women, women of color, and women with disabilities. The result is that women’s self-fulfillment remains possible in *The Feminine Mystique* only for the kinds of women whose suffering matches Friedan’s description of “the problem that has no name”, and it is purchased at the continued, possibly even redoubled, oppression of those whose suffering is not of the kind Friedan discusses. This ends up creating a stunted form

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1 Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 2001), 57. Originally published 1963 by Norton. Citations to this work in the rest of this chapter will be in parentheses in the body of the text.
of agency that is unable to address the institutional sources of women’s oppression, and so neither offers agency to all women nor offers full agency even to elite women.

In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan criticizes the 1950s ideal of housewifery that socialized U.S. girls and women into roles as stay-at-home wives and mothers, and that gives the book its title. Communicated through myriad media and from earliest childhood, the feminine mystique taught women that marriage and childrearing were the natural extent of their lives, and were the most satisfying and noblest endeavors they could pursue. But while it was able to convince many middle-class women to forego their education and careers in order to find a husband and have children, the mystique could not, Friedan argues, successfully satisfy women’s need for something more than the drudgeries of housework and child-care. Much of *The Feminine Mystique* is dedicated to documenting the existence and experiences of “the problem that has no name”, the epithet Friedan gives the emptiness that housewives experienced: “a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States” (57). These housewives often attempted to cope with their emptiness through overwork on domestic tasks, smothering attention to their husbands and children, abuse of alcohol and drugs, sex, and even suicide. The solution to the problem, she concludes, is that women need the same opportunities as men to develop their own identities, that is, to pursue those activities they derive from their own internal sense of self—a process she variously calls self-realization, self-actualization, and self-fulfillment. It is not possible for women to achieve self-fulfillment through the means that the feminine mystique limits them to, namely housewifely tasks. Rather, self-realization can only come about when women pursue the same kinds of grand, socially valuable tasks as men, such as “mastering the
secrets of the atoms or the stars, composing symphonies, pioneering a new concept in
government or society”; these “serious larger interests” Friedan labels “careers” (350).
Finally, the self-fulfillment of a career not only overcomes the problem that has no name,
but is also the process by which women acquire the political agency to challenge the
feminine mystique and create new norms and possibilities for women’s lives: “Every girl
who manages to stick it out through law school or medical school who finishes her M.A. or
Ph.D. and goes on to use it, helps others move on. Every woman who fights the remaining
barriers to full equality which are masked by the feminine mystique makes it easier for the
next woman” (508).

The reading of The Feminine Mystique I offer here owes much to preceding critics’
observations of and objections to the elitism, racism, and classism that Friedan expresses in
the book. As Zillah Eisenstein summarizes, “Friedan presents this problem [that has no
name], which is particular and specific to the suburban middle-class woman’s identity, as
though it is woman’s problem in general.”2 And bell hooks characterizes the women
discussed in The Feminine Mystique as “housewives bored with leisure, with the home, with
children, with buying products, who wanted more out of life.”3 For hooks, these women
“were so blinded by their own experiences that they ignored the fact that a vast majority of
women were (even at the time The Feminine Mystique was published) already working

For similar criticism from a socialist-feminist standpoint, see Juliet Mitchell, Woman’s Estate (New York,

outside the home, working in jobs that neither liberated them from dependence on men nor made them economically self-sufficient."⁴ In fact, she says, “many women longed to be housewives,” a fact that Friedan ignored; Friedan “never wondered whether or not the plight of college-educated, white housewives was an adequate reference point by which to gauge the impact of sexism or sexist oppression on the lives of women in American society.”⁵ Not only did many women already work in 1963, hooks observes, but the tasks that many white, middle-class women would escape through Friedan’s plan would have to be performed by other women, primarily working-class women and women of color. Yet in her proposal that women pursue careers, Friedan “did not say whether it was more fulfilling to be a maid, a babysitter, a factory worker, a clerk, or a prostitute, than to be a leisure class housewife.”⁶

While hooks rightly calls our attention to the narrowness of The Feminine Mystique’s characterization of women’s oppression and its solution to it, I disagree with her characterization of the sources of this shortcoming. It is not the case that The Feminine Mystique ignores women who are not white and middle class, or that it fails to understand the need for labor to replace that of housewives to pursue careers outside the home, or that

⁴ hooks, 95.

⁵ hooks, 2.

it fails to discuss the dissatisfying nature of paid menial work. As we shall see, Friedan is relatively explicit in *The Feminine Mystique* about whom she excludes from her account of “the problem that has no name” and thus from the possibility of self-fulfillment. There is also recognition that at least some of the housework will have to fall to paid employees, and that work that does not become more satisfying because it is paid. Rather than ignorance and lack of acknowledgement of non-privileged women, I find that the model of agency proposed in *The Feminine Mystique* is premised upon the persistence of suffering among those who will take over for career-seeking, agentic women; this dependence is not simply an oversight, a sad consequence of Friedan’s own narrow experiences; rather, it is central to her theory. Though the discussion of the plight of non-privileged women is spare, these

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7 It should also be noted that, according to Friedan, at least some of the labor will not be necessary once women start pursuing careers and stop trying to create meaning out of drudgery, thus allowing (to paraphrase one of her chapter titles) “housewifery to expand to fill the time available” (333–62). This expansion occurs through several means, for example, an excessive frequency of cleaning, and cooking elaborate meals as a means for women to express their creativity, all of which will be curtailed as women find careers to give their lives meaning and fill their time.

8 This is not only supported by textual evidence, but it is also more plausible in light of the facts of Friedan’s life. As Victoria Hesford usefully comments, “it is worth noting that Friedan, long a labor activist before she wrote *The Feminine Mystique*, was no doubt well aware of the diversity of American women’s lives.” (Victoria Hesford, *Feeling Women’s Liberation* [Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2013], 282n.60.) For more on Friedan’s history of labor activism and its effects on Friedan’s work in *The Feminine Mystique*, see Daniel Horowitz, *Betty Friedan and the Making of The Feminine Mystique: The American Left, the Cold War, and Modern Feminism* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000).
women nevertheless do appear in *The Feminine Mystique*; where and how they do so is key to understanding Friedan’s account of women’s oppression and agency under the mystique.

One common misreading of *The Feminine Mystique* is the mistaken equation of careers, which are the means to self-fulfillment and so women’s political agency in *The Feminine Mystique*, with paid work. This error is not unique to critics of the book, such as hooks, but is a commonplace shared by critics and supporters of *The Feminine Mystique* alike.⁹ And yet, *contra* this prevalent reading, Friedan is clear that mere paid employment is not a career, nor do all careers have to be paid (though most will be): “a job, any job, is not the answer—in fact, it can be part of the trap” (472).

Returning to Friedan’s understanding of a career, paid or unpaid, as the manifestation of women’s political agency also calls attention to the solipsistic nature of Friedan’s account of women’s suffering and their realization of agency. Whatever its flaws, a feminism premised on equality through paid employment is one that demands engagement with others through the mediation of the material exchange and measured through material change to those exchanges. That is, it locates women’s oppression in their exclusion from paid work—or from certain kinds of paid work—and presents the resolution of that oppression as the ending of that exclusion, possibly even with an eye

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toward an outcome that is egalitarian for all women. Yet this is not the feminism that Friedan gives us in *The Feminine Mystique*. While middle-class, white, married, suburban women are the subjects of Friedan’s account, these limitations are not the products of her focus on paid employment, or even more narrowly on women’s obtaining “interesting, well-paid jobs.”

This move away from paid work is central to formulating my criticism of *The Feminine Mystique*. My interest in this chapter is not merely to criticize Friedan’s humanist project as elitist because it is focused on bourgeois ideals like a career. To do so, as others have, relies too heavily on the overlap between career and paid work that is, as I have just said, a mistaken reading. Friedan’s goal for women is a career that brings about self-fulfillment because it is personally meaningful on account of its future-oriented and socially contributory nature. This, in turn, contributes to her larger goal of overturning the feminine mystique, enabling as many women as men to achieve self-actualization. My goal in this chapter is, instead, to show how, through its containment of suffering, *The Feminine Mystique’s* solipsistic, sensation-based definition of agency *qua* self-realization depends upon, and so reproduces, hierarchies of class, race, and ability. At the same time it essentializes these hierarchies, rendering them invisible to agency-achieving women, who, because they do not have to be troubled by their complicity in such hierarchies, are further

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10 My point here is not that such an egalitarian outcome is possible under capitalism, but rather that it is possible that a feminist could argue for *all* women to have good, high-paying and satisfying jobs. This is not, however, the argument that Hirshman makes in *Get Back to Work*, in which she openly admits and defends her elitism (see Hirshman, 9–10).
enabled to achieve their agency as self-fulfillment. In other words, while Friedan's project is dependent upon the existence of the hierarchies it reproduces, because of its sensuous nature it is also dependent upon ignorance of those hierarchies—ignorance that it likewise produces. Self-realization as Friedan describes it cannot be troubled by guilt and doubt over the complicity in others’ oppression, nor responsibility for the larger structural and institutional barriers to equality. Friedan avoids such problems, I will argue, by privileging non-material, sensuous factors, namely suffering and self-fulfillment, in the move from oppression to agency. To make this case, I will make three overall points: first, I will reconstruct Friedan’s account of women’s agency through the overcoming of their suffering “the problem that has no name” and their achievement of self-fulfillment, thus limiting suffering to an inaugural role. Second, I will detail the marginal status material concerns have in The Feminine Mystique, both in the account it gives of women’s oppression and in its characterization of women’s agency, which enables the reliance on suffering and self-fulfillment. Finally, in the remainder of the chapter, I will show how this non-material, suffering- and self-fulfillment-based theory is premised on the reproduction of hierarchies of class and ability, and on limiting the possibility of agentic women’s experiencing either their complicity in or self-alienation due to those hierarchies. But before delving more fully into the role of materiality, I want to briefly review my reasons for selecting The Feminine Mystique as an example, given its limited treatment by political theorists.

Political Theory and The Feminine Mystique

Most of the attention paid to The Feminine Mystique in recent scholarship has either been in relationship to changing ideologies of motherhood in the nineteenth and twentieth
centuries, or as an example of the political use of psychology in the United States. As important as this placement of the book in broader historical trends is, scholarship on Friedan has failed to draw on and develop some of the valuable insights that Friedan brings to bear on U.S. popular culture, capitalist processes of consumption, and their effects on conceptualizations of freedom—and not just in terms of gender. I turn to Friedan both because of these insights (which remain, sadly, incomplete), as well as her problematic formulation of a specific understanding of women’s oppression and agency that remain central to debates within feminist politics and theory today. I believe that these two aspects of Friedan’s work make her work valuable, though understudied, for political theory, including not just feminist scholarship, but for those interested in understanding the

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12 For more on the need for this kind of scholarship, see Daniel Horowitz, "Rethinking Betty Friedan and the Feminine Mystique: Labor Union Radicalism and Feminism in Cold War America," American Quarterly 40, no. 1 (Mar 1996), 1–42. See also Kathryn A. Cady, "Labor and Women’s Liberation: Popular Readings of The Feminine Mystique," Women’s Studies in Communication 32, no. 3 (Fall 2009), 348–79.
relationship between psychology, humanism, and political theory in the mid-twentieth-century United States.¹³

Despite the paucity of discussion in The Feminine Mystique regarding the situation of working-class women and women of color in the U.S., Friedan’s engagement with mid-twentieth-century U.S. culture is nevertheless useful in critically analyzing the effects of the white, middle-class ideal on them, as well as the effects that ideal has on women elsewhere in the world, especially in the Global South. For example, while hooks criticizes Friedan for ignoring the desires of many U.S. working women to escape paid employment and spend more time at home, caring for their families, The Feminine Mystique actually allows us to understand those desires in light of the normative family ideal that portrayals of the white middle class in advertising and women’s magazines (to use two of Friedan’s most important examples) promoted. This is because, “by virtue of their class and race privilege, middle- and upper-middle-class white women were (and arguably still are) arbiters of gender norms, defining the male breadwinner model as the cultural desideratum and benchmark.”¹⁴ We can see this as a benchmark by which society and governments judge all

¹³ For more on psychology and American politics, though not primarily from a political-theoretical standpoint, see Herman; and Moskowitz. The political-theoretical works that study Friedan in any depth are Eisenstein; and Jean Bethke Elshtain, Public Man, Private Woman 2nd Ed. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), 249–55.

women’s lives, but also by which women continue to judge their own lives. And while, as I will argue, the proposal to dismantle the mystique is not directed to the benefit of all women, Friedan’s work in chronicling its existence and genesis is nevertheless important. And just as many subsequent readers of *The Feminine Mystique* have found its proposals dissatisfying for ignoring the problems of careerism, we can also use Friedan’s work to avoid falling back into a kind of romantic maternalism or gender essentialism.

Not only is the feminine mystique’s ideal of woman as home-maker, child-rearer, and husband-tender part of a larger, class- and race-transcending standard; it is also an integral part of the capitalist system of surplus-value generation and valorization, and as such is an important link between the oppressions of class, race, and gender. Friedan offers us a semi-marxist lens through which to view the means by and ends toward which this ideal was promulgated, namely the ever-expanding consumption of capitalist-produced goods. Although I do not have the space to fully develop this analysis here, I see in *The Feminine Mystique* the beginnings of an analysis of the hidden, gendered and classed processes by which consumption is secured, surplus-value sold, and capital valorized in capitalist systems. A fully developed theory of consumption could draw on Friedan’s basic observations that “the really crucial function, the really important role that women serve as housewives is *to buy more things for the house*” (299; emphasis in the original). This would serve as a complement to Marx’s analysis of the hidden processes by which workers are made to produce as part of the system of producing and valorizing surplus-labor, one that rethinks the intersection of sex/gender hierarchy and capitalist exploitation. Developing this into an analysis of globalized circuits of capitalist production and consumption also makes Friedan helpful for understanding how even today the feminine mystique, as well as
the family ideal that it is a part of, contributes to globalizing capitalist expansion and thus has ill effects on women outside the United States, especially in the so-called developing world.\footnote{The idea of reading Friedan’s take on the feminine mystique as a stunted Marxist text is inspired by Daniel Horowitz’s biography of Friedan, cited above, which was the first to uncover Friedan’s Marxist education and activism, something she later vociferously denied.}

This is one of the central valuable insights that I take from Friedan’s work in *The Feminine Mystique*, and it is one that also speaks to a larger set of issues that concern more than just the white, middle-class women that are Friedan’s subject and audience. Although she does not make them the focus of her work in the book, *The Feminine Mystique* touches in places upon the issues of class and race, and the features of U.S. society that she criticizes continue to adversely affect people beyond her limited focus. In order to understand part of the plight of working-class women, women of color, and women in the Global South, we must also understand both the desires that are laid out for them by the persistent feminine mystique, as well as the judgments that those in power make of their lives for failing to live up to that ideal.\footnote{These gendered, heteronormative assumptions undergird many norms around race and sexuality, too, and have influence on a range of contemporary policies, from welfare provision to elder care. Jonathan Ned Katz goes so far as to read *The Feminine Mystique* as questioning heteronormative sexuality and familial arrangements; see Jonathan Ned Katz, *The Invention of Homosexuality* 2nd Ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 113–25.}

I also find that *The Feminine Mystique* belongs among those now-canonized theories of freedom and concerns over its imperilment that characterize, in part, the concerns of
post-World War II and Cold War political theory. Friedan's theory of agency, with its
distinction between self-realization and drudgery, echoes those of Simone de Beauvoir and
Hannah Arendt, for example. All three authors place the satisfaction of basic material needs
at the lowest levels of human activity, and the ability to act in a lasting way for the common
good as the highest.17 Friedan, though, gives it a particularly liberal American spin by
shifting the ideal, from achieving transcendental greatness (Beauvoir) or glory through
action (Arendt), to the sensuous state of self-realization that she believes indicates one's
contributing to society.18 This ideal of agency as self-fulfillment is the way that Friedan

17 There are important and potentially fruitful differences between Friedan's, Arendt's, and Beauvoir's
taxonomies of human action. For example, Arendt's threefold hierarchy divides the production of lasting
works of art from the highest form of action, constitution-making; see Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition
2nd Ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). Friedan, in contrast, places art in the higher tier of her
two-tier ranking system. In that way she more closely resembles Beauvoir's distinction between immanent
and transcendent work, which is understandable given Beauvoir's influence on The Feminine Mystique. See
Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevalier (New York:
Knopf, 2009); see also Andrea Veltman, "The Sisyphean Torture of Housework: Simone De Beauvoir and
Inequitable Divisions of Domestic Work in Marriage," Hypatia 19, no. 3 (Aug 2004), 121–43. Although
Beauvoir appears by name only once in the The Feminine Mystique, in a brief discussion of her U.S. reception
(62); she may be cited, unnamed, in references to "the existentialists" (429–34; see also 550). Sandra Dijkstra
calls Friedan Beauvoir's "translator", and that the former only belatedly and minimally acknowledged the
latter's influence on her in 1975 (Sandra Dijkstra, “Simone de Beauvoir and Betty Friedan: The Politics of
Omission", Feminist Studies 6, no. 2 [Summer 1980], 293.)

18 For more on the particular career of self-realization and self-fulfillment in twentieth-century U.S. thought,
see Herman; and Moskowitz. I have taken the notion of Friedan's Americanizing of Beauvoir from Sandra
responds to her concerns about women’s lack of agency under the feminine mystique, as well as its significance for the decline in US politics. Like Arendt and other post-war critics of U.S. society, for example Sheldon Wolin, Friedan is concerned about the way that changes in consumption and employment behaviors have robbed people of the capacity to engage in public life.\(^{19}\) This is true not only of women living under the feminine mystique, but of their sons, too. (It is remarkable that in a book dedicated to criticizing women’s undue focus on their children and husbands, much of the text is dedicated to expressing Friedan’s anxieties over the ill effects of the mystique upon the lives of U.S. men and boys, the husband and sons of the women who have conformed to the mystique’s demands.) This is because Friedan sees the feminine mystique as a (though not the only) source of many of the ills confronting U.S. society, especially the trends toward conformity and the move away from issues of common concern (e.g., 278–81; ).\(^{20}\) In contrast, her theory of self-

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Dijkstra’s reading of the Beauvoir–Friedan relationship, although unlike Dijkstra, I do not evaluate Friedan as harshly on this account; see Dijkstra, 294.

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\(^{20}\) This emphasis on the ill effects of “mothers mired in psychopathology” on their husbands and sons forms the basis of Rebecca Jo Plant’s criticism of Friedan:

In essence, The Feminine Mystique reproduced the antimaternalist critique that figured so prominently in postwar psychological literature and popular culture... She [Friedan] blamed them [American moms] for the mental problems of World War II servicemen, the traitorous behavior of Korean War POWs, the difficulties of children suffering from severe mental illness and schizophrenia, and “the homosexuality that is spreading like a murky fog over the American scene”. (Plant, 146–7)
fulfillment, and the creativity and social impact it will lead to, represents the pinnacle of human achievement made possible for some people in an affluent society such as the U.S. 21

Finally, we must recognize The Feminine Mystique for its popularity and importance at the time of its publication, especially to debates within and about feminism. Astrid Henry, in her history of second- and third-wave feminism, observes that “by all accounts, Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique had an enormous impact on the national discussion about women in U.S. society; her 1963 analysis of the limits of women’s traditional roles as housewives and mothers lit a fuse that would eventually lead to the explosion of women’s rights groups in the late 1960s.” 22 Friedan’s book is a foundational text for the subsequent debates that took place over the relationship between motherhood and paid work in women’s lives, and the nature of the feminist political project and its vision for women’s liberation. Understanding the nature of Friedan’s critique and her positive political project, especially the way it reproduces an idealized middle-class, capitalist careerism and the

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21 Wendy Brown compares Friedan’s argument for self-fulfillment with the socratic imperative of self-examination:

Most people want to do more than merely live life and long instead to live it creatively, in active engagement with the world, even to determine something of the course of the world. What else can explain that “problem that has no name” with which Betty Friedan inaugurated the middle-class feminist movement two decades ago—the widespread experience among “housewives” that despite the relevance of their daily tasks to physical and emotion sustenance, their lives were empty, shadowy, void of meaning? It is not merely “the unexamined life which is not worth living” but the uncreative life, the life wholly determined by the past and by external conditions, that cannot be experienced as a meaningful life. (Wendy Brown, Manhood and Politics: A Feminist Reading in Political Theory [Totowa, N.J.: Rowman & Littefield, 1988], 203.)

22 Henry, 69.
inequality on which that depends, is important to grasping the persistence of these problems even today.23

For example, we can see in Linda Hirshman’s polemic against “choice feminism” and the departure of women from the paid workforce. She invokes Friedan as the feminist who laid out the vision of feminist politics and freedom. Calling Friedan a “real radical” who offers a vision of women’s emancipation in which women fully use their talents to help undermine the “mostly male working class”, Hirshman wants to extract from The Feminine Mystique a feminist political project grounded in a duty to other women.24 As I have already shown, this attempt to rely on Friedan for support is a misreading, albeit a common one.25

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23 We can see this, for example, in contemporary feminist debates about women’s paid employment and its relationship to motherhood, such as anxieties about “having it all” and the “opt-out revolution”, the name given to women who have left paid employment because it failed to provide them the satisfaction that the commonplace misreading of Friedan promised them. See Sheryl Sandberg, Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead (New York: Knopf, 2013); and Anne-Marie Slaughter, “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All”, The Atlantic (July/August 2012), online: http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2012/07/why-women-still-cant-have-it-all/309020/ (Accessed: 31 October 2014).

24 Hirshman, 2; 36.

25 Kathryn Cady chronicles the commonness of this misreading, and also argues that the emphasis on careers is misplaced, but she draws a more favorable conclusion about Friedan’s project than I do.

Hirshman’s misreading of Friedan seems to be the result of her playing fast-and-loose with feminist history. In addition to bafflingly labeling Friedan a radical, she also erroneously associates Friedan with second-wave feminist practices of consciousness-raising, which actual self-identified radical feminist groups developed, which she then goes on to dismiss as “mere rhetoric” (Hirshman, 3).
Hirshman fails to realize the ways in which Friedan’s own project actually undermines the insistence that women pursue careers as the path to liberation. Although Friedan **does** argue that women’s self-realization will usually take the form of paid work that contributes to society, Friedan’s privileging of self-realization above employment undercuts this assumed link. **Contra** Hirshman, the self-realized woman, especially one living today who has failed to find her identity in the paid workforce, could just as well have these sensations from dedication to her children. And, although Hirshman appeals to Friedan to support her claims that women have a duty to other women to pursue careers, because they will benefit collectively from more women in careers, this is only an ancillary point in *The Feminine Mystique*. Rather, it is the benefit to the individual, in terms of improved feelings of self-fulfillment and the satisfaction for something more that Friedan presents as the motivation of women to escape the constraints of the feminine mystique.

**From Suffering to Self-Fulfillment: Friedan’s Psychology of Agency**

As I mentioned above, Friedan’s assumption that an increase in the number of women pursuing careers and achieving self-realization will undermine the feminine mystique and make it easier for greater numbers of women to follow is what makes her conception of agency a **political** one. In this section, I will show how Friedan’s understanding of self-fulfillment, including her use of this understanding to diagnose the situation of the 1950s housewife, relies on those women’s suffering. According to Friedan, self-fulfillment for all people, men and women, requires some initial suffering, as the individual seeks to find his place in the world. Suffering is thusly inaugural of the very process of becoming an agentic individual capable of changing the world. The problem for
the housewife, according to *The Feminine Mystique*, is that her suffering is not contained but rather persists well into adulthood, and possibly through her entire life. Her struggle for identity and agency in the world is, as a result, left incomplete, which only exacerbates her suffering. All of this is, Friedan relates, the product of the feminine mystique, which assures women that they *should* achieve self-fulfillment through their domestic labor, and that any dissatisfaction they experience is the result of their shortcomings or defects, and not a problem with their gender-role confinement—Friedan’s refutation of which becomes ironic in light of, as we shall see below, her assignment of household labor to women she essentializes as incapable of self-fulfillment.

“The feminine mystique”, then, is simply a stunting of the normal process of human development or maturation that men, in contrast, are encouraged to complete:

It is my thesis that the core of the problem for women today is not sexual but a problem of identity—a stunting or evasion of growth that is perpetuated by the feminine mystique... [O]ur culture does not permit women to accept or gratify their basic need to grow and fulfill their potentialities as human beings, a need which is not solely defined by their sex role. (133)

In light of this, I am going to begin with Friedan’s solution to the feminine mystique, because it is here that we can see how the “normal” development of agency proceeds. In the normal process of maturing into a self-realized adult, that is, the process men undergo, suffering serves an inaugural role: it comes to be contained within a person’s biography to their early adulthood, in which the suffering is the manifestation of their sense of subjective disruption that can only be resolved through finding a way to express their individuality in the service of a greater, societal purpose. “In every generation, many men have suffered misery, unhappiness, and uncertainty because they could not take the image of the man
they wanted to be from their fathers... And it has always been considered right in America, good, for men to suffer these agonies of growth, to search for and find their own identities” (135). That is, suffering is the product of identitylessness, even as it makes the individual aware of his lack of identity, and so prepares him to forge one for himself. (I want to briefly note that suffering does not have to lead to an identity. As I will elaborate below, young men can, Friedan says, fail to find an identity, and so continue to suffer, a problem that is increasingly common. As we shall see, this failure is linked to the problem of women’s identitylessness under the feminine mystique.) That suffering can serve this role is what makes it, especially in the form of “the problem that has no name”, such a rich resource for Friedan’s project in the *Feminine Mystique*. Women already undergo the same disruptive experiences that self-realizing men do, but in their case, under the feminine mystique, the process remains incomplete, and so the suffering persists: “Women had to suffer this crisis of identity, which began a hundred years ago, and have to suffer it still today, simply to become fully human” (136). In the second chapter, Friedan shows just how those involved in nineteenth-century women’s movements had to suffer through both an identity crisis and deeply entrenched gender norms to create identities for themselves and so realize their full humanity.

This notion of “fully human” returns at the end of *The Feminine Mystique* when Friedan details what exactly a self-realized person is, and how women’s self-realization can combat the feminine mystique. In the final two chapters, the normal path of development that Friedan begins at the beginning of *The Feminine Mystique* comes to completion and bears feminist fruit. Drawing on the humanist psychology that arose in the mid-twentieth-century U.S. (which I will discuss in greater length below), Friedan argues for a vision of
self-realization that is, like the need for identity itself, intrinsic to human nature. “Scientists of human behavior have become increasingly interested in the basic human need to grow, man’s will to be all that is in him to be... The premise is that man is happy, self-accepting, without guilt, only when he is fulfilling himself and becoming what he can be” (429–30). In the next section, I want to call attention to two aspects of Friedan’s account: first, the way that self-fulfillment is a means of connecting, through the pursuit of a career, women’s individual agency to the larger political project of ending the feminine mystique; and second, the way that self-fulfillment depends upon the overcoming of the initial suffering of the individual’s identity crisis, as well as the suffering of earlier generations of people due to material deprivation. In contrast, self-fulfillment is for Friedan the sensation that attends the restoration of the subject’s integrity, only made possible through prior suffering and its containment. In Friedan’s telling, there is no room within self-fulfillment, and thus women’s political agency, for suffering; the two are defined by their exclusion of the other, even as agency qua self-realization depends upon suffering, and suffering only comes to have political import insofar as it can be redeemed into agency.

**Beginning the "Massive Attempt": Self-Fulfillment as the Means to Ending the Feminine Mystique**

As regards the first point, the connection between self-fulfillment and women's agency vis-à-vis the feminine mystique, Friedan argues:

We need a drastic reshaping of the cultural image of femininity that will permit women to reach maturity, identity, completeness of self, without conflict with sexual fulfillment. A massive attempt must be made by educators and parents—and ministers, magazine editors, manipulators, guidance counselors—to stop the early-marriage movement, stop girls from
growing up wanting to be “just a housewife”, stop it by insisting, with the same attention from childhood on that parents and educators give to boys, that girls develop the resources of self, goals that will permit them to find their own identity. (496)

As we shall see, it is up to women to effect this “massive attempt”. They do so by demonstrating the possibility of women’s self-realization to those who propagate the mystique; and by changing the attitudes of their husbands and children, forcing them to see that they, too, will benefit from a self-fulfilling wife and mother.

This first requires, however, that a woman reject the feminine mystique for herself, and commit to self-actualization. The mystique is at once exclusive of self-fulfillment, as well as a threat to women’s capacity to achieve it:

Housewives who live according to the feminine mystique do not have a personal purpose stretching into the future. But without such a purpose to evoke their full abilities, they cannot grow to self-realization. Without such a purpose, they lose the sense of who they are, for it is purpose which gives the human pattern to one’s days. (433)

The first step, Friedan says, to breaking out of the mystique’s hold on a woman’s individual life is that “she must unequivocally say ‘no’ to the housewife image” (468). But the mystique is deeply rooted both in society and in the individual’s psyche—it is, Friedan says, “no mere intellectual construct” (479)—and thus acquiring the capacity for self-fulfillment demands making a “personal commitment to the future” (462), namely in the form of a career:

The only kind of work which permits an able woman to realize her abilities fully, to achieve identity in society in a life plan that can encompass marriage and motherhood, is... the lifelong commitment to an art or science, politics or
profession. Such a commitment... is a continuous thread, kept alive by work and study and contacts in the field, in any part of the country (476).

Friedan continues that "the women I found who had made and kept alive such long-term commitments did not suffer the problem that has no name.... But music or art or politics offered no magic solution for the women who did not, or could not, commit themselves seriously" (476). Thus, women must put themselves into a virtuous cycle in which their rejection of the feminine mystique enables them to pursue their career, which better inures them against the power of the feminine mystique.

Having successfully overcome the mystique’s restrictions on her thinking and committed herself to a career, the erstwhile housewife is on the path to self-actualization, that is, “the full use and exploitation of talents, capacities, potentialities. Such people seem to be fulfilling themselves and to be doing the best that are capable of doing” (443, quoting Abraham Maslow). Not only does the activity of self-fulfillment extend into the future, it also extends beyond the self: “Those who most fully realize themselves, in a sense that can be recognized by the human mind even though it cannot be clearly defined, have done so in the service of a human purpose larger than themselves” (458). While for Friedan, the expansive, social nature of self-actualization is due to the content of the work itself, when we look at it from the standpoint of women’s political agency, it is the recognizability of a self-realizing career that becomes central. As it is not only individual women who subscribe to the feminine mystique, neither is it only internal psychological barriers that prevent them from abandoning housewifery. Much of The Feminine Mystique documents the many parties who promulgate the mystique, from women’s magazines, to advertising agencies, to sexologists and psychologists, to Margaret Mead. Even theorists of self-actualization have
contributed to the problem: “The new theorists of the self, who are men, have usually
evaded the question of self-realization for women” (449). Having first rejected the feminine
mystique in their own lives, women who pursue careers can also help challenge this way of
thinking; and the more they do so, the more examples of self-realizing women there will be,
disabusing these theorists who are “bemused themselves by the feminine mystique,” and
which makes it “very difficult, even for the most advanced psychological theorist, to see
woman as a separate self, a human being, who, in that respect, is no different in her need to
grow than is a man” (449).

This exclusion of women is not that surprising, Friedan comments, because there
are few opportunities for women to achieve self-fulfillment, and so there are few examples
of women who have done so. Abraham Maslow, the foremost developer of self-fulfillment
theory, in his study of self-actualizing public figures, “was able to find only two women who
had actually fulfilled themselves—Eleanor Roosevelt and Jane Addams” (443). Moreover,

Apart from public and historical figures, he studied at close range a small
number of unnamed subjects who met his criteria—all in their 50’s and
60’s—and he screened 3,000 college students, finding only twenty who
seemed to be developing in the direction of self-actualization; here also, there
were very few women. As a matter of fact, his findings implied that self-
actualization, or the full realization of human potential, was hardly possible
at all for women in our society. (444)

Given the paucity of examples, then, it is unsurprising when Friedan relates how “Professor
Maslow told me that he thought self-actualization is only possible for women today in
America if one person can grow through another—that is, if the woman can realize her own
potential through her husband and children” (449). Yet, the very suffering of housewives
under the feminine mystique, who have been told that this vicarious success is their path to fulfillment, belies Maslow’s point. And it is possible, Friedan argues, for women to challenge both these restrictions on women as well as the exclusion of women from self-fulfillment theories, by striving toward that end themselves. “Now that education, freedom, the right to work on the great human frontiers—all the roads by which men have realized themselves—are open to women, only the shadow the past enshrined in the mystique of feminine fulfillment keeps women from finding their road” (450). This still-looming past can only be combatted when women name and reject the feminine mystique, and begin to correct the psychological theorists and others who promulgate it:

A great many people have, or think they have, a vested interest in “Occupation: housewife.” However long it may take for women’s magazine, sociologists, educators, and psychoanalysts to correct the mistakes that perpetuate the feminine mystique, a woman must deal with them now, in the prejudices, mistaken fears, and unnecessary dilemmas voiced by her husband; her friends and neighbors; perhaps her minister, priest, or rabbi; or her children’s kindergarten teacher; or the well-meaning social worker at the guidance clinic; or her own innocent little children. But resistance, from whatever source, is better seen for what it is. (479–80)

This resistance to a woman’s leaving her housewifery behind and pursuing a career is but a manifestation of the mystique’s deep hold on a broad range of society. It is only by following through on her commitment to a career that a woman can loosen the mystique’s grip on others, and so ease the path of other women to self-fulfillment: in other words, acquire and exercise what I am calling women’s political agency.

In The Feminine Mystique, the operation of this agency within the family receives the most attention. Because it is impossible to self-realize through others, the woman who lives
“in the image of the feminine mystique... must ‘castrate’ the husband and sons who can
never give her enough satisfaction to make up for lack of a self, and pass on to her
daughters her own unspoken disappointment, self-denigration, and discontent” (449).
Through their treatment of their children, housewives perpetuate the mystique
intergenerationally; and through their husbands, they extend it beyond the confines of the
home. “One woman told me that she gave up her job in television to become ‘just a
housewife’ because her husband suddenly decided his troubles in his own profession were
caused by her failure to “play the feminine role’ ” (482). The problem with such men is that
their wives are all too willing to indulge their own incapacity for self-realization. “The
husband who is unable to bear his wife’s saying ‘no’ to the feminine mystique often has
been seduced himself by the infantile phantasy of having an ever-present mother, or is
trying to relive that phantasy through his children” (484). This phantasy is not only
damaging to the capacities for self-realization of husbands and children, it is also surprising
insofar as the housewife’s “castration” and vicarious living is equally generative of the
former’s suffering as it is the latter’s; the feminine mystique has led to a “rising tide of
resentment among new young husbands at the girls whose only ambition was to be their
wives... a dream come true for no man” (379). And for children, “evidence of something
similar to the housewife’s problem that has no name in a more pathological form has been
seen in her sons and daughters by many clinicians, analysts, and social scientists” (393).
The solution is for women to more strongly commit to their future and redouble their
efforts at a career. While “it is difficult for a woman to tell such a husband that she is not his
mother and that their children will be better off without her constant attention,” Friedan
argues that, “perhaps if she becomes more truly herself and refuses to act out his phantasy
any longer, he will suddenly wake up and see her again” (484). This disabusing is important, because it shifts how men and children act toward their wives and mothers, changing their expectations, and also makes it possible for families to shift how their children, both boys and girls, are educated. It is, then, in individual women’s throwing off the feminine mystique and seeking self-fulfillment for themselves, instead of vicariously, that Friedan locates the beginnings of that “massive attempt” necessary to end the feminine mystique.

*From Suffering to Agency: “The Problem that Has No Name” and Self-Realization*

While Friedan stresses the self-realizing woman’s capacity to escape reduction to wifely duties, it is also as a wife that we can see some of the first changes to women’s experiences, from suffering to identity and fulfillment. “Contrary to the feminine mystique... the more educated the woman, the more likely she was to enjoy full sexual orgasm more often, and the less likely to be frigid” (451). This is because “the transcendence of self, in sexual orgasm, as in creative experience, can only be attained by one who is himself or herself, complete, by one who has realized his or her own identity” (448). In contrast, “too many Americans—especially the women sex-seekers—are putting into the sexual search all their frustrated need for self-realization” (457). The “new life plan” laid out at the end of *The Feminine Mystique* will resolve the emptiness that housewives suffer in all aspects of their lives, and that, as documented throughout in the book, pervade women’s sexual practices—as do their overzealous-yet-misplaced attempts to resolve it. “Instead of fulfilling the promise of infinite orgasmic bliss, sex in the America of the feminine mystique is becoming a strangely joyless national compulsion, if not a
contemptuous mockery” (366).26 This compulsion exists not just within suburban homes, but is also evident in media, “whether it is pictured in the frankly lascivious pages of a popular novel or in the curious, almost asexual bodies of the women who pose for fashion photographs” (367). The first problem with this ubiquity of sex is that it is unsatisfying for anyone involved, man or woman: “As American women have turned their attention to the exclusive, explicit, and aggressive pursuit of sexual fulfillment, or the acting-out of sexual phantasy, the sexual disinterest of American men, and their hostility toward women, have also increased” (366). And, “even though they find no satisfaction in sex, these women continue their endless search” (372), often through ever-more transgressive sexual practices, such as the sexual domination of their husbands, (sometimes concurrently) pursuing extramarital affairs, or sexual relationships with other women (362–4).27 When

26 For more on Friedan’s focus on sexuality, including her emphasis on deviance, see Hesford, 106–13.

27 It is not only through sexual transgression that women attempt to resolve their dissatisfaction; “feminine sexual conflict” is also displaced into a serious of psychosomatic “female troubles”: doctors see, “with increasing frequency in young mothers the same impairment of the ovarian cycle—vaginal discharge, delayed periods, irregularities in menstrual flow and duration of flow, sleeplessness, fatigue syndrome, physical disability” usually seen only in menopausal women (374). Conversely, women who have recovered from hysterectomies suffered physical and psychological manifestations of a much more severe trauma, especially if their “lives revolved almost exclusively around the reproductive function and its gratification in motherhood” (375, quoting Doris Menzer-Benaron).

Friedan also identifies women’s domination of men, and the latter’s need to “escape from the devouring wife” or mother and “seek the human relationship that got lost when he became merely an appendage to his wife’s
women escape the mystique, then, we can expect them not only to be more faithful wives, but to enjoy sex with their husbands—even to orgasm more: “the very opening to Americans of those roads to their own identity in society brought a real and dramatic increase in woman's capacity for sexual fulfillment: the orgasm” (450).

I take the resolution of women's (and men's) sexual discontent under the feminine mystique into “orgastic bliss” of self-fulfillment as metonymic for the larger shift that occurs when women achieve agency, that is, a shift in a woman's experiences of herself as subject. This accords with the relationship Friedan establishes between sex and the innate human need for self-realization:

For woman, as for man, the need for self-fulfillment—autonomy, self-realization, independence, individuality, self-actualization—is as important as the sexual need, with as serious consequences when it is thwarted. Woman's sexual problems are, in this sense, by-products of the suppression of her basic need to grow and fulfill her potentialities as a human being, potentialities which the mystique of feminine fulfillment ignores. (448)

We can see this metonymic relationship, too, in the way that sex and other features of the feminine mystique, like housework, function analogously for women. Because both housework and sex are, according to the mystique, supposed to be the means by which women can become creative and so fulfilled, women dedicate ever-greater amounts of time and energy to them in order to try to fill the emptiness they feel. Yet these constantly growing efforts only lead to greater disappointment, for neither can replace the only true aggressive 'home career” ” (381) as reasons for male sexual transgressions, including extramarital sexual relationships, sex with girls, and homosexuality (382–4).
source of self-actualization: a career. Finally, once pursuing a career, women will learn to consign housework and sex to their proper places, and so be able to enjoy them for what they are, rather than overburdening them with the demands of a whole life. In this way, the trajectory of women’s sexual experiences—the move from sexual dissatisfaction to sexual fulfillment—is a useful way to understand the nature of the transition from living with “the problem that has no name” to self-fulfillment.

I will argue in this section that the move to self-fulfillment, and thus the achievement of agency as understood in The Feminine Mystique, is constituted by a change in the experiences women have of their own subjectivity, a move from disruption in the form of suffering (which Friedan captures in “the problem that has no name”) to containment of that suffering and a restored sense of subjective integrity, as indicated by the satisfaction (sexual and otherwise) that self-realized women experience. Two included sensations are also necessary for women to attain political agency: the inaugural suffering and the satisfaction of self-realization. The absence of initial suffering means that the woman has not had to confront the question of her identity, and so remains trapped in the feminine mystique; the persistence of suffering or its return, which is coincident with the absence of fulfillment, means that the woman, even if she has attempted to confront the mystique, has failed to successfully self-realize and so remains without political agency. Finally—and this is a point that will lead to my discussion of the role of materiality: Friedan assumes that changes to women’s practices (the diminishment of housework and the pursuit of a career outside the home) will be the product of and reinforce the changes to their experiences of themselves. I will show, however, that it is experiential changes—
moving from suffering to subjective integrity—that are privileged in women’s agency, while the former, changes to material practice, are given secondary status.

Most basically, we can see how the move from the feminine mystique to agency is marked by changed experiences of the self in the way that Friedan describes each one. We can take one representative passage of the many in which Friedan describes women living with “the problem that has no name”:

Sometimes a woman would tell me that the feeling gets so strong she runs out of the house and walks through the streets. Or she stays inside her house and cries. Or her children tell her a joke and she doesn’t laugh because she doesn’t hear it. I talked to women who had spent years on the analyst’s couch, working out their “adjustment to the feminine role,” their blocks to “fulfillment as a wife and mother.” But the desperate tone in these women’s voices, and the look in their eyes, was the same as the tone and look of other women, who were sure they had no problem, even though they did have a strange feeling of desperation. (64)

What Friedan describes in this passage, the near-catatonia and the weeping as well as the desperation, is suffering as I understand it: an unpleasant experience of disruption of one’s subjectivity. It also relates their futile attempts to restore their subjective integrity through therapy, adjustment, and attempted denial. Yet, these efforts are doomed to fail, because the housewives’ suffering indicates that they lack a self, at least as they had expected to: “Sometimes a woman would say ’I feel empty somehow... incomplete.’ Or she would say, ‘I feel as if I don’t exist.’ ” (64) While these women know that they are supposed to be subjects, and they know what kind of subjects they are supposed to be—women fulfilled by their feminine roles as wives and mothers—their lack of satisfaction becomes suffering because it is discordant with who they believed they were, a good and feminine woman,
and with the desires they thought that person would have. “I have heard so many women
try to deny this dissatisfied voice within themselves because it does not fit the pretty
picture of femininity the experts have given them,” which they have bought into and
pursued with vigor (71–2). Exacerbating their suffering is the sense that these women are
at once responsible for their situation while also feeling helpless to remedy it: “If a woman
had a problem in the 1950’s and 1960’s, she knew that something must be wrong with her
marriage, or with herself. Other women were satisfied with their lives, she thought” (62).
Friedan is adept at evoking the ways that woman experience the problem that has no
name: desperation, helplessness, emptiness, distillation, shame, embarrassment,
frustration, and isolation.

There is a stark contrast between Friedan’s description of the problem that has no
name, in which the language of suffering is ubiquitous, and her description of self-
realization, characterized by the language of confidence, satisfaction, and, of course,
fulfillment. For example, Friedan describes how women, “when they began to use their
various abilities with a purpose of their own in society... spoke of a new feeling of
‘aliveness’ or ‘completeness’ in themselves” (469). This language communicates self-
realization as an experience of, and thus indicated by, a sense of subjective integrity, as
further exemplified by Friedan’s repeated use of the language of “identity” in discussing the
self-realization process. Self-actualization is also an experience that is that is positive, even
pleasurable (as we saw above in the example of sex); one woman who “had made it to the
other side... told me that when she stopped conforming to the conventional picture of
femininity she finally began to enjoy being a woman” (465; italics in original).
While there are affirmative descriptions of self-realization in *The Feminine Mystique*, often its qualities are implied through the juxtaposition with women’s suffering under the mystique, whether because they have yet to begin their self-realization, or because of their feminine recidivism. As Friedan summarizes, “The women I found who made and kept alive such a long-term commitments [to careers] did not suffer the problem that has no name” (476). The contrast between the problem that has no name and self-fulfillment is thus often drawn by the absence of the experiences of the former—emptiness, desperation, etc.—in the latter. In one such instance, Friedan contrasts the lives of two women of ability, both of whom were bored as housewives and both of whom got jobs in the same research institute. They loved the increasingly challenging work, and were quickly promoted. The first woman, clearly recognizing the future this work held for her, spent virtually her entire salary on a three-day-a-week cleaning lady. The second woman, who felt her work was justified only if it “helped out with family expenses,” would not spend any money for cleaning help.... She quit her job after a year from sheer exhaustion. The first woman, who made the necessary household changes and sacrifices, today, at thirty-eight, has one of the leading jobs at the institute and makes a substantial contribution to her family’s income, over and above what she pays for her part-time household help. The second, after two weeks of “rest,” began to suffer the old desperation. But she persuaded herself that she will “cheat” her husband less by finding work she can do at home. (478–9)

In this passage, while the affective state of the first woman, who continued on with her career, remains unstated, it is nevertheless revealed through the absence within the narrative of the return of the “old desperation” that the second woman experiences. In so doing, Friedan establishes suffering as antagonistic of suffering, so for the truly self-
realizing woman, the suffering of housewifery is located firmly in their own past, as well as in the present lives of other, non-self-realizing women from whom they differ.

The reference to the first woman’s “sacrifices” is, in the context of Friedan’s larger account of self-realization, part of the suffering that women must both experience to inaugurate the process and overcome as the final step of that beginning. As we saw above, suffering is a necessary part of any person’s maturation in self-actualizing adulthood. This means that women, like men, also face the “terror” of maturation as they enter young adulthood: “The freedom to lead and plan your own life is frightening if you have never faced it before. It is frightening when a woman finally realizes that there is no answer to the question ‘who am I’ except the voice inside herself” (463). But while the questioning of one’s identity is necessary for any person to achieve agentic adulthood, Friedan observes that “the feminine mystique permits, even encourages, women to ignore the question of their identity” (127). Thus to achieve self-realization, women, like men, must embrace the subjective crisis that prompts the interrogation of their lives. In answering the question, “Who am I?”, “there are no easy answers, in America today. It is difficult, painful, and takes perhaps a long time for each woman to find her own answer. First, she must unequivocally say ‘no’ to the housewife image” (468). Woman, that is, can only overcome the initial suffering of the problem that has no name if they come up with the right answer, which is not full-time housewifery, as the feminine mystique would lead them to believe. That mistaken choice is an attempt to choose the easy way out of the identity crisis, but only ends up perpetuating their suffering; even if it offers a temporary reprieve in youth, as women continue to age, and especially after their children are all in school, they will find themselves suffering more and more the problem that has no name.
This means, as we saw in the case of the second woman, that any suffering that disrupts the woman’s sense of her identity’s rightness is incompatible with her project of self-realization; it is an indication of her continued enthralment to the feminine mystique, and thus her lack of agency. That is, as we saw above, it is only “the voice within herself” that can tell a woman who she is and what she is to do to realize that identity. All other voices, including those internalized voices that are false selves, expressions of the feminine mystique, she must ignore. For the agentic woman, one who is self-actualizing, suffering belongs only in the past, as that which was overcome, giving way to the positive experiences of completeness and fulfillment. In the non-agentic woman, the persistence of the mystique’s hold on her may manifest as her being torn between career and household duties, despite the fact, according to Friedan, that “it is not difficult as the feminine mystique implies, to combine marriage and motherhood and even the kind of lifelong personal purpose that once was called ‘career’ ” (468). These problems only seem great when a woman is already suffering under the feminine mystique’s insistence on full-time housewifery as her only proper activity. “There are, of course, a number of practical problems involved in making a serious professional commitment. But somehow these problems only seem insurmountable when a woman is still half-submerged in the false dilemmas and guilt of the feminine mystique” (477). Here, the conflicts and guilt that women suffer are products of the feminine mystique upon them and are also sensations of suffering that preclude the possibility of their attaining agency, because they prevent them from achieving the kind of identity that constitutes their agency.

In claiming that in The Feminine Mystique, the transition from inaugural suffering to satisfaction constitutes rather than merely indicates or results from women’s becoming
agentic, I am privileging that change in subject experience above other changes to a woman’s life, say, her material practice. While this claim leads me to a fuller discussion of the status of materiality in Friedan’s text, which is the topic of the following section, in the remainder of this section I will discuss what I mean by constitution, and the evidence in the text for this argument. When I say that suffering constitutes the agencylessness of women under feminine mystique, and its absence and the presence of positive experiences of subjective integrity constitute agency, I mean that (a) this change in sensation, and not other changes, is the telos of women’s development; and (b) there remains no standard other than sensation by which women’s agency and its lack can be known. That is, as I shall discuss below, while Friedan assumes that there is some necessary relationship between the formation of agency and material changes to women’s lives, this coincidence is never fully explicated, but instead posited then disclaimed, as we shall see in the following section. But when they do come apart—when women are genuinely satisfied as housewives, or when they are unable to reach self-fulfillment through work—Friedan must justify this failure by essentializing a fault in the woman herself, rather than question the relationship between the experience of agency and actual change.

In support of point (a) from the preceding paragraph, we can see that the purpose of a career, according to Friedan, is to enable women to achieve their full humanity in the form of self-realization. For example, according to Friedan women’s artistic dabbling such as “the Sunday painting, the idle ceramics do not bring that needed sense of self when they are of no value to anyone else. The amateur or dilettante whose own work is not good enough for anyone to want to pay to hear or see or read does not gain real status by it in society, or real personal identity” (477). In this passage Friedan is trying to force the
alignment of two distinct phenomena that, at other points, she wants to hold separate and in tension: the means by which society communicates value and the attainment of self-realization through socially valuable work. As we saw in the introductory section of this chapter, Friedan states that not any paid job will lead to self-realization, and may actually prevent it by not allowing a person to develop her full human potential. As I shall argue in the next section, Friedan ultimately resolves this tension by marginalizing materiality, and favoring the move from suffering to self-realization as process of realizing agency.

*The Marginal Position of Materiality in The Feminine Mystique*

It is not only in the relationship between careers and paid labor that we can see Friedan trying to sever the material, and thus intersubjective, from the individual psyche. From the beginning of *The Feminine Mystique*, materiality exists alongside the non-material, psychic conditions that Friedan describes. It simultaneously bolsters her argument while also presenting a potential challenge to it. For example, in her description of the problem that has no name, Friedan says the problem lacks a name in part because it is not supposed to exist; housewives in the United States live in luxury, especially in comparison to other women:

The suburban housewife—she was the dream image of the young American woman and the envy, it was said, of women all over the world. The American housewife—freed by science and labor-saving appliances from the drudgery, the dangers of childbirth, and the illnesses of her grandmother. She was healthy, beautiful, educated, concerned only about her husband, her children, her home. (60–1)

The wealth and elite status of the suburban housewife potentially undercuts Friedan’s diagnosis and attempts to problematize her situation (and, as we saw above, remains the
basis for criticisms of her project today). At the same time, for Friedan, the fact that such women still suffer, are nevertheless dissatisfied, strengthens her claim that there must be some problem heretofore unidentified (or, in actuality, improperly identified by those who support the feminine mystique). In this passage we can see the recurring conflict between the material and the psychic that persists throughout the book, and that Friedan wants to resolve in favor of the latter by turning the former toward her advantage. As we shall see, however, the attempted alignment of the psychic and material is never entirely successful, and Friedan must marginalize the material in favor of the psychic to silence potential rival interpretations of women’s material conditions that might undercut her theory of agency.

I make my argument in this section—that Friedan must marginalize a materiality that escapes her attempts to align it with her psychic project—in service of my larger point regarding her treatment of suffering in her theory of agency. In my reading, Friedan’s failed attempt to align the psychic and the material is part of a solipsism that at once evidences and makes possible her use of suffering as inaugural to and antagonistic of women’s agency qua self-realization. That is, her treatment of the material enables Friedan to craft a narrative of the move from women’s suffering to self-realization, and to characterize it as women’s realizing their agency in order to challenge the feminine mystique. If the material is subordinated to the psychic, then it is only psychic change that can be a reliable indicator of a woman’s agency or lack thereof. But the persistence of the material, both of material needs and in material inequality, despite her attempted subordination requires the marginalization of those material conditions that either remain unchanged or those new material problems that arise in the process of self-realization. Thus, when I claim that Friedan is marginalizing the material, I mean that she is marginalizing those who live under
conditions that are not amenable to her story, including those who must work to satisfy the
material conditions that make that story possible for a select few women. In the following
sections, we shall see exactly how this marginalization takes place not only in the narrative
of women’s self-realization, but in the very text of *The Feminine Mystique*. In the remainder
of this section, I will show how Friedan attempts to subordinate the material to the psychic,
how this results in her marginalizing the former to the latter, and how this makes her
account of women’s move from suffering to self-realization a story of individual psychic
change. The result is that Friedan’s story, as well as the self-actualizing women she writes
about, are shielded from having to confront the material conditions that are supposed to
support their own journey; this is both deeply ironic, given that self-actualizing activities
are supposed to be in the service of societal advancement, as well as anti-political in its
turn away from the material world that is an object of shared and disputed interpretations
and actions.

To return to the issue of self-realization, Friedan’s marginalization of materiality
continues with her adaptation of humanistic–psychological theories of human development
that posit self-realization (and its equivalent terms) as the final, most mature stage of
human life.

Scientists of human behavior have become increasingly interested in the
basic human need to grow, man’s will to be all that is in him to be.... This ‘will
to power,’ ‘self-assertion,’ ‘dominance,’ or ‘autonomy,’ as it is variously
called... is the individual affirming his existence and his potentialities as a
human being in his own right.... The premise is that man is happy, self-
accepting, healthy, without guilt, only when he is fulfilling himself and
becoming what he can be. (429–30)
But as we saw above, while many of these theories limit themselves to describing men, Friedan applies them to women, too. Men also experience roadblocks to their growth as suffering, and the reward for overcoming them is the sense of fulfillment at having a life of one’s own and at having contributed to the common good by reforming society in line with that life. Women, like men, have the same “need to grow and realize one’s full potential” (434). Those who study men’s failure to individualize “may not know how accurately they are describing the kind of adjustment that has been inflicted on American housewives. What they are describing as unseen self-destruction in man, is, I think, no less destructive in women who adjust to the feminine mystique.” (430–1)

Although she cites a wide variety of theorists in developing her account of self-realization, Friedan’s approach owes its greatest debt to the theory of the “hierarchy of human motivation” (more often referred to as the “hierarchy of needs”) that U.S. psychologist Abraham Maslow developed in the 1940s:

Maslow’s motivational schemed consisted of a hierarchy with basic needs at the bottom and higher needs at the top.... At the lowest levels were physiological needs for food, clothing, and shelter. A bit farther up were safety needs, then needs for “belongingness” and love, and finally needs for esteem, achievement, and respect. Higher needs emerged as lower needs were satisfied. Self-actualization, the inherent tendency in people to move toward becoming all they could potentially become was located at the summit of the motivational heap.  

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28 Herman, 270.
We can see that *The Feminine Mystique* shares both Maslow’s ends, of folding U.S.-style liberal democracy into human development; and his means, a hierarchy of needs. According to Herman, Friedan “turned women’s relative exclusion from the ultimate in psychological integration [i.e., self-actualization], at least according to Maslow, into an appeal for feminism.” As we shall also see below, *The Feminine Mystique* also shares the troubling assumptions and implications of Maslow’s project, despite Friedan’s efforts to deploy it for a liberatory project. But before delving more deeply into Maslow’s psychology-cum-political-philosophy, I first want to reconstruct Friedan’s use of his hierarchy of needs in *The Feminine Mystique*. In *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan adapts his argument about human development as the basis for her criticism of the problem that has no name and her proposed course of action for housewives to overcome it.

Only recently have we come to accept the fact that there is an evolutionary scale or hierarchy of needs in man (and thus woman), ranging from the needs usually called instincts because they are shared with animals, to needs that come later in human development. These later needs, the needs for knowledge, for self-realization, are as instinctive, in a human sense, as the needs shared with other animals of food, sex, survival. The clear emergence of the later needs seems to rest upon prior satisfaction of the physiological needs. The man who is extremely and dangerously hungry has no other

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29 Herman, 291.

30 In one of his earliest versions of the hierarchy, Maslow actually lists “the desire to be an ideal mother” among possible forms a self-actualizing life may take (A.H. Maslow, “A Theory of Human Motivation”, *Psychological Review* 50, no. 4 [Jul 1943], 383.)
interest but food. Capacities not useful for the satisfying of hunger are pushed into the background. (434–5)

For Maslow and Friedan alike, progression up the needs hierarchy is a function both of one’s social position and one’s trajectory of maturation. Living under conditions of material deprivation or insecurity can prevent one from reaching the highest levels of selfhood, but so, too, can internal psychological barriers that prevent maturation. The result, however, is the same: a failure to grow fully into someone who is able to self-realize and make her own, individual contribution to society. As we shall see in the subsequent sections of this chapter, this essentialism dismisses impoverished and disabled persons, as well as those who enjoy housewifery, as incapable of reaching the highest levels of human development. They cannot, despite whatever psychology they have, mature because they cannot progress up the hierarchy of needs in order to do so.

Friedan’s use of Maslow’s model of needs satisfaction as a model of individual development provides the grounds for her criticism of the feminine mystique, and is the basis for her formulation of alternatives to it. From the Maslovian perspective, and that of others who present similarly teleological accounts of human development that Friedan cites, all the daily-repeated tasks that fill the life of the housewife still leave her feeling empty because they neither offer an opportunity to express her true self nor do they challenge her capacities, and so they cannot afford her the opportunity for growth, self-fulfillment, and to contribute to the common good. Cooking, cleaning, sewing, child-rearing, sex: none of them can be the basis for a fully human life, says Friedan. This is true despite the best efforts of educators, therapists, politicians, magazines, and marketing agencies to promulgate the feminine mystique. Friedan presents a ubiquitous social effort to make it
seem that “American housewives can be given the sense of identity, purpose, creativity, the self-realization, even the sexual joy they lack—by the buying of things.” (301) She includes as examples cake mix, sewing patterns, and new cleaning supplies, each offering emancipation from drudgery with a promise of more opportunities for creativity and individually meaningful work. Part of this latter promise is to transform housework itself into an opportunity for creative self-actualization.

Housework, washing dishes, diaper-changing had to be dressed up by the new mystique to become equal to splitting atoms, penetrating outer space, creating art that illuminates human destiny, pioneering on the frontiers of society. It had to become the very end of life itself to conceal the obvious fact that it was barely the beginning. (340)

Friedan provides several examples of how housework is over-esteemed through this kind of false professionalization and expert-ification (309). The feminist mystique, deployed for marketing, gives a woman the chance for “doctoring up” cake mixes and canned foods by which she “can prove her personal participation and her concern with giving satisfaction to her family.” (308) And a novel cleaning product means that “the housewife can participate in science just by buying something new” (310). Finally, “In selling their products the [home sewing] industry must emphasize the ‘lasting creativeness’ of sewing” in order to convince women with an “unfulfilled need to create, and achieve, and realize their own individuality” (319) that following a sewing pattern is the answer. But such marketing ploys are not interested in fostering real senses of creativity. In the case of the sewing patterns, the point “was not to satisfy women’s need for individuality, for expression or creativity, but to sell more patterns—which is better done by building conformity.” (320)

The possibility that housewives might think too critically about what they are buying, and
either change brands or abandon their roles as consumers altogether means that product-marketing “must concentrate instead on creating the illusion of that sense of achievement that housewives seem to need.” (311)

Because they were primarily oriented toward encouraging consumption, labor-saving products like cake mixes and vacuum cleaners neither freed up women’s time for more genuinely creative pursuits, nor did they deliver on their marketers’ promises to help women self-actualize. Instead, women ended up spending more time on their chores and felt less satisfied; “each scientific advance that might have freed women from the drudgery of cooking, cleaning, and washing... instead imposed new drudgery.” (342) The same has happened with child-rearing and sex: as the feminine mystique has presented each as the means to satisfy housewives’ need for self-realization, these women have given themselves over entirely to the task. Thus they have grown more attached to their children, to the point of being unable to separate their own lives, successes and failures from their children’s (399–403). Similarly, because of their “need to seek status, achievement, or identity in sex” (452), they have become (and are making their daughters) more sexually insatiate even as the sex itself “is becoming a strangely joyless national compulsion, if not a contemptuous mockery.” (366) Friedan presents all of these activities as failed sources of fulfillment because they are poor facsimiles for real creativity and opportunities to self-realize and contribute to society’s progress. “The glorification of ‘women’s role,’ then, seems to be in proportion to society’s reluctance to treat women as complete human beings” (340), that is, beings who have the abilities necessary to find and realize their own identities, and thus to contribute to their society.
Primary among the ill effects of the feminine mystique is a societally pervasive passivity that threatens any future political participation. According to Friedan, Americans are plagued by the inability either to initiate meaningful acts on their own, or to confront and overcome the challenges required to sustain such actions. For example, among U.S. youth, there is a creeping “kind of infantilism that makes the children of the housewife-mothers incapable of the effort, the endurance of pain and frustration, the discipline needed to compete on the baseball field, or get into college.” (394) For Friedan, this is part of a larger crisis in U.S. society after World War II, in which both the opportunities and willingness to go through the maturation process halted:

What happened to women is part of what happened to all of us after the war. We found excuses for not facing the problems we once had the courage to face. The American spirit fell into a strange sleep; men as well as women, scared liberals, disillusioned radicals, conservatives bewildered and frustrated by change—the whole nation stopped growing up. All of us went into the warm brightness of home, the way it was when we were children and slept peacefully upstairs while our parents read, or played bridge in the living room, or rocked on the front porch in the summer. (273–4)

The feminine mystique is at once an expression of and contributor to this collective loss of adult spirit and independence. This nationwide stuntedness is also manifest in the (Friedan-identified) pathologies of popular culture, including Norman Mailer, beatniks, the rise of psychoanalysis, the theater of the absurd, and Tennessee Williams’s exclusive focus on “his sexual perversions, and the fact that he loved and hated his mother” (275). In Friedan’s theory of maturity into a sensuous freedom, these are indications of a large-scale failure to reach adulthood that makes Americans unfree.
In chronicling the loss of political interests and activities, and linking it to the mystique-driven problems of feminine immaturity across the U.S. populace, Friedan attempts to provide objective evidence by which we can see the mystique as freedom-limiting. Because people no longer face collective problems or concern themselves with contributing to society, they are unfree.\(^3^1\) We might expect, then, that the reverse of this would be increased participation in politics and socially valuable enterprises like, and indeed this is how Friedan characterizes self-realizing activities. Friedan tries to establish that “those who have most fully realized themselves...have done so in the service of a human purpose larger than themselves” (458); that is, the work that they actualize themselves through must be “real work, serving a real purpose in the community” (459). For men and women alike, this cannot be merely making a living, adapting to one’s prescribed social role in the life of the “organization man” or the housewife; rather, people must “seek their own autonomy through productive contribution to society” (265). But in this we encounter the same problem that confronts all those theorists who exhort people to pursue the common good: How do we know what the common good is and which actions contribute to it?

\(^3^1\) There is an important caveat to this summary: Because Friedan understands freedom and unfreedom through sensations, the real problem with and sign of unfreedom is their inability to achieve the requisite sensations of self-fulfillment. Instead, people like the beatniks and Williams dwell on their suffering, unable to see it for the challenge it is. And those who return to the pleasures of home, like many men and, of course, housewives find themselves trapped in the false comforts of home that always end up in suffering like the problem that has no name.
It is at this point that the identity Friedan assumes between sensuous self-realization and contribution to the society begins to break down; self-realization becomes solipsistic and sensation comes to dominate the end of the maturation process and with it, self-realization. The question of how to know when one is contributing to society, and thus is engaged in self-realizing actions, is especially important to address in the context of Friedan’s adaptation of Maslow. This is because the esteem and respect of others is the second-highest need in his hierarchy, just below self-realization. According to Maslow, to be able to sense the need for self-fulfillment, and to be able to subsequently achieve it, women must first attain the respect of others that will lead them to self-esteem. But, as we saw above, one of the features of the feminine mystique was to tell women that they do contribute to society in their roles as wives and mothers, and so they should be fulfilled. Housewifery is supposed to be worth women’s lifelong dedication because of its importance to society. Politicians and experts alike told women that “far from the vocation of marriage and motherhood leading you away from the great issues of our day, it brings you back to their very center and places upon you an infinitely deeper and more intimate responsibility than that borne by the majority of those who hit the headlines” (113, quoting Adlai Stevenson). Such overestimations of housewifery make intersubjective forms of activity valuation unreliable at best, and oppressive at worst. They are falsehoods of the feminine mystique, and serve to infantilize women, preventing them from competing with men for jobs and keeping them in the role of household-goods consumers. But, according to Friedan, “self-esteem in woman, as well as in man, can only be based on real capacity, competence, and achievement; on deserved respect from others rather than unwarranted adulation.” (435; emphasis added) This means that the self-realizing individual must
distinguish by and for herself real achievements from fake ones, determining when others’ respect is unwarranted from when it is deserved. Because of the feminine mystique, for Friedan the individual must be the ultimate judge of the rightness of the esteem received, and thus the socially contributory nature of an action and its suitability for self-realization.

In The Feminine Mystique, this judgment takes place through how a woman feels about her own life. It is a person’s own feeling of fulfillment or emptiness, of self-realization or a yearning for something more is the sole criterion for whether received adulation is deserved or not; and by implication, whether an action is actually socially valuable; and so, finally, whether it is actually self-actualizing or only falsely promised to be so. Experiences of suffering, in contrast, must be signs that a woman needs to start or continue the process of critical reflection on her own life and whether her actions are expressive of who she really is. Especially in the context of the feminine mystique,

when society asks so little of women, every woman has to listen to her own inner voice to find her identity in the changing world. She must create, out of her own needs and abilities, a new life plan, fitting in the love and children and home that have defined femininity in the past with work toward a greater purpose that shapes the future. (463–4)

Friedan clearly positions the individual as the best judge of what the greater purpose is and how she can best advance it. To suffer the yearning for more means that the quest must continue, while the sense of fulfillment, “a sense that can be recognized by the human mind even though it cannot be clearly defined” (458) means that she is so contributing and is thus free.

The housewife’s liberation is thus a process of starting with suffering, “a sense of emptiness, non-existence, nothingness”, and overcoming it to reach a sense of subjective
integrity, “a sense of human identity, the firm core of self or ‘I’” (422). The result of this sensuous transition, according to Friedan, is a person who will lead a life of social value, who is able and willing to address matters of public concern beyond just their own intimate sphere. A career—ideally outside the home—represents, for Friedan, the combination of self-realization and contribution to society. Paid careers, in particular, provide “work that is of real value to society”, because this is the “work for which, usually, our society pays” (474). Even here, however, the contribution-signaling power of the wage is dubious; busywork also pays, and so “a job, any job, is not the answer—in fact it can be part of the trap” (472). What remains as the sole criterion by which a job must be judged is whether it enables a woman to “find herself” (472). The problem of the feminine mystique, with its goal of misleading women, thus leads Friedan to prioritize sensuous change; to make it the goal of women’s liberation from suburban life; and to leave public contribution an assumed but unverified (and unverifiable) consequence. In Friedan, there is no way to know, other than the individual’s own feelings about them, whether her actions contribute to society; this also prevents there from being any means of criticizing those who claim self-realization but do not appear to have contributed to society.

**WHO WILL DO THE HOUSEWORK NOW? THE “WOMAN OF ABILITY” AND THE PERSISTENCE OF ESSENTIAL HIERARCHY**

I want to return briefly to Abraham Maslow and his hierarchy of needs as a primary resource for Friedan’s development of agency in the form of self-realization. Upon exploring his work more, we find that Maslow’s hierarchy is the product of an approach to psychological research that is deeply troubling, and that the claims that he makes through
his conceptual apparatus are inimical to the project of equality and collective agency that Friedan’s purports to be. I highlight these aspects of Maslow’s work not to indict Friedan by association, but rather to better understand the nature of her project, including the narrow scope of her humanistic approach to women’s agency and liberation and the hierarchical social arrangements on which it depends. That is, while Friedan wants to use Maslow for her own gender-liberation ends, she also imports into her project his elitism and disdain for “the study of crippled, stunted, immature, and unhealthy specimens [that] can yield only a cripple psychology and a cripple philosophy.”

In contrast to Maslow, who betrays little interest in the “crippled, stunted, immature, and unhealthy” persons in society, Friedan wants to use Maslow’s work to help women, forced by the mystique into stuntedness and immaturity, onto the path of normal development and ultimately, to the summit of human needs, self-actualization. There are, however, limits to Friedan’s capacity to salvage Maslow’s project. As Herman observes, Maslow’s zenith state, self-actualization, is both rare and dependent upon specific political-economic conditions to be possible:

Self-actualization... rested self-consciously on the type of environment that the postwar United States allegedly offered: a society of abundance. The higher reaches of human psychological experience were possible precisely because, it was assumed, poverty and material deprivation had yielded to widespread prosperity in a middle-class society. Mental health, the product

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32 Maslow, qtd. in Herman, 271.
of a psychic economy of plenty, resulted from economic affluence. It could be bought and sold.\textsuperscript{33}

However, Maslow was aware that this material prosperity depended upon the continued existence of sizeable portions of the population at lower levels of the hierarchy, people who could continue work in order to sustain the material prosperity that the rare self-actualizers required. Maslow's hierarchy of human needs required a hierarchical society, which he justified through a kind of class system fused into a form of biological essentialism. As Herman documents, Maslow did not shy away from the conclusion that his hierarchical scheme might support a self-actualizing ruling class and lead to a two-tiered society, a sort of psychological apartheid. Because he accepted the inevitability of inequality as a scientific fact, yet was unwilling to relinquish his commitment to liberal democracy, Maslow opted for institutional arrangements that would reward the "biological" superiority of a natural elite, rather than one founded on aristocratic, racial, or religious prejudices.\textsuperscript{34}

In Maslow's work, then, we can see an effort to contain the efforts of the suffering masses, those psychological "cripples" who are unable to be adequate models for psychology and unable to achieve the highest levels of human existence. The desire to contain their suffering within psychology echoes in Maslow's political-economic program, in which he "distinguished between 'jungle politics,' suitable for the majority stuck on the lower end of

\textsuperscript{33} Herman, 270–1.

\textsuperscript{34} Herman, 272. Italic in original.
the motivational ladder, and 'specieshood politics,' for the self-actualizing elite.”35 This “psychological apartheid”, as Herman names it, ensures that those stuck in the jungle are unable to threaten those elites who are capable of self-actualization. Not only, then, are the damaged psychological specimens unfit for psychological research, but their suffering the unsatisfied needs at the lower end of the hierarchy means that they are unfit for full political membership. They must be politically contained as much as they are contained within psychology, in order to prevent their suffering from undoing the selfhood of the elites.

I see in The Feminine Mystique the persistence of Maslow's hierarchical humanism, especially in the assumed satisfaction of material requirements for women's agency in the form of self-fulfillment, and the essentializing of a political-economic social hierarchy that is built into those requirements. Even Maslow's own ableism, evident in his dismissal of “cripples”, is present in Friedan's theory. While Friedan is interested in helping some women overcome their immaturity, she does not believe that it is possible for everyone, and she essentializes the differences between the two categories. In The Feminine Mystique, this is most evident in the distinction that Friedan draws between the “woman of ability” and all other women who do not—because they cannot—achieve self-realization. "Women of ability" is the label Friedan applied to the two women who obtained work at a research institute discussed above, who were both potentially able to achieve self-realization because of their intelligence and education. And it is “for women of ability, in America today,” Friedan says, “that housework is dangerous” (422). She knows this because she

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35 Herman, 272.
relates how she “went as a reporter from suburb to suburb, searching for a woman of ability and education who was fulfilled as a housewife” (333), and she found none.\footnote{While Friedan says that she visited different mental health facilities and "asked them to steer me not to the neurotic, frustrated housewives, but to the able, intelligent, educated women who were adjusted full-time housewives and mothers" (333), of the four women she met, none were full-time housewives but rather had careers outside the home. Those she visited in other communities similarly had careers, or, in many cases, were in therapy, on medication, receiving in-patient psychiatric care, or having extramarital affairs "in fact or in fantasy" (334–5).}

Friedan positions her failure to turn up any “able, intelligent women who were adjusted full-time housewives and mothers” (333) to support her claim that housework is intrinsically stultifying. But elsewhere in The Feminine Mystique, she reverses this logic, so that the enervating effects of housework reveal essential differences between women of ability and others. The tautology this creates is, evident, for example, in Friedan’s characterization of those women who do enjoy their lives in the home:

Surely there are many women in America who are happy at the moment as housewives, and some whose abilities are fully used in the housewife role. But happiness is not the same thing as the aliveness of being fully used. Nor is human intelligence, human ability, a static thing. Housework, no matter how it is expanded to fill the time available, can hardly use the abilities of a woman of average or normal intelligence, much less the fifty per cent of the female population whose intelligence, in childhood, was above average. (359)

In short, no women of ability find housework fulfilling, and no woman who is pleased doing housework has the capacity for self-fulfillment. Friedan makes several moves to support this tautology, moves that I think demand more attention than they have received in the
secondary literature. First is the move to differentiate between happiness and "aliveness of being fully used", the latter being an experience of self-realization not present in the former. For Friedan, those women who are happy with their lives of housewifery demonstrate their disability for self-actualization, which in turn explains how they are able to be happy as housewives. In this passage, the defect that precludes their self-fulfillment, and that thus prevents them from making any significant contribution to society, is their below-average intelligence. In the paragraph following the above passage, Friedan goes on to recount that,

some decades ago, certain institutions concerned with the mentally retarded discovered that housework was peculiarly suited to the capacities of feeble-minded girls. In many towns, inmates of institutions for the mentally retarded were in great demand as houseworkers, and housework was much more difficult then than it is now. (359–60)

The point here appears to be a demonstration of the low demands housework puts on a person’s intelligence, in order to show why a woman of ability (that is, "a woman of average or normal intelligence") should not find it fulfilling. But we should also note the implication for those women who, according to Friedan, are disabled: their happiness in full-time housewifery (whether because they actually are intellectually disabled, or whether they simply have a predilection for housework) means that their restriction to lives of housework is justified because of their lack of intelligence.\(^{37}\)

\(^{37}\) As a further example of Friedan’s essentializing the distinction between women of ability and others, Friedan argues that physical attractiveness is also a factor in whether a girl or woman self-actualizes: "Some [women] may have been driven to that ambition by childhood rejection, by an ugly-duckling adolescence....It
Friedan not only positions the intellectually disabled as suited to housework, but rather, all those who find happiness in such labor are essentially different from “women of ability”, as we saw in the first quotation in the last paragraph. The issue here is the capacity for maturation and self-realization, which each women’s degree of happiness as a full-time housewife reveals. Those who are not intellectually disabled may, instead, be unable to mature in other ways, caught in a kind of psychological neoteny. Paraphrasing Maslow, Friedan observes that even a materially well-off person “can be fixated on a lower need level; higher needs can be focused or channeled into the old avenues and may never emerge” (435). While we have already seen how this is the result of the feminine mystique for many women, and how Friedan believes they can overcome their false needs, other women are never able to do so for reasons that remain unexplored, but essentially pathological according to Friedan: those women “who live without conflict or anxiety in the confined home have forfeited their own being; the others, the miserable, frustrated ones, still have some hope” (431). At various points, such as this passage, Friedan indicates that such a forfeiture is irrevocable; there simply is no hope or help for those women who enjoy being full-time housewives.38

is both an irony and an indictment of the the feminine mystique that it often forced the unhappy ones, the ugly ducklings, to find themselves, while girls who fitted the image became adjusted ‘happy’ housewives” (496).

38 Friedan argues that “education, and only education, has saved and can continue to save, American women from the greater dangers of the feminine mystique” (487), yet it is also clear—based on the number of women
The exploitation of an essentially subhuman disabled or pathological person is one way that Friedan deals with the persistence of suffering that is generated by the continued need for domestic labor. But as it is unlikely that there are enough such persons to do all the necessary domestic labor following the end of the feminine mystique, others must also be found. The suffering of these women, too, is not the same as that of the educated, middle-class woman of ability. Although not disabled, and so not permanently prevented from achieving self-fulfillment, women who have unmet needs for food, shelter, security, or love are also lower on the Maslovian hierarchy, so they cannot have the same sensations of deprivation and fulfillment of their identities, because they do not have a need for them yet. Their suffering, too, is justified as the price of living under poverty until such time as they are secure enough to move up the needs hierarchy, and then, presumably, to escape paid domestic work for education and a career.

Whether poor, insecure, unloved, intellectually disabled, or otherwise psychologically undeveloped, the result for persons who are unable to achieve self-realization is the same: “There is something less than fully human in those who have never know a commitment to an idea, who have never attempted the kind of creativity of which men and women are potentially capable” (437). While Friedan uses this to argue for the dehumanizing effects of the feminine mystique, that only applies to women of ability, those who can have the kinds of experiences that Friedan proposes, but that the mystique wrongly denies. If we apply it instead to those who cannot for whatever various reasons who squander their education as full-time housewives—that this is at most a necessary condition and not a sufficient one.
become so agentic, this passage reads less as critique and more as a disturbing
dehumanization of all non-elite women. In this reading, poor, disabled, and essentially
immature women can at best be happy and never self-actualized, so they are not able to
contribute to society by searching for and realizing their identities. Nor can they have the
kind of agency to challenge the norms under which they live, norms we might think of as a
“disability mystique” and “poverty mystique” that Friedan promulgates to replace the
feminine mystique. At most, the girls and women that Friedan describes can adapt to their
condition; and any suffering that they do experience would have a different nature for
Friedan, both descriptively and normatively, than the suffering of women of ability. Were
such persons to remain trapped performing domestic labor, this would not be the same
kind of problem that it would be in the case of the woman of ability. Contra hooks’s
criticism that Friedan remains silent on whether menial paid work is more satisfying than
unpaid domestic labor, we can see that Friedan is not silent at all. For Friedan housework
does not suddenly become more fulfilling because it is accompanied by a paycheck; rather,
it matters little for the women who will take over domestic work whether it is fulfilling or
not, because they are essentially unable to capitalize on more meaningful tasks.39 Rather
than proposing a more egalitarian system of domestic-labor, Friedan proposes to simply

39 At points, Friedan suggests that women can both have careers as well as perform all necessary housework,
especially after cutting back on the unnecessary work (e.g., 469). At other points, however, she highlights the
use of servants as one solution to the issue of inadequate time for the self-realizing woman (e.g., 477–8). I
side with bell hooks in reading Friedan as supporting the use of paid domestic labor to at least partly replace
that of career-seeking women.
replace gender hierarchy with one based on other differences. In so doing, she simply
repeats about other groups the beliefs about women’s natural suitedness for housework
and incapacity for anything else that she criticizes in the feminine mystique.

In Friedan’s understanding of agency, such a hierarchy is necessary in order to meet
the material needs of newly agentic women of ability and their families, as well as to justify
the material inequality that Friedan’s proposal generates. Friedan does this by
differentiating between the nature and value of certain persons and the sensations they
have, privileging self-realization above all else. This hierarchy is not only required by a
sensation-based theory of agency such as Friedan’s, it is also permitted by the use of
sensation as the basis for agency. Friedan tells us that people are less mature or able
because they do not pursue their self-fulfillment, evidence of which are the sensations of
struggle and the sensuous transformation. This allows Friedan to definitionally cast out the
experiences of the disabled, the poor, the insecure, and the unloved, and thus to deny their
ability to contribute to society. This forms closed loops of reasoning, immune from
contradictory experiences or material facts: housework is not a form of social contribution
because it does not produce the right kind of sensations, and it does not produce the right
kind of sensations because it is not a form of social contribution. Women who are happy as
housewives cannot reach self-realization, and those who have not reached self-realization
should be happy as housewives.

What becomes noticeable in this reading, then, is the way that Friedan contains
suffering in two ways, one for each essential kind of woman. For the woman of ability, her
suffering is part of the narrative of coming-to-agency. This is simply her particular
experience of the universal suffering of all who struggle for self-realization, whether man
or woman, an experience that is shaped by the feminine mystique, even as it produces an agent that can challenge the mystique. Suffering is contained to the inaugural steps of her self-realization process; this must definitionally be the case, for a failure to find one’s identity and career, and thus overcome one’s suffering and realize a core self, is to fail to self-actualize. The suffering of the non-self-realizing woman, in contrast, is neither relevant to Friedan’s project nor to the lives of women of ability, as it has little bearing on their careers. Indeed, too much attention by women of ability to the suffering of other women may inhibit their careers. And because non-self-realizing women’s suffering is not the product of the feminine mystique—again, because the only suffering that the feminine mystique produces is the lack of self-actualization, something these women cannot achieve—it is not relevant either to Friedan’s proposal, nor to the lives of the women she would have follow it. This irrelevance contains the suffering of these other women outside the concerns of The Feminine Mystique, depriving these other women of a meaningful role in the version of feminist agency it proposes.

**Institutional Change and the Problem of Agency**

We saw in the previous section how Friedan’s conception of agency contains women’s suffering, and in so doing denies many women agency so that they can continue to perform domestic labor. But what of the agency of the woman of ability? Could they not find a self-actualizing career, and then help to pursue greater gender equality for all? In this final section, I will argue that because The Feminine Mystique presents such a narrow, suffering-based understanding of women’s oppression, and requires that this suffering be contained for women to have agency, Friedan not only fails to address structural and
institutionalized sexism, but also fails to theorize political agency in a way that could address that form of sex/gender hierarchy. This reading augments Zillah Eisentein’s criticism that Friedan lacks a systematic understanding of either sex/gender oppression or women’s capacity to act under it:

Friedan helps us understand that how we think about ourselves is important, but she does not help us understand that individual yearning is not enough. Individual activity is racially, economically, and sexually ordered with limitations and constraints. Woman does not have the freedom to act in the way Friedan assumes she does within this unequal structuring of patriarchal society.\(^{40}\)

Although Friedan catalogs with great detail the efforts of publishers, authors, educators, advertisers, politicians, psychologists, and other scholars to dupe women into housewifery, missing are any similarly detailed accounts of employers’ discrimination against women trying to enter the professions or of the institutions that permit this behavior. For example, as Gail Collins observes, “although Friedan obsesses about women getting jobs, she does not mention that newspapers were allowed to divide their Help Wanted ads into categories for men and women, or that it was perfectly legal for an employer to announce that certain jobs were for men only. Even the federal government did it.”\(^{41}\) Similarly, Stephanie Coontz opens her “biography” of *The Feminine Mystique* with a litany of legal restrictions on U.S.

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\(^{40}\) Eisenstein, 186.

\(^{41}\) Gail Collins, “Introduction”, in Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* 50th Anniv. Ed. (New York: Norton, 2013), xii. Collins unduly dismisses the many criticisms of Friedan’s project as positive attributes, since it permits the book to be punchier, but she does not say why these must be trade-offs.
women’s lives that existed in the 1960s. For example, “many states had 'head and master' laws, affirning that the wife was subject to her husband.”42 Under such a legal system, “husbands had the right to control what their wives did or even read”, and “many husbands forbade their wives to return to school or to get a job.”43 This not only gave men the right to make such decisions, it also gave men the right to violently enforce them—or to commit violence against their wives for any other reason. Wives, in contrast, lacked any legal right to their husbands’ earnings, to maintain a separate residence, or to have any say in what constituted the necessities her husband was legally obligated to provided.44 It was not only to husbands, of course, that women were legally subjected. Until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 passed, employers’ discrimination on the basis of sex was legal. “There were no laws preventing employers from firing female employees if they were married or got pregnant, or from refusing to hire married women or mothers at all.”45 And, “once hired, working women, single or married, were discriminated against in pay, promotion, and daily treatment on the job. In 1963, women who worked full-time earned only 60 percent of what men earned; black women earned only 42 percent. On average, a woman with four years of college still earned less than a male high school graduate.”46 Discrimination against

42 Coontz, 5.

43 Coontz, 5.

44 Coontz, 4–8.

45 Coontz, 8.

46 Coontz, 10.
women applying for lines of credit was also legal, and in some states women could not open businesses in their own name without court approval.47

Despite the fact that they have direct bearing on women’s ability to pursue self-realization through education and careers outside the home, such issues make only minor appearances in The Feminine Mystique. This absence is consistent with a reading of Friedan as trying to minimize the importance of others’ actions upon women. For example, pay discrimination comes up only once in the original text of book, when Friedan observes how “subtle discrimination against women, to say nothing of the sex wage differential, is still an unwritten law today, and its effects are almost as devastating and as hard to fight as the flagrant opposition faced by [first-wave] feminists.” (272) There is no further discussion of how this relates to the larger problem of the feminine mystique, nor does Friedan call for legal reform. Similarly, some women Friedan interviews mention “the violent objections of their husbands”, but these “disappeared when they finally made up their own minds and went to work.” (483) And for those husbands “whose resistance is not so easily dispelled”, the problem is that the feminine mystique has him trapped in “the infantile phantasy of having an ever-present mother”. The answer is more assertiveness from the woman so “he will suddenly wake up and see her again.” (484) The problems of legal discrimination and violence merely disappear in the face of women’s determination to self-actualize. Friedan is silent on how to respond should this fail to succeed, or should the violence escalate.

However, one implication of Friedan’s adaptation of the Maslovian framework is that, because physical security is the second-lowest need in the Maslovian schema, women

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47 Coontz, 6–7.
subject to violence are in the similar situation as poor women: unable to need or seek self-realization.

Friedan also reverses the entire relationship between institutional barriers to women’s freedom and their self-realization; where once the feminine mystique had justified structural barriers and exclusions, now it caused them:

The logic of the feminine mystique redefined the very nature of woman’s problem. When woman was seen as a human being of limitless potential, equal to man, anything that kept her from realizing her full potential was a problem to be solved: barriers to higher education and political discrimination or prejudice in law or morality. But now that woman is seen only in terms of her sexual role, the barriers to the realization of her full potential, the prejudices which deny her full participation in the world are no longer problems. The only problems now are those that might disturb her adjustment as a housewife. So career is a problem, education is a problem, political interest, even the very admission of women’s intelligence and individuality is a problem. And finally there is the problem that has no name, a vague undefined wish for “something more”. (114)

One way of reading this is as a call to return to the questions of prejudice and discrimination. But Friedan does not make such a call in the book. Instead, the problem that needs to be addressed first is the question of the feminine mystique and how to help women escape from it. The nature of the problem is reversed, such that the feminine mystique actually takes the place of the primary obstacle, and merely produces problematic behaviors and, possibly, institutions as a result. Eliminate the mystique, says
Friedan, and the other problems will follow suit. And, of course, the biggest problem to be addressed is that which stands apart from the others in the final sentence of this passage: the desire for self-realization. Friedan simplifies the relationship between institutional problems and the ideology of gender so that the former become mere products of the latter. From there, she is able to make fulfillment of the wish for “something more” the primary solution to “woman’s problem”.

Friedan’s minimization of gender discrimination and failure to call for institutional change is part of the larger problem of privileging sensation as the essence of, and solution to, women’s problem. My objections, then, to Friedan’s sensation-based account of women’s liberation are not just that she ignores important features of sexism, but that she actually encourages women’s ignorance of such problems to ensure their own experience of subjective integrity in the form of fulfillment. Attention to systemic, institutionalized sexism or to widespread, legally sanctioned violence which lie outside any individual woman’s ability to change is a form of being acted upon that persists despite any sensations of self-realization a woman may have. It also requires acting politically—that is, acting with others, and making oneself subject to being acted upon by them—in order to bring about larger systemic change.

To address the latter problem, the need for concerted political action to address entrenched sexism, women (and men) would have to pursue a political agenda that may not provide them with self-realization. Involvement in collective political action may require people to delay fulfilling their identities, because it first requires them to perform

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48 Friedan presents the same reverse-narrative in her discussion of Freud (184–7).
the kinds of unpleasant tedium that social movements require, and that resemble the very “busywork” Friedan condemns as part of the feminine mystique. Friedan’s criticism of volunteering applies equally well to this kind of political-organizational work: “Community work often expands in a kind of self-serving structure of committees and red tape... until its real purpose seems to be just to keep women busy.” (473) Of course, the drudgery of movement-building work is much less appealing than getting to follow one’s dreams of becoming an artist, actress, professional, or whatever else one finds most fulfilling. This unattractiveness comes about from the egalitarian mutuality that movements require if they are to persist and have any chance of success, but that is anathema to Friedan’s goal of self-realization.49 The only way this could be justified is as part of the “search for an identity” in which having overcome suffering redeems it. But the possibility of having to suffer through the tedium of political “busywork” that Friedan thinks intelligent, educated women should be exempt from is exacerbated in a political movement that does not guarantee the actualization of any individual’s vision for her liberation. Compromise and collaboration are at once the stuff of political movements and also a key way of adapting to others, of letting oneself be acted upon. This could be painful, and funs afoot of Friedan’s equation of adaptation with “forfeiting one’s life”.

The incompatibility between the unpleasant, even crisis-inducing, requirements of political action and Friedan’s goal of women’s self-realization means that structural sexism remains unaddressed. And yet, because it will not just vanish, even those women who are

49 The persistence of gender inequality in apportioning such tasks is one of the primary reasons women departed from New Left groups, contributing to their decline.
able to work toward self-fulfillment will nevertheless encounter discrimination and institutionalized sexism. To retain the positive sensations of self-realization in the face of collaborative political action, Friedan encourages women to remain ignorant of these larger, more deeply entrenched forms of sex hierarchy. This is a problem that has returned to haunt those like Linda Hirshman who have attempted to base their feminism on Friedan’s model of women’s liberation. Friedan’s call for women to have careers outside the home was remarkably successful, but it did little to change either the discrimination against women advancing higher up in their careers, or the undue burdens of childcare and housework that often made them less competitive in meeting the requirements of partnership in a law firm, or tenure in academia. The “second shift” of housework following paid work and the problems that flow from it are not, contra Friedan’s assertions, merely failures to prioritize career over motherhood or the inability to complete household tasks quickly enough.50 Instead, they are the product of larger sexist assumptions about what women should be doing, and about how women will act once they are hired. Instead of the feminine mystique creating discriminatory institutions, which would enable women to liberate themselves by pursuing a career alone, the two facets of women’s oppression exist in a mutually reinforcing relationship, each contributing to and justifying the other.

It may be the case that, as Friedan implies, women abiding by the feminine mystique reproduce such barriers to equality. But she does not explicitly make ending them a reason for women to abandon the mystique, nor does she provide any information for how women who want to escape the mystique should respond to them. What remains the point of

women’s new life plans is their own self-fulfillment, not larger systemic or institutional change that may benefit all women, even if Friedan also seems to want the barriers to end. As we shall see, this also leaves at a loss those women who are unable to pursue their own fulfillment because of institutional barriers or discrimination against them, as well as those who are unable to pursue their visions of self-realization because of class, race, or disability.
CHAPTER 2

JENNIFER NEDELSKY: SUFFERING AND CYCLES OF AUTONOMY

INTRODUCTION

The last two decades have witnessed a renewed interest in autonomy, especially on the part of feminist theorists. As part of this trend, feminists have questioned the previous bases for determining who was (and could be) autonomous and which actions were undertaken autonomously. Women’s lives have challenged dominant theories of autonomy, because the oppressive conditions of women’s socialization differ from the conditions of socialization of the men by whom, about whom, and for whom such theories have been developed. As a result, “feminist theorists... have pointed to the male-bias of conceptions of autonomy that, on the one hand, call for self-sufficiency, substantive independence, and dispassionate rational reflection, and on the other hand, presuppose a disembodied, tightly unified, and transparent self.”¹ In response to these challenges, feminist theorists of autonomy have redefined autonomy so that it can arise out of oppression, and in many theories, can enable women to challenge that oppression. This has increased the role for suffering and other forms of subjective disruption in feminist theories of women’s autonomous agency.

One of the most common feminist approaches to autonomy has been relational autonomy, which seeks to establish new ways of defining and evaluating autonomy that

focus more on relationships. This chapter will look at one account of relational autonomy, Jennifer Nedelsky’s *Law’s Relations*, one of the lengthiest treatments of the topic, and one that takes seriously the need for disruption in the development of women’s political agency.² For Nedelsky, autonomy is central to women’s capacity for political agency, and exists in a positively cyclical relationship with women’s equality, each furthering the other. This chapter will look at the way that Nedelsky’s account of relationality attempts to incorporate suffering into the agency–equality relationship, but nevertheless sees it as an antagonist of women’s autonomy and with it, their political agency. As a result of the containment that results from this characterization of suffering, Nedelsky theorizes individuals who are less relational than she assumes, and whose agency may reinforce inequality rather than challenge it.

Relational autonomy has entailed criticizing, even rejecting, the historic means by which autonomy was credited to a person, such as rationality, material independence, and conformity to the normative expectations of a heterosexual, masculine life plan.³ Relational-autonomy theorists tend to replace these requirements for autonomy with

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either a set of mental procedures on the part of the autonomous subject, or the subject's possessing some substantive knowledge attitude toward their own lives and/or the oppressive gender norms that structure those lives. But in the absence of tangible or material metrics, feminist autonomy-theorists encounter a problem analogous to the one Friedan did in *The Feminine Mystique*: the epistemological problem of evaluating a person's autonomy (or lack thereof). That is: How does one know that someone has the necessary knowledge, attitude, or mental procedure—and that she is acting from that mental state (instead of merely believing she is)—that autonomy requires? And even if we could so answer that question, how do we know that we, the evaluators, are correct in our beliefs about the proper, "autonomous" attitude or mental processes? Answering these questions allows people to understand their own relationship to norms and institutions, and to evaluate their lives and actions under those systems; and it is also important for those interested in helping people to attain freedom under conditions of normative and

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4 These two alternatives are usually labeled “procedural” or “content-neutral” and “substantive”; see Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, "Introduction: Autonomy Refigured," in Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, eds., *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000): 3–31. Friedman's work is an example of the former, while Paul Benso's work is an example of the latter; see Paul Benson, "Autonomy and Oppressive Socialization", *Social Theory and Practice* 17 (1991), 385–408. Andrea Westlund argues for a substance-neutral autonomy, but one that requires engagement with external others' criticism instead of an internal mental process; see Andrea C. Westlund, "Rethinking Relational Autonomy", *Hypatia* 24, no. 4 (Fall 2009), 26–49. Nedelsky rejects both standards as adequate by themselves (59–61).
institutional constraint.\(^5\) It is also central to the question of women’s *political* agency, because answering these questions is central to any account of change to the sex/gender hierarchy, as well as changes to other oppressive hierarchies that intersect with it.

Nedelsky’s account of relational autonomy endeavors to surmount the epistemic challenge of feminist autonomy by emphasizing autonomy’s relationality and its nature as a never-ending process. That is, autonomy is not simply the achievement of a teleological end, as self-realization is for Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique*; instead, it is a “lifelong process” (124) of changing the relationships, institutions, and structures that constitute a person and her life. This process must continue to improve the individual’s understanding of her own life and the relationships, etc., that constitute it; in turn, this improved understanding will better enable her to be a creative collaborator in the shape that her life, including her life-constituting relationships, takes. Thus, unlike Friedan, Nedelsky holds the process of becoming agentic to be an iterated one, in which people with subjective integrity are disrupted, sometimes through suffering, only to restore their integrity. Through this cycle, which provides a greater role for suffering than Friedan’s more linear process, women increase their political agency. But while the increased role for suffering in Nedelsky’s relational autonomy is an improvement over Friedan’s account, Nedelsky nevertheless persists in temporally containing suffering, and so fails to develop an account of fully relational selfhood, one that generates agency that challenges sex/gender hierarchy.

and promotes equality in the way that Nedelsky wants women’s political agency to.\(^6\) An account of agency premised on fully relational individuals and dedicated to equality must forgo suffering’s containment and allow for it to coexist with agency, or it must admit that it is retaining a core individualistic subjectivity that must not be sacrificed for the purposes of equality when the two conflict.

**Agency, Autonomy, and Equality in Law’s Relations**

Nedelsky’s relational understanding of persons means that individuals both draw on and seek to change the relationships that constitute them. For Nedelsky, exercises in individual agency are expressions of an innate capacity and desire for self-expression that will, given the opportunity, tend toward equality. These individual exercises are motivated by a response to recurrent disruptions of subjectivity that people encounter, often in the form of suffering. Similar to Friedan’s account of self-realization, according to Nedelsky overcoming this disruption enables the attainment of autonomy, a necessary component of individual agency; yet unlike for Friedan, this overcoming and the autonomy it generates is never final, but must always re-occur upon encountering new sources of disruption. It is

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\(^6\) Although Nedelsky also writes about equality for other groups, including people of color, persons with disabilities, gay and lesbian people, and the poor, much of her focus is on women, and it is regarding questions of gender that she does much of her substantive theorizing about equality. She also states (6) that her relational approach comes out of feminist theories of autonomy, and it is in that context that I am interested in it. For these reasons, I shall be treating Law’s Relations as a feminist text, and will refer to it as developing a theory of women’s political agency, although I recognize that it is not solely about women, and that different hierarchical systems have different qualities that make simple translation across them difficult.
the cyclical movement between disruption and its containment that is the motor of socio-
political structural changes in Nedelsky’s theory, including the production of greater
sex/gender equality.

Nedelsky places structures of sex/gender hierarchy into the category of
relationships, which are nested within one another, beginning with the intimately personal:
“Intimate relations, such as spousal relationships, are shaped by societal structures of
relationship such as those formally shaped by family law as well as powerful informal
norms of gender roles.... Each set of relations is nested in the next, and all interact with
each other. Relational selves shape and are shaped by all interactions” (31). Nedelsky’s
project is to develop a relational account of individuals, including their rights, equality,
freedom, agency and autonomy. Because “relationships are constitutive, yet not
determining” (31) of persons’ selves, it becomes possible for those persons to act upon
their relationships, and by extension, to reshape them according to their own desires,
values, and imagination—which are themselves relational. Importantly for my purposes in
this chapter, one of Nedelsky’s interests is in the capacity to restructure sex/gender
relationships and structures in order to decrease violence against women and increase
their autonomy, safety, and dignity. She does this not by proposing an escape from
relationships, but rather through restructuring relationships, to promote women’s
relationship-altering agency, and, ultimately, their equality (307–8).

Nedelsky expresses this sense of agency in the form of “interactive self-
creation” (166) in the phrase “the capacity for creative interaction”, of which autonomy is
the central (though not sole) component:
Human beings have the capacity to create something new, something that (in this particular form) did not exist before, that was not simply determined by what preceded it, that could not have come into being but for the act of creation, the exercise of autonomy that transformed what had previously existed into something new. (170)

Thus, although Nedelsky argues that numerous values are part of the capacity for creative interaction (166),

that potential also requires the possibility of new engagement, breaking or transforming received patterns, giving rise to and acting on one’s own distinctive perceptions, insights, and forms of engagement. This is the dimension of creative interaction captured by the idea of autonomy. (167)

Autonomy, in turn, is the uniquely individual set of “values, limits, orders, even commands” that is the result of a process of “finding one’s own law” (123). For Nedelsky, this “finding one’s own law” is an unending, iterative process by which one comes to reflect upon the values in one’s life to determine how one is to live, as well as providing a means by which one can evaluate the relationships in one’s life. For Nedelsky, autonomy is also the appropriate word to capture women’s capacity to resist and change gender relationships (again, including large-scale societal structures and institutions) even under oppressive conditions:

This concept thus has inherent tensions between the idea of autonomy as both originating with oneself and being conditioned and shaped by one’s social context. Those tensions are the tensions of feminism, as of all theories that take seriously both individual freedom and social embeddedness. The word “autonomy” is thus a suitable vehicle for achieving feminist objectives. (124)
In sum, relational autonomy forms the basis of the capacity for women to perceive and act anew—i.e., the capacity for creative interaction. For the purposes of feminism, this capacity for creativity can be directed back upon the gendered relationships that constitute women (and men), thus giving women political agency.

*Autonomy: Cycles of Disruption and Containment*

The tension between internally originating autonomy and socially conditioned autonomy is what enables people to have the kind of agency that is necessary for producing social change, and so argues against a pre-determined division between an interior self and the outside world. Instead, Nedelsky gives us a dynamic model by which it is possible for individuals to selectively incorporate the outside into the inside—or, in Nedelsky’s language, to “come to be able to find and live in accordance with one’s own law” (123). In Nedelsky’s description of autonomy, it is an individual’s reflection, development, and affirmation (123) of “shared social norms, values, and concepts” (124) that enables one to become autonomous, that is to claim some set of those norms, values, and concepts as “one’s own law”. As we shall see, this occurs as a cycle of external disruption and the individual’s overcoming of that disruption through reflection and judgment and the restoration of subjective integrity. From there, the individual can then act upon those relationships that had acted upon them, leading to, in Nedelsky’s account, even greater autonomy and equality.

The need for greater openness to subjective disruption is evident in Nedelsky’s use of spatial and property metaphors for autonomy, specifically in the centrality of boundaries as the foundation for autonomous personhood. Criticism of the metaphor begins with criticism of the object of comparison, in this case, property. According to Nedelsky, the U.S.
Constitution gave rise to a popular and legal understanding of rights and autonomous selfhood through property ownership and protection. Owing to this property basis, autonomy developed as “a picture of human beings that envisions their freedom and security in terms of bounded spheres” (92)—specifically, *materially* bounded spheres, i.e., property. In the U.S., in legal thought and popular thinking alike, the capacity for autonomy is intimately linked, even at times equated, with the protection for private property and, by extension, material inequality. At the time of the U.S. Constitution’s drafting, “property was important for the exercise of liberty, and liberty required the free exercise of property rights; this free exercise would inevitably lead, in turn, to an unequal distribution of property” (94). As Nedelsky observes, this association between the concepts persists today, and continues to justify limitations on the intrusion of government and other individuals through the enforcement of inviolable boundaries as the prerequisite for autonomy.

But for Nedelsky, the “boundary is destructive as a central metaphor for addressing the real problems of autonomy” (92), because “neither the ‘bounded self’ nor the ‘boundaries of state power’ are optimal concepts for articulating or protecting core values, such as autonomy or equality” (91). The most important feature of property in prevailing conceptions of autonomy is the way that it bounds a protected sphere for the individual that is essential to his autonomy. “In the American tradition of constitutionalism, property has served as a powerful symbol of rights as limits to government”, that, when translated into popular conceptions of the role of rights, results in “an image of property as a source of security, the sacredness of which acts as a barrier even to the power of the state” (92). She continues:
This conception is, in turn, a part of a deeper phenomenon: the focus on boundaries as the means of comprehending and securing the basic values of freedom or autonomy. The importance of property in American constitutionalism both reflects and exacerbates the problems of boundary as a central metaphor in the legal rhetoric of freedom. (92)

This conception of autonomy as bounded sphere, grounded in property as an apt model, serves to undermine the actual attainment of autonomy because it fails to account for the myriad relationships that both permit property ownership and that persist even despite its realization. “What is essential to the development of autonomy is not protection against intrusion, but constructive relationship. The central question then for inquiries into autonomy (legal or otherwise) is how to structure relationships so that they foster rather than undermine autonomy” (98). Linking autonomy to bounded property prevents such relational thinking because "the boundary metaphor does not direct our attention to this question. Instead it invites us to imagine that the self to be protected is, in some crucial sense, insular and that what is most important to the preservation of such a self is drawing boundaries around it that will protect it from invasion” (98). This linkage undermines autonomy in two ways: first, the emphasis on property-protection “never actually led to autonomy for all”; and second, it ignores how “property rights have in fact been subject to a great deal of state interference and to redefinition that amounted to destruction” (132).

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7 Nedelsky also observes that the boundaries have become important to thinking about autonomy outside legal contexts, for example, in feminist and child-development literatures (99–107). She relies on Andrea Dworkin’s discussion of intercourse as an example of the former; I shall return to her discussion of Dworkin below.
Nedelsky proposes the abolition of the boundary metaphor, especially its need for exclusion and protection from others, with one that acknowledges how “people develop their values, predispositions, interests, and autonomy—indeed, their identity—in large part out of these relations” (132) with those others. In particular, this requires de-naturalizing the boundary as the basis for our understanding of individuals, not just property but the other ontological basis for boundaries, the body. While “most people in North America experience themselves as individuals with natural and essential boundaries to their physical selves”, and this sense of boundedness “then forms the basis for the metaphoric structure of such concepts as boundary and in-out”; Nedelsky argues that this sense is not essential in the way we think it is, the result of “experiences of our bodies [that] are unmediated through culture and language and thus concept and metaphor” (111). Instead, such an ontology ignores how “our bounded bodies could not function as living beings without the constant exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide, not just through the nose and mouth but also through the very boundary itself: the skin” (111). Just as we need to foreground the state’s role in defining and shaping property, instead of simply protecting it, so too do we need to think about the constitution of the body by the environment. By extending our rethinking of human bodies and property via metaphor to a rethought self, Nedelsky summarizes, “our new conception will focus on the complexities of the interpenetration of individual and collective”, particularly through “boundary-dissolving metaphors” (115). Among these, Nedelsky highlights the “oceanic feeling” of “an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world” (112).\(^8\) By focusing on openness to

\(^8\) Nedelsky is quoting from Keller, *From a Broken Web.*
our relationships instead of protecting ourselves from them, Nedelsky believes that we can better understand, and so act upon, the relationships that constitute us.

In turning to the spatial metaphor, we see how Nedelsky seeks to increase the role of disruption, especially suffering, in developing agency. Boundaries not only protect individuals from invading others, they also “protect the seemingly overwhelming responsibility that would flow from a recognition of unity” (116). This “particularly frightening form of the ‘oceanic feeling’ ” is an expression of how “(most) people in North America fear being ‘invaded,’ ‘taken over,’ not just by threats but by also by demands—the overpowering demands of those in pain and hunger all around us” (116). Here we see how prevailing accounts of autonomy qua protected, bounded selfhood are grounded in the often unacknowledged containment of suffering (alongside the often literal containment of sufferers outside our borders). Without this containment, their suffering and the claims that may flow from it would disrupt who we think we are and what we believe we owe to others. The disruption of suffering would, for example, make us aware of the alienness of our attitudes toward property-ownership and our complicity in material inequality.

In Nedelsky’s model, what follows the experience of disruption through encounters with others (whether as sufferers or respondents to one’s own suffering) is a re-evaluation of both those experiences and the current contents of one’s own law in light of that disruption. For Nedelsky, this occurs through judgment, which she describes as the essential activity of becoming autonomous: “to decide which of the values one has grown up with to make ‘one’s own,’ one must exercise judgment” (58). Judgment involves the finding of one’s own law, or the selective uptake of external experiences, viewpoints,
values, etc., into one’s internally given law, which in turn enables us to become better at discerning how we treat future experiences:

One can learn to exercise judgment well, to use the perspectives of others to become conscious of one’s presuppositions and biases.... As we use the perspectives of others to liberate ourselves from our private idiosyncrasies, we become free to make valid judgments. Indeed, I see a reciprocal relation between judgment and autonomy. Each requires the other, and experience with one enhances the other: as we exercise judgment about the values we want to embrace, we become more fully autonomous; as we become more fully autonomous, our capacity for judgment increases. (59)

Despite this mutually reinforcing relationship between autonomy and the capacity for judgment, the latter never promises certainty about whether or not our own law is either right or truly our own. Further experiences could challenge our sense of ourselves:

The longing for certainty, and for theories that purport to offer it, seems powerful. Perhaps this is especially so with respect to what we call ‘our own.’ But all that we can do is understand what fosters our capacity for judgment and the reciprocal capacity for autonomy. We can then do both the personal work, such as expanding our capacity for judgment through engaging with the perspectives of others, and the institutional work of structuring relations to foster these capacities for all. (59)

In the failure of judgment to provide certainty, and thus in autonomy’s uncertain basis, we can see the expanded role that Nedelsky gives to subjective disruption, including suffering, in agency. By rejecting certainty from judgment, Nedelsky pushes for greater engagement with others’ perspectives, rather than allowing a settled or stable definition of what is “our own law” that would protect us from the potential for disruption from such engagements.
In one example that she gives of such disruption in her own life, Nedelsky relates how she became aware of her complicity in homelessness in her description of an experience when she was a young adult,

visiting Philadelphia for a job interview in the political science department at the University of Pennsylvania. I was crossing a busy street with the chair of the department on our way to an appointment. In the middle of the street, right in front of me, a manhole cover opened and a man climbed out of it. I stopped in shock. The chair hurried me on, saying casually that the man lived down there. (24)

Nedelsky’s initial disruption at the (assumed) suffering of the homeless man she encountered in Philadelphia changed her understanding of herself, revealing the relationship that existed between him and herself, one shaped by institutions like private property, that partly determines both their lives:

Even if I am not always conscious of it, I know that there is a direct relationship between my legally protected right to exclude even a cold and hungry person from my home and that person being on the street.... My right to exclude creates an asymmetrical relation of power and advantage between me and the homeless person, and it creates a relation of responsibility—in this case an absence of (legal) responsibility on my part for her immediate well-being. (24)

She argues that a change to ways of thinking, from an individualist mind-set that focuses on individual control and boundary-protection to a relational approach, must occur so that people will be more aware of and alter their relationships. “Habits of relational thought will make it easier to see the interconnection and thus to accept the urgency of stopping the harm that causes such acute suffering to many and harm to all who live in the societies that
tolerate it” (25). By making such relational perspectives part of “one’s own law”, one will pursue changes to relationships that will increase autonomy for currently impoverished or marginalized others. To address problems like homelessness, or violence against women and children, we must first change our conception of autonomy. As we can see in the example of Nedelsky’s encounter with the homeless man, suffering can play a central role in changing habits of thought to make them more relational, and so improve their autonomy.

It is not only engagement with others’ suffering that has the power to generate habits. One’s own suffering can also be a source of disruption, often because it again forces one to seek others for help with that suffering. Another example of suffering that disrupts Nedelsky’s sense of herself and so makes possible her finding her own law is suffering that she experiences because of chronic fatigue syndrome (CFS): “In the beginning I devoted a lot of energy to trying to find psychological causes for the fatigue.... But I’m not sure that psychological causes really had anything to do with the fatigue. And as long as my approach was to find a psychological cause, I did think of it as somehow my fault” (289). Nedelsky initially refused to allow herself, especially her senses of control and responsibility and her relationship to her body, to be disrupted by her illness. She clung to her old notions of autonomy and the values she abided by until she “finally saw a family doctor—a very sympathetic doctor who had suffered from what he called postviral fatigue syndrome himself” (289)—and changed her attitude toward the disease, and ultimately, her relationship with her body. “I shifted my energies from trying to find out why I was feeling this way to figuring out what I needed to do to feel all right. I wasn’t trying to change my symptoms; I was trying to give my body what it needed, given my symptoms” (289; italics
in original). Again, this disruption occasioned a reflection on what Nedelsky wanted to claim as her own law:

I used the enforced rest to pay attention to my dreams, turn inward, and be contemplative. I learned a lot from this period, and I think I was able to benefit from the rest and contemplation in part because I was not constantly trying to understand my symptoms or cure them. I was in an ongoing state of reflection, not (generally) an attempt at control. (290)

And, as in the case of homelessness, this also entailed a change in her conception of autonomy to one that included—even required—relationships that permitted her recovery (including “the vast flexibility of an academic job” and “an insurance plan that covered all the expenses except the naturopath” [290]) and dependence on others for assistance:

I believe I should take credit for finding a variety of excellent body/psyche/soul workers who helped me enormously in learning from the experience. And I can claim responsibility for the ways in which what I did took a kind of hard work, courage, and perseverance. But it does not detract from that to know that I could not have done this work alone (290).

Again, the disruption brought about by her suffering was necessary to Nedelsky’s becoming more autonomous. It was through allowing herself to be disrupted that she could begin the work of reflecting on and finding her own law. But neither could Nedelsky have accomplished this on her own; it depended, in the first instance, on the doctor who helped reframe her perceptions of her illness and her relationship to her body.9 But, in Nedelsky’s

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9 In the case of CFS, given its debated status in medical communities, both as regards its aetiology and proper treatment, finding a sympathetic physician is even more key, and underscores Nedelsky’s point about properly structured relationships as the foundation of autonomy. A less sympathetic doctor, or one who had
own telling, this opened her up to greater receptivity to and willingness to be disrupted by her body, which will continue to make finding her own law possible.

In both the case of her encounter with the homeless man, and with her own illness, we can see how suffering disrupted Nedelsky's own account of her life, including the relationships that structure it. But these experiences contributed to autonomy and agency only after she decided to change the contents of her own law. So, in the case of her illness, this meant foregoing the desires for control and the ability to “do it all” and the antagonism she felt for her body. Part of this change to her own law involved the end of her suffering and the restoration of her subjective integrity, her ability to end her panic and “relax into the situation” (290). Nedelsky's overcoming the antagonism of her suffering in the form of symptoms was also her coming into subjective integrity, and with it, the autonomous capacity for creative interaction.

**Inequality and Autonomy**

So far, we have seen how autonomy, and with it agency, is produced through engagement with others’ perspectives, the exercise of judgment upon those perspectives, and the modification of one’s own law in light of that judgment. Because of the uncertainty of judgment it is also a cycle that moves between subjective disruption and the restoration of subjective integrity. These two poles of the cycle, disruption and integrity, are also where

not experienced a similar illness, may not have been able to help Nedelsky and may even have exacerbated her condition. See Smaranda Ene, "Faces of Fatigue: Ethical Considerations on the Treatment of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome", *AJOB Neuroscience* 4, no. 3 (Jul–Sep 2013), 22–6.
we can see two groups of people that fail to be autonomous, and so fail to have full agency; these two groups are also at opposite ends of a social hierarchy: those who are too controlling, and those who lack control. At the top of the hierarchy are those powerful persons who remain ignorant of the relationships that constitute themselves, and wrongly assume their own independence. Their own laws are thus not adequately open to revision through judgment, because they refuse to engage with the perspectives of others, or in my language, they refuse to allow themselves to be disrupted. At the lower end of the hierarchy are those persons who are too other-determined, often because they lack the power to live according to their own laws. For these people, they cannot exercise judgment because they do not have their own law, and so cannot effectively incorporate others’ experiences into it. Both groups, Nedelsky maintains, must be disabused of their self-misunderstandings if they are to begin the process of becoming agents, entering the cycle of disruption and integrity. It is in her treatment of the latter group in particular, the powerless who lack their own law, that Nedelsky reveals how suffering, while it can have a role in generating autonomy and so agency, nevertheless is antagonistic to them and so must be contained. It is also here that we begin to see the problems that Nedelsky encounters in trying to articulate a sense of agency that is relational and equality-promoting while also protecting individuals’ deeply held values, preferences, and desires.

Before moving on to my critical claims, I want to first reconstruct Nedelsky’s two groups in greater detail, and show how the suffering of the less powerful is an antagonist to their agency in need of containment. While, as outlined above, their suffering (and other forms of disruption) can always recur in the cyclical process of their becoming more agentic, it nevertheless must resolve into subjective integrity to complete that iteration of
the process. In the first case, Nedelsky is interested in doing away with popular notions of autonomy that wrongly equated it with control or independence:

People can best exercise their autonomous capacities for creative interaction when they relinquish control as a goal. Seeking control is not a path to autonomy, and control is not a component of autonomy.... Control is not a respectful stance toward others with a capacity for autonomy. Indeed, the link between autonomy and control (and independence) is also a link to domination: the illusion of control and independence can only be sustained through domination. (277)

The problem with people who confuse control or independence for autonomy is their failure to engage with the relationships and values that structure their lives because they refuse to adequately take up the experiences, roles, and viewpoints of others, and instead treat them disrespectfully by ignoring or discounting them. “Those in relative positions of power learn to see themselves as autonomous, which means learning to be blind to their multiple forms of dependence and interdependence” (138). This is failure to perform the right kind of labor upon the proper materials because “the model of autonomy as control precludes true intersubjective exchange with other people” (298), that is, to properly reflect upon and incorporate the others’ experiences into one’s sense of self. Only by having a proper sense of the extent of her dependence upon others can a person actually have the necessary empirical knowledge about the relationships that condition herself in order to evaluate the values those relationships instantiate. This, in turn, depends upon heeding the experiences of others, which requires assuming their capacity for autonomy, including their ability “to see situations clearly, make good judgments, and feel competent to act” (141). For those who mistake themselves as autonomous because they mistakenly believe
they are independent, their labor must begin at re-forming their sense of themselves in order to recognize that they are mutually dependent upon others and that this dependence does not diminish anyone’s autonomy. Rather, it is only by failing to see the dependence for its necessity and value that autonomy is undermined.

In the second case, which complements the first (insofar as it is often produced by it [297]), individuals are prevented from becoming autonomous because the relationships they are in generate internal conditions that prevent them from finding their own law. “Feelings of powerlessness and helplessness are not conducive to autonomy” (135) because they may prevent the person experiencing them from performing the kind of reflection that is necessary for finding her own law. Similarly, “experiencing one’s life as ‘out of control’ is a sign that one’s autonomy is not thriving, and having others control one’s life is inconsistent with autonomy” (277), again because it decreases the likelihood that one is able to properly engage in the kind of reflection necessary for autonomy. Unless one engages in the kinds of self-conscious labor upon the values that drive one’s life, one is not autonomous (135). Frequently, the fear, powerlessness, helplessness, or out-of-control feelings that a person experiences are the products of a relationship that has a material component, whether that is physical violence or material deprivation. And yet, despite the efforts of dominant groups to control subordinates including through fear-inducing violence and poverty, “the control will never be complete, and the others will resist in some ways. Resistance to domination and control is reasonable and probable” (298; see also 137). This resistance makes autonomy possible because it means that one is able to come to a point of self-consciousness and reflect upon the values one wants to claim as one’s own, and those that are alien and to be rejected:
One might unconsciously resist external demands and expectations that are in accord with one’s own values, but that is still at quite a remove from full autonomy. Self-consciousness is an aid to autonomy as well as a component of it. Self-consciousness assists in recognizing when one is allowing one’s life to be driven by fear, or anxiety, or values that are not really one’s own. Self-consciousness is important because, as with fear or anxiety, one can experience constraints that are self-imposed rather than externally imposed, which nevertheless interfere with one’s autonomy. (135)

Fear and anxiety are not completely exclusive of autonomy, and neither are the relationships that produce them.

Nedelsky repeatedly returns to examples of those in destructive relationships whose autonomy is threatened, such as women in abusive relationships (173–83). Unlike those who are not autonomous because they wrongly believe themselves to be independent or in control, those who live in a state of fear, anxiety, helplessness, or powerlessness—all experiences that Nedelsky sees as threats to autonomy—do not need to be disrupted. Instead, they need to contain that disruption by recognizing their capacity for autonomy and resistance. In some cases, “‘all’ they need to do is recognize that the source of constraint is internal”, including becoming aware of how, “as with fear or anxiety, one can experience constraints that are self-imposed rather than externally imposed, which nevertheless interfere with one’s autonomy” (135). Of course, with her placement of “all” in quotation marks, Nedelsky is signalling that recognition of the fear, anxiety, or other negative sensations that govern one’s life is no simple task, and is shaped—although not determined—by one’s relationships:

Constructive relationships make it possible for autonomy to develop and thrive, and thus it is important to understand how institutions and ideas
affect the relevant relationships. But that does not mean that people who live within oppressive relationships of domination, and even abuse, are devoid of autonomy... People are resilient, relationships are multiple and complex, and people are able to call upon inner resources developed in other contexts when they are faced with terrible external constraints and dangers (136–7).

Again: although it may be difficult; although we should not expect it to just happen in oppressive relationships; and although oppressed and abused persons will require our assistance to do so, it is possible for any person to become autonomous regardless of their material circumstance. As we saw above, this must be the case because autonomy is what enables people to change their relationships; it is the source of their agency for Nedelsky. What I want to highlight here is the way that, in Nedelsky’s description, this constrains the role of disruptions like suffering to an inaugural role, that is one that prompts the kind of reflection necessary for autonomy, but that is ultimately incompatible with autonomy and so must be overcome, contained to those initial stages of pre-autonomy (or decreased autonomy for the already autonomous person). In this sense, disruption provides the material upon which the person becoming autonomous must labor upon to make part of themselves, or else reject as external. We can see this in the example of Nedelsky’s illness discussed above; in her description, she initially “felt helpless and very scared that [she]”

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10 This includes fear of others and the desire to distance ourselves or conquer those others and objects, which does not eliminate those fears but rather tries to disavow them. Real autonomy, Nedelsky says, requires overcoming our fear of subjectively external others and objects—including our fear of our bodies as alien impositions on our independent selves—through admission of our relationality, including our dependence (see, e.g., 298–9).
would never be all right again” (289), and it was through both her recovery and her
overcoming of her despair that she was able to find her own law as regards her
relationship with her body. Through “hard work, courage, and perseverance”—and the
help of others—helplessness yielded to “a genuine, autonomous capacity to shape and
create” (290).  

This points to the subjective change that is at the heart of Nedelsky’s account of
autonomy, and thus is key to her understanding of political agency: “Neither conceptual nor
institutional transformation will take hold unless there is a corresponding transformation
in the subjective experience of autonomy” (133). This is true for those who wrongly see
themselves as independent and thus autonomous, for whom a relational conception of
autonomy “involves a deep change in their sense of themselves” (138). It is true as well for
those whom they dominate, who must “call upon inner resources developed in other
contexts” (137) and become self-conscious about the role of domination in their lives, and
so gain awareness of their capacity to reject the values it imposes on them. The solution to
both of these problems, then, is both a change to the relationships that inhibit individuals’
participation in the judgment–autonomy cycle that generates agency. However, I find that
Nedelsky’s containment of suffering to an antagonistic role undermines the potential for

11 This also maps on to the necessary changes to the popular conception of “autonomy as independence”.

“When this is the image of the proper adult member of society, those excluded from it will suffer. When such a
misguided image of autonomy is a central marker of full, competent adulthood, both equality and the actual
value of autonomy call out for a reconception that can embrace dependency” (43), a reconception that will,
for Nedelsky, mitigate the suffering of those now wrongly excluded from autonomous adulthood.
people at either extreme of the hierarchy to more fully realize their agency. Instead, I maintain that suffering can play a greater role than Nedelsky allows—indeed, in many cases, it may have to—by coexisting alongside agency, while contributing to it.

**Autonomy without Agency. Agency without Equality**

Having examined in detail the way that Nedelsky’s conception of autonomy functions and its relationship to inequality, I now want to return to its relationship to women’s political agency and her goal of greater equality. I find that the limited role suffering has in Nedelsky’s account of agency both limits agency’s equality-generating potential and its relationality. This is a problem because it excludes women who suffer from agency in a feminist movement that seeks, as Nedelsky does, to change the relationships that simultaneously cause their suffering and constitute their inequality. This not only undermines Nedelsky’s claims that anyone, even the most oppressed, can have at least some measure of autonomy in their lives; it also perpetuates an inequality within feminism that reserves agency to elite women while treating suffering women as objects of the formers’ agentic decisions and activities. Conversely, for those who do have agency as Nedelsky describes it, the autonomous capacity for creative interaction, I find that it is insufficient to challenge inequality, including sex/gender hierarchy. Instead, Nedelsky’s conception of autonomous agency could also be satisfied through merely subjective changes—the end of suffering or disruption—that occur through adjustment to persistent and seemingly intractable oppression, instead of through the end (or mitigation) of that oppression. This is a problem for the inaugural, antagonistic role that Nedelsky assigns disruption, especially suffering. But this potential for agency to perpetuate rather than
challenge inequality also reveals that Nedelsky’s relationality is potentially more limited than she acknowledges. The antagonism between suffering and agency reveal the persistence of a core self that must be protected from disruption if they are to retain the miraculous ability for creativity, that “spontaneity, the imagination of the new [that] comes from within the actor, (enabled by her relational web)” (49).

*Sufferers’ Agency and the Problem of Inequality within Feminism*

I want to first address the problem of the non-agency of sufferers in *Law’s Relations*. As we saw above, Nedelsky argues that those who suffer disruption—those who feel helpless, powerless, anxious or afraid—are unlikely to be autonomous, and by extension, are unlikely to be agentic. Thus, despite Nedelsky’s claims that autonomy is possible for even the most oppressed or deprived person, and that this autonomy is the basis for their capacity to alter the relationships that condition them, there are few examples of abused or dominated persons actually *being* autonomously agentic in *Law’s Relations*.12 We do not

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12 The one exception to this is in her discussion of battered women who kill their abusers, and here it remains unclear whether such cases represent autonomous action and what the legal implications of this would be: “It seems likely that in many cases a fair assignment of responsibility would require attention both to external realities—of threat, violence, failure of protection, financial constraints, lack of support, such as housing—and to the impairment of her autonomy caused by the combination of her relationship to the batterer and those social failures” (182). Insofar as Nedelsky is calling for greater attention to “society’s consistent, long-standing structural failure to provide protection against violence” (182) against women, it remains unclear how relational autonomy is necessary for that analysis, instead of a threat to it. Finally, and most important for our purposes here, it is not clear that, in cases in which abused women *do* kill their abusers and it *is* an exercise in
actually know what their autonomy looks like or what those of us who are not similarly situated should do in response to their autonomy, besides working in some way to restructure societal relationships to further that autonomy. But how dominated or abused persons and those persons who are autonomous agents should bring their projects together—and what this will mean for our own autonomy—is left unspecified.

While Nedelsky persists in a relational analysis of, for example, gender violence and how to end it, in those chapters (primarily 5 and 8) where gender violence and gender equality are discussed, autonomy does not appear. In part, this is because in these chapters, Nedelsky’s focus is on the second half of the virtuous cycle of autonomy–relationship–restructuring. For example, she opens Chapter 8 (308–61), titled “Restructuring Relations”, by highlighting the importance of restructuring relationships to increase autonomy:

The heart of my argument has been that values like equality or autonomy are made possible by the structures of relationship. Thus transformative projects, such as feminism, involve restructuring relations.... This chapter turns to a variety of scholars, each of whom provides an example of what it means to bring a relational analysis on the problem of violence against women. It also takes up some of the most important challenges to projects of restructuring relations through law. (307)

This treatment of autonomy, as an outcome of relationship changes and the object of societal and legal changes, is the primary way that Nedelsky invokes the term in this chapter. In most mentions there, “autonomy” occurs as one item in a list of other “core autonomy, that this is a useful example of agency that changes the "nested relationships" that Nedelsky is interested in changing.
values” (322) that legally restructured relationships should promote, alongside privacy, equality, security, sexual freedom, empowerment, dignity, and bodily integrity (see, e.g., 317; 322; 331; 351; 353). Similarly, when it comes to discussions of women who are in abusive relationships, “autonomy” appears only in the context of the “autonomy-impairing personal relationship” (311) and the “autonomy-impairing fear and dependency created by the relationship itself” (312). That is, for victims autonomy exists as that which is under threat and so the object of concern for legal reform. Despite her focus on producing relationship change, Nedelsky has little to say about how victims of violence actually exercise any autonomous agency in restructuring the relationships that victimize them. The agents on whom Nedelsky focuses are, instead, elites like policy-makers, lawyers and judges (see, e.g., 316); agents of the state like police and prosecutors (336); as well as men—and even they are not using their autonomy to bring about such changes (325).\(^\text{13}\)

The absence of autonomy in Nedelsky’s discussion of the substance of feminist politics, given the focus of the first part of the book, is problematic for its marginalization of

\(^{13}\) It is not that there are no accounts of victims engaging in actions in this chapter, but rather that those descriptions do not involve autonomous agency. For example, in her discussion of Sally Merry’s work, it is rights—and not autonomy—that do the work of ending violence and restructuring relationships. At the outset of her discussion of Merry, Nedelsky describes it as a “study of the role of rights in changing patterns of men’s violence against women who are their intimate partners” (318–9), and notes that, “in adopting the subjectivity of rights bearer, women enhance their power, their autonomy, and their safety” (319). Nedelsky leaves unclear how autonomy contributes to agency or the formation of a rights-bearing subjectivity, and thus to the restructuring of relations.
victims’ and other sufferers’ place in that politics. My worry is that this results in an elite-driven feminism in which those women who lack autonomy become the objects of actions of autonomously agentic women to reshape their relationships with an eye toward promoting the former’s equality, but without the need to treat them as already-agnostic collaborators in that process. So, while Nedelsky wants to give an account of agency that can restructure relationships to promote equality, her means of doing so depends upon inequality within feminism that, as many feminists have observed about elite-driven feminism, often reproduces that inequality instead of ameliorating it. For these feminists, such as Chanda Talpade Mohanty, the problem is the misidentification of such non-elite women (in Mohanty’s case, Third-World women) as passive, oppressed objects of sex/gender oppression.14 Similarly, feminists of color writing about the U.S. have commented on the white feminists’ appropriation of African American women’s experiences, but still remain at the center of defining what feminism is about: “once the other is present there is not institutional expectation that the other will or can contribute in any additional way.”15 The experiences of marginalized women are taken up by elite


feminists, but treated as objects of the latter’s actions, rather than treating the marginalized women as co-agents.\textsuperscript{16} I do not want to claim that this is the move that Nedelsky makes in the account of feminism she gives in the second half of \textit{Law’s Relations}; but I do find the absence of victims as autonomous agents in challenging, for example, sexual violence, to be more open to that possibility than Nedelsky acknowledges.

The inequality I find in Nedelsky’s account of feminism is a result of her privileging the restoration of subjective integrity as necessary to the completion of the cycle of autonomy generation/augmentation, and thus as essential to agency. This is part of her casting suffering as antagonistic to autonomy and containing it to the inaugural stage of that cycle. Those elite women on whom she focuses as agents of feminism, at least initially, need to treat the experiences of suffering women only as inputs into their own reflections and judgments, to be incorporated or not into the former’s own law.\textsuperscript{17} But the necessity of

\textsuperscript{16} Doing the latter may require those feelings that Nedelsky characterizes as at odds with autonomy. For example, Sharon Keller wrote to Marilyn Frye that it may be helpful “for white women to take seriously their [relative] helplessness” (qtd. in Marilyn Frye, “White Woman Feminist”, in Frye, \textit{Willful Virgin: Essays in Feminism, 1976–1992} [Freedom, Calif.: Crossing Press, 1992], 148) in addressing racial inequality. Insofar as part of taking seriously one’s own helplessness may entail feeling helpless (a feeling that Nedelsky characterizes as likely incompatible with autonomy), then it is possible that one can agnatically promote an egalitarian relationship that promotes equality with other women, while at the same time not feeling that those changes are autonomous, that is, originating from within.

\textsuperscript{17} This is also evident in the example of homelessness that we saw above; while Nedelsky’s encounter with the homeless man makes her aware of her reliance on, and potential complicity in, relations of exclusion and inequality, the voices of homeless people do not appear in \textit{Law’s Relations}. Thus, while Nedelsky is critical of current conceptions of property, hers “is not an argument for equality of property” (95); but it is possible that
restoring subjective integrity for autonomous agency provides good reason for already-autonomous women to shield themselves as much as possible from that which would deeply disrupt their senses of themselves, that which is most likely to undo them at a profound level and from which it is most difficult to restore their subjective integrity—especially when such disruption is likely to be negatively experienced. Such shielding, of course, is the opposite of Nedelsky’s goals, which are to promote a rethinking of autonomy that is strongly relational and not only recognizes the importance of others to agency, but even seeks out their perspectives to increase autonomy through improved judgment. But in her treatment of suffering women, we begin to see how a strong relationality is in tension with Nedelsky’s containment of suffering to an inaugural role, and how it tends to protect a core self that is less relational than the thorough-going relationality she otherwise insists on. Both of these problems become more evident when we turn to Nedelsky’s description of the creative agency of autonomous women.

*Autonomy and the Questionable Agency of Housework and Sex*

While I claimed above that Nedelsky does not provide examples of suffering women’s political agency, there are nevertheless examples of autonomous women throughout *Law’s Relations*. But her descriptions of such examples point to another problem with Nedelsky’s discussion of autonomy, namely, its openness to reproducing rather than challenging hierarchies, including the sex/gender hierarchy that lead to violence against women. To be clear, it is not that I think that autonomy cannot produce the

some homeless people would make such an argument, which should, if we want to take their agency seriously, challenge Nedelsky even more than she her initial engagement with the homeless man in Philadelphia did.
kind of agency that will challenge gender hierarchies; it is possible—likely, even—that in finding their own law, many women will come to recognize that their lives are determined by relationships and values inimical to them, and that they will then take the kinds of political actions to change them. My concern in this section is that autonomous agency could arise though changes to oppressed persons’ mental states without any resultant changes to their relationships, including their material circumstances. In pursuing autonomy through the exercise of agency as part of the assumed autonomy–equality cycle, a woman could end up autonomously pursuing greater inequality in her relationships. It is possible, even likely, that someone will come to find their inequality is part of their own law as an adaptation to a situation that they do not believe they can change. Women can leave a state of subjective disruptiveness—“powerlessness and helplessness” (135)—to come to “feel they are following an inner direction” (134) without actually becoming more powerful, equal, or politically agentic. Looking to the larger social relationships that are the object of Nedelsky’s political project, highly oppressive relationships, such as sex/gender hierarchy, are just as capable of being in accordance with one’s own law as are egalitarian ones. Instead, changes to the relationships that structure one’s own life may require disruption, say through alienation, that does not abate; changes to one’s relationships may feel like they come from external directions rather than from within, even as the person in question recognizes that they are for the best. But by presenting suffering only as an antagonist of agency, Nedelsky precludes this possibility.

One example of autonomy without equality in Law’s Relations is seemingly minor, but I find it representative of the larger problems I just identified. Among the examples of “the ordinariness of the capacity for creativity that matters the most” to her project,
Nedelsky includes “a new, attractive arrangement of furniture in a room, designing a
garden, or even just buying one plant and finding the right place for it” (48). These are, she
continues, the “small abilities that make life dynamic and joyful, as well as generate the
resilience to respond to extreme deprivation” (48). These domestic tasks of creativity are
the expressions of an autonomous agency that is also part of the response to adverse
conditions. But in addition to being an expression of autonomous agency that we should
celebrate, we may also want to worry about women’s over-reliance on the domestic sphere
as the expression of their inner values, desires and commands, especially given the
machinations of consumer capitalism that Friedan and others have documented. Under
conditions of women’s forced domesticity, it seems likely that the examples Nedelsky gives
are not an exercises of agency, but rather the incorporation of the historic gender-division
of labor into one’s own law as a means of coping with the lack of other available options.
This evidences a gap between autonomy as the agent for change and the deeper, material
structures (capitalism, domesticity) that produce both the inequalities and the
subjectivities within them.

In Nedelsky’s discussion of sexual relationships, we can see a similar problem of
autonomy arising without a necessary challenge to the inequality of a relationship.
Nedelsky avers that “it is the nature of the relationship at the time of intercourse that
determines the pleasure, satisfaction, or harm. It is the relationship, not the physical
boundary crossing, that defines the experience as a joy, a violation, or something in
between” (101). The assumption that sexual pleasure is the product of and indicator for
relationship quality demonstrates the problem with Nedelsky’s subjective–integrity–
privileging understanding of agency. Subjective integrity that arises out of a relationship
could be an adjustment to the relationship rather than the product of any change to it. Any
given incident of sexual intercourse can produce joy for one participant but a sense of
violation in the other—indeed, this would seem to be paradigmatic of rape. The rapist may
experience the intercourse as joyful or satisfying, while his victim experiences a violation
that he is ignorant of. And while we might hope that, were he aware of her violation, his joy
would evaporate and his satisfaction turn to remorse; we also know that this does not often
happen. In one sense, his pleasure and her trauma are determined by the relationship,
including the ways in which it produces the rapist’s ignorance. But it is also the case that
the rapist’s pleasure is the product of his subjective experience of his relationship with his
victim, whom he may wrongly believe to be a willing equal. In short, the quality of a
relationship determines sexual joy, but it does not follow that sexual joy is only the product
of normatively desirable relationships, such as equal ones—nor is such joy necessarily the
product of women’s agency. It is also the case that women can feel pleasure even in
inequitable relationships, for example: because they are ignorant about the nature of the
relationship; because their attempts to change the relationship lead to greater sexual
pleasure, but fail to produce meaningful material change; or because (as may be the case
with pleasure-experiencing pornography performers) they are also ignorant of the
existence of a set of relationships.18

18 This is at the center of Dworkin’s and Catharine MacKinnon’s objections to pornography; see, for example,
Catharine A. MacKinnon, Only Words (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); Christopher N.
Kendall, Gay Male Pornography: An Issue of Sex Discrimination (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2004); see also Tania
Modleski’s discussion of MacKinnon’s work for a fuller fleshing out of those relationships and how they make
This reading is borne out—and becomes more troubling—later in the book, when Nedelsky returns to the issue of sexual violence. Taking changes to Canadian sexual assault law and the Antioch College code of conduct as exemplars of a “relational approach” to sexuality, she observes that

these changes require new forms of responsibility for both men and women. Men have the obvious responsibility of obtaining consent.... But women also now bear the responsibility for acknowledging and communicating their sexual desires; if no means no, then women will have to say yes, and perhaps even articulate what they want. (224)

Part of this “deep kind of transformation” will mean that “both men and women have to take up new responsibilities as they learn to relate to each other with the kind of mutual respect befitting equals” (224). Nedelsky’s assertion that women need to learn to relate to men as equals, and should communicate their sexual preferences, assumes that these are already possible for most women—or that, simply by adopting the “mutual respect befitting equals” as part of their own law they could make that equality a reality. But this assumption that women’s agency is possible is rebutted by sociolinguistic research into gender norms and sexual consent. In his essay “No”, Don Kulick demonstrates that it is in effect impossible for women to utter either consent or refusal to a man’s sexual proposition:

The subject position “woman” is produced in part by the normatively exhorted utterance “no” when encountering male desire for sex. This differs

at least some pornography problematic (Tania Modleski, *Feminism without Women* [New York: Routledge, 1991]).
from the subject “man” who, in contrast, is normatively exhorted to never say “no” when confronted with female desire. All of this configures a cultural grammar in which saying “no” is part of what produces a female sexual subject, and not saying “no” produces a male sexual subject.\textsuperscript{19}

As part of his inability to say “no” to female sexual desire, the male sexual subject is also unable to interpret a woman’s normatively exhorted “no”: “In a culture that relentlessly objectifies and sexualizes women, the illocutionary force of a woman’s ‘no’ to sex is consistently thwarted and distorted to mean ‘keep trying’, or even its inversion, ‘yes’.”\textsuperscript{20} Woman can only say “no”, while men can never hear it. This dynamic is so strong that it is the woman’s “no” that creates sexuality between individual men and women: “‘no’ works as a performative to produce situations as sexual, and it simultaneously materializes sexualized, gendered subjects that are positioned in a specific relation of power.”\textsuperscript{21}

In light of Kulick’s description of the basis of heterosexual sexuality and gender, my worry is that Nedelsky places a burden on women to bring about sexual equality which is

\textsuperscript{19} Don Kulick, “No”, \textit{Language & Communication} 23 (2003), 141.

\textsuperscript{20} Kulick, 141.

\textsuperscript{21} Kulick, 141 n2. It is not only, Kulick observes, in the context of sexual assault that this dynamic is operational; it is also central to both “homosexual panic” murders and sadomasochism. For an example of the latter, see Pat Califia’s comments on “fucking like a man” in Pat Califia, \textit{Sex Changes: The Politics of Transgenderism} (Berkeley, Calif.: Cleis Press, 1997).
beyond their power to effect. Women could adopt “the responsibility for acknowledging and communicating their sexual desires” to men as part of their own laws, but it remains unclear to me that this will result in the kind of changes to the deeper structures of language and power that Kulick presents. Instead, it is possible that women’s attitudes will have changed without the necessary, concomitant change in the linguistic structure or gendered distribution of power from which sexuality arises. Additionally, I worry that it will instead perversely undermine this project of equality, presenting new grounds to shift responsibility for rapes back onto the victimized women for failing to fulfilling their roles as the “equals” they are supposed to autonomously see themselves as. In this case, by failing to engage with the material inequalities that underlie the system of sexuality, women’s autonomy may actually frustrate their agency in addressing sexual inequality and violence rather than advancing it.

The Conflict between Autonomy and Political Agency

Having seen how autonomous agency may reproduce sex/gender hierarchy, rather than leading to equality, we can see how it is the product of a deeper individualism than Nedelsky admits in Law’s Relations. If we are to privilege changes to relationships to make them more egalitarian, we must recognize that one of the costs is likely to be the capacity of some people to see those changes as coming from sources internal to themselves or as part of their own law—that is, as autonomous—even if they also support those changes.

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22 It is, too, beyond the capacity of any individual man to change this sociolinguistic system through his own efforts.
Nedelsky is quite clear that autonomy is relational because it draws on social resources that are shaped by relationships, which can in turn be more or less favorable to autonomy’s thriving. For example:

The necessary social dimension of the vision I am sketching has two components. The first is the claim that the capacity to find one’s own law can develop only in the context of relations that nurture this capacity. The second is that the “content” of one’s own law is comprehensible only with reference to shared social norms, values, and concepts. (124)

In this passage, the contents of the law do not come from without (though, in her earlier discussion of judgment, it is possible for such values to come from external sources that we then internalize), but more importantly, the self that is evaluating the potential contents of the law it will find as its own is not relational. This is made clear in the passage that I quoted above: “spontaneity, the imagination of the new [that] comes from within the actor, (enabled by her relational web)” (49; italics added). In this description, there is a self that stands apart from the relational web, which then acts upon that internal self to enable its spontaneity. Nedelsky does not ever explicate where the self that is so enabled and that does the reflecting and judging on potential laws comes from; nor does she detail the source of that self’s standards and decision-making rules that form the basis of its reflections, judgments, and evaluations. Put differently, Nedelsky lacks an account of the second-order laws or meta-laws (that is, laws about laws) that are a necessary part of the process of “finding one’s own law”. These second-order laws determine how one “recognizes as one’s own” certain values and demands, but given Nedelsky’s interest in disabusing the privileged from their feelings of autonomy, they must be more than mere sensation.
Despite Nedelsky’s emphasis on undermining the boundaries between the self and the others that are part of the self’s relational web, and her promulgation of the boundlessness of the “oceanic feeling” of inerconnectedness, there still persists a self-other, inside-outside dynamic in the descriptions of what makes autonomy and creative agency possible. This dynamic is the result of a core self that constitutes the inside from which autonomous commands and desires issue, and into which the perspectives of others are to be incorporated (or not) during judgment.

This core self is how Nedelsky addresses the problem of determinism that looms over any relational project, as she recognizes:

The problem, of course, is how to combine the claim of the constitutiveness of social relations with genuine scope for the value of autonomy.... If, in the effort to insist on the centrality of social relations, “constitutiveness” comes to be defined in ways that amount to the self being determined by its relationships, then genuine autonomy becomes impossible. This problem is common to all social theorists who take the constitutiveness of social relations seriously but is particularly acute for feminists. (121–2).

The commonality of this problem to theories of agency also comes out clearly, for example, from Rey Chow’s engagement with Georg Lukács’s theory of class consciousness. According to Chow, Lukács “theorizes consciousness in such a way as to move it—or so he intended—beyond the antinomies (nature/man, subject/object, mind/matter, nature/rationalization, etc.) left unresolved by classical philosophy, which has kept the fragmentation between the subject and the outside world... intractable and
irreconcilable”. Although the language is different, I find a striking similarity between the
series of concerns that Nedelsky is addressing and those Rey identifies in Lukács. And,
indeed, for Chow, Lukács runs up against the same problem of being constituted but not
determined, and thus having the ability to develop a critical consciousness that is necessary
to act against the social structures or relationships that one is constituted by. For Lukács,
says Chow, “it would be virtually impossible to separate the proletarian’s consciousness
from his reified and commodified existence. On the other hand, against the definitions he
himself has provided, Lukács also insists that there is something else, something more to
the proletarian’s consciousness that distinguishes him from other men”. For Lukács (in
what we will see may be the greatest similarity to Nedelsky), this “something else” is the
worker’s “humanity” and “soul”: “it remains true that precisely his [the worker’s] humanity
and his soul are not changed into commodities” and thus lie outside the material
determinations of capitalism. For Chow, Lukács’s move is to “idealize or essentialize the
proletarian’s capacity for resistance” and is the means by which Lukács escapes
determinism. In effect, this carves out a non-material and historically transcendent
exception in an otherwise historically immanent account:

23 Chow, 35–6.

24 Chow, 36–7.

25 Lukács, History and Class Consciousness, qtd. in Chow, 37.

26 Chow, 38.
If the very source of captivity, namely, commodification, is itself a historical and universal condition, how can the proletarian go beyond it? This is the point at which Lukács, in spite of his historical rigor, resorts to idealist terms such as “soul” and “humanity”, insisting they have not been “changed into commodities”.... At the most crucial juncture of his arguments, Lukács has in effect left reified precisely the terms on which he bases his entire thesis. “Humanity” and “soul”, like the much idealized term “labor,” remain historical essences. They can be invoked with passion, but their status cannot be questioned.27

In order to explain the possibility of agency, Lukács must break the chain of historic materiality and move to the ideal, the non-material.

Chow recognizes that this move is a common one in many critical social theories: “Be they through feminism, postcolonial theory, alternative sexual preferences and lifestyles, or other types of minority discourses, numerous contemporary versions of identity-based critical thinking have, wittingly or unwittingly, been replicating Lukács’s modernist narrative with its telos of self-ownership and self-affirmation.”28 This is an apt description of Nedelsky’s project, and Nedelsky makes the same moves as Lukács and the others whom Chow identifies. She does so in order to escape the determinism of relationality and open up the possibility of newness, of a creativity that acts to change the very relationships that form the problem in need of redress. And she does so in language strikingly similar to Lukács’s: Nedelsky also invokes the language of spirituality and

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27 Chow, 40.

28 Chow, 40; italics added.
humanity in order to explain how autonomous creativity is possible for relationally constituted persons. These are evident in Nedelsky’s repeated invocations of the “miraculous (and ordinary) human capacity for creation” (170; see also 47); in her insistence on “openness to the idea that one’s own law is revealed by spiritual sources, that our capacity to find a law within us comes from our spiritual nature” (123); and in her claim that “the theological metaphor of our capacity as the ‘spark of the divine’ is a helpful way of capture the mysterious dimension of the human capacity for autonomy” (278). There is a transcendent self with a creative capacity that exists apart from, and ideally as an actor upon, the relationships the person is in.²⁹

This transcendent self, and along with it the process of becoming autonomous, fails to problematize the very basis for individual reactions to a given set of values or

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²⁹ This is evident, for example, in Nedelsky’s answer to the question she poses about newness: “Given the complex network of interaction that led up to the moment of action, when or why would we attribute such ‘ownership’ or authorship of action so that we could then attribute responsibility?” (279) She responds that “the core of the answer to why is a belief in the genuinely creative capacity in human beings to bring forth something new, something not determined by all that went before. We live in a web of relationships that shape us, that are necessary for our very capacity for autonomy; the web interacts with and enables an irreducible capacity to initiate, to be ourselves a shaping force, to interact in ways that create. Our conception of autonomy must, then, capture this capacity for creation at the same time that it is built upon the interdependence that makes autonomy possible” (279). In addition to exemplifying the transcendent, non-material notion of “human being” discussed above, this passage also shows the way that the self is the originative site of creativity, which is then made possible by that which lies separate from and, from the standpoint of creativity, a posteriori the self.
experiences. That is, there is no way of understanding or problematizing whether my feeling that something is “my own law”, that it originates within as opposed to external to me, is actually the product of the very same inequalities that are the objects of Nedelsky’s criticism. This explains the undue weight that the restoration of subjective integrity is given both as essential to autonomous political agency. In taking subjective experiences of autonomy as expressive of a transcendental humanity that is the source of political agency and, thus, of egalitarian political change, Nedelsky must make producing more of those experiences central to her project. Conversely, experiences of disruption that are imimical to them are consigned to an inaugural role, always showing where there is room for more autonomy to be created. That is, suffering must be an antagonist to autonomy because it is threatens the basis for agency as Nedelsky understands it. A fuller relationality, in which individuals may be subject to more disruption, including suffering, alongside their agency, would be one in which more people can be agents and there is a stronger push toward women’s equality. Conversely, a stronger core individualism, in which the individual is better able to knowingly and purposively shape their lives but that restricts who can be agentic, tends to weaken the agency–equality link.
CHAPTER 3

SUSAN STRYKER: MONSTROUS AGENCY

INTRODUCTION

Let us now turn our attention from strategies of containment to the politics of disruption. In this chapter, I will present a first-person account of how feminism can use the disruption of suffering to contribute to women’s political agency without having to overcome the former. The account I turn to an early statement of transgender theory, now considered a landmark, Susan Stryker’s “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage” (1993),1 in order to interrogate the

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1 Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage", in Susan Stryker and Stephen Whittle, eds., The Transgender Studies Reader (New York: Routledge, 2006), 244–55. Stryker’s essay was originally published as Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," GLQ 1, no. 3 (1994): 227–54. All future references to the essay will be to the version in the Reader, and will be in parentheses in the body of the text.

assumptions that underlie ascriptions of agencylessness to sufferers, in this case, those still used to differentiate cis- and trans women. I propose that Stryker offers us an account of be said to mark the emergence of ‘transgender studies’ ” (Paisley Currah, ”Gender Pluralisms under the Transgender Umbrella”, in Paisley Currah, Richard M. Juang, and Shannon Price Minter, eds., Transgender Rights [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006]: 4.)

The terminology used is important to reckon with, as there has been a good measure of debate in the last several decades over the nature, relationships, and boundaries between the terms "transgender", "transsexual", and "trans". In a later work, Transgender History, Stryker writes:

Because “transgender” is a word that has come into widespread use only in the past couple of decades, its meanings are still under construction. I use it in this book to refer to people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth, people who cross over (trans-) the boundaries constructed by their culture to define and contain that gender. (Susan Stryker, Transgender History [Berkeley: Seal, 2008], 1.)

In contrast, transsexual "typically refers to people who feel a strong desire to change their sexual morphology in order to live entirely as permanent, full-time members of the gender other than the one they were assigned at birth" (Stryker, Transgender History, 18). I will, following Stryker, "use the word ‘transgender’ as a shorthand way of talking about a wide range of gender variance and gender atypicality … and I sometimes apply it to people who might not apply it to themselves. Some butch women or queeny men will say that they are not transgender because they do not want to change sex. Some transsexuals will say that they are not transgender because they do” (Stryker, Transgender History, 24). As we shall see below, the debates over transgender and transsexual, as well as between butch and transsexual informed Stryker’s work in "My Words".

While in "My Words" Stryker uses the term transgendered, the currently predominant preference is for transgender (no -ed), which is the form I adopt here. I will also use the term trans as a shorthand for
transgender, especially when I am referring to the community of transgender people or the transgender political movements, but I want to note that Stryker, along with Paisley Currah and Lisa Jean Moore, call for a move to *trans* (and subsequently, *trans’*) to avoid trans or transgender becoming "a gender category that is necessarily distinct from more established categories such as 'woman' or 'man.' “ (Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore, "Introduction: Trans-, Trans, or Transgender?", *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 36, nos. 3 & 4 [Fall/Winter 2008]: 12.)

The terms *cisgender* and *cissexual* rely on "the prefix *cis* [which] means 'on the same side as' (that is, the opposite of *trans*). The idea behind the terms is to resist the way that 'woman' or 'man' can mean 'nontransgendered man' or 'nontransgendered woman' by default, unless the person's transgendered status is explicitly named" (Stryker, *Transgender History*, 22). *Cissexism*, then, refers to the hierarchy of cisgender people over transgender people, and the forms of prejudice, bias, and violence that manifest it.

Finally, I want to highlight the use of the terms *gay, lesbian, and bisexual* in distinction with *queer*. There is a danger in drawing too sharply a distinction between the two terms, given the tendency for issues of gay and lesbian sexuality to continue to dominate queer theory, identity, and politics (see, e.g., Susan Stryker, “Transgender Theory: Queer Theory's Evil Twin,” *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 10, no. 2 [2004], 212–5; and Cathy J. Cohen, "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?", *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 3, no. 4 [May 1997], 437–65.); and in "My Words", Stryker uses queer both positively and negatively. I nevertheless use the term *queer* to remain open to more radical forms of gender *and* sexual politics, while the term *lesbian, gay, and bisexual* (abbreviated "LGB") specifies those sexuality-focused movements in order to focus on the elements within them that often (as Stryker details in "My Words") exclude trans people and marginalize their concerns—and frequently do so violently. For another example, see John Aravosis, "How Did the T get in LGBT?", *Salon* (Oct 8, 2007). Online. [http://www.salon.com/2007/10/08/lgbt/](http://www.salon.com/2007/10/08/lgbt/). Accessed Jul 28, 2014; and Stryker’s response: Susan Stryker,
“monstrous agency”: one that is born of suffering yet does not promise alleviation from that suffering in its realization. This monstrous agency also requires that one allow oneself to be called to embrace monstrosity—that is, one’s status as a creature of sex/gender hierarchy—as well as their complicity in that hierarchy’s perpetuation. This entails that one undergo the alienation of rejecting one’s own embodied desires as either natural or self-made; in short, one must come to see oneself as a creature, not a creator. Agency also requires that one call others to embrace their own monstrosity, thus spreading the disruption of monstrosity. In short, Stryker presents an understanding of trans and feminist political agency in which suffering disruption from others’ suffering is necessary. This monstrousness is enabled by her transgender-theoretical account of sex/gender, at the same time that it is integral to her conception of agency.

“My Words” is partly Stryker’s response to feminist and bisexual and lesbian theorists’ and activists’ accusations that transsexuals are Frankensteinian monsters, “agents of a ‘necrophilic invasion’ of female space” (245). But rather than challenging this characterization and asserting her naturalness or the inborn nature of her gender identity, and thus claim her status as (self-)creator rather than creature, Stryker embraces the “monster” label. Admitting that “the transsexual body is an unnatural body... a technological construction,” she notes that, “in these circumstances, I find a deep affinity between myself as a transsexual woman and the monster in Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein” (245). The affinity with the Monster that Stryker feels arises not only out of the similarity of


their bodies, but also because of the reactions those bodies have received: “Like the monster, I am too often perceived as less than fully human due to the means of my embodiment; like the monster’s as well, my exclusion from human community fuels a deep and abiding rage in me that I, like the monster, direct against the condition in which I must struggle to exist” (245). The other task of Stryker’s essay, then, is to begin to outline “how to harness the intense emotions emanating from transsexual experience—especially rage—and mobilize them into effective political actions” (244). Stryker gives us an account of transgender monstrosity that is also a theory of monstrous agency, one that comes about through and with suffering that is transformed into rage but not into subjective integrity.

To understand how Stryker uses the concepts of monstrosity and creaturehood to develop a conception of agency out of trans experience, including rage, I read “My Words” back into the original account of monstrosity to which she alludes, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. I find doing so clarifies what Stryker captures in the label “monster” that

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3 In order to clearly distinguish between Stryker’s use of “monster” and “creature” to refer to herself (and others) and the unnamed being from Shelley’s novel, I will capitalize the words “Monster” and “Creature” when referring to the latter—excepting directly quoted passages from Shelley, and acknowledging that this may undermine the ends that the namelessness serves in the original story.

she adopts. More than simply an “unnatural body” that consists of “flesh torn apart and sewn together in a shape other than that in which it was born” (245), Stryker’s monstrosity also embodies conceptions of sex/gender and agency that arise from her experiences of suffering and rage, the revelatory and transformative capacity of which she is open to. How these all operate together is also helpfully elucidated by the ways in which Stryker’s monstrousness differs from that portrayed in Shelley’s novel. So while Stryker identifies with Frankenstein’s Monster, we must also take account of the limitations of that identification if we are to fully understand Stryker’s essay. Toward that end, my primary claim in this chapter is that Stryker resolves both the problems of gender embodiment and the problems of agency she experiences through her embrace of monstrosity, and that this helps her rewrite the story of Frankenstein’s monster. By “rewrite” the story of Frankenstein’s Monster, I mean that Stryker changes the fate of the monster from the novel to her own story. We can see this in a difference between the Monster’s activities and Stryker’s stated goal: “I want to lay claim to the dark power of my monstrous identity without using it as a weapon against others or being wounded by it myself” (246). This is decidedly different from the actions of the Creature in Frankenstein, who uses his monstrously superhuman size to murder his creator’s family and friends in retribution for the latter’s failure to fulfill his duty to provide the love and companionship he owed his

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University Press, 1993), ch. 6; and Charles E. Robinson, “Introduction”, in Mary Shelley (with Percy Shelley), 
Frankenstein, or, The Modern Prometheus: The Original Two-Volume Novel of 1816–1817 from the Bodleian 
creation. As I shall discuss below, the tragic fates of Frankenstein and his Monster, as well as Shelley herself, are the products of their entrapment within the hierarchical binaries of sex/gender, creator/creature. These are both expressed in the human/monster hierarchy, and the models of agency that they entail. In proposing a transgender monstrosity and a monstrous model of complicity and agency, Stryker is able to avoid the destructiveness that Shelley’s Creature could not. Stryker, however, neither kills nor dies; she is able to become a member of a rage-driven community of trans people and to participate in an academic conference at which “My Words” was originally presented. The monstrosity that Stryker lays claim to, then, and in which she locates the possibility of a rage-fuelled transformative politics is not only a gender monstrosity, but also a monstrous form of agency that does not set itself in opposition to the monstrosity of createdness, but rather is premised on it.

Rewriting the fate of monsters, as revealed by the juxtaposition of Stryker’s essay with Shelley’s novel, also enables us to see how Stryker uses her own suffering to develop her political agency and to call others to embrace it. This also allows her to rewrite the stories of transgender persons’ suffering and despair. At the beginning of “My Words”, Stryker recounts the fate of Filisa Vistima, “a 22-year-old pre-operative transsexual woman from Seattle,” who committed suicide in 1993 (246). “What drove her to such despair,” Stryker says, “was the exclusion she experienced in Seattle’s queer community, some members of which opposed Filisa’s participation because of her transsexuality—even

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5 For example, in his initial encounter with his creator on the mountain above Chamounix, the Monster warns Victor that he will use his size to defend himself: “Remember, thou hast made me more powerful than thyself; my height is superior to thine, my joints more supple” (Shelley, 126).
though she identified as and lived as a bisexual woman” (246). Like Stryker, Vistima identified as “a mutant, Frankenstein’s monster” (Vistima, qtd. in Stryker, 246); but she was unable to rewrite the Creature’s story, and could only resolve her monstrosity by repeating his destruction upon herself. The response of the Seattle queer community to Vistima’s death repeats this denial of agency by containing her suffering and avoiding their own roles in it:

“Why didn’t Filisa commit herself for psychiatric care?” asked a columnist in the Seattle Gay News. “Why didn’t Filisa demand her civil rights?” In this case, not only did the angry villagers hound their monster to the edge of town, they reproached her for being vulnerable to their torches. Did Filisa Vistima commit suicide, or did the queer community of Seattle kill her? (246)

Unlike the columnist she quotes, Stryker allows Vistima’s story to disrupt her own sense of who she is, her understanding of gender and her role therein. In recounting Vistima’s suffering, as well as her own, Stryker gives us a fuller understanding of the conditions that make her suffering imperil agency, leading only to Frankensteinian destruction, and those that generate agency, enabling their challenges to the sex/gender system.

In the remainder of this introductory section, I will explain the relationship between Stryker’s speech-cum-essay and the novel in which she places it. In the next section, I look at the gender dynamics in Frankenstein, with specific attention to the role of family, which is also central to the story Stryker tells in “My Words”. The changes Stryker makes to the Monster’s story challenge the assumptions that Shelley’s story rests upon and that account for the latter’s turn to destruction. Similarly, and in the third section, I argue that Frankenstein and his Monster give us two different accounts of agency. One, expressed by the Monster’s creator, Victor Frankenstein, is individualist and focused on responsibility;
the other, the Monster’s, is collective and premised on complicity. But the Monster, *sui generis* and alone, is unable to realize his alternative model to challenge that of his creator. He must turn to Victor to create a fellow monster, which brings him back under that model he wishes to resist. Like the Monster, Stryker sees the possibility for agency even in conditions of domination and violence; but unlike him, she is not alone, and throughout she makes appeals to her fellow monsters to join her in eschewing the privileges of gender-naturalness and the status of creator. She, unlike, the Monster, is able to articulate a collective, monstrous form of agency by erasing the creator–creature distinction and calling on the monsters to be remade *qua* monsters and join her to challenge the hegemony of those, like transphobic feminists, who would cast themselves only as creators. We can read this back into the sex/gender politics about which Stryker is writing, and see how the transphobic feminists and lesbian/bisexual women’s activists have not only indulged in violent transphobia, but in doing so, have also supported the same sex/gender system that oppresses them. In the final section, I more directly analyze the role of suffering that pervades “My Words” to understand how Stryker enables her experience of subjective disruption to transform from despair to rage—an experience that, while it produces agency, does not require that she overcome her suffering. Instead, as we shall see, suffering characterizes her descriptions of her experiences both before and after her transformation, and rage acts as a vehicle for that suffering.

*Stryker’s Substitution*

Stryker literally locates her own story in *Frankenstein*, that is, in a very specific part of the novel. The title of her piece references the Monster’s speech to Victor Frankenstein in the Alps above the village of Chamounix, during which he relates his autobiography to his
creator and explains the source of rage and the murder it led to, that of William, Victor’s young brother. The portion of *Frankenstein* that Stryker cites in her title is a story (actually two) within a story. As many scholars of *Frankenstein* have commented, one of the most striking features of the novel is its narrative structure: the entire story is presented as (0) a series of letters from Robert Walton, the captain of a ship exploring the Arctic, to his sister, Mrs. Margaret Saville, in London. Nested within this story, like so many matryoshki, are three others: (1) Victor Frankenstein’s story of the creation of the monster, his actions after its creation, the Monster’s crimes against Victor’s loved ones, and Victor’s subsequent pursuit of the Monster to the Arctic. Within this story is (2) the Monster’s own account of his life immediately post-creation, including: his acquisition of speech and education by the (unwitting) DeLacey family, his discovery of his origins in Victor’s journals, and his repeated rejection by every person he meets. This account, which as Stryker observes, “occupies nearly a quarter of the novel” (249), takes place above the village of Chamounix; the Monster’s self-told tale is the Monster’s “words to Victor Frankenstein” to which the title of Stryker’s piece refers. Finally, the Monster in his monologue conveys another story, (3) that of the DeLacey family. For much of his story, the Monster hides in a novel attached to a cottage in which the DeLaceys dwell: siblings Felix and Agatha along with their unnamed, blind father. Later they are joined by Safie, Felix’s beloved betrothed, a Turkish woman whose father Felix had helped escape from French prison in exchange for the promise of marrying Safie. The Monster, who has been watching and following the family, soon hears their story, which he relates to Victor (who in turn tells it to Robert who transcribes it in his letter to Margaret): the DeLaceys were a wealthy family from Paris who were exiled from France after Felix helped Safie’s father to escape jail, forcing them to live
in penury in the cottage. Meanwhile, Safie’s father had reneged on his promise to permit Felix and Safie to wed, and absconded with her to Italy, only for her to escape and make her way back to her beloved Felix in Germany. Story (2) concludes with the Monster’s attempt to join the loving DeLacey family, only to be cruelly and violently rejected, which sets in motion his violent plan of revenge against his maker, Victor. The Monster’s words, those that Stryker quotes and substitutes with her own, are of rage as she says, but also pain, rejection, self-awareness, and violence.

As I read it, then, we can substitute Stryker’s “words to Victor Frankenstein” for the original Monster’s words that constitute stories (2) and (3). Like the Monster’s tale, Stryker’s is one of rejection, pain—and even death, when she tells of Filisa Vistima, driven to suicide by “the exclusion she experienced in Seattle’s queer community, some members of which opposed Filisa’s participation because of her transsexuality” (246). Similarly, Stryker recounts how she “discovered the journals of the men who made my body, and who have made the bodies of creatures like me since the 1930s” (249). And finally, at the heart of Stryker’s words to her creators is a family story. But unlike that of the DeLaceys, this is a story of a family of which she is already a member, a “queer family” constituted by “communal living and... nurturing, bonded kinships for which we have no adequate names” (250). As we shall see in the following section, these two family stories generate not only important differences in the trajectories of the monsters, Stryker and Frankenstein’s, but they also allow us to see how Stryker reappropriates monstrosity for transgender political ends.

Both its use of allusion and its structure of nested narratives make *Frankenstein* ripe for reappropriation, and that is exactly what Stryker does. As Criscilla Benford argues, the
nested narrative structure of *Frankenstein* enables a plurality of responses from its readers, each of which reflect that reader’s position and implicates them in the social structures that give rise to their responses:

The evident plurisignificance of the creature’s eloquence calls attention to the role of social vantage point in readerly sense making and adjudication. As the inassimilable—that textual element which means differently depending upon which sense-making frame one applies to it—the creature’s eloquence prompts us to interrogate the ease with which we grasp some arguments and the challenges involved in grasping others.⁶

By giving us the story through multiple lenses, Shelley challenges the possibility of any authoritative account of what transpired and, more importantly, resists the ability to lay blame for the monster’s violence onto any single person. In substituting the story of her monstrous self for that of the Monster, Stryker is likewise prompting us to reconsider our own relationship to the monstrous creatures such as herself, the challenges they present to our understandings of gender and agency, and our roles therein. In particular, she enables a stronger reading of the Monster’s plight by eliminating the tactics of violence the Monster relied upon in the novel. As Benford says,

The creature’s recourse to violence to express outrage at his social and moral exclusion often distracts readers from the importance of the strategies by which he argues for integration, strategies that seek to redefine the social meaning of his identity by establishing a strong frame through which his previous actions are to be judged. He understands that others interpret his

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⁶ Criscilla Benford, “‘Listen to My Tale’: Multilevel Structure, Narrative Sense Making, and the Unassimilable in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, *Narrative* 18, no. 3 (Oct 2010), 331.
physical form as justification for their hatred. He uses his eloquence to shift attention from his body to his story.⁷

Eliminating the Monster’s violence from the story and replacing it with Stryker’s own enables new understandings of the relationships between gender, violence, and agency, as well as implicates the reader in new ways. It also, as Benford implies, returns focus to Stryker’s body, but only through the lens of the narrative she shares with us; but this focus on Stryker’s body is both a lens and a mirror, reflecting her readers’ bodies. No longer can those who would position themselves as “natural women” in opposition to transsexuals do so; they are also monstrous creatures of a gender system that enlists them, in arrogating nature to themselves, in its own violent reproduction. Realizing this, new political possibilities are created that can save the monsters—as well as would-be victims—from violence and challenge the hierarchies that generated that violence in the novel. If we are all monsters, then we can all join together to resist and challenge our complicity.

**Monstrous Genders**

As I indicated above, the cores of both the Monster’s and Stryker’s tales are stories about families, and in both cases the storytellers use families as a lens to understand and criticize sex/gender hierarchy. According to Stryker (quoting Peter Brooks), “whatever else a monster might be, it ’may also be that which eludes gender definition.’ ” (247) This comes through clearly in the Monster’s story of the DeLacey family (in stories numbered 2 and 3 above). The Creature relates the family’s formation, including his own education at their

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⁷ Benford, 331.
hands; his attempt to gain recognition as a member; and his rejection by all the family members except the blind father. While hiding in his shanty attached to their cottage, a stranger—Safie—arrived, bringing great joy to the disconsolate family. Watching their daily interactions, the Creature realized “by the frequent recurrence of some sound, which the stranger repeated after them, that she was endeavoring to their language; and the idea instantly occurred to me that I should make use of the same instructions to the same end.”

He does so, following along while hidden in his shack, and acquires not only language but a knowledge of history and society, too. As his time with the DeLacey family proceeded, the Creature became increasingly aware of his familylessness, especially after he discovered Victor’s journal “of the four months that preceded my creation”:

   Everything is related in them which bears reference to my accursed origin; the whole detail of that series of disgusting circumstances which produced it is set in view; the minutest description of my odious and loathsome person is given, in a language which painted your own horrors and rendered mine indelible.

Aware of his terrifying nature and resultant isolation, the Monster increasingly longed to join the DeLacey family even as he feared their rejection: “The more I saw of them, the greater became my desire to claim their protection and kindness; my heart yearned to be known and loved by these amiable creatures; to see their sweet looks directed towards me

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8 Shelley, 149.

9 Shelley, 164.
with affection was the utmost limit of my ambition.”  

Yet it was not to be: upon revealing himself to them, the Creature’s worries proved justified: “Agatha fainted, and Safie, unable to attend to her friend, rushed out of the cottage. Felix darted forward, and... dashed me to the ground and struck me violently with a stick.... I saw him on the point of repeating his blow, when, overcome by pain and anguish, I quitted the cottage, and in the general tumult escaped unperceived to my hovel.”  

The DeLaceys abandoned the cottage shortly thereafter, and the Creature was left alone and in despair: “My protectors had departed, and had broken the only link that held me to the world. For the first time the feelings of revenge and hatred filled my bosom, and I did not strive to control them; but allowing myself to be borne away by the stream, I bent my mind towards injury and death.”  

He would soon depart for Geneva in search of Victor and so begin his murderous vengeance, which he relates in the remainder of his words to his creator.

While the Monster longs for familial membership and its attendant love, feminist theorists have shown that Shelley’s treatment of the family is far more ambivalent. Elizabeth Young summarizes that, “as more than a quarter century of feminist criticism has shown, Shelley’s Frankenstein uses its male-centered plots to explore questions about women, including female authorship, maternity, [and] sexuality”.

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10 Shelley, 166–7.

11 Shelley, 170–1.

12 Shelley, 175.

sex/gender concerns, including familial ones, has been important to the development of feminist literary theory, as well as to the revaluation of the novel in the 1970s, from a minor work by the wife of an important poet (Percy Shelley) to a canonical classic of women’s literature and the Gothic genre. As regards feminism, Diane Long Hoeveler argues that “Frankenstein has figured more importantly in the development of feminist literary theory than perhaps any other novel, with the possible exception of Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre.” (In light of this, Stryker’s embrace of monstrosity against the

For example, Fred Botting asserts that “Frankenstein is a product of criticism, not a work of literature” (qtd. in Debra Long Hoeveler, “Frankenstein, Feminism, and Literary Theory,” in Esther Schor, ed., The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003], 45).

Marie-Hélène Huet argues that the anxieties over Percy Shelley’s role in editing Frankenstein undermine a deeper understanding of the novel itself as a monstrous creation; in contrast, Anne Mellor argues that many of Percy’s changes were stylistically bad and demonstrate his misunderstanding of the novel’s view of gender relations and criticism of Victorian masculinity; see Anne K. Mellor, Mary Shelley: Her Life, Her Fiction, Her Monsters (New York: Routledge, 1988), 59–77.

Hoeveler, 45.

Similarly, Shelley’s novel has played a central role in the development of queer literary theory; Mair Rigby comments that “queer theorists recognize something powerfully compelling in the Gothic, something that keeps them returning to the genre for insights”, and for many queer theorists, Frankenstein is the apotheosis of the Gothic form. (Rigby, “Uncanny Recognition: Queer Theory’s Debt to the Gothic,” Gothic Studies 11, no. 1 [May 2009], 46.) For examples, see Judith Halberstam, Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); and Sedgwick, The Epistemology of
transphobic feminist authors and activists is important because of the place of *Frankenstein* in the history of feminist, as well as queer, literary theories."

Although a full accounting of the history of feminist interpretations of *Frankenstein* is beyond the scope of this chapter, I want to briefly highlight one set of concerns. In many feminist readings, Victor Frankenstein and his creation represent the problems surrounding sex/gender relations and the fate of women and families in an increasingly male-dominated public sphere. Mary Poovey, for example, argues that Shelley is expressing an ambivalence about her own ambitions and success as a woman writer in defiance of "proper womanhood", and the destructive capacity of this anti-feminine urge for self-expressive creativity. In the novel, then,

as long as domestic relationships govern an individual’s affections, his or her desire will turn outward as love. But when he individual loses or leaves the regulating influence of relationship with others, imaginative energy always

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*the Closet* 2nd Ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000). Though Sedgwick does not treat *Frankenstein* at any length in either work, the novel is important enough that she names the 19th century "the Age of Frankenstein" which she describes as "an age philosophically and topologically marked by the wildly dichotomous play around solipsism and intersubjectivity of a male paranoid plot—one that always ends in the tableau of two men chasing one another across a landscape evacuated of alternative life or interest, toward a climax that tends to condense the amorous with the murderous in a representation of male rape" (Sedgwick, *Epistemology*, 163).
threatens to turn back on itself, to “mark” all external objects as its own and
to degenerate into “gloomy and narrow reflections upon the self.” ¹⁶

In the novel, Poovey says, “Shelley makes the ego’s destructiveness literal by setting in
motion the figurative, symbolic character of the monster.”¹⁷ The fate of Victor
Frankenstein—the destruction of his family and friends by the manifestation of his own
ego—“gives a conventionally ‘feminine’ twist to the argument that individuals mature
through imaginative projection, confrontation, and self-consciousness”, and instead “ties
the formation of personal identity to self-denial rather than self-assertion.”¹⁸

Yet domesticity may not provide Shelley or her characters the bliss that Poovey
implies. For example, in one of the earliest feminist readings of Frankenstein, Ellen Moers
claims that, despite being “without a heroine, without even an important female victim...
Frankenstein is a birth myth, and one that was lodged in the novelist’s imagination, I am
convinced, by the fact that she was herself a mother.”¹⁹ Moers locates the horror not in the
birth itself, but

in the motif of revulsion against newborn life, and the drama of guilt, dread,
and flight surrounding birth and its consequences. Frankenstein seems to be
distinctly a woman’s mythmaking on the subject of birth precisely because its

¹⁶ Mary Poovey, The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer: Ideology as Style in the Works of Mary Wollstonecraft,
Mary Shelley, and Jane Austen (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 123.

¹⁷ Poovey, 125.

¹⁸ Poovey, 125; 126. For a similar take on Frankenstein and gender, see Mellor, Mary Shelley.

emphasis is not upon what precedes birth, not upon birth itself, but upon what follows birth: the trauma of the afterbirth.\textsuperscript{20}

This is an important counterpoint to the prevailing portrayals of childbirth and child-rearing as an unmitigatedly happy event for the mother: “More deeply rooted in our cultural mythology, and certainly in our literature, are the happy maternal reactions: the ecstasy, the sense of fulfillment, and the rush of nourishing love which sweep over the new mother when she first holds her baby in her arms.”\textsuperscript{21}

Despite the diversity of emphases and specific points, what these readings share in common is an emphasis on the duality of domesticity. \textit{Frankenstein} allegorizes the necessity of women’s domestic roles for human thriving \textit{and} their discontent with those roles for being oppressive, even constrictive. While the occasion of parenthood in \textit{Frankenstein} is not itself the joyful experience it ought to be, neither is the \textit{absence} of mothers at all salutary. As Anne Mellor notes, “\textit{Frankenstein} is a book about what happens when man tries to have a baby without a woman.”\textsuperscript{22} Indeed, in attempting to create life without women, Victor repeats the death of his mother and effects the death of his beloved wife Elizabeth and, ultimately, himself.\textsuperscript{23} Shelley’s novel does not, in these readings, give us

\textsuperscript{20} Moers, 93.

\textsuperscript{21} Moers, 93.

\textsuperscript{22} Mellor, \textit{Mary Shelley}, 40.

\textsuperscript{23} Immediately after beholding his completed creation, Victor exits his laboratory, collapses onto his bed, and has a dream of his fiancee, Elizabeth, turning into his long-dead mother: “I was disturbed by the wildest dream: I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets of Ingolstadt. Delighted and
a radical (proto-)feminist account of women’s situation in the early Victorian sex/gender system, but rather a more ambivalent treatment of both masculinity and femininity, one that fails to either escape or condemn either. Shelley indicts the ambitious, masculinist Prometheanism because it runs amok without human connection; but as she portrays it, that masculine ideal also traps women in domesticity, hides them away, and attempts to create without them. While home is a solution to the ill effects of Victor Frankenstein, Shelley also voices dissatisfaction with domesticity and its effects upon her as a woman. The simultaneity of her dissatisfaction with feminine motherhood and domesticity and with the masculinist alternative of individualist creativity leaves Shelley’s novel hemmed in with no effective means of transcending gender, but rather moving destructively between them. All that Shelley, and her Monster, are left with is destruction.

Returning to the DeLacey family and the Monster’s failed attempt to join them, we can see the fraughtness of both gender and the Monster’s relationship to it. Given the happiness of the DeLaceys, despite their poverty and exile from their native country, they appear the portrait of domestic bliss. For example, for Mellor the DeLaceys represent “the closed domestic nuclear family...organized around the principle of personal autonomy and

surprised, I embraced her, but as I printed the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms” (Shelley, 72).

24 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls *Frankenstein* “a text of nascent feminism that remains cryptic” (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism”, *Critical Inquiry* 12, no. 1 (Autumn 1985), 254.)
bound together by strong affective ties”, but this representation also includes “an egalitarian definition of gender roles within the bourgeois family.”25 But they cannot accommodate the Monster, and he must be cast out if the heterosexual family is to survive. Read as an embodiment of gender-ambiguity (both bodily gender ambiguity, as per Stryker and Brooks, and Shelley’s own felt ambiguity about Victorian gender roles), the Creature demonstrates the fragility of the family, even one premised on the kind of gender-equality that Mellor identifies. Despite the happiness of the DeLaceys because of their gender-egalitarianism, the necessity of two genders leaves the idealized family susceptible to monstrous disruption; even in its idealized form, it has no place for those who fail to fit into the gender binary. In the context of the feminist readings above, then, any attempts to challenge Victorian Romantic gender roles (including, possibly, Shelley’s own actions) are themselves defiant of gender roles, monstrous even, and so incompatible with the family that Shelley at once idealized and feared.26 Unable to accommodate the Monster, the

25 Mellor, Mary Shelley, 44.

26 This comports with the reading that Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar give of the Monster, who “is himself as nameless as a woman is in patriarchal society, as nameless as unmarried, illegitimately pregnant Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin [later Shelley] may have felt herself to be at the time she wrote Frankenstein.” (Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination 2nd Ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000): 241.)
heterosexual family violently exiles him; unable to find a place in the family, the Monster sets about to destroy it.27

Stryker proposes an alternative to Shelley’s own gender-entrapment in the family story that she gives as an alternative to that of the DeLaceys. The parallels between Stryker’s “My Words” and the Monster’s autobiography and tale of the DeLaceys are striking, yet at the same time she makes several important changes to that story, which enables her to identify with the Monster while changing the outcome of its story. In the penultimate section of the essay, entitled “Journal (February 18, 1993)”, she relates the birth of her partner’s child, Denali. Just as the Monster experiences his utmost desire, membership in a human family and community, vicariously, so too does Stryker experience her desire, womanhood, through another: “Through my lover’s back, against the skin of my

27 Read thusly, we may be able to better reconcile two of the prevailing "strands" of feminist scholarship on Frankenstein, what Hoeveler (among others) calls the American, which includes the authors discussed above, and the French, which privileges deconstruction over authorial biography. The former has largely fallen out of fashion in recent scholarship (Hoeveler restricts it to the 1970s and 80s [Hoeveler, 45], while the latter has thrived. One major difference, according to Mary Jacobus, is that "in America the flight toward empiricism takes the form of an insistence on 'women's experience' as the ground of difference in writing", while "the French insistence on écriture feminine—on woman as a writing-effect instead of an origin—asserts not the sexuality of the text but the textuality of sex." [Mary Jacobus, “Is There a Woman in this Text?” New Literary History 14, no. 1 [Autumn 1982], 138). Reading through a transgender lens that focuses on the gender monstrosity of the Creature and Shelley alike may allow us to better synthesize the ways that Shelley at once produces and is produced in the text—she is both trapped within the heteropatriarchal and sex/gender binary discourse of her era, even as she also produces her destructive monstrosity with it.
own belly, I felt a child move out of another woman’s body and into the world” (247). And, as in Frankenstein, the inescapability of this vicariousness leaves her in a state of suffering and, ultimately, rage: “I came as close today as I’ll ever come to giving birth—literally. My body can’t do that; I can’t even bleed without a wound, and yet I claim to be a woman... I’m such a goddamned freak. I can never be a woman like other women, but I could never be a man” (251; italics in original). And yet, there are importance differences; unlike the Monster, Stryker is part of a “queer family... with Wilson, Anne, Heather, Denali, and whatever babies would follow” (250). Stryker longs not to become a part of a family, then, but rather to protect the family that she has from the destructive effects of the heteronormative family and gender binary. “We joke about pioneering on a reverse frontier: venturing into the heart of civilization itself to reclaim biological reproduction from heterosexism and free it for our own uses. We’re fierce; in a world of ‘traditional family values,’ we need to be”. (250) This reverses the Monster’s situation and ultimately his fate; like the Monster, Stryker is to destroy the “family” of her creators, both scientists and transphobic feminists and LGB people alike, whose “cultural politics are aligned with a deeply conservative attempt to stabilize gendered identity in service of the naturalized heterosexual order” (248). But in doing so, she will allow her queer family, and other families like hers, to survive. This depends upon abolishing the sex/gender system that has either excluded monsters like her from family life, or forced them into bodily invisibility in order to retain their families.

What enables this reversal is not simply Stryker’s life within a family, however. Unlike Shelley, Stryker in rewriting the Monster’s family story is able to think beyond these assumedly natural sex/gender categories by embracing her own monstrosity and
rethinking the nature and basis of the family and the role of gender therein. This means that, unlike in *Frankenstein*, in “My Words” it is not the destruction of the family that is the alternative to women’s forced domesticity and motherhood, but rather it is the reconstitution of the family absent the gender binary families historically required and reproduced. “We’ve all tasted the exhilarating possibility in communal living and these nurturing, bonded kinships for which we have no names” (250). Thus rather than simply fulfilling the Monster’s wish (and Shelley’s?) for family membership, Stryker is able to succeed at what the Monster could not: the redefinition of the family to transcend the sex/gender system. Conversely, the imposition of sex and gender onto the family, rather than the gender-ambiguous Monster, imperils the continued success of that family, and must be cast out. Stryker laments “all the friends and acquaintances these past nine months who’ve asked me if I was the father”; rather than understanding her queer family for what it is, they reveal “dramatically how much they simply don’t get what I’m doing with my body” (251). The assumption by those who know her of Stryker’s fatherhood attempts to re-impose the heteropatriarchal binary, with its names and roles, back upon Stryker and her queer family. The threat to Stryker and her family is, in this telling, the continued intrusion of sex/gender hierarchy, including heteronormativity, into her life and the lives of her family members. It is also this resurgent system that produces her suffering—especially, as we shall see momentarily, that of Denali, the daughter whose birth and sexing/gendering occasions Stryker’s rage-fueled story. This occasion marks the beginning of Stryker’s own account of her suffering, first through being reminded of how others (mis)understand her, and second through her own unavoidable complicity in the very system she seeks to fight.
Before we move on to agency, I want to briefly make two other observations: first, another structural parallel between Stryker’s and the Monster’s stories, their shared calls for more monsters; and second, a brief comment on suffering.

*Making More Monsters: The Creature’s and Stryker’s Demands*

I want to draw out another parallel between the Monster’s words and Stryker’s, one that also highlights the difference between them. At the end of his speech, the Creature, lacking any fellows of his ilk to establish a non-human community that might enable his survival and happiness, turns to Victor to make such a mate: “You must create a female for me, with whom I can live in the interchange of those sympathies necessary for my being. This alone you can do; and I demand it of you as a right which you must not refuse to concede.”28 Stryker, too, calls for more monsters, both early in the essay, and at the end: “I challenge you to investigate your nature as I have been compelled to confront mine. I challenge you to risk abjection and flourish as well as have I. Heed my words, and you may well discover the seams and sutures in yourself” (247). And again, at the end: “If you will but listen to the monsters... be forewarned that taking up that task will remake you in the process” (254). The differences between Stryker’s call and the Monster’s are important both for agency, as we shall see, and for gender, as well as for linking the two together.

Regarding sex and gender, the Monster sought to resolve his lack of family and his gender-ambiguity by having a female mate constructed for him. This would secure him a place in the naturalized heterosexual order, and he promises to cease being a threat to

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28 Shelley, 183.
humanity: “we shall be monsters, cut off from all the world; but on that account we shall be
more attached to one another. Our lives will not be happy, but they will be harmless, and
free from the misery I now feel.”29 Though he cannot join humanity, then, the Monster can
create an alternate version far from oppressors in “the vast wilds of South America” where
“the sun will shine on us as on man” and their lives will be “peaceful and human”.30 Initially
Victor accedes to the Monster’s demands, but ultimately, fears what a female monster may
itself mean to humanity and the heterosexual order on which it is premised. Even if the
Monster and his mate were to fulfill the heterosexual ideal of procreation, “a race of devils
would be propagated upon the earth.”31 Victor cannot bring himself to complete the
request, and in a grisly scene of male violence against a female body, he destroys the
female-in-the-making. “Trembling with passion, tore to pieces the thing on which I was
engaged”, leaving “the remains of the half-finished creature... scattered on the floor.”32

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29 Shelley, 184–5.

30 Shelley, 185.

31 Shelley, 213.

32 Shelley, 213; 218. Spivak comments on how, in describing his destruction of the female-monster-in-the
making, Victor himself identifies it as a human being: "It is impossible not to notice the accents of
transgression inflecting Frankenstein's demolition of his experiment to create the future Eve. Even in the
laboratory, the woman-in-the-making is not a bodied corpse but 'a human being.' The (il)logic of the
metaphor bestows on her a prior existence which Frankenstein aborts, rather than an anterior death which
he reembodies" (Spivak, 255).
Following this destruction, the Monster resumes his murderous revenge against
Frankenstein, destroying him and his family.

In contrast, Stryker’s would-be monsters, her transphobic feminist and bisexual and
lesbian critics and her readers more generally, do not promise quietude nor do they seek
peaceful happiness. They instead continue to question and challenge the sex/gender
binary—that is, indeed, what will cause them to discover themselves as monsters.
Addressing her audience as “fellow creatures”, she says “I offer you this warning: the
Nature you bedevil me with is a lie.... You are as constructed as me; the same anarchic

Many feminist scholars have commented on Victor’s destruction of the female monster-in-the-making and his
fear of female sexuality. For example, Mary Jacobus observes that “Behind this fantasy lies yet another, that of
the female monster who might desire men instead of monsters. The threat to male sexuality lies not only in
her hideous deformity, refusing to accommodate the image of his desire, but in the dangerous autonomy of
her refusal to mate in the image in which she was made” (135). Similarly, Mellor poses and answers the
questions

What does Victor Frankenstein truly fear, that causes him to end his creation of the female? First, he
is afraid of an independent female will, afraid that his female creature will have desires and opinions
that cannot be controlled by his male creature.... Moreover, those uninhibited female desires might
be sadistic... Third, he fears that his female creature will be more ugly than his male creature, so
much so that the male will turn from her in disgust. Fourth, he fears that she will prefer to mate with
ordinary males. Implicit here is Frankenstein’s horror that, given the gigantic strength of this female,
she would have the power to seize and even rape the male she might choose. And finally, he is afraid
of her reproductive powers, her capacity to generate an entire race of similar creatures. What Victor
Frankenstein truly fears is female sexuality as such. A woman who is sexually liberated, free to
choose her own life, her own sexual partner (by force, if necessary), and to propagate at will can only
appear monstrously ugly to Victor Frankenstein, for she defies that sexist aesthetic that insists that
women be small, delicate, modest, and sexually pleasing—but available only to their lawful
husbands. (Mellor, Mary Shelley, 119–20)
Womb has birthed us both” (247). It is by reflecting on their nature as creatures of the sex/gender system, rather than as naturally embodied creators that they will come to know their own natures, and thus to become the monsters they always were. Neither does Stryker seek even to emulate human life:

A creature, after all... is nothing other than a created being, a made thing. The affront you humans take to being called a “creature” results from the threat the term poses to your status as “lords of creation,” beings elevated above mere material existence. As in the case of being called “it,” being called a “creature” suggests the lack or loss of a superior personhood. I find no shame, however, in acknowledging my egalitarian relationship with non-human material Being: everyone emerges from the same matrix of possibilities. (246–7)

Thus, not only is Stryker questioning the privilege of those who would deny their constructedness, but she questions the very basis on which the naturalized sex/gender system rests, the “groundlessness of privilege you seek to maintain for yourself at my expense” (247). In this questioning, she is also able to inquire after questions of who acts to uphold that system and its privileges. It is to this, specifically questions of agency and responsibility, that we now turn.

“What Gender Had Done to Me”: Suffering in the Formation of Transgender Knowledge

Before moving on to the question of agency, I want to briefly look ahead to my later discussion of suffering in Stryker’s story by observing here its role in generating her knowledge of the violent means by which sex/gender and creator–creature hierarchies operate, including in making her complicit in the former. As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, Stryker uses the story of Filisa Vistima’s suicide to note that the appellations
“monster” and “creature” “have the power to destroy transsexual lives” (246), but that this suffering is also the product of a deeper fear of what transsexuals represent, “displaying in unnerving detail the anxious, fearful underside of the current cultural fascination with transgenderism” (245). Through the Seattle queer community’s success at making Vistima believe herself to be a monster, and then absolving themselves of any role in her death, Stryker is able to understand the relationship between transgender oppression and the politics of gender and sexuality. Through Vistima’s suffering, she can see how the centrality of transgender abjection operates to secure the pretense of naturalness on which some feminist and queer politics are founded. We can also see how those claims to naturalness not only create new hierarchies, but fail to challenge those they are meant to, and so imperil the very political projects that rely on them.

We can see how suffering contributes more directly to Stryker’s understanding of sex/gender in her family story. Immediately after the child’s birth, someone announces the child’s sex/gender, which immediately elicits a strongly negative response from Stryker: “‘It’s a girl,’ somebody said. Paul, I think. Why, just then, did a jumble of dark, unsolicited feelings emerge wordlessly from some quiet back corner of my mind? This moment of miracles was not the time to deal with them. I pushed them back, knowing they were too strong to avoid for long” (249). Already, we see a link between Paul’s words sexing/gendering the newborn and Stryker’s sense of something amiss, which she will only have the opportunity to reflect upon and develop more fully later, “in the solitude of my home” (250). There, after the “simple joy in the presence of new life came bubbling out” (250), the “dark, unsolicited feelings” return:
Frustration and anger soon welled up in abundance. In spite of all I’d accomplished, my identity still felt so tenuous. Every circumstance of life seemed to conspire in one vast, composite act of invalidation and erasure.... The high price of whatever visible, intelligible, self-representation I have achieved makes the continuing experience of invisibility maddeningly difficult to bear. (250–1)

Stryker’s own suffering is the product of the widespread tendency to assume a congruence between bodies, gender, and sexuality—the naturalization of the sex/gender system—that erases her own experiences of transsexuality, which are part of her and her family’s efforts to challenge that system. She describes her postpartum breakdown as the product of and contributor to this awareness, for following her reflection on the sources of her initial response to Paul’s proclamation, “the collective assumptions of the naturalized order soon overwhelmed me” (251). We see these assumptions in the many reactions to the birth of Denali, for example, when Stryker says, “I wonder what the hospital staff thought of our little tribe swarming all over the delivery room” (249–50), or in the reactions of friends and acquaintances who assumed her possible paternity. Stryker’s suffering is both the product of and contributes to her understanding of the sex/gender system, especially her coming to see herself once again through the eyes of those in dominant positions. Stryker’s suffering also makes clear to her, however, that these individuals are not themselves to blame, but rather that this is a feature of the sex/gender system (I shall return to this point below): “I cried, and abandoned myself to abject despair over what gender had done to me” (251; italics added). It is Stryker’s experiences of suffering, both her own and those which she shares with other transgender people, that enable her to be aware of how gender operates through people, that it is “phallogocentric language” (253) that the naturalized
gender hierarchy uses for its reproduction, and that this occurs whenever gender is verbally imposed onto bodies, regardless of who does the speaking. It is to Stryker’s theorization of this system that I now turn.

FROM COMPPLICITY TO AGENCY

As we just saw, Stryker calls for cisgender persons to recognize their own monstrosity and creaturehood—a nature they share with those whom they label “monster”—and to reject the creator/creature divide that privileges them. Doing so will enable them to see not only their own createdness through sex and gender, but it will also expose their own complicity within that system, exacerbated by the privilege of naturalness they wrongly claimed at the expense of transgender people. Read against the original Monster’s tale, Stryker’s claims fulfill the account of complicity and agency that the Monster articulated, but was never able to realize because of his singularity and idealization of Victor as his maker. Stryker thus does not seek to emulate the human life of her oppressors, as the Monster does, but to eradicate the “lords of creation” status that self-identified humans have arrogated to themselves. The universality of createdness that Stryker repeatedly posits against humanity allows her to assert the falsity of the human/monster divide in a way that Frankenstein’s Creature cannot. She is able then to posit a kind of “monstrous agency”, one that eschews the “lords of creation” ideal of agency only available to self-proclaimed “natural”, uncreated individuals; one that instead finds agency in shared createdness. This agency is realized not by creating more monsters, as Victor’s creature would have it, but rather, by people understanding their own monstrosity for what it is and joining with Stryker and other monsters in their rage.
I will argue in the remainder of this section that Stryker’s monstrous agency comes out of the realization that we are all creatures of the “fields of domination”, and that one aspect of recognizing our createdness is that we are also complicit as participants in, and so re-creators of, that domination. As I read her, then, Stryker moves from complicity to agency. The model that Stryker proposes lies in sharp distinction to the creator–creature dynamic that we see in *Frankenstein*, particularly as articulated by Victor. This holds individuals *responsible* for the actions of their creatures, rather than understanding themselves as created objects *cum* participants, alongside many others, in the maintenance of a whole violently hierarchical system. Throughout the novel, however, this model proves to be disastrous, and only causes the perpetuation of violence.\(^{33}\) We can see at certain points the Monster articulating a different model of responsibility, one based in a collective complicity in the exclusion of the monstrous from humanity. The singularity of the

\(^{33}\) Spivak comments that *Frankenstein* is puzzling to many readers as a feminist text, "simply because it does not speak the language of feminist individualism which we have come to hail as the language of high feminism within English literature" (Spivak, 254). She also offers a reading of the relationship between Victor and his two childhood friends as an allegory of "Kant’s three-part conception of the human subject: Victor Frankenstein, the forces of theoretical reason or ‘natural philosophy’; Henry Clerval, the forces of practical reason or ‘the moral relations of thing’; and Elizabeth Lavenza, that aesthetic judgment" (Spivak, 256). In this reading, "this three-part subject does not operate harmoniously in *Frankenstein*" (Spivak, 256) because the individual, in this case Victor, escapes the other two parts of the subject only for all three to be killed by the Creature who would hold all responsible for his situation, further undermining the individualism that is absent from Shelley’s text. "In the end, as is obvious to most readers, distinctions of human individuality themselves seem to fall away from the novel" (Spivak, 258).
Creature, however, makes impossible the realization of this model; by appealing for a mate, and so buying into the hierarchies of sex/gender, human/monster, and creator/creature, the Monster is only able to reinforce those systems.\textsuperscript{34} Stryker, in contrast, proposes to

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Though I have focused on it here, it is not only the sex/gender hierarchy that constitutes the human/monster hierarchy. Judith Halberstam adapts Franco Moretti’s concept of the Creature as a “totalizing monster” as a means of articulating the multifarious nature of the monstrous: “totalized monstrosity allows for a whole range of specific monstrosities to coalesce in the same form,” so that “the ‘totalizing monster’… threatens community from all sides and from its very core rather than from a simple outside” (Halberstam, 29). From this understanding of the nature of monstrosity expressed in Frankenstein, Halberstam argues that “the book presents itself not as the making of a monster, \textit{but as the making of a human}” (32; italics in original). But she is not making the more commonplace claim that the monster is, despite its appearance, really a wrongly and wrongfully outcast person who others fail to see as such. Instead, it is the formation of Victor as a \textit{human} that occurs through the novel: “The identity of Frankenstein, in other words, always depends utterly upon his status as male, bourgeois, and white as the monster’s monstrosity depends upon his yellow skin, his masslike shape, and his unstable gender” (32). For Halberstam, Frankenstein is as much about the formation of the human to which the monstrous is counterposed and excluded. For Halberstam, this means that we cannot privilege any hierarchy in our reading of the novel, for that risks missing out on the multiplicity of hierarchies that come to define the human. Because “nineteenth century monstrosity confounds the possibility of a single answer to the question of identity,” Halberstam cautions that “if we read Frankenstein as a story about repressed homoerotic desire, for example, we risk not reading it as a story about childbirth; and if we only read it as a ‘birth myth,’ we miss the narrative of class” (36). The point is to keep in mind the many hierarchical axes along which the human comes to be defined; Frankenstein is useful because it uses the very visibility of the monster and its repulsive ugliness to reveal the contours of the human, which normally persist unseen, and how it is constructed alongside the construction of otherness.
\end{quote}
eradicate these hierarchical distinctions so that becoming an agent depends upon understanding the system by which one was made—and that one participates in perpetuating—thus *remaking* oneself, or rather, allowing oneself to be remade in and by the system of oppression and the fellow monsters that coexist within it. This, in turn, depends upon overcoming the kind of isolation that monsters often feel, to become a part of a collective in which agency can be realized and those systems can be challenged.

*Being/Making Creatures: Complicity vs. Responsibility*

By claiming responsibility for the Monster’s deeds, making them his own, Victor also makes it his responsibility to punish the Monster and himself. These are actions that will, Victor believes, destroy them both: “It was surely that I might fill my destiny... and, in executing the award of justice, I shall also sink to rest.”35 For Victor, fulfilling his destiny would, at the rightful cost of his own life, re-establish the rightful order of creating human over created monster. And yet, in constantly citing the death of his beloved friends and family, Victor is also differentiating himself from the Monster, who is without family and love, and who blames others for his unhappiness and the actions it motivates. Indeed, Victor’s “destiny” is part of his larger program to protect his family:

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Because of its readability, monstrosity allows us to peek at the construction of otherness out of the raw materials of racial undesirability, class definition, family ties, sexual perversity, and gender instability. The monster, therefore, by embodying what is not human, produces the human as discursive effect. The human in Frankenstein, of course, is the Western European, bourgeois, male scientist. (45)

35 Shelley, 232.
One duty remained to me, the recollection of which triumphed over my selfish despair. It was necessary that I should return without delay to Geneva, there to watch over the lives of those I so fondly loved; and to lie in wait for the murderer, that if any chance led me to the place of his concealment, or if he dared again to blast me by his presence, I might, with unfailing aim, put an end to the existence of the monstrous Image which I had endued with the mockery of a soul still more monstrous.\(^{36}\)

The bearing of responsibility for Victor is toward those whom he loves, and yet whom he believes he has murdered through his creative act of making the Monster. Thus he asserts that, as the responsible individual, he alone must fight to preserve the familial bonds and structures that his creation threatens to undo, and he alone must return the Creature to its rightful place in the natural(ized), hierarchical orders as Victor understands them.

Yet these efforts prove fruitless; the Monster successfully destroys familial bliss by murdering Victor’s bride, Elizabeth, on their wedding night. I read this as, in part, an outcome of Victor’s own insistence on his solipsistic understanding of his role in the Monster’s crimes. In treating the Monster’s actions as his own, Victor is only ever able to take responsibility for them as an individual, to see them as his own actions directed against himself. The consequences are disastrous: Victor’s, his father’s, and the Monster’s deaths all follow Elizabeth’s murder. But it is only after the Creature’s murder of Elizabeth, and not any of his preceding three killings, that Victor openly discusses the existence of the Monster with any other person in order to convey the threat the latter poses. Victor explains: “I could not bring myself to disclose a secret which would fill my hearer with

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\(^{36}\) Shelley, 234.
consternation, and make fear and unnatural horror the inmates of his breast.” In taking on the responsibility for his own actions, and thus privileging his own need to act over others’ capacity to do so, Victor fails to enable them to protect themselves. This is especially stark in the case of the murder of Elizabeth, which Victor could have foreseen, as the monster warned “I will be with you on your wedding-night!” Yet Victor fails to understand the threat, able only to understand himself as the proper object of the monster’s violence (this despite the fact that all the previous victims have been Victor’s family members and not Victor himself) because he fancies himself the sole creator of the Monster and his rage. Recalling “the threat of the fiend—‘I will be with you on your wedding-night!’ ”, Victor comments,

Such was my sentence, and on that night would the daemon employ every art to destroy men, and tear from me the glimpse of happiness which promised partly to console my sufferings. On that night he had determined to consummate his crimes by my death. Well, be it so; a deadly struggle would then assuredly take place, in which if he were victorious I should be at peace, and his power over me be at an end. If he were vanquished, I should be a free man.

Unable to see beyond the model of individual responsibility and agency, and the solipsism they engender, Victor offers us an understanding of the flaws of the human individual as the basis for understanding action and responding to it.

37 Shelley, 237.

38 Shelley, 216.

39 Shelley, 240–1.
In contrast, while the Creature targets Victor for punishment, the former holds all of humanity responsible for shunning him and denying him the opportunity of love and human communion. In his speech to Victor above Chamounix, the Monster repeatedly observes his odiousness to humanity and his isolation from society as the sources of his unhappiness: “Everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend.”40 The Monster then speaks directly of human justice and its relationship with his situation:

If the multitude of mankind knew of my existence, they would do as you do, and arm themselves for my destruction. Shall I not then hate them who abhor me? I will keep not terms with my enemies. I am miserable and they shall share my wretchedness. Yet it is in your power to recompense me, and deliver them from an evil which it only remains for you to make so great, that not only you and your family, but thousands of others, shall be swallowed up in the whirlwinds of its rages.41

In this passage, the Monster at once presents an alternative model of responsibility to Victor’s, but simultaneously appeals to and reinforces that of his creator. In highlighting his status as a creature, the Monster is reallocating responsibility for his actions upon Frankenstein and all those others who spurned him. This is reinforced in the Monster’s initial encounter with the DeLaceys’ blind father. In relating his initial, painful and violent encounters with humans, the Monster repeats his earlier claim that it is all of humanity who made him, and so who bears the responsibility for his murders. This responsibility is

40 Shelley, 126.

41 Shelley, 126–7.
allocated not solely by the justice of punishment, but also in the aid and acceptance of innocent unfortunates who were socialized into wrongdoing. This standpoint is voiced by the elderly Mr. DeLacey in response to the Monster’s fear of rejection and persecution: “Heaven forbid! Even if you were really a criminal, for that can only drive you to desperation, and not instigate you to virtue.” Of course, the father’s (blind) sympathy is not shared, and the Monster is rejected by the rest of the DeLacey family, as well as all other humans he meets, prior to having committed any crimes.

Despite his innocence, then, the Monster is already treated as, and so is made into, the criminal; a process that the creature is aware of, yet that he is powerless to change:

I am malicious because I am miserable. Am I not shunned and hated by all mankind?... You, my creator, would tear me to pieces, and triumph; remember that and tell me why I should pity man more than he pities me?... Shall I respect man when he condemns me? Let him live with me in the interchange of kindness; and, instead of injury I would bestow every benefit upon him with tears of gratitude.”

In describing his expulsion from humanity, the Monster moves between Victor qua individual and humanity as the collective agent of his own misery, and so of their

42 Shelley, 170.

43 The fact that the DeLacey father’s words come before the Monster has committed any crimes in the timeline of the novel, but after we, the readers, are made aware of his murder of William Frankenstein makes them more a key to the Monster’s own self-understanding than somehow prophetic. They may even have served for the Monster to give himself license to turn to crime.

44 Shelley, 184.
victimization at his hands. So while the Creature seeks to escape the individualized model of responsibility, he cannot. He must instead constantly return to holding Victor to account for the actions of the whole: “Unfeeling, heartless creator! You had endowed me with perceptions and passions and then cast me abroad an object for the scorn and horror of mankind. But on you only had I any claim for pity and redress, and from you I determined to seek that justice which I vainly attempted to gain from any other being that wore the human form.” The Monster is unable to escape the human system of responsibility, but in his isolation he is unable to exercise the agency that would eradicate the human form that Victor embodies; he is able only to destroy the system as a whole by destroying Frankenstein and his family. While the creation of a mate opens the possibility of that agency, as we saw above, Victor refuses to allow that threat to his own privileged status to be realized.

Stryker is also concerned with the problem of complicity in a gender system that her transgender project may result in. The goal of identification with the Monster, quoted at the beginning of this paper (“I want to lay claim to the dark power of my monstrous identity without using it as a weapon against others or being wounded by it myself”) is thus not just a challenge to the story of Frankenstein’s Monster, but can also be read as a challenge to rethink complicity and agency. It is a statement of the central problematic of transgender—and all those marginalized feminized persons’—political agency: How is it possible to use the tools of oppression (including self-oppression) to overcome the oppressive system instead of reproducing it? Stryker takes transgender persons’ constructedness not as a

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45 Shelley, 176.
problem, but rather as a starting point for agency. Just as “Frankenstein cannot control the mind and feelings of the monster he makes [because] it exceeds and refutes his purposes... the consciousness shaped by the transsexual body is no more the creation of the science that refigures its flesh than the monster’s mind is the creation of Frankenstein” (248).

While she does not seek the status of creator, neither does Stryker characterize monstrosity in the usual terms as complete object; instead, as *Frankenstein* shows, to be created still enables one to have a unique subjectivity and agency that humans want to reserve to themselves alone.

To show how Stryker crafts agency out of her creaturehood, I return to her family story, specifically her reaction to the birth of Denali summarized above. The “assumptions of the naturalized order” that erase Stryker’s transgender existence and generate her suffering are evident in the many reactions to the conception and birth of Denali that Stryker is aware of, for example: Paul’s sexing/gendering of the baby; the friends and acquaintances who inquired after her paternity; or a visit from her former wife, to whom she was married before her gender-transition, which leads Stryker to “mourn the passing of old, more familiar ways” (250). What Stryker’s suffering makes clear to her, however, is that these individuals are not themselves to blame for their painful misrecognition. She describes her reaction: “I cried, and abandoned myself to abject despair over *what gender had done to me*” (251; italics added). I emphasize Stryker’s placement of gender as the subject in the subordinate clause; it is *gender* and not either the hospital staff, or the “friends and acquaintances”, or even herself, who failed to understand Stryker’s family’s project and contributed to her invisibility and suffering. Through their actions, they may have been the proximate causes of Stryker’s current misery; at the same time, however,
those actions and the sensations they bring up are also a condition of bringing Stryker back to awareness of her situation as a transwoman in society. They remind her of her knowledge of how others see her, or fail to see her. These people (Stryker included) are complicit in her oppression and suffering, but she does not hold them directly responsible for it.

This generalized complicity is also evident when, like the Monster, Stryker speaks to her creators. Unlike the Monster, she identifies at least two sets of people in that role: transphobic lesbian-feminists like Mary Daly and Janice Raymond, and the medical professionals who developed the definitions and treatment of transsexuality *qua* pathology. For transphobic lesbian feminists, Stryker comments that “it is a commonplace of literary criticism that Frankenstein’s monster is his own dark, romantic double, the alien Other he constructs and upon which he projects all he cannot accept in himself... Might I suggest that Daly, Raymond and others of their ilk similarly construct the transsexual as their own particular golem?” (245) Later in the essay, she also identifies as her creators “the men who made my body, and who have made the bodies of creatures like me since the 1930s” (249). This conflation is powerful because the lesbian-feminists present themselves as at odds with the doctors’ and scientists’ project, and with the transsexual patients they treat, which we see in one quotation from a lesbian-feminist Stryker provides: “People who break or deform their bodies [act] out the sick farce of a deluded, patriarchal approach to nature, alienated from true being” (Mikuteit, qtd. in Stryker, 246) Yet both the feminists and the biomedical professionals make transsexuality a monstrous, disordered way of being that threatens to upend the “deeply conservative attempt to stabilize gendered identity in the service of the naturalized heterosexual order” (248), and so impose on
Stryker—and all transgender people—“the necessity of existing in external circumstances that work against my survival” (249).

“But,” as Stryker immediately adds, “there is yet another rage within” (249). This rage is not solely directed against those more direct creators in the previous paragraph, the transphobic feminists and the sex/gender-stabilizing doctors. Rather, it is directed against the very sex/gender system that every person who labels an infant a boy or girl, and every user of gendered language, is implicated in—including Stryker herself.

Gender attribution is compulsory; it codes and deploys our bodies in ways that materially affect us, yet we choose neither our marks nor the meanings they carry. This was the act accomplished at the beginning and end of that short sentence in the delivery room: “It’s a girl.” This was the act that recalled all the anguish of my own struggles with gender. But this was also the act that enjoined my complicity in the non-consensual gendering of another. (253)

This complicity is unavoidable, and so all the more violent: “A gendering violence is the founding condition of human subjectivity. Having a gender is the tribal tattoo that makes one’s personhood cognizable. I stood for a moment between the pains of two violations, the mark of gender and the unlivability of its absence” (253). One cannot simply refuse to gender one’s child, for this casts them outside the system on which they depend for their survival, another form of violence that likewise carries complicity in strengthening the sex/gender system. This is the genesis of “transgender rage... a queer fury, an emotional response to conditions in which it becomes imperative to take up, for the sake of one’s own continued survival as a subject, a set of practices that precipitates one’s exclusion from a naturalized order of existence that seeks to maintain itself as the only possible basis for
being a subject” (253). This systemic maintenance is performed by nearly everyone all the
time—even those who, like Denali’s father Paul, otherwise embody antagonism toward that
same sex/gender system. Upon “finding one’s self prostrate and powerless in the presence
of the Law of the Father” of heteronormative sex/gender, Stryker wonders: “What
difference does it make if the father in this instance was a pierced, tattooed, purple-haired
punk fag anarchist who helped his dyke friend get pregnant?” (253). Like Frankenstein’s
Monster, Stryker simultaneously recognizes the generality of complicity in her situation
and singles out certain parties as having played a greater role. Yet, unlike the Monster, she
neither holds these people more responsible, nor does she place her demands for
resolution singly upon them. Because of the generality of complicity in reproducing the
sex/gender system, and with it the oppression of transgender people, Stryker presents the
necessity of eliminating the very status of creator and simultaneously eschews individual
responsibility and agentic capacity to bring about that change. Her simultaneous call to
universal monstrosity presents an alternative model of agency, one that is adequate to
meeting the challenge of a sex/gender hierarchy that forcibly draws people into its
reproduction.

In my reading, then, Stryker completes the promise of the Monster’s understanding
of complicity by finding a way to challenge the sex/gender and creator-created
dichotomies without having to rely on the creators themselves. This connects the problem
of complicity with that of agency by making the formation of the latter dependent upon
awareness—often painful—of the former. For both dichotomies, this requires living and
embodying the very model she hopes to realize in the world. This means her existence as a
transsexual person who embraces and openly speaks her transsexuality to “assert my
worth as a monster in spite of the conditions my monstrosity requires me to face, and redefine a life worth living” (254). But it also means the shared monstrosity that she calls on all others to recognize in themselves, and that will enable them to take part in a new, shared and monstrous agency that can challenge the sex/gender system. It is to this new model of agency that I now turn.

**Monstrous Agency**

Given the shared monstrosity of all sexed/gendered persons, and given our unavoidable complicity, Stryker characterizes the feminist and queer ascription of monstrosity to transsexuals a failed attempt to grasp the “lords of creation” status for themselves. Despite their accusations that transsexuals violate their “true natures”, Stryker shows that it is indeed these critics who refuse their own monstrosity and creaturehood and who seek to elevate themselves above nature. In the context of *Frankenstein’s* anxieties over the undomesticated, Promethean masculinity of the early Victorian era that I discussed above, this reversal becomes all the more ironic. Raymond and Daly both argue that male-to-female transsexuals like Stryker and Vistima are men masquerading as women, agents of male domination come once again to invade feminist space. Similarly, in one letter to a gay and lesbian periodical that Stryker quotes from at the beginning of “My Words”, “When an estrogenated man with breasts loves a woman, that is not lesbianism, that is mutilated perversion. [This individual] is not a threat to the lesbian community, he is an outrage to us” (Mikuteit, qtd. in Stryker, 246). But this violent rejection of “creatures” aspires toward the “lords of creation” ideal that Stryker eschews and that in *Frankenstein* effects the violent destruction of women, including their elimination, not their liberation or love.
For Stryker, the rejection of the sex/gender hierarchy, as well as those of creator/created and human/monstrosity—all of which are constellated together through mutual constitution—makes agency possible. As I have already said, this demands painful recognition of our created status, as well as of our complicity in maintaining the gender system and imposing it on others. This is something that many people are not willing to do, and instead they take transsexuals and other monsters as threats to the privileges of sex/gender hierarchy and humanity that they enjoy; these people are abiding by the system they wrongly believe themselves to be challenging. Neither, as we saw in Stryker’s anguish over Denali’s sexing/gendering, is simply declining to participate in the system an adequate expression of political agency, for this only allows the violence of the sex/gender system to be visited upon those who remain unsexed and ungendered, and thus abject, unable to speak at all to the system itself.

Instead, I read in “My Words” a proposal for a kind of monstrous agency, one in which one is both the creature of oneself and of others. Monstrous agency means operating within the oppressive, hierarchical, and violent systems to challenge, and eventually dismantle them—something that cannot be done on one’s own. For Stryker, this agency is the product of her recognition of the inescapability of gender, which we can see in her poem of transformation from despair to agentic, monstrous rage: “If I cannot change my situation, I will change myself” (251; italics in original) which generates her rage, and from that, her new agency: “In birthing my rage,/my rage has rebirthed me” (252). This rage does not posit Stryker as the sole agent of systemic change or simply of resistance. Rather, she becomes part of a fluid whole: “I am not the water—/I am the wave,/and rage is the force that moves me” (252). This means that, “though I cannot escape its power, I can move
through its medium. Perhaps if I move furiously enough, I can deform it in my passing to leave a trace of my rage. I can embrace it with a vengeance to rename myself, declare my transsexuality, and gain access to the means of my legible reinscription” (253–4).

This project of “deforming the medium” of sex/gender by articulating her own transsexuality is incomplete if others do not hear and repeat it, claiming monstrosity for themselves and becoming part of the wave that moves the water, deforming and ultimately transforming the medium that constitutes all gendered persons. Anyone else can participate, too, “if you will but listen to the monsters: the possibility of meaningful agency and action exists, even within fields of domination that bring about the universal cultural rape of all flesh. Be forewarned, however, that taking up this task will remake you in the process”, just as it remade Stryker herself. And as it was for Stryker, it will be painful for those who heed her call; “confronting the implications of this constructedness can summon up all the violation, loss, and separation inflicted by the gendering process that sustains the illusion of naturalness” (254). That is, those who seek to be feminist political agents must allow themselves to be disrupted through the experiences of others who have already embraced their monstrosity and suffered for it. However, this opens the possibility of undergoing the rage that birthed Stryker’s agency, and that can be the source for ours, too, as in the “monstrous benediction” with which Stryker concludes: “May you discover the enlivening power of darkness within yourself. May it nourish your rage. May your rage inform your actions, and your actions transform you as you struggle to transform your world” (254). The monstrous agency that Stryker’s transgender project enables, then, requires that we inhabit our monstrosity as both creatures and as rage-fuelled defiers of the system that is our creator. It is only by coming together to join that “race of devils” that
so troubled the Monster’s creator that we will successfully create the monstrous agency that any challenge to the system requires.

**Monsters Suffer, But They Also Rage**

As I have already recounted in this chapter, throughout “My Words” Stryker embraces her place in the non-normative categories of transsexual/transgender, monster, and creature. As the many passages I have already cited make clear, however, this embrace occurs through the experiences of subjective disruption occasioned by Stryker’s inability to reconcile her desires for her body and for her child with the demands of the sex/gender system. Indeed, this disruption is how Stryker characterizes her rage:

The rage itself is generated by the subject’s situation in a field governed by the unstable but indissoluble relationship between language and materiality, a situation in which language organizes and brings into signification matter that simultaneously eludes definitive representation and demands its own perpetual rearticulation in symbolic terms. Within this dynamic field the subject must constantly police the boundary constructed by its own founding in order to maintain the fictions of “inside” and “outside” against a regime of signification/materialization whose intrinsic instability produces the rupture of subjective boundaries as one of its regular features. (252)

For transgender persons, then, disruption is a fact of life under the current sex/gender hierarchy, just as it is for many other people with non-normative genders and sexualities. The experiences of others’ perceptions that Stryker details—the imagined whispers of hospital staff, the inappropriate questions of acquaintances—only serve as painful reminders of that, disrupting an otherwise happy event. The narrative that Stryker presents us with, however, is not one of overcoming that suffering, nor does she hold out
that promise to her fellow monsters. That, Stryker maintains, is impossible under the
current discursive–material regime. This means that, rather than being an overcoming of
suffering, the genesis of rage becomes a means by which agency can coexist and spread
alongside suffering. Stryker’s rage is essential to her project of monstrous agency. Stryker’s
“My Words” directs us to think how to transform the monster’s suffering from despair to
agency, while also helping its disruption to spread, in order to begin to challenge the
sex/gender system itself. In this final section, I am going to look at how Stryker describes
the transformation of her own suffering from despair to rage. This not only gives us a
valuable first-personal account of suffering; it also enables us to see how Stryker
successfully crafts herself into a subject that is at once tenuous and tenacious, open to
disruption but not prevented from agency because of it.

Again, juxtaposition of Stryker’s experiences with the suffering of the Creature from
Frankenstein is instructive as a contrast to Stryker’s own story and demonstrates the
dangers of imagining a post-suffering life as the fulfillment of one’s agency. We can see this
if we return to the Monster’s demand for a mate, and the reasons for Victor’s refusal.
Issuing his demand, the Creature explains:

If I have no ties and no affections, hatred and vice must be my portion; the
love of another will destroy the cause of my crimes... my virtues will
necessarily arise when I live in communion with an equal. I shall feel the
affections of a sensitive being, and become linked to the chain of existence
and events, from which I am now excluded.46

46 Shelley, 186–7.
The Monster links loving “communion with an equal” with both an end to his suffering isolation and to a greater communion with the world itself, and thus a more benign disposition toward it. While the Monster means this as a promise to end his violence and make himself harmless toward humanity, what he fails to see is the deeper connection between the cause of his suffering, viz., his isolation, and his agency, namely, his continued existence as non-human, uncertainly gendered monster. As we know, it is fear of the multiplication of such monsters that leads Victor to destroy the mate-in-the-making.\(^4\) In my reading, the Monster and Victor represent the violence at the heart of prevailing (even today) understandings of the agency—suffering relationship. While the Monster seeks the promise of a life without suffering through a life with another, it requires that he deny the possibility of his mate’s agency. This denial only begets further violence through Victor’s acts of destruction to prevent that agency from being realized. Similarly, Victor’s own agency is premised on enacting violence and generating suffering with the goal of securing his identity and the lives of the family members under his protection—efforts that, as we saw earlier, continually fail.

Read against the Monster’s fantasy of a happy life with a mate, the absence of any such promise from Stryker of happiness or an end to suffering stands out. Instead, what

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\(^4\) As feminist scholars like Anne Mellor and Mary Jacobus have observed, Victor’s reasoning and his actions belie a deep and violent fear of women’s agency, especially as regards the possibility of their monstrous, “uninhibited female sexuality” (Mellor, Mary Shelley, 120). But at least Victor acknowledges the possibility that a female monster would have some agency to reject the mate she for whom she was created—an eventuality that the Monster fails to consider.
Stryker promises those who join her is their own undoing by and into rage. In the “Journal” section of the essay, the brief glimpse of happiness immediately postpartum decomposes into a “jumble of dark, unsolicited feelings” of frustration, anger, and despair, that, through its disruption and even dissolution of Stryker’s previous subjectivity, turns into agentic rage. Thus, in her story of becoming an agent herself, she exemplifies the role of suffering the making of monstrous agency. In the remainder of this section, I shall first present evidence to support my claim that suffering remains a part of Stryker’s story of agency, and that it exists alongside the rage she comes to feel; I shall then show how this is integral to the conception of monstrous political agency that I attributed to her above, namely, as collective.

“*This Act of Magical Transformation*: The Genesis of Monstrous Rage and the Persistence of Suffering

It is not only the case that Stryker does not promise freedom from suffering to those she calls on to embrace monstrosity; she also details how she was transformed into an agent through her experiences of suffering. We can find evidence of the first claim, that of what agency holds in store for those who cast themselves as monsters, in the closing benediction discussed above. Stryker’s blessing offers only the “solace” that the “struggle to transform your world” is the product of the rage that comes from “the enlivening power of darkness within yourself”. The possibility of world-transformation is dependent upon the darkness of her monstrous suffering and the rage that darkness can generate, but it does not promise peace or subjective integrity.

Stryker’s calling others to embrace their monstrosity and rage requires the repetition of the story she tells of the formation of her own rage and the birth it gave to her
agency. Trans people experience and embody the violence of the gender system, and, “as bearers of this disquieting news, we transsexuals often suffer for the pain of others, but we do not willingly abide the rage of others directed against us. And we do have something else to say, if you will but listen to the monsters: the possibility of meaningful agency and action exists.... Be forewarned, however, that taking up this task will remake you in the process.” (254) The repetition of Stryker’s story—and those of other trans agents—is thus twofold: First, it is a verbal repetition, the re-telling of the story to new audiences who must listen. Second, it is a repetition of the process that story tells, a self-un- and re-making through a replaying of the disruption of one’s naturalized gender, identification with gender monstrosity, and descent into rage.

Rage, then, comes to exist alongside Stryker’s suffering as her despair wanes and she becomes an agent, and it is the transformation of that suffering from despair that constitutes her acquisition of agency. But what enabled her, as opposed to say Filisa Vistima, to make this transformation? While above I observed the ways in which gender is a threat to Stryker’s queer family, we should resist the temptation to see the story of Denali’s birth and gendering as tragic because of the unhappiness it brings. I propose instead that we read the story as one of the end of invisibility and helpless forced complicity and the beginning of rage and agency. Along the way, of course, Stryker must go through despair and a sense of agencylessness; but as that despair transforms into rage, so too does she transform into an agent. What persists through this transformation, however, is the negative feeling of disruption, or suffering.

I first want to note that it did not have to be the case that this knowledge, and the suffering that generated it, had to lead to agency at all. It could well have led either to
despair or complete passivity. The possibility of despair exists when Stryker describes how “the collective assumptions of the naturalized order... overwhelmed me”, and she becomes aware of how “nature exerts such a hegemonic oppression” (251). In response, she says: “I felt lost and scared, lonely and confused.... I cried, and abandoned myself to abject despair over what gender had done to me” (251). At the depths of her despair—when, she says, “I’m falling into darkness I am falling apart” (251; italics in original)—Stryker gives herself over to the darkness. By so doing, she is transformed and transforms herself from despair to agent—yet in the rage that characterizes her agency she retains the suffering that had generated her despair (more on this below). I quote this transformation, written partly in verse, in full:

    I enter the realm of my dreams. I am underwater, swimming upward It is dark. I see a shimmering light above me. I break through the plane of the water’s surface with my lungs bursting. I suck for air—and find only more water. My lungs are full of water. Inside and out I am surrounded by it. Why I am not dead if there is no difference between me and what I am in? There is another surface above me and I swim frantically towards it. I see a shimmering light. I break the plane of the water’s surface over and over and over again. This water annihilates me. I cannot be, and yet—an excruciating possibility—I am I will do anything not to be here.

    I will swim forever.
    I will die for eternity.
    I will learn to breathe water.
    I will become the water.
    If I cannot change the situation I will change myself.
In this act of magical transformation
I recognize myself again.

I am groundless and boundless
movement.
I am furious flow.
I am one with the darkness and the
wet.

And I am enraged.

Here at last is the chaos I held at bay.
Here at last is my strength.

I am not the water—
I am the wave,
and rage
is the force that moves me.

Rage
gives me back my body
as its own fluid medium.

Rage
punches a hole in water
around which I coalesce
to allow the flow to come through me.

Rage constitutes me in my primal
form.
It throws my head back
pulls my lips back over my teeth
opens my throat
and rears me up to howl: and no sound
dilutes
the pure quality of my rage.

No sound
exists
in this place without language
my rage is silent raving

Rage
throws me back at last
into this mundane reality
in this transfigured flesh
that aligns me with the power of my
Being.

In birthing my rage,
my rage has rebirthed me.

(251–2; italics in original)

It seems obvious enough that Stryker feels despair prior to her rage (insofar as, we saw
above, she uses the term), and that this despair is a form of suffering (as I understand the
term). In this lengthy passage, we can see the sense of subjective disruption, of the
dissolution of oneself as a well-defined agent able to move through the world: “My lungs are
full of water. Inside and out I am surrounded by it…. There is no difference between me and
what I am in…. This water annihilates me.” This annihilation is also unpleasant—“I will do
anything not to be here”—just as I described suffering in the Introduction to this
dissertation. Stryker’s sense of herself is in crisis: “I cannot be and yet—an excruciating
possibility—I am”. This kind of despair can become permanent or terminal, as in the case of
Filisa Vistima from the beginning of “My Words”, when it leads to suicide.\(^{48}\) What, then, enabled Stryker to survive and become an agent—simultaneously granting Vistima posthumous agency?

The most notable difference is the isolation that Vistima, like the Monster from the novel, felt; Stryker, already a member of a family and so surrounded by love, knows she is not alone, and so does not despair. I think this reading would be a mistake, however, for several reasons. First, we should note that while it is a source of happiness for her, Stryker’s suffering, both on account of her invisibility and her complicity in gender, are also what occasion her despair. Second, Stryker does not climb out of despair because of or for her family; it is rage that rebirths her, gives her new life. Finally, although Stryker says that “what drove her [Vistima] to such despair was the exclusion she experienced from Seattle’s queer community”, this is not only exclusion from community, it is also exclusion from the normalcy that constitutes that community. This is evident in the passage Stryker quotes from Filisa’s journal: “I wish I was anatomically ‘normal’ so I could go swimming...” (246). It is, in contrast, the rejection of normalcy and the embrace of monstrosity that lie at the heart of Stryker’s transformation into an agent.

\(^{48}\) This is not to say that Vistima’s suicide, or any suicide, was either irrational or the sign of deep pathology; it is only to claim that, in committing suicide, Vistima was unable to participate fully in the collective agency that would challenge the system that pushed her to take her own life. That Stryker tells Vistima’s story does, however, give her some agency even after death, just not full agency to participate in the fate of her story and her life afterward.
Stryker’s agency, then, comes about because of and through her dissolution as the seeker of normalcy and her acceptance of her monstrosity. These are both inescapably characterized by suffering, such as the rage that is the outcome of her transformation: “What I’ve termed ‘transgender rage,’ emerges from interstices of discursive practice and at the collapse of generic categories” (252). The story of Stryker’s transformation, related in verse, is one of Stryker’s refusal to fight that collapse, but rather to let herself be undone and moved by it, and so learn to move along with and against it. Insofar as the sex/gender system is the liquid medium that surrounds us, Stryker’s attempt to swim to the surface—to rise above and master it—proves itself to be impossible. She cannot transform sex/gender by trying to be other than it, for then it will only swallow her up, just as it did Fistima, with her dreams of swimming. Instead, allowing herself to be dissolved by sex/gender, Stryker learns how to move through it without her agency being premised on either destroying it or escaping from it.

Another possible outcome of despair, one that leads to survival, is a kind of resistance that focuses primarily on overcoming and containing the suffering to restore one’s subjective integrity qua stably sexed and gendered person. This is, as I read it, what many theorists who privilege transsexuality as the ability to pass and so rely on the stability of the sexes/genders into which transsexuals transition push toward.\(^49\) We can

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just glimpse this in the possibility of a rage-fueled hedonism in "My Words". Stryker describes her reaction to her sense of “powerlessness in the presence of the Law of the Father” that defines sex/gender and interpellates (nearly) all bodies into it:

I defy that Law in my refusal to abide by its original decree of my gender. Though I cannot escape its power, I can move through its medium. Perhaps if I move furiously enough, I can deform it in my passing to leave a trace of my rage. I can embrace it with a vengeance to rename myself, declare my transsexuality, and gain access to the means of my legible reinscription. Though I may not hold the stylus myself, I can move beneath it for my own deep self-sustaining pleasures. (253-4)

Sustaining oneself is, as Stryker observes, an essential aspect of agency that depends upon the possibility of pleasure, at least momentarily. It would be a mistake to read my argument for the importance of suffering as a claim that it is all that matters, or that it can only be a good thing. Despair that leads to suicide precludes the possibility of the individual’s agency, at least in a meaningfully participatory way. But so, too, does an eschewal of suffering that seeks only to resist in ways that are dependent solely upon the oppressive system itself.

I find in my reading that Stryker recognizes the impossibility of escape from such a system, but also remains dissatisfied with inhabiting it entirely and the complicity that it entails. This is her rage. What is less clear is how suffering persists through the formation of her rage. It is tempting to see rage as a completely different sensation than suffering—perhaps as something more akin to anger—but I want to argue that, at least as Stryker describes it, rage is an affective component of her agency that exists alongside and arises out of her suffering. But, while through the transformation of her despair into rage, Stryker says “I recognize myself again”, this self is different from the despairing self in several key
ways. This re-recognized self is one that continues to be disrupted, and to be subject to further disruption. It is also a self that has agency constituted through others’ agency, a shared agency that depends upon the capacity to be disrupted and to disrupt, to suffer for oneself and also because of others’ suffering. Yet the tenuousness of this new self does not inhibit its potential for agency, nor does it diminish its potency; it is the condition of both. In the lengthy passage just cited, we can see Stryker’s description of her attempted movement through the medium of water that she cannot escape and that threatens to drown her in it. Yet she is only able to successfully move the water after it “annihilates” her and she changes form: “I will become the water/If I cannot change my situation I will change myself”, become “a wave/and rage/is the force that moves me.” If we read the water as gender, then it is only by giving herself over to it, allowing it to dissolve the walls that protect her (251) that she can reconstitute herself within and against gender through rage.

Countering transphobic rage with their own is the means by which Stryker herself and, as she presents them, other transgender people can effectively communicate their suffering. “Through the operation of rage, the stigma [of transgenderism] itself becomes the source of transformative power” (253). It does so through the spread of monstrosity that rage brings with it: “by mobilizing gendered identities and rendering them provisional, open to strategic development and occupation, this rage enables the establishment of subjects in new modes, regulated by different codes of intelligibility” (253). These “new modes” are monstrous, but transgender people are only harbingers of them; they are not only for transgender people, but rather, Stryker repeats (and we have repeatedly seen), they are for all sexed/gendered persons. The term “monster”, Stryker writes, “is derived from the Latin noun monstrum, ‘divine portent,’ itself formed on the root of the verb
monere, ‘to warn’ ” (247). As such, monsters, including herself, have “served to announce that impending revelation, saying, in effect, ‘Pay attention: something of profound importance is happening’ ” (247). One must be open to this revelation, however, which comes about through rage even as it perpetuates both rage and suffering. “Transgender rage furnishes a means for misidentification with compulsorily assigned subject positions. It makes the transition from one gendered subject position to another possible by using the impossibility of complete subjective foreclosure to organize an outside force as an inside drive, and vice versa” (253; italics added). In other words, rage becomes a means by which people can effect the same kind of self-dissolution, or what I am calling subjective disruption, that Stryker underwent and that she characterizes as part of identifying with one’s monstrosity, something that, for non-trans people, is dependent on their disruption through the rage and suffering of transgender people. “Meaningful agency and action exists, even under fields of domination”, Stryker asserts, but this can only be known “if you will but listen to the monsters”, even though “taking up this task will remake you in the process” (254).

There is a cyclicality to the relationship between agency, suffering, and rage that we can draw out of the passages quoted in the previous paragraph, and that demonstrates my point that, for Stryker, rage effects the agency of the original sufferer. It does so, again, by disrupting the listener or reader’s own sex/gender self-understanding, which will often be experienced as suffering, which in turn can produce rage, thus spreading the disruption further. While not exactly a reversal of the cycle I located in Jennifer Nedelsky’s account of agency in Law’s Relations (see Chapter 2), Stryker’s is nevertheless a cycle that effects agency and (hopefully) equality through cycles of disruption, of undoing that with which
people deeply identify and that they even believe originated internally to them. This begins with what Stryker describes as suffering of “the impossibility of subjective foreclosure” to the violence of the sex/gender system and its linguistic imperatives for individuals, which rage is able to transform into a source of agency by enabling transgender people to know and communicate their suffering and its sources to others. Those others must undergo the suffering, first, of their awareness of their complicity in the violence that Stryker and other trans people have experienced; and second, of their own self-alienation that attends the artificiality of their sex/gender identities, that feel as though they are natural and internal, but are in actuality the products of the same sex/gender system that wrongly makes Stryker seem unnatural, differently monstrous. Stryker thus premises the possibility of her own agency on her suffering and on spreading it through rage to others.
CHAPTER 4

CATHARINE MACKINNON: VICTIMS AS AGENTS

INTRODUCTION

While Stryker gives us a first-personal account of suffering’s contribution to her own agency, and that of her fellow monsters, in this chapter and the next I want in greater detail at the level of a larger feminist movement, to see how suffering can, by its spread across women, contribute to women’s political agency. To do so, in this chapter I will give a reading of Catharine MacKinnon’s Toward a Feminist Theory of the State (hereafter referred to as Toward).¹ There MacKinnon argues that the task of feminism is first to help produce the agency of victims of sexual violence, which is a necessary step toward the larger goal of transcending the sex/gender system and its constitutive hierarchy. As we shall soon see, this is not the usual way of reading MacKinnon’s work; her many critics portray her account of women as essentialist or universalist, one in which they are always already victims—just with varying degrees of awareness of their victimhood. I, however, read MacKinnon’s claims about women not as assertions about empirical existence—and so decidedly not universal or essentialist—but rather as political claims about what feminists should be aware of and care about. Thus, MacKinnon observes that it is obviously the case that not all women are victims of sexual violence, but it is equally true that rape is always a possibility for many, if not all, women; that many, many women are raped every day; and

¹ Catharine A. MacKinnon, Toward a Feminist Theory of the State (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989). All citations to this text in this chapter will be in parentheses.
that for these women, rape comes to define their experiences of their sex/gender and sexuality. It is these latter two truths that MacKinnon argues are politically important for feminism; that is, even as the sex/gender system leads to sexual pleasure, career success, or domestic bliss for some women; for others this system entails violence, terror, and suffering. But this suffering also unmasksthe sex/gender system for what it really is: one in which gender is inescapably hierarchical, and where hierarchy is enforced through violence, fear, ignorance, and despair. For MacKinnon, this understanding comes about not just through the act of rape itself, but from the entire apparatus that precedes and succeeds it: pornography and the public–private divide, as well as all the subsequent, “secondary rapes” of official and social disbelief, aspersion, and impugnment of victims. What feminism must do, MacKinnon argues, is to take this suffering and allow it to disrupt non-victims’ accounts of sex/gender hierarchy; in the process, this may reveal their own construction by and complicity in that very system.

Many readers have rejected MacKinnon’s rape-centric feminism for being too focused on violence and victimization, and failing to see the diversity of women’s experiences—especially the ways in which many women enjoy sex, including pornography and sex work. In her review of Toward, Brown argues that

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2 My characterization of MacKinnon’s work as “rape-centric” differs from the more frequent focus on MacKinnon’s treatment of pornography. For example, Miranda Fricker posits that “MacKinnon casts pornography as the essence of women’s subordination to men” (Miranda Fricker, Epistemic Injustice: Power & the Ethics of Knowing [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007], 137). While Wendy Brown, Gayle Rubin, and Drucilla Cornell do not make the same explicit claim about MacKinnon’s approach, pornography nevertheless
MacKinnon dismisses or ignores the most obvious challenges to her argument: women whose lives appear at least as heavily marked by a gendered division of labor as by sexual objectification, same-sex sexual relations gendered in ways not easily reducible to polar inequality, or manifestations, however partial or paradoxical, of female sexual agency and pleasure.⁴

In a later work, *States of Injury*, Brown condemns MacKinnon for failing to properly de-essentialize and historicize her conception of gender, not just in terms of the pleasure—

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victimization divide, but also along other social hierarchies. She finds that MacKinnon’s approach

unifies and stabilizes gender by dehistoricizing it; by divesting it of any greater specificity through class, age, sexuality, race, or culture; by exhaustively identifying it with respectively dominant and subordinate social positions; and by making gender fully a function of such positions, giving it no plasticity, complex and diverse interiors, variability, or domain of invention.\(^5\)

In this passage, Brown links attention to diverse experiences with three factors: intersecting hierarchical systems (class, race, etc.), non-hierarchical gender relations, and agentic change (plasticity and invention). Brown links greater attention to the diversity of experiences, both in terms of sexual pleasure as well as in terms of multiple forms of oppression with the possibility of women’s agency and gender equality. That MacKinnon, in Brown’s reading, fails to attend to this diversity and wrongly universalizes victimization means that she is also unable to provide a theory of women’s agency. Indeed, later in the same chapter, Brown makes this objection explicit: “This evacuation of female subjectivity of any element not transparent on the pornographic page renders any emancipatory project nearly impossible.”\(^6\) The victimization of women weighs so heavily on MacKinnon’s

\(^5\) Brown, States of Injury, 84.

\(^6\) Brown, States of Injury, 89.
project that, Brown observes, “There’s no way out’ is among students’ most frequent responses to her work.”

The possibility of a “way out” is lost in particular because, Brown assumes, MacKinnon’s emphasis on victimization means that women’s consciousness is overdetermined. “Prospects for radical social change evaporate when the oppressed class is only derivative of the dominant class... and when the oppressed have no inner resources for the development of consciousness or agency, precisely because they have been produced subjectively, and not only positioned, by dominant power.” For Brown, this resource is, as we saw in the Introduction to this project, pleasure. More specifically, Brown proposes that pleasure derives from eschewing the entrenchment of suffering in discourse, which leads to a disciplinary identification with victimhood. First, because “confessing injury can become that which attaches us to the injury, paralyzes us within it, and prevents us from seeking or even desiring a status other than that of injured.” Second, the escape from victimization enables the kind of self-reinvention that, for Brown, is both closely linked with pleasure and productive of social change in its resistance to discursive disciplinarity. Thus does she charge us to “Consider the pleasures of... relatively uncoerced sexual lives, and some modicum of choice in reproductive and productive work,” which

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7 Brown, States of Injury, 91.

8 Brown, States of Injury, 93.

Brown characterizes as “experiences of autonomy, creativity, privacy, and bodily integrity so long denied those whose subjugation included, *inter alia*, sexual violation or other deprivations of privacy”.¹⁰ For Brown, MacKinnon’s forcing women into the model of perpetual victim not only fails to recognize the diversity of experiences, but also robs even victimized women of the capacity to escape those negative experiences and utilize the positive ones as resources for their own freedom.

It is possible, however, to reverse these criticisms: if MacKinnon pays too scant attention to pleasure, then her critics pay too much; if MacKinnon centers her theory on victims, her critics often (re-)marginalize them, and over-represent the importance of diverse experiences, or sexual agency and pleasure.¹¹ Cressida Heyes summarizes one

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¹¹ For example, in Gayle Rubin’s “Thinking Sex”, Rubin champions intergenerational sex as one form of the “outer limits” of sexuality subject to social stigma and even persecution, but consent or domination do not arise as potential problems (in Rubin, 137–81). And in “Misguided, Dangerous and Wrong: An Analysis of Antipornography Politics”, Rubin briefly notes that “there are, of course, incidents of abuse and exploitation in the sex industry, as there are in all work situations”, but she quickly observes, “such coercion is not the industry norm” (Rubin, 268–9). While we may want to advocate for de-stigmatization of intergeneration sex and pornography, it is also necessary to explore the relationship between women who are (overtly) coerced and those who choose pornography (or, more accurately, either experience themselves as choosing or enjoy their work). This would enable us to understand whether both outcomes are produced by the structure or whether one or the other is contingent on outside factors, and how to avoid—as Rubin wants to—the ways in which the oppression facing sex-workers being exacerbated by feminists’ reproduction of the shame around such work.
aspect of this problem: “MacKinnon presents her theory in unequivocal terms, and... it is this lack of ambiguity in her account that has provoked charges that it is ‘essentialist.’ These charges have often been made simply by pointing to possible exclusions in MacKinnon’s theory rather than offering alternative accounts of the phenomena she describes.”12 This is especially troubling because feminism still pays inadequate attention to intersecting hierarchies that make women of color, poor women, and trans people more likely to be victims than women who occupy privileged positions relatively these groups. As part of the “well-rehearsed critique that feminism has been built on the exclusion of women of color”, Kimberlé Crenshaw observes that “MacKinnon is often read as advancing a theory that centers on white women”.13 But, in contrast to these critics, Crenshaw finds that “MacKinnon’s rhetorical stance and confrontation of the racial politics embedded in this debate pose a striking contrast to some white feminists who engage the critique through superficial gestures of inclusion, or who ignore the argument altogether.”14 There


is even, she goes on to note, “a sizable cohort who style their critiques as anti-essentialist, yet whose basic moves are themselves built on essentialisms, including the trope of the white woman.”  

In Crenshaw’s estimation, many critics have erected a virtual MacKinnon, a two-dimensional hologram constructed out of discourses engendered by the figure of MacKinnon as much if not more than by her writing. For many, the conceptual images of the white feminist character cross the imaginary terrain before any particular words do, establishing an array of assumptions and predispositions that substitute reputational consumption of the figure for active engagement with her work.

According to Crenshaw, those who criticize MacKinnon for universalism or essentialism have failed to adequately account for her reliance on women’s experiences. “For the claim [that MacKinnon’s subject is white] to be more fully vetted, critics must grapple with MacKinnon’s own descriptions of her method in which commonality isn’t presumed or imposed by informed by what women say their experiences are.”

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15 Crenshaw, 152.

16 Crenshaw, 169.

17 Crenshaw, 162. Ann Cahill’s treatment of MacKinnon is an example of this insufficient attention to MacKinnon’s method; Cahill cites only chapter 9 of Toward, “Rape: On Coercion and Consent”, to dismiss MacKinnon’s approach to rape as wrongly eliminating the possibility for women’s meaningful choice of sex (Ann J. Cahill, Rethinking Rape [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001]). But, building on Crenshaw’s comment and as I shall elaborate below, MacKinnon develops much of her account of rape earlier in Toward, especially
Crenshaw’s argument to claim that such criticisms rest on their authors’ not attending adequately to the way that, as I said above, MacKinnon’s claims about “women’s

in Part II, “Method”; read in light of Part II, MacKinnon’s understanding of rape is different than what Cahill presents.

MacKinnon’s method, related to her epistemology, is especially important because it informs how she conceives of agency, something that her critics often miss. For example, Brown, in her review of Toward for The Nation, accuses MacKinnon of relying on some sort of “clitoral false consciousness” to explain away women’s sexual pleasure (Brown, “Consciousness Razing”), despite the explicit rejection of false consciousness in Toward (115–6).

Similarly, Gayle Rubin criticizes MacKinnon (among other anti-pornography feminists) for the claim that pornography harms women: “Supporters of anti-porn politics have argued that recent research in experimental psychology proves that pornography causes violence against women. The research does nothing of the sort” (Rubin, 265). She makes this claim on the lack of evidence of changed attitudes or behaviors after test subjects viewed porn. “Those studies of pornography show at most some changes in attitudes in artificial settings that which may or may not have implications for behavior in real-life situations” (Rubin, 265–6). But in this rebuttal, Rubin ignores MacKinnon’s rejection of the narrow definition of harm within a “positivistic idea of causality... which in pure form would prohibit all restrictions on everything classified as expression”, instead opting for a more expansive understanding of harm reflected in the treatment of other speech acts:

Words cannot constitute harm in themselves—never mind libel, invasion of privacy, blackmail, bribery, conspiracy, most sexual harassment, and most discrimination.... These words, printed or spoken, are so far from legally protecting the cycle of events they actualize that they are regarded as evidence that acts occurred, in some cases as actionable in themselves. (206)
experience” and “women’s reality” are political. Those who fault her for essentialism pay insufficient attention to the ways that she seeks to explain what makes it possible for women to be feminists, and advancing the conditions of that possibility. MacKinnon’s claims about “women’s experiences” as the basis for feminism are arguments that, despite the existence of women who are not victims, the current system of gender and sexuality nevertheless will necessarily victimize at least some women, and it is these women’s experiences that we must heed if we are to liberate all women. MacKinnon’s claim regarding the nature of women’s experiences is not a descriptive one, but a political claim about whose experiences feminism must prioritize in order to understand and challenge the operations of the sex/gender system.

In this chapter, I take up Crenshaw’s exhortation that readers must engage with MacKinnon’s reliance on women’s experiences as method in her theory-building. In Toward, MacKinnon articulates the conditions of possibility for feminism, and thus establishes what feminists must do if they are to succeed at expanding feminism and at successfully challenging the sex/gender system. Much of this work is concentrated in Part II of the book, “Method”; this is also the part of the book that receives the least attention from MacKinnon’s critics. Yet it is in Part II that MacKinnon most clearly relates experiences of sexual pleasure to rape, thus preemption of many of the criticisms of her. It is also there that she argues how the sex/gender system is able to produce both sexual pleasure and victimization, and why the existence of the former does not negate the

\[18\] See, for example, Jodi Dean, The Solidarity of Strangers: Feminist after Identity Politics (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1996), 64.
importance of feminism’s focus on the latter. Thus, in this chapter, I pay special attention to the work MacKinnon does in Part II; and I relegate Part III, which has received more attention from her interlocutors, to a supporting role.¹⁹

This enables me to offer a reconstruction of MacKinnon’s approach to victimization that finds political value in the disruption wrought by rape, even as it seeks to generate a feminism that will abolish rape (or at least greatly reduce the incidence of it). As I read her, MacKinnon locates this value in the knowledge that rape, including both the act itself and its treatment in the law, forces upon its victims. Specifically, rape exposes the system of male domination and its reliance on force to define sexuality and, through it, men’s and women’s sexualities and genders. The legal definition and treatment of rape, which is always at odds with women’s understandings of what happened, also reveals the ways in which this system rests on purportedly objective truths that are, in actuality, always partial and based on the perspective of the men whose power that truth upholds.

Nevertheless, the disruption of this knowledge is insufficient to bring about feminism, and in the second section of this chapter, I show how that knowledge often produces women’s acquiescence to, and thus complicity in, the very system that victimized

¹⁹ For exceptions to this see Sally Haslanger’s work, which engages primarily with MacKinnon’s epistemology, although as we shall see, does not relate it to the questions of either agency or politics. Another example, in which MacKinnon’s method is related to her understanding of agency, is Clare Chambers, “Masculine Domination, Radical Feminism, and Change”, Feminist Theory 6, no. 3 (2005), 325–46.
them in the first place.\textsuperscript{20} It is here that we can first see victims' agency, and it is here that MacKinnon locates the opportunity for feminism to use that agency, and the knowledge that directs it, for liberatory ends instead of oppressive ones.

In my explication of the value of suffering's disruption, in the third section, I will explain the means by which disruption acts upon non-victims, namely, through the exposure of complicity and the resultant sense of self-alienation. This is important to understanding the reason for the necessity of feminism, insofar as many women (including many feminist critics of MacKinnon) strongly resist any notion that their own sexual pleasure could be bound up in, or even contribute to, the victimization of other women. The fact of this complicity, and the self-alienation it produces, also returns us to the question of suffering's disruption and its compatibility with agency. Just as with victims, so too can non-victims experience awareness of their own complicity as a form of suffering, insofar as it disrupts their previous understanding of themselves. And, again, MacKinnon sees in that disruption the opportunity for feminist politics to arise. It is this, I argue, that explains MacKinnon's characteristic tone and “relentlessly polemical style”\textsuperscript{21} MacKinnon's style, while alienating to many of her readers, is nevertheless valuable for interpellating those readers into the feminist project by conveying to them both the necessity of action and the possibility of their participation in that action. Contrary to the misreading of her style that is now a feminist commonplace, I find that MacKinnon actually enacts the model of feminist

\textsuperscript{20} As I shall elaborate below, I find that MacKinnon uses “complicity” in a very specific way that does not carry with it any sense of responsibility or culpability, which leads to a misreading of her arguments.

\textsuperscript{21} Fricker, 137.
action that she exhorts for others: disrupted and disrupting, participating in action in common with others.

Victims' Knowledge and the Operation of Rape

To understand the political value of victims' suffering, and how it can be made to contribute to victims' agency, we first need to understand how sexual violence operates on victims. One of the hallmarks of MacKinnon's work, and that which has drawn the ire even of those who otherwise agree with her, is the way that she expresses the nature of women's gender and sexuality. For MacKinnon, women's gender and sexuality are the products of male domination, defined by the fulfillment of male desire. For MacKinnon, a feminist account of sexuality is one that "treats sexuality as a social construct of male power: defined by men, forced on women, and constitutive of the meaning of gender" (128). Rape serves a role in all three of these aspects of sexuality: definition, force, and meaning. Among its other functions, rape subjugates victims into femininity by making them into objects of male desire regardless of their own desires.\(^{22}\) It also makes its victims aware of their own subjugated status through that disregard—including, subsequent to the the act of rape itself, the legal system's ignoring their claims of violation and/or imputing to them agency that they could not and did not exercise. These are mutually reinforcing insofar as the sense of powerlessness makes victims more likely to submit to men's sexual desires and to

\(^{22}\) The "other functions" to which I am referring here include the role of rape in war, ethnic cleansing, and genocide; as well as the indirect effects of sexual deception, for example, men's sabotage of birth control in order to father a child that will ensure the perpetuation of their relationship with the woman. The predominance of this latter form of sexual violence is only now becoming more fully known.
resist them less, thus making sexual violence easier to perpetrate and more likely to go unreported and unpunished. There are two points that follow from this. First, the mechanisms of victimization extend beyond the rape itself to include the entire social apparatus that constructs rapes as consensual sex, thus permitting rapes to continue with impunity. These mechanisms also act beyond direct victims of sexual violence to include all persons who are constructed by the system that permits rape to be labelled consensual and thus to occur with impunity. Second, the vicious cycle of subjugation and awareness is undetermined, and so provides an opening for feminist intervention. The revelation that rape makes to victims is the means of operation of the gender hierarchy; while this knowledge can be (and often is) disempowering, productive of submission to avoid future violence, it is also the knowledge that is a necessary precondition for combatting the system of gender hierarchy. As we will see in the following section, MacKinnon believes that the first response of victims, submission, is a rational tool of self-preservation, and she does not hold them individually responsible for moving from that response to a confrontational one. Instead, it is the task of feminists as a collective movement to take up victims’ knowledge, and use it as the basis for feminist critique and political action. In so doing, they must allow themselves to be disrupted, but they will also help reconstruct victims as politically agentic. In this section, I am going to present the way that rape forces on its victims awareness of the operation of the gender system. I first want to note that I do not make this claim in order to try to salvage or redeem rape or other forms of gender violence. Clearly, a world without rape is an ideal toward which we should be striving. However, insofar as the current system of gender and sexuality cannot exist without rape,
then we must allow the experiences of rape victims to conduce toward ending rape, rather than simply leaving them aside.

Contrary to those critical readings that cast MacKinnon as universalizing all women as victims, as well as the conventional summary that MacKinnon equates all (heterosexual) sex with rape, MacKinnon recognizes the difference between sex and rape—indeed, her account of sexuality depends upon such a difference. Again, part of the misinterpretation comes from a reliance on the chapters in the third section of the book, where MacKinnon makes her boldest claims, such as: “To be rapable, a position that is social not biological, defines what a woman is” (178); and

The view that derives most directly from victims’ experiences, rather than from their denial, construes sexuality as a social sphere of male power to which forced sex is paradigmatic. Rape is not less sexual for being violent. To the extent that coercion has become integral to male sexuality, rape may even be sexual to the degree that, and because, it is violent. (173)

Even in these passages, though, MacKinnon at once differentiates between rape and other sexual activities, between women who have been raped and women (who are rapable) in general, and so between victims and non-victims. And in the light of the second section of the book, it becomes clear that, without such differences, were all women already raped and so already victims, there would little left for feminism to do—and certainly no grounds for disagreement among feminists. Without recognizing such differences among women, it would be impossible for MacKinnon to point to sexual violence as representative of how sexuality in general operates; for rape to be the legend with which we are able to map gender, it must stand out from gender, even as it is part of it:
Force is sex, not just sexualized; force is the desire dynamic, not just a response to the desired object when desire’s expression is frustrated. Pressure, gender socialization, withholding benefits, extending indulgences, the how-to books, the sex therapy are the soft end; the fuck, the fist, the street, the chains, the poverty are the hard end. (136)

In this passage, a representative example of a point MacKinnon makes repeatedly, rape violently exposes the system of which it is an integral part. When a given rape takes place, it is a manifestation of a larger system of hierarchical sexuality into which individual girls and women must be inaugurated. This inauguration, according to MacKinnon, is not only the act and sign of a girl’s or woman’s transition into sexuality, it is also (and more importantly for feminist purposes) the point at which the victim herself comes to understand the meaning of her gendered sexuality, and the system of which it is a part:

“First sexual intercourse is a commonly definitive experience of gender definition. For many women, it is rape.... What women learn in order to ‘have sex,’ in order to ‘become women’—woman as a gender—comes through the experience of, and is a condition for, ‘having sex’—woman as sexual object for man, the use of women’s sexuality by men” (111).

Rape is one common means by which women come to know their roles as men’s sexual objects and by which those roles are enforced.

Recall that more than one-third of all girls experience sex, perhaps are sexually initiated, under conditions that even this society recognizes are forced or at least unequal. Perhaps they learn this process of sexualized dominance as sex. Top-down relations feel sexual. Is sexuality throughout life then ever not on some level a reenactment of, a response to, that backdrop? (147)
MacKinnon chronicles the ways that women respond to their sexual initiation, becoming promiscuous or sexually disinclined, “or both in series” (147); using sex to secure male approval; and believing that “they really wanted the rape or incest and interpret violation as their own sexuality” (148). Rape’s revelatory action is important for making girls and women aware of their sexuality and position vis-à-vis men, an awareness that is necessary for producing the former as self-objectifying subjects, willfully submitting themselves to men’s desires.

Of course it is not solely through rape that gender hierarchy is communicated to women and enforced. Domestic violence, pornography, sexual harassment, and all the other “hard” and “soft” ends of force that MacKinnon lists above also serve these ends. They also often occur alongside rape and produce similar ends:

If a woman has ever been beaten in a relationship, even if “only once,” what does that do to her everyday interactions, or her sexual interactions with that man? With other men? Does her body ever really forget that behind his restraint he can do that any time she pushes an issue, or for no reason at all? Does her vigilance ever really relax? If she tried to do something about it, as many women do, and if nothing was done, as it usually is not, does she ever forget that that is what can be done to her at any time and nothing will be done about it? Does she smile at men less—or more? (150)

Like rape, domestic violence forces upon its victims awareness of their gendered position, especially in relation to the perpetrator and other men. As indicated in this passage, women suffer this revelation; that is, they experience it as a disruption of their sense of subjectivity. Also like rape, men often perpetrate domestic violence with impunity, further contributing to women’s suffering, with its attendant awareness of their own powerlessness. But there is something more particular about rape that is revealed in the
second half of the paragraph from which I just quoted: “If a woman has ever been raped, does she ever fully regain the feeling of physical integrity, of self-respect, of having what she wants count somewhere, of being able to make herself clear to those who have not gone through what she has gone through, of living in a fair society, of equality?” (150; italics added) What is unique about rape and other forms of sexual violence (which often serve as a prelude to rape itself) is the way that their very occurrence is denied. It is the disavowal of the occurrence of rape—and of its commonality—that makes it so difficult for victims to make themselves clear to non-victims. This, in turn, makes it nearly impossible for victims to secure legal sanctioning of the rapist. In cases of domestic violence, impunity arises from a question of whether the victim “deserved it”, not from a question about whether the beating took place. Men get away with rape, in contrast, because of the purportedly objective difference between it and sexual intercourse, a difference MacKinnon sees reflected in the social treatment of rape. This question over what happened, over the ontological status of the event and the participants in it, necessarily precedes and determines questions of blame and desert. Rape is thus unique among the forms of violence against women, a difference that at once lends it unique revelatory power to its victims and explains its centrality in MacKinnon’s theory.23

23 For example, MacKinnon places recognition of the predominance of sexual violence against girls and women at the center of a feminist approach to law, which “is based on the reality that feminism, beginning with consciousness raising, has most distinctively uncovered: the reality of sexual abuse” (242). So while along with rape, MacKinnon treats abortion and pornography in separate chapters in Part III of Toward, she makes clear that the first stands out as unique. First, pornography and abortion rights can only be understood in relation to sexual domination, and especially on men’s sexual access to women. In the case of abortion, for
While the difference between rape and sex is reproduced in numerous fora, including popular culture and even feminist texts, of special interest to MacKinnon is the way that this it is reflected in and enforced by the law. The division between rape and sex frustrates victims' ability to secure legal redress and frequently results in their re-victimization at the hands of the criminal legal system and/or society in general. But it is also uniquely revelatory to victims and disruptive of their previous understanding of the nature of gender hierarchy; its relationship to sexuality; and the pervasiveness of the epistemological apparatus, codified in law, that manifests and secures it. We have already seen how, according to MacKinnon, rape reveals the force that underlies sexuality. The treatment of rape in the law also reveals the necessary partiality of purportedly objective example, rape plays a central role in making abortion necessary because "a good user of contraception can be presumed sexually available and, among other consequences, raped with relative impunity" (185). Conversely, "the availability of abortion enhances the availability of intercourse" (188) for men, while also decreasing the consequences of that access, while "women's right to decide has become merged with an overwhelmingly male professional's right not to have his judgment second-guessed by the government" (189). Second, neither the fact of women's access to reproductive control (or lack thereof) nor their participation in pornography is either denied or hidden; that they happen is readily admitted by feminists and patriarchy-apologists alike. The contention exists in how to determine the meanings of these phenomena. So, for example, the liberal legal tradition "has authoritatively defined pornography as not about women as such at all, but about sex, hence about morality, and as not about acts or practices, but about ideas", including artistic expression and free speech (196; MacKinnon defends the importance of pornography's content in *Only Words*). In the case of rape, however, the primary disagreement is about the ontological status of the event itself: was it rape or sex?
truths, and the way that claims to objectivity always serve to perpetuate and mask power hierarchies, especially gender but also race, class, age, and ability.

In the law, there is a clear division between sex and rape, so that, “under law, rape is a sex crime that is not regarded as a crime when it looks like sex” (172); and conversely, “once an act is labeled rape there is an epistemological problem with seeing it as sex” (145). The law defines and treats rape to make sexual violence appear isolated and aberrant, instead of as part of a systematically oppressive, yet nevertheless changeable, norm. It does so by denying women’s claims of violation, which in turn permits sexual violence to occur with impunity. It accomplishes these by adopting the male point of view in deciding when a rape has occurred, then treating that as the objective truth. “The crime of rape is defined and adjudicated from the male standpoint of view.... [T]his means that the man’s perceptions of the woman’s desires determine whether she is deemed violated.” (180) This way of determining rape, however, assumes women can consent by ignoring the larger structural forces that shape women’s motivations and desires, most notably the desire for self-preservation. “Rape law takes women’s usual response to coercion—acquiescence, the despairing response of hopelessness to unequal odds—and calls that consent. Men coerce women; women ‘consent.’ ” (168) Women’s accounts of their own violation are discounted, if not dismissed or ignored altogether; and their consent is either assumed or read onto their experiences. This surfaces repeatedly in rape trials, in which “raped women are seen as asking for it: if a man wanted her, she must have wanted him.” (141)

Having rejected the validity of the woman’s experience, the law then uses the man’s version of events to produce the truth of what happened, “a single underlying reality,
rather than a reality split by divergent meanings inequality produces” (180). This is reflected, for example, in the way that mens rea is the basis for guilt in rape trials:

Many women are raped by men who know the meaning of their acts to their victims perfectly well and proceed anyway. But women are also violated every day by men who have no idea of the meaning of their acts to the women. To them it is sex. Therefore, to the law it is sex. That becomes the single reality of what happened. When a rape prosecution is lost because a woman fails to prove that she did not consent, she is not considered to have been injured at all.” (180)

The result of this is, from a feminist standpoint, terribly ironic: it is the accused rapist who gets to determine whether his act was rape at all. “In conceiving a cognizable injury from the viewpoint of the rapist, the rape law affirmatively rewards men with acquittals for not comprehending women’s point of view on sexual encounters” (182). And for the victims, the legal process of determining—or, in many cases, finding or inventing—consent is often violent, to the point that “women who charge rape say they were raped twice, the second time in court” (179). Victims of sexual violence not only know what happened to them when they were violated (the first time), they also know what happens, or is likely to happen, to them when they pursue charges. “Most women get the message that the law against rape is virtually unenforceable as applied to them” (179). This explains why so few women choose to fight back against rapists, as well. Indeed, as we shall see in the next

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24 MacKinnon also observes the way this system intersects with the structural racism in the law, for example in her discussion of the stereotyping of rapists as Black men (181), or the targeting of women of color (along with disabled women, young women, working-class women and sex-workers) for sexual violence (138).
section, their responses to rape, both during the violation itself and subsequent to it, are a reflection of this knowledge. Included in such responses are women’s passivity in the face of attack, their eroticization and claims of ownership over their violation, and their failure to pursue criminal charges against their violators.

This knowledge, disruptive of victims’ sense of themselves, their place in society, and their status before the law, is what MacKinnon calls back to every time she invokes “women’s experiences”, “women’s reality”, and “women’s point of view” as the basis for feminism. Thus does MacKinnon exhort us to “compare victims’ reports of rape with women’s reports of sex. They look a lot alike” (146). In spite of the predominant (and understandable) response of victims—acquiescence—their knowledge of the power that inheres in both sexuality and in the determination of the truth is what feminism must seek out and valorize to even begin combatting gender hierarchy.

**The Agency of Victims and the Task of Feminism**

What are the consequences of women’s victimization and the awareness it gives them of the gender system? According to MacKinnon, while women often resist gender hierarchy, they “also embrace the standards of women’s place in this regime as ‘our own’ to varying degrees and in varying voices—as affirmation of identity and right to pleasure, in order to be loved and approved and paid, in order just to make it through another day. This, *not inert passivity*, is the meaning of being a victim” (138; italics added). The first point to notice in this passage is that, regardless of their response, victims (at least those who survive) are *not* robbed of all their agency or rendered completely passive. As we shall see, this agency will be important as a resource for and object of feminist political action.
Instead of passivity, victims retain their agency, although with that agency they often actively acquiesce to their position, thus reinforcing the gender system that victimizes them; this is what I, following MacKinnon, refer to as “women’s complicity in their [own] condition” (124). So, while many victimized women will acquiesce to their situation, it is an active acquiescence in which they are agentic participants.25 “Complicity in oppression acquires concrete meaning as women emerge as shapers of reality as well as shaped by it” (88).26 Producing this complicity is the social function of rape, and it occurs for two

25 This breakdown between object created by gender and agentic subject who re-creates it is an extension of MacKinnon’s larger criticism of the subject/object split, which maps onto the objective/subjective division in epistemology:

Having been objectified as sexual beings while stigmatized as ruled by subjective passions, women reject the distinction between knowing subject and known object—the division between subjective and objective postures—as the means to comprehend social life. Disaffected from objectivity, having been its prey, but excluded from its world through relegation to subjective inwardness, women’s interest lies in overthrowing the distinction itself. (120–1; emphasis in original).

Rejecting this binary is essential to MacKinnon’s project, because the possibility of women being both objects of male domination and subjects who know it is what makes feminism possible.

26 MacKinnon’s use of complicity is similar to Haslanger’s notion of the “collaborator in objectification” of women. According to Haslanger,

MacKinnon claims that the stance of objectivity is the stance of those who function socially as men. This would seem to commit her to the claim that one functions socially as a man if and only if one satisfies the norms of objectivity....Objectivity is strongly masculine because satisfying the norms of objectivity is sufficient, at least under conditions of male dominance, for being a sexual objectifier. And objectivity is weakly masculine given that those who function as men are successful in this role, at least in part, because they are objective. (Haslanger, 64.)
reasons. First, as noted in the passage above, victimized women may need to become actively complicit simply in order to survive or cope with their situation. Second, women’s agency is actually a requirement of male sexuality. That is, even as they make women objects of their desires, men also want (and so construct) women to be subjects who actively participate in their the fulfillment of men’s sexualities.

Before developing these points further, I want to make two brief side points. First, it is not only victims who are complicit in the system of gender and sexuality. As we shall see, non-victimized women are likewise complicit in reproducing, and even strengthening this system. Indeed, I would argue that we should read MacKinnon, like Marx, as giving a complicity model of agency, insofar as everyone’s sexuality and gender—men and women, masculine and feminized—are the products of the current system of sexuality and gender.27 From this model—and this is my second side point—it is important that we

For Haslanger, while “we should conclude that the ideal of assumed objectivity is weakly masculine”, objectivity fails to be strongly masculine. Objectivity “is not sufficient, in general, to be an objectifier, or more specifically, to objectify women” and thus assume the role of the man; instead, she claims, “the ideal of assumed objectivity is contextually grounded, not directly in the role of objectifier, but in the role of collaborator in objectification” (Haslanger, 74). So, for example, “a woman who views women as weak and inferior by nature, and acts accordingly, collaborates in objectification, though in doing so she need not objectify women” (Haslanger, 75). Thus, she concludes that MacKinnon is wrong that objectivity is strongly masculine. Yet, I would counter that this is something that MacKinnon remains open to because of the centrality of complicity to her project.

27 MacKinnon’s discussion of homosexuality bears this out: “Nor is homosexuality without stake in this gendered sexual system. Putting to one side the obviously gendered content of the expressly adopted roles, clothing, and sexual mimicry, to the extent the gender of a sexual object is crucial to arousal, the structure of
distinguish between complicity and culpability, blame, or responsibility; women are
complicit because they “have little choice but to become persons who then freely choose
women’s roles” (124). Thus, despite the language of complicity, MacKinnon avoids victim-
bordering; neither, despite her often furious tone, does she blame pornography performers,
sex workers, or those feminists with whom she disagrees. They are, to adapt Marx,
“personifications of gender categories”.28

social power which stands behind and defines gender is hardly irrelevant, even if it is rearranged” (141). That
is, homosexuality is not an intelligible concept except under conditions in which gender already exists on
which to base the sameness of the “homo-” in contradistinction to the opposition of the “hetero-”. So, says
MacKinnon, “to the extent gay men choose men because they are men, the meaning of masculinity is affirmed
as well as undermined” (142).

28 This is drawn from Marx’s disclaimer in the “Preface to the First Edition” of Capital I:

To prevent possible misunderstandings, let me say this. I do not by any means depict the capitalist
and the landowner in rosy colours. But individuals are dealt with here only in so far as they are the
personifications of economic categories, the bearers of particular class-relations and interests. My
standpoint... can less than any other make the individual responsible for relations whose creature he
remains, socially speaking, however much he may subjectively raise himself above them. (Karl Marx,

We can also draw a parallel between sex/gender and capitalism from Marx’s claim that the latter operates
“behind the backs of the producers [i.e., the workers]” (Marx, 135); the same could also be said of women as
the sexually expropriated class of male domination. Given the parallels to Marx that run throughout Toward
(for example in her claim at the beginning of chapter 1 that “sexuality is to feminism what work is to
marxism” [3]), as well as her marxian objections to the moralism of obscenity (195–209), it also makes sense
that MacKinnon would be similarly uninterested in the moral condemnation of the participants in the
sex/gender system, as that would assume the possibility of choosing otherwise. This holds, moreover, despite
We can see the sources for women’s complicity in gender oppression by returning to the law’s treatment of rape. The law rests upon a narrow definition of rape that ignores (even as it depends upon) women’s powerlessness and their experiences of it, and so permits men to coerce women into sex with impunity. By ignoring women’s experiences of sex as violation, the law ignores the powerlessness that women have prior to any given sexual interaction, and that constitutes their lack of ability to refuse sex. Women always already exist in a condition of domination by men, and all sexuality occurs within and because of this fact. Thus, contrary to its legal definition, rape is not wholly separable from “regular” intercourse, and for many women, neither is it experientially different, as we already saw when MacKinnon exhorted us to “Compare victims’ reports of rape with women’s reports of sex. They look a lot alike” (146). But because the law does not treat sexuality this way, because “some force may be perceived as force, but only above certain threshold standards” (134), women are right to be afraid that they will be treated violently: they likely will be. And that women embrace their imposed femininity and lack of choice is a sensible reaction to the denial that their experiences constitute rape, and the expectations of their relationships to men that permit this denial: “Women, as realists, distinguish between rape and experiences of sexual violation by concluding that they have not “really” been raped if they have ever seen or dated or slept with or been married to the man, if they were fashionably dressed or not demonstrably a virgin, if they are prostitutes, if they put up with it or tried to get it over with, if they were force-fucked for years.” (179) The law

her harsh tone (again like Marx) in addressing those she sees either as complicit either in their actions or in their role as theoretical apologists for male domination.
thus creates an environment in which women themselves, and other members of society, ignore the claims of victimization that do not meet the standard narrative of rape. Given the power of the state, and its arrogation of the truth, it is understandable that women would not believe that their situations are changeable, that they feel unable do anything about their sensations of violation other than finding a way to survive. Women’s inability to challenge being “defined in terms of their fuckability” (183) thus occurs preemptively, taking the form of fearful submission or embrace of their femininity. Key to all of this is producing a system in which women do not believe that they can do anything to change the system, and so do not try.

Given the imperatives of women’s lives, the necessity to avoid punishment... it is not irrational for women to see themselves in ways that makes compliance tolerable, even satisfying. Living each day reconvinces everyone, women and men alike, of male hegemony, which is hardly a myth, and of women’s innate inferiority and men’s innate superiority, a myth that each day’s reliving make difficult to distinguish meaningfully from reality. (99–100)

Rape, as a social phenomenon, succeeds at compelling women into complicity largely by convincing them of its own inevitability and their inability to do anything about it, and contributes to the larger system of falsely ontologized male domination. At work through rape is a system of women’s forced knowing and unknowing: they are made to know their powerlessness and violability on the one hand, while they also are made ignorant of their own capacity to do something differently. What MacKinnon sees, but what her interlocutors rarely engage with, is the possibility for women to come to recognize that
men’s knowledge is not universal or objective, and that their knowledge is both valid and can open up the possibility for collective political change.

Contrary to those who worry about MacKinnon’s construction of sexual violence as an inescapable totality, there are contradictions within that system that point to possible ways out. Rape reveals the ways in which men’s sexuality requires that women be subjects as well as objects. While “men are systematically conditioned not even to notice what women want”, it is also the case that “rapists typically believe the woman loved it” (181). Insofar as the law maintains that most cases of sexual violence are merely sex, despite women’s experiences to the contrary, rape produces a contradiction between its self-presentation (and enforcement) as the objective truth and its reliance on women as active participants in their own domination. This latter requirement opens the possibility that some women will come to eroticize and enjoy their domination, while others will come to resent it. The existence of this second group of women, and the accusations of rape they make, “express one thing men cannot seem to control: the meaning to women of sexual encounters.” (181) That there is a difference between how women are supposed to respond to their sexual violation and how they actually respond is a product of the construction of women as not merely sexual objects but as sexual subjects who reciprocate men’s desires for them. MacKinnon is clear that rape is not solely about men experiencing women as sexual objects, as lumps of erotic clay; rather, the point is that women are constructed to actively want men to desire them, who desire their own violation, even though violence is also an acceptable way for men to deal with women who refuse go along with the plan. Men fantasize about being subjects who are able to command the sexual desire of other subjects that they are able to command into being objects. MacKinnon finds
this, for example, in popular and pornographic portrayals of “women sexually accessible, have-able, there for them, wanting to be taken and used” (138; emphasis added). The conditions of women’s accessibility are that they have purportedly made themselves accessible, hence the importance of constructing consent in rape cases. “The appearance of choice or consent, with their attribution to inherent nature, is crucial in concealing the reality of force” (141). This ruse is often successful: many women do want to give men what they want; in so doing, they further the concealment of male force. But it is also the case that many women do not share this desire; and it is these women who feel the violation of forced sex and the violence of being told that it was not force, or that the force was acceptable, or that they in reality wanted or should have wanted it. “Men say women desire to be degraded; feminism sees female masochism as the ultimate success of male supremacy and puzzle (and marvel) over its failures” (125). In both cases, women become complicit in their own oppression because that complicity is both demanded by male domination, as well as allowed it by their construction as subjects who willingly submit to male desire: “Women, as a survival strategy must ignore or devalue or mute desires, particularly lack of them, to convey the impression that the man will get what he wants regardless of what they want” (181). Nevertheless, many women are aware that the legal assertion that they consented makes it makes it true only in the eyes of those who benefit from it. They also know that consent never occurred in fact because they did not give it, nor could they have because they lacked the ability to safely refuse.

Important for my reading of MacKinnon’s project is the idea that victims’ complicity in their own oppression is not either an irrational response or the product of their having been duped by male domination. That is, complicity does not merely appear rational; from
the standpoint of victims of sexual violence, it is rational if she wishes to survive (and even then, it is hardly a guarantee of that). It is rational when victims are living under the circumstances of their repeated victimization by men, society, and the law, and in apparent isolation from others with similar experiences. Complicity is rational absent a feminist movement that mitigates that isolation, valorizes their knowledge, and presents viable and rational alternatives to their active acquiescence to violence. Given this situation, the task of feminism becomes clear: build on victims’ knowledge to provide alternatives to complicity, that is, to redirect victims’ agency from active acquiescence to the system that oppresses them, toward fighting that system.

*The Task of Feminism*

Characterizing the “task of feminism” thusly makes clear why MacKinnon would make the focus of *Toward* feminist epistemology and methodology, especially in a work of “epic theory” (x–xi) that sets out “demonstrate that feminism systematically converges upon a central explanation of sex inequality through an approach distinctive to its subject yet applicable to the whole of social life, including class” (108). This “distinctive approach”, with its capacity to systematize feminism, rests primarily on the politics of knowing, as MacKinnon indicates on the first page of *Toward*: “This book... explores the significance gender hierarchy has for the relation between knowledge and politics. In other words, it engages sexual politics on the level of epistemology” (x). This engagement demands not only challenging the predomination of masculinist objective epistemology, but also reconstructing a feminist epistemology that provides women a “way out” of their domination, both in terms of their ability to see that there is a way out and actually providing the basis for system-changing action.
For MacKinnon, the resolution to the problem of epistemology is through collective consciousness and action. Women must come together in order to understand their individual situations as part of hierarchical system that rests on domination through violence. Without coming together to know collectively, “women's bondage, degradation, damage, complicity, and inferiority—together with the possibility of resistance, movement, or exceptions—will operate as barriers to consciousness rather than as means of access to what women need to become conscious of in order to change” (124). Collective consciousness is thus the necessary first step, and as this passage observes, does not seek to primarily change women’s situation, but rather their understanding of their situation and their role in it.

We should recognize both that this collective consciousness is not the end of the story, but neither is it an easy first step. MacKinnon comments that “the theory and practice of consciousness-raising... can lapse into treating social reality as if it were constructed solely by one's idea of it, so that all that is required for social change is to persuade people of the morality and utility of equality for women to achieve equality by force of reason and exemplary practice” (50). But she also spends much time explicating consciousness-raising as the feminist methodology. “Consciousness-raising... inquires into an intrinsically

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29 Haslanger assesses this knowledge, which MacKinnon herself helps to spread, similarly: "MacKinnon's analysis of gender and sexual objectification is important and effective because it vividly captures the very real power that men have over women, power backed by violence and hatred and law. In spite of the horror of it, it is empowering to recognize that the threat of male violence has significantly formed the social world as women know it and live it" (Haslanger, 78). This is another way we can think about using rape for positive political ends without claiming that rape itself is good.
social situation, into that mixture of thought and materiality which comprises gender in the broadest sense. It approaches the world through a process that shares its determination: women’s consciousness, not as individual or subjective ideas, but as collective social being” (83–4; italics added). It is in this movement from individual ideas and experiences to collective ones that “the pursuit of consciousness becomes a form of political practice” (84), in a way that is doubly preparatory for feminist political action. Consciousness-raising brings women together in order for them to acquire an understanding of the sex/gender system and their situation in it, but their coming together is also necessary for them to exercise their agency to challenge their situation.\(^3^{0}\) Stated differently, MacKinnon lays out a feminism that is deeply anti-individualistic; individuals alone are unable challenge their oppression because they can neither comprehend it nor can they act against it.\(^3^{1}\) “From the

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\(^3^{0}\) While this is similar to Adriana Cavarero’s description of consciousness-raising as we saw in the Introduction to this dissertation, for MacKinnon consciousness-raising is more about the collective aspects and is more focused around producing a shared understanding of women’s oppression, and less about feminine friendship.

\(^3^{1}\) This seems true in even in cases where women resist their victimization, for example, by pursuing legal charges against men who rape them. Reproducing the extant distinction between rape and sex is a major social function served by labeling acts rape. Rape becomes something a rapist does, as if he were a separate species.... In spite of the numbers of victims, the normalcy of rapists, and even given the fact that most women are raped by men they know (making it most unlikely that a few lunatics know around half of the women in the United States), rape remains considered psychopathological and therefore not about sexuality (145–6).

Successful pursuit of criminal charges against her rapist, then, is less likely to blur the lines between rape and sex, which is necessary to exposing and changing sexual domination, and more likely to pathologize that
feminist point of view, the question of women’s collective reality and how to change it merges with the question of women’s point of view and how to know it.... [Women] know inequality because they have lived it, so they know what removing barriers to equality would be” (241; italics added). As the project of valorizing that knowledge and using it as the basis for action, feminism presupposes (some) women’s suffering as the motivation for coming together and the contents of what they will share in consciousness-raising.

particular man, further entrenching the sex/rape distinction. While one the one hand MacKinnon does not call for women to stop filing charges in cases of rape, she also does not see greater prosecution of rapists as the solution to sexual violence. In short, what MacKinnon proposes is not a strengthening of the state to either protect or forward feminism’s goals. Rather, she proposes abolishing the state’s male bias, first by eliminating its guises of neutrality and objectivity. This lies in stark contrast to the state’s co-optation of feminist language and analyses, with which it only continues their oppression; see, e.g., Kristen Bumiller, In an Abusive State: How Neoliberalism Appropriated the Feminist against Sexual Violence (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008); and Chandan Reddy, Freedom with Violence: Race, Sexuality, and the US State (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011). Thus, Janet Halley and others like her are mistaken to claim that feminism has become “too powerful” or “has blood on its hands” (Halley, 20–1). It is the state and other agents of male domination that remain powerful, both epistemologically and effectually; they have just appropriated the language of feminism, potentially weakening it in the process. Additionally, the complicity of the kind of politics of sexual freedom that Halley seems to advocate for is itself complicit in licensing state violence, especially against queer and trans people of color. See, for example, Christina B. Hanhardt, Safe Space: Gay Neighborhood History and the Politics of Violence (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2013); and Isaac West, Transforming Citizenships: Transgender Articulations of the Law (New York: NYU Press, 2014), esp. 1–9.
The place of suffering comes through in MacKinnon’s description of consciousness-raising as historical feminist practice (although she also notes that “consciousness-raising as discussed here was often not practiced in consciousness-raising groups” [84]):

As constituted in the 1960s and 1970s, consciousness-raising groups were many women’s first explicit contact with acknowledged feminism. Springing up spontaneously in the context of friendship networks, colleges and universities, women’s centers, neighborhoods, churches, and shared work or workplaces, they were truly grassroots. (84)

What they discussed varied across groups and across time within any given group, from members’ sharing their autobiographies, to reading books, to dealing with urgencies.32

“Concretely, consciousness-raising groups often focused on specific incidents and internal dialogue: what happened today, how did it make you feel, why did you feel that way, how do you feel now?” (87) Most important among these were discussions of women’s sexuality, both during sex and outside it: “Intercourse was interrogated: how and by whom it is initiated, its timing, women’s feelings during after, its place in relationships, its meaning, its place in being a woman.... Women’s stories—work and how they came to do it; children; sexual history, including history of sexual abuse—were explored” (88). But

32 “Some groups proceeded biographically, each woman presenting her life as she wished to tell it. Some moved topically, using subject focuses such as virginity crises, relations among women, mothers, body image, and early sexual experiences to orient discussion. Some read books and shared literature. Some addressed current urgencies as they arose, supporting women through difficult passages or encouraging them to confront situations they had avoided. Many developed a flexible combination of formats. Few could stick to a topic if a member was falling apart, yet crises were seldom so clarifying or continuous as entirely to obviate the need for other focus” (84–5).
regardless of the methods and topics covered, consciousness-raising groups brought together women who were dissatisfied with their situations, often suffering, and who consequently sought change with and through others.

The result was that “realities hidden under myths were unmasked simply by talking about what happens every day” (89); it is this revelation that was of the greatest import to feminism.

The point of the process was not so much that hitherto-undisclosed facts were unearthed or that denied perceptions were corroborated, although all these happened. It was not only that silence was broken and that speech occurred. The point was, and is, that this process moved the reference point for truth and thereby the definition of reality as such. Consciousness-raising alters the terms of validation by creating community through a process that redefines what counts as verification. This process gives both content and form to women’s point of view. (87)

This is the foundation on which women’s agency can be rebuilt, and one that does not demand that women cease being victims, but rather draws its necessity from their suffering. The consciousness-raising process “created bonds and a different kind of knowledge, collective knowledge built on moving and being moved, on changing and being changed. As an experience, it went beyond empirical information that women are victims of social inequality. It built an experienced sense of how it came to be this way and that it can be changed” (91). Rather than trying to provide an analgesic to help women heal and overcome their suffering, as is often the approach to sexual violence today, consciousness-raising seeks to change a woman’s relationship to her victimization by building upon it, changing it from an individual event to a form of oppression, and transforming her from
individual victim to one among a potentially powerful group. To that end, MacKinnon notes that during consciousness-raising, “the discovery that these apparently unchangeable dictates of the natural order are powerful social conventions often makes women feel unburdened, since individual failures no long appear so individualized” (91).

Yet the success of consciousness-raising during the 1960s and ’70s requires us to question it as a political practice of feminism as a movement:

The effectiveness of consciousness raising is difficult to apportion between the process itself and the women who choose to engage in it. The initial recruiting impulse seems to be a response to an unspecific, often unattached, but just barely submerged discontent that in some inchoate way women related relate to being female.... Restrictions, conflicting demands, intolerable but necessarily tolerated work, the accumulations and indignities of everyday existence have often been justified on the basis of sex. Consciousness raising coheres and claims these impressions. (85)

The self-selection of consciousness-raising participants means that those who took part were those who already had a sense that something was amiss and that they could—possibly even, had to—do something about it. This means that many of the women most in need of consciousness-raising did not (and do not) participate, and thus part of feminism as a political movement has to be the incorporation of those women and their experiences into collective consciousness: “What brings people to be conscious of their oppression as common rather than remaining on the level of bad feelings, to see their group identity as a

33 Bumiller notes that such therapeutic approaches to women’s victimization are often a way to bring women, especially poor women of color who are more likely to have been victimized, into the neoliberal state’s surveillance apparatus. See Bumiller, 21–30.
systematic necessity that benefits another group, is the first question of organizing” (86). The persistent task for feminism is to incorporate more women’s experiences into its consciousness, in the process reformulating the contents of that consciousness and changing women’s agency. As we shall see, MacKinnon’s own project participates in this project of consciousness-raising and agency-redirection.

**Resisting Victimization, Resisting Feminist Consciousness**

We can see the problem of self-selection in consciousness-raising as one of resisting associating oneself with victimization *qua* helplessness, but also a refusal of what confronting others’ victimization might mean for oneself. There are two implications of MacKinnon’s theory of the sex/gender system, and the role of complicity therein, that help elucidate this. The first is that even women who escape victimization, including those who experience sexual pleasure, are complicit in the system that produces sexual violence and other forms of oppression. The revelation of this complicity can extend the disruption of the victims’ suffering to disrupt the subjectivity of other women who take as important the problem of sexual violence and the experiences of victims. Non-victimized women may experience a kind of self-alienation as they come to realize that their desires, acts, identities, and pleasures are not wholly “their own”—that they are not essential to them or existent outside or prior to gendered society—but instead are the products of and potential contributors to the suffering of others. The second implication, which follows from the

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34 This kind of self-alienation is most obvious in the sense of threat to her uniqueness and self that pervades Roiphe’s *The Morning After*, but is also evident in Cornell’s, Rubin’s, and Brown’s criticisms of MacKinnon. Each of these authors seeks some essential, non-socially constructed, and thus non-gendered feature of life on
first, is that their complicity means that ending sexual violence will require sacrifices on their part, overturning a system that gives them pleasure or power.

One the one hand, the expansive nature of suffering’s disruption—that is, its power to disrupt the subjectivities of other people who are not suffering the same experiences—is part of what makes victims’ experiences so potent in the context of feminist consciousness-raising. This disruption allows even non-victimized women to come to understand the system of male domination and their relationship to it. But at the same time, many women, including many prominent feminist theorists, have tried to contain victims’ suffering in order to avoid such implication and the unpleasantness that often accompanies it. This makes MacKinnon’s claims about the importance of victims’ suffering not solely normative, about how victims should be treated; nor are they only prudential, in the sense of whose experiences would best serve as the basis for a successful feminist movement (though I think that her claims are also those). The resistance of non-victimized women and their attempts to contain victims’ suffering also make MacKinnon’s claims political, insofar as the role accorded to the latter cannot be separated from the goals of a feminist movement. That is, a debate over the treatment of victims’ experiences and the knowledge these engender is also a debate about what feminism should seek to do, the kinds of change it should endeavor for. The primary example of this debate in Toward is MacKinnon’s engagement with the 1984 Barnard Conference on sexuality (the proceedings of which were later published as Pleasure and Danger). Many of the presenters at the conference ignored both

which to rest their claims: sexual difference in the case of Cornell, sexuality in the case of Rubin, and pre-discursive pleasure in the case of Brown.
the prevalence of sexual victimization and the domination that inheres in sexuality, which for MacKinnon only “perversely equates sexuality with ‘pleasure’” (135). Instead, they sought to discover how to maximize women’s capacity to “negotiate sexual pleasure”. For MacKinnon, this is at best premature and at worst makes impossible any truly transformative feminist project by ignoring even non-victims’ lack of power:

As if women under male supremacy have the power to [negotiate sexual pleasure]. As if pleasure and how to get it, rather than dominance and how to end it, is the overall “issue” sexuality presents feminism. As if women do just need a good fuck. (135)

At stake in the debate between MacKinnon and her critics is, then, the nature of feminism and the possibility of women’s liberation. Taking sexual pleasure as the goal for women requires ignoring the problem of domination, which in turn rests on ignoring victims and makes impossible the overcoming of all women’s domination. For MacKinnon, privileging sexual pleasure over addressing the sources of victimization is “the glorification of settling for the best that inequality has to offer or has stimulated the resourceful to invent” (154), and thus MacKinnon approvingly quotes Ti-Grace Atkinson: “I do not know any feminist worthy of that name who, if forced to choose between freedom and sex, would choose sex. She’d choose freedom every time.”35

In rejecting the ends of so-called sex-positive feminists like those involved in the Barnard conference, MacKinnon is first relying on (and, by implication, providing further support for) her claim that victims have agency despite their victimization. This claim can

be seen as a useful rebuttal of those who assume that women who experience sexual pleasure must be exercising agency that victims lack. Unlike these authors, and because she recognizes the diversity of women’s experiences, MacKinnon assumes that a system of sexual domination is equally capable of producing both experiences of sexual pleasure and

36 In addition to the Brown passages discussed at the beginning of this chapter, Heyes provides a useful examples of the link between sexual pleasure and agency. After Heyes concludes that MacKinnon is an essentialist, she then goes on to point out that

by insisting that there is a unitary experience of sexuality in this culture, that sexuality is reducible to relations of domination and subordination where masculinity maps onto the former and femininity the latter, and that there can be no sexuality, let alone sexual pleasure, outside the terms of this dichotomy, MacKinnon is required to explain how queer desires, acts, and identities can be theoretically intelligible. (Heyes, 145. Italics mine.)

Chief among these “queer desires” is lesbian sexuality, MacKinnon’s ignoring of which fails to account for the agency that they exercise. MacKinnon, says Heyes,

needs to explain why lesbian feminists who think their sexuality is importantly resistive are wrong. By reducing sexuality to dominance and submission, and rejecting attempts to resist, subvert, and change this construction, MacKinnon concomitantly erases women’s agency, making us into hapless re-enactors of the patriarchal imperative to be subordinate. (Heyes, 147–8.)

In part because they do not have sex with men, and in part because their queer sexual desires are associated with sexual pleasure, lesbians are exercising agency to resist their subordination. While this may be a useful way of thinking about lesbian feminism, it is not a given that victims of sexual violence (including many lesbian and non-lesbian victims of, for example, lesbian-baiting) are not also exercising agency. Neither their experiences of sexual pleasure nor their lesbian desires are necessarily indicators of agency in contradistinction to agencylessness of other women. Nor should we conflate lesbian feminists’ resistance to and subversion of domination with the kind of system-transcending agency MacKinnon is interested in constructing (a point I shall address in the following footnote).
sexual victimization, neither of which is more dependent on or productive of women’s agency than the other. I want to highlight that this kind of analysis is only possible if we understand MacKinnon’s claims about “women’s experience” to be political and not descriptive, which may explain why there is such a strong overlap between critics of MacKinnon and those who assume a correspondence between sexual pleasure and agency. If we accept both the political claim and the claim that sexual pleasure and sexual victimization are results of the same system, we could still say simply that all women lack any agency whatsoever, in which case her critics’ accusations that there is “no way out” would be ultimately correct (even if their reading of MacKinnon on experience was still erroneous). However, I think that the centrality of complicity to MacKinnon’s understanding of women’s agency under patriarchy saves her from boxing herself into a “hopeless” description of male domination. Again, the problem is not the lack of agency, it is that that agency cannot be effectively exercised by any individual for feminist ends.37

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37 Although at points Heyes maintains a distinction between agency as resistance and as revolution (Heyes, 146), she conflates the two in her comment on this passage from Toward:

Some have argued that lesbian sexuality—meaning here simply women having sex with women, not men—solves the problem of gender by eliminating men from women’s voluntary sexual encounters. Yet women’s sexuality remains constructed under conditions of male supremacy; women remain socially defined as women in relation to men; the definition of women as men’s inferiors remains sexual even if not heterosexual, whether men are present at the time or not. (141–2; qtd. in Heyes, 146. Italics mine.)

One of the mistakes made in this passage, according to Heyes, is that “MacKinnon argues against lesbian feminist attempts to construct lesbian identities as spaces of resistance” (Heyes, 145–6; italics mine). Yet in the passage Heyes quotes, MacKinnon is not speaking to the question of resistance, but rather of the
That the trade-off between sexual pleasure and freedom from gender domination may be necessary adds another political dimension to MacKinnon’s feminism, insofar as it will require a redistribution of experiences, pleasures, and suffering. That MacKinnon takes cognizance of this, and the resistance to it (by men and women alike) explain her tone and style in describing the experiences of victimized women, as well as in dealing with rival feminist theories. MacKinnon, in her written work—and even more so when speaking—is (in)famous for her strong language and vivid descriptions of the situations of victims of sexual violence (“From the testimony of pornography, what men want is: women bound, women battered, women tortured, women humiliated, women degraded and defiled,”)

possibility that lesbian sexuality (which, it must also be noted, is not equivalent to lesbian feminism, either historically or conceptually) could somehow solve the problem of sexual domination by men through avoiding sex with men. MacKinnon earlier makes explicit the distinction between her project and those of resisting male domination, when she observes that her own “approach is more complex than transgression, more transformative than transvaluation, deeper than mirror-image resistance, more affirmative than the negation of negativity” (117).

While Heyes is right that lesbian feminism’s eschewing of men is an important form of resistance to which MacKinnon pays insufficient attention, nothing in this passage challenges that point. Instead, MacKinnon’s claims are (1) that lesbians’ sexualities (and so genders) are also constructed under conditions of male domination, as evidenced in the use of gender as a classifier of the objects of sexual attraction; and (2) lesbians are as susceptible as any other women to male sexual violence. The second claim reasserts the political privileging of victimization; insofar as lesbians are still women, and so still raped and rapable (and so still women, and so on), then they are as unfree as any non-lesbian woman is, regardless of their resistance. Lesbians have neither escaped male domination themselves (including domination by gay men in the queer movement), nor have they solved the problem of male domination for other women.
women killed [138]”) and her almost epigrammatic summation of the nature of women’s situation under male domination (“Man fucks woman; subject verb object.” [124]).

MacKinnon’s “typically vivid words”, her syntax, and her sentence structure serve two important functions that are inseparable from her claims about the centrality of victims’ suffering to the feminist project. First, MacKinnon’s tone communicates (or at least attempts to) the disruption that the victims’ themselves experienced, and thus contributes to the spreading of that disruption that makes it possible for non-victims to have their own understandings of and roles in the violence of the sex/gender system. The forcefulness of MacKinnon’s writing is not just a means of aiding the disruptiveness of victims’ experiences; in the face of non-victimized women’s tendency to contain that suffering, to prevent it from touching upon their own lives and senses of womanhood, it is also necessary. Again, this produces the unpleasantness, even suffering of self-alienation upon awareness of one’s own constructedness and complicity.

But MacKinnon is uninterested in leaving unchallenged the comfortable illusions that many apologists for male domination draw on, hence her harsh tone in dispatching

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38 The former tendency is less evident in Toward, although MacKinnon does sometimes quote other women’s vivid descriptions of their experiences, for example:

As Valerie Heller has said of her use in incest and pornography, both as a child and as an adult, “I believed I existed only after I was turned on, like a light switch by another person. When I needed to be nurtured I though I wanted to be used … Marks and bruises and being used was the way I measure my self-worth. You must remember that I was taught that because men were fucking my body and using it for their needs it meant I was loved.” (149)

39 Haslanger, 84. See also Crenshaw, esp. 157–60.
with many rival feminist theories. We see this, for example, in the above-quoted “as if women just needed a good fuck” (135), MacKinnon’s summation of the sexual liberation, sex-positive, “depressive” movements. She applies this quippy style not just to feminists, but to all those who study women’s sexuality without accounting for the fact of sexual violence. For example, she states that “most professionals in the area of sexuality persist in studying the inexplicabilities of what is termed female sexuality acontextually, outside the context of gender inequality and its sexual violence,” which she equates to “navel gazing, only slightly further down” (151). Neither is MacKinnon interested in the male-dominated accounts, such as liberal legal theory and jurisprudence, psychoanalysis, post-structuralism, or deconstruction, that often serve to redescribe women’s experiences in ways that mask, naturalize, or dismiss the violence that took place. “In contemporary philosophical terms, nothing is ‘indeterminate’ in the post-structuralist sense here; it is all too determinate.... The feminist point is simple. Men are women’s material conditions. If it happens to women, it happens” (137-8).40 MacKinnon uses similarly clipped sentences in summarizing her objection to Foucault’s work in *History of Sexuality*: “Gender, however, eludes him.... Women are simply beneath significant notice” (288n). MacKinnon’s tone and

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40 This is not to say that MacKinnon’s reading of, for example, the deployment of indeterminacy in post-structural feminism is entirely accurate, although it does give us grounds on which to interrogate the political efficacy of, for example, Judith Butler’s privileging of subversion in her early work. Nevertheless, there is more overlap between Butler’s and MacKinnon’s accounts of gender than many readers find. See, for example, Butler, *Gender Trouble*, xii-iii; or more on the overlap between Butler and MacKinnon, see Nancy J. Hirschmann, *The Subject of Liberty: Toward a Feminist Theory of Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 90–3.
style in these excerpts communicate the disruptive effects of victims’ experiences to likewise disrupt theories that are premised on not taking those experiences seriously. In exposing yet more male bias in the production of knowledge about sexuality and its use to continue the male domination of women, MacKinnon is, with her very words, beginning the same process she advocates for: the valorization of victims’ knowledge and the redirection of their agency toward feminist ends.

The second function MacKinnon’s tone serves is to draw in those non-victimized women, now implicated in male domination and sexual violence, back into the necessarily collective task of feminism, especially in the redirection of victims’ agency—as well as their own—and the valorization of victims’ knowledge. There is in MacKinnon’s forceful tone an urgency, as well, that highlights that something must and can be done:

Male dominance is sexual. Meaning: men in particular, if not men alone, sexualize hierarchy; gender is one.... If one believes women’s accounts of sexual use and abuse by men; if the pervasiveness of male sexual violence against women substantiated in these studies is not denied, minimized, or excepted as deviant or episodic; if the fact that only 7.8 percent of women in the United States is not considered ignorable or inconsequential; if the women to whom it happens are not considered expendable; if violation of women is understood as sexualized on some level—then sexuality itself can no longer be regarded as unimplicated. Nor can the meaning of practices of sexual violence be categorized as sex not violence. (127)

MacKinnon’s urgency and exhortation to action is also reflected in this passage’s sentence structure, which contains several features characteristic of her writing. These include the short clipped sentences that pervade the passage; but it also includes the paucity of commas to separate subordinate clauses (“...as violence not sex...”, instead of “...as violence,
not sex..."), which are often replaced with em-dashes ("some level—then" instead of "...some level, then...")41 or full stops ("...as unimplicated. Nor...") instead of "...as unimplicated, nor..."); heavy use of active participles ("Meaning: ...")42; and the use of anaphora to list phenomena ("If...; if...; if...; if...; if... —then....") to a sense of urgency that draws the reader in even as she is implicated in their existence. MacKinnon's style first conveys to her readers that sexuality and gender are nearly overwhelming problems in which they are complicit. But it also gives to her readers the sense that there is something for them to do, and that this something comes from and builds upon the knowledge of victims of sexual violence.

Thus through her style, not only does MacKinnon interpellate her readers into complicity with the victimization of others, and so disrupt their previous subjective relationships with gender and sexuality; she also gives her readers the opportunity to allow that disruption to redirect their own agency, as well as the agency of the victims whose experiences she conveys. In so doing, she is both presenting as well as enacting her own


42 This tendency is also evident in the following paragraph: "A feminist theory of sexuality based on these data locates sexuality within a theory of gender inequality, meaning the social hierarchy of men over women.... A theory of sexuality become feminist methodologically, meaning feminist in the post-marxist sense, to the extent it treats sexuality as a social construct of male power" (127–8).
model of feminist political agency. That is, MacKinnon is allowing herself to be affected by those women whose victimization she engages with, even as she attempts (through her theoretical writings, as well as arguably as in her public speaking and legal and political activities\textsuperscript{43}) to help redirect that agency away from complicity and toward collective political activity, including collective consciousness-raising. Her tone is especially important in this regard because it exemplifies this activity. Critics have accused her of dominating her readers with her style—Brown even accuses MacKinnon of “fucking her readers”—and so of engaging in an oppressive overrepresentation of victimization to which her readers must conform if they wish to successfully claim the identity of “woman”, while also reproducing the worst notions of women’s passivity and disempowerment. But, once again, this line of criticism ignores that MacKinnon’s claim is a political one about what those who aspire to feminism must do; it also, possibly more perniciously, downplays or even ignores that MacKinnon’s own account actually draws upon those of many women who were victimized. For MacKinnon, “feminism is the first theory to emerge from those whose interest it affirms” (83); MacKinnon is not imposing her own account onto women, either the victims who serve as her sources or the readers.\textsuperscript{44} But neither does she

\textsuperscript{43} I am thinking here of MacKinnon’s debates with Phyllis Schlafly during the 1980s, as well as her efforts to legally empower women as a collective to acquire legal standing for civil proceedings, for example, in cases of sexual harassment and harm from pornography. See Catharine A. MacKinnon, \textit{Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law} (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987); and MacKinnon, \textit{Only Words}.

\textsuperscript{44} I think we can see in Brown’s criticism of MacKinnon a parallel to criticisms of rhetoric’s persuasive force that Bryan Garsten chronicles. According to Garsten, modernity has usually seen rhetoric as a threat to freedom, because “the practice of persuasion seems to prone to two forms of corruption. In trying to
downplay the reports of victims’ experiences, and so contain their suffering, for the purposes of providing comfort to those women lucky enough to experience pleasure. MacKinnon is participating—both acting and being acted upon—in collective feminist political agency, with all the disruption that that requires, and she demands that her readers do the same if they wish to be feminists and exercise their agency for liberatory ends. We do not see MacKinnon either going it alone or retreating to the claims of individual resistance or action; nor do we see, as in Brown’s claims, that it is up to victims to “go it alone”. Instead, she is working with victims, and working upon other women (and men), in order to produce changes to the sex/gender system itself.45

So while MacKinnon’s critics see her insistent, even unforgiving tone as threatening to their own senses of agency, I see it as a sign of what her work has to offer feminism. MacKinnon offers the possibility of addressing the differences in women’s experiences, but

persuade, democratic politicians may end up manipulating their audiences, or they may end up pandering to them.” (Bryan Garsten, Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Persuasion and Judgment [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006], 2.) Yet, he continues, “the two vices... arise from the dual character of persuasion itself, which consists partly in ruling and partly in following. In this way persuasion shares more generally in the character of democratic citizenship, which requires citizens to both rule and be ruled” (Garsten, 2).

Similar to this “ruling and being ruled”, MacKinnon models the kind of feminist agency that she also argues for, that is, responsive to the claims of sufferers in such a way that she helps redirect the agency that coexists with their suffering, while also contributing her own agency to the collective project.

45 This is not to say that MacKinnon’s own claims or activities have been infallible or uncriticizable. We should question, for example, the lack of attention that organizing by sex workers, including pornography actors, receives in her work.
understands these differences not merely as benign plurality or as signs of individual resistance. Instead, the differences to which MacKinnon demands we attend are violent and disruptive. They are politically salient differences that also map onto hierarchies that intersect with gender, such that ignoring them eliminates the possibility of addressing the ways that, for example, hierarchies of class, race, and disability are gendered and sexualized, including their enforcement through sexual violence. It is also only through attention to these differences that we can create a feminism that is open to those same differences, revisable with the experiences of victims.
CHAPTER 5

SPREADING SUFFERING: PRODUCING AGENCY AGAINST RACIAL PRIVILEGE AND HIERARCHY

INTRODUCTION

For suffering to contribute to women’s political agency, it is not enough to allow it to persist beyond the inaugural stages in an individual’s life to which it is often restricted; that suffering, or at least its disruptive aspect, must also spread beyond the individual sufferer. This chapter will, building on the work done in the previous two, offer an account of the spread of suffering from marginalized women to privileged women, and its capacity to contribute to women’s political agency—that of both dominant and marginalized women. In Chapters 3 and 4, we saw how two different theorists approach women’s suffering in such a way that it can lead to their agency, rather than being exclusive of it. Central to both Catharine MacKinnon’s and Susan Stryker’s theories is their articulation of the need for readers and listeners to be susceptible to challenges to their own self-understandings and their relationship to sex/gender hierarchy and violence, including openness to negative experiences of such disruption. In the readings I gave of both authors, the original suffering of women marginalized within feminism spreads to others who come to be disrupted by that suffering, thus becoming sufferers themselves; at the same time, this suffering and its spread are the avenue by which the original sufferers’ experiences come to contribute to their agency, while the secondary sufferers also become agentic. This chapter will detail how this co-suffering/co-agency dynamic operates. It will also more directly address the question of difference and hierarchy within feminism as an impediment to both dominant
and marginalized women’s political agency, one that can be mitigated through spreading suffering’s disruptive effects.

In particular, in this chapter I am going to focus on racial hierarchy within U.S. feminism, especially white women’s dominance and the exclusion and marginalization of women of color. In so doing, I want to underscore the way that suffering can contribute to political agency by making possible the kinds of challenges to the understandings of sex/gender hierarchy and the goals that white, middle-class feminists have laid out for the movement. Many feminists of color have sought to challenge these understandings and goals on the grounds of their racial specificity and the resultant exclusivity and white supremacy that a feminism based on them reproduces. This bears out the strong link between equality, agency, and suffering that I criticized Friedan for missing, and for which I found Nedelsky’s account of relationality insufficient because of its containment of suffering and prioritizing of subjective integrity’s restoration. What I want to show in this chapter is how suffering, allowed to spread from women of color to white women, is a contributory factor in the generation of agency by redressing the problem of racial inequality among women.

This chapter addresses the subjective experiences of trying to realize collective political agency in conditions of internal inequality and difference, that is, inequality and difference among the members of the putative collectivity. In the case of feminism, this includes women and other feminized persons, who are hierarchically related to one another along lines of geography, ability, sexuality, and class—in addition to race. Differences that arise from these hierarchies pose a challenge to feminism because of the exclusion of certain perspectives from the formation of that collective and the domination
of other perspectives within it; promoting equality within feminism is going to both
generate greater agency and disrupt the prevailing understandings of sex/gender as a
system and individuals’ place therein. The literature on whiteness and feminism
illuminates this dynamic particularly well, because it brings together women’s experiences
of themselves as sexed and gendered subjects, their understandings of sex/gender
hierarchy and feminism, and questions of how they can exercise agency in the context of
inequality, exclusion, and ignorance. This literature highlights the importance of the two
aspects of self-understanding that can contribute to agency: complicity and self-alienation.
Acquiring awareness of these two aspects of oneself, including their unavoidability under
sex/gender hierarchy and their inescapability through individual action, can be particularly
negatively disruptive, that is, can be experienced as suffering. But becoming aware of one’s
own complicity and self-alienation is no less productive of agency for the suffering it
generates; rather, as we saw in the last two chapters, suffering is a condition of that
awareness. The same is also true of awareness of one’s own complicity in and constitution
by racial hierarchy, for both women of color and white women.

We have already seen how, in the case of transgender women, women marginalized
within feminism are forced to suffer awareness of dominant women’s understandings of
them. This dynamic occurs between white women and marginalized women of color as
well. Women of color undergo suffering as they become aware of their own constitution by
and role within racial hierarchy, whether through actions of others, or through descriptive
accounts of the lives of women of color. Such suffering is evident, for example, in Patricia
Hill Collins’s discussion of “the damaging effects of stereotyping” on Black women.¹ According to Collins, Black women are often painfully aware of both white supremacist ideology, especially racist conceptions of Black women by white people, and the sexism of Black men and women in response to Black women’s knowledge and perceived relative power among African-Americans. Black women's painful awareness of how others see them and how that determines their lives, even as they become of aware of their capacity for agency, is the source of the conflicts in subjectivity that Collins describes as the “outsider-within”: “Under conditions of social injustice, the outsider-within location describes a particular knowledge/power relationship, one of gaining knowledge about or of a dominant group without gaining the full power accorded to that group.”² Coming to this knowledge, on which Black women’s agency depends—and on which feminism depends in order to understand the sex/gender hierarchy against which it fights—often generates suffering.³ For example, “when confronted with theories about their own inferiority, Black women and other groups that have been historically marginalized within


² Collins, 6.

³ It is also, in part, a product of suffering, because, as Collins observes, Black women’s outsider-within status comes about through their role in the racial and gender division of labor. Collins’s paradigmatic example is Black domestic workers in white households, who were often key to “African-American resistance traditions”; but those “who worked this triple shift of unpaid family employment, low-paid domestic work, and Black community service often did so at substantial cost to their well-being” (Collins, 7).
academia often demonstrate similar reactions to those who encounter hate speech”, namely, suffering in the form of “fear, rage, and shock”, as well as physical symptoms that prevent them from responding. In both kinds of incidents, academic speech and hate speech, the victim is made aware of how they are perceived by the dominant group. While this awareness often takes the form of suffering, and it can be debilitating of Black women’s agency, Collins also argues that publicizing and sharing that knowledge can both contribute to Black women’s agency and begin the process of recovery from the harm it inflicted: “For individuals, healing from this harm by making one’s experience and point of view public remains one of the most fundamental contributions of breaking silence.”

The link between suffering, healing, and voice that Collins posits can help us to understand the need to spread suffering across racial hierarchies in order to further the agency of women of color. There is still a risk that when communicating across racial lines, Black women’s accounts will be returned with more racism, turning their potential agency back into a form of victimization. To avoid this—and, for Sandra Harding, in order to become feminists—white women

have had to start listening to women of color telling about their lives—and then themselves in contrast; they have had to reflect on the race aspects of their lives, undertake acts of resistance to race supremacy, reflect on the consequences of those acts, learn various theories produced by people of color about race relations and imperialism that provide contexts into which

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4 Collins, 85.

5 Collins, 48.
they could insert their own experiences and perspectives... and so forth. That is, they ache to learn how to become feminists who can function effectively as antiracists (that is, who are antiracist), rather than feminists who, intentionally or not, perpetuate race supremacy. They have had to learn to take historical responsibility for their race, for the white skins from which they speak and act.6

Engaging with one’s own whiteness and the privileges that confers is, as Harding characterizes it, part of the same difficult work that women and other marginalized groups undergo in developing an understanding of the nature of their experiences in relation to hierarchical social structures.7 “Members of marginalized groups must struggle to name their own experiences for themselves in order to claim the subjectivity, the possibility of historical agency, that is given to members of dominant groups at birth.”8 That is, it would be a mistake to see acquiring an awareness of their own whiteness as an extra burden imposed on white women, rather than simply a part of what, for example, feminist consciousness-raising is already doing. And, just as feminist consciousness-raising or the formation of a feminist standpoint can occur through suffering, so, too, should we expect a


8 Harding, 128. Italics in original.
white feminist’s awareness of their own relationship to racial hierarchy to occur through suffering. As I shall discuss below, awareness of one’s own complicity in white supremacy often generates experiences of guilt; while awareness of white privilege, its history, and benefits often lead to racial self-alienation, a desire to repudiate one’s own racial identity and history. Yet these forms of suffering cannot simply be overcome or integrated into a restored sense of one’s self; the disruption is itself central to the continuation of one’s awareness of and struggle with a recalcitrant racial hierarchy of which white people, as the dominant group, can only have a partial understanding. As Harding summarizes, “when marginalized people begin to gain voice in the dominant circles from which they had been excluded, members of the dominant group invariably begin to hear about how, from the perspective of those marginal lives, dominant assumptions and claims are distorted.”

Conversely, dominant groups’ hearing about the distortion of their own perspective must be perpetuated if marginalized groups’ voices are to actually be heard. This requires the continuation of disruption, including suffering, of those dominant perspectives.

I addressed the dynamics around the suffering of women marginalized within feminism in the previous two chapters, so in this chapter I am going to focus on how privileged women, in this case white women, can allow themselves to be disrupted by other, more marginalized women’s suffering, and how the former’s disruption by the latter’s suffering is necessary to increasing the agency of both groups by combatting the inequality between them. My interest is less in what white women should do to address racial inequality, and more about how suffering is a valuable means by which they can get

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9 Harding, 125.
to the point of figuring out how to address the problem of racial hierarchy within (and outside) feminism. This “figuring out” can only happen when white women’s experiences are de-centered from feminist politics, and depends upon their ability to see themselves as constituted by and complicit in racial hierarchy which they must then commit to challenging. While getting to the point of racial self-understanding is likely to be experienced as suffering, I also see the commitment to challenging racial hierarchy as demanding an openness to disruption; white women must remain open to the views of women of color and accepting of the fact that they will remain ignorant of how to address racial inequality, and thus dependent upon women of color to “take the lead”. However, given the self-confidence and authority that are typically associated with whiteness, it is likely that this dependency will itself be disruptive. In the final section of this chapter, then, I outline some of the ways that the circumscribing and decentering of white women’s perspectives may occur in feminism. Before that, however, I want to review the literature on cross-contextual communications and its relationship to suffering. I will then look at two aspects of white women’s experiences of their racial identity, complicity and self-alienation, and argue that the suffering that these often manifest can be a means of bringing women to a critical relation with their racial identity and role in racial hierarchy. Finally, I will address the question of how commitment to racial equality within feminism allows us to rethink central concepts for feminist purposes.

**Circumscribing and Decentering White Womanhood**

Before we look at what suffering can do to abate racial inequality within feminism, let us first look briefly at how feminist theorists of color have diagnosed the problem of
racial hierarchy within feminism, and what they have argued must happen for that
abatement to occur. Many feminists of color have observed the need to disrupt prevailing
feminist narratives, both individual and shared, that fail to acknowledge the specificity of
white women’s experiences, understandings of sex/gender hierarchy, and feminist political
ends:

The location of white women in America as the benefactors of racism has
enabled them to ignore their whiteness.... White women must realize that as
womanness circumscribes their whiteness, (they are not white males), so
their whiteness circumscribes their womanness. White feminists must come
to terms with the circumscribing nature of their whiteness.¹⁰

Armstrong’s claim that experiences of sex/gender, including sex/gender hierarchy, are
racially specific, and that white women often fail to notice this fact, is echoed by other
feminist scholars. For example, Adrienne Rich identifies the problem of “white solipsism—
not the consciously held belief that one race is inherently superior to all others, but a
tunnel-vision which simply does not see nonwhite experience or existence as precious or
significant”.¹¹

¹⁰ Pat Armstrong, qtd. in Gloria Joseph, “The Incompatible Menage à Trois: Marxism, Feminism, and Racism,”
in Lydia Sargent, ed., Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism
(Boston: South End Press, 1983), 102.

¹¹ Adrienne Rich, “Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynephobia,” Chrysalis 7 (1979); reprinted in
will be to the reprinted version; the quoted passage is from p. 306; italics in original.
Many feminists connect white solipsism among feminists to their wrongful distortions and appropriations of the experiences of women of color to fit within the former's understandings of sex/gender hierarchy. For example, Kimberlé Crenshaw argues that Anita Hill, a Black woman who claimed that then-nominee to the U.S. Supreme Court Clarence Thomas had sexually harassed her, had her experiences wrongly claimed and misinterpreted by white feminists.

While white feminists were in general the most consistent and vocal supporters of Hill, the fact remains that both her lack of fit into the dominant imagery of the violated madonna and, more specifically, the feminist movement’s inability to develop alternative narratives comprehending the ways that women of color experience gender power, led to the particular dynamics that many of her supporters themselves were unable to

It is not the case that the claims about white solipsism imply that the spread of suffering must only go from women of color to white women in order to contribute to women’s political agency. Aida Hurtado, for example, relates an experience of her valuable disruption by white women’s suffering that better enabled her to understand the persistence of sex/gender hierarchy even among privileged, successful women. Hurtado opens her *The Color of Privilege* with a story of her disruption by the suffering of her white female colleagues from the University of California, Santa Cruz. Hurtado describes her confusion at their “deep sadness that at times resulted in crippling depression”:

I thought I had died and won the lottery to be able to teach what I wanted and to write as I pleased. Why were they so sad when, whichever way it was analyzed, structurally, they had more power and control than 99.9 percent of all women in the world? I did not know, and yet I did not doubt, what they felt. My job, I thought that night, was to figure out why they were so sad and I was not (at least not all the time) and what we could do, as women, to help one another. (Aida Hurtado, *The Color of Privilege: Three Blasphemies on Race and Feminism* [Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996], 2.)
understand, dynamics that included the rejection of Hill by the majority of black women as well as white women.\textsuperscript{12} The problem that Black women in the U.S. (and elsewhere, as Crenshaw notes) face “is not the precariousness of holding on to the protection that the madonna image provides or the manner in which the madonna image works to regulate and thereby constrain black women’s sexuality. Instead, it is the denial of the presumption of ‘madonna-hood’ that shapes responses to black women’s victimization”.\textsuperscript{13} White feminists, in their “reluctance to incorporate race into their narratives about gender, sex, and power” also simultaneously failed “to understand the ways that race may have contributed to Anita Hill’s silence”.\textsuperscript{14} The result was that white feminists’ “attempt to explain why she remained silent spoke primarily to her career interests.”\textsuperscript{15} This interpretation only reinforced the characterization of Hill by those who sought to discredit her as ambitious or spurned, and it failed to arrive at the more complex motivations, such as the “fear that [Black women’s] stories might be used to reinforce stereotypes of black men as sexually threatening”, or fear of ostracism.\textsuperscript{16}


\textsuperscript{13} Crenshaw, “Whose Story?”, 414.

\textsuperscript{14} Crenshaw, “Whose Story?”, 414.

\textsuperscript{15} Crenshaw, “Whose Story?”, 414.

\textsuperscript{16} Crenshaw, “Whose Story?”, 415.
“Black women face these kinds of dilemmas throughout their lives”, but they are not dilemmas that the prevailing, white understanding of sexual harassment accounts for.\textsuperscript{17}

Crenshaw summarizes that “the central disadvantage Hill faced was the lack of available and widely comprehended narratives to communicate the reality of her experience as a black woman to the world” because white women’s narratives about hierarchy dominate feminist understandings of the sex/gender system (just as, Crenshaw claims, Black men’s narratives dominate anti-racist understandings of racial hierarchy).\textsuperscript{18} “Identification by race or gender seemed to be an either/or proposition, and when it is experienced in that manner, black people, both men and women, have traditionally chosen race solidarity”; Crenshaw observes that “white feminist acquiescence to the either/or frame” left their understandings of sex/gender hierarchy intact, but also made them complicit in the vilification of Hill and the success of Thomas’s nomination.\textsuperscript{19} The solution to problems such as Hills’s is that “feminism must be recast in order to reach women who do not see gender as relevant to an understanding of their own disempowerment.... Nonwhite and working-class women, if they are ever to identify with the organized women’s movement, must see their diverse experiences reflected in the practice and policy statements of these predominantly white middle-class groups”.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{17} Crenshaw, “Whose Story?”, 415.

\textsuperscript{18} Crenshaw, “Whose Story?”, 404.

\textsuperscript{19} Crenshaw, “Whose Story?”, 415.

\textsuperscript{20} Crenshaw, “Whose Story?”, 435.
Understanding the racial specificity of white women’s experiences of sex/gender hierarchy, what Armstrong calls “circumscribing their womanness”, is the first step to decentering their perspectives, allowing the experiences of women of color to inform feminism as much as white women’s experiences have. For Crenshaw, this means that “women organizers have to begin to apply gender analysis to problems that might initially appear to be shaped primarily by exclusively racial or class factors.”21 But this can only work if that analysis relies on non-white narratives that are appropriate to the intersecting identities of the women whose situation is being analyzed. This, in turn, requires that white women, when they do perform such an analysis, readily admit of their own ignorance and the insufficiency of their experiences to fully comprehend the experiences and situations of women of color. While Crenshaw demonstrates the problem of feminists’ excluding the experiences of women of color from feminism, thus leaving intact white women’s domination, Kim Marie Vaz argues against racial aliteracy, the inclusion of people of color in ways that fail to challenge white systems of understanding. This occurs, for example, “in research that superficially appears to be about us, but in the end does very little to illuminate and change racial differences.... In racial aliteracy African American culture is acknowledged and even ‘celebrated,’ but White appropriate aspects of African American

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culture to make it fit into a White worldview.”

In addressing the experiences of Black women, and other women of color, white feminists must not only avoid casting them as too different, say primarily racialized instead of sexed and gendered; they must also avoid fitting them only into their understandings of women’s experiences qua white women’s experiences. Both are ultimately the same action, leaving the white feminist model of sex/gender hierarchy intact as the lens by which to understand women of color, either as “not at all like us” and so not includable within feminism, or else as “just like us”, and so includable in feminism regardless of their differences and possible dissent from that inclusion. This requires that white women’s experiences and understandings of feminism be decentered, allowing feminism to be changed by and in response to women of color, rather than trying to include or exclude them.

From the vantage point of white women, one key aspect of decentering their experiences from feminism is recognition not only of their specificity, but of the inequality that exists between them and women of color. This occurs through what I think of as the spread of suffering’s disruption from women of color to white women; for the latter, this often takes the form of white guilt and white racial self-alienation, both of which I will

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detail below. The suffering that both women of color and white women undergo in becoming aware of their relationships to racial and sex/gender hierarchies arises in part through their exposure to others’ perceptions of them. Thus the literature on racial hierarchy, whiteness and feminism is also helpful for augmenting the literature on feminist judgment, “the faculty that allows us to order or make sense of our experience”.23

According to Linda M.G. Zerilli, judgment is especially important in what she calls “transcontextual” situations. These are situations in which “we (feminists and citizens of Western democracies) need to make judgments about cultural and political practices not always our own and, where appropriate, declare them ‘bad for women’ and refuse them our political support.”24 For Zerilli, the practice of feminist judgment is about improving our capacity to evaluate the world for political purposes: “Rooted in an uneasy confrontation with the opinions of others, the ability to judge critically must be differentiated from the capacity for identification, recognition, or empathy.... We should try


to see from the other perspectives because those perspectives open the world up to us; they give us a more worldly reality.”

Much of the feminist literature on judgment is, as we saw in Nedelsky’s use of the concept, focused on the ways that judgment can produce a disruptive effect upon the judger, the person who is experiencing others’ perspectives and experiences. This is particularly clear in Iris Marion Young’s work, in which she argues for the value of “wonder, an openness to the newness and mystery of the other person”, to feminist judgment. As Young characterizes it, “wonder also means being able to see one’s own position, assumptions, perspective as strange, because it has been put in relation to others.” Just as for Young wonder is a valuable component of judgment, I would argue that judgment can also rely on negative experiences of disruption, including suffering. Judgment thusly understood is a bi-directional engagement of making meaning for ourselves and making our selves meaningful to ourselves through others. It permits both the possibility of resistance and critical evaluation, but it also permits us to see how we may be complicit in the way others are oppressed and self-alienated by that knowledge.

This capacity for disruption, whether through wonder or suffering, is especially important given the danger that, as Young observes, “the very attempt of some to take the

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26 Young, 357.

27 Young, 358.
standpoint of others risks not respecting them”. In particular, Young worries that though people assume they have imagined themselves as another, this ignores the way that “they do not imagine the point of view of others; rather, they project onto those others their own fears and fantasies about themselves”. One means of avoiding this is, Young argues, “an acknowledgement of an asymmetry between subjects”, in which the judging person recognizes the limitations of their own capacity to adopt others’ standpoints: “Moral respect between people entails reciprocity between them, in the sense that each acknowledges and takes account of the other. But their relation is asymmetrical in terms of the history each has and the social position they occupy.” This is especially important in situations of inequality, when the person in the dominant position is attempting to adopt the standpoint of a more marginalized person. In the case of race, this would seem to risk the very racial aliteracy that Vaz describes if the racially dominant person is not especially careful.

We can contrast the exclusion or aliterate inclusion of women of color from white feminism with forms that decanter white experiences from feminism. For example, Cherrie Moraga identifies the need for subjective disruption, through exposure to others’ experiences, as essential to the possibility of a feminist movement able to bring together diverse women, especially to combatting hierarchies among women that perpetuate

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28 Young, 343.

29 Young, 344.

30 Young, 351; italics in original.
oppression. The continuation of divisions among women, especially the alienation of many women of color from feminism, is in part a product of feminists’ refusal to be open to self-alienation and one’s own complicity in the oppression of others:

   Within the women’s movement, the connections among women of different backgrounds and sexual orientations have been fragile, at best. I think this phenomenon is indicative of our failure to seriously address ourselves to some very frightening questions: How have I internalized my own oppression? How have I oppressed?... We need a new language, better words that can more closely describe women’s fear of and resistance to one another.31

For Moraga, accounting for this internalized oppression is what enabled her to come to lesbian–Chicana–feminist politics, but she was only able to do so after being herself disrupted by another’s experiences. Attending a reading, she realized:

   The reading was agitating. Made me uncomfortable. Threw me into a week-long terror of how deeply I was affected. I felt that I had to start all over again. That I turned only to the perceptions of white middle-class women to speak for me and all women. I am shocked by my own ignorance.32

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32 Moraga, 31.
Combatting this ignorance depends upon "the capacity to enter into the lives of others", something that requires her to confront "what seems to be unknown, and therefore, fearful". This unknown is particularly fearful to those oppressors, Moraga says:

but it is not really difference that the oppressor fears so much as similarity. He fears he will discover in himself the same aches, the same longings as those of the people he has shitted on. He fears the immobilization threatened by his own incipient guilt, He fears he will have to change his life once he has seen himself in the bodies of the people he has called different. He fears the hatred, anger, and vengeance he has hurt.

This extends to women, too, "for each of us in some way has been both oppressed and the oppressor." The result is that

We are afraid to look at how we have failed each other. We are afraid to look at how we have taken the values of our oppressor into our hearts and turned them against ourselves and one another. We are afraid to admit how deeply "the man's" words have been ingrained in us.

This becomes especially troublesome for feminism in relations of privilege among women, for example, racial privilege. "In a white-dominated world, there is little getting around racism and our own internalization of it. It's always there, embodied in some one we least expect to get rub up against." But when such contact does take place, "there then is the

33 Moraga, 31.
34 Moraga, 31.
35 Moraga, 31.
36 Moraga, 32.
challenge. *There* then is the opportunity to look at the nightmare within us. But we usually shrink from such a challenge.\(^\text{37}\) It is, however, only by confronting “the nightmare within us” that privilege can be combatted, and that the exclusions of women of color and other less-privileged women can be addressed. “I have come to believe that the only reason women of a privileged class will dare to look at *how* they oppress, is when they come to know the meaning of their own oppression. And understand that the oppression of others hurts them personally.”\(^\text{38}\)

Moraga calls our attention to the tendency to resist those negative experiences of disruption, which she expresses in the language of fear and nightmare, when giving in to them would require the individual to confront her own complicity, internalized oppression, and racial privilege. Moraga also shows how, in instances in which one is privileged in relation to the person whose experiences threaten oneself with disruption, it is more likely that the openness to disruption is necessary or salutary. That is, it is likely that the disruption will expose one’s complicity in the oppression of others and her constitution by racial and sex/gender hierarchies. Resisting this disruption, seeking to contain the fear is going to replicate the hierarchical relations of privilege and oppression that occlude others’ agency; this may occur by silencing them or minimizing their experiences to contain their suffering.

Addressing white solipsism and dismantling racial hierarchy among women is dependent upon an openness to be disrupted by the experiences, especially the suffering, of

\(^{37}\) Moraga, 32. Italics in original.

\(^{38}\) Moraga, 32. Italics in original.
women of color. In the following two sections, I will look at how awareness of complicity and self-alienation can operate through the spread of suffering.

**Complicity and the Question of White Guilt**

One of the best known accounts by a white feminist on engaging with her own whiteness and racism, Adrienne Rich’s “Disloyal to Civilization: Feminism, Racism, Gynephobia”, captures the psychic difficulties of such demanding work. “If black and white feminists are going to speak of female accountability, I believe the word *racism* must be seized, grasped in our bare hands, ripped up out of the sterile or defensive consciousness in which it so often grows, and transplanted so that it can yield new insights for our lives and our movement.”39 For Rich, too often, “the concept of racism itself is often intellectualized by white feminists.... I have more than once felt anger at abstractly ‘correct’ language wielded by self-described political feminists.”40 This intellectualization is a form of distancing that, ironically, Rich finds disempowers women and leaves her “feeling out of touch with some vital centre I need to experience in order not to feel powerless.”41 For Rich, the temptation to do away with the very word *racism* is always there—she admits that she has “pronounced the word ‘racism’ while withholding my body and soul from the reality that word could invoke in me, if I would let it”—because of its disruptive effects, its

39 Rich, 301.

40 Rich, 304.

41 Rich, 304.
capacity to induce “anger, tears, denial, rebuttal, ensuing conversations.” But, she insists, “I am convinced that we must go on using that sharp, sibilant word; not to paralyze ourselves and each other with repetition, stagnant does of guilt, but to break it down into its elements, comprehend it as a female experience, and also to understand its inextricable connections with gynephobia.”

Confronting and addressing white women’s relationship to racism is, as Rich describes it, difficult and disruptive work; but it is also work necessary to properly understand how women’s agency can be realized, and what white and racialized women must do to forge it. Central to this in Rich’s story is understanding white women’s complicity in racism, both as beneficiaries of white privilege, as well as active perpetrators of racism; this is important even if, as Rich claims, the same system of racial privilege also defined white women by their passivity, fragility, and purity. But in the passage quoted at the end of the previous paragraph, she also raises a commonplace worry over the question of white guilt and its paralyzing effects on women. “A great deal of white feminist thinking and writing, where it has attempted to address black women’s experience, has done so labouring under a massive burden of guilt feelings and false consciousness, the products of

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42 Rich, 304.

43 Rich, 304.

deeply inculcated female self-blame”. Often, Rich observes, this is simply a form of maintaining the focus on white women and their feelings:

It seems to me that guilt feelings—so easily provoked in women that they have become almost a form of social control—can also become a form of solipsism, a preoccupation with our own feeling which prevents us from ever connecting with the experience of others. Guilt feelings paralyze, but paralysis can become a convenient means of remaining passive and instrumental. If I cannot even approach you because I feel so much guilt towards you, I need never listen to what you actually have to say.46

As I understand it, based on Rich and the other authors I will discuss in this section, white guilt is a form of negative disruption, suffering, that occurs when a white person is made aware of her role in the suffering of women of color through her complicity in racism. At points, as in this passage and despite her emphasis on the difficulty of engaging with racism, it seems as though Rich wants to claim that white women’s suffering of guilt needs to be avoided or overcome if they are to become agents alongside Black women. This assumption that white guilt is self-indulgent and/or incapacitating is a common one; and, as we shall see, I find that white guilt is often a component of white solipsism, but not in the way that Rich and others maintain.47 I think it is the desire to contain the suffering of white

45 Rich, 281.


47 Naomi Zack argues against the value of white guilt because, “neither the psychological guilt based on unearned advantages nor the moral guilt based on past injustice entails an awareness of contemporary white moral obligations.” (Naomi Zack, “White Ideas”, in Chris. J. Cuomo and Kim Q. Hall, eds., Whiteness: Feminist Philosophical Reflections [Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999], 81.) While it is likely the case that some
guilt that reproduces racism within feminism. Conversely, I argue that white guilt, as a form of disruption that spreads in reaction to the suffering of women of color, can contribute to agency. It does so through recognition of their complicity in racism that can also decenter white women’s understandings and goals from feminism and push them to engage with women of color. For this to occur, however, white women must allow themselves to be disrupted by that guilt, rather than seeking its alleviation and containment through either absolution or individual action.

*Containing Guilt through Absolution*

I will begin, then, with how two common responses to white guilt are, in actuality, desires for alleviation and containment of that guilt. These two responses are: (1) to seek absolution from a person of color; (2) and to seek individual re-empowerment in ways that escape that complicity, and with it, guilt.

We see the first response in Krista Ratcliffe’s *Rhetorical Listening* when the author reflects on her own experiences of white guilt and observes how it unfolded into a commonplace dynamic. In the process of publishing her first book, *Anglo-American Feminist Challenges*, several readers observed that Ratcliffe had failed to foreground people feel white guilt without realizing any their complicity in contemporary racism, that does not mean that all white guilt is thusly rendered useless. And, as we shall see from Linda Alcoff below, adopting a critical attitude toward the suffering created by whiteness can be part of the formation of a critical attitude toward racist institutions. This latter point would also be a means of addressing Zack’s correct observation, which she also uses against white guilt, that “customs and practices are judged racist because of their effects on nonwhites, not because of the feelings of those actively engaged in them or past injustices” (Zack, 82).
questions of race in the works of the three white women (Virginia Wolf, Mary Daly, and Adrienne Rich) she focused on. They suggested that she could do so by adding a chapter that focused on an author of color, like Alice Walker; yet Ratcliffe declined to follow those suggestions. That decision nevertheless left her “alternately satisfied and bothered... by visceral doubts”, and as she reflected further, “my first response was guilt—good old-fashioned liberal guilt”, from which followed a familiar pattern of behavior: “What did I do with this nonproductive guilt? I did what most white people trapped in a guilt/blame logic do: I focused defensively on myself, repeating to myself all the logical reasons I had omitted Walker from my project. In other words, the subject of all my sentences was I.”

Still dissatisfaction, Ratcliffe followed her defensiveness with another common tactic of addressing white guilt, to “search for absolution, a search for someone else to validate my thinking, to tell me it was OK not to include Walker in my project.” Ratcliffe’s discussions with “former professors, colleagues, friends, students” assured her that “I had nothing to feel guilty for” and thus helped her avoid disruption. Ratcliffe provides an example of a common means of seeking absolution from a member of the oppressed group:

In my frenzied search for absolution, I did refuse an editorial suggestion that I call Shirley Wilson Logan, whom I did not know at the time, to ask her if she thought it would be “OK” for me to focus on three white women and not

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48 Krista Ratcliffe, Rhetorical Listening: Identification, Gender, Whiteness (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 2005), 4–5; italics in original.

49 Ratcliffe, 5.

50 Ratcliffe, 5.
include Walker. I could only imagine the conversation: “Hello, Shirley. My
name is Kris Ratcliffe. You don’t know me, but I understand you’re African
American and, hence, the perfect person to give me permission not to include
a chapter on an African American woman in my book.”

As Ratcliffe, observes, “such a ‘white’ move would have been insultingly essentializing,
making Logan a spokesperson for an entire ethnic group”; this request for absolution
would have reinforced the racism that has long been institutionalized in the academy,
while reproducing the “servant/served relationship” between white and Black women in
North America in yet another setting.

As I understand it, the guilt that Ratcliffe describes is a possible moment of
disruption in which she could recognize her complicity in the marginalization of women of
color and in the failure to analyze whiteness, leaving the latter as the default category for
women, even in contemporary feminist theory and politics. There are hints of this potential
for disruption in her refusal to seek absolution from Logan, the wrongness of which
Ratcliffe “felt viscerally”, even if she was unable to explicate the reasons why at that
moment. And yet, she actively seeks to avoid her own disruption and retain her subjective

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51 Ratcliffe, 5.

52 Ratcliffe, 5–6. On the question of the servant/served relationship between white and Black women,
Ratcliffe quotes Maria Childers and bell hooks: “As long as white women within feminism still ask black
women to teach them about race, [black women] are still being put in a servant/served relationship.” (Maria
Childers and bell hooks, “A Conversation about Race and Class”, in Marianne Hirsch and Evelyn Fox Keller,
eds., Conflicts in Feminism [New York: Routledge, 1990], 71.).
integrity, doing so at the cost of continuing to put herself, a white woman, at the center of the conversation—as Ratcliffe herself comments, “the subject of all my sentence was I.”

For Ratcliffe this statement has to do with whose experiences she foregrounds in addressing her own feminist complicity and how she responds to those experiences, but I want to supplement this point by noting that making the I the subject of her sentences depends upon the persistence of an I to at once utter and serve as the sensible subject of those sentences. That is, we should understand Ratcliffe’s defensiveness and absolution-seeking as activities that serve to restore her own subjective integrity by resisting the full disruptive force that her guilt could have had. Again, as we saw in my readings of Friedan and Nedelsky, this containment effects a reproduction of the extant hierarchies among women. And while it is fortunate that Ratcliffe had enough of a visceral awareness of her own privileged roles in feminism and the academy to avoid imposing on a black colleague for absolution, there are plenty of situations in which that dynamic is not avoided, in which the effort to avoid guilt’s disruption does lead to further enactment of the racial hierarchy that led to the guilt in the first place. In contrast, if in such situations the privileged person actually let the guilt disrupt them and allow it to produce a subjective crisis that they do not then reactively seek to contain, it is possible that they can better understand the ways in which they are, through their exclusions and universalizations, at once complicit in the further marginalization of women of color and preventing the realization of feminist political agency. As we shall see in the next section, it is from this disrupted point that the guilty woman can then take action, but one taken in concert with others.

For Ratcliffe, defensiveness and absolution-seeking are themselves inevitable outcomes of the “guilt/blame logic” that demonstrate the necessity of moving to an
accountability logic grounded in listening.\footnote{Ratcliffe, 6–8; 88–92.} I do not, however, see these problems as intrinsic to guilt, but rather to the common responses to it that endeavour to contain the guilty subject’s suffering and restore her integrity. We might, instead, want the negativity that comes along with awareness of one’s own complicity in racial hierarchy, because it implies the capacity for agency. For example, Rich not only worries about the paralyzing effects of white guilt that I discussed above, she also worries that white women’s guilt for racism is the product of a misunderstanding of their role in racism. “An analysis that places the guilt for active domination, physical and institutional violence, and the justifications embedded in myth and language, on white women only compounds false consciousness;... it impedes any real discussion of women’s instrumentality in a system which oppresses all women, and in which hatred of women is also embedded in myth, folklore, and language.”\footnote{Rich, 301.} This understanding of white women’s oppression and the oppression of people of color as both the products of patriarchy leads Linda Martín Alcoff to criticize Rich because she “continues to put sexism at the center of all women’s lives and to portray white women as primarily victims of racism rather than agents who help to sustain it.... In her view, white women’s racism is actually a misdirected outlet for their rage over their powerlessness”.\footnote{Linda Martín Alcoff, “What Should White People Do?” Hypatia 3, no. 13 (Summer 1998), 11.} The irony is that Rich fault white guilt for making women too passive and obstructing their capacity to connect with Black women; yet her account of white women’s complicity
in racism, one free of guilty feelings, is built upon those same problematic assumptions, that women were passive instruments of racism and that women of color should identify primarily with their sex/gender oppression rather than understanding sex/gender as revisable in light of racial oppression. We might argue, instead, that suffering guilt brings with it an understanding that white women can and must do something differently, and that the persistence of those feelings push them to engage with women of color in a way that acknowledges the former’s own limitations.

*Containing Guilt through Individual Agency*

Attempting to actively address one’s white complicity and privilege without white guilt is the second means of containing suffering in order to generate agency. We can see an example of this in Alison Bailey’s essay on white privilege, “Despising an Identity They Taught Me to Claim”, again her description of a response she considers but rejects.56 Bailey states that she wants to “explore a dilemma of ‘white privilege awareness’ that leaves some privilege-cognizant white trapped in the awkward position of knowing that it is both impossible to dispose of privilege and impossible to take advantage of it without perpetuating the systems of domination we wish to demolish.”57 This double bind is a product of the way that “white privilege takes on a new dimension for whites who resist common defensive or guilt-ridden responses to privilege (e.g., ‘I’ve worked hard for

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57 Bailey, 86.
everything I have,’ or ‘It’s not my fault I was born into a system that values whiteness,’ or ‘My ancestors never owned slaves’). Here we have an awareness of the inescapable complicity that hierarchical structures trap people in. Bailey links negative disruption, like guilt, with anger, defensiveness, resistance, and “feeling powerless in the face of what I perceived to be the impossible task of working to dismantle systems of domination to which I unknowingly contribute.” For Bailey, overcoming her initial, negative reactions is key to addressing the problem of racial privilege; rather than simply feeling helpless and seeking to escape the dilemma of privilege-awareness, she argues that white people must “begin thinking of privilege as a resource for undoing institutional racism”.

As I read her, Bailey’s initial attempts to escape the dilemma of her complicity with racism are themselves attempts to contain the suffering of guilt she initially experiences, rather than being products of that guilt. Instead of imposing herself on people of color to absolve her of her guilt, as Ratcliffe did, Bailey instead attempts (and fails) to find a course of action she can engage in that will restore her subjective integrity as an anti-racist agent. For example, in the case of a Black student who was discriminated against by her university’s Financial Aid Office, Bailey could “speak on her behalf, demand to speak to administrators in the registrar’s office and make everybody in the office give [her] the

58 Bailey, 85.

59 Bailey, 86.

60 Bailey, 87.
appropriate attention and treat her like a deserving scholarship recipient.”\textsuperscript{61} While this is a case of Bailey's “using my privilege in a way that we both hope will help” the student, it is also the case that "the whole performance reinscribes, rather than undermines, the script that teaches the staff to listen to and believe white people and does not honor the explanations of most students of color.”\textsuperscript{62} While the individual victim of racism has been aided, doing so may have come at the price of more deeply entrenching the institutional racism in the university's Financial Aid Office.

For Bailey, this failed attempt to escape the dilemma of complicity in racism is a manifestation of "assumptions about race or whiteness that cause me to think of privilege as something unshakable, to be escaped"; namely, that race is somehow an essential or fixed trait of individuals based on an unchanging social system.\textsuperscript{63} She holds on to this "essentialist hangover" despite her awareness of race's social construction, the solution to which is "replacing essentialist views of race with views that construct racial identities as ambiguous, open-ended, fluid products of the interplay between a social group's history, social condition, and the chosen behavior of individual persons."\textsuperscript{64} There is no possibility of individual action that is not complicit in the reproduction of racism, and thus able to escape the double bind. Bailey concludes that, to effectively use privilege to combat racism, white

\textsuperscript{61} Bailey, 93.

\textsuperscript{62} Bailey, 93; 94.

\textsuperscript{63} Bailey, 95.

\textsuperscript{64} Bailey, 96.
people must make themselves "accountable for privilege by choosing to collectively explore strategies for redistributing resources, especially when these strategies require placing myself in an uncomfortable or vulnerable position."\textsuperscript{65} The solution of collective agency is also one that feeds back to the negative feelings of guilt and helplessness that motivated her actions: "To refuse compliance to racist and white supremacist scripts allows an exit from the dilemma and may even alleviate feelings of helplessness on the part of those with unjustified privileges."\textsuperscript{66} As we saw with Stryker’s and MacKinnon’s approaches to complicity, Bailey, too, comes to realize that addressing the problem of complicity is only possible through a collective agency. Unlike MacKinnon and Stryker, however, Bailey’s shared agency is premised on overcoming the disruption of guilt, which she initially attempts by reconstructing herself as an individual agent capable of meaningful, non-complicit action, the impossibility of which she ultimately recognizes.

While her acknowledgement of the necessity of continuing to engage people of color despite her discomfort is valuable, and I agree with the conclusion she reaches regarding collaboration with people of color, I find that Bailey mischaracterizes the role of guilt. I propose that, had she understood her initial attempts to escape the double bind of white privilege as attempts to contain her guilt rather than as a manifestation of the guilt itself, she could have arrived at the same conclusion regarding the need for collective action—and potentially without the initial, abortive attempt to escape the double bind of white privilege. Bailey shares with Rich a concern about the paralysis or helplessness that can

\textsuperscript{65} Bailey, 101.

\textsuperscript{66} Bailey, 98.
result from white guilt; as a result, her attempt to escape the dilemma of white privilege in
the example of the African American student facing discrimination is also an attempt to
overcome that helplessness by undertaking action. This would demonstrate that she is not
helpless or paralyzed by her guilt and that she is genuinely committed to, and taking action
against, the racism in which she is complicit. But that initial response, the desire to restore
subjective integrity—and her later assumption that collective action not only solves her
double bind, but also her feelings of helplessness—assume that paralysis or helplessness
are inimical to agency. Instead, I propose that the feelings of subjective disruption that
Bailey and Rich associate with white guilt—helplessness and paralysis, as well as
uncertainty and anxiety—can actually conduce to the kind of collective agency that Bailey
ends up arguing for.

We can see how helplessness and the other disruptions of guilt may be valuable for
agency in one of the sources that Bailey draws on, Marilyn Frye’s “White Woman Feminist”,
in which Frye relates how

Sharon Keller said to me in a letter, “I think that there are things which white
women working together can accomplish but I do not think that white
women are in the best positions usually to know what those things are or
when it is the right time to do them. It would go a long way... for white
women to take seriously their [relative] helplessness in this matter.”

Keller’s surmise that white women are helpless, yet fail to take that fact seriously, points to
two ways that white guilt can conduce to agency, both that of white women and of women

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of color. For white women especially, feeling guilty, and with it helpless, are suffering experiences of their lives in racial hierarchy. That is, just as victims of rape suffer awareness of sex/gender hierarchy’s reliance on violence, so too white women’s feelings of guilt and helplessness demonstrate how they are simultaneously complicit in racial hierarchy, while also being unable to see the entirety of their complicity—and are thus by themselves helpless to avoid it. Being aware of these limitations contributes to white women’s agency by revealing their dependence on women of color’s experiences to give them the full picture.

Feelings of helplessness can also help challenge white supremacy and contribute to the agency of women of color by challenging white solipsism. Frye observes that feelings like helplessness, anxiety, and uncertainty that are part of white guilt are inimical to the “belief in one’s authority” that “you might expect from a people who are raised to run things, or to aspire to that”. The association between white racial identity (what Frye calls “whiteliness”) and authoritativeness explains why “whitely people have so much trouble learning, so much trouble receiving, understanding and acting on moral or political criticism and demands for change”. The authority that white people come to rely on for their sense of identity is one explanation for white solipsism, as well as for Bailey’s search for some individual act that will escape the double bind of white privilege. Ignoring the experiences of people of color, or trying to find an action without consulting the affected person of color, both preserve the authority of the whitely person. The solution that Frye

68 Frye, 156.

69 Frye, 157.
proposes to this is, in part, to resist the temptation to turn to authority, and instead to embrace the helplessness and uncertainty that come with collective agency. “White women have to resist the temptation to encourage whiteness in each other when, in moments of cowardice or insecurity, we long for the comfort of ‘solidarity in superiority,’ or when we wish someone would relieve our painful uncertainty with a timely application of judgments and rules.”\(^\text{70}\) If, as Rich and Bailey argue, white guilt generates or is constituted by feelings of helplessness and uncertainty—potentially, even paralysis and passivity—then that guilt can be a useful means of challenging the authority that white people have such difficulty relinquishing, making them more subject to criticism and challenge and contributing to their agency and the agency of women of color.

**Self-Alienation and the Question of White History**

Linda Martín Alcoff understands both Rich and Frye to argue that white women “must become disloyal to whiteness and unlearn our ‘whiteness’ assumptions of entitlement and authority.”\(^\text{71}\) Yet, she worries that the self-alienation this disloyalty requires may exact a toll on white people; “facing the reality of whites’ moral culpability threatens their very ability to be moral today, because it threatens their ability to imagine themselves as having a socially coherent relation to a past and a future toward which

\(^{70}\) Frye, 167.

\(^{71}\) Alcoff, “White People”, 12.
anyone could feel an attachment.”72 This would be especially damaging for those white people who are marginalized in other ways, such as poverty or immigrant status:

white people’s sense of who they are in the world, especially in this country [i.e., the U.S.], depends deeply on white supremacy. And this dependence may often operate precisely because they are themselves oppressed; that is, because their immigrant relations were a humble lot without other cultural resources from which to draw a sense of entitlement. White supremacy may be all that poor whites have to hold on to in order to maintain a sense of self-love.73

What Alcoff is drawing out of Frye’s and Rich’s work and thematizing here is a form of suffering I have been calling self-alienation. Her worry is that self-alienation, the realization that one’s deepest sense of who one is comes from hierarchical structures to which one is opposed, may undermine the very capacity for agency that combatting racism demands. For Alcoff, self-alienation is opposed to the capacity for self-love, or what she elsewhere calls a “positive sense of self”, and it resembles my concept of subjective integrity. “‘Feeling white’, when coupled with a repudiation of white privilege, can disable a positive self-image as well as a felt connection to community and history, and generally can disorient identity formation.”74 Part of the problem with the arguments for disloyalty and the resultant self-alienation, according to Alcoff, is that they underplay those white people who did seek to challenge structures of racism, and who may be valuable examples to


contemporary white anti-racists. It is not true, Alcott argues, that there is *nothing* in white culture to serve as the basis for the self-love on which agency may depend. If Alcott’s concerns prove insurmountable, then my attempt above to rescue guilt for feminist political agency may, despite my best efforts, result in the same outcome. That is, in arguing for the value of white guilt that tends toward self-alienation as regards one’s own whiteness, if the self-alienation is inimical to agency, then we should also worry more seriously about the guilt. I will argue briefly in this section, however, that Alcott’s solution in the form of “white double consciousness”* is compatible with my argument for the value of suffering for women’s political agency.

Alcott argues that, “if the collective structures of identity formation that are necessary to create a positive sense of self—a self that is capable of being loved—require racism, then only the creation of new structures of identity formation can redress this balance.”* But, unlike the shared histories of marginalized peoples that go into constructing *their* identities, “relying on a shared history... is precisely what is problematic for whites. The attempt to emphasize the genuinely positive moments of the past and to see only those moments as representative of the true core of whiteness is too obviously implausible, as well as susceptible to becoming part of a rewriting of the supremacist or vanguard narrative once again.”** “Perhaps,” she says, “white identity needs to develop its

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own version of ‘double consciousness’ which "requires an everpresent acknowledgment of the historical legacy of white identity constructions in the persistent structures of inequality and exploitation, as well as a newly awakened memory of the many white traitors to white privilege who have struggled to contribute to the building of an inclusive human community." 78 For Alcoff, to bring about the necessary lovability on which agency depends, white anti-racists must “transform the basis of collective self-respect from global, racial vanguardism to a dedicated commitment to end racism." 79

Alcoff characterizes the production of white anti-racist agency with a transition from the self-alienation of “feeling white while repudiating white privilege” to “positive self-image” and the ability to be loved. One reading of this would be that “white double consciousness” relies on a reconstituted white subjective integrity, one better able to understand its own past without being debilitated by it. The suffering of self-alienation would thus only be inaugural to each white person becoming aware of the repugnant aspects of white history, to be undone upon learning of the history of white race traitors. But I find that this reading weakens the very basis for Alcoff’s condemnation of white racist history, as I shall explain momentarily. Alternatively, we can (and I shall) read Alcoff’s white double consciousness as reliant on the persistence of self-alienation, in order to maintain a critical stance toward whiteness and continue decentering white subjectivities.

One of the worries I have about the focus on white suffering is that it risks not just re-centering white experiences, but severing them from their necessary relationship to the


suffering of people of color, again universalizing them. Alcoff herself seems to share this concern when she notes, regarding the racial specificity of blues music and its appropriation by white musicians, that “universal suffering is non accusatory; black suffering is implicitly accusatory, just by making reference to black history.” But, of course, Black history is also white history; Black suffering arises because of the very white history that is the source of white anti-racists’ self-alienation. The persistence and spread of whites’ self-alienation may be a necessary means of maintaining the differential relationship between the meaning of white people’s actions for contemporary white anti-racists, and their meaning for people of color. In other words, self-alienation may need to persist simply because it is the means by which the problem of “white history” continues to be perceived through the lens of Black suffering, and avoid collapsing the problem of white history into white guilt or self-alienation.

Whites’ self-alienation is also a means to connect the history of white racism with white racial identity, Frye’s “whiteness”, in the present. That is, it is not just the history of white racism and Black suffering that is a problem for racial equality. There is also the problem of their present perpetuation in the form of continued Black suffering because of whites’ racist attitudes, many of them not conscious to the white people (including anti-racists) who hold them. Alcoff’s recognizes the importance of this ignorant white racism as a problem for anti-racism: “white supremacy may be deeply held because it is not conscious”, but is nevertheless important to the formation of marginalized whites’ positive

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sense of self. It is thus through the perpetuation of experiences of self-alienation, including their spread across white anti-racists, that white experiences can continue to be de-centered, and white understandings, say of sex/gender hierarchy, can continue to be challenged. In the context of feminism, this is an important reminder for those, like Rich and Frye, who continue to prioritize sex/gender over other forms of hierarchy, and who mistakenly call for women’s primary political allegiance to be with feminism.

OUT OF (BUT NOT AWAY FROM) SUFFERING

As I have framed it, the value of disruption, including suffering, is in its usefulness and even necessity for political agency. In this chapter and in Chapters 3 and 4, I have primarily discussed the outcome of disruption as the changes to feminists’ knowledge of sex/gender hierarchy, the relationship of their subjectivities to that hierarchy, and the consequences of their actions to challenge it. But I also think that this knowledge must lead to a change in behaviors; as I argued in my reading of Catharine MacKinnon’s *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, MacKinnon is at once calling for and engaged in a set of actions that contribute to the agency of victims by spreading the disruption of their suffering to her readers and listeners. Similarly, I argued that Susan Stryker is able to contribute to the agency of Filima Vistima, the transwoman who was pushed to suicide by members of the Seattle queer community, by allowing Vistima’s suffering to disrupt Stryker’s subjectivity and pushing for it to disrupt that of her readers. In the final section of this chapter, I am going to briefly present several other possible activities that may result from disruption,

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and that will contribute to the realization of feminist political agency. I should note that, while these are the outcomes of spreading disruption, including suffering, so too might the activities I outline here return the active subject to disruption, even suffering.

**Solidarity**

I first want to discuss solidarity: the outlook that I hope will be either the product of or reinforced by disruption, even though it is not action *per se*. Many feminists and others have discussed what solidarity *is*, but I in part want to focus on its subjective dimensions, that is, to think about solidarity as in part something like an affective orientation toward others and the self.\(^2\) I think of solidarity as in part a form of identification with the problems and struggles of others, but one that is based neither on self-interest nor on pity (though it is not necessarily at odds with these). While in the case of feminism we can see the value of self-interest in appeals to potential supporters, because sex/gender hierarchy also oppresses many different groups, it is also important not to allow self-interest to become the sole basis for one’s identification with other gender-oppressed persons. Doing so generates several risks, including: requiring any expressions of oppression to be in terms that appeal to the self-interest of one group, most likely an already-privileged one;

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licensing the construal of all other forms of oppression as similar to one’s own; and ending
one’s identification with and support for oppressed persons as soon as their interests
diverge from one’s own. This last point is especially dangerous, given the short-term
interests that can be furthered through embracing an oppressive hierarchy. For example,
women may strive to become the best women possible in order to reap the benefits of
doing so, or just to survive in the face of violence for those who transgress sex/gender
norms. And, as I have shown throughout this project, and will discuss in relation to sacrifice
below, feminist political agency may requires acting at odds with what one’s interests are
(or are perceived to be).

Solidarity, as I understand it, is a tenacious form of identification with the situation
and struggles of the oppressed that depends neither on fickleness of aligned interests, nor
on the kind of pity that retains the subject–object dynamic of racial alterity. Instead,
solidarity depends upon a willingness to see oneself as a participant in the struggles of
others who may or may not share one’s own form of oppression, and that may or may not
be of benefit to oneself—and indeed, that may incur losses and demand sacrifice. The
distinctiveness of solidarity as an approach to others is premised on identifying with
others’ oppression and struggle while perhaps lacking the same experiences of struggle
and oppression oneself, and so may require that one remain an outsider. Standing in
solidarity with others requires that one actively understand and support their oppression
and their struggles against it, but that the activity one engages in has ends that are set by
others, in forms, and at times and places that those others have determined to be
appropriate. There is, then, a collaborative element to solidarity, but being in solidarity
with others requires vigilance against dominating the members of that group. As Moraga
states: "Without an emotional, heartfelt grappling with the source of our own oppression, without naming the enemy within ourselves and outside of us, non-authentic, non-hierarchical connection among oppressed groups cannot take place."83 This connectivity out of self-alienation is effectively an extension of my claims regarding the means of disruption’s operation within feminism. Just as disruption by other women's suffering can create a feminist movement out of differing experiences of sex and gender, so too should we expect it to lead to solidarity across anti-oppression movements. Solidarity is a requirement for feminism because it is necessary for women to understand and be in solidarity with the intersecting oppressions that other women must struggle against, but that they may not identify in their own sex/gender oppression.

**Listening and Self-Education**

One specific set of actions that one can take after being disrupted is to build on the awareness that the disruption imposed on one’s subjectivity, both through actively listening to others whose situation differs from one’s own, as well as actively seeking out information about others’ experiences of oppression. This is how Krista Ratcliffe acted following the experiences of white guilt that she underwent and that I reconstructed above.

I no longer wanted absolution; I wanted answers and was willing to do my own work to find them, which included (when necessary) asking for a little help from my friends, whether those friends be flesh-and-blood people or texts that have become the friends of my mind…. I determined to bring my

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83 Moraga, 29.
embodied racism to consciousness (well, as much as possible anyway) and use it to complicate my feminism, my scholarship, and my daily life.\textsuperscript{84}

In this passage, Ratcliffe has moved from the activity of resistance in the forms of defensiveness and absolution-seeking and allowed herself to be disrupted, to be struck by the awareness of her own racism. Thus the activity of answer-finding that she proposes is not defensive, but rather the activity of a subject reshaped by the disruption that is both reintegrated into a whole, but also open to further disruption. Ratcliffe is well aware that, just as her initial coming-to-consciousness of her own racism was deeply disruptive and unpleasant, so too is the continuing process of “complicating” the activities of her life likely to be similar.\textsuperscript{85}

For Ratcliffe, one of the means by which she can remain open to new information, even that which is unpleasant or disruptive to receive, is through what she calls “rhetorical listening”, which “may help people hear intersecting identifications with gender and whiteness”.\textsuperscript{86} In coining the term \textit{rhetorical listening}, she seeks to rethink listening as an \textit{activity} with specific ends and that requires specific practices that one must endeavor to do and do well. This challenges the prevalent assumption that listening is “something that everyone does but no one needs study.”\textsuperscript{87} In particular, Ratcliffe’s rhetorical listening is “a

\textsuperscript{84} Ratcliffe, 6.

\textsuperscript{85} See, for example, Ratcliffe, 34, on how “another’s truth” can hurt us.

\textsuperscript{86} Ratcliffe, 9.

\textsuperscript{87} Ratcliffe, 18.
stance of openness that a person may choose to assume in relation to any person, text, or culture; its purpose is to cultivate conscious identifications in ways that promote productive communication, especially but not solely cross-culturally.\textsuperscript{88} Rhetorical listening is, as exemplified in Ratcliffe’s own autobiographical narrative, a means by which one can become more open to the necessity of rhetorical listening as well as to the process of centering one’s own privileged subjectivity. In other words, having already disrupted the subject, it becomes possible for others to be central to the activities of subjective reconstruction in ways they were not previously. Yet this subjective reconstruction is not the end of Ratcliffe’s activity of listening. She posits “productive communication” as the goal, which requires a continued focus on the means of engagement between self and other. Unlike, for example, Nedelsky’s description of judgment as the privileged moment of becoming autonomous, in rhetorical listening the goal is not to determine which of the other’s experiences, values, and claims one is going to accept or reject, but instead to foster identification with a previously unknown and unknowable (because one had not yet determined to listen) other. That is, the purpose is to bring about understanding of others and oneself in relation to them, even in the most troubled of circumstances. The purpose is thus not to determine whether someone can accept what she is hearing as part of (in Nedelsky’s terms) “her own law”, or whether it is (as Friedan would have it) self-fulfilling, but rather to determine how best to fully understand others, potentially across great differences and troubled relationships of power, privilege, oppression, and even histories of violence. Listening as Ratcliffe conceives of it, including active self-education, has not

\textsuperscript{88} Ratcliffe, 25.
been central to feminist political theory (or to other areas where it also seems necessary, so as democratic theory), yet it is one potential outcome that can build on subjective disruption and further contribute to the kind of feminist political agency suited to challenging the multifariousness of sex/gender hierarchy because it is premised on exactly the kinds of identifications with different others that such agency requires.\(^{89}\)

**Helping and Allowing Others to Communicate**

I want to return to how I concluded my discussion of MacKinnon’s *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* in Chapter 3, with her use of victims’ suffering to disrupt other women through the rhetoric that so many readers find jarring, even objectionable. As I said there, communicating the suffering of others is a means by which one can contribute to their agency as part of a larger feminist political project. This, too, is what Stryker does when she tells Filima Vistima’s story. This form of communicating involves using one’s own, newly challenged subjectivity to insist on others’ attention and openness to those same challenges. Yet trying to help others communicate, whether by re-presenting their experiences or trying to interpret them for others, is risky, again especially when there are relations of privilege between the original experiencer and the helper. One danger is that

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one will distort or weaken the force of the original suffering, and do so in ways that undermines its disruptive effects on hierarchies. Another potential problem is that speaking of others’ experiences can reinforce extant hierarchies because it reinforces the authority that, for example, men (even feminized ones) have over that of women (even masculine ones). In other words, the fact that people will take the words of a man as more truthful or authoritative than those of a woman means that the man will give the woman’s experiences more weight for others than when she conveys her own experiences. This means that those of us who want to help communicate the experiences of more marginalized persons may have the perverse effect of reinforcing that system of marginalization.90

I do not think that either of these problems can be entirely avoided, but I do think that spreading disruption can help to mitigate them, because it challenges the very subjectivity, especially in distinction to objecthood, on which one’s self-understanding as helper instead of collaborator is based. This should change how we think of and engage in communicating others’ experiences; ideally, it would turn us into conduits to help marginalized people communicate their disruption to others.91


91 I find that MacKinnon is more effective as a conduit for other women’s experiences than her critics credit her for, even despite her own use of rhetoric. Many of the examples she provides in her descriptions of, for example, rape, domestic violence, and pornography are actually reproductions of the words of victims.
Sacrifice

Becoming aware of the negative consequences of one’s feminist-intended actions and seeking to act more strategically may, in fact, carry with it the demand that one sacrifice fulfilling some deeply held desire or identity.\(^{92}\) There is much more to say about the need for sacrifice in the process of building a social movement, and I find the topic to be understudied in feminist political theory. The outcome of disruption may lead one to realize that a proposed action is simply untenable given its costs, or that the object of a desire, or the desire itself, has become repugnant. Yet the awareness of these costs does not fully resolve the question of sacrifice in the context of social movements. The question of “When is a sacrifice justified?”, as well as related questions like “When should we expect others to sacrifice?”, is ultimately a political decision that is going to depend upon the judgment of those involved. As Danielle Allen observes, this judgment requires an acknowledgement that sacrifice has been and will continue to be necessary, and that participants “cultivate... the habits to deal with the sacrifices that would come their way.”\(^{93}\)

As above, this judgment must be affected by the relations of privilege among those involved. As discussed in the context of democracy, often the expectation of sacrifice is imposed disproportionately on some groups, namely, those who are already

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\(^{92}\) Danielle Allen makes a similar claim in the context of democracy: “The hard truth of democracy is some citizens are always giving things up for others. Only vigorous forms of citizenship can give a polity the resources to deal with the inevitable problems of sacrifice.” (Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004], 29.)

\(^{93}\) Allen, 29.
marginalized.\textsuperscript{94} This, in turn, contributes to "the general absence from democratic practice of a language to comprehend sacrifice, or the losses and disappointments people accept".\textsuperscript{95} I find that Allen’s point regarding democracy resonates for feminism, too, as both women generally and women marginalized by privileged feminists too often are told to forego even voicing their experiences and dissents for the sake of group unity.\textsuperscript{96} The paucity of discussions of the proper place of sacrifice within feminism is somewhat ironic, given the centrality of sacrifice both to women’s experiences of sex/gender hierarchy and to the formation of the contemporary feminist movement. For example, many early second-wave feminists sought a women’s movement because of the insistence by men of the New Left on women’s silent sacrifice of their claims of gender oppression.\textsuperscript{97} This aspect of the sexism in the New Left was continuous with the expectations for women’s sacrifice that constituted the “angel in the house” Virginia Woolf sought to kill.\textsuperscript{98} Even today, the expectation remains

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{94} See Allen, 39–48, as well as Bonnie Honig, Democracy and the Foreigner (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 33–6.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{95} Allen, 35.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{96} For the issues of sacrifice and gender, see Allen, 39.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{97} Lydia Sargent, “New Left Women and Men: The Honeymoon is Over”, in Lydia Sargent, ed., Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism (Boston: South End Press, 1983): xi–xxxi.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{98} Woolf describes the problem with women’s felt need to sacrifice as its interference with her creative work:}

\begin{quote}
I discovered that if I were going to review books I should need to do battle with a certain phantom. And the phantom was a woman, and when I came to know her better I called her after the heroine of
\end{quote}
that women, especially mothers, will forego their own desires and even identities to fulfill their gendered obligations.

It may be the case that the centrality of sacrifice to women’s oppression, and the importance to feminism of resisting and denying those expectations, explains the paucity of discussion about sacrifice in feminist theory. That is, in an effort to end women’s oppression through self-sacrifice, many feminists may have found it necessary (as Woolf did) to end the association between femininity and sacrifice. But this silence is also dissatisfying. Not every desire is compatible with a feminist political project. But the failure to adequately address the fact of sacrifice means that disagreements about sacrifice lead,

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a famous poem, ‘The Angel in the House’.... She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it—in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all—I need not say it—she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty—her blushes, her great grace. In those days—the last of Queen Victoria—every house had its Angel. (Virginia Woolf, “Professions for Women”, in Woolf, The Death of the Moth and Other Essays [London: Harcourt Brace, 1942], 235. Italics added.)

For Tillie Olsen, Woolf’s “Angel” is a different one from the labouring angel of non-elite women:

There is another angle, so lowly as to be invisible, although without her no art, or any human endeavour, could be carried on for even one day—the essential angel, with whom Virginia Woolf (and most women writers, still in the privileged class) did not have to contend—the angel who must assume the physical responsibilities for daily living, for the maintenance of life.... I cannot help but notice how curiously absent both of these angels, these watchers and warders at the frontiers of invisible, are from the actual contents of most men’s books, except perhaps on the dedication page:

To my wife without whom...

for example in the split between the second and third waves of feminism, to deep rifts because there is no language to help elucidate the problem.99

It is also likely that the refusal to countenance the need for sacrifice motivates resistance to disruption by others. For Allen, sacrifice “entails pains and disappointment”, and even “psychological terror”.100 So on the one hand, the very need for sacrifice may itself be disruptive, and thus lead to resistance or refusal to sacrifice; but on the other hand, cultivating an openness to that disruption can abate those reactions. Openness to disruption in the face of the disruption of others will not only, I hope, may us more aware of what needs to be sacrificed, but in alienating us from ourselves, it will also weaken the hold that the desires and identities we must give up have on us. That is, valorizing self-alienation over subjective integrity can make the fact of sacrifice less painful and disruptive, especially for those of us who are privileged and who must endeavor to dismantle the structures of privilege for the sake of equality.

The need for sacrifice is especially important to a project of building feminist agency among a collective group of people because it may be the case that the kind of awareness such agency requires is itself a sacrifice of one’s previously undisturbed happiness or belief in its possibility under current conditions. Although she does not name sacrifice specifically, Sara Ahmed nevertheless describes how feminism requires that women give

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100 Allen, 29, 34.
up the illusions of happiness and freedom: “you have to experience limitations as
limitations; the act of noticing limitations can actually make life seem more rather than less
limited.”¹⁰¹ For Ahmed, feminist consciousness is about giving up the illusions of happiness
that women are expected to abide, which we can see in the expectations and demands that
they constantly smile, or through the norms of womanly hospitality and warmth. But, this
(false) happiness comes at a cost: “the public investment in happiness is an investment in a
very particular and narrow model of the good” that constrains women to certain roles,
including the maintenance of social happiness more generally as in the case of Friedan’s
“happy housewife heroines”.¹⁰² Feminism is a threat to this system because it
simultaneously enables women to see the fantasy of feminine happiness for what it is, and
calls on them to reject their duties as happiness-makers. But this also exacts a cost on the
women who are coming to consciousness:

Feminism involves political consciousness of what women are asked to give
up for happiness. Indeed, in even becoming conscious of happiness as loss,
feminists have already refused to give up desire, imagination, and curiosity
for happiness. There can be sadness simply in the realization of what one has
given up.¹⁰³


published 1963 by Norton.

¹⁰³ Ahmed, Happiness, 70.
For Ahmed, then, feminism involves a dynamic of sacrifice of (false) happiness, even as it makes a claim against further sacrifice of those other aspects of life. However, we should note that in this passage it is the capacities of “desire, imagination, and curiosity” that women will not give up for happiness. That is, women will sacrifice *desires* but not desire. They may have to forgo certain problematic desires, but they must retain the desiring for something new in order to keep feminism going. I stress this point because the sacrifice of happiness that feminism demands is not immediately redeemed. That is, feminism does not involve the immediate escape from oppression into freedom, from suffering into pleasure, or from false happiness into real satisfaction. As Ahmed observes, it involves giving up happiness for feminist consciousness and agency, the capacity to challenge the system that demands that women abide by their roles, regardless of whether they are actually happy or not.

In pointing out the nature of sacrifice, I want to reconcile it with feminist *political* agency. This builds on Bonnie Honig, who, in her reading of *Antigone*, seeks to change the association of sacrifice from heroism to sororal conspiracy and solidarity. In Honig’s reading of the play, *Antigone* is “the story of two women [Antigone and her sister, Ismene] partnered in their difference—one brazenly bold, the other possessed of quieter courage—both plotting and conspiring in resistance to overreaching sovereign power but acting also in love or loyalty for each other.”¹⁰⁴ Antigone will sacrifice herself so that her sister can survive, and continue on their shared plot. This contrasts, Honig says, with the prevalent readings of the play in which Antigone acts alone, without Ismene’s help; these readings

are evidence to support "humanist assumptions about heroic individual agency, politics, and sovereignty." For Honig, however, "the idea that political action is heroic has blinded us to the sisters' actions in concert and perhaps also to conspiratorial and even sororal powers in the world around us." The prevailing heroic-individualist reading of Antigone's agency exists in part "because readers and spectators do not admire conspiracy as a mode of action and they have trouble imagining a female agency that is agonistically and solidaristically sororal and not merely subject to male exchange." Moreover, the power of this reading of the play—and the assumptions about individual agency that undergird it—is demonstrated by the fact that even "feminists have been drawn to this heroic Antigone as well, perhaps also (even if unwittingly) to the power of her self-sacrifice."

In re-reading the nature of Antigone’s agency from heroic and individualistic to one that is shared, through conspiracy and plotting, with her sister Ismene, Honig is also reinterpreting the nature of Antigone’s sacrifice. In the former reading, Antigone’s sacrifice is immediately redeemed for the preservation of the virtues she identifies. That is, while she gives up her life, she does so for something much greater than herself, commonly read

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105 Honig, Antigone, Interrupted, 153.

106 Honig, Antigone, Interrupted, 155.

107 Honig, Antigone, Interrupted, 170.

108 Honig, Antigone, Interrupted, 156.
as familial or religious obligation.\textsuperscript{109} However, in Honig’s version, the idea of sacrifice is no longer redeemed immediately, but rather simply becomes a disruptive cost to the sisters’ larger political project. Like with Ahmed, the sacrifice that Antigone makes is not one that promises immediate gratification; rather it is simply a cost she must bear in order to have political agency.\textsuperscript{110}

Sacrifice, then, has particular importance as a form of post-disruption action because it is often necessary to complete the work of agency-making that the disruption began, at the same time that it may entail further unpleasantness, and even further suffering and disruption. This underscores my earlier point that we must not privilege the restoration of subjective integrity or seek to contain suffering to any given moment in feminist politics. Instead, sacrifice shows us the necessity of disruption and suffering’s continual possibility to political agency.

\textsuperscript{109} Honig, \textit{Antigone, Interrupted}, 155–6.

\textsuperscript{110} So too, Honig observes, is Antigone’s sacrifice a cost Ismene must bear in the form of “a living death: to go on living in the house of her sister’s killer, Creon.” (Honig, \textit{Antigone, Interrupted}, 154).
CONCLUSION

Over the course of this project, I have presented examples that support both of my overarching claims: (1) that many feminists have treated suffering as an antagonist of women’s political agency, containing it to inaugural roles and non-agentic women; and (2) that, contra these accounts, suffering can contribute to women’s political agency. Toward that end, I provided examples of feminists who articulate the compatibility between agency and suffering, even if they do not do so in that language. I have also, in Chapter 5, discussed the value of passivity in the face of others, so that suffering’s disruption can do its useful work beyond the initial sufferers, especially to unseat the subjectivities of those women who occupy positions of relative privilege and power within feminism.

In Chapters 1 and 2, in which I make the case for argument (1), I found that the conceptual apparatuses with which each author theorizes women’s political agency (for Betty Friedan, that is self-realization; for Jennifer Nedelsky, autonomy through finding one’s own law) reflect a reliance on sensation to understand women’s oppression and agency. From The Feminine Mystique, it is evident that the assumed antagonistic relationship between suffering and agency is not new, but rather has its origins at the beginning of contemporary U.S. feminism. And, as we can see in the self-proclaimed heirs to Friedan, as well as in Nedelsky’s work, this problem is still very much with us even if it has changed form and become more open to the role of disruption, including suffering, in generating agency. Within both The Feminine Mystique and Law’s Relations, I have shown how each work’s respective authors relied on suffering’s inaugural role and subsequent containment as part of their account of agency-formation, dependent upon the putative
agent’s restoring their subjective integrity. This process of overcoming suffering and acquiring subjective integrity served simultaneously to define women’s political agency and to make it knowable to both the woman in question and to others. Especially troubling for feminism is that this use of suffering does not just happen to reproduce sex/gender and other hierarchies, but actually depended upon agentic (at least in the sense these texts understood that term) women’s complicity in that reproduction, as well as ignorance of that complicity.

In contrast, I have identified in both Catharine MacKinnon’s and Susan Stryker’s work accounts of women’s political agency that do not insist on its exclusivity from women’s suffering, but rather locate in that suffering the basis for agency. In the case of MacKinnon, we must first understand that her argument in *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* is not primarily empirical in its definition of women as rapable and its focus on victimization. Instead, I have argued in Chapter 4 that MacKinnon is enacting her political argument that feminism must focus on and address women who are victims if it is to be adequate to its goals of challenging sex/gender hierarchy. This requires that feminists not just privilege the experiences of victims of sexual violence, but that they remain open to disruption from those experiences. Similarly, in Chapter 5, I read Susan Stryker’s “My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix” as presenting an autobiographical account of her suffering in the face of her own self-alienation and complicity in the system of forced sexing and gendering, including its various violences. Like MacKinnon, Stryker demands that her readers use her suffering to disrupt their own understandings of their genders as natural, allowing themselves to become alienated from those genders and to see their own complicity in that system. This does not, Stryker shows,
promise a new subjective integrity, but only a self sutured together and embodying rage. In both works, I found that the treatment of suffering was not only one that made it conducive to agency, but also to the kind of egalitarianism that permits an open-ended and revisable feminist politics.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I build upon MacKinnon’s and Stryker’s demands that feminists be open to disruption to build upon the suffering, respectively, of victims and trans people to show the spread of suffering can also function to help challenge hierarchies within feminism, in this case, racial hierarchies between white women and women of color. I have also presented possible actions that would follow up that passive openness to disruption. Across these five chapters, I have challenged the prevailing conceptions of agency as located in an individual and knowable through that individual’s subjective state, and re-sited that agency in the practice of feminist politics. This politics is a process that entails disruption and agreement, and most importantly a shared yet always-revisable understanding of sex/gender hierarchy and feminist challenges to it.

This dissertation has advanced political theory not only by challenging the prevailing accounts of suffering; it has also pushed back against prevailing, individualist understandings of agency. In so doing, it has also rebutted prevailing accounts of the relationship between individual women’s lives and “women” as the subject and object of feminism—including feminist epistemology, agency, and politics. Instead of the common calls either for incommensurability or universalizing essentialism, I have shown how the focus on suffering enables us to see the ways in which individual plurality can be articulated with the demands of a broader social movement through politics itself. In short, my analysis has shown how politics is the best means to address the recurrent feminist
problem of difference among women. This politics need not, however, *feel* positive or perpetuate participants’ subjective integrity, but may engender subjective disruption and even suffering.

I have done this by bringing together a variety of often disparate feminist texts to both demonstrate a set of commonalities and provide new readings of many of them. These readings have placed their political assumptions and implications in focus, alongside their treatment of suffering. These works include several that lie outside the traditional feminist political-theoretical canon, like Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, and Stryker’s "My Words"; it has shown how they participate in and have valuable lessons for feminist debates over women’s experience and how politics can arise from it. It has also called for a reconsideration of texts, most notably MacKinnon’s *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, that are often misinterpreted and wrongly maligned. It is my hope that these contributions can lead to more fruitful discussions of the questions raised. I will now turn to several areas of future research that I believe my project points to.

**Directions for Future Research**

At the end of the last chapter, Chapter 5, I presented some possible concepts that my arguments regarding suffering point to, such as solidarity and sacrifice; these would be the first logical directions to take future research coming out of this project. While this project has focused on the relationship between experience and agency, it has briefly looked at other kinds of sensations. I want to highlight two of them here because of their strong relationship to suffering, as well as their undertheorization in feminist theory. The first of these is pleasure. While pleasure, especially sexual pleasure, has been central to debates
within feminist theory (as we saw in the Introduction), how pleasure relates to both the
description of feminism and the role it can and should play within feminist agency remain
contested, and continue to arise in debates over, for example, trigger warnings. In
particular, my work suggests the necessity of investigating the relationship between
subjective integrity; frustrations with feminist politics; and queer theory’s origins in
theories of sexual oppression, sexual freedom, and sexual pleasure and enjoyment—in
particular those theoretical moves that came out of the so-called “feminist sex wars” of the
1980s. A focus on pleasure in queer theory, including its origins in feminist theory and the
feminist response to it, might look more strongly at the foundational status of Gayle Rubin’s
“Thinking Sex”, with its privileging of sexual pleasure over inquiring after social
constructivism.1 Investigating the pleasure-queer theory link is not just necessary as a
complement to my focus on suffering, but also to better understand agency itself. To come
back to suffering, we can see how it often manifests as despair, and that pleasure may also
be necessary for agents’ desire to continue participating in politics, if not their very
survival.

390n.87. Rosemary Hennessy provides an overview of the development of pleasure in relationship to the
development of queer theory in reaction to both marxist and feminist theories of subjectivity and liberation;
see Rosemary Hennessy, Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism (London: Routledge, 2000),
68–73. For more on the “feminist sex wars”, see Carole S. Vance, ed., Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female
Sexuality (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984); Lisa Duggan and Nan Hunter provide a generally pro-
pleasure account of the sex wars in Lisa Duggan and Nan D. Hunter, Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political
Finally, building upon my discussion of materiality in my critique of *The Feminine Mystique*, I think that material practices, including political economies of suffering and responses to it, are central to understanding how and why subjective integrity is privileged, to whom it is denied, and on what bases. Looking to future directions for research, I surmise that this speaks to contemporary debates over care and disability, and especially their intersection in the work of scholars like Eva Feder Kittay, as well as to international appeals to care for less-fortunate others. I will take each of these in turn.²

Care theory, which encompasses both normative theorizing about care and empirical accounts of the political-economy of care provision, lies at the intersection of affect and materiality. As such, it is an extension of many of the issues I raised in Chapters 1 and 2, especially questions about the nature of drudgery and its role in feelings of agency, as well as questions of the distribution of labor necessary for any democratic polity.³ Political-economic changes to the division of labor have affected not just *who performs* care-work, but also what we now think of as “care”, both paid and unpaid, performed domestically and abroad.⁴ This includes not only recent changes because of globalization,

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³ This is clear enough in the responses to Friedan’s work; Jennifer Nedelsky is now turning her attention from autonomy to the distribution of care-work in contemporary society (Jennifer Nedelsky, “Creating New Norms of Work and Care” [lecture, McGill University Faculty of Law, Montreal, Qc., 24 Oct 2014].)

but changes over the longer term of industrialized capitalism. For example, many women
used to prepare all of their families’ food and make their clothing. But today much of that
previously domestic labor takes place outside the home—often even in another country—and
is not classified as “care work” in the same way that nursing, childcare, and
(sometimes) sex work are.\(^5\) It is women in the food and garment industries, especially in
the Global South, who are frequently portrayed as the most victimized by globalization, yet
they do not have a clear place in contemporary care theory in the same way that, say,

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According to Nancy Hirschmann, “the focus on care has done little to change the sexual division of labor. In
fact, the celebration of care generally has reinforced women’s role as caregivers, just as many feminists
originally feared.” For Hirschmann, part of the problem has been to continued inability to see intimate
relationships as sites of material problems, instead focusing solely on externalizing the responsibility for care
to other (usually) women: “Women have been trying for decades to get men to do more. But when feminists
demand that state and employer policies take the place of inadequate spousal help, men once again avoid
having to change. Until men share equally in child rearing—not to mention the other aspects of housework—
gender equality will not be achieved.” (Nancy J. Hirschmann, "Mothers Who Care Too Much", Boston Review
35, no. 4 (Jul/Aug 2010), online: http://bostonreview.net/BR35.4/hirschmann.php (Accessed: 1 August
2012).

\(^5\) This criticism of care is, to me, an extension of the hierarchy between “menial housework” and “spiritual
housework” that Dorothy Roberts identifies; according to Roberts, this hierarchy creates racial divisions
within the private sphere, undermining the possibility for solidarity among women. See Dorothy E. Roberts,
nannies and housekeepers do. Important questions to ask are: how “care” came to be defined as it has, how that definition has shaped care theories of knowledge and agency, and what the political effects of the emphasis on care have been for feminism.

The question of care for the “less fortunate” more directly concerns questions of suffering, and places them in the context of global policies. Arguing for the agency of sufferers also helps avoid treating them as objects of concern to be rescued rather than as subjects with the agency to participate in their own liberation. In the latter case, they are infantilized as innocents who are neither complicit in their own oppression nor capable of any desire to retain the cultural formations that are seen as oppressing them. This generates questions about the nature of charity and its reliance on the innocence of its recipients, evident, for example, in portrayals of children’s suffering as morally worse than the suffering of adults. What kind of agency do such appeals to suffering and their assumptions about the nature of childhood assume? How do such appeals simultaneously naturalize and universalize the modern, Western childhood they rely on, while leaving that model and its political-economic uses uninterrogated?

These are important questions not just for thinking about modern childhood and its relationship to suffering, but also for thinking through issues about how we deal with others’ suffering. In this project, I have criticized feminist theorists for trying to contain

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suffering and avoid its disruptive effects. In thinking about charities’ appeals to address children’s suffering, we can identify similar dynamics of containment and disruption at work. Investigating how these dynamics work can better allow us to understand how disruption fails or is limited. For example, people often do feel badly about the situation of poor children, even to the point of recognizing their own complicity in those children’s situation. Yet these feelings often lead to only limited actions, such as charitable donations, that may exacerbate rather than mitigate the very situations that generated that suffering.\footnote{The literature on the problems of charities for poverty, especially the Global South, is vast and has a lengthy history. For more on charity appeals and their relationship to our understandings of the Global South, poverty, and childhood, see Erica Burman, “Innocents Abroad: Western Fantasies of Childhood and the Iconography of Emergencies” \textit{Disasters} 18, no. 3 (1994), 239–53; McKenzie Wark, “Fresh Maimed Babies: The Uses of Innocence”, \textit{Transition} 65 (Spring 1995): 36–45); Lauren Berlant, “The Subject of True Feeling: Pain, Privacy, and Politics”, in Elisabeth Bronfen and Misha Kavka, eds., \textit{Feminist Consequences: Theory for a New Century} (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001): 126–160.} This extends one of the central points of my project: what does it take to disrupt people and enable political agency? It also links with the largest unanswered questions about the material processes at work, especially those around the political economy of suffering: who suffers, how they are represented, by whom, to whom, and toward what end. Answering these kinds of questions, building on the research I have done here, will better enable us to understand the political potential of suffering, and hopefully, to actualize that potential into meaningful political change.
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