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ABSTRACT, LITERAL, REDUCTIVE: HOW FEMINISM THOUGHT

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The most useful thing I learned when I worked in book publishing is that the best way to find out what a book is really like is to go straight to the acknowledgments, where instead of summary description you can find out who it has in its mind's eye as its first readers, who co-parented into being. This dissertation is no different: it is a product of the intellectual community that it brought me into by writing it, which has been one of the most valuable parts of writing it, for me.

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Introduction

Over the years *Abstract, Literal, Reductive* has taken shape, feminism has been said to be resurgent, and also finished, even impossible. Neither the sense of its new urgency nor the claim that it has (finally) extinguished itself is new. For the last 50 years, there has been a metonymy for the vexed relationship we have to feminism, and through it, to gender, and that metonymic figure is the “Second Wave.”¹ It floats up into our debates where it is not wanted, we have reached for it as an origin we might recuperate, it is what we banish to the past when we want to purge from ourselves those qualities we take to be metonymic of *it* – qualities, for example, that my title names. Being too abstract, too simple or literal-minded, making incredibly reductive, over-exaggerated claims: what these terms describe are what we take to be wrong with how nascent contemporary feminism, the “Second Wave,” thought; these judgments name what was mistaken about that feminism, feminists’ incapacity for sophisticated, nuanced, properly skeptical analysis, their immanent failure to see properly. *Abstract, Literal, Reductive* pries these terms from those associated meanings, in order to hear them differently: as descriptions that name and respond to qualities of style. Making this aspect switch is necessary to understanding what feminists thought and also the purpose of feminist style: to force us to hear differently.

¹A few terminological clarifications up front: I use the term “Second Wave” to refer to both a real event in political history, and to refer to an object in history that stands *for* certain qualities of thought – I will sometimes use quotations to indicate when I’m talking about “Second Wave” as a kind of adjective or set of qualities. I use the term gender to mean gender/sex, with the undramatic interchangeability Catharine MacKinnon grants to these terms, as opposed to the more dramatic deconstructive progress supposedly signaled by a shift from one to another. See Catharine MacKinnon, Catharine MacKinnon, “Feminism, Marxism, Method, and State: Toward Feminist Jurisprudence,” in *Signs*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Spring 1983), 635, footnote 1. This is part of my attempt to pry the Second Wave out of its teleological place in history – always on its way to a deconstructive realization (that not just gender, but sex itself, is “constructed”) it paved the way for, but was too unsophisticated to grasp. I default in this dissertation to using the word “gender” unless the particular thinker I’m writing about uses the term sex, because today “gender” is the word *we* use today to signal non-commitment to the “naturalness” that “sex” signals. But I use it with no intention of asserting any particular theoretical content.

How my title tries to effect this aspect switch is one way feminist style does: it latches on to the bits of language that have become such common currency in how we regard gender that they float free from any particular context – and seizes them, driving them into a different meaning by stripping them of that tone, speaking them in a different voice. In doing so, it underlines that although free-floating, these bits of language are legibly descriptive or referential only insofar as they have or are in a voice and are inscribed in the abstraction of metaphor. The way, for example, a feminist like Ti-Grace Atkinson’s manifesto-like assertion “men are the enemy” launders out what is innocuous about the phrase “battle of the sexes” when it strips that phrase of its jocular, tongue-in-cheek tone and figurative register and asserts for feminism a position that is entirely *too literal*.² What my title does to the terms abstract, literal, reductive is what my dissertation does to Second Wave writings. And that sentence, too – which conflates as it reduces dissertation to title, whole to part – practices one of the ways feminist style works: think, for example of the first sentence of Catharine MacKinnon’s 1982 article “Feminism, Marxism, Method, and State,” which begins: “Sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism: that which is most one’s own, yet most taken away.”³ The qualities of MacKinnon’s style, here, are distantly recognizable in the sweep of terms that have familiarly described what’s, in a word, bad about the Second Wave: literal-minded, blunt, militant, dogmatic, extreme, melodramatic, frivolous, trivial, aggrandizing, too serious, totalizing, universalizing, overly abstract, reductive. If the polarities of this list seem to suggest that either Second Wave feminists’ work was irrationally self-contradictory or that the cross-current of feeling through which we retrospectively regard it are, the fact that this list is, also, a list of intelligibly related and

²Ti-Grace Atkinson, “Radical Feminism,” in *Amazon Odyssey* (New York: Link Books, 1974).

³Catharine MacKinnon, “Feminism, Marxism, Method, and State: An Agenda for Theory,” in *Signs*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Spring 1982), 515.

consistently registered qualities, even as *also* effects near-contradiction, signals that there is an operative logic here. What I'm saying in short is that feminist style is objective, formal: it can be practiced, and to practice it is to practice a mode of thought.

I. Doing it Badly

In the 1960s, amidst the student anti-war movement and the New Left, as the Civil Rights Movement was giving way to a militant Black Power movement and a Black Arts movement, a political impulse that would first call itself the women's rights movement, and then women's liberation, and finally feminism, burst onto the scene. By its own account, the Second Wave discovered feminism as if for the first time, or resuscitated it from the dead. It was both prescient, and belated; as Simone de Beauvoir had written in *The Second Sex* twenty years earlier, in 1949: "Enough ink has flowed over the quarrel about feminism; it is now almost over: let's not talk about it anymore. Yet it is still being talked about."⁴ The women's movement that spread through Europe and America over the course of the 19th century had narrowed its focus in the 20th to achieving the vote and then, achieving it, seemed to become in the public eye instantly passé – alternately forgotten and excoriated, in what Shulamith Firestone called "the fifty year ridicule," and Kate Millett called "the counterrevolution: 1930 – 1960."⁵ Second Wave feminism clawed its way from this closure, inventing itself as something new by making something out of what felt residual, that we are *still talking about it*, that the "woman question" irritatingly persists, even without a question ("is there even a problem?" Beauvoir asks). It was a politics of gender that was not concerned with formal legal rights, such as the right to vote, but something

⁴Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 3.

⁵Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1970), 24. Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 266.

else: something else that was differently and repeatedly articulated (civil rights, the personal, the cultural or self-definitional, relation to work, to race) but always coded as deeper, overlooked before. The “Second Wave” was both a political/historical event, a resurgence of new groups, a series of actions, a print archive of new feminist manifestos, poems, scripts, memos, essays, dialogues, manifestos, and a conceptual shift, a different way of thinking politically about sex and gender.

The historical event of the Second Wave has been said to begin with white (southern) women’s participation in the Civil Rights Movement in the early 1960s (Sara Evans), with women’s backlash against the sexually repressive culture of the Cold War 1950s that forced women back into the home, epitomized by the publication of Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* and the founding of NOW (Ruth Rosen), or with (mostly white) women’s defection from a New Left they discovered to be chauvinist, inspired by Black Power’s insistence on the necessity of the autonomy of political movements and the radicalness of “organizing around your own oppression” (Alice Echols).⁶ It has been said to have bubbled up amongst different leftist women with varying other political commitments, inspired by white women’s autonomous liberation groups or simultaneously to them, within the movements for radical nationalism or as independent Black, Chicana, and poor women’s feminist groups (Benita Roth, Wini Breines, Kimberly Springer).⁷ The “Second Wave” has been said to end when it changes beyond recognition. Austerity, a robust anti-abortion movement, viciously anti-sex conservatism transform radical feminism’s properly political desire to *change* the circumstances that make sex

⁶ Sara Evans, *Personal Politics: The Roots of Women’s Liberation in the Civil Rights Movement and the New Left* (New York: Vintage, 1980); Ruth Rosen, *The World Split Open: How the Modern Women’s Movement Changed America* (New York: Viking, 2000), and Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

⁷ Benita Roth, *Separate Roads to Feminism: Black, Chicana, and White Feminist Movements in America’s Second Wave* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Wini Breines, “What’s Love Got to Do With It? White Women, Black Women, and Feminism in the Movement Years,” in *Signs*, Vol. 27, No. 4 (Summer 2002); Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

hierarchical into a defensive essentialism, a positive revaluation of femininity and a focus on “women’s culture” (Echols). Or it is said to end with “the 80s,” when its untutored thinking matures and is institutionalized as women’s studies, hammered into shape by the work of several thorough-going critiques from difference feminism (“French” feminism), women of color feminism, and deconstructive feminism, decentering “woman” as the subject of feminism (Clare Hemmings, Victoria Hesford).⁸ 1981 has been seen symbolically as the real beginning of the end, at the moment of the infamous Barnard Conference, when the Second Wave’s analytical focus on a political critique of sexuality, its attention to those “too personal” components of gender, is lost in the vitriolic “feminist sex wars,” splits feminism’s coalition and makes clear a need for a politics of sexuality distinct from a politics of gender (Srinivasan).⁹ Sometimes the Second Wave is sad not to have ended – either because it is ongoing, or never was.¹⁰

As different as these accounts of the Second Wave are, there is nevertheless a working consensus they do not either acknowledge or disrupt about what made the Second Wave second, what made it different from earlier political moments’ ways of thinking politically about women was. If we were to put it into narrative, this working consensus would go something like this: the Second Wave was a moment in which women looked for the first time at their own, previously ignored, experiences to extrapolate from them at once a better account of the political world – revealing it to be chauvinist, sexist, or patriarchal – and a politics that could represent their real interests. Reading feminism through consciousness-raising, this account sees feminism as

⁸Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), and Victoria Hesford, *Feeling Women’s Liberation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013).

⁹Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2021).

¹⁰Respectively Linda Nicholson, “Introduction” in *The Second Wave: A Reader in Feminist Theory*, ed. Nicholson (New York: Routledge, 1997), who writes that we are still playing out something about the Second Wave – in 1997, but an analysis this dissertation agrees with, and Nancy A. Hewitt, ed., *No Permanent Waves: Recasting Histories of U.S. Feminism* (Newark: Rutgers University Press, 2010), which interrogates the coherence of the “wave” metaphor for historiography altogether, and collects writings by historians and critics that suggest that feminism was not so much a midcentury event as an ongoing phenomenon of political activity across many different groups of women, with many different leftist aims.

politically representational, implicitly liberal, and epistemically, empirical, methodologically sociological: women's experiences are the data from which a theory of "woman" is produced as a generalized description or model. It is by collecting those experiences, seeing commonalities, similarities in them, that allows women to see those experiences as political – rather than private, their own fault. It is by collectivizing them into a general account of *women* that we can contest what the world's account of women has been, and articulate a political agenda that represents women the way they really are.

Large swaths of the writings that most centrally animated the moment of the Second Wave are disconcertingly oblique to this consensus, and the kinds of realist, descriptive, narrative modes of writing and the cathartic effects most appropriate to it. To put it mildly, the Second Wave's central texts are not textured, nuanced descriptions of "women" as a category, when they can be said to be descriptive at all. Often they were declarative, militantly demanding, plagued by wild misperceptions of scale. They made, on the one hand, sweeping ahistorical analogies comparing women to slaves, to colonized people. They began their histories of patriarchy at the dawn of civilization, or at the gender of cells and the behavior of animals, or in the Platonic cave, describing the source of gender as metaphysical drives.¹¹ On the other hand, they could get tunnel-vision around minutiae, mired in the concrete – as if they believed that on the factual question of whether orgasms were physiologically vaginal or clitoral turned the whole matter of gender's naturalness.¹² They performed equally jarring reversals of tone, switching precipitously from high parody to melodramatic intensities of sincerity. They claimed Valerie Solanas as their own and debated over whether to contribute to her defense when she was tried

¹¹See Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women, and Rape* (New York: Fawcett, 1975), 12 – 15; Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, 4, 9, Atkinson, "Radical Feminism," 57 – 63.

¹²Anne Koedt, "The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm," in *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader*, ed. Barbara Crow ((New York: NYU Press, 2000).

for shooting Andy Warhol; they publicly testified to their abortions in an attempt to stop a New York abortion reform law. They counter-protested a women for peace protest against the Vietnam War because they objected to its wives-and-mothers rationales, staging a “burial for traditional womanhood,” holding a procession “with a larger-than-life dummy on a transported bier, complete with feminine getup, blank face, blonde curls, and candle,” both vastly exaggerating the seriousness of patriarchy and being grossly inadequate to its seriousness at the same time.¹³ If these ways of writing, too, describe something familiar, a different consensus about the Second Wave’s qualities, these qualities would seem to have little to do with representing or describing or generalizing from experience – at least, with doing these things well. That we often perceive *what* they were doing most forcefully and paradigmatically at the moments that also give the impression they were doing it badly should lead us to ask whether what they were doing badly was what they were doing at all.

II. Repetition Compulsion

Let’s not talk about it / it’s still being talked about: this might describe our own position with respect to the Second Wave just as well as it apparently described the moment of 1949 and its sense of exhaustion with “the woman question.” Our public criticism, our academic accounts, have looked back to the Second Wave with increasing frequency, with a sense that our moment mirrors that one: in its bouts of furious new awareness and protest against sexual harassment and assault, in its high-key moral panics around trans people in sports, in bathrooms, and saying gay to the children, its zealous battles over “free speech” and the attempts to “defend it” against

¹³New York Radical Feminists, “The Jeannette Rankin Brigade: Woman Power? A Summary of Our Involvement” in *Notes from the First Year* (1968), Sallie Bingham Collection, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University. <https://repository.duke.edu/dc/wlmpc/wlmms01037>.

“critical race theory” and coddled co-eds, the right-wing backlash reacting to “identity politics” and the changes they have wrought with an explicit desire to reverse them as though it all began yesterday. In response, journalists and cultural critics published paeans to an earlier feminism’s appreciation for the uses of female rage.¹⁴ #MeToo reanimated debates about “sexual pleasure and danger” and prompted instant comparisons to the feminist sex wars of the 1970s in a flurry of articles and books such as Andrea Long Chu’s “The Impossibility of Feminism,” *Why We Lost the Sex Wars* by Lorna Bracewell, *The Right to Sex* by Amia Srinivasan, and *The New Sex Wars* by Brenda Cossman.¹⁵ Scholarly journals published special issues on the 1970s,¹⁶ the writings of Second Wave feminists were anthologized and their deaths eulogized.¹⁷ We have had a slew of new biographies, like Martin Duberman’s *Andrea Dworkin*, Rachel Shteir’s *Betty Friedan*, Katherine Turk’s *The Women of NOW*, and Breanne Fahs’ *Firebrand Feminism* (2018).¹⁸ These broadly recuperative moves have been accompanied by corrective moves and distancing moves that invoke the Second Wave in their own way, critical of what it has been taken to stand for, but

¹⁴Rebecca Traister, *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women’s Anger* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018); Soraya Chemaly, *Rage Becomes Her: The Power of Women’s Anger* (New York: Atria Books, 2018).

¹⁵Andrea Long Chu, “The Impossibility of Feminism,” in *Differences*, 30(1)(2019); Lorna Bracewell, *Why We Lost the Sex Wars* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021); Brenda Cossman, *The New Sex Wars: Sexual Harm in the #MeToo Era* (New York: NYU Press, 2021). See also Srinivasan, “Who Lost the Sex Wars?” in *The New Yorker*, September 6, 2021. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/09/13/who-lost-the-sex-wars>; Lynn Comella “Revisiting the Feminist Sex Wars” in *Feminist Studies*, Vol 41, No 2 (2015).

¹⁶“The 1970s,” in *Women’s Studies Quarterly*, Vol 43, No. 3/4 (Winter 2015); Lisa Disch, ed., “1970s Feminisms,” in *South Atlantic Quarterly*, Vol. 114, No. 4 (October 2015).

¹⁷Ellen Willis, *The Essential Ellen Willis*, ed. Nona Aronowitz Willis (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014). Andrea Dworkin, *Last Days at Hot Slit*, ed. Johanna Fateman and Amy Scholder (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2019). Ti-Grace Atkinson, Rosalyn Baxandall, et al, “On Shulamith Firestone” in *n+1*, Issue 15 (Winter 2013), <https://www.nplusonemag.com/issue-15/in-memoriam/on-shulamith-firestone/>.

¹⁸Martin Duberman, *Andrea Dworkin: The Feminist as Revolutionary* (New York: The New Press, 2020). Rachel Shteir, *Betty Friedan: Magnificent Disrupter* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2023). Katherine Turk, *The Women of NOW: How Feminists Built an Organization that Transformed America* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2023). Breanne Fahs, *Firebrand Feminism: The Radical Lives of Ti-Grace Atkinson, Kathie Sarachild, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, and Dana Densmore* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018). This is only a partial and incomplete list of the scholarship and popular recuperations that have popped up in recent years, including several misty films and television shows that are explicitly “Second Wave”: *On the Basis of Sex* (2018), no fewer than three films about the Jane Collective, *Call Jane* (2018), *Ask for Jane* (2018), and *The Janes* (2022), Amazon’s *Good Girls Revolt* (2015); equally misty work has been done with what I would call gesturally or thematically Second Wave texts (as in: she wasn’t explicitly a feminist, but she was feminist for her time!), i.e. *Julia* (2022) and *Lessons in Chemistry* (novel/television series, 2022). All of this has gone on in the midst of a more general look back to the moment of the 1960s; Black Power and the New Left have made appearances in the cultural impulse to look back: for example, *The Black Power Mixtape* (2011), *Selma* (2014), *The Black Panthers: Vanguard of the Revolution* (2015), *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016), *The Trial of the Chicago 7* (2020), *Judas and the Black Messiah* (2021), and *The Big Cigar* (2024).

desirous of complicating it, recuperating the Black feminisms, Chicana feminisms, lesbian feminisms, that were equally of the 1960s and 1970s moment but occluded by what the “Second Wave” stands for.¹⁹

We do not know how to relate to the Second Wave; we do not know how to stop relating to it. We look to it to recuperate something we “left behind,” to estrange ourselves from the impasses that seem to strap us now; we castigate it as something we want to make sure stays behind, trying to free ourselves from a perceived tether to the past that repeats. We long for its (imagined) conceptual coherence around a clear-cut object (women), we are shamed by its conceptual incoherence, its inability to keep a basic grasp on its own intervention in understanding gender to be socially constructed without falling backward into overt biological essentialism. The over- and under- identifications of this affective pattern, the circular form of its process, have frequently noticed and taken up by a variety of critics – it is what Anna Kornbluh evokes when she argues that feminism’s preoccupation with the personal creates a “repetition compulsion” to disclose oneself, what Robyn Wiegman refers to when she describes our relationship to the “feminist classics” as one of “love and repudiation.”²⁰ Why do we repeat this pattern? Why do so many attempts to name it and break it get subsumed into simply repeating it?

One way of seeing the pattern of our relation to the Second Wave is that the lingering durability of a representational picture of feminism is what drives the compulsion to repeat our critical exposures of it; another, that the compulsion to repeat the same critical kinds of

¹⁹Recent popular works that invoke the “Second Wave” negatively, sometimes explicitly and sometimes implicitly, sometimes referring to feminism as such but really meaning a “Second Wave” idea of feminism, include: Rafia Zakaria’s *Against White Feminism* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2021), Mikki Kendall’s *hood feminism: Notes from the Women a Movement Forgot* (New York: Penguin Books, 2021), and Kyla Schuller’s *The Trouble with White Women: A Counterhistory of Feminism* (New York: Bold Type Books, 2021). If the Second Wave is often metonymically evoked as white feminism, it is also metonymically evoked as “radical feminism,” (most often when repudiating the roots of TERF-ism), mainstream feminism, and bourgeois feminism.

²⁰Anna Kornbluh, “In Defense of Feminist Abstraction,” in *Diacritics*, Vol. 29, No. 2 (2021), 56. Robyn Wiegman, “Love and Repudiation in the Feminist Canon,” in *Feminist Formations*, Vol. 32, Issue 1 (Spring 2020). Hemmings observes this same phenomenon and calls it a problem of “repetition and grammatical transferability.” See Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, 13.

exposures produces this representational picture of the Second Wave as a byproduct. The representational picture is not really a picture so much as a fungible element in a process. The more contemporary gender and sexuality studies tries to get free of a representational picture of *feminism*, the more over-inscribed the Second Wave has been *as* that kind of feminism, relegated to the past. The more the Second Wave is over-inscribed *as* that theoretical commitment to “women” we can’t quite seem to purge, the more the Second Wave won’t *stay* past, is resuscitated like some tired neurosis to keep our thinking in a cycle of either doing the work of representing (women, gender, black women, black lesbians, whichever proper object or choice) or dispelling representation (deconstructing those objects).²¹

We see this back-and-forth between theory and history in recent work by feminist theorists and historians alike. Influential work by Hemmings, Hesford, and Wiegman all suggests in different ways that the history of feminism as both a political/grassroots movement and a discipline are sublimated influences on key theoretical debates of the 1990s and 2000s over what is sometimes called “the subject question.”²² Hemmings’ 2011 book *Why Stories Matter*, for example, argues that scholars of gender and sexuality have relied on a set of assumptions about the Second Wave and its periodization to narrate the development of feminist thinking as one in which “the 70s” has come to be seen as “the time when we thought ‘woman’ could be the subject and object of liberation,” when feminism had an “emphasis on and investment in female experience as the ground of feminist knowledge and action.” From this originary moment, Hemmings writes, scholars narrate “the 80s” and “90s” as moments which introduced

²¹Robyn Wiegman describes this process in institutional terms in *Object Lessons* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

²²Linda Zerilli argues that what looks like the “end” of feminism, the disappearance of the “movement” from the feminist movement, is not because feminism has “lost” its sense of the coherence of its subject, women, but because of the forces that have shaped feminism’s sense of itself and its purposes so as to make this “loss” seem like an unsolvable political paradox. The “subject question,” the paradox that feminism’s task is to up-end the category woman, feminism’s politics is to organize in the interest of women, is actually a subject-centered frame. See Linda Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 9-16.

“difference within the category woman”: in the 80s, it was through the “efforts of black and lesbian theorists,” that the “field has diversified, and feminism itself has become the object of detailed critical and political scrutiny.” “Postmodernism...[took this] process still further [in the 90s] toward a focus on political effect over identity politics and highlights the exclusions and inclusions social movements, including feminism, produce.”²³ Different “narratives” treasured by different political/theoretical commitments in feminism actually overlay different attitudes onto a basic agreement about this same narrative trajectory. “Progress” narratives overlay a positive affect and teleology on this timeline – we went from erroneous singularity to critical senses of difference, pluralization, inclusion, and theoretical sophistication. “Loss” narratives project nostalgia and a sense of increasing dissolution on the same material – we went from politically purposeful unity and connection to the *real* stuff of women’s lives to recrimination, fragmentation, and effete academic abstraction.²⁴

The back-and-forth in which a representational feminism is over-identified with the “Second Wave” but is also displaced as a role onto a given position’s critical others is evident in these progress/loss narratives. Deconstructive and intersectional feminisms of that 1990s moment (personified in Judith Butler and Kimberlé Crenshaw, respectively)²⁵ are aligned, in this “progress narrative,” in their desire to disrupt the hegemonic coherence of the category “woman.” But the progress narrative also paints over the critical opposition between

²³Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, 3-4.

²⁴Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter*, 4. See Hesford, *Feeling Women’s Liberation*, 1 – 6, for a similar account of the connection between ambivalent historiographical attitudes around “women’s liberation” and their connection to a theoretical quagmire between feminist and queer studies in the 1990s and 2000s. See Wiegman, *Object Lessons*, for an account of this quagmire as it plays out as a theoretical question animating disciplinary and institutional shifts (i.e. from Women’s studies, to Gender Studies). Wiegman’s account makes it clear that this theoretical impasse is portable – it can re-cast the roles of “women” and “gender” onto other proper objects. Wiegman and Zerilli both analyze the “theoretical impasse” that seems to be at the heart of what I’m calling feminism’s “repetition compulsion” as an impasse created by the frames feminism is working in, a frame that can’t see what are choices, decisions, desires, or practices except as problems of knowledge.

²⁵And in their two field-defining publications in the early 90s. Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006) and Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color” in *Stanford Law Review*, Vol. 43, No. 6 (July 1991).

deconstructive and intersectional feminisms produced in a different sense by the way their common critical orientation to the “Second Wave” is also critical orientation to *each other*. Intersectional feminism critiques the Second Wave for its universalizing sense of its subject; queer theorists critique it for inadvertently essentializing what it wants or should want to deconstruct. Insofar as intersectional feminism seeks to explode that false universality by capturing the real differences between women’s experiences of oppression and the ways they exert power over each other, and deconstructive feminism, on its way to queer theory, sees feminism’s project as deconstructing the stability and representability of “woman,” they each implicitly cast the other into the role of the “Second Wave” feminism they are critiquing. Intersectional feminism threatens to become the crudely representational and liberal politics that deconstructive feminism and queer theory critique when they critique “identity politics”; deconstructive feminism threatens to become the universalizing feminism intersectional politics critique when they critique white feminism: after all, deconstruction of the signifier “woman” is no less uniform than its reification.²⁶

If Wiegman, Hemmings, and Hesford demonstrate that the theoretical impasses of gender and sexuality studies sublimate Second Wave history, the work of feminist historians has shown us that that historical narratives of feminism sublimate theory – specifically, the same theoretical impasses I just described. For example, some historiographers have argued that the “wave” metaphor itself is a function of history’s centralization of white feminism – we take the 1960s to

²⁶For Hemmings this menage-a-trois of shifting critical alignments are revealed in the contrary ways progress and loss narratives code the relationship between these theoretical positions. As Hemmings writes, “Western feminist progress and loss narratives are thus locked into a mutually reinforcing battle for meaning within the same storyline.” “Progress” narratives emphasizes the throughline between intersectional and women of color feminisms and deconstructive feminisms as a single, upward trajectory toward more nuance, undecidability, and pluralism; “loss” narratives, in an attempt to reclaim “the past” from its damning association with racism, see commonalities between all feminisms organized around the concretism of being in touch with experience – loss narratives point out the tensions between deconstruction of “woman” and the desire to get better accounts of women’s specificities. Perhaps the most famous working out of these tensions is bell hooks’ objections to Diana Fuss’ *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, and Difference* (New York: Routledge, 1990) in hooks, “Essentialism and Experience,” in *American Literary History*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Spring 1991).

be a significant moment in feminism's history because we only "see" the professedly feminist activity of white women as acting in the interests of women qua women *as* feminist in the first place. To remove this historiographical lens is to see that women have been political in their own, varied interests all along through the 1930s, 40s, and 50s: socialist women, women in the social reform movements, and black women were politically active, on issues that impacted women's lives, in ways that might just as well be definitional to what "feminism" is as political issues that affect women "as such."²⁷ In short, history and theory play alternating roles in feminism's repetition compulsion. Historians seek to complicate and pluralize the history of the Second Wave and 20th century feminisms by shifting their conceptual aperture away from understanding "feminism" as, definitionally, a politics representing the interests of women as such. Feminist theorists enjoin us to focus on the way present tense political stakes shape our historical narratives *as* narratives that overdetermine the Second Wave as the kind of feminism we seek to displace. To encounter the real complexity of the archive, they suggest, is to see the way material traces *really* resist, deconstructively, the kind of stabilizing account that sees the Second Wave as meaning *one thing* that our current discourse makes it.

In other words, both theory and historiography imply that it is *our* reductive and overdetermined accounts of the Second Wave that make it seem reductive and overdetermined as a moment and as a body of thought. And yet: it is hard not to notice, when confronting the archive in attempts to puncture, pluralize, and destabilize what it has come to signify, that the Second Wave *is* often palpably reductive and overdetermined. It does not cooperate with this deconstructive project, which also does not mean that it cooperates with the representational accounts of it that figure as input/output of the theoretical role-playing staged by our ways of

²⁷Nancy A. Hewitt, *No Permanent Waves*.

thinking about gender and sexuality. If our accounts of the Second Wave are stubbornly reductive, if in fact they are repetitiously and compulsively so, I suggest we reverse the critical imaginary that connects our accounts to its qualities and say that our accounts are reductive *because* the Second Wave itself was reductive, and not the other way around – or rather, because the Second Wave *is* reductive. Its militancy, its literalism, its abstraction are our ways of capturing aesthetic effects that are live whenever we confront their writing.²⁸ They work for us, now. It's not that “we,” new (ever newer) generations of feminists, project contemporary theoretical impasses onto our vision of the past, but that they (the past) opened up different paradigms for thinking about the perennial problems of feminism that are effected by style that we still think within.

III. Representation as a Frame: Capturing Epistemic/Aesthetic Simultaneity

To talk about the Second Wave differently, we must take account of what it “thinks” by virtue of its aesthetics. Our totemic descriptions of it imply an analysis of why what feminists argued was wrong. But before these descriptions stage an objection to what they take feminism to say, they qualify a reaction they also index, against the *way* feminists are saying what they are saying, the sense that stylistically their work is clumsy, inept, in a word, bad.²⁹ Put another way: it is only within a certain frame or imaginary that the formal or semantic actions like reducing,

²⁸Lionel Gossman writes that disciplinary practice of writing about literary objects in the present tense marks an important distinction between how we understand literary aspects of texts and how we are seeing them when we see them as historical documents. See Gossman, “History and the Study of Literature,” in *Profession* (1994).

²⁹They are in a way double judgments – an ostensibly logical or purely cognitive judgment that is parasitic on an unacknowledged aesthetic judgment. I will discuss at length the aesthetic status of these reactions in my chapters, but my sense of what makes them aesthetic is their immediacy, their strong affect, the fact that they demand to be recognized as *right* and can produce reasons and justification for this rightness after-the-fact; we can say what we mean when we say it, I can point to where and when intuitions of “literalism” happen; finally, aesthetic status of these judgments is indicated for me by their responsiveness to form, as style, across media; burning a bra expresses the kind of militancy/extremism/literalism that Atkinson’s “Radical Feminism” produces in essay-form. What it means to see these texts aesthetically as opposed to logically or communicatively is that they “are” an experience, that what they *effect* are central to what they mean. See Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), and Linda Zerilli, *A Democratic Theory of Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

abstracting, literal language, desire for systematic-ness or schematization, chime as off-key.

Abstraction is in itself neutrally descriptive – as when it describes a process in the visual arts; to say something is too abstract is to say it is too abstract *for* something, for what it is doing or what we think it should be doing. There is a distinction between what it is these terms perceive about qualities of Second Wave writing and thought, and how they analyze what they perceive. And we could say: it is *our* residual and resistant representational picture of what feminism is/should be doing that intervenes in that space, that is the context in which those qualities can be understood to be *too something*, marks of bad method or logic. The problem is that if we have a representational picture of the Second Wave, it is because the Second Wave often had this picture of itself: if feminists wrote in a way that strikes us as too literal, what it was too literal for is not just our sense of what feminism was but also theirs, a lingering or implicit sense of what feminism should be like, keyed to intuitions about what gender is and what gender is like. The propensity for literalism to be heard as too literal was constitutive of style, not a product of our misapprehension of it. The style feminists collaboratively worked out exploits the gap between what they say and how we, reading with certain assumptions and default practices of interpretation, will hear it; between what we're seeing in their language that makes us take it be literal, reductive, and so on, and how we respond to what we take them to mean.

There has been very good reason for us to take the Second Wave as having been organized around the signifier “women” and grounded in “women’s experiences”: this is how the Second Wave often articulated its own project, and in doing so they shared in a broad sense of what the new social movements of the 1960s were about, and in how *they* articulated what *they* were doing.³⁰ To cast the project of the new social movements in representational terms is what makes

³⁰Wini Breines writes that the New Left understood itself to be about “represent[ing] something more genuine and human, a way of life that called for equal and caring relationships...the way people treated one another was interpreted politically, something to

them legible as certain kinds of claims or demands in the context of political liberalism, as Wendy Brown has argued in “Wounded Attachments.”³¹ It is what connects the “new” social movements to rights-based political movements, Black Power to Civil Rights, women’s liberation to women’s rights. It is in a classically liberal and legal imaginary that politics is tasked with making visible and forwarding the specific interests of a marked group because that category is legally constituted and bears a different (lesser) set of rights than the undifferentiated/abstractly equal full citizen. For “sex” to achieve the status of suspect classification juridically is for this “exclusion” from unmarked isometrically equal citizenship to be remediated. To insist within a liberal context that some subjects are marked in ways that do not make them formally and abstractly equal – i.e. to insist that women should have the right to work on the same terms as *anyone else* (men) is always ambiguously a claim made within liberalism and as a “corrective” to its oversights and also a claim that threatens to explode it, exploding its foundational assumption that citizens are justly grasped as abstract equals by the law.

The new social movements articulated claims that refused or challenged this liberal frame, but still turned on a slide from an epistemic sense of representation to a political one. The link between their sense that to produce better accounts of themselves will lead on to political theory is premised on a basic sense of the political character of representation and representativeness: if we produce a better account of ourselves, we will see how the world as it is

"work" on...individual failings or difficulties were understood to be caused by forces larger than oneself; "the personal is political." See Breines, *Community and Organization in the New Left, 1962-1968* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 48. See also Peniel Joseph, "Introduction: Toward a Historiography of the Black Power Movement" and Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, "Rainbow Radicalism: The Rise of Radical Ethnic Nationalism," in *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, ed Peniel Joseph (New York: Routledge, 2006), and Toni Cade, "Preface," in *The Black Woman*, ed. Toni Cade (New York: Washington Square Press, 1970). I discuss Cade's sense of the common project, the shared newness of what she calls the new social movements, and its relation to a representational frame of understanding at length in my second chapter.

³¹Wendy Brown, "Wounded Attachments," in *Political Theory*, Vol. 21, No. 3 (August 1993).

produces those things as lacks, negatives, disadvantages. To get a sense of how the world misrecognizes and misfits us is a blueprint for a political agenda that can create a different world, a self-defined world, better because its ideologies, its structures, and so on, reflect *our* experiences and interests. There is at work here a sense of mirroring, reflection, a better correspondence that is the sign of the absence of ideological distortion. Hannah Pitkin, in *The Concept of Representation*, calls this correspondence imaginary “descriptive representation.”³² And in the ways a representative picture slips between epistemic, political, and aesthetic notions of representation, they exemplify what Pitkin’s account of representation argues is the way the concept has worked generally in political thinking, either suppressing or relying on its secondary meanings, usually clearer in another context, to make theoretical accounts of one sense of it seem completely resolved, in a way unassailable.³³

Second Wave feminists’ descriptions of consciousness-raising make the source of our representational picture of it pretty clear. At the same time, these descriptions never cast consciousness-raising as consistent a resolved a method as claims for its being the epistemic grounds justifying feminism’s knowledge of the world and its paradigmatic contribution to political theory suggest. For example, Carol Hanisch’s 1969 pamphlet “The Personal is Political” describes consciousness-raising as precisely the kind of process that analyzes by collectivizing or generalizing from individual narratives: “we go around the room answering the questions from our personal experiences. Everybody talks that way. At the end of the meeting we try to sum up

³²Hannah Fenichel Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1972), 60 – 92.

³³The simple definition of representation is “to make present.” Raymond Williams covers the knotty terrain of the different senses that emerged etymologically around representation in the entry on “Representative” in *Keywords*: “represent quickly acquired a range of senses of making present: in the physical sense of presenting oneself or another, often to some person of authority; but also in the sense of making present to the mind, and of making present to the eye, in painting or in plays. But a crucial extension also occurred in C14, when represent was used in the sense of ‘symbolize’ or ‘stand for.’” In this trajectory Williams’ account of “representative” accords with Pitkin’s earlier work; it too is very focused on the slide between political and aesthetic notions of representation. Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 266-267.

and generalize from what's been said and make connections.³⁴ What makes consciousness-raising politically analytical, rather than “merely group therapy,” Hanisch writes, is precisely the fact that it doesn't make anyone feel any better – it works because it generalizes and abstracts away from the individual. Kathie Sarachild's “A Program for Feminist Consciousness-Raising,” understands consciousness-raising's analytical foothold in different terms: what makes consciousness-raising analytical for her is the way it turns “inward,” peering beneath the surface of how women have been told to regard their circumstances to access how they really feel about them.³⁵ It doesn't primarily generalize and build up, it excavates and exposes. And although Vivian Gornick, like Sarachild and Hanisch, thinks about “consciousness-raising” as a process that works when “a group's discussions start to revolve more and more about apparently individual circumstances...[and] often lead to startling similarities,” she grounds its power to produce insight in the retrospective gaze it casts over one's experiences, reinterpreting those experiences in *light* of feminism's theory of sexism.³⁶

If consciousness-raising is a process that makes its claims to knowledge in empirical terms it also functions as a literary process. It produces narratives of experience that its participants meet with certain forms of reading. Doing consciousness-raising turns on knowing that one thing to do with such a narrative is “identify” with it, recognize something about my experience in “yours.” I may, when recognizing my experience in yours, recognize that what I have taken to be “personal” problems or deficiencies are not, are products of a situation out of my control – a kind of reverse-catharsis. I may respond to your narration of an insight by being prompted to engage in a mode of self-reflection that may produce a parallel insight of my own.

³⁴Carol Hanisch, “The Personal is Political,” in Crow, *Radical Feminism*, 113.

³⁵Kathie Sarachild, “A Program for Feminist Consciousness-Raising,” in Crow, *Radical Feminism*, 273 – 277.

³⁶Vivian Gornick, “Consciousness,” in Crow, *Radical Feminism*, 290.

Responding this way to another's testimony about their own life is not a given: consciousness-raising turns on knowing what to *do* with certain forms of narration or speech. These are reading processes that are modeled by the ways genres of novelistic realism and spiritual autobiography are defined and define practices of reading.³⁷ If we sometimes think about genre as categorical differences, it is also clear that "genre" describes a set of expectations about a text, as well as a culturally and historically learned mode of response to it – knowing what a novel *is* is knowing that you do not use *Moby Dick* as a handbook for whale hunting – or that if you did, you would be missing the point.³⁸

"Consciousness-raising" takes the effect it names and hopes to produce – some as-yet unqualified shift in consciousness – and makes it legible and justifiable as knowledge by characterizing it in representational terms. Consciousness-raising's account of itself is unstable in ways that can suggest lack of self-awareness: feminists weren't yet sure what they were doing, their justifications for what they were doing stand on epistemically hazy grounds. But these instabilities and the gaps they point up between what one does and how one accounts for it just as equally produce moments for self-awareness about this mismatch, meditation on it, and experiment with it. For example, viewed one way, the second half of *The Second Sex*, which is called "Lived Experience," can give rise to readings of it that position it as a kind of textual antecedent or prescription for what consciousness-raising thinks it is doing. Over 400 or so pages "Lived Experience" tells a kind of archetypal coming-of-age narrative as a narrative about woman's becoming, one that will show what its famous first sentence suggests: that one is not

³⁷Here I follow historicist thinkers like Catharine Gallagher. Gallagher's "The Rise of Fictionality" understands fictionality as a specific and historically developed *reading capacity*, the capacity to hear plausible claims and narratives but suspend the assumption of real reference implied by the use of proper names. Realism as a genre creates a reading public able to hear "Tom Jones" as referential in a different sense – as a generalized type who is everyone and no one – and also is in turn shaped by the aesthetic affordance's of this reading capability. See Gallagher, "The Rise of Fictionality," in *the Novel, Volume 1: History, Geography, and Culture*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

³⁸See Elaine Freedgood and Cannon Schmitt, "Denotatively, Technically, Literally," in *Representations* 125, no. 1 (Winter 2014).

born, but rather becomes, woman.³⁹ We can see how it might give rise to readings that see it as narrating women's real experiences in order to expose the social construction of sex. In a way consciousness-raising *is* this reading of it: as a collective account of how different types of women fit into a generalizable model of becoming based on the titular "lived experience" of women. "Lived Experience" suggests this kind of reading because of its quasi-narrative form, organized around temporal stages (childhood, girlhood) that are also descriptive of different types – the mother, the lesbian. This is a reading that assimilates the formal strangeness of "Lived Experience" into a text in which its figural types can function like characters (we are invited to see their representativeness of some human type across individualizing/specific differences) and sociological categories (with descriptions of "the lesbian" and "the mother" consisting of the typological features all members of the group can be said to share).

"Lived Experience" clearly gives us the forms that ground those readings of it that see it in representational terms, and it just as clearly does *not* conform to those representational frames. It invokes both discipline and genre, and also subverts both of these frames that mediate the intelligibility of its knowledge claims and the literary forms by which it means. It is a narration of Woman's life cycle in which events are sometimes sequential to one another in the imagined life of the same (allegorical) woman, sometimes counterfactual or conditionally tensed paths to "woman" as she makes choices and differentiates herself into different types; sometimes it works more like a side-by-side contrast or itemized survey of types of women as they exist now (in 1949) in France. It is compiled of philosophical, psychoanalytic, anthropological, fictional, testimonial cultural ephemera submerged and woven into a "plot" narrated by a voice that sometimes speaks like a naturalist looking upon women as an almost alien life form, at others

³⁹Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 283.

gives its allegorical women, the girl, the child, a point of view in nearly free indirect discourse. Likewise, it is only *part* of a text that is neither novelistic nor autobiographical, flirts with being “philosophy” (many readers have mistakenly considered it nothing more than warmed over or watered down existentialism) but is also political theory, science history, and cultural criticism. It has a rigid conceptual organization, but not one that legibly orders the relationship between its critique of Marxism as a frame for understanding gender and its critique of biology: *The Second Sex* as a text is highly structured, a formally thoughtful panoptic or totalizing view of sex/gender that nevertheless does not define an organizing principle to sort these heterogeneous commitments to discipline/genre – it does not commit to, or hierarchize, the categorical frames in which it is working.

The textual forms of the Second Wave position themselves between these kinds of kinds, between disciplines that contextualize the character of their knowledge claims and genres that contextualize the status of their aesthetic effects. In this the Second Wave is deeply at odds with the frames in which it was heard and continues to be heard. The ways the 20th century has learned to understand language taken to make truth-claims, assertions, or communications, and it has learned to understand language taken to be “literary” have been often and at least premised on their being different functions of language, and frequently on the assumption that they should be as distinct and separate as possible. Factuality has been thought to be most served by “clarity” and “directness,” imagined as the absence of form, conceived as a kind of ornament, or by putting language into forms which can make explicit the full set of predicative claims other forms of speaking might imply but not announce.⁴⁰ Being poetic has been taken to mean, in

⁴⁰In popular praise for the plain style and imagination that the plain style is the most direct way to capture factuality, which I discuss in my first chapter. In philosophical tradition, analytic philosophy premise that language might be fitted to logic. As Stanley Cavell glosses it, “positivism had hoped for the construction of an ideal language...in which everything which could be said at all would be said clearly, its relations to other statements formed purely logically, its notation perspicuous – the form of

modern literary studies, language grasped in its irreducibly formal aspect.⁴¹ That each of these ways of seeing language is a problem for the other puts a point on the ways they are contradictory to one another: consider the problem that fictionality has posed for analytic philosophy, and that the factuality, historical accuracy, and presumptive identity between real author and speaker in autobiography has been to its literary status as a genre and its progressive recognition as one of literary studies' proper objects.⁴² The way consciousness-raising provides a model for assimilating aesthetic effect and modes of reading and political truth claims into a single, overtly empirical account is indicative of the ways these two supposedly opposed functions can be made to converge: along the axis of their shared representational imaginary, the fact that they both think about language corresponding to the world.⁴³ Likewise, they increasingly marginalize notions of truth that do not think about it as factual assertion that does or does not correspond to what obtains in the world, and notions of the literary that do not presume a representational relation to the world by virtue of a presumed fictionality and object-

the statement *looking* like what it means." Cavell, "Ending the Waiting Game," in *Must We Mean What We Say?* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969), 123. See Bertrand Russell, "On Denoting," in *Mind*, Vol. 14 No. 56 (October 1905).

⁴¹ In New Criticism. This is what Wimsatt and Beardsley mean when they insist, for example, that "practical messages" are "more abstract" than poetry – because there are many possible ways of framing the same meaning. Poetry is "less abstract" in the sense that all its meanings are handled "at once" and as a "complex of meaning." Cleanth Brooks echoes this idea when he writes that the structure of a poem is unlike the structure of the kind of statement (rational or logical) that we "abstract" from it as paraphrase, because the poem is a "pattern of resolved stresses," it is a temporal scheme, more analogous to drama than to statement. This is utterly opposed to the terms of science which are "abstract symbols" that "are pure (or aspire to be pure) denotations." To rearrange the poem into a different form (i.e. to say one way of saying has the same sense as another) is to approximate what it *says* but to miss what it means, and so (what is poetic about) a poem *is* its form. See W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, "The Intentional Fallacy" in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1954), and Cleanth Brooks, "The Heresy of Paraphrase," in *The Well-Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1956).

⁴²For key texts on the problem fictionality has posed for analytic philosophy, see John Searle, "The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse," in *New Literary History*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Winter 1975); Richard Rorty, "Is there a Problem about Fictional Discourse?" in *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays 1972 – 1980* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982); Thomas Pavel, *Fictional Worlds* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989). For key texts that outline autobiography's literary status and its exclusion/inclusion from literary studies, see Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), Linda Anderson, *Autobiography (The New Critical Idiom)* (New York: Routledge, 2011), Philippe Lejeune, *On Autobiography*, ed John Eakin, trans. Katherine Leary (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), and Paul de Man, "Autobiography as De-facement," in *MLN*, Vol. 94, No. 5 (December 1979).

⁴³For discussions of the distinction between what it means to be "literary" versus being "representational" or "mimetic," and the increasing collapse of all genres deemed literary into representational and presumptively *imitative* and therefore fictional genres, see Gerard Genette, *The Architext: An Introduction*, trans Jane. E. Lewin (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1992).

status. We assimilate the way feminist form simultaneously evokes genre and evades it by self-characterization in disciplinary terms, and evokes discipline but really operates in generic terms, to representational meta-narratives that reconcile the fact that feminism both makes claims to truth and is overtly literary in its forms. It is through this almost intangible assimilation, representation not as a “theory” but as a frame for reading and hearing, that we take them to be theorizing in certain ways, and taking certain (often unintelligible or shockingly unrelatable) positions when we read them as being certain kinds of things, that cue us to *do* certain kinds of things in order to decode what they mean or test their truth claims (against our own experiences, or against statistics, and so on).

IV. Exploiting Blind Spots

How, then, should we read? What kind of thing was feminism?

Consider three ideas – phrases, really – that might be taken as paradigms for the theoretical shift produced by the Second Wave instead of consciousness-raising:

Men are the enemy.

Wages for housework!

Sex is rape.

Set together, these phrases are indicative of the kind of thinking and writing that are *too something* for the kinds of cognitive goods a representational feminist project might prize. They are associated, respectively, with justifications for an autonomous radical feminist movement, the most theoretically innovative incarnation of Marxist feminism, and, infamously, the distillation of anti-porn (sometimes, “dominance”) feminism and its putatively “cultural” feminist commitment to an essential distinction between men and women and the revaluation of

the feminine. They evince thinking that chimes immediately as crude, unsophisticated, embarrassingly bad in the ways my title names: for feminism to be articulated as a politics that takes men to be “the enemy” is at once extreme and literal, a fever dream of the man-hating spurned woman (or the man-hating, mannish lesbian). It’s a statement of the case that can’t parse the difference between the idea of counterposed self-interest and the pure *feeling* of animosity, that can’t manage the distinction between sex as a social ideology that operates systematically and sex as an intentional organized exertion of power by one group against another. It seems to imagine men like some kind of organized cabal, conspiratorial, to be *personally* antagonized.

These are the kinds of statements that trip up our sense of what the Second Wave was coherently saying, or rather our sense that they were saying something coherent. Ti-Grace Atkinson’s essay “Radical Feminism,” for example, articulates a particularly affronting version of the idea that “men are the enemy,” a principle she seems to take so literally and at such face value that she wants feminist theory to proceed as a battle plan, complete with a set of step-by-step heuristic questions for going ahead with making one. And yet, “Radical Feminism” frequently articulates robustly “deconstructive” positions on gender, insisting that women are a political class, that political classes are “artificial,” that feminism is a project of women eradicating their own definition – insistence that such a blasé faith in the idea that “men are the enemy,” that there *are* men, that they are so concretely identifiable as a group of individuals that they can be regarded with animosity, seems to undercut.⁴⁴ It’s as if, having pronounced skepticism of gender’s reality effect in one moment, Atkinson abruptly forgets it in the next, can’t hang on to it, can’t practice the implications of her own idea. If confronting the declaration that “men are the enemy” makes the reader recoil, makes the reader say, but does she *really*

⁴⁴Atkinson, “Radical Feminism,” 52.

(seriously) mean that?, its contextual interaction with the rest of the essay makes us say – does she really mean *that*? (does she really mean, by “men,” men? All men? Does she really mean battle – actual violence?). And yet: THE FEMINISTS, the group Atkinson formed when she and others left NOW, famously put quotas on the number of members who could be married – a fact that seems to say, by fiat, yes, she really did mean it, literally.

The plotline I just sketched out for the way interpreting one feminist “position” plays out is recognizable as a semantic pattern that all three of these statements produce. This pattern is formal, a function of a shared set of stylistic mechanics that constitute shared thought cutting across what, when taken as “positions,” seem to be ideologically distinct, even competing/contradictory, feminisms. The phrases produce this semantic pattern because, read in one way, the expected way, we understand them as saying something that is contextually implausible, cognitively *wrong*. It is our sense that these descriptors also capture stylized qualities that are intentional, that are formally identifiable, that constitutes a kind of excess to that erroneous meaning. It is the one with the other that draws the reader into the negotiations with its meaning or with peculiar way it asks us to “believe” what it is saying that feed in to one another (when this fails to make sense of it, try that).

Abstract, Literal, Reductive argues that Second Wave style works *because* of the ways it cues us to read referential statements, representational descriptions, claims to truth, and denies or resists the meanings those default readings produce. It works at formal junctures that “literary” modes of reading direct us to disregard, and makes knowledge claims in ways that imaginaries of truth as factual assertion do not capture. It will exploit senses of figurativity and tone in ways that disrupt how we process reference as something after or beyond them, once meaning has been extracted from what tone and figuration do. It will exploit and shift the way speech and

writing are attached to the speaker/author, it will exaggerate both the intentionality and control over its assertive meanings while provocatively perpetrating textual effects that cross cut them, it will produce reactions that can only be reconciled with what they seem to mean when we see the ways the text grasps its reader, in decidedly less *implied* and anonymous ways than representational presumption has made us used to. It will look like a series of utterances proceeding in time but behave like an enclosed textual whole. It is irreducibly literary, but its formal experiment and aesthetic impacts are effected in ways that evade reading practices shaped by prohibitions on the intentional fallacy, the affective fallacy, aesthetic distance (the presumption of fictionality), and literary object status. Out of the misperception of the effects it pitches into places where they will be misperceived, feminism effects thinking. It produces insight because of the ways its style works, but the way its style works provokes readers to explain over and over as the way its thinking doesn't work. This is cart before horse, which can fail to be discerned as the cart moving in the opposite direction.

This style is shared not just by virtue of habit or default, which is often how the theatrical, aggrandizing, and jejune quirks of Second Wave style scan – as just a way of talking, something in the air in the 1960s, a hand-me-down from the Yippies and the Weathermen and the counterculture, an imitation of Black Power's radical chic. Feminism's style was shared because it was responsive to a shared set of problems, problems women encountered when they began to articulate gender as a political concern and were confronted with a kind of radioactively disproportionate or unexpected reactions on the left. Shared, I want to emphasize, is not the same as "the same." One of these encounters that became a touchpoint, for example, took place very publicly at the National Conference for New Politics in Chicago in 1967. A caucus of women were repeatedly denied when they requested to put a resolution on abortion, free distribution of

birth control, and bodily autonomy up for a vote, because there was already a “women’s” resolution on the docket from Women Strike for Peace. When Shulamith Firestone and three or four others took the stage to try and force the resolution, William Pepper, the chair of the conference, patted Firestone on the head and said “Move on little girl; we have more important issues to talk about here than women’s liberation.”⁴⁵ Ellen Willis narrates another of these very public and functionally mythic encounters with a kind of radioactive and totally unexpected antagonism in “Up From Radicalism,” at the Counter-Inaugural Protest of 1969:

M. [Marilyn Webb] from the Washington group [D.C. Women’s Liberation] gets up to speak. This isn’t the protest against movement men, which is second on the agenda, just fairly innocuous radical rhetoric—except that it’s a good-looking woman talking about women. The men go crazy. “Take it Off!” “Take her off the stage and fuck her!”... By the time we get to the voter card business [the group’s planned dramatic action], I am shaking. If radical men can be so easily provoked into acting like rednecks, what can we expect from others? What have we gotten ourselves into?⁴⁶

Moments like these were literally foundational to women’s liberation in the US: as Jo Freeman recounts, the day after William Pepper patted Firestone on the head in front of the NCNP conference, women met and formed the group that would become Chicago Women’s Liberation Union and published a call in *New Left Notes* for women to form an intellectually and organizationally autonomous movement. Willis writes that the unexpected response of radical men at the Counter-Inaugural made her realize that she had been working under two contradictory assumptions: that it was necessary for women to have their own movement and that that movement should be allied to the “male left.” The Counter-Inaugural materialized the oppositional nature of these movements for Willis. It could not be good for women, she wrote, to be “allied” to a movement whose ideology and practice were created by their oppressors; men,

⁴⁵Echols, *Daring to Be Bad*, 103.

⁴⁶Ellen Willis, “Up from Radicalism: A Feminist Journal,” in *The Essential Ellen Willis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), Kindle Edition.

understanding that the thrust of the women's movement runs against their material interests, would resist genuine solidarity against sexism until it they were strategically forced to it. Would-be leftist women's liberationists, in short, articulated political claims about gender to leftist men who they expected to easily grasp and accept them as easily extending political logics they already espoused and embraced – an act of extension, or analogy, that, in its grossly antipodal and unexpected effects, made them feminists, organizationally but also conceptually.

That the theoretical apparatuses of the left could not make sex visible as a thing that was isometrically like class or race demanded not just new/different organizations but new/different modes of theory and analysis. Early Second Wave feminists correspondingly argued, in person, in ambitious theoretical systems, in essays published in zines and pamphlets and mimeographed journals, about how to conceptualize the relation of male chauvinism, sexism, or patriarchy to a schema of the political whole. They argued about whether sex was a class distinction or a caste distinction, whether it should be conceived as one of multiple effects of “the system” that either produced class inequality and race, or *was* capitalism (which produced class inequality and race). Why could no one “see” gender the way they otherwise saw other power hierarchies? They experimented with ways of thinking about this imperceptibility, gender's latent-ness, as depth, as grounds for radicalism. They conceptualized sex as a political system that was historically prior to others (the “first” political system, going back to pre-historic agriculture), or one that was pedagogically, phenomenologically, or psychoanalytically prior, the “earliest” way we learn power difference in our lifespan, through mother and father, or a power difference that was logically prior (the thing on which property conception and conception of kin are based).⁴⁷

⁴⁷See note 11, above. Shulamith Firestone combines all three of these rationales in *The Dialectic of Sex*.

Such claims are usually read as feminists responding to (justifying) their schism with Black and New Left activism with bids to aggrandize sex as *the* most important or all-encompassing oppression, in an imagination in which the conceptual effect of the offensive “so-called black analogy” was to assert that sex (for white women) was really *just as bad as* race (for black men).⁴⁸ But actually it was self-conscious awareness and experiment with the instability of the meaning of the analogy, under scrutiny of which the stable sense of the nature of analogizing itself dissolved. For example, in the 1968 radical pamphlet “Toward a Female Liberation Movement,” Beverly Jones critiques the SDS Women’s Manifesto for shamefully apolitical and deferential way it makes “demands” more like soft requests. She writes that the absurdity of this posture will become obvious if we simply take every time the manifesto says “male” and “female” and replace them with “black” and “white.” She reprints the manifesto’s text so that we can properly hear statements like: “It is obvious from this meeting of the city council that full advantage is not being taken of the abilities and potential contributions of blacks. We call upon the black people to demand full participation in all aspects of local government from licking stamps to assuming leadership positions.”⁴⁹ Toni Cade describes doing the same thing to a student’s paper on the differences between men and women in “On the Issue of Roles”:

Years ago I did a terrible thing. I edited a copy of a young male student’s paper, “Reflections on Black Women,” so that all references to male and female were changed to “us” and “them.” After several months elapsed, I read the paper during one of our after class beer chats. And sure enough everyone reacted to phrases like “I don’t believe in the double standard, but” or “They’re trying to take over” and agreed it was the usual racist shit. As a matter of fact, the author of the original piece was even more vitriolic in his condemnation of the bigotry and hypocrisy than anyone else.⁵⁰

⁴⁸Marlene Dixon, “Why Women’s Liberation?” in Crow, *Radical Feminism*, 74.

⁴⁹Jones and Brown, “Toward a Female Liberation Movement,” 17.

⁵⁰Toni Cade, “On the Issue of Roles,” in Cade, *The Black Woman*, 130-131.

If the analogy expresses a desire for us to be able to see gender as something that is like race, as a structure that is “anti-people,” the force of the analogy, the way it is deployed, is, also, that we do not. Its emphasis is on how we speak, how we can or cannot hear what is being said; what we hear, when we hear the SDS Women’s Manifesto “translated” into the new context of race is not a convincing aspect switch that forces us to open our eyes to the fact that sex “really is” *as* oppressive as race. The violation of the comparison is as strong as its likeness: we hear that the way we talk about and hear talking about sex, the way that concept functions, is *not* like the way we hear and talk about race – the way *that* concept functions. Altering their own sense of the figurativity or parallelism might shift not what was imagined as their rhetorical effect but the theory expressed by their language, as Marlene Dixon’s 1969 pamphlet “Why Women’s Liberation?” did. She wrote: “the phenomenon of male chauvinism can only be understood when it is perceived as a form of racism, based on stereotypes drawn from a deep belief in the biological inferiority of women. The so-called ‘black analogy’ is no analogy at all; it is the same social process that is at work, a process which both justifies and helps perpetuate the exploitation of one group of human beings by another.”⁵¹

Style theorizes itself: putting their assertions into contexts, reflecting on their operations, materializing again and again these unexpected recoils, alternately contemptuous, diminutive, joking, sexually threatening, and so on, feminists worked up stylistic mechanics that materialized and re-routed these meaning effects, and so collectively constitute a kind of inverse landscape of how gender works in discourse, a “theory” in effect, and in the negative.⁵² My aim here is to be analytical – how does this style work? – rather than nostalgic or contemptuous, but to be

⁵¹Dixon, “Why Women’s Liberation?” 74.

⁵²I am indebted to Julie Orlemanski’s “Who Has Fiction?” for this hermeneutic insight – in her argument, that medieval fictions themselves might constitute medieval theories of fictionality, that literary works can be literary theories, and that theories are not (necessarily) the kinds of things that are composed of explicit assertion. Orlemanski, “Who Has Fiction? Modernity, Fictionality, and the Middle Ages,” in *New Literary History*, Vol. 50, No. 2 (Spring 2019), especially 156 – 158.

analytical about how this style works requires us to be open to examining how it provokes and then recruits strong aesthetic reactions – recoil, and fascination, the latter produced by the unarticulated perception that there is an excess to the flat ways things are said, and that style is effecting a shift in consciousness that runs against the ways we intuitively think. But if I recuperate anything here, I am not recuperating icons, activists, artists, or positions, but a style, something formally “material.” As I hope will be clear as I proceed, I do not think either the development or use of this style is the exclusive province of radical feminists, white feminists, feminists as such, either self-identifying or not, or any particular kind of *people*. There are real historical reasons why white feminists were the ones deploying it. The way it works as I describe it, the effects it produces, if not the styles it uses or the discursive phenomena it is responsive to, are locked in to how gender works as a concept. What it shares stylistically with Black Power, with the New Left and other styles that produce materialist insights, can cut new through-lines in our sense of what “identity politics” were and are. How its modes land differently when they are used to intervene in gender, race, sexuality, as discourse tells us something about how they are produced as overtly different concepts that stand side-by-side, when operatively they may relate to each other, co-constitute each other, in uneven relationships.

Feminists were not always self-conscious or even good practitioners of this style – on the contrary I think this style was made by floating discursive balloons and then watching them pop, and correcting each other, trying again – but they were often more self-conscious and intentional than we give them credit for. This intentionality was not the intentionality of the “theorist” but the artist, an intentionality expressed by learning and being immersed in style conceived as a *practice*. It is the style itself, ironically, that makes it difficult for us to imagine that it might have been collaboratively developed through mutual aesthetic recognition, critically and self-

consciously employed as thought. But many of the Second Wave's central figures were artists, writers, and critics. Shulamith Firestone was a painter at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago; Ellen Willis a writer and rock critic; Toni Cade a short story writer (Toni Morrison was her editor); Kate Millett was a PhD candidate in literature at Columbia and a sculptor, Ti-Grace Atkinson was a painter who had been an art critic for the Philadelphia Art News, and a PhD candidate in philosophy; Jill Johnston was a dance critic, Andrea Dworkin was a poet and novelist, in the early days of her return to New York mentored by Grace Paley, Muriel Rukeyser, friends with Judith Malina and Julian Beck, who ran the experimental Living Theater; the aesthetic credentials of Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde need no introduction.⁵³

The three chapters of *Abstract, Literal, Reductive* follow the arc I just traced from the discursive problems Second Wave style is responsive to and that give rise to it, to how it thinks and what it thinks through becoming aware of itself. My first chapter, "Really Meaning It: Feminist Literalism" analyzes how this style works, and what it means for it to work, in formal terms. I read literalism as a shared style across the three ostensibly different, even opposed, feminist theories I discussed above, situating the too-literal "messages" or "positions" that sum up what these theories were in the texts that both do and do not say them: Ti-Grace Atkinson's 1968 theoretical prolegomena "Radical Feminism," in the Marxist-feminist international

⁵³The sense in which I understand this style to be intentional and shared is grounded in a different model of authorship than the ways we usually understand literary authorship – it is neither an "anxiety of influence" situation nor a kind of anonymous house style. It is analogous to the way Michel Foucault evokes the authorship of "Marxism" or "Freudianism" in "What is an Author?" For Foucault, the author-function is what sets a boundary around texts as singular wholes (textual object status), and imagines style as personal signature. He argues that this imaginary precludes us from recognizing the *other* ways we frequently imagine and understand authorship: when we think about Ann Radcliff as the "author" of the gothic genre, or when we produce thinking within a recognizable tradition, for example, and are therefore capable of arguing over whether some theory profession to be part of that body of thought is or isn't "really" Marxist without appealing to "what Marx the person said." My argument is that Second Wave feminists produced a style that can be conceptually inhabited in this way. Their own conceptions of authorship, their absolutely insistent resistance to single and proper-name authorship to the point of "trashing" one another for perceived bids to author feminism, is good evidence of what their style formally demonstrates. See Foucault, "What is an Author?" in *Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James. D. Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: The New Press, 1998). For an account of feminism's hostility to authorship, see Hesford, *Feeling Women's Liberation*, 160, and Kate Millett, *Flying* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1974).

collective that called itself the wages for housework committee, and anti-porn feminism, in Catharine MacKinnon's 1982 and 1983 *Signs* articles published under the shared title "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and State." I argue that these writers' drive to literalize is a shared style, collaboratively developed in response to the patterned kinds of reactions new feminist ideas produced when they were first shared.

My second chapter, "Getting Basic," then turns to a sense that problems of address are foundational to the development of new social movements' thinking on identity, across the categories of race and gender. "Getting Basic" the chapter is about race and gender as phenomena that thwart something the desire to "get basic" yearns for, the dream of clear communication. Just as in the previous chapter I argue that we can discern the forms of feminist style because they effect patterned forms of response in their readers, in my second chapter I argue that style can be understood as formal because it is responding to a diffuse problem of address it is trying to materialize as form. In this chapter, I look at three dialogues that are staged across different scenes of address, different formations of an "us" speaking to a "them," or an "us" trying (and failing) to speak amongst "ourselves." They are tense dialogues that seem inexorably to fall into a certain shape, to list toward antagonism and circularity: first, between Malcolm X and a listener to one of his radio appearances, second, between Adrienne Rich and Susan Sontag in the *New York Review of Books*, and third, between Audre Lorde and James Baldwin in *Essence Magazine*.

The new social movements, I argue, were premised on being able to hear and understand the sense of address driving the suddenly radioactive dynamics that speaking about race and gender were prone to set off – we might say, they wanted to take account of that sense of address as political meaning that could be navigated and re-routed, rather than just react to or be

provoked by it. Correspondingly, they wrote *to* this anticipated dynamics of response; their writing does not say what it means, it means what it does (to us, to the us it positions or constructs). In my final chapter, “Reductive” I read Andrea Dworkin’s *Pornography* as a text that works this way: a text that tries to shift our relation to pornography by shifting our relation as readers to *it*. Dworkin writes in ways that are infamously reductive, in service of a project that is understood to reductively argue that porn, as such, causes sexual violence because it uniformly depicts sex as violence. To understand *Pornography*, I argue, rather than to be, in a way, operated on by it, is to see differently this reductive juncture it brings us to again and again. In this way, I understand *Pornography* as a text that “does” a theory of the discursive habits feminist style is responding to, which is a theory of pornography – a theory of style aware of itself.

Chapter 1

Really Meaning It: Feminist Literalism

Judging a poem is like judging a pudding or a machine. One demands that it work.
– W.K. Wimsatt and Monroe C. Beardsley, *The Verbal Icon*

As far as I can determine, Goebbels' film of the generals slowly, horribly dying—their innards caving in from the force of gravity on their hung bodies, the slow strangulation pushing out their tongues and eyes and causing erection (which strangulation invariably does in the male)—was the first snuff film. The master of hate propaganda didn't get it right though—a rare lapse. Audiences became physically sick. These were Nazi audiences watching Nazi generals, men of power, the society's patriarchs, so white they were Aryan; rulers, not slaves. It only works when the torture is done on those who have been dehumanized, made inferior...desensitizing his Nazi audiences to the humiliation, the torture, of Jews, he could have made a film that would have worked—of Jews hanging from meat hooks, slowly strangled. But never of power, never of those who were the same, never of those who had been fully human to the audience the day before, never of those who had been respected.”

– Andrea Dworkin, from the 1989 Introduction to *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*

From 1972 to 1977 a small but dispersed collective of international women organized themselves around a Marxist feminism that articulated itself as the concrete demand to receive “wages for housework.” As Silvia Federici, one of the leaders of the collective, writes in her retrospective documentary anthology of the movement, *Wages for Housework: The New York Committee 1972 – 1977*, unknown to the international collective of the 1970s at the time, women had been organizing around housework since the late 19th century. In her introduction, Federici recognizes these early socialist and Marxist efforts to remunerate housework as forebears of the wages for housework committee, by first conceiving of the housewife as a member of the working class in her own right (not via her attachment to her working class husband or father).¹

¹Silvia Federici, “Introduction,” in *Wages for Housework: The New York Committee 1972 – 1977: History, Theory, Documents*, ed. Silvia Federici and Arlen Austin (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 2018), 15.

And yet, Federici writes, there was a “profound difference” between the 19th century politics of housework and the wages for housework movement of the 70s:

For most of them wages for housework was the just remuneration of a work with which they identified but wished to see upgraded...Demanding WFH was for them an affirmation of housework, while for us it expressed the refusal of a work by which we felt imprisoned and whose ends (the provision of cheap, docile, disciplined workers) we rejected as social and feminist ideals.²

We might say, in other words, that the difference Federici is describing between the two movements is that one ironizes the other: a demand that was once a straightforward and sincere demand – to be paid for housework, to really see its status as work reflect the value of its contribution to society – is now a “demand,” performed in order to effect a refusal to do that work that is a feminist/socialist conceptual intervention. On the one hand it is the almost perverse concretism, immediacy, and total seriousness of the undirected demand “wages for housework” that makes the demand radical and feminist. It is the concretism of wages, the insistence that the feminized and abstract form “housework” that occurs in the realm of the private, that is never on or off the clock, could or should be subject to the same numerical, quantitative exchange that the “wage” represents, that makes the demand jolting. It anticipates the way the demand will not compute – and that therefore anticipates the refusal of the demand that will occasion their responsive refusal to keep, then, doing housework. On the other hand, to make this demand a feminist demand is to, perversely, put pressure on the concretism of “housework” as a clearly defined material phenomenon: what counts as “work” that goes on “in the house”? Was marriage’s commandment to be always available for sex “housework”? Was giving birth “housework”? Could the demand “wages for housework” be used to protest forced sterilization?

²Federici, “Introduction,” in *Wages for Housework*, 15.

Just as the “demand” balances on a knife’s edge between a sincere/serious and potentially reformist desire for literal wages, and an ironized or perverse espousal of a demand it “knows” will be refused, “housework” balances on a knife’s edge between a concretism and materialism that is subject to a wage, and a metaphorical status that throws the possibility of quantification by a wage into question. It is only by seeing these dual negotiations with meaning that we can understand what “wages for housework” “says,” why it is a feminist critique of orthodox Marxism’s limited conception of “work.” For 19th and early 20th century socialist feminists, constructing housework as work was a demand to be included in the vision of the working class as a class; it confirmed and upheld the Marxist vision of politics as classes defined by wage labor; for the wages for housework movement, the “demand” for wages highlighted that the wage itself produced and was subtended by another kind of class division, one created by the fact that whatever is granted a wage becomes intelligible as work, and whatever isn’t, can’t be. And yet what keeps the worker subject to a wage relation with capital is his need not just to feed himself but to support unwaged dependents, whose un-waged not-work is the labor that subtends his ability to socially reproduce himself and enter in to waged work day after day.

What “wages for housework” theorizes as a movement is negotiated around what “wages for housework” as a phrase, as a demand/refusal, means – and what it means is not what it “literally” says but the way that what it says with a posture of total seriousness provokes the intuition that it is much too literal. In these ways, “wages for housework” is like “men are the enemy” and “sex is rape,” other phrases that stand for key “positions” or “theories” in the broader feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s: each centrally anchors a feminist politics which is interpretively organized around it, with a drive to winnow that politics into a too-determinate, too flat, oddly concrete or partial statement of the case of gender. The centralized

concepts have to stretch their meanings in order to make sense as a politics of gender: in what sense are men “the enemy” – in the sense that means “men,” as an idea, is the class antagonist of women? If men are the enemy is heterosexual marriage a betrayal of feminist politics? Is lesbianism therefore the paradigm of feminism? If sex is rape, does that mean that each instance of sex should be legally classified as rape, or does it mean that sex is, in a more metaphorical sense, rape-like? To understand the theory that a conflation like “sex is rape” anchors (a paraphrase of a central idea that theory both produces and refuses) we have to understand the temperature of its irony or the pitch of its abstraction.

The judgment that there is something too literal going on in the kinds of thinking these three political statements exemplify – and that in being so literal they are paradigmatically “Second Wave” – indexes and qualifies the way these statements produce for the reader a quandary about what, or how, they mean. Nowhere is this easier to see than in the reception of Dworkin and MacKinnon’s work, which has been vociferous, insistent, and consistent: even when they aren’t intentionally pejorative. For example, in her foreword to a new issue of *Intercourse* reissued in 2008, Ariel Levy performs the process of reading Dworkin on the page:

“The experience of sexual possession for women is real and literal,” [Dworkin] writes, “without any magical or mystical dimension to it: getting fucked and being owned are inseparably the same; together, being one and the same, they are sex for women under male dominance as a social system.” She may not have been saying all sex is rape, but clearly she was suggesting that most sex is something damn close when you live in a patriarchy. . . and where else are we to live? In this world, which is the only world that exists, “critiques of rape, pornography, and prostitution are ‘sex-negative’ without qualification or examination, perhaps because so many men use these ignoble routes of access and domination to get laid, and without them the number of fucks would so significantly decrease that men might nearly be chaste.

Really?³

³Ariel Levy, “Foreword,” in *Intercourse*, by Andrea Dworkin (New York: Basic Books, 2008), xiv.

Negotiating with the question of how to read Dworkin is, as Levy shows, is to negotiate the following: that she does not literally assert, in so many words, that sex is rape – but she *does* assert that sexual possession for women is real and literal. If she isn't saying all sex is rape, what she does say seems to *mean* that sex is rape, in a literal sense. Decoding what the sentence “the experience of sexual possession for women is real and literal without any magical or mystical dimension to it” means goes on in a context in which Dworkin and MacKinnon vociferously assert that they *do not mean* that sex is rape, that to read them as saying it is, in fact, symptomatic of the thing they are trying to critique: i.e., in a preface to a 1994 reissue of *Intercourse*, Dworkin herself wrote: “If one has eroticized a differential in power that allows for force as a natural and inevitable part of intercourse, how could one understand that this book does ***not*** say that all men are rapists or that all intercourse is rape?”⁴ Similarly, Dworkin herself captures, describes, and disqualifies this response to her work: in the introduction to a 1989 reissue of *Pornography*, she wrote:

Such first-person stories from women [about the role of pornography in attacks on them] are dismissed by defenders of pornography as "anecdotal...She's probably lying; maybe she really liked it; and if it did happen, how could anyone (sometimes referred to as "a smart girl like you") be stupid enough, simple-minded enough, to think that pornography had anything to do with it? Wasn't there, as one grinning adversary always asks, also coffee in the house? The coffee, he suggests, is more likely to be a factor in the abuse than the pornography—after all, the bad effects of coffee have been proven in the laboratory.”⁵

If Dworkin and MacKinnon continuously insist that such readings of their “simple-minded” equivalences between sex and rape, porn’s depiction of violence and the violence of real sex, are wrong, critics nevertheless struggle to understand how what they literally say can be construed to mean it any other way. In 2018, when the publication of an anthology of Dworkin’s collected

⁴Andrea Dworkin, “Preface,” in *Intercourse* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), xxxii.

⁵Andrea Dworkin, “Introduction,” in *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: Plume, 1981), xxvi.

work prompted a new round of critical attention to it, Lauren Oyler wrote of *Intercourse* in the New Yorker: “When she says that men will have to ‘give up their precious erections,’ it makes sense metaphorically – men should ‘renounce their phallogentric personalities, and the privileges and powers given to them at birth.’ But she also seems to mean it literally, which without mandated surgical intervention is just not going to happen.”⁶ Michelle Goldberg wrote in the New York Times: “Dworkin never actually wrote that all sex is rape, a claim often attributed to her, but she did see heterosexual intercourse as almost metaphysically degrading.”⁷ Dworkin’s writing, its proximity to the claim that “sex is rape,” drives meaning into a cul-de-sac, one in which we as readers make shifts to reconstruct what that claim might mean alternately by shifting its registers of figurativity and tone. Hearing what seems to amount to the meaning “sex is rape,” readers recoil – does she really mean that, literally? Does she really mean *that*? (Does she mean by “rape” what I think rape means? Does “giving up precious erections” mean castration – literally?). Does she really *mean* that? (Is she as straight-faced as she seems? Is there not a tongue in cheek here, an ironized performance of extremity?).

Understood this way, literalism is at once an aesthetic and cognitive judgment: it is our sense of tone or registers of figurativity – or, rather, the absence of any particular tone and the absence of any register of figurativity – that opens on to the sense that what is meant, and the thinking it evinces, is “literal-minded.” This is not a primary use of the idea of “literal” language, which is usually a neutral description and a description of neutrality. Literal language is often understood to be a description of language as such, something akin to the plain style, a cousin to sincerity. In their introduction to a special issue of *Representations*, “Denotatively, Technically,

⁶Lauren Oyler, “The Radical Style of Andrea Dworkin,” in *The New Yorker*, March 25, 2019. <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/04/01/the-radical-style-of-andrea-dworkin>

⁷Michelle Goldberg, “Not the Fun Kind of Feminist,” in *The New York Times*, February 22, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/02/22/opinion/sunday/trump-feminism-andrea-dworkin.html>.

Literally,” Elaine Freedgood and Cannon Schmitt more or less posit an equivalence between those three terms: language that denotes is language that is technical (scientific, instructive) is literal language. Literal language is language that *seems* to mean what it says; it is language that we imagine we can look transparently through, rather than *at*.⁸ When literal language is understood as perfectly denotative language, language either achieves or we are describing language we *think* achieves (depending on your language philosophy) frictionless connection between intention and world – what one *means* to identify with language is what one actually does identify with language. It is the “opposite of the language of the literary text: operational in precisely the way the literary text is not. We do not use *Heart of Darkness* as a sailing manual or a handbook for the extraction of natural resources.”⁹ The kinds of things we do with language we take to be literal is not the kinds of things we do with language we take to be literary – and literal language projects a direct line from statement to action (it is instructional, technical, the stuff of handbooks) because it enacts frictionless reference.¹⁰

This explains literalism’s inverse relationship to, alternately, metaphor or irony, both of which have at times been taken as paradigmatic of literary language, technical language’s

⁸Elaine Freedgood and Cannon Schmitt, “Denotatively, Technically, Literally,” in *Representations* 125, no. 1 (Winter 2014), 4.

⁹Freedgood and Schmitt, “Denotatively, Technically, Literally,” 1.

¹⁰See also Alex Woloch’s *Or Orwell*, which argues that Orwell’s “plain style” is a challenge for literary critics precisely because it offers “direct” access to intentionality, and John Guillory’s “Mercury’s Words,” which argues that the development of “the plain style” is the development of the desire for what we conceptually call prose, a “vanishing mediator,” a desire for a fantasy, for “no style at all,” for “mathematical plainness” and the kind of perfect communication that would move discourse beyond ideological dispute. Alex Woloch, *Or Orwell: Writing and Democratic Socialism* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2016); John Guillory, “Mercury’s Words: The End of Rhetoric and the Beginning of Prose,” in *Representations* 138, no. 1 (Spring 2017), 77 – 78.

Literary criticism has also used the term literalism to think about language’s material/object status, in critical debates broadly inspired by Michael Fried’s “Art and Objecthood” and its description of Minimalism as a literalist art. Critics such as Walter Benn Michaels and Steven Knapp take a sense of “literalism” about language to be a conceptual pre-requisite for conceiving of interpretation as an activity premised on the interaction of a reader or viewer and the art/text as material object. “Literalism” refers to an attitude toward the text’s materiality that denies the connection between authorial intention and meaning, and “literal language” in their work is the converse of Guillory’s vanishing mediator – it regards language as a non-medium, a material thing-in-itself, and for Michaels to regard language with this literalism is to bring it to meaninglessness. Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). Walter Benn Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem: Photography, Autonomy, Economy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015). See also Sandra Macpherson, “The Novel is a Theory of Allegory,” in *The Eighteenth Century* Volume 61, Number 2 (Summer 2020).

opposite, and both of which are ways language does not mean what it says. Metaphor and irony have, paradoxically, frequently been understood to make no alteration to meaning when they are understood, in the rhetorical tradition, as figures – or rather, we understand what a metaphor asserts when we “translate” it back into its literal meaning. In *The Rule of Metaphor*, Paul Ricoeur calls this the postulate of “no new information,” and it is baked into the theory of metaphor as substituting a “deviant” word for a “proper” word that he traces from Aristotle through the rhetoricians of the 19th century and lingering in late 20th century theories of metaphor that rely on Saussurean linguistics.¹¹ The theory of metaphor as substitution follows certain logical steps, he writes. Certain names belong to certain kinds (species or genera) of things. What we do when we make a metaphor is transpose a “proper” word for a word belonging to some other kind, an “improper” word. The improper word stands in for an absent, proper word (the word that would produce literal meaning), creating a “deviant” meaning. The metaphor can be explained or paraphrased, by appealing to the “reason” for the metaphor, which is the relationship between the borrowed word and the absent, “correct” word its standing in for. When we discover the reason, we can produce an exhaustive paraphrase of the metaphor: “in principle, the restitutive paraphrase is exhaustive, so the algebraic sum of substitution and subsequent restitution is zero”; part and parcel of this is that “if an exhaustive paraphrase of the metaphor (and of tropes in general) can be given, then the metaphor says nothing new.”¹² Against this theory of metaphor as word substitution whose logic involves the principles of exhaustive paraphrase and no new information, Ricoeur elaborates a theory of metaphor in which metaphor produces some irreducibly *intermediate* shade of meaning: a metaphor always asserts X is Y, and

¹¹Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny, with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello (London and New York: Routledge Classics, 1975), 52.

¹²Ricoeur, *Rule of Metaphor*, 52.

also carries with it a “resisting” not, it *also* means that X is not Y. Hope is the thing with feathers, but also hope is not the thing with feathers (because it is not the kind of thing that can have feathers). Metaphorical meaning arises when a literal sense of the proposition fails to compute – it is this failure that prompts the reader or listener to produce a “deviant” meaning for the sentence as a whole. In Ricoeur’s formulation, metaphors are referential *in* and *with* this kind of mediate meaning (as opposed to only becoming referential once their ‘true’ meaning is derived by discovering the ‘reason’ for comparing the world to a stage, producing an exhaustive paraphrase of it, etc).¹³

To make a pejorative judgment of literalness is to make a judgment that the distance of metaphorical or ironized language is the language that best captures the situation, that metaphorical or ironized language is the language that is properly referential in this case. Literalism is a charge that regulates the habitual relationship of language to the world: when you’re speaking too literally about something, I’m telling you that the key of your language is too close to the situation you’re trying to grasp. When you’re taking something someone says too literally, I’m telling you that your *reading* of someone else’s language does not capture the complexity, abstraction, tonal or figurative distance their language has to the situation it describes. As a judgment it indexes the fact that normative language is often *not* literal, or rather that literal language does not have priority on description of the world – it is often abstract, metaphorical, even irony-laden language that can seem to best capture the “nuance” of the real. It also indexes the fact that cognition has an aesthetics: literal-mindedness is a short-hand analysis of why someone is wrong, but also, it is an immediate recoil, one that precedes its own criteria or reasons. To be so simple-minded that you think the *porn* caused the rape is not just a claim that

¹³Ricoeur calls this his “tensional theory” of metaphorical reference. See “Study 8: Metaphor and reference,” in *The Rule of Metaphor*, and especially section 5, “Towards the concept of ‘metaphorical truth,’” 255 – 303.

the thinking in question makes some collection of classifiable epistemic mistakes that “literalism” names; it is a judgment laced specifically with contempt for the clunkiness or aesthetic quality of your thinking.

What readers mean by the pejorative judgment that she’s being simple-minded, thinking too literally, responds explicitly and argumentatively to what these writings “say” while also describing something we are averse to about the way they mean: the difference between, she means X literally (when she shouldn’t) and the perception that her style, her thinking, literalizes. It is the way this style simultaneously prompts and blocks the reader’s recourse to the sense of metaphor or irony that grates against grates against our usual meaning-making mechanics, that produces an intensely negative aesthetic reaction we qualitatively name as being literal, *too* literal. What “being literal” describes or grasps as an aesthetic judgment is the way feminist style drives us directionally against the grain of our normal meaning-processing, putting semantic decoding into reverse, as it were. The way we habitually process meaning moves from confrontation with a literal meaning that does not compute → reconstructed meanings negotiated through figurativity, or irony. What we describe as “*too* literal” is the way feminist writing forces us from an accustomed figurative or ironic reference (its customariness casting *it* as literal, transparent to the world) → a supposedly constitutive failed literal meaning.

Their writing works, like a pudding, or a machine: or, in the way Dworkin’s anecdote about Goebbels suggests is testable or analyzable by the aesthetics of those artifacts that create work stoppages. That Goebbels’ last film so spectacularly *does not work* lights up the components on which his other films do, like salt in the pudding, or a wrench in the machine.

I. Provoking a Recoil: “Radical Feminism” and Literalism as Form

The question of how to regard men was a line-drawing and constitutive debate for radical feminism, both materially and conceptually. It began as a question about whether “male chauvinism” was something that could be addressed, organizationally, from within the groups women already participated in, from within Black Power or the SDS; it divided women’s groups on the left from groups that came to describe themselves as women’s liberationists, and then feminists, and it. The left groups, sometimes called *politicos*, wanted to form subcommittees on “the woman issue” within groups like the SDS or SNCC; they wanted to see themselves as part of the left, and they broadly considered “male chauvinism” to be a product of “the system” or capitalism. Groups that would become women’s liberationists and radical feminists made their first moves toward this kind of becoming through their objections to this positioning, or rather, through their sense that the way the male left met this sort of positioning (with derision) revealed something logical, systematic, or durable about gender itself. Radical feminists recoiled against what they saw as the mystification of objecting to “the system” and the pandering appeals to the male left to please respect them and spare a thought for sex inequality as an injustice, however epiphenomenal and bourgeois it might be: Shulamith Firestone called them, in what constitutes the most derisive terms possible for the 1960s political scene, the “Ladies Auxilliaries of the Left.”¹⁴

As radical women articulated different rationales to each other for forming separate groups that would have different kinds of organizational ties and attitudes toward collaboration with the “male left,” what was a concrete organizational question lead on to a conceptual debate about how feminists should regard men, how “woman” related to “man,” whether existing leftist

¹⁴Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex*, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2003), 33. My overview of this early moment is indebted to Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), especially her second chapter, “The Great Divide: The Politico- Feminist Schism,” and Ellen Willis, “Radical Feminism and Feminist Radicalism” in *Social Text*, “The 60’s Without Apology,” No. 9/10 (Spring/Summer 1984).

analysis could or couldn't explain sexism, and how an autonomous feminist movement's political analysis might map a politics of sex onto the known political world. Was sex/gender one of other equally weighted products of "the system" that also produced race and class, or was it an epiphenomenon of capitalism? Was feminism therefore autonomous because it could therefore recruit and bring a new constituency – women – into the left? Or was sex/gender prior to or more basic than race and class – and in what way prior?¹⁵ Even in the earliest articulations of radical feminism, autonomy was a tone and a posture as much as a theory about the way gender power worked, or rather, it was a theory that the properly political was expressed as a tone and posture: to ask rather than demand, to rely on others to be active on one's own behalf, was not properly political. How should we regard men, how should we orient ourselves to them (merely separate? Strategically opposed? Really with loathing?), was equally a question of gender's cause and feminism's political orientation to as-yet-not-conscious women: should it regard women as incapacitated, slightly pathetic apolitical creatures who do not yet recognize their own oppression? As dupes to the ideology of sex and love? As a materially and structurally un-resourced class making strategic survival decisions in their own material interest? As actors responsible for their own complicity in systems of power, clinging to an ideology of helpless victimhood as an alibi?¹⁶

Ti-Grace Atkinson's "Radical Feminism," written in 1969 for MacLean's magazine and rejected, published in 1970 in New York Radical Women's *Notes from the Second Year*, is one

¹⁵Feminists experimented with the differences in these theoretical conceptions by framing in slightly different ways their rationales for an autonomous movement. See Ann Koedt, "Women and the Radical Movement," "What is Liberation?" published by the editorial board of *Women: A Journal of Liberation*, Marlene Dixon, "Why Women's Liberation?", Roxanne Dunbar, "Female Liberation as the Basis for Social Revolution," and Rita Mae Brown, "Roxanne Dunbar: How a Female Heterosexual Serves the Interests of Male Supremacy," all anthologized in *Radical Feminism: A Documentary Reader*, ed. Barbara A. Crow (New York: NYU Press, 2000).

¹⁶This debate was sometimes called the debate over the "pro-woman line," which was the name the Redstockings gave to what Willis described as their "neo-Maoist materialism" that led them to take a position against any theories of internalized sexism and to explain women's "complicity" with patriarchy as the result of rational adaptive preference. See Willis, "Radical Feminism and Feminist Radicalism," 97.

of the paradigmatic manifestoes for this radical feminist political “misandry.”¹⁷ And it is paradigmatic not just because it gives itself the name of the movement it will define but because it exaggerates some of the less extreme, less flat, more “nuanced” ways of parsing the question of how to regard men that bubbled up across leftist print culture and carved one group’s position from another’s. Consider, for example, some of the – already quite literal – ways other feminists tried out and staked out different ways of phrasing some sense of feminism’s normative opposition to men – different phrasings that become the grounds for conceptually different ways of understanding gender. Here is how Beverly Jones and Judith Brown put it in their 1968 pamphlet, “Toward a Female Liberation Movement”:

A relationship between a man and a woman is no more or less personal a relationship than is the relationship between a woman and her maid, a master and his slave, a teacher and his student... Purposely divided from each other, each of us is ruled by one or more men for the benefit of all men.¹⁸

Here is how the Redstockings Manifesto put it, as line item III in their declaration of principles:

We identify the agents of our oppression as men... They have used their power to keep women in an inferior position. *All men* receive economic, sexual, and psychological benefits from male supremacy. *All men* have oppressed women.¹⁹

And finally, here is how Lynn O’Connor put it in her 1972 mimeograph, “Male Supremacy”:

Cheerfully, women continue to talk about teaching their men to think differently about women, as if their oppression were based on some unfortunate mistake that men would happily rectify, given time and a more sound moral education... [but] good intentions are pernicious forms of self-protective deception that flow out of the mouths of those who

¹⁷And the texts that articulate variations on it, approach it with different styles, and extend it into different ways of conceptualizing feminism go far beyond those I’ve surveyed here. See Roxanne Dunbar, “Who is the Enemy?” in *No More Fun and Games*, Issue 2 (February 1969), 51 – 60, and Betsy Warrior, “Man as an Obsolete Life Form,” in *No More Fun and Games*, Issue 2 (February 1969), 77 – 80. See also, in Crow, *Radical Feminism*: Valerie Solanas, “SCUM Manifesto,” 201 – 223, Joanna Russ, “The New Misandry,” 167 – 171, Sidney Abbot and Barbara Love “Is Women’s Liberation a Lesbian Plot?,” 310 – 325, and Martha Shelley’s “Lesbianism and the Women’s Liberation Movement,” 305 – 310. It was radical feminism’s normative desire to see and respond to gender as an antagonism between men and women that made it a vein of feminism alienating to black women, who did not want to practically or conceptually abandon a sense of political unity with Black men; however, black women *did* perceive, theorize, and try to ameliorate a sense of gender as an antagonism in some of black feminism’s earliest work – a much under-emphasized vein of thinking. See Fran Sanders, “Dear Black Man” in *The Black Woman*, ed Toni Cade (New York: Washington Square Press, 1970), 87-95, and Kay Lindsey, “The Black Woman as a Woman,” also in Cade, 103 - 109.

¹⁸Beverly Jones and Judith Brown, “Toward a Female Liberation Movement,” in Crow, *Radical Feminism*, 35 – 36.

¹⁹“Redstockings Manifesto” in Crow, *Radical Feminism*, 223.

benefit from the oppression of women but don't want to openly admit it, which at this point means most men.²⁰

Now consider how "Radical Feminism" frames the issue. It is subtitled "A Declaration of War," and basically it proceeds in its temperature of extremity from there:

Almanina Barbour, a black militant woman in Philadelphia, once pointed out to me: 'The Women's Movement is the first in history with a war on and no enemy.' I winced. It was an obvious criticism. I fumbled about in my mind for an answer. Surely the enemy must have been defined at some time. Otherwise, what had we been shooting at for the last couple of years? Into the air?

Only two responses came to me, although in looking for those two I realized that it was a question carefully avoided. The first and by far the most frequent answer was 'society.' The second, infrequently and always furtively, was 'men.'

If 'society' is the enemy, what could that mean? If women are being oppressed, there's only one group left over to be doing the oppressing: men. Then why call them 'society'? Could 'society' mean the 'institutions' that oppress women? But institutions must be maintained, and the same question arises: by whom? The answer to 'who is the enemy?' is so obvious that the interesting issue quickly becomes 'why has it been avoided'?²¹

The sense of Atkinson's literalism starts to emerge here in the way she frames the question of feminism's autonomy from the male left as, starkly, "men are the enemy" which stands out even in a field of positions in which "each of us is ruled by one or more men" and "all men" are benefitting from the oppression of women. Atkinson's way of putting this position seems not to grasp, alternately, the abstract kind of antagonism that obtains between political classes, conflating such an antagonism with intensely personal, too-pointed *animosity*. It commensurately seems to be unsophisticatedly concrete in its sense that "men" are *the* enemy, singular, full stop, as if men are at once a "who" one can locate and blame, like finding the who in a whodunnit, an uncomplicatedly unified and intentional entity. Contrast the former with the still highly intentional but much more clinical evocation of men as "agents" of oppression; contrast the latter

²⁰Lynn O'Connor, "Male Supremacy," in Crow, *Radical Feminism*, 171.

²¹Ti-Grace Atkinson, "Radical Feminism" in *Amazon Odyssey: The First Collection of Writings By the Political Pioneer of the Women's Movement* (New York: Links Books, 1974).

with the totalizing but still plural claim that *all* men benefit from women's oppression. "Radical Feminism" takes this rudimentarily definite sense of things and runs with it, by evoking this antagonistic stance between men and women in terms of a metaphor of battle – and exaggerating it:

The 'battle of the sexes' is a commonplace, both over time and distance. But it is an inaccurate description of what has been happening. A 'battle' implies some balance of powers, whereas when one side suffers all the losses, such as in raids (often referred to as the 'rape' of an area), that is called a *massacre*. Women have been massacred as human beings over history, and this destiny is entailed by their definition. As women begin massing together, they take the first step from *being* massacred to *engaging in* battle (resistance) and, hopefully, eventually to negotiations – in the *very* far future – and peace.²²

And then extending it, advising that when any person or group of persons is being attacked, one should follow a succession of responses and investigations, such as (numbers and all):

- (1) Depending on the severity of the attack (short of an attack on life), the victim determines how much damage was done and what it was done with.
- (2) Where is the attack coming from? – from whom? – located where?²³

If these merely diplomatic maneuvers fail, Atkinson goes on, straining the metaphor still further, you must force your enemy to stop attacking you – for which you need a strategy, and a "map" of the "relevant landscape," which might include questions like "who is the enemy?" followed by "is he getting outside support? – material? – manpower? – from whom?" and "where are his forces massed?" and "what's the best ammunition to knock them out?"²⁴

"Radical Feminism" grasps what is intuitively literal about the position "men are the enemy" and exaggerates it, gives it form, when it seizes a metaphor for that pitch of animosity – not just a battle of the sexes, a massacre of one sex by another! – and slides into language that no

²²Atkinson, "Radical Feminism," 49.

²³Atkinson, "Radical Feminism," 49-50.

²⁴Atkinson, "Radical Feminism," 50.

longer discerns between a metaphorical and literal massacre. The “extremity” that repels readers about this writing is inextricable from the intuited literalism of this sentence. Her too-literalism is the perception that she wants to exaggerate the harms to women because she has collapsed the distance between metaphorical and literal “massacre,” that she “really” thinks that what has happened to women *is* or amounts to massacre. It is the objection we make to the loss of nuance that happens when something that is understood to more distantly *evoke* some situation is taken to *literally* describe it: the lack of nuance that goes on when Atkinson asserts that women have been massacred for “all of history” (which does not capture historical change or context) and that this has been “entailed by definition” (ignoring questions of proximal cause or the distinction between words and what they describe). By the time Atkinson has arrived at bullet point questions about whether the enemy is getting “outside manpower” (men getting manpower outside of men?) the reader has the sense that Atkinson is unequal to the analogical work she has been doing, as if she “believes” her own metaphor and really means that women are at battle, literally; or, that she has become so lost in the vehicle that she has forgotten about what any of this could possibly mean when extrapolated back to the tenor. Later in her work, Atkinson will stretch this metaphor even further, publishing 35 charts and diagrams in *Amazon Odyssey* that map out a “Strategy and Tactics: A Presentation of Political Lesbianism” and in graphical terms depict results to the “oppressor,” “oppressed” and “pro-rebellion” populations of various defensive maneuvers and sequenced “offensives.”²⁵ Feminist scholar Meghan Morris wrote about these diagrams that they constituted “fanatical attempts to make the metaphorical war [between the sexes] a real one.”²⁶ Sam McBean, writing about Morris writing about the diagrams, writes that for Morris “the diagrams’ depiction of feminist revolution as a literal

²⁵Atkinson, “Strategy and Tactics: A Presentation of Political Lesbianism,” in *Amazon Odyssey*.

²⁶Quoted in Sam McBean, “Feminist Diagrams,” in *Feminist Theory*, Vol 22(2) (2021), 207.

battleground can only be a curious and characteristic object of the so-called second wave, and radical feminism of the 1970s in particular.”²⁷

When “Radical Feminism” provokes the intuition that it is “being literal” it is provoking the kind of structured reading experience I described above: as Atkinson stretches the battle metaphor further and further, the reader increasingly negotiates with his or her sense that Atkinson can’t really mean *that* – can’t mean *literally* that sex inequality is a battle. The text in fact grasps and anticipates this reaction, and contravenes the reader’s cue to renegotiate what she is saying in more figurative registers: “I am using some military terminology, which may seem incongruous,” she writes, “But why should it? We accept the phrase ‘battle of the sexes.’ It is the proposal that *women fight back* that seems incongruous.”²⁸ As the essay drives toward the sense that this “battle” isn’t so much of a metaphor, as it strips away the possibility of residual figurativity in our sense of what Atkinson means, it drives the reader to press for senses of irony (is this militant seriousness, this straight face, a posture? Satire?) – a renegotiation with Atkinson’s meaning that “Radical Feminism” cues and then withholds or reroutes, producing, again, the sense that Atkinson has failed to grasp the kind of ironized absurdity of her own language, the humor produced by the positions she finds herself in going right over her head. Having spent most of the essay relying on the increasingly literal metaphor that sex is a battle to outline a theory of feminism in which “the interaction between classes” is what “defines political action” and that in order to have a politics of gender women must in a sense commit suicide by destroying their own definition,²⁹ “Radical Feminism” veers jarringly onto another course altogether in its last few paragraphs:

²⁷McBean, “Feminist Diagrams,” 209.

²⁸Atkinson, “Radical Feminism,” 51.

²⁹Atkinson, “Radical Feminism,” 53.

Because women have been taught to believe that men have protective feelings towards women (men have protective feelings toward their functions (property) Not other human beings!), we women are shocked by these discoveries and ask ourselves why men took and continue to take advantage of us.

Some people say that men are naturally, or biologically, aggressive. But this leaves us at an impasse. If the values of society are power oriented, there is no chance that men would agree to be medicated into an humane state. The other alternative that has been suggested is to eliminate men as biologically incapable of humane relationships and therefore a menace to society. I can sympathize with the frustration and rage that leads to this suggestion.

But the proposal as I understand it is that men constitute a social disease, and that by 'men' is meant those individuals with certain typical genital characteristics. These genital characteristics are held to determine the organism in every biochemical respect thus determining the psychic structure as well. It may be that as in other mental derangements, and I do believe that men behave in a mentally deranged manner towards women, there is a biochemical correspondence but this would be ultimately behaviorally determined not genetically.³⁰

There is something surreal and deeply wrong-footing about this turn in the essay, as it veers from an imaginary of (too literal) battle to contending with the idea of men as a social disease, sans any sense of the figurative difference between a "social disease" and (real, material, literal, biologically eliminable) disease. What provokes a sense of literalism is the way precipitous reversals in tone supervene on this reversal in figuration: the conversation Atkinson stages around the possibility that "men" are a biological problem goes on as if she cannot hear the tone that inflects the meaning of these "proposals." The proposal that men are "naturally" aggressive, clearly the kind of proposal usually offered as a depoliticizing apologia, is pried from all sense of context. Atkinson treats it as if it is totally sincere, as if to see this as the nature of the problem of men really constitutes a troubling "impasse" to solving it. She then puts it in conversation with a position she responds to with equal practicality and tone-deafness, the "proposal" that men must be eliminated, as if she has read pamphlets like Valerie Solanas' SCUM Manifesto or Betsy Warrior's "Man as an Obsolete Life Form" and has completely missed the tone of statements

³⁰Atkinson, "Radical Feminism," 54 – 55.

like this: “Life in this society being, at best, an utter bore and no aspect of society being at all relevant to women, there remains to civic-minded, responsible, thrill-seeking females only to overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation and destroy the male sex.”³¹ To characterize this passage from SCUM Manifesto as a “proposal” is to have rather missed the point. Having laundered any perception of tone from the way she makes sense of what these writings mean, in order to hear them making “proposals” she then too-seriously considers, Atkinson herself adopts the cerebrally cool, distant tone of Solanas herself. She puts on a clinical remove, taking the “proposal” to be that “genital characteristics are held to determine the organism in every biochemical respect,” a “scientific” claim she then considers on its merits and tepidly concedes only part of. SCUM Manifesto works as satire: it effects a denaturalization of sex via reversal – how would some of the beliefs we hold with regard to “inherently female” qualities sound if we simply turned the tables, shifting the value terms of the “inherent” qualities and ascribing them to men? It operates ironically as the citation of another’s voice (patriarchal discourse about sex) with a tonal difference that cues us to scan its meaning in some form of negation to what it is saying. Atkinson’s too-literal reading of this manifesto, that is, a reading of it that launders away its tone and reads it merely as a perfectly sincere proposal, is a reversal of a reversal: it produces a classically patriarchal understanding of gender as biologically essential characteristics with fascist results. It is the utter incongruity of this quasi fascist, cerebral consideration of the proposal to eliminate men with the rest of “Radical Feminism” that cues the reader to look for irony. It is Atkinson’s serious consideration of, and ultimately serious disagreement with, this “proposal” that refuses the sense of irony it also cues

³¹Solanas, “SCUM Manifesto,” 201.

for: ultimately disagreeing (seriously) with this position, Atkinson blocks the completion of the ironic process in which the reader, sensing irony, reverses the stated position to its opposite.

II. Breaking Metaphors, Re-Routing Meaning

To follow the sense that literalism is an intentional style, that “Radical Feminism” *literalizes* stylistically, is to reframe what “Radical Feminism” “says” as a theory. It does not, actually, assert, manifesto-like, that “men are the enemy” – rather, it begins from the question, “why has this obvious answer been avoided?” “The “raison d’etre” of all groups formed around the problem of women, Atkinson writes, “is that women are a class,” and if “traditional” (liberal) feminists fail to consider this and find themselves stuck asking for equal rights for unequal functions (do *all* women have the right to decide not to bear children?), radical women (politicos) understand that politics is a class analysis but fail to consider the distinct ways women constitute a class and its implications for political analysis. This is why “Radical Feminism” asserts there has “never been a feminist analysis,” that “women who have tried to solve their problems as a class have proposed not solutions but dilemmas” – not because they don’t try to see women as a class, or perceive the “dilemma” that women are a class who must eradicate their own definitions, but because they do not grasp the *distinctness* of women “as a class,” the challenge that sex poses for a politics conceived as class contradiction.³²

What is distinct about women as a class is what it is about “Radical Feminism” that makes us recoil at its literalism; it is the strange ways women cannot be made to see themselves as a class. Although gender is a binary “universe of discourse” and there is therefore only one class left over to *be* the antagonist, the answer made necessary by that binary class structure is

³²Atkinson, “Radical Feminism,” 48-49.

nevertheless studiously avoided. If feminists must eradicate sex to eradicate “women” as their definition, this definition does not seem to work as the kind of dialectically defining binary it presents itself as – otherwise, “men” would be an easy answer. The gesture of exposure that Atkinson’s opening lines perform, in which she peels back the obfuscating sense that women’s circumstances are produced by a diffuse, faceless “system” to ground politics in the concrete, the material *does not work*. It doesn’t produce a sense of revelation or insight; it produces a recoil, the sense that this is too concrete a parsing of the problem, the wrong register of antipathy for a political antagonism. If the project of doing a political analysis of sex might wish to approximate the clarity of a materialist analysis, in which one might identify the organizing class contradiction by looking to material reality, this does not work for feminism. There is no appeal to the corresponding material reality that controls sex – the body, genitals – to produce this kind of exposure of ideology. To say “men are the enemy” does not work: it does not successfully upend the mystification of “the system” layered on top of it. What the appeal to a sense of class contradiction grounded in “reality,” in bodies, in genitals, materializes when is that the habitual register for leftist politics does not work for feminism. It brings us up against a durable intuition of *wrongness*. Feminism proper, Atkinson is saying, has to read this recoil, has to understand it as indicating something meaningful about gender as a material and symbolic system.

“Radical Feminism” is a point of arrival for Atkinson, a kind of annunciation of her feminism. It has worked out a theory about why “eradicating our own definition” is a dilemma as opposed to a solution. It has done so because it has worked out a stylistic practice of literalism that evokes and re-routes the durably material semantic practices that set limits on what and how one can mean about gender, that make gender not just a matter of “definition” understood in the assertive or predicative sense. We can see this when she republishes it in *Amazon Odyssey* in

1974, a collection of her writings that she characterizes as a kind of narrative depiction of her progression through the movement. “Radical Feminism” appears one third of the way through *Amazon Odyssey*, but it is the first of what Atkinson calls three mini-books that in themselves dramatize an “arc” for her participation and thinking in the movement, distinguished and off-set by different page design and art. “Radical Feminism,” she writes in her Afterword, “marked the beginning of a formulation of the *dimensions* of the problem of women”: she nicknames it “Genesis.” It consolidates and finalizes a set of ideas that run through the early pieces of *Amazon Odyssey*, compressed, finally, into this sentence in “Radical Feminism”: “What is frequently omitted is that ‘political’ classes are *artificial*; they define persons *with* certain capacities *by* that capacity, changing the contingent to the necessary, thereby appropriating the *capacity* of an individual as a *function* of society....A ‘function’ of society cannot be a free individual.”³³ But it is the way *Amazon Odyssey* tracks the development of style that fully evokes this idea about how definition works to produce political class, as we can see Atkinson experimenting with the practice of this style as she evokes and develops this concern over the distinction between capacity and function.

The piece that opens *Amazon Odyssey* “Abortion Paper II,” is a strange little essay Atkinson wrote and presented at the National Conference for NOW in 1967. “Abortion Paper II” argues that women should have the right to abortion by relying on an analogy between women and sculptors. The rhetorical purpose of this analogy is, ostensibly, that if we compare the way we regard the reproductive process to the way we regard something like sculpting, we’ll see that we do not grant “women” the same kind of autonomous relationship to the capacity they’re exercising or the material they’re exercising it on as we do to artists. The force of the comparison

³³Atkinson, “Radical Feminism,” 52.

might be glossed as: we think of reproduction as something totally different than autonomous creation, but women are “really” like sculptors, reproduction is “really” a creative capacity that women control – and if we were to conceptualize it this way, we might conceptualize differently what rights a woman has over the “material” she works (the fetus) and when it is conceived of as having an independent ontology (not till she says so, or at the end of gestation). But although this seems to be the natural rhetorical purpose that such a comparison would lend itself to (we should shift the way we conceptualize reproduction to be more like the way we think of a creative capacity, like sculpting), it is difficult to say so because “Abortion Paper II’s” analogy works badly. It frequently violates the basic procedures of parallel comparison or likeness. As sculptors are granted control over the artistic process and correspondingly own the material they’re operating on (and as part of both, are granted infinite freedom to do with that material whatever they want), so, Atkinson analogizes, we might see the woman as an artist:

The property which distinguishes her as a woman is her reproductive function. She may choose not to exercise her function at all, or she may choose to exercise it. The man may try to give her certain material which would then become her property. She can accept or reject the gift. Once accepting the gift, she can choose to exercise her special capacity on this material or not.³⁴

As sculptures are considered “finished” at a certain point, Atkinson implies, so might the process and material involved in reproduction be considered as the woman’s property until some definite point. The force of this point is decidedly blunted when Atkinson runs a category violation, trying to locate such an “objective criterion” for a sculpture’s being an independent object – she writes that it is “finished” either when artist says it is done, or it meets some objective criteria of “what it is to be a statue of a person.”³⁵ These are junctures that make the reader proverbially wince – we immediately feel the wrongness, the awkward sentimentality, of understanding sex to

³⁴Atkinson, “Abortion Paper II,” in *Amazon Odyssey*, 2.

³⁵Atkinson, “Abortion Paper II,” 2.

be a property transaction in which sperm is a “gift.” We immediately feel that the operation of metaphor has been transgressed when the question of whether a fetus is a person is migrated into the question of when a sculpture meets objective criteria for being finished (in order to then analogically extrapolate backwards that we might see reproduction as a creative capacity like sculpting). It’s as if Atkinson has taken her own metaphor too literally, has over-extended what might be useful as a spontaneous and evocative similarity (what if we granted women a sense of creative capacity over their own reproduction?) to a point-by-point translation that loses any figuratively inflected sense of analogical likeness and collapses vehicle/tenor too close to literal sameness. To the point that the analogy’s failure rhetorically works in the opposite direction we might presume it wants to go: the sense that this analogy is much too literal, doesn’t work, produces the rather overriding impression that women are *not* like sculptors. The capacity to sculpt is actually not understood as a definitive essence; sperm is actually not understood as the woman’s property, it never ‘belongs’ to her, and she has no ‘say’ over when it is finished.

My sense is that this is, in fact, the exercise “Abortion II” experiments with. To perceive the wrongness of its too literal comparison is to be thrown back on a sense of what “reproduction” as a concept will and won’t allow: that is, the metaphor makes us feel that the concept “reproduction” doesn’t work for us this way. If at times the effect of the metaphor *is* to evoke our sense that we might see ‘reproduction’ as a capacity, the way we see sculpting, it also powerfully works to show us the reverse, that the romantic notion that reproduction is a creative capacity works for us only on the level of metaphor; it only feels right cast in those terms. And this is in fact a point that Atkinson continues to elaborate through her early pieces, the way she elaborates a concern about women’s “definition” and a sense of how that definition works. In “The Institution of Sexual Intercourse,” for example, Atkinson writes:

The biological argument for the maternal instinct goes something like this: women need to have children, it's part of their nature. Can't you see that that's what their bodies were built for? And if women didn't like to have children, they wouldn't; this proves women choose to have children. And since they choose to have children in such large numbers, having children must come natural to women. It's an instinct, the maternal instinct.³⁶

Atkinson responds that this kind of thinking conflates, or perhaps, implants a conclusion derived externally (from a perception about form or women's bodies) as creative capacity women choose. It envisions maternity as a kind of expressive plenitude. Atkinson's concern is that functions (what women are needed *for*, to reproduce society) and capacities (what one may choose to exercise, develop, or use) are opposites, but capacities are the source of functions, and functions can come to feel like capacities. To be a function is to cease being the kind of thing to which other things can belong, but functions and capacities are conceptually linked through the relationship signaled by the two senses of the word property, as characteristic and possession. A capacity is a characteristic, something you have; when it becomes a property of you, it can be made to instead to *have you*, to operate what you do and work on *you* as (society's) material, while never ceasing to feel like it's something *you* have. Abortion Paper II takes up *society's* sense that reproduction is a kind of capacity, expressive plenitude freely chosen, and proceeds as if we really *did* regard reproduction as fully "creative" in the other ways we often understand the idea of creativity: and in doing so, makes us recoil against it, drives what works for us as a figurative meaning into a literal meaning that does not.

By putting "Abortion Paper II" first in her collection Atkinson identifies this style, no less than the thinking it initiates about gender as political class, as a foundational idea of her feminism. Abortion Paper II's sculpting/reproducing analogy works similarly to the way "battle of the sexes" works in "Radical Feminism." What is significant is the way "men are the enemy"

³⁶Atkinson, "The Institution of Sexual Intercourse," in *Amazon Odyssey*, 14- 15.

does not work for us: and yet, as Atkinson insists, *we* accept “battle of the sexes.” The too-literal analogy between sex and battle actually isn’t, originally, hers – she takes it up, and drives it to its fullest extension, provoking the sense that actually, gender *isn’t* like battle. Where is the attack coming from? Are men getting outside manpower? What is ammunition in this case? Literalizing the analogy casts into sharp relief our sense that gender is this way, not something so discrete and agential, something we struggle to conceptualize as a “series of attacks,” as consisting of any kind of discrete action with limited temporality at all. It is by drawing the line of her own use of the battle metaphor back to this free-floating bit of discourse that she “explains” the work that this recoil her literalism produces is doing it shows us that actually, we *do* recognize antagonism between the genders, and this recognition is indexed in our ordinary language. What Atkinson does when she takes up this metaphor and drives it into its literal sense is strip it of the things that make “battle of the sexes” as an idea about gender pass seamlessly into our use and thinking, with a feeling of naturalism or rightness: the phrase carries with it, utterly free-floating from any particular context that might cue us to these meanings, a baked-in sense of figurativity, a kind of winking, jocular tone. In one sense, then, the failure of the metaphor is the point. It is and isn’t ironic: it echoes what was another’s language, “battle of the sexes” to mean something different, but it drives in the “wrong” direction: it inhabits what was language inflected with a definite tongue-in-cheek and moves it *back* to a tonally neutral, literal sense. Breaking the metaphor, Atkinson indexes a semiotic limit on meaning that defines gender, she materializes a recoil – and so shows us that to describe or refer to gender in our ordinary language actually goes on with tonal or figurative guardrails. In another sense, Atkinson really does mean it – she takes up “battle of the sexes” to show us that we *do*, actually, grasp gender as an antagonism. Asserting that sex is literally “a battle” she radically puts into question what in this metaphor is the vehicle,

and what is the tenor. And therefore she puts into question why the kinds of antagonism that emerge between nations, are normally described as enmities, produce physical acts of violence of a certain kind, are paradigms of the political: why is it that war between nations is the tenor vis a vis the antagonism between genders when trying to “evoke” what is political? Why shouldn’t the antagonism we clearly perceive and can automatically reference be the paradigmatic or “literal” instance of politics, the clash between abstract collective “selves” such as nations the more metaphorical extension of the political?

III. X means Y, X as Y, X is Y: Catharine MacKinnon’s Conflations

For Atkinson, “men are the enemy” is a horizon of meaning that her style drives us toward, something we *might* take her to mean but cannot yet really hear. For MacKinnon and Dworkin’s work, we might say something like the reverse: sex is rape is the horizon of meaning what they’re saying always threatens to amount to, that we can’t but take them to mean, that their style challenges us *to not hear*. In its role as a virtual paraphrase of what they’re fundamentally saying, “sex is rape” captures the sense that they’re being too literal: it is a meaning that has been approximated out of several possible meanings, a negotiation with senses of figurativity and irony as I described it above. That is to say, the conflation they seem to be driving toward might, on the one hand, be saying something that moves toward concreteness, stripping away any sense of figurativity, such as “(all) sex is rape,” as in, potentially, “every instance of ‘sex’ we should see as ‘rape’ (and as legally actionable)” (does she really mean *that* – that all sex should be legally actionable as a rape?). The failure of this meaning can drive, in turn, a negotiation with irony, an attempt to locate or pinpoint MacKinnon or Dworkin’s authorial voice – as living somewhere between a kind of perversely ironic insistence on its own militancy and a fully sincere assertion of reality that borders on a kind of metaphysical assertion. Either she says “sex

is rape” with the definitiveness and confidence intended to provoke us – so that if she does not therefore *mean*, actually” sex is *not* rape, she nevertheless doesn’t “really” mean it. Or else “sex is rape” becomes “sex is *really* rape,” a revelation that turns on locating an exchange of voice, that requires the listener to hear a kind of quotation that gives way to full authorial voice that claims to see rape: “(what others call) ‘sex’ is *really* rape.”

As I described above, readers of Dworkin and MacKinnon’s work can’t seem to *not* hear them as saying “sex is rape,” even years after they have made quite a habit of going around explicitly saying in intratextual, paratextual, and extratextual contexts that they *are not saying this*. More than that: they assert that not only is “sex is rape” not what they’re saying, but that to hear them as saying it is symptomatic of the very thing they really are saying. If you want to object to what they’re saying because you hear it as saying “sex is rape,” you are confirming whatever it is they *are* saying. You are part of the problem. If one reason readers can’t quite escape the sense that “sex is rape” is what Dworkin and MacKinnon *mean*, even after they have disavowed saying it, is that they have a tendency to say things that hover dangerously close to implying that they see sex as being indistinguishable from rape in a quite literal way– see Dworkin’s assertion above that sexual possession for women is *real* and *literal* – the other is that “sex is rape” expresses what they seem to be saying in one of their shared style’s favored syntactical forms.

Dworkin and MacKinnon collaborated as activists, theorists, and writers from the time when they first met in 1977, when MacKinnon invited Dworkin to speak at a class she was teaching at Yale on pornography. Each had already written books that recognizably contain some of the ideas they would develop in conversation with one another and with Second Wave feminism as a body of thought, though they had both come to feminism after its formative

radical feminist moment in the late 60's. MacKinnon had paused her PhD in political science in order to go to law school, where she had written the first major legal work on sexual harassment, which was to contribute pioneering theory to the nascent case-law on sexual harassment, *Sexual Harassment of Working Women* (which she first circulated as a draft in 1975). Dworkin had had published *Woman Hating*, which interrogated the thematic of misogyny in literature, myth, and pornography, written when she was living in hiding from her abusive husband in Amsterdam and published when she finally escaped and returned to the States in 1974.³⁷

Dworkin and MacKinnon became the emblematic figures of what is most often called anti-porn feminism (or sometimes dominance feminism). It was a tendency in feminism that developed in the 1970s that focused on force, and especially on sexual violence as the political expression of gender: feminists developed thinking that understood phenomenon like rape and harassment as the punishment practiced on some women, the threat of which kept all women in line. Force exercised sex as a hierarchy, rape the concept that is ultimately the linchpin of gender itself. MacKinnon's and Dworkin's joint version of this position unites two major theoretical components, one, a sense of the significance of "real" sexual violence to gender, and the other, a theory of the symbolic importance of sex/violence to gender which constitutes an opposition to porn. You might gloss it as a position that joins the ideas that "gender is sex," "sex is rape," and "porn is real," except that I hope I've already signalled why glossing and paraphrasing when it comes to Dworkin and MacKinnon is a hazardous business, their style being constitutively resistant to and intentionally provocative of glossing and paraphrasing at the same time. Each of

³⁷Martin Duberman, *Andrea Dworkin: The Feminist as Revolutionary* (New York: The New Press, 2020). See also Johanna Fateman, "Introduction" in *Last Days at Hot Slit: The Radical Feminism of Andrea Dworkin*, ed. Johanna Fateman and Amy Scholder (Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2019), Fred Strebeigh, "Defining Law on the Feminist Frontier," in *The New York Times Magazine*, October 6, 1991, <https://www.nytimes.com/1991/10/06/magazine/defining-law-on-the-feminist-frontier.html>; and Emily Bazelon, "The Return of the Sex Wars," in *The New York Times Magazine*, September 10, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/13/magazine/the-return-of-the-sex-wars.html>.

them published major works that articulate one half of these two theoretical components in the early part of their careers: in 1981 Dworkin published *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (porn is real); in 1982 and 1983, MacKinnon published a pair of articles in *Signs*, “Feminism, Marxism, Method, and State: An Agenda for Theory” and “Feminism, Marxism, Method, and State: Toward a Feminist Jurisprudence” (gender is sex, and sex is rape, respectively). Over the course of their collaboration over the subsequent 15 years, each published work that theorized the other component of the theoretical conjuncture that makes up anti-porn feminism: throughout the mid- to late-80s MacKinnon published articles on pornography that would be collected in *Feminism Unmodified* (1988) and coalesce into her book on pornography, *Only Words* (1993); in 1987 Dworkin published *Intercourse*.

That they were stylistic and writerly collaborators no less than political and activist ones is clear from the noticeable similarities in their locution and syntactical choices. Consider, for example, one of the introductory sentences of *Pornography*, in which Dworkin writes:

The major theme of pornography as a genre is male power, its nature, its magnitude, its use, its meaning. Male power, as expressed in and through pornography, is discernible in discrete but interwoven, reinforcing strains: the power of self, physical power over and against others, the power of terror, the power of naming, the power of owning, the power of money, and the power of sex. These strains of male power are intrinsic to both the substance and production of pornography; and the ways and means of pornography are the ways and means of male power.³⁸

Now consider the opening sentences of the first of MacKinnon’s two articles in *Signs*, “Feminism, Marxism, Method, and State: An Agenda for Theory”:

Sexuality is to feminism what work is to marxism: that which is most one’s own, yet most taken away. Marxist theory argues that society is fundamentally constructed of the relations people form as they do and make things needed to survive humanly. Work is the social process of shaping and transforming the material and social worlds, creating people as social

³⁸Dworkin, *Pornography*, 24.

beings as they create value. It is that activity by which people become who they are. Class is its structure, production its consequence, capital its congealed form, and control its issue.³⁹

The clearest parallel between these two introductory paragraphs is Dworkin's first sentence and MacKinnon's last, which are slight variations on the same syntactical form: "X is Y, its A, its B, its C, its D" (in the case of MacKinnon, this structure is spread over the last three sentences, beginning with "Work is...", and has the structure: X is Y. A is its B, C its D, E its F). Although these sentences say totally different things, this structure does, in both of them, the same thing: it opens up shades of meaning that it also closes down. So, for example, in Dworkin's sentence "The major theme of pornography as a genre is male power, its nature, its magnitude, its use, its meaning," what starts off as a straightforwardly declarative topic sentence with the closed structure "x is y" gets sort of needlessly elaborated in a way that requires the reader to re-process a unit of language they might have taken for granted – "male power" – each time. Each one raises a new possibility about "male power" might mean – is it the kind of thing best understood as having a nature, or the kind of thing that is *real*, has substance and therefore extension and magnitude? In other words, the sentence threatens to put "male power" into question, to deconstruct it, showing it to be merely a construct of language by showing that it has an uncertain referent – but it does so only in and through asserting that "male power" means *all* of these things, that these possible differences or shades of meaning are contained by "male power" as facets of it. "Male power" as a concept is thickened: what threatens to erode our sense of its existence by eroding our sense of its meanings become axes along which it extends its meaning.

³⁹Catharine MacKinnon, "Feminism, Marxism, Method, and State: An Agenda for Theory," in *Signs*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Spring 1982), 515.

In a similar way, MacKinnon's sentence uses the "its" to rearrange the elements of marxist theory so that they are all facets of the central concept "work."⁴⁰

MacKinnon's first sentence and Dworkin's last also work in parallel ways. They're both made of two clauses which juxtapose two modes of equivalence. MacKinnon opens by drawing feminism and marxism together in a merely analogical way: "sexuality is to feminism what work is to marxism"; feminism and marxism are similar insofar as they have the same relationship to a constituent concept. This sentence puts feminism and marxism in *parallel* rather than equating them. It then stylistically collapses this distance on the other side of the colon, when it declares "that which is most one's own, yet most taken away." The mode of similarity implied by analogy, that feminism *relates* to sexuality the way marxism *relates* to work, collapses into the thought that feminism thinks sexuality is what marxism thinks work is. This uncomfortable collapse is prefigured by the subtle substitution of the analogical as to an overly determinate "what" – not the expected "sexuality is to feminism as work is to marxism," but "sexuality is to feminism *what* work is to marxism." Dworkin's final sentence is animated by the same dynamic in reverse: "the strains of male power are intrinsic to both the substance and production of pornography" – male power and pornography are so intertwined as to be *coextensive* – "and the ways and means of pornography are the ways and means of male power." Suddenly male power and pornography are not interpenetrating but paralleled, their similarity woven through the doubled similarity of having the same ways and means. They are the same thing; also – a little backwards and anticlimactically – they are similar because they work the same way with the same stuff. In both of these sentences, our sense of metaphorical or an otherwise abstract

⁴⁰I use lowercase to refer to Marxist theory throughout this discussion because MacKinnon does: it signifies her sense that the term "marxist theory" refers to a multiply authored form of thinking, rather than an individual's body of work, which is of course relevant to how I understand her to understand feminist theory.

likeness is violated by being applied to things that are also ascribed equivalence or co-extension. “Sex is rape” produces the intuition that they are arguing something much too literal, in the sense I’ve been evoking it in this chapter, because of this neat, conflating form, which trades on the formal indistinguishability between the default form of a predicative statement and the default form of metaphor. The two equivalences that MacKinnon threatens to mean in her *Signs* articles – “Gender is sex” and “sex is rape” – are engineered to neither provide the kind of definition a predicate does, nor produce metaphorical reading by equating two different kinds of kinds. Sex and rape are too mutually exclusive, defining one another as opposites (if it’s sex, then it isn’t rape), for this to be intelligibly an information-giving definition, too different to be a a no-new-information tautology. But they are also not different enough in kind (rape is a kind of sex, a deviation or perverse form of it) for this literal failure to give rise to a sense of metaphor. As in Atkinson’s work, this literalizing style feels “too literal” because it violates, and so materializes, the directional, circumscribed ways our concepts of gender, sex, and rape work, in doing so each motoring the functioning of the others.

“An Agenda for Theory” aims to shift feminism away from defining its project in terms of the mutual interaction of the concepts of gender and work, and toward defining its project in terms of the mutual interaction of sex (the act) and gender. It is a theoretical shift that MacKinnon began formulating, by this article’s own account, in 1973, a shift that winds its way through both her engagement with liberal legalism and liberal models of feminism as a lawyer (and in *Sexual Harassment of Working Women*) and her more genuinely conflicted engagement with Marxism as a political theorist. For MacKinnon, both liberal and marxist feminisms are politics centrally engaged in renegotiating the relationship between women and work, positing different relationships between gender/work that *Sexual Harassment of Working Women* attacks

from both sides in ways that I think are substantively captured by the statement with which MacKinnon opens her first chapter, “Women work ‘as women.’”⁴¹ Most explicitly, the argument that goes on to substantiate this statement counterposes it to what it understands as liberalism’s implicit suggestion that women can be “equal workers” insofar as they “are human,” that is, insofar as their differences from some standard are only “arbitrarily” seen as a disadvantage in their ability to work.⁴² Ability to work, in the predominant liberal conception of discrimination, is the domain in which women can be and aren’t “equal.” For MacKinnon this is exemplified in the way pregnancy was ruled by the federal courts to be a relevant basis for distinguishing among recipients of temporary disability benefits; the finding upheld the idea that it is legal to exclude pregnancy as a temporary disability eligible from benefits by employers (it’s not a disability, but a “normal” function of being a woman). It also therefore removed the grounds women workers had for arguing that they were receiving unequal pay, because disability relief actually awarded displayed gender parity – once pregnancy was ineligible. MacKinnon analyzes this as a logic displaying the tautology: “biologically different people are to be treated the same except when their biological differences are relevant,” or as I would put it, women are workers to be conceived as equal to any other workers except when they are women.⁴³

Women work *as women* is MacKinnon’s attempt to situate feminism beyond the paradox Atkinson says liberal feminism cannot overcome, of demanding equal treatment for different functions; women work *as women* also up-ends or elaborates on the way wages for housework conceptualizes gender in relation to work and vice versa. If “wages for housework” points out – speaking back to Marxism’s centralization of the wage relation as expropriation, the source of

⁴¹Catharine MacKinnon, *The Sexual Harassment of Working Women*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 9.

⁴²MacKinnon, *Sexual Harassment*, 101.

⁴³MacKinnon, *Sexual Harassment*, 111.

labor's alienation -- that it is the very status of waged/unwaged that controls what we think work even *is*. Gender is the "house," is the space in which work should not /does not need to be waged and so is not even work, is done "for love," that also defines, in the negative, where work is waged, is work, and so on. When MacKinnon says women work *as women*, she reverses this, in a sense: women's roles in the labor market are stratified both horizontally and vertically according to gender – they work in feminized industries (horizontal), they perform the feminized and subordinate roles in contexts that are not feminized.⁴⁴ They are hired to *be women*, the work they are hired to do *is* gender, the house is also the workplace (and the world) and the housework and the housewife's role of providing available sex is also the secretary's role and the domestic worker's role and the waitresses' role and anyone else available for what is now called "sexual harassment" but which MacKinnon understands as an implicit but authorized job function. To say that the work of social reproduction is the unwaged housework that sustains and defines the wage relation is incomplete, since "housework," women's work, is waged and unwaged, in the home and outside the home, understood as such and also not understood as such.

"An Agenda for Theory" seeks to shift feminism from explaining gender in terms of work, to understanding sex as a concept it should treat analogously to the way marxism treats the concept of work. It goes about producing what it understands to be a properly explanatory theory of gender by relating it, via a series of literalizing confluences, to sex – as in sexuality:

Under the rubric of feminism, woman's situation has been explained as a consequence of biology or of reproduction and mothering, social organizations of biology; as caused by the marriage law or, as extensions, by the patriarchal family, becoming society as a 'patriarchy'; or as caused by artificial gender roles and their attendant attitudes. Informed by these attempts, but conceiving nature, law, the family, and role as consequences, not foundations, I think that feminism fundamentally identifies sexuality as the primary sphere of male power...If the literature on sex roles and the investigations of particular issues are read in light of each other, each element of the female *gender* stereotype is revealed as, in fact, *sexual*. Vulnerability means the appearance/reality of easy sexual access; passivity means

⁴⁴MacKinnon, *Sexual Harassment*, 9-13.

receptivity and disabled resistance, enforced by trained physical weakness; softness means pregnability by something hard. Incompetence seeks help as vulnerability seeks shelter, inviting the embrace that becomes the invasion, trading exclusive access for protection...from that same access.⁴⁵

From this list she distills, on the next page: “Socially, femaleness means femininity, which means attractiveness to men, which means sexual attractiveness, which means sexual availability on male terms. What defines women as such is what turns men on...It is that process through which women internalize (make their own) a male image of their sexuality *as* their identity as women.”⁴⁶ And then she concludes:

Sex as gender and sex as sexuality are thus defined in terms of each other, but it is sexuality that determines gender, not the other way around. This, the central but never stated insight of Kate Millett’s *Sexual Politics*, resolves the duality in the term ‘sex’ itself: what women learn in order to ‘have sex,’ in order to ‘become women’ – woman as gender – comes through the experience of, and is a condition for, ‘having sex’ – woman as sexual object for man, the use of women’s sexuality by men. Indeed, to the extent sexuality is social, women’s sexuality *is* its use, just as our femaleness *is* its alterity.⁴⁷

It is easy to take this abundant cascade of equivalences as a kind of rhetorical disposition to be *very forceful* and *really mean* that gender and sexuality are the same. But each *very forceful* equivalence does more than add rhetorical emphasis. It works the way I described the first sentences of this article and *Pornography* working, by opening up possible variation in meaning only in order to assert a total equivalence. First: “each element of the female *gender* stereotype is revealed as, in fact, *sexual*.” Then: “vulnerability means the appearance/reality of easy sexual access; passivity means receptivity and disabled resistance...femaleness means...sexual availability on male terms.” Then: “sex as gender and sex as sexuality are thus defined in terms of each other, but it is sexuality that determines gender, not the other way around.” And finally: “to the extent that sexuality is social, women’s sexuality *is* its use, just as our femaleness *is* its

⁴⁵MacKinnon, “An Agenda for Theory,” 529 – 530.

⁴⁶MacKinnon, “An Agenda for Theory,” 530 – 531.

⁴⁷MacKinnon, “An Agenda for Theory,” 531.

alterity.” All of the italics are hers. This complete conflation, in which “each” aspect of gender stereotype is enumerated and “revealed as” sexual is the kind of prose that has led to descriptions of MacKinnon’s work as muscular, startling, and totalizing: and the way in which this pretends to both completeness (each aspect of gender) and determinate-ness each aspect *means* (something sexual) cues our sense that MacKinnon is reading too literally: the impulse is to ask, “when?” or “to who?” The idea that gender is *revealed* to be sexual, or that vulnerability *means* sexual access, feels much too on the nose – more comfortable would be “vulnerability *evokes* sexual access” or “suggests,” “has connotations of,” or even “symbolizes” sexual access [in some such interpretive context]. The strong equivalence that threatens to be a full and literal identification between gender and sex when MacKinnon provokes the reader to negotiate with what this might mean: it is hard to understand *what*, in fact, it would mean for gender to literally be sexuality, because, like “sex” and “rape,” gender and sex are neither different enough nor the same enough for this equivalence or even a likeness to make sense, the kinds of things they are resist being combined this way.

The differences in this cascade of what seems to be an intensifying metaphysical equivalence are the junctures at which MacKinnon is effecting theory: they are places where syntax does work on the ideas of gender and sexuality – places in fact where *only* syntax could do this work on gender/sexuality– that run directly perpendicular to the way sex and gender normally work. They show us that sex and gender as concepts normally *do work*: in certain directions, with certain circumscriptions, in a constitutive relation to each other that they do not explicitly announce. To see this is to be able to understand what MacKinnon is talking about and getting at explicitly in much of her work. Take, for example, her reading of the never stated insight of *Sexual Politics*, the “resolution” of the duality in the term “sex” itself: in this sentence

explicating the resolution of that duality the reader is not initially clear which sense of sex MacKinnon is talking about. “Having sex” is more colloquially the verb form of sex, but MacKinnon uses it first to evoke the meaning “being a woman,” which we are now heavily aware of as containing a sense that to *be* sexed is to possess *a* sex. Thus when MacKinnon comes to the second clarification, that femaleness is then a condition for “having sex,” the reader is prepared for the deep sense of irony that she defines this as “the use of women’s sexuality by men,” since we have just been made aware that “having sex” as being sexed is imbued with a sense that sex is something women possess. The sense we get at the end of this sentence is that our language very much signals the delimited ways sex as a concept is allowed to operate. Like Atkinson’s analysis that what defines “woman” are capacities becoming functions that we still give the meaning of capacities, sex is spoken of like something *you have* when it is actually something that is *done to you* (that you, woman, cannot do); sex is a property that, when it is an action, is positioned grammatically as a possession you cannot exercise. When it does operate as a verb, as she will note elsewhere, it has a limited direction – as she puts it, “man fucks woman. Subject verb object.”⁴⁸ In a much earlier footnote she writes:

I know of no nondegraded English verb for the activity of sexual expression that would allow a construction parallel to, for example, “I am working,” a phrase that could apply to nearly any activity. This fact of language may reflect and contribute to the process of obscuring sexuality’s pervasiveness in social life. Nor is there *any* active verb meaning ‘to act sexually’ that specifically envisions a woman’s action. If language constructs as well as expresses the social world, these words support heterosexual values.⁴⁹

We resist “gender is sex” because overtly these designate non-equivalent kinds – an identity, an action – but our language suggests that to be *sexed* (a property) is to be acted on and that to *do* sex (very non-colloquial) is property-like (having sex).

⁴⁸MacKinnon, “An Agenda for Theory,” 541.

⁴⁹MacKinnon, “An Agenda for Theory,” 517.

If sex as an action is directional, it is also circumscribed and delimited in its meanings in particular ways. On the one hand, as MacKinnon explains in *Sexual Harassment of Working*

Women, “sex” is most referred to when it is not directly referred to:

In these discussions of women’s and men’s workplace roles – in ‘the function of being a sex object,’ the ‘submissive gestures’ required, ‘covering up sexual affairs,’ the injunction to ‘please their boss before their husbands,’ the ‘perceived sexuality,’ and the ‘enormous personal latitude’ bosses have around their ‘pretty packages’ – sexuality remains subliminal. When gender – women and men – is discussed, sexuality per se is left to be inferred. Symmetrically, when sexuality is discussed, gender tends to be glossed over, as if sexuality means the same thing for women as it does for men. Such an assumption of gender symmetry underlies Herbert Marcuse’s analysis of one expression of advanced industrial civilization, the freeing of sexual energy for its own frustration.⁵⁰

People are perfectly willing to avow that secretaries are supposed to be pretty packages as part of their job description, but not that pretty packages are designed to be opened (this would be impermissible workplace sex, *her* fault, etc). The observation that “sexuality remains subliminal” and that “sexuality per se is left to be inferred” is an observation that sex as a concept is *used* or most recognizable as a facet of some other thing – “sex” is an overtone or an undercurrent, it has a persistent quality of figurativity. Sex is, in certain circumstances, *de facto* figurative, most natural to us when it is innuendo, overtone or undertone, a valence of some other thing. In this sense it is *too literal*, and also backwards, to say that gender *means* sex: what sex is is the possibility of double meaning, a valence of something *else*; of *course* “battle of the sexes” is sexy, but it’s overly literal and self-serious to say it *means sex*. You might even say it’s a little rigid, a little deflating: it takes the frisson right out of the double entendre, the sex right out of sex. Gender *means* sex and therefore sex determines gender reverses this order of things: it attributes *final* meaning to sex; it imagines gender as the inuendo of sex.

⁵⁰MacKinnon, *Sexual Harassment*, 21.

But in other circumstances sex is only recognizable overtly as *itself* in very delimited ways, as MacKinnon evokes above when she says that “to sex” as a (nonexistent) verb is not like “to work,” which can refer to an infinite array of specific activities. Sex’s reference doesn’t work like this: it always designates a specific act, fucking, and when it refers to other acts or behaviors it refers to them insofar as they symbolically substitute for, gesture, or are teleologically on their way *to*, fucking, and it is only in relation to that central act that those other acts are “sex” or sexual. The other side of the coin of sex being most familiarly referred to as a figurative second meaning of something else is that when it is referred to directly it is imagined as a separate zone of meaning, entirely unto itself: “when sexuality is discussed, gender tends to be glossed over, as if sexuality means the same thing for women as it does for men.” Here the target of critique is leftist theorists like Marcuse and others of the sexual revolution who see sex a kind of sublimated singular force, ready to be unleashed, unilaterally radical. Sex is political insofar as it is autonomous from capital, the anti-work that threatens to make society unproductive, must be controlled and disciplined in order to control this radical disruptive potential. The politics of sex, the power differences perpetrated *by* sex, are therefore displaced into other meta-languages for accounting for it:

Incest, for example, is commonly seen as a question of distinguishing the real evil, a crime against the family, from girlish seductiveness or fantasy. Contraception and abortion have been framed as matters of reproduction and fought out as proper or improper social constraints on nature...Across and beneath these issues, sexuality itself has been divided into parallel provinces: traditionally, religion or biology; in modern transformation, morality or psychology. Almost never politics.”⁵¹

“An Agenda for Theory” not only strips the natural feeling figurativity from sex but insists on its bilateral relationship with gender and a perspectively riven understanding of sex: the equivalence it drives toward is a kind of negative of a negative; women’s sexuality *is* its use, and

⁵¹MacKinnon, “An Agenda for Theory,” 532.

femaleness *is* its alterity. Read: gender “is” sexuality, which is not a singular domain, a specific action, a thing women “have,” a property, but a process/absence, “through which women internalize (make their own) a male image of their sexuality *as* their identity as women.”⁵²

The way sex as a concept is structured in this account – on the one hand, everywhere implied, most acceptably referential to us when it is figurative, on the other hand, only directly picked out by or as acts on their way to being one highly specific, directional thing, a zone of meaning separate from others – is, for Dworkin and MacKinnon, the source of its worst alibis. The inuendo the boss invites the secretary to indulge in, that it is part of her job to indulge in, can’t be objected to – it isn’t an assertion. To object to figurative innuendo as if it were a serious proposition or assertion is to be taking it much too literally, to be wrong or in error. But to go along with inuendo or not demonstrably object to it is always retrospective demonstration of a latent willingness that can testify to consent, or the reasonable assumption of consent. The way “An Agenda for Theory” understands sex as a concept brings us, in other words, to “Toward Feminist Jurisprudence’s” putative assertion that “sex is rape.” “Toward Feminist Jurisprudence” begins its treatment of rape, as an exemplary case study for understanding the law and the state’s relationship to women (and working toward a feminist theory of state), by pointing out the way sex designates a zone of exception:

some see rape as an act of violence, not sexuality, the threat of which intimidates all women. Others see rape, including its violence, as an expression of male sexuality, the social imperatives of which define all women... The point of defining rape as ‘violence not sex’ or ‘violence against women’ has been to separate sexuality from gender in order to affirm sex (heterosexuality) while rejecting violence (rape). The problem remains what it has always been: telling the difference.⁵³

⁵²MacKinnon, “An Agenda for Theory, 530 – 531.

⁵³Catharine MacKinnon, “Feminism, Marxism, Method, and State: Toward Feminist Jurisprudence,” in *Signs*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Summer 1983), 646.

The illegality of rape, the harm of rape, does not turn on a finding of facts – did intercourse happen – but on a determination of difference: was the thing that happened sex or was the thing that happened rape? As MacKinnon puts it, “rape is a sex crime that is not a crime when it looks like sex,” a distinction that sets rape apart from the way all other crimes are conceptualized: “assault that is consented to is still assault; rape consented to is intercourse.”⁵⁴ Sex functions as a concept here the way it functions in “An Agenda for Theory”: it is, as Marcuse has it, a separate domain unriven by other structures (violence, capital) – and this is practiced as the desire to see rape as violence, not sex, and in the discerning of rape as only that sex that is not sex. The law acts as though there is a fact to the matter, but rape or sex is a determination that may well be split by perspective: a woman can be raped by a man who is not a rapist; in this scenario, the law says not just that the man lacked intent and so there was no crime, but also that there was no injury because nothing, fundamentally, happened at all.⁵⁵

If “gender means sex” is a “assertion” that makes the figurative status of sex too determinate, the final meaning rather than the double meaning, with gender as the innuendo of sex and not the other way around, “sex is rape” is a non-ironic “assertion.” The law ostensibly encodes rape as a prohibited crime and explicitly practices this prohibition by disambiguating illegal instances of rape from the thing they might otherwise be, normal sex. This principle of discernment is a practice that courts use frequently to say that individual instances that one might consider rape are in fact sex. It is the principle of disambiguation that in practice repeatedly is used to make determinations that (what others call) rape is (what the court deems just) sex. The actual “intention” of the law to, as MacKinnon puts it, see the sex in rape is revealed by the way

⁵⁴MacKinnon, “Toward Feminist Jurisprudence,” 649.

⁵⁵Legally, this collapses a determination of criminality with a determination of whether there is harm – i.e. whether a woman raped by someone who is not criminally a rapist might nevertheless sue civilly for injury or harm. My focus here is on how MacKinnon uses the law as example of male speech, as the language that materializes how “men” conceptualize sex/rape, and not the other way around.

it does and does not conceptualize what the harm of rape actually is. We often think of rape as a violation or expropriation of what “belongs” to women, a co-optation of their sex, their right to control it; in practice, the law can’t conceive of rape as this kind of harm; it can’t imagine *what* is actually taken away when rape violates. The way the law “does not conceive” of rape as expropriated sexuality is the way it does not see rape when it is coerced sex with someone a woman has previously consented to, when it is rape in the context of marriage, both formally and in practice. Formally, it encodes this as the marital rape exception and statutory rape laws: a child cannot consent, a wife cannot not consent. Informally/in practice, this means that the courts are liable to find rape only when a woman is provably virginal and never when she is loose. MacKinnon exposes the difference between the harm we think the law is protecting against and the harm the law *actually sees* in rape by writing: “instead of asking, what is the violation of rape, what if we ask, what is the nonviolation of intercourse? To tell what is wrong with rape, explain what is right about sex. If this, in turn, is difficult, the difficulty is as instructive as the difficulty men have in telling the difference when women see one.”⁵⁶ It is very easy to read this kind of language as saying that MacKinnon thinks nothing is right with sex, that *she* thinks all sex seems pleasurable but is really dangerous, harmful, violating, *really* rape. But it is the *law* that formally and in practice cannot conceptualize the violation of rape as a harm because what it actually does is protect against the harm of losing exclusive access: this explains, MacKinnon writes, “the male incomprehension that, once a woman has had sex, she loses anything when raped. To them we *have nothing* to lose.”⁵⁷ The little girl can not say yes; the harm conceived by this is not loss of control of her sex, but sex itself. The wife cannot say no; she can’t be harmed by loss of control of her sex because she does not have it.

⁵⁶MacKinnon, “Toward Feminist Jurisprudence,” 647.

⁵⁷MacKinnon, “Toward Feminist Jurisprudence,” 647.

In other words, to hear *MacKinnon* saying “sex is rape” is to put in her voice an “assertion” that she is saying the law says. It is the law that uses a practice of discerning the difference between sex and rape to see them as the same, to see would-be rapes as sex. For MacKinnon to say “sex is rape” inhabits what the law “says” practically and drives it into explicitness. The purpose of “saying” it is to materialize what the law says, how we “accept” the law’s conception of rape, by saying it in a way that does not work for us – the way Atkinson takes up “battle of the sexes,” a statement we *do* accept, and literalizes it as “men are the enemy,” a paraphrase of it that we don’t. But if “sex is rape” is so literal as to make us ask “does she really *mean* that,” to cue us to the sense of irony we might really hear in her adopting the voice of the law, “Toward Feminist Jurisprudence” sounds *too literal* because it denies us this ironic reading. Women do *have* to “say” “sex is rape” descriptively and literally, because the law seeing it this way, makes it this way. As MacKinnon puts it, an oppositional (woman’s) standpoint sees the rape in sex where the law sees the sex in rapes. When “women” say “sex is rape,” they (MacKinnon) are understood to have ownership of this metaphysical revelation, a metaphysical investment in seeing sex-as-rape (sex is *really* rape) that they are only actually quoting or describing. The law makes sex “really” rape (really a violating harm) when it understands sex itself as the injury that is done to women, that takes away a thing (statutory rape that is “really” sex) that then cannot be taken away again (marital “sex” that is really rape). That the law actually makes it the case that the grounds for conceptualizing rape as the harm of loss of control of one’s sexuality almost disappear: even *women* see their own would-be rapes as not “really rapes,” that is not really violating, except if they can be understood as rape in the terms the law understands it. To literalize what the law “says” as “sex is rape” is both to drive our way of seeing normatively toward being able to see this conflation (how the law really does conflate

sex/rape when it overtly is engaged in a practice of discerning them) and also to drive our way of seeing away from this conflation, to drive *toward* an ironic distance from this assertion, to be able to think about sex in ways that do not understand it to be the real harm of rape, that is not yet possible.

Chapter 2

Getting Basic: Address as a Beginning in the New Social Movements

In her preface to the watershed 1970 anthology *The Black Woman*, Toni Cade articulates the rationales for the Black feminism the anthology paves the way for by characterizing Black feminism's potential distinctness from other political movements of the 1960s left as something that would make it part of what the new social movements were doing overall:

We are involved in a struggle for liberation: liberation from the exploitive and dehumanizing system of racism, from the manipulative control of a corporate society; liberation from the constrictive norms of "mainstream" culture, from the synthetic myths that encourage us to fashion ourselves rashly from without (reaction) rather than from within (creation).

What characterizes the current movement of the 60's is a turning away from the larger society and a turning toward each other. Our art, protest, dialogue no longer spring from the impulse to entertain, or to indulge or enlighten the conscience of the enemy; white people, whiteness, or racism; men, maleness, or chauvinism: America or imperialism ... depending on your viewpoint and your terror. Our energies now seem to be invested in and are in turn derived from a determination to touch and to unify. What typifies the current spirit is an embrace, an embrace of the community and a hardheaded attempt to get basic with each other.

If we women are to get basic, then surely the first job is to find out what liberation for ourselves means, what work it entails, what benefits it will yield. To do that, we might turn to various fields of studies to extract material, data necessary to define that term in respect to ourselves. We note, however, all too quickly the lack of relevant material.¹

What makes the new social movements new is a turn inward, as opposed to speaking, protesting, orienting their politics toward "the enemy," addressing those entities constructed as others. It is because of this turn inward that the new social movements can "get basic" with each other, can produce authentic accounts of those synthetic myths that have defined us from without. Turning

¹Toni Cade, ed., *The Black Woman* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1970), 1.

inward, getting basic is not just a new organizational autonomy – Black Power turning away from Civil Rights and white organizing collaborators, radical feminist groups breaking out from the New Left – but a conceptual shift. It’s how Cade characterizes what kind of new knowledge about race, gender, imperialism, and so on, the new social movements will produce and work with. It evokes cutting past bullshit, taking the “synthetic myths” of race and gender down to the studs, being able to talk to each other unimpeded, without pretense or ulterior motive, and so to be able to see the thing itself clearly, to look at the raw data – experience. The attempt to “get basic” dreams of pure communication, and it correspondingly suggests that what was wrong with the “old” politics’ was their attempts to address the other, that to do so inevitably casts speech into the mold of supplication, entertainment, appeasement, persuasion, and general falsity. Something about trying to speak to the other warps speech, limits what we can say and know about race and gender – it is the cause of the bullshit we need to cut past to get basic.

Cade’s sense that something about addressing the other is distorting echoes the way radical feminists processed the male left’s rebuff of “women’s concerns” as a founding moment: like Cade, they felt there was something distorted and distorting to these interactions, in the way a totally aberrant and outsize reaction dragged the expected dialogue about “male chauvinism” off course. Much later, Audre Lorde will describe that same kind of distortion Cade is describing, that outsize reaction as our propensity to “knee jerk” on differences.² That “knee jerk” quality equally describes the way an American national audience, already prone to seeing Civil Rights’ nonviolent protest movement as barely lawful unrest, reacted to an emerging Black

²James Baldwin and Audre Lorde, “Revolutionary Hope: A Conversation Between James Baldwin and Audre Lorde,” *Essence Magazine*, 1984. Accessed: <https://mocada-museum.tumblr.com/post/73421979421/revolutionary-hope-a-conversation-between-james>.

Power movement and its militant embrace of a principle of Black self-defense and rejection of nonviolence as political practice.

This turn to self-defense is in one way the kind of turn inward Cade is talking about. It exchanges agitation for integration for a politics of self-sufficiency. It is the conceptual inflection point between Civil Rights and the emerging new politics of Black Power, large swaths of which will be addressed inward as cultural nationalism, to developing new conceptions and valuations of Blackness, wearing natural hair, promoting a Black Arts movement, creating community programs. But the militancy of this early principle of “self-defense,” its principle of nonviolence, is not exactly an impulse to “touch and embrace.” It is addressed to the national audience, to the particular imagination of the white audience; and we can see the way its address across black/white produces exactly the kind uncanny distortion and unusual response pattern that Cade gestures to. Take, for example, this quite typical exchange between Malcolm X and an antagonistic listener on one of his appearances on Boston public radio in 1964. The first question is from a listener who simply asks Malcolm X to lay out his position on nonviolence, which he does at length. The following is just a small excerpt of an idea that repeats many more times even in that first answer:

Any Negro leader who teaches our people to be nonviolent, in the face of the violence we’ve been experiencing in the past 400 years, is doing our people a disservice.... I’m nonviolent to those who are nonviolent with me. This is intelligent!...it is time for the black Man to stand up and start defending himself. Not to go out and initiate acts of aggression against whites, or initiate acts of aggression against *anyone* – but in areas where we see that the *government* will not protect us or defend us or find those who have brutalized us and made us the victims for the past 400 years, then it is time for *us* to do whatever is necessary to defend ourselves. And it should be *emphasized* that by this I don’t mean go out and look for trouble or start trouble or initiate acts of aggression, but we should feel that we’re within our human rights, our civil rights, and within the rights of intelligence, to do whatever is necessary when we are *attacked*, to defend ourselves.³

³Malcolm X, “1964 Boston Radio Broadcast,” in *Malcolm X: All Time Greatest Speeches Vol 2*. (Master Classics Records, 2008), <https://www.amazon.com/All-Time-Greatest-Speeches-Vol/dp/B001ANLKT6>.

The dialogue in some sense never goes beyond this first question and response. A few minutes later, a second listener initiates an exchange that becomes almost hallucinatory in its “requests” to Malcolm X to speak to the question of whether he is “advocating violence”:

Listener: Are you saying a more violent approach to [the would-be 1965 Civil Rights Act] would cause this bill to be passed?

Malcolm X: It’s not a case of violence, and I think our people should never let themselves be trapped intellectually into thinking that whenever they do something to defend themselves against the violence of the white man that they’re being violent.

Listener: But you’re advocating violence.

Malcolm X: No, we’re advocating the necessity of Black people defending themselves against the violence of the white man, because the American government has already proven itself either unable or unwilling to defend us as it should do.

[...]

Listener: Well, the white man hasn’t gone out to create any marches, nor has he gone out to do anything that would make the people in the communities feel that he was opposed by law to their thinking.

Malcolm X: No all he has done is sick his police dogs on innocent black women and babies. All he has done is put his firehoses on innocent women and children, black women and children.

[Audience: That’s right]

All he has done is shoot Medgar Evers in the back.

[Audience: That’s right]

Or he has bombed a church in Birmingham Alabama and has murdered four innocent little girls.

Or he has shot down young boys from their bicycles as they were riding innocently through the streets.

[Audience: That’s right]

That’s *all* he has done.

Listener: Well, you feel that this is a cause for the Negro to take on the violent act.

Malcolm X: It’s not a case of the Negro taking on a violent act, it’s a case of the Negro doing what is necessary to defend himself against the violent acts of the whites.⁴

Something about this dialogue is going quite wrong: it is almost uncannily, frustratingly repetitious and circular. The listener in some sense “can’t hear” what Malcolm X is saying, no matter how much explanation and refutation he solicits, he returns, like a perverse Bartleby, to

⁴Malcolm X, “1964 Boston Radio Broadcast.”

the one response – “you feel that this is a cause for the Negro to take on the violent act.” There seems to be no amount of clarity Malcolm X can achieve about the difference between his position and “advocating violence” that will settle this listener, and the listener in turn never moves his opposition or disagreement out of this circular demand for the same thing. What is strange about this dialogue is not that some listener disagrees with or is resistant to Malcolm X and the idea of self-defense, but the peculiar form that disagreement takes, which pushes this conversation to the limit of what works as semantically legible exchange. Their speech verges on becoming meaningless tokens of some other, silent, contest of wills, or else there is something not-quite lucid about the listener’s inability to hear what Malcolm X has said.

This chapter argues that the way the exchange proceeds above is not incidental or spontaneous. Just as in the last chapter I aimed to show that reader responses to feminist writing are formal in ways that are produced by feminist style, in this chapter I look to the way style is responsive to a problem that is also formal, a problem I argue “getting basic” evokes and the exchange above materializes. What is shared across the new social movements conceptually, the shared newness Cade identifies, can be understood as a shared responsiveness to the patterned way that address about race, across race, or about gender, across gender, goes awry.

This sense of what is common to the new movements broadly speaking cuts across the ways we historically narrate the political/theoretical developments of the 1960s left, which Cade’s gloss reflects, perhaps helped to establish, which has a tendency to see the development of new movements as reactive turns away / turns inward to autonomy and self-definition. As Black Power splits off from Civil Rights and expels white activists, consolidating black solidarity across different political groups, working on behalf of themselves, and beginning a political and aesthetic project to celebrate and define Blackness, so radical feminism draws

inspiration from this militancy and autonomy to separate from the New Left and Civil Rights, from men, to look to their *own* experiences in order to redefine *themselves*, for themselves. Cade's rationale for a conceptually, if not organizationally, distinct Black feminism follows this pattern of separation and autonomy: Black women need to define *themselves*, separately from the way either "blackness" or "woman" have been defined, because they have been defined by and taken to mean black men and white women, respectively. Each movement successively "realizes" that the political logic that helps a group or a movement understand one identity concept, or one axis of the political, does not extend to helping them see or acknowledge another – and may even occlude being able to see the other; the "knee jerk" they confront when they attempt such an extension is the sign of this.⁵ Each breaks off on the premise of producing a better account of ourselves, more grounded, less synthetic, closer to experience, and therefore more usable and less abstract. And yet: as I will argue, the new social movements figured what they were doing not, or not just, as a move to better represent themselves, but as a shift in address. If the preface of *The Black Woman* insists that what Black women are doing is producing better accounts, better definitions of "black," and "woman," better because they come *from us*, it also insists that what is different is not what "we" are saying but who we are speaking to, that we are turning inward, addressing each other. The distinction between these two meta-languages is neatly staged by the title of the anthology in relation to its project and its contents. Does *The Black Woman* name a dialogic space, a "we" who are speaking to "ourselves" about "ourselves" through the texts it collects? Or is "the" Black Woman that elusive thing that has yet to be adequately described, and that, taken together, the pieces in the anthology – patchworked

⁵That what each group or movement is organized around can't be said to be different identity concepts is one thing that belies the one to one to one relationship this rationale for successive schism and individualized turnings-inward imagines for the 1960s and 1970s. Class is not *like* race, gender, and sexuality in this way.

and perspectively different as they are – are engaged in a project of collectively describing? Is *The Black Woman* a composite picture or a space of discourse?

Usually we regard the one as a matter of the other: the question of whether something addresses *me* is, we frequently assume, actually a matter of whether it represents me; something speaks to me if it has me “in mind,” if I am included in what it most centrally refers to and the objects its meanings most pick out. Or else that the language of being “addressed” or not by a politics is just a figurative way of speaking about what is substantively a matter of representation, whether “I” have been included in the data it has used to build its account of the world. But address is not just a matter of representation. For example, the interchange *between* address and representation is at the heart of interpellation as a figurative account for subject formation, as Judith Butler, makes use of it: when we accept the hailing “woman,” we become that subject, we accept a designation that normatively disciplines our behavior in ways that misrecognize us. But how does this scene move from one in which acknowledgement of being addressed instantiates us as a certain kind of subject, and one in which what that name means is an image to which we must conform? In this figurative primal scene, if we turn toward that call or name “before” we actually are that thing, if it is the turn that makes us that subject, as opposed to, the fact of being that subject is how we know *we* are the ones being called – why do we turn? What gives that definition its addressing grip on us?⁶ Normativity as it has been taken up has a tendency to collapse this into a problem of representation and the way anti-normative performance might disrupt the consolidated/stable representation at the heart of what that sign means.

⁶This is an implication of Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge Classics, 2006) that she elaborates on specifically in Butler, “Conscience Doth Make Subjects of Us All,” in *Yale French Studies* No. 88 (1995).

The tendency of address to slide seamlessly into representational terms has to do with its slippery status as something that has been conceived as a type of language, one function of language, central to what language itself does, and something ethical and pre- or extra-linguistic. As an aspect of language “address” can pick out as narrow a phenomenon as grammatical pronoun shifts (i.e. what controls a T-V distinction in informal/formal address in many languages) or as broad a phenomenon as genre, such as letters (which we address to a recipient) or speeches (also colloquially, giving an address). It has sometimes been understood to be a central type of language, and other times, the primary function of language itself. A mini-sketch of the history of its central role in thinking about different types of language or genre might begin with the distinction Aristotle makes when he writes *Rhetoric* and *Poetics* and distinguishes between uses of language that persuade an audience and uses of language that imitate human action. In Derrida’s “Signature, Event, Context” the capacity to address, the specificity of address, is anchored to and anchors language in a context; the specificity of address, the signature, marks the difference between written and oral language, and it is when language becomes increasingly distant from the scene of speech which is always situated in a discrete context set by its natural address that meaning becomes subject to iterability and différance.⁷ In the hermeneutic tradition language and knowledge are conceived as fundamentally dialogic, always in response to other language and only legible in terms of how we are responsive to it (consider Mikhail Bakhtin’s sense that even the novel, seemingly objectified/reified language, is a “crossing of voices,” always responsive to other, prior utterances more and less complex than it).⁸ At still other times address has had a role in theoretical traditions as something non-

⁷Jacques Derrida, “Signature, Event, Context,” in *Limited Inc.* ed. Gerald Graff, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman and Samuel Weber (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

⁸Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1982).

discursive, either exceeding or prior to language: as when it serves a central role in theories of ethics that turn on an I-thou relationship and recognition of/responsiveness to another (i.e., Levinas, Buber). It is often named as a gaze, as a turn, or an orientation – toward, or away – as Cade does above. Bakhtin calls what I am describing as address’ situation inside/outside of language as the “specific nature” of dialogical relations in “Speech Genres”:

Dialogic relations have a specific nature: they can be reduced neither to the purely logical (even if dialectical) nor to the purely linguistic (compositional-syntactic). They are possible only between complete utterances of various speaking subjects...Where there is no word and no language, there can be no dialogic relations; they cannot exist among objects or logical quantities (concepts, judgments, and so forth). Dialogic relations presuppose a language, but they do not reside within the system of language. They are impossible among elements of a language.⁹

This “specific nature” of the dialogical (here, I take “the dialogical” to be synonymous with a sense of address), its non-reducibility to either the logical or linguistic, its state of being both “before” language and language being “before” *it*, makes it difficult to keep address in view even when trying to get address into view.

In this chapter I read three dialogues that capture the structured nature of the “knee jerk,” and show, in its speakers’ manipulation of the conversation’s dynamics, its foundational role for political thought. These dialogues materialize the effects of address in the negative: we see address by its effects, by the pressure address exerts off-stage on the unusual shape the dialogue takes, the way it circularly repeats, the ways its interlocutors persistently speak past each other. These dialogues make a sense of address that is difficult to capture formally visible, as an effect on how meaning is construed, a frame for reading or hearing. We might say address is the difference between hearing in “wages for housework” a statement that says “housework is labor like any other and should be waged” and hearing a *demand* to someone, to *you*, “wages for

⁹Mikhail Bakhtin, “Speech Genres,” in *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1987), 117.

housework,” even without that demand being syntactically designated (not: you, give us wages for housework!). Similarly address makes the difference between understanding “sex is rape” as a description of the world, as saying something like “what our society calls sex is not distinguishable from what our society designates as rape,” and saying “your sex is rape,” or still more direct, “you’re a rapist.” It’s what allows us grasp language intensifying its gaze at a listener, or listeners, so that we might hear registers of blame, threat, accusation, invitation, demand, on stretches of language that might otherwise function as neutrally descriptive, factual, assertive, and so on.

If address is not *entirely* compositional-syntactical, it is nevertheless fundamentally linguistic, subject to differences in style that produce and different aesthetic effects. The way a reader or listener is positioned by Lorde and Rich’s styles of pedagogical, lyrical, and therapeutic modes of address is noticeably different, to understate the case, than the way the reader is “seen” by Malcolm X’s militancy, Black Power’s militancy, and radical feminism’s militancy: it is this quality that makes these texts feel muscular, gut-punching, confrontational – or as Ti-Grace Atkinson puts it, they have the quality of “reach[ing] for the jugular.”¹⁰ These styles, I argue, are fundamental to the conceptual shift the politics they characterize make, and all responsive to the “knee jerk” – they express a different understanding, via a different kind of response, to a shared problem. If Cade, Lorde and Rich all imagine that the “knee jerk” is an effect of distortion they want to look past, a *barrier* to better representation of the realities of race and gender, militancy, I argue, is a style of address that works on and also stays within this problem, that does not conceptualize the “knee jerk” as something to look past. Militancy conceptualizes race and gender *as* this discursively warped space, one aspect of which is to persistently overdetermine

¹⁰Ti-Grace Atkinson, “Afterword,” in *Amazon Odyssey* (New York: Link Books, 1974), ccxlviii.

address. Militancy is a style that operates in address, as address: it knows that to say “sex is rape” is to *mean* or effect its listener as if it were saying “your sex is rape,” because it has already understood that it is provoking a context in which the switch for hearing registers of address is set permanently to “on” and dialed up to 10. To *read* militant style in representational terms is to understand “sex is rape” as a description of the world but be unable to think about its meaning as determined by what it does to its listener, the way I do in the prior chapter. It is because these styles are responsive to a sense of race and gender *as* address that address is also the axis on which their forms try to do work.

I. Speaking to Each Other/Seeing Ourselves

The dual ways Cade frames the newness of the new social movements, as a different address producing a better representation of identity, tracks with some of the key distinctions historians have used to map one from another and to mark different positions within each. Some of the qualities that for historians mark the shift from Civil Rights to Black Power are an embrace of “Blackness” that is also an embrace of Pan-Africanism and a consolidation/expansion of the Black community’s new sense of “ourselves,” an international gaze that tries to see Black Power in the context not just of revolutions for independence on the African continent but in the nationalisms of all people of color, an a Black Arts movement that can foster this new cultural sense of Blackness, and an increased militancy that comes along with the sense of solidarity with said revolutions.¹¹ These distinctions from Civil Rights, seemingly continuous with each other, also mark out a distinction between factions within the larger Black

¹¹For historical and aesthetic context on the Black Power movement I have relied on Peniel Joseph, *Waiting ‘til The Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2006), Amy Abugo Ongiri, *Spectacular Blackness: The Cultural Politics of the Black Power Movement and the Search for a Black Aesthetic* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2009), and Margo Natalie Crawford, *Black Post-Blackness: The Black Arts Movement and Twenty-first-century Aesthetics* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

Power movement: loosely, between Pan-Africanists and Black Marxists.¹² The impetus of the former is a new consolidation of strength, a turn toward each other that represents us better; the impetus of the latter is a militant confrontation with racialized capitalism and state. Huey Newton, architect of the Black Panthers' hallmark militancy called Pan Africanism, pejoratively, the "highest stage of cultural nationalism."¹³ Scholars often discuss increasing militancy as the quality that marks the shift from Civil Rights to Black Power, and in recent debates, questioning how clear the distinction really is.¹⁴ When historians debate the degree of militancy and its demarcating significance, they talk about it as a measure of willingness to use violence: militancy expresses a zero degree of separation between the principles one announces or espouses and what one does, or what lengths one will go to implement those principles. To be militant is to be so committed to the abstract political principle that one will go to any means necessary to implement it. But, I argue, drawing on Amy Abugo Ongiri's convincing argument that Black Panthers' use of media and messaging was sophisticated and intentional in *Spectacular Blackness*, that militancy is a style, specifically, a style of address.¹⁵

Feminist historiography has long marked a shift in feminist practice that it, too, has imagined as a turn inward that is primarily a representational project, called "cultural feminism" to signal how central to its project was fostering a female culture, its affiliation with projects of

¹²See Joseph, "Dashikis and Democracy," in *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour*, 276 – 401.

¹³Joseph, *Waiting*, 285.

¹⁴For an overview of these debates, see Simon Wendt, "The Roots of Black Power? Armed Resistance and the Radicalization of the Civil Rights Movement," in *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, ed Peniel Joseph (New York: Routledge, 2006). See also Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).

¹⁵My sense is that militancy extends across the longer arc of Black Power that makes it temporally overlapping with the Civil Rights moment, that historians such as Tyson and Joseph argue for. Key texts I have drawn on in thinking through militancy that I will not discuss directly include Robert F. Williams, *Negroes with Guns* ((New York: Marzani & Munsell, 1962), Eldridge Cleaver, *Soul on Ice* (London: Delta Publishing, 2019) and the writings of Huey P. Newton in *The Huey P. Newton Reader*, ed. David Hilliard and Donald Wiese (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2019). I have also relied on accounts of militancy as a hallmark of First Wave feminism in Nancy Cott, *The Grounding of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) and Laura E. Nym Mayhall, "Defining Militancy: Radical Protest, the Constitutional Idiom, and Women's Suffrage in Britain, 1908 – 1909, in *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (July 2000).

literary recuperation and canon revision, with investigations of mothering, and revisions of religion and myth. Echols, following feminists such as Ellen Willis, characterized “cultural feminism” as a distinct and sharp shift away from radical feminism that didn’t seek to break women free from “femininity” but to re-value and restore power to “the feminine” and to embrace by revaluing its qualities. The tendency Echols calls “cultural feminism” lumps together lesbian separatism, feminists who were poets and essayists such as Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich, feminist psychoanalysts like Carol Gilligan, and Mary Daly – as well as anti-porn feminism, personified by no one more than Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon.¹⁶

It is through these two shifts that we can track the conceptual life of Cade’s particular formation, that the new social movements were a shift in address: transitional political figures like Malcolm X, Adrienne Rich, and Audre Lorde figured what they were doing in terms of address. But they figured it differently, and they used it differently: if address marks the distinction between Civil Rights and Black Power, it also marks the distinction between conceptions of Black Power as cultural nationalism and conceptions of it as an increase in militancy.

In Malcolm X’s pivotal speech “The Ballot or the Bullet,” he figures the shifts he will aim to make in Black radical politics as shifts in address. Joseph describes Malcolm X’s career as notable for its “envelope-pushing militancy,” and takes him to be the recognizable “prelude to the fiery awakening of [Black Power in] the 1960s.”¹⁷ “The Ballot or the Bullet” is a version of a speech Malcolm X began giving in Harlem after he broke from Nation of Islam and set out to do what NOI would not let him do – function as the central organizing figure for a radical Black

¹⁶See Ellen Willis, “Toward a Feminist Sexual Revolution” in *The Essential Ellen Willis*, ed. Nona Aronowitz Willis (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), and Alice Echols, *Daring to Be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967 - 1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), especially her last chapter, “The Ascendance of Cultural Feminism.”

¹⁷Joseph, *Waiting*, 8.

politics that could unite black nationalism with Civil Rights groups. In the speech Malcolm X articulates the grounds for a black politics for a community that can “submerge our differences” and address “a common problem – a problem that will make you catch hell whether you’re a Baptist, or a Methodist, or a Muslim, or a nationalist.”¹⁸ Responding to the question posed by the CORE conference’s title where he was speaking – “The Negro Revolt – What Comes Next?” – the speech switches back and forth between answering in a predictive and descriptive way, that his audience will have to see that what comes next is either the ballot or the bullet, and a normative mode, in which he works to give the civil rights struggle “a new interpretation, a broader interpretation.”¹⁹ The “new interpretation” “The Ballot or the Bullet” puts on the Civil Rights struggle turns on a double reversal Malcolm X makes in the imaginary of the scene of dialogue that is race relations.

The first of these reversals rewrites the Civil Rights movements’ political imagination of the relationship between race and social politics, state politics, and the federal government. In order to do this, he first disaffiliates his own perspective on the situation from an American perspective – instead, he sees this political situation of race, a situation in which “everything that came out of Europe, every blue-eyed thing, is already American. And as long as you and I have been over here, we aren’t Americans yet” – from the perspective of the victims of Americanism.²⁰ It is this disaffiliated viewpoint, a black viewpoint standing *outside* of “Americanism,” that is “waking up,” becoming politically mature enough to see that they are their own voting block; viewed as a voting bloc, it was the black man’s vote that put the present administration in Washington DC. From this same perspective, he says, a politically mature

¹⁸Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet” in *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Grove Wiedenfeld, 1965), 24.

¹⁹Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet,” 31.

²⁰Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet,” 26.

perspective, one can in turn see that Lyndon B. Johnson's Democratic party, which is ostensibly pro-Civil Rights but for a Dixiecrat wing, is *actually* the black man's antagonist. The speech goes on to argue that Johnson, head of the Democratic party who is from Texas, a lynch state, who is friends with Richard Russell, the head of the filibuster against Civil Rights, is in cahoots with the Dixiecrats.²¹ Malcolm X writes:

So what I'm trying to impress upon you, in essence, is this: You and I in America are faced not with a segregationist conspiracy, we're faced with a government conspiracy. Everyone who's filibustering is a senator – that's the government. Everyone who's finagling in Washington D.C. is a congressman – that's the government. You don't have anybody putting blocks in your path but people who are part of the government. The same government that you go abroad to fight for and die for is the government that is in a conspiracy to deprive you of your voting rights...²²

As he shifts the listener's sense of *who* is "speaking," who is issuing this "refusal" or a denial to the black community's "request" for civil rights, Malcolm X is also shifting the listener's sense of the direction of this exchange and sense of indebtedness, from one in which the black community is a minority waiting their turn to be heard, to one in which the government is failing to make good on a debt it has *already incurred* to black people:

Your vote, your dumb vote, your ignorant vote, your wasted vote put an administration in Washington D.C., that has seen fit to pass every kind of legislation imaginable, saving you until last, then filibustering on top of that...How can you thank a man for giving you what's already yours? How then can you thank him for giving you only part of what's already yours? You haven't even made progress, if what's being given to you, you should have had already.²³

Throughout, what the vision of political maturity "sees," what it is waking up to, is evoked as a kind of half-realized allegory of a scene of address: analyzing, for example, the way that Democrats are made free to say they're for Civil rights and thereby solicit black votes in the North, because the minority of their own party holding Civil Rights hostage ensures they never

²¹Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet," 27.

²²Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet," 30 – 31.

²³Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet," 27, 31.

have to actually pass any. Malcolm X says, “they’re playing that old con game. One of them makes believe he’s for you, and he’s got it fixed where the other one is so tight against you, he never has to keep his promise.”²⁴ And later: “What alibi do they use when you and I ask, ‘Well, when are you going to keep your promise?’ They blame the Dixiecrats. What is a Dixiecrat? A Democrat.”²⁵ What floats up into the speech is race figured as an abstracted, schematized standoff that maps the direction of power as a kind of dialogue – one says one thing to you, the other says another thing to you.

Malcolm X has at this point shifted the implicit scene of race-as-dialogue that runs beneath Civil Rights as a project. From: one in which the Black community is in an antagonistic back-and-forth with segregationists and appeals to its allies, the federal government and Northern white liberals. To: one in which the Black community is *really* in an antagonistic back-and-forth with the government as such, which *is* the white man (including the white liberal). “The Ballot or the Bullet” then goes on to rotate the scene of address it has just reoriented once more. If the first reversal occurs around “the ballot” – refiguring electoral politics as a scene of address operating between racial blocs – this second occurs around “the bullet,” refiguring, this time, the scene of address between the law as moral conscience and the violence of those who object it. He reverses what is an implicit *direction* in the conceived dialogue around Civil Rights – the idea that Civil Rights is initiated by black activists’ objections to the law, civilly disobeying the law, disrupting order. Instead, in the picture Malcolm X paints, Black activism is *responsive* to someone else’s opening salvos in transgressing the law: “I might stop right here to point out one thing. Whenever you’re going after something that belongs to you, anyone who’s depriving you of the right to have it is a criminal...this was pointed out by the Supreme Court decision. It

²⁴Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet,” 28.

²⁵Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet,” 28.

outlawed segregation. Which means segregation is against the law, which means a segregationist is breaking the law. A segregationist is a criminal.”²⁶ He goes on, “Now who is it that opposes you in carrying out the law? The police department itself. With police dogs and clubs. Whenever you demonstrate against segregation...the law is on your side, and anyone who stands in the way is not the law any longer.”²⁷ There is a double reversal here: in an inscribed racial and directional logic to the idea of criminality. The civil disobedience of black activism *responsive* to the criminality of the segregationist, the self-defensive violence of the new black man coming up is “law enforcement” insofar as it is responsive to the police’s violent enforcement of criminal law-breaking. The criminality of the law-breaking segregationist is in turn itself a reversal of address – this is why it is non-intuitive: the implied address of an accusation of criminality, criminality as a very concept, moves from law to citizen, and from white to black. A lawbreaking law-maker is sometimes understood to be *wrong* – but not criminal. The reverse-address of black back to white is then reinscribed by being set within an address to a third party. Suddenly, in “The Ballot or the Bullet,” the scene of address is not simply modeled by “us” (black) speaking to an entity construed as “them” (segregationists → government and the white man as such), but black accusing white *to* the world, an other other:

We need to expand the civil-rights struggle to a higher level – to the level of human rights... When you expand the civil-rights struggle to the level of human rights, you can then take the case of the black man in this country before the nations of the U.N. You can take it before the General Assembly. You can take Uncle Sam before a world court. But the only level you can do it on is the level of human rights. Civil rights keeps you under his restrictions, under his jurisdiction. Civil rights keeps you in his pocket. Civil rights means you’re asking for Uncle Sam to treat you right. Human rights are something you were born with.”²⁸

²⁶Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet,” 33.

²⁷Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet,” 33.

²⁸Malcom X, “The Ballot or the Bullet,” 34 – 35.

The scene of address he's conjuring has shifted, again: not just the black community in a back-and-forth with the government, but the black man accusing the white man, addressing the third personal eye of the world (in "the court of nations") as he addresses the white man.

These rhetorical transformations map many of the shifts in concern and activism that characterize black nationalism throughout the 1950s and 1960s, and which historians point to when they mark a decisive shift in the locus of Black organizing from Civil Rights to Black Power. The differences historians mark between the two – an international awareness, a self-defensive militancy, a consolidation of different parts of the Black community – are figured as scenes of address, and it is within these scenes of address that the speech reorders the audience's sense of "race" through conceptual reversal. What constructs this sense of reversal is the way Malcolm X reverses the direction or order of an imagined exchange, casting black activism as *responsive* in order to underscore the suppressed overture of violence, transgression, and criminality white society first made to the black community. It is only possible to *have* this sense of reversal when Malcolm X figures political in terms of address in the first place, revising and reversing an "initial" sense of the dialogic plot of racial relations that was not actually perceptible in terms of address. The conceptual work "The Ballot or the Bullet" does is not to reverse the imagination of race relations, but to bring the whole imaginary of race relations into an imagination of address at all.

Adrienne Rich and Audre Lorde were both already working poets when they met in 1968, when they were both teaching in the SEEK program at City University of New York alongside poets and critics like June Jordan, Toni Cade, and Barbara Christian. They began a friendship and long, working collaboration when Rich returned to New York in 1972, during the time when both of them were coming out publicly and increasingly engaged with the feminist movement

because of it.²⁹ Their writings, both poetry and collected prose, powerfully reflect this collaboration – and also the distinct style of writing and feminist vision that critics like Echols seek to consolidate in the term “cultural feminism.” In Lorde and Rich’s feminism, a truly radical feminism is a feminism that reorders not just ideas but the whole sensorium, by re-accessing the *true* self; the true self is the denied self and the principles that have been denied in it, which are feminine. In their shared work, the feminine is both what one embraces to uncover one’s true self, and the thing one uncovers when one embraces one’s true self. In Rich’s poetry this feminist non-cognitive epistemic process is figured, famously, as “diving into the wreck” – new knowledge about ourselves is always recovered from “depth,” figured as both the past and the interior; this knowledge, fully unfolded, is also always on the horizon, something we *will* know only after we fully uncover it.³⁰ As Lorde evokes this theme in “Poetry Is Not a Luxury” (1977), quoting from her own poem, “Black Mother Woman” (1973):

For each of us as women, there is a dark place within, where hidden and growing our true spirit rises, “beautiful / and tough as chestnut / staunchions against (y)our nightmare of weakness/” and of impotence. These places of possibility within ourselves are dark because they are ancient and hidden; they have survived and grown strong through that darkness. Within these deep places, each one of us holds an incredible reserve of creativity and power, of unexamined and unrecorded emotion and feeling. The woman’s place of power within each of us is neither white nor surface; it is dark, it is ancient, and it is deep.”³¹

This vein of thought in both of their work is often framed as anti-intellectual – the deep “knowledge” is felt, it is a different and more attentive or intense way of inhabiting experience. It eschews “knowledge” and “rationality” but insists it is better/more real knowledge in ways that echo the representational framing Cade poses, that a new self-definition is a more true, more

²⁹Alexis De Veaux, *Warrior Poet: A Biography of Audre Lorde* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co, 2006), 103, 128, 133, 139.

³⁰Adrienne Rich, “Diving into the Wreck,” in *Diving into the Wreck: Poems 1971 – 1972* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co, 1973).

³¹Audre Lorde, “Poetry is Not a Luxury,” in *Sister Outsider* (New York: Ten Speed Press, 1984), 36.

accurate self-definition because it is working with material or data that is more raw and immediate, uncorrupted by outside expertise or secondary knowledge. As Lorde writes, in “Uses of the Erotic”:

When we live outside ourselves, and by that I mean on external directives only rather than from our internal knowledge and needs, when we live away from those erotic guides from within ourselves, then our lives are limited by external and alien forms, and we conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need, let alone an individual’s. But when we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense.³²

Running through this figural imaginary of turning inward as excavation of depth, both deep interior and deep past, is an inexplicit but constitutive imaginary of address. As Lorde goes on, for example, in “Uses of the Erotic”:

the erotic cannot be felt secondhand. As a black lesbian feminist, I have a particular feeling, knowledge, and understanding for those sisters with whom I have danced hard, played, or even fought...but this erotic charge is not easily shared by women who continue to operate under an exclusively european-american male tradition...only now, I find more and more women-identified women brave enough to risk sharing the erotic’s electrical charge without having to look away, and without distorting the enormously powerful and creative nature of that exchange.”³³

Turning “inward” to the erotic “within ourselves” is also a turning inward toward each other and speaking amongst two who constitute an “us” – to speak amongst ourselves is to work toward a *direct gaze* that refuses the possibility of distortion.,

In Rich and Lorde’s work, turning inward and speaking “amongst ourselves” is articulated as a rejection of rhetoric or “argument” and an affinity for another kind of language – usually poetry, which has, implicitly, a different model of communication, a different model of address, at its heart. In “Toward a Woman-Centered University,” for example, Rich imagines

³²Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” in *Sister Outsider*, 58.

³³Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic,” 59.

feminism remaking knowledge by remaking the institution, often keeping up the insistently materialist premise that remaking the labor conditions of the institution *is* remaking knowledge. The first intervention she imagines is not feminism's introduction of new content to the disciplines – i.e., inserting women's contributions “back” into narratives of history – but feminism's remaking of an academic style of knowledge, which she imagines as a shift away from rhetoric that becomes synonymous with the historical (male) university and with masculine thinking. She writes:

Walter J. Ong suggests the very origins of academic style are peculiarly masculine: ‘rhetoric...developed in the past as a major expression of the rational level of the ceremonial combat which is found among males and typically only among males at the physical level throughout the entire animal kingdom... For until the romantic age, academic education was all but exclusively focused on defending a position (thesis) or attacking the position of another person – even medicine was taught this way.’ Ong remarks that “the ancient art of rhetoric did not and could not survive coeducation” – a statement that unfortunately is true only in the most literal sense.³⁴

In turn, in Rich's vision of a woman-centered university, the classroom style will be “more dialogic, more exploratory, less given to pseudo-objectivity, than the traditional mode.”³⁵ This theme is echoed throughout Rich's work. In a headnote to two essays in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence* that Rich originally wrote for *American Poetry Review*, she writes:

I learned something of value in writing for APR: that women's words, even when they are not edited, can get flattened and detonated in a context which is predominantly masculine and misogynist, that attempting to “reach” readers through such a context can be a form of self-delusion...when we write for an audience of women we imagine an audience which *wants* our words...We write for ourselves and each other – an ever-expanding sense of whom is part of our imagining – passionately listening and reading as we write because other women's words are vital to our own.³⁶ (*On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, 77)

³⁴Adrienne Rich, “Toward a Woman-Centered University,” in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co, 1979), 92.

³⁵Rich, “Toward a Woman-Centered University,” 156.

³⁶Rich, *On Lies*, 77.

In “Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying,” Rich builds some of the connections between looking inward and looking to each other around what become shared themes of silence/lying/fear. She moves from a consideration of gendered kinds of honesty and honor – male “honor” is conceived of honesty secured by his word, while women’s honor has been conceived as faithfulness, their word cheap because they are assumed to lie – to a kind of inward analysis that to survive, women, powerless people, have learned to lie even to each other: “lying is done with words, and also with silence...a subject is raised which she wants buried. She has to go downstairs, her parking meter will have run out. Or, there is a telephone call she ought to have made an hour ago...”³⁷ Rich continues: ‘the liar fears the void...the void is the creatrix, the matrix. It is not mere hollowness and anarchy. But in women it has been identified with lovelessness, barrenness, sterility. We have been urged to fill our ‘emptiness’ with children. We are not supposed to go down into the darkness of the core.’³⁸ Truth, however, entails confronting that depth/negativity -- at the same time as it entails horizontally addressing one another: “truthfulness, honor, is not something which springs ablaze of itself; it has to be created between people,” she writes, amidst abstracted and recollected conversations such as these:

We take so much of the universe on trust. You tell me: “in 1951 I lived on the north side of beacon street in Somerville.” you tell me: ‘She and I were lovers, but for months now we have only been good friends.’ You tell me: “it is seventy degrees outside and the sun is shining.”...I fling unconscious tendrils of belief, like tender green threads, across statements such as these...I allow my universe to change in minute, significant ways, on the basis of things you have said to me, of my trust in you.³⁹

Rich and Lorde begin with different conceptions of what it means to turn inward by turning to “ourselves.” For Lorde, neither the signs “women,” nor “black,” nor even “black women” stand

³⁷Rich, “Women and Honor: Some Notes on Lying,” in *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, 206).

³⁸Rich, “Women and Honor,” 211.

³⁹Rich, “Women and Honor,” 212.

uncomplicatedly as a “we,” who is definitionally “ourselves” (and, under her influence, Rich too begins to conceive of “speaking amongst ourselves” as “speaking amongst ourselves *across* a difference”). And yet the basic structure of thought, truth as something deep and uncovered/recovered from within ourselves by learning constitute address as an address to “ourselves” continues to operate. Learning to address “ourselves” is learning a mode of speech that is in this frame non-rhetorical, modeled instead by poetry. In Lorde’s work, “poetry” is something like private language, language in which the self addresses itself, in an understanding that echoes John Stuart Mill’s famous definition of lyric as “overheard thought.” In Rich’s writing, rhetoric stands for an antagonistic other-facing address contra a “dialogic” address that is more *personal*, language explicitly attached at either end to a speaking “I” and an addressee, a “you” conceivable as part of a “we.” In Lorde’s writing, it is the process of bringing something up (feeling, “thought” of a different order) from the depth into prose itself that is warping. In a dialogue with Rich published in *Sister Outsider*, Lorde explains her earlier comment that “Poetry is Not a Luxury” and “Uses of the Erotic” constitute a “progression,” because they are connected to “the first piece of prose I ever wrote.” She recollects that as a child, she “kept herself through feeling, “at such a “subterranean level that I didn’t know how to talk. I was busy feeling out other ways of getting and giving information and whatever else I could, because talking wasn’t where it was at.”⁴⁰ She goes on to elaborate that although it was a difficult way to live, as a child Lorde learned from her mother how to acquire “vital and protective information without words,” and that you have to pick things up nonverbally because people will never tell you what you’re supposed to know.” Instead, as a child, she expressed herself by memorizing poems: “when someone said to me, ‘how do you feel?’ or ‘what do you think?’ or asked another direct question,

⁴⁰Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich, “An Interview: Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich,” in *Sister Outsider*, 81-82.

I would recite a poem, and somewhere in that poem would be the feeling, the vital piece of information...the poem was my response.”⁴¹ By contrast, she recounts, when she got to high school she suddenly saw “the way other people thought, and it was an amazement” – “not in bubbles up from chaos that you had to anchor with words” but “step by step,” they “perceived, puzzled out, and acquired information verbally.”⁴² Prose itself is a “rhetorical” mode in the sense Rich and Lorde use it – a way of bringing up from “depth” thought/feeling into language, in Lorde, necessary for communicating with others, but also a process of warping the preservation of the thought that exists when the self brings itself into language to itself.

II. Talking in Circles

The persistent way that the “new” social movements repeatedly and successively figured their newness (including their newness from each other) as address is not merely figurative, not just an allegorical way of pointing to shifts toward cultural nationalism or separatism as problems of authenticity and description (revaluing and redefining blackness, femininity). They conceptualize what they’re doing differently as shifting address because they are responding to a sense of a problem encountered in actual situations of speech, exchange, and dialogue. The way “The Ballot or the Bullet” conceptualizes and (in the process of doing so) actually shifts its mode address responds to whatever it is that is happening in the dialogue between Malcolm X and his antagonistic listener – responds to it not so much in a sense, i.e. that “The Ballot or the Bullet” is “inspired” by that particular dialogue, but in the sense that what the dialogue materializes is a formal problem that shapes the context “The Ballot or the Bullet” anticipated and was written into, and, as I will argue, takes as subject matter. The desire “getting basic” expresses both does

⁴¹Rich and Lorde, “An Interview,” 82.

⁴²Rich and Lorde, “An Interview,” 83.

and does not grasp this: it clearly points to the sense that there is something “off” about how dialogue across political differences works, it suggests that there is some conceptual skew to the forms of address (supplicating, entertaining, explaining) that are produced by a scene in which one addresses a political “other,” and it imagines that there is something foundational to the new politics in grasping this skew as central to the failure of the “old” politics. But its implied perspective on what causes this skew, the “rhetorical” or oppositional character produced by speaking to an other, misses the formal character of the problem. It imagines that in “turning inward” to speak “amongst ourselves” is in a sense to eliminate the friction of address altogether and get down to the business of looking to the thing itself and representing it more clearly. It heavily implies a standpoint theoretical explanation of how our ideas about race and gender get warped by speaking about them in public or to the public: that to speak from opposed or differentiated positions about race is to simply be unable to grasp the other’s perspective; what we think, what we can even hear, is circumscribed by these social categories. But in the conversations that follow, a turn “inward” to speak within the “we” of women, or to speak within the black community, does not actually inoculate these discussions from the kind of circular and almost uncanny way Malcolm X and his putatively white listener talk past each other. Who is speaking is not predictive in terms of how the dialogue will go. Further, they go uncannily the same way: across these scenes of encounter different not only for who is speaking but their attitudes, contexts, and subject matters, the conversations fall into the same shapes. This is why they’re not just exemplary in the sense of providing historical context for the politics Malcolm X, Rich, and Lorde develop: they don’t merely “inspire” the politics these figures stand for. It is the fact that these dynamics can be predictably reproduced, that the participants of these conversations staged them – went in, to use Lorde’s words, knowing they would activate a “knee

jerk” – that both indicates their formal nature and explains what I mean when I say they are logically prior. They are able to predictably produce a surprising deviation from the expected course of dialogue because of prior, genuinely surprising encounters with this dynamic.⁴³ A knee jerk is an evocatively appropriate image for the character of the dialogues as I’m about to analyze them: it has the same uncanniness as these dialogues. It seems underdetermined by what ostensibly causes it, too much motion or reaction, surprising involuntary – and yet having discovered it, we can produce this deviation if you tap the same spot every time, and it’s this predictability that signals that the knee jerk, an event notable for how under-determined and random it is, has a structural character.

What makes the course of these dialogues unusual, how inexorably drawn they seem to be to flow into a certain form (toward antagonism), or as it were, to stay stuck in the same form (circular impasse), is best described by the way it fails to take the normal form of either a dialogue or an argument. Malcolm X and listener are both compelled to engage and re-engage – the conversation has an impetus, some drive that brings them to address one another. And yet that engagement is non-dialogical, in the sense that what the listener says back to Malcolm X seems almost totally unresponsive to him, unresponsive to even the fact that Malcolm X resistantly repeats the same thing and so signals that he is not moveable or prompted to do anything other than repeat *his* articulation of why self-defense is not violence. Likewise, although he clearly disagrees, and his disagreement is totally unresponsive to any response

⁴³Likewise, there are many other public dialogues and exchanges at various points before, during, and after the political movements that take what I think they materialize as foundational that I might have taken as my examples. See: James Baldwin and Nikki Giovanni, *A Dialogue* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1973), responses to Michele Wallace’s *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (New York: Verso, 2015), especially Robert Staples, “The Myth of Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists, in *The Black Scholar*, Vol. 10, No. 6/7 (March/April 1979), and the subsequent special issue of *The Black Scholar*, “The Black Sexism Debate,” Vol 10 No. 8/9 (May/June 1979), and Faith Ringgold, *A Letter to My Daughter, Michele* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015). Other exemplary dialogues include: Malcolm X’s last radio appearance, “Confrontation with an ‘Expert,’” in *Malcolm X Speaks*, Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” and “Open Letter to Mary Daly” in *Sister Outsider*. De Veaux, *Warrior Poet*, recounts in detail the formative nature of these kinds of exchanges – staged, and totally contingent – on Lorde’s thinking.

Malcolm X makes, he never actually articulates disagreement in terms like “I think a position of self-defense amounts to advocating violence,” or “I think you are not being clear enough about what kinds of circumstances would make a ‘violent’ act a self-defensive one.” He never allows himself to constitute an opposing perspective. The listener’s “disagreement” is repeatedly framed as an assertion of what Malcolm X is saying – *you’re saying, you’re advocating, you feel*. If the course of the conversation is noticeably not dialogical – that is to say, what I say is contingently and spontaneously prompted by what you just said, and what you then say is then prompted by and responsive to what I say – it is also strange for never becoming argument. If its forward motion isn’t spontaneous and emergent – responding to *each other* – it is also not at all dialectical, a logical progression that might in some sense go on with or without each other (and irrespective of what the other expresses).⁴⁴ “X is Y” contradicts “X is not Y” and are responsive to one another, clearly face or address one another in some way that requires resolution, whether or not I want to claim that “X is Y” and you want to claim that it isn’t. Malcolm X and the listener’s conversation “moves,” they are driven to keep responding, but not because one position contradicts and revises the other, which in turn produces a new thought to contradict it, and so on: they repeat, return, engage only in order to stage the same clash over and over again. What is strange about this conversation is the fact that it moves and takes a distinct shape, but the

⁴⁴Here, I am understanding the dialogical and the dialectical to be two different ways of thinking about how and why some language addresses other language: the former emerges between speakers in discourse, the latter is something a matter of logical content. To say that there is a long critical history that either explicitly or implicitly debates the relation between these terms, and the relation between dialectic, rhetoric, and logic (and *their* relation to what I’m calling address) is a bit of an understatement, since such a history might encompass wide swaths of the history of philosophy. See J Anthony Blair’s “Rhetoric, Dialectic, and Logic as Related to Argument,” in *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, Vol. 45 No. 2 (November 2, 2012) for a good overview of how recent rhetoric has articulated the difference between those three categories as different points in a process of producing “argument.” See Thomas Conley, *Rhetoric in the European Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) for a lucid survey of the history of rhetoric that attends to the differences in rhetorics as different imaginaries of address. See C. Jan Swearingen’s “Dialogue and Dialectic: The Logic of Conversation and the Interpretation of Logic” in *The Interpretation of Dialogue*, ed. Tullio Maranhão (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990) for a discussion of the dialogical as something counterposed to, structureless conversation, syllogistic logic, and especially narrative.

shape it takes points up the kinds of rationales we would normally understand to produce a conversational logic and use to follow its shape.

If this is exactly the kind of rhetorical/ “debate” scenario Rich and Lorde evoke when they imagine that clarity comes from speaking amongst “ourselves,” in which pure opposition reduces the substance of what is said about race to zero, we can nevertheless see that these patterns of antagonism get produced in scenes that go on “amongst ourselves.” In 1973 Adrienne Rich wrote a letter to the *New York Review of Books* in response to Susan Sontag’s article “Fascinating Fascism” to express “disappointment” in the way Sontag (briefly) attributes feminism a role in the insidious recuperation of Leni Riefenstahl’s films. Rich opens her letter by writing,

It was a strange experience to read Susan Sontag’s critique [NYR, February 6] of Leni Riefenstahl and the eroticization of Nazism. I was forced to ask myself how the same mind had produced this brilliant essay, and the equally brilliant essay which appeared a year or two ago in *Partisan Review* (“The Third World of Women”). In her discussion of Riefenstahl and SS Regalia she seems often on the verge of making important sexual/political connections which, in fact, are never made.⁴⁵

Rich critiques Sontag for her assertion (which she calls a “factual inaccuracy”) that feminists might wish to recuperate Riefenstahl because they are desperate to reclaim what few remaining women filmmakers there are, arguing that the connection she “misses” is that she fails to conceive of her critique of fascist aesthetics as ultimately/really a feminist critique of patriarchy:

What *are* the themes of domination and enslavement, prurience and idealism, male physical perfection and death, ‘control, submissive behavior, and extravagant effort,’ ‘the turning of people into things,’ ‘vitality...identified with physical ordeal,’ the objectification of the body as separate from the emotions – what are these but masculinist, virilist, patriarchal values?⁴⁶

⁴⁵Adrienne Rich and Susan Sontag, “Feminism and Fascism: An Exchange Between Adrienne Rich and Susan Sontag,” in *On Women*, ed David Rieff (New York: Picador, 2023), 141.

⁴⁶Rich and Sontag, “Feminism and Fascism,” 142 – 143.

In the end, the fact that, in her terms, Sontag “missed” these “connections,” causes Rich to recast her opinion of “The Third World of Women”: “Sontag’s lucid and beautifully reasoned *Partisan Review* piece begins to seem, after all, more of an intellectual exercise than the expression of a felt reality – her own – interpreted by a keen mind.”⁴⁷

New York Review of Books then published Sontag’s response: how her mind produced both “Third World Women” and “Fascinating Fascism,” she wrote, is not that confusing, but has a simple explanation: “By addressing itself to a different problem, with the intention of making a different point.”⁴⁸ She goes on to write that the “connection” Rich wants her to make demonstrates that feminism cannot offer a certain form of explanation:

Applied to a particular historical subject, the feminist passion yields conclusions which, however true, are extremely general. Like all capital moral truths, feminism is a bit simple-minded...Holding the subject at arms’ length with a pair of verbal tongs, Rich refers to a “phenomenon called fascism” as if she were in some doubt about its reality – as indeed she is since, according to her view, all that epiphenomenal trash is nothing “in light of” the real stuff, “patriarchal history.”⁴⁹

In the end, Sontag writes that she *does* disavow the strain of feminism this “unremitting rhetoric” characterizes, which is so willing to promote the “antithesis between mind (“intellectual exercise”) and emotion (“felt reality”).” She concludes by countering Rich’s assertion that her “disappointment” lies simply in not seeing an open mind follow what she implies is the natural progression of thought from experience to a properly espoused feminism:

Despite her demurrer about “not looking for a ‘line’ of propaganda or a ‘correct’ position,” this is exactly what she is doing. Why else would I be chided for not bending the immense subject of the image-world created by photography (the NYR essays) or a meditation on death and report on the current agony of the state of Israel (my recent film *Promised Lands*) to the concerns of feminism?⁵⁰

⁴⁷Rich and Sontag, “Feminism and Fascism,” 142.

⁴⁸Rich and Sontag, “Feminism and Fascism,” 145.

⁴⁹Rich and Sontag, “Feminism and Fascism,” 147.

⁵⁰Rich and Sontag, “Feminism and Fascism,” 149.

This is, categorically speaking, a dialogue “amongst ourselves” that does not go as expected or proscribed. It is “staged,” provoked almost with a sense of intentionality, when Rich accuses Sontag of not doing the very thing that would make it a dialogue “amongst ourselves” – of essentially disidentifying as a woman, or refusing what Rich takes to be the natural way feminism addresses her that she has already acknowledged, when she speaks as an outside observer about feminism. It, too, has a repetitious form that is driven by a certain mutual disingenuousness – if Sontag and Rich are responsive to one another, if their letters back and forth are engaged with the text of the other, they are also mutually misconstruing in a way that always suggests the antagonism that is being worked out here remains offstage. Sontag and Rich are each helpful in qualifying about the other what I think the reader can also perceive, a certain sense of disingenuousness. It begins with Rich’s initial objection to “Fascinating Fascism,” which Rich responds to as if it represents an ultimate and dramatic schisms from a feminism Sontag had declared herself allied to in “The Third World of Women.” “Fascinating Fascism” is hardly an ideal object for this reading. In the essay, Sontag’s explicit discussion of feminism as an etiology for Riefenstahl’s recuperation is in fact entirely contained to the following paragraph:

Part of the impetus behind Riefenstahl’s recent promotion to the status of a cultural monument surely owes to the fact that she is a woman. The 1973 New York Film Festival poster, made by a well-known artist who is also a feminist, showed a blond doll-woman whose right breast is encircled by three names: Agnes Leni Shirley. (That is, Varda, Riefenstahl, Clarke.) Feminists would feel a pang at having to sacrifice the one woman who made films that everybody acknowledges to be first-rate. But the strongest impetus behind the change in attitude toward Riefenstahl lies in the new, ampler fortunes of the idea of the beautiful.⁵¹

The rest of the essay is hardly a kind of declaration of independence from feminism; it is in fact feminist in its desire to critique a fascist aesthetics’ will to power as physical perfection/domination. Rich calling Sontag out in the New York Review of Books feels under-

⁵¹Susan Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism,” in *On Women*, 117.

motivated, almost as if Rich were lying in wait for the slimmest of reasons to call out Sontag's feminism. It's the way Rich positions herself as having been provoked into spontaneous response that underlines the non-responsive quality of her letter: that she finds herself "confused" about how Sontag could have written both "The Third World of Women" and "Fascinating Fascism," that all Rich "wants to see" is the open-ended and sincere development of Sontag's feminist thinking that is also what Rich casts as the natural and automatic direction for thinking (via her "surprise" and "confusion" that Sontag's thinking, from the earlier essay to this one, did not take this route). Rich is characterizing her letter as both dialogical and dialectical, as if it is both spontaneously responsive to what Sontag says and almost automatically so, in response to what is so visibly illogical as to lead to "confusion."

Sontag's response locks on to the disingenuousness of Rich's characterization of her own letter when she says that in spite of Rich's demurer about not demanding some kind of party line, what Rich wants is for Sontag to toe a party line. This is (dizzily) a disingenuous diagnosis of Rich's real disingenuousness. Sontag's response to Rich accuses Rich of a kind of anti-intellectualism in which a certain simple-minded form of analysis is engineered backwards to produce always an even more immanent mode of thought, adherence to a "party line." In this, she says, Rich is in fact displaying a reductive hallmark of feminist thought. Just as Rich wants adherence to a party line, feminist thought's simple-mindedness is what makes it ill-suited to the kind of explanation that history is, and requires, because feminism seeks to see all causes as epiphenomenal of a single cause: patriarchy. In a much subtler way than Malcolm X's radio appearance, this exchange repeats: in response to Rich Sontag "explains" or "responds" by doubling down and doing again what so irritates Rich about "Fascinating Fascism" in the first place, construing feminism as an immanence which is a foil to her own thinking. It is because

“Fascinating Fascism” really does rely on forms of attention and analysis that are recognizably feminist – this is, in fact, the premise of Rich’s objection, how “close” Sontag is to certain “connections” – that Sontag’s punch-back at Rich, in which she calls out Rich’s disingenuousness as immanent simple-mindedness (feminism), is disingenuous. It essentially replays the first (disingenuous) move of the “dialogue” in “Fascinating Fascism,” in which Sontag uses feminism as a one-dimensional foil for her own untethered and far-seeing analysis while also using feminism to produce that analysis. What is overtly a clarifying exchange in which each response successively tries to make clear a point of contention or difference with what the other has said repeats in a pattern of talking past each other – each misdescribing the other’s misdescriptions of what antagonism or opposition is being worked out here, an antagonism that the form of the dialogue increasingly points to as offstage.

An excerpt of an exchange between Audre Lorde and James Baldwin at Hampshire College, published in *Essence Magazine* in 1984 completes the triptych of examples that capture the fact that these politics’ persistent figuration of their effects as shifts in address was responsive to a shared foundational problem. It completes the triptych by, in a sense, showing what persists about this dynamic across a full spectrum of counterfactual instances. If the dialogue between Malcolm X and his listener is maximally combative, the listener asking the “question” never displaying anything like sincere interest in an answer, the conversation between Lorde and Baldwin is remarkable for the way it is shaped by good will and attempts to find common ground, to bring repressed antagonism into the light of explicit statement and to move it toward synthesis. For example: the conversation – as excerpted by *Essence* – begins with James Baldwin offering up a shared vision of blackness that is, by 1984, a familiar sentiment from his work: “To be a Black American is in some way to be born with the desire to be white...Dubois

believed in the American dream. So did Martin. So did Malcolm. So do I. So do you. It's why we're sitting here."⁵²

And Lorde responds: "I don't, honey. I'm sorry, I just can't let that go past. Deep, deep, deep down I know that dream was never mine. And I wept and I cried and I fought and I stormed, but I just knew it. I was Black. I was female. And I was out – out – by any construct wherever the power lay. So if I had to claw myself insane, if I lived I was going to have to do it alone. Nobody was dreaming about me. Nobody was even studying me except as something to wipe out."

Baldwin meets this objection with a form of common ground; he gives her a formulation or reframing for what she's said about recognizing herself outside of the "schizophrenic" desire he describes, in his own terms: "you're saying you do not exist in the American dream except as a nightmare." Lorde agrees. They seem to set off on mutually elaborating this allegory of being and being in the American dream – except Baldwin keeps restoring *his* side of the account to gender parity, and Lorde subtly corrects him. So for example, Baldwin says, "You're trying to deal with the man, the woman, the child – the child of whichever sex – and he or she and your man or your woman has got to deal with the 24-hour-a-day facts of life in this country. We're not going to fly off someplace else, you know, we'd better get through whatever that day is and still have each other and still raise children – somehow manage all of that."

To this Lorde says, "Even worse than the nightmare is the blank. And Black women are the blank. I don't want to break all this down, then have to stop at the wall of male/female division. When we admit and deal with difference; when we deal with the deep bitterness; when we deal with the horror of even our different nightmares; when we turn them and look at them,

⁵²This and all following quotations from the dialogue to be found in Baldwin and Lorde, "A Revolutionary Hope" in *Essence*, 1984, <https://mocada-museum.tumblr.com/post/73421979421/revolutionary-hope-a-conversation-between-james>.

it's like looking at death: hard but possible. If you look at it directly without embracing it, then there is much less that you can ever be made to fear.”

To which Baldwin says, “I agree.”

Let's call what I've just described two full rotations of the wheel of the conversation as a whole: claim, objection, consensus – then claim, objection, consensus again. As Baldwin and Lorde go back and forth in their somewhat elliptical way a pointed antagonism repeatedly breaks through, or breaks up, the consensus they reach. Lorde, for example, arrives at quite clear point early on that although it's easier “when all our asses are in the sling,” in the context of being black in America, that it's easier to deal with “samenesses” than with differences, but that “we need to acknowledge those power differences and see where they lead us. An enormous amount of energy is being taken up with either denying the power differences between Black men and women or fighting over power differences between Black men and women or killing each other off behind them. I'm talking about Black women's blood flowing in the streets – and how do we get a 14-year-old boy to know I am not the legitimate target of his fury?” Baldwin in turn counters: “I hear you – but let me backtrack, for better or worse. You know, for whatever reason and whether it's wrong or right, for generations men have come into the world, either instinctively knowing or believing or being taught that since they were men they in one way or another had to be responsible for the women and children, which means the universe....I don't think there's any way around that.” Over several rotations of the cycle, as Baldwin and Lorde become more explicit about the tension they are alternately introducing and fending off around sex difference, they eventually arrive at a working consensus:

JB: I'm not disagreeing with you, but I do think you're barking up the wrong tree. I'm not trying to get the Black man off the hook – or Black women, for that matter – but I am talking about the kingdom in which we live.

AL: Yes, I absolutely agree; the kingdom in which these distortions occur has to be changed.

JB: Something happens to the man who beats up a lady. Something happens to the man who beats up his grandmother. Something happens to the junkie. I know that very well. I walked the streets of Harlem; I grew up there, right? Now you know it is not the Black cat's fault who sees me and tries to mug me. I got to know that. It's his *responsibility* but it's not his *fault*. That's a nuance. UI [sic] got to know that it's not him who is my enemy even when he beats up his grandmother. His grandmother has got to know. I'm trying to say one's got to see what drove both of us into those streets. We be both from the same track. Do you see what I mean? I've come home myself, you know, wanting to beat up anything in sight- but Audre, Audre...

AL: I'm here, I'm here...

JB: I agree with you. I see exactly what you mean and it hurts me at least as much as it hurts you. But how to maneuver oneself past this point – how not to lose him or her who may be in what is in effect occupied territory. That is really what the Black situation is in this country. For the ghetto, all that is lacking is barbed wire, and when you pen people up like animals, the intention is to debase them and you have debased them.

AL: Jimmy, we don't have an argument

JB: I know we don't.

AL: But what we do have is a real disagreement about your responsibility not just to me but to my son and to our boys. Your responsibility to him is to get across to him in a way that I never will be able to because he did not come out of my body and has another relationship to me. Your relationship to him as his farther is to tell him I'm not a fit target for his fury.

JB: Okay, okay...

AL: It's so entrenched in him that it's part of him as much as his Blackness is.

JB: All right, all right...

AL: I can't do it. You have to.

JB: All right, I accept – the challenge is there in any case. It never occurred to me that it would be otherwise. That's absolutely true. I simply want to locate where the danger is...

In other words, they come to a working acknowledgement of what their point of friction is:

Baldwin's sense that Lorde is blaming or accusing Black men for behavior that is a function or expression of their oppression, not giving enough conceptual deference to the larger, causal context. They correspondingly develop a grounds for consensus: a sense that sex difference is a problem within and *for* the Black community that nevertheless isn't *authored by* Black men. It is a moment that functions roughly how argument normatively is supposed to function: conversation "discovers" a difference in perspective or opinion that, through repeated exchange, is fleshed out as explicit semantic content, and driven to resolution. Gender, they conclude, is a problem *for* Black people if not one created *by* Black men, it is our *responsibility* even if we are

not to *blame*, even if it *is* the result of an oppressive racial order. In fact to resolve this internal division of gender, to refuse to let it dictate to us or divide us, is to conceive of the Black community as internally unified in the way Baldwin originally wants to; it provides a new grounds for collectively working against external political forces that divide us. They arrive at a conceptual reconciliation between the antagonism of sex and the desire for racial solidarity that Black feminists have by 1984 been articulating for years – since, for example, Toni Cade’s essay in *The Black Woman*, “On the Issue of Roles.”⁵³ Lorde herself has articulated a position quite like this in “The Great American Disease,” a special 1979 issue of *The Black Scholar* responding to Robert Staples’ “The Myth of Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists.”⁵⁴ And yet, this synthesis doesn’t hold. The dialogue breaks, again, the sense of blame/accusation resurfaces, is foreclosed, peppered with acknowledging “yeses” and “I agrees” and “I’m here’s,” and resurfaces, again:

AL: I can’t tell you what I wished you would be doing. I can’t redefine masculinity. I can’t redefine Black masculinity certainly. I am in the business of redefining Black womanness. You are in the business of redefining Black masculinity. And I’m saying, ‘Hey, please go on doing it,’ because I don’t know how much longer I can hold this fort, and I really feel that Black women are holding it and we’re beginning to hold it in ways that are making this dialogue less possible.
JB: Really? Why do you say that? I don’t feel that at all. It seems to me you’re blaming the Black man for the trap he’s in.

And, the “end” of the dialogue as it was printed by *Essence*:

B: But you don’t realize that in this republic the only real crime is to be a Black man?

AL: No, I don’t realize that. I realize the only crime is to be Black. I realize the only crime is to be Black, and that includes me too.

JB: A Black man has a prick, they hack it off. A Black man is a ***** when he tries to be a model for his children and he tries to protect his women. That is a principal crime in this republic. And every Black man knows it. And every Black woman pays for it. And every Black child. How can you be so sentimental as to blame the Black man for a situation which has nothing to do with him?

AL: You still haven’t come past blame. I’m not interested in blame, I’m interested in changing...

⁵³Toni Cade, “On the Issue of Roles,” in Cade, *The Black Woman*, 123-137.

⁵⁴See note 43.

JB: May I tell you something? May I tell you something? I might be wrong or right.

AL: I don't know – tell me.

JB: Do you know what happens to a man-?

AL: How can I know what happens to a man?

JB: Do you know what happens to a man when he's ashamed of himself when he can't find a job? When his socks stink? When he can't protect anybody? When he can't do anything? Do you know what happens to a man when he can't face his children because he's ashamed of himself? It's not like being a woman...

In this exchange between Baldwin and Lorde, I think, we have a concerted, good-will attempt to speak *to* each other, to collaboratively identify and qualify what is driving their opposition, which the dialogue *itself* elides, as if in spite of them. You cannot voluntarily override a knee jerk, in other words, and it is because you cannot voluntarily override it that the knee jerk reveals its connection to an underlying autonomic system that governs it. The form of these exchanges is *not* being determined by the inventive, responsive, or spontaneous exchange of two speakers – the speakers are speaking “past” each other, articulating disingenuous rationales; and yet, neither are the dialogues dialectical, understood as the progression of argument that is determined by the logical content of two positions as they interact with one another. But these conversations nevertheless seem dragged into a kind of circular repetition in which their statements continue to have a sense of contesting the other, continue to compel them to address each other and work something out. They are not simply two parallel speeches or non-sequiturs passing like ships in the night, even while some quality of disingenuity fails to allow them to make that contradiction or dialogical antagonism explicit or expressed in the dialogue itself. It is because of this that the conversation seems to point always “beyond” what is being said to some other impetus, whose operation is being indexed by what's happening even if it is not being represented in what's happening.

The absent thing that these dialogues point to is the way that race and gender function as frames or contexts for overdetermining address; conversely, the sense that the statements in these dialogues address one another is underdetermined by their logical content or the expressive desires of the speakers. If there is for example a spectrum of meaning in which “sex is rape” may descriptively mean something like “in this society sex as a practice is indistinguishable from rape” to “all instances of sex should be classified as rape” to “your sex is rape” (or, even more short-circuited: you are a rapist), the switch in these conversations is flipped toward the latter. Whether one understands a statement to address another statement, whether you understand a statement to address *you*, is the difference between a descriptive statement and one that can register blame, threat, accusation, invitation, and so on. If the speakers in these conversations seem to be operating or responding to an antagonism that is always in excess of what is expressed as argument, it is through a kind of practice of reading that cannot but determine the meaning of the other’s statement as *addressing* them in ways that either by virtue of the form of discourse or its logical-syntactical structure it is not. This is what the “disingenuousness” of Rich’s account of her own objection to “Fascinating Fascism” points to: Sontag argues that feminism, as an intellectual social force, is a contributing factor to the cultural recuperation of Leni Riefenstahl’s work. Her position is a logical description of feminism’s implications. Rich reacts to this idea as if Sontag has said that *feminists* advocated (and are responsible) for Riefenstahl’s recuperation; she *hears* blame. Sontag, in turn, responds to an objection Rich puts descriptively – Sontag’s feminism doesn’t really represent or reflect an inductive and sincere excavation of experience – as Rich trying to force her to toe a party line; she hears threat and recrimination (you haven’t toed the party line, we will revoke your former membership). This is a conversation about address that is overdetermined by it: Rich hears the way Sontag narrates a

relationship to feminism in a third person, omniscient voice as a disidentification with feminism or refusal to accept feminism's address to Sontag that addresses *her*; Sontag hears Rich's objection to this accusation as the coercive or smothering address of feminism (and therefore gender) itself. Lorde in particular gives us language to understand what these dialogues materialize as overdetermined address, by virtue of the way she frames her own attempts to try and defuse it: what she repeatedly tries to do is siphon the sense of *blame* out of the introduction of gender as a problem. She works to deflate antagonisms – the sense that man/woman are concepts that face or address each other– into differences, in parallel with one another. In the distinction she makes when she says to Baldwin that they don't have an argument, but they do have a disagreement, she suggests that the knee jerk escalates two positions that merely do not agree, are not perfectly aligned – two statements that are simply descriptively *different* – into an argument, two positions that address each other, gaze at each other, the precondition for contesting/contradicting each other.

III. Lyrical Address, Militant Address

Responsiveness to the problem of the “knee jerk” traces out an under-read throughline in the new social movements, a shared insight that politics must be responsive to this distorting dynamic as that thing that provokes a new mode of thinking politically: Malcolm X's instantiation of shift from Civil Rights to Black Power, Toni Cade's from Black Power to Black feminism, Adrienne Rich's from radical feminism to lesbian separatism, and Audre Lorde's from female cultural nationalism to difference feminism. This throughline is also, though, a distinction along the same lines. The differences in their styles of address respond differently to the “knee

jerk.” The practice of these styles implicitly understand race/gender in ways that are different from each other.

The sense that there is some “other” impetus driving the dialogue opens, for Lorde and Rich, beyond language, and on to a representational logic. The antagonism that is “really” driving the dialogue, that the exchange repeatedly comes up against but isn’t articulating or capturing, is understood in psychoanalytic terms; what communication is coming up against is latent resistance, latent (internalized) opposition (racism or sexism) always susceptible to therapeutic methods of exposure. It is because Rich and Sontag read each other’s objections in representational terms, for example, that they produce, perceive, and disingenuously try to diagnose a sense of disingenuousness. It is the representational terms of how they account for each other that produces the sense that they are misdiagnosing what the other *means*. What the other *means* (and how they each react to it) is most intelligibly rendered through the overdetermined frame of address. For example, Sontag codes her own critique in “Fascinating Fascism” as feminism’s representational insufficiency – it is not fine-grained enough to “represent” history, it reduces history to a single etiology (patriarchy) that fails to produce narrative. This is how she describes what she imagines Rich wants her to do in toe-ing the party line. And how she is describing it casts what was implicitly a critique about address – Rich does not like Sontag’s free-floating descriptive voice, her presumption that feminism does not address *her*, that she is somehow above it – into a representational desire. Similarly, as Lorde’s exchange with Baldwin progresses, it suddenly – and quite shockingly – turns to a mutual non-recognition of experience – Lorde asks, how can she know what it is to be a black man? And counters: does Baldwin know what it is to be a black woman? The conversational turn from blame versus responsibility for gender as a problem to the unknowability of two different experiences of

race/gender implies that this inability to understand the other's experience or to communicate it is the *real* cause, at the heart of their inability to exit the dialogical circle that keeps bringing them back to blame.

In Lorde and Rich's work, overdetermined address is a barrier to the ability to represent and communicate experience. Because it imagines that what communication is coming up against is latent, internalized, the distortion these dialogues provoke is always symptomatic of some residual racism or sexism, and susceptible to therapeutic methods of exposure. This way of conceptualizing address manifests as a style that is informed by lyrical, pedagogical, and therapeutic models of address. In Lorde's terms, it is poetry – and its lyrical model of *indirect* (apostrophized) and self-contained address – that is capable of getting at this layer beneath what people *say* to what one needs to know, as she described it in her reflections on childhood. One gets to what is *really* driving the knee jerk by shifting down-gear, by producing an address (to “ourselves”) that removes the sense of address altogether (we are “alone,” simply speaking) and so is capable of shifting speech (back?) into a merely descriptive register. To understand their political practice as fundamentally responsive to their sense of what the “knee jerk” is certainly disrupts the way they have been usually understood in terms of standpoint-theory (the terms in which they sometimes understand themselves): there is a significant distinction between the idea that a problem that begins in or as address might be normatively or desirably defused by being *moved* into a representational register, and one in which the fundamentally different social positions of the speakers produces unrepresentable differences between their experiences that can only be understood by actually having those same experiences.

But the fact that this style shares with the desire to “get basic” an assumption that an I/you address is a distortion to cut through to be able to look clearly and directly at gender/race

itself misunderstands militancy – and misunderstands what militancy as a style of address does understand about the “knee jerk.” Militancy does not conceptualize the way gender and race overdetermine/are overdetermined by address as a barrier to speaking about, and therefore being able to clearly describe and analyze, gender or race. Militancy understands this overdetermination of address to *be* gender, or race. There’s nothing to see beyond: this warp, this “knee jerk” is the thing itself. In this sense, militancy is a style of address that stays within the problematic of address: it seeks to *materialize*, as in *make material*, make syntactical and compositional, what is not fully syntactical-compositional. It does this by insistently *responding* to the meaning that is produced by the reading frame of address, refusing to hear statements in the merely descriptive or assertive key in which they might (i.e. syntactically-compositionally) seem to be offered; to put it succinctly, it reacts to, or in turn offers the statement “sex is rape” as if it means or knowing it will mean “your sex is rape.”

Like Baldwin, Malcolm X’s listener’s response displays this sense that what he hears is overdetermined by a sense of address: what Malcolm X offers descriptively as the principle that Black people are, if violently addressed, entitled to defend themselves, and *should* defend themselves, the listener responds to as if the *principle* of self-defense were a declaration of retaliation, a threat. Unlike Rich and Lorde, Malcolm X does not try to shift or meta-describe this excess. He stays on the narrative level of the dialogue’s overt content, repeating back to the listener that he is advocating self-defense, as opposed to violence, as though the thing he said that made the listener demand he admit that he was advocating violence would clarify for the listener that he was not advocating violence. This is, actually, part of its uncanny-ness – not just that the listener can’t seem to hear that the distinction Malcolm X makes is a response to his “question” (can’t hear it, because he doesn’t change his objection), but also that Malcolm X

doesn't seem to shift or try another strategy to get through to him. This is because what is being staged here is not an attempt to communicate past some troublingly distorting feeling of opposition. It is an attempt to materialize the overdetermined frame of address as a structure of racialized thought, and re-route it. Self-defense is a concept that proceeds as if it is already *in* a frame in which one should or already does hear all statements through a frame of address: it conceives of race as a dialogue of violence in which one half of the conversation is delusionally "muted" – white violence is not seen as violence, so Black "violence" can never be responsive, can never be justified self-defense. Whiteness makes overtures of violence to blackness and then it denies the nature of this discourse as exchange. Self-defense as Malcolm X articulates it has analyzed a racial scene in which even "nonviolent" black protest – protest that involves black people being beaten, fire-hosed, etc. – is, in the singular voice of white liberal moderation, excessive, expecting too much too soon, too disruptive, etc. This is the more abstract sense in which the dialogue has already "happened" and is merely being replayed (in addition to the ways in which it probably, by 1964, has literally already happened, hundreds of times). Black protest will be heard in ways that are overdetermined by a sense of address, in the sense that it "seems" (to a position that constructs itself *as white* by virtue of hearing it this way) to initiate a combative exchange, to *start* a dialogue it is really already in, really only just responding to. Self-defense provokes – it "knows" it will be heard as threat – and withholds, in the sense that its overt content, its characterization of itself as always already responsive and justified, denies what the white listener "is hearing." Thus – the listener in the dialogue above insists to Malcolm X that *he is advocating violence*, as if to make Malcolm X explicitly *say* the thing the listener already hears, to make him "admit" or "own" the initiating, threatening status that for the white listener is what Malcolm X really means. To simply repeat in response to this that he is

advocating self-defense, not violence, is not a clarification but a refusal – it insists on “hearing” the delusionally muted opening to the racial exchange, insisting on the responsiveness of black “violence.” This is a scene of force. The “white” listener is white in a formal sense: because he is insisting on *his* frame of meaning, a frame in which to be a Black speaker is to overdetermine address, or for one’s address to be underdetermined because the listener is deaf to what it is responding to. Malcolm X is proceeding by reading everything the listener says through *his* frame of meaning. To insist on shifting the sense of address with which he speaks and hears to counter to the normal/normative one in which a responsive concept is an aggressive one is to make this frame of reading produce itself as *material* in the space of the dialogue: we can literally see it as this dialogue’s exaggerated form, as the surreally repetitious circularity of this dialogue which the listener will not be able to get out of unless he shifts how he hears Malcolm X.

Chapter 3

Reductive: Style Theorizing Itself

Feminist style as I have so far tried to analyze it is not *a style* but a stylistic *practice*: to do stylistically what she was doing, to make interventions at the formal junctures where feminism began to experiment, was to enter a shared conversation and mode of thought.¹ To know how to practice it is to express a kind of intentionality that can be, but need not be, and often wasn't, capable of giving explicit account of itself. But in this chapter, I draw together my analysis of how style works on readers, and what sense of *problem*, discursively encoded, it responds to, to think about feminist style's understanding of itself, what it comes to know by virtue of its ability to work (or to demonstratively *not work*). The object I take to express this theoretical self-awareness about style is Andrea Dworkin's *Pornography* – a rather perverse choice because what Dworkin has been recognized *for* has not, to put it mildly, been the virtue of the kind of subtle thinking we take to be properly theoretical.

In recent years, revisiting, reevaluating, and recuperating Dworkin's work has been almost as popular and productive as the critical trend of rethinking, renegotiating, and returning to the feminist Sex Wars – a moment that has often been understood to be the cause of a schism between feminism and itself, as well as feminism and queer theory, feminism's self-defeating wrong turn away from the left, the apotheosis of what Second Wave feminism was doing wrong all along. Dworkin's work has been the subject of new scholarly attention from Leah Claire Allen (2016); her name has been invoked in the celebrations of female and feminist rage that

¹Reprinted with changes from an article published as "Reductive: Andrea Dworkin's Style as Thought," in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*; Volume 49, No. 4 (Summer 2024).

followed the #MeToo moment, as in Rebecca Traister's *Good and Mad* (2018); her work has been collected in an anthology titled *Last Days at Hot Slit* (Dworkin 2019), with an introduction by Johanna Fateman (2019) that thoughtfully reconsiders its importance, prompting a flurry of reviews in major outlets; she has been the subject of a compelling new biography by Martin Duberman (2020).²

What Dworkin *has* been known for, now as much as she ever was, has been variously described as “startling,” “unapologetic,” “blunt,” “relentless,” “dogmatic,” “lurid,” and “extremist,” a list that is strangely consistent in the ways it tries to describe her work in spite of the fact that it also reflects the full, polarized spectrum of feelings that work inspires, from fascination to contempt.³ It is a list that suggests that how readers judge Andrea Dworkin is also how they judge the Second Wave. If the flurry of recent readings of Dworkin have a distinctly recuperative bent, if these readings are staged in the name of a desire to give Dworkin the objective, clear-eyed, if not admiring, consideration she never had in life, they are nevertheless still missing something critical about Dworkin's work – in fact, missing it to the extent that they are trying to be neutral, objective, and clear-eyed, because what they're missing is what is most obvious about Dworkin's work, that quality that makes her work feel *bad*, and also makes it *feel* bad, as in wrong, stupid, grating, extreme, gut-punching, totalizing, and, in a word, reductive.

²Leah Claire Allen, “The Pleasures of Dangerous Criticism: Interpreting Andrea Dworkin as a Literary Critic,” in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* Vol. 42 No. 1 (2016); Rebecca Traister, *Good and Mad: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Anger* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018); Andrea Dworkin, *Last Days at Hot Slit*, ed Johanna Fateman and Amy Scholder (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2019); Martin Duberman, *Andrea Dworkin: Feminist as Revolutionary* (New York: New Press, 2020).

³For sources of these descriptions see: Ellen Willis, “Nature's Revenge,” in *The New York Times*, July 12, 1981; Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1984); Elaine Blair, “Fighting for Her Life,” in *New York Review of Books*, July 27, 2019, <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/06/27/andrea-dworkin-fighting-for-her-life/>; Moira Donegan, “Sex during Wartime: The Return of Andrea' Dworkin's Radical Vision” in *Bookforum*, February/March 2019, <https://www.bookforum.com/print/2505/the-return-of-andrea-dworkin-s-radical-vision-20623>; Johanna Fateman, “Introduction,” in *Last Days at Hot Slit*, Lauren Oyler, “The Radical Style of Andrea Dworkin,” in *The New Yorker*, March 25, 2019, and Jennifer Szalai, “Andrea Dworkin, Startling and Ruthless Feminist Whose Work Is Back in the Spotlight,” in *New York Times*, March 12, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/12/books/review-last-days-at-hot-slit-andrea-dworkin.html>.

When critics say that Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon’s argument about porn is “reductive,” what they usually mean is that it is wrong. “Reductive” is a charge intended to be argument-ending: it names an epistemic quality and takes that quality as damning in one fell swoop. Being “reductive” is at the heart of the critique that Dworkin and MacKinnon can’t distinguish porn’s fictional representations from the reality of sexual violence, and it’s at the heart of the critique that, when they imagine that what porn represents might influence what people do, Dworkin and MacKinnon are imagining a “straightforward causal connection between the sight of images and one’s subsequent behavior.”⁴ To be accused of being reductive is to be accused of eschewing proper nuance, of failing to perceive fine distinctions, such as the distinction between a phenomenon having multiple and proximate causes rather than one singular, direct, or necessary one. When we see Dworkin as being reductive, we see her rendering binaries where we should see spectrums, winnowing multiplicities to singularities, declaring stable and certain meaning where she should express or hear multiple meanings, metaphorical meanings, uncertain meanings. To be reductive is to fail to capture necessary complexity in one’s explanation, interpretation, or representation of a thing; it is, for example, to represent sex as singularly and overwhelmingly violent rather than understanding women’s ambivalent experience of it as both pleasurable and dangerous.

But when critics describe Dworkin’s writing as reductive, that description doesn’t just pick out a cognitive quality of the anti-porn argument. They’re describing something that picks up on a quality of Dworkin’s sentences, her prose, as well the content of her argument. And it is this sense of reductiveness as style – not thought – that has motivated critics’ recent attempts to recuperate Dworkin as a valuable feminist forebear by recuperating her as a writer and artist. As

⁴Frances Ferguson, *Pornography, the Theory: What Utilitarianism Did to Action* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 41.

Jennifer Szalai writes in her *New York Times* review of *Last Days at Hot Slit*, “A new generation of feminists has reclaimed her, seeing in Dworkin’s incandescent rage a source of illumination even as they bristle at some of her specific views.” If contemporary readers still can’t get behind such “categorical edicts” as Dworkin’s “verdict” on pornography as “Dachau brought into the bedroom and celebrated,” Szalai writes – well, these are the “least interesting” aspects of her work anyway. What is interesting is how the “the confident strut, the incantatory repetition, the startling, belligerent language, the ruthless whittling down of options to a single, irrevocable point” express Dworkin’s rage. Critics reviewing *Last Days at Hot Slit* overwhelmingly share the sense that if Dworkin’s early experiences with sexual violence and domestic battery led her to excess, to extreme views, at least she came by those views authentically. And if that extremity led her to espouse ideas that were, conceptually speaking, pretty intolerably wrong, her work is nevertheless artistically valuable on the grounds that her incantatory repetition, her ruthless whittling down of options, are also a searing reflection of the extremity of rape as an experience, a cathartic and fearless evocation of the rage so many women feel but aren’t free to express. In support of this expressive recuperation, reviewers almost to a person rely on the way Dworkin describes her own style in the essay, anthologized in *Last Days*, “My Life as a Writer”: Dworkin writes that she knew she had to write a prose “more terrifying than rape, more abject than torture, more insistent and destabilizing than battery, more desolate than prostitution, more invasive than incest, more filled with threat and aggression than pornography.”⁵

This is what I mean when I say that Dworkin’s reductiveness is the most noticeable, least really noticed aspect of her work. The ways we read her cope with the strangeness of her work, its incantatory rhythms, its apocalyptic declarations, its whittling down to singularities, by either

⁵Dworkin, “My Life as a Writer,” in *Last Days at Hot Slit*, 314.

isolating reductiveness as thought or isolating it *from* thought, celebrating it as purely stylistic or dismissing it as mere style. When discussing her ideas, there is a tendency (particularly when the critic in question hopes to object to those ideas) to take her reductiveness as mere mistakenness in a way that can't account for the intentional qualities of reductiveness as a style of writing. Or else there is a tendency (particularly when the critic in question hopes to look back to the sex wars coolly, to extract an ideological disagreement from the sense that it was a vitriolic catfight) to gloss those ideas in ways that treat Dworkin's extremity and militant overzealousness as rhetorical flourish – mere style – layered over what comes out to be quite prescient opposition to sexual violence. In the era of #MeToo, Dworkin's ideas about the violence of the sexual landscape need not sound hyperbolic, as long as you take out what makes them sound hyperbolic. Alternately, there is a tendency (when the critic in question hopes to recuperate Dworkin as an artist) to acknowledge the poverty of her ideas before talking about her style as such – in fact, celebrating Dworkin's style becomes a way of discounting her as a thinker, since it is precisely the survivor's searingly warped perspective on sex that most evocatively *expresses* her trauma. What these ways of reading Dworkin seem unable to do is to incorporate an understanding of her reductiveness as both style and thought.

But what reductiveness does as a style *is* Dworkin's thought; it *is* her theory of pornography. This, I think, is what she means in "My Life as a Writer" when she evokes a parallelism between her style and her objects of critique, contra the ways her recent readers have used her self-reflection to recuperate Dworkin as an artist *in spite* of her mistakes as a thinker. *Pornography* is reductive because pornography is reductive, but not because *Pornography's* style aims to evoke the extreme picture of sex as violence that constitutes a survivor's perspective, or to express an aesthetic quality of rape via style, as if *Pornography* were one long

illustrative soliloquy, its author a dramatic speaker, a character. The parallel is not mimetic, expressive, or reflective. “My Life as a Writer” begins with the declaration that all of Dworkin’s writing emerges from her early determination, after being battered as a young wife, to figure out what happened to her. It goes on to explain that she has to write the way she does (with desolation, abjection, etc) because, although she would like to take what she knows and just hand it over, there is the problem, when writing as a woman, of being believed. What the style parallels in its objects of critique is set up, in this essay, not as a way of expressing what happened to her but as a way of figuring it out, a way of solving a problem by conveying that knowledge, the problem of testimony’s failure.

Dworkin wrote very infrequently about her experiences with wife battery, but she wrote about it publicly for the first time—not uncoincidentally, I think—when she was first drafting *Pornography*, in 1978’s “A Battered Wife Survives” (republished in *Last Days at Hot Slit*). In in a 1982 interview with Elizabeth Wilson in *Feminist Review*, Dworkin describes the problem of wife battery this way:

When this individual who hit me hit me, he hit me only because I was a woman – there is simply no other way to describe it. I mean the reason may have been that the laundry wasn’t done right or that the refrigerator wasn’t cleaned, and I may have been confused by trying to understand how my whole life and all my aspirations had somehow come down to trying to figure out how to clean the refrigerator the right way, but the fact of the matter was that I was hit because I was a woman. And every time I tried to get away, every time I tried to get help, people sent me back because I was a woman, people didn’t believe me because I was a woman, so that my own individuality or my own personality or my own intelligence or my own sensitivity had absolutely no meaning in the real world in which I was living, which was defined completely by my sex-class and not by anything else.⁶

Wife battery, in this explanation, is impersonal because it is a confrontation with an alien but subsuming system of meaning: everything Dworkin thought about herself and tried to be, all the

⁶Dworkin, Andrea, and Elizabeth Wilson. 1982. “Interview with Andrea Dworkin.” *Feminist Review* 11 (Summer 1982), 25.

meanings one tries to make of one's own life, were null inputs to the rationales that governed the thing now defining her life. Wife battery presents itself as having rationales, as being navigable, as promising that if you grasp the rules governing fridge cleaning or laundry doing you will have found the key to the map, you can grasp, predict, pre-empt wife battery's reasons and causes. To play this hermeneutic game on wife battery's own terms is to lose (mastering the process of correct fridge cleaning as a way of mastering wife battery is to be perpetually behind the curve), but that doesn't mean wife battery is random: if it doesn't represent its own rules sincerely, it nevertheless *has* rules, a rationale, a system, and can be seen to have them precisely because it is impersonal. It is not an interaction of specific personalities, or controlled by individual impulse, hers, or his, or theirs.

Wife battery, as Dworkin describes it, is a discursive situation, a back and forth: wife battery speaks to its victim, and the victim tries to read it, to exert interpretive mastery over it; the victim tries to speak *about* wife battery, to testify to it, but wife battery swallows up and nullifies this testimony. The battery is not just the battery, not just being hit: the battery as a phenomenon is the throughline between why, contra the terms battery offers, she is being hit, and why she is not being believed. The physical situation is also a discursive situation – a single, closed system. “I had been told by everyone I asked for help the many times I tried to escape – strangers and friends – that he would not be hitting me if I didn't like it or want it. I rejected this outright,” Dworkin writes.⁷ In other words, wife battery does not nullify testimony with counter-testimony – it doesn't counter her claim about the situation with a different claim, nor does it deny her claim; it claims to be able to say what she really *meant*. This implies that the way we so often frame the epistemic problem of rape – that our ability to know the truth of what happened

⁷Dworkin, “My Life as a Writer,” 319.

bottoms out at a direct contradiction, she said/he said – is wrong: in Dworkin’s analysis, the discursive situation that is sexual violence is modeled by: she said / he said what she (really) means. Wife battery swallows up its victim’s testimony by asserting that *it* provides the real meaning of what she’s saying. The formal feature of wife battery as discourse in this account is that it always comes back around to point to its speaker as its content: trying to point to wife battery, to testify to something happening in the world, Dworkin can only ever say or reveal (is repeatedly construed as saying) something about herself, that she wants it, provokes it, likes it.

To read *Pornography*’s reductiveness as a style that thinks, that figures out this problem, is to see why it does *not* testify to, represent, express, or convey porn, rape, incest, battery as experience. What it is trying to figure out is how these phenomena structure testimony’s failure. How Dworkin’s reductiveness “parallels” pornography’s reductiveness is better understood in the ways I described style seizing and re-routing language in my first chapter (for example, the way Ti-Grace Atkinson exposes “the battle of the sexes” by literalizing it as “men are the enemy”) – better yet, reverse engineering it. What reductiveness does to us, *Pornography*’s readers, as a style, the way it shifts us with respect to *it*, aims to shift the way we position ourselves with respect to porn. This is to say that I am reading Dworkin’s militancy, dogmatism, extremity, and so on not as her insistence, as Sontag put it in the last chapter, that feminist should stick to a “party line” on pornography (that party-line being a searingly absolute “no,” no exceptions) but the way I read Malcolm X’s militancy: *Pornography* insists on hearing pornography and responding to it outside of the representational register in which it disingenuously *presumes* to speak.

When we read *Pornography* with the assumption that porn is a thing we decode like a novel or a film, and we therefore take Dworkin to be reading pornography like a novel or a film,

Pornography looks like a series of reductive readings performed to create an overwhelmingly singular picture of sexuality in order to make an implausible argument about how a genre causes rape, or incites rape, or documents mens' overwhelming desire to commit rape. The harder the reader rests unconsciously on these assumptions about what porn is, the more infuriating, baffling, perversely and confidently illogical and even self-contradictory *Pornography* comes to be as it goes on, as the experience of reading it goes on. *Pornography's* style is a mechanism, is an engine for the reader's frustration, producing again and again an immediate sense of having taken a wrong step, the reaction that that's *too reductive*, that reading she offered of that photo is doesn't fit its original, it's too constrained or constraining, in service of an argument she's making about sex as a whole that isn't true to *its* original, sex itself, as I or you or culture experience it in all its multiple dimensions and richness.

To understand *Pornography* rather than to be, in a way, operated on by it, is to see differently this reductive juncture it brings us to again and again: from the sense that its *interpretations do not fit porn*, to: porn is not the kind of thing we understand by interpreting it this way, like we would a novel, or a film, or a genre. *Pornography* shifts our sense of the kind of thing *it* is – our assumption that it is a document that uses a literary critical method of reading porn in order to interpret what it shows us about sex – in order to shift our sense of the kind of thing porn is – our assumption that it is something that represents or documents what sex is, i.e., the kind of thing that one analyzes via interpretation. What *Pornography* objects to about porn is not, as readers have so long understood its critique, the way porn represents sex (violently): what is problematic about porn for Dworkin is that, like wife battery, it is a subsuming mode of discourse, a discourse that has the power to respond to whatever she *says* with what she *really* means, what sex *really* is. To read porn as representing sex is to attempt to decode it on the

disingenuous terms in which it invites you to read it, the terms by which it constructs sex the kind of thing that porn could say something true about in the first place and therefore the terms that make it *work*, make it able to precipitate the interpretive pleasure that constitutes fantasy as something clearly fictional and not real precisely because it is sexier than “real” sex.

Pornography's style theorizes that porn is reductive in the sense that it distills the sexual by setting itself up as more paradigmatically sex than any discrete bodily interactions, that thing it creates (and disavows creating) by claiming to represent and document “sex itself.”

I. Strained, sweaty, grasping: Being reductive as being wrong

Readers and critics have understood Dworkin and MacKinnon’s position on porn in two major ways. Most often, readers understand Dworkin and MacKinnon to oppose pornography because it represents sex as sexual violence: either because they think it worryingly reveals that what men who make or watch porn really want sexually is violence, and testifies to the fact that sexual violence is more widespread than we think it is, or because they think porn’s representations are ideologically influential, that it habituates its users to a culturally constructed understanding of sex, like propaganda.⁸ A second set of readings try to intervene in this chicken-and-egg debate about whether representations reflect the culture they’re in or shape the culture they’re in, by understanding Dworkin and MacKinnon to be arguing that porn is not a “mere” representation, that it indexes or documents sexual violence – for example, because in requiring real models it films or photographs a sex act coerced by financial need, or because porn is the

⁸These readings are pervasive across both sympathetic and critical readers of Dworkin and MacKinnon. For examples of these ways of reading Dworkin and MacKinnon, see Willis, “Nature’s Revenge,” Allen, “The Pleasures of Dangerous Criticism,” and Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2021).

material prop to a sexual act, not just a representation of one, and when it gets used in masturbation, the model is “re-raped,” again and again.⁹

All of these readings have baked into them a sense that Dworkin and MacKinnon’s position is reductive – a sense that becomes explicit when critics object to their argument. If what’s wrong with porn is that it reveals that sex is sexual violence, critics ask, why are Dworkin and MacKinnon weirdly preoccupied with attacking the picture of the thing, rather than the thing itself?¹⁰ If porn is worrisome because it *causes* sexual violence among those who use it, other readers object, this seems to attribute to porn an absurdly deterministic power over reality. And those who think about their claims primarily in the context of porn’s production wonder why they’ve reduced all pornography to filmed pornography, and object that they have failed to understand that the porn actress is doing just that, *acting*. These critiques point to thinking that is mistaken in ways identifiable as being reductive: their position simplifies a diffuse and ubiquitous problem, it conflates a mere effect (the representation of rape) with the original problem (the rape itself), it collapses causal distinctions and intentions into actions, it can’t distinguish between fiction and reality, between acting out a rape and being raped.¹¹

If the Dworkin-MacKinnon position on porn has been understood as epitomizing a reductiveness inherent in the fact that anti-porn feminism focuses on pornography at all in a program pitched against “real” sexual violence, in the whole project of narrowly focusing on the picture of the thing rather than the thing itself (and on a narrow, generic subset of pictures at

⁹See Susanne Kappeler, *The Pornography of Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); Frances Ferguson spells out the elements of MacKinnon’s work that give rise to readings of it as objecting to porn’s indexicality as a medium and the kinds of actions it therefore requires in its production, its material status as a (representational) object that has certain uses in *Porn, the Theory*, 44.

¹⁰See Willis, “Nature’s Revenge,” Ann Snitow, “The Sex Wars in Feminism: Retrenchment versus Transformation, in *The Feminism of Uncertainty: A Gender Diary*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1983), 126; Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson, *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 460; Rubin, “Thinking Sex,” 166.

¹¹ For an overview of readings that make especially apparent, in their very framing, a critique that this argument is reductive, see Ferguson, *Porn, the Theory*, 41.

that), Dworkin, in turn, has come to embody to readers what is paradigmatically the worst, most reductive impulses of the Dworkin-MacKinnon position specifically and the anti-porn position generally. For example, in an article titled “Nature’s Revenge,” Ellen Willis, one of radical feminism’s most stringent critics of the anti-porn position, takes it on in a double review of *Pornography* and Susan Griffin’s *Pornography and Silence*. If Griffin’s *Pornography and Silence* slips into the “logical flaws” of “melodramatic” claims that “reductively condemn” pornography instead of open-endedly “analyzing” it, Dworkin perfects that kind of thought: “‘Pornography,’ in contrast, is less a theoretical work than a book-length sermon, preached with a rhetorical flourish and a single-minded intensity that meet somewhere between poetry and rant. In Andrea Dworkin’s moral universe the battle of the sexes is a Manichaeian clash between absolute power and absolute powerlessness.... If Susan Griffin misses contradictions, Andrea Dworkin scorns the very idea of contradiction.”¹² If MacKinnon has long been the face of their shared position, this is because she has seemed the more thoughtful, intellectual expounder of what is nevertheless a fundamentally reductive position. Dworkin, who sounds like a sermon, a rant, is the dogmatically reductive rhetorician of that fundamentally reductive position. This is why I take up *Pornography* to think about reductiveness as a shared feminist style: the fact that it is the apotheosis of an apotheosis, that it intensifies the reductive impulses of the discourses it is supposedly exemplary of, is what suggests that it self-consciously practices reductiveness as a style that is thought – a style and mode that emerge from Dworkin’s careful understanding of the reductive components of the feminist thinking she was deeply engaged with, but from which her work also importantly differs.

¹²Willis, “Nature’s Revenge,” 9, 18.

What I've tracked thus far in critical responses to Dworkin is that the global, free-floating description that she (and anti-porn feminism generally) are reductive is a perception built in to the very sense of what her argument is and how it works at the broadest level: as critics understand it, there is something wrong with the way this argument imagines the relation between pornographic representation and "real" sex. We can see in these same kinds of critical responses (especially to *Pornography*) that the perception that she's being reductive is prompted by the moments in which she reads examples of pornography, readings critics feel to be reductive in their desire to ascribe a singular meaning (that sex is violence) to pornographic photos and texts whose actual meanings are multiple, complex, and undecidable. So, for example, Elaine Blair, sounding quite a lot like Ellen Willis in 1981, writes in her 2019 review of *Last Days at Hot Slit* for the *New York Review of Books*:

What's remarkable is that even with some very damning material in hand, Dworkin still has to sweat to characterize pornography as wholly aligned with the operations of male domination. She describes the plots of three stroke books (*Whip Chick, I Love a Laddie*, and *Black Fashion Model*) scene by scene in their entirety, then interprets them... But even in these books, handpicked by Dworkin for polemical purposes, there seems to be more going on than her narrow reading allows. Or, to put it another way, if Pete's enthusiasm for being ass-fucked by his dildo-wielding wife is an item of propaganda for patriarchy, then patriarchy is a subtle foe, against which we need still more subtle criticism.¹³

Dworkin, Blair writes, understood that porn was "carnivorous," that it does not stay within its own bounds, that we might find "porn" in things that are not, generically, porn, in advertisements, in popular culture – but she didn't understand the implications of this for her own writing: "Dworkin thinks she's got pornography's number, but the reverse seems true. Her sentences become lurid under its influence. If you had to name one underlying reason that pornography threatens to get the better of *Pornography*, it's because the book does not admit the

¹³Blair, "Fighting for her Life."

possibility that its readers might have an erotic response to the subject” (Blair 2019). This reading of *Pornography* is actually a common one. In *How to Do Things with Pornography*, Nancy Bauer writes:

I suppose it’s conceivable that the members of the Meese commission were too busy crusading to see that to describe a piece of porn is to produce a piece of porn.... There are people who enjoy accusing Andrea Dworkin, the iconic antiporn feminist, of being asleep at the same wheel. But ... [Dworkin] understood that readers of her 1981 book *Pornography*, which is basically one graphic *Tying Up Rebecca*-ish plot summary after the next, are at least as likely to hold their genitalia as their noses.... Her goal [was to] get us to experience the discomfort of becoming aroused by what she hoped she had convinced us is fundamentally soul-crushing, and not just for women.¹⁴

What is striking about these readings is that they share the sense that what *Pornography* does, the way it works, is to present the reader with pornographic examples and then reductively read them, and that this is staged as the crux of a contest for the control of meaning between Dworkin, and porn, one negotiated by control of an effect -- arousal. For Bauer, Dworkin “wins” this contest to the extent that she is aware that porn’s erotic effects exceed these meanings, and for Blair, porn “gets the better” of Dworkin because she isn’t. Either way, both critics share a picture of *Pornography* that, just as Dworkin described wife battery, is a discursive contest between Dworkin and porn – a contest staged ultimately or finally at these moments where *it* speaks to the reader, turns the reader on, and she reads it, attempts to set, control, narrow its meanings.

Strictly speaking, *Pornography* is not one *Tying Up Rebecca*-ish plot summary after another. *Pornography* is organized into a preface and seven chapters: “Power,” “Men and Boys,” “The Marquis de Sade,” “Objects,” “Force,” “Pornography,” and “Whores.” Only in chapters 1, 5, and 7 does Dworkin’s analysis centrally turn on glossing pornographic objects and then analyzing her examples. And yet, it is not hard to see why critics build the picture of what *Pornography* is doing, those underlying assumptions Blair and Bauer share: these set-piece

¹⁴Nancy Bauer, *How to Do Things with Pornography* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 3.

paraphrases/readings loom large within *Pornography* – in part because they *are* set pieces. Set off from the rest of the text, the summaries are long, detailed, almost luxuriant, carefully scientific in their studious attempt to clock every detail. The glosses, usually offset at their beginnings lexically and paratextually, are also offset from the rest of the text semantically at their conclusions, when Dworkin, in a marked shift in style, comes in to decode the meaning of the porn in declarative, muscular, highly symbolic readings of it. Dworkin's readings are deeply hermeneutic, almost exegetical, and reductive in the sense that they strive to assign clear and certain meaning; they pronounce messages.

The sense that Dworkin arrives on the scene of encounter already equipped with readings that condemn the pornographic example is reinforced when *Pornography* arrives, in a chapter with no readings titled "Pornography," at the following definition of pornography:

The word pornography, derived from the ancient Greek *pornē* and *graphos*, means "writing about whores." *Pornē* means "whore," specifically and exclusively the lowest class of whore, which in ancient Greece was the brothel slut available to all male citizens. The *pornē* was the cheapest (in the literal sense), least regarded, least protected of all women, including slaves. She was, simply and clearly and absolutely, a sexual slave. *Graphos* means "writing, etching, or drawing."

The word pornography does not mean "writing about sex" or "depictions of the erotic" or "depictions of sexual acts" or "depictions of nude bodies" or "sexual representations" or any other such euphemism. It means the graphic depiction of women as vile whores.¹⁵

What makes this definition feel like a point of arrival is its reductiveness, its drive, in a stunning series of conceptual collapses, to assert that all porn is or means one singular thing: it reduces the contents of a genre to the meaning of its name, the meaning of its name to that word's etymology, etymology to original meaning, and original meaning to a crudely additive math problem, pornography = *pornē* + *graphos*. And "Pornography" (the chapter) seems to arrive, finally, at any one of the three versions of the argument for which Dworkin and MacKinnon are

¹⁵Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: Plume, 1981), 199 – 200.

known, in a paragraph that seems to emphasize the intuition that those arguments are reductive: “The valuation of women's sexuality in pornography is objective and real because women are so regarded and so valued. The force depicted in pornography is objective and real because force is so used against women.... The uses of women depicted in pornography are objective and real because women are so used. The women used in pornography are used in pornography.”¹⁶ Each sentence in this litany dramatizes the same collapse of representation into reality, as it sets up, via parallelism, a mimetic relation between porn and real life, a relation (of mirroring or likeness) that always implies a distinction (between a porn that is *life-like*, and life itself) that it overwrites in its argument that porn is “objective and real because.” Each collapsing sentence in the litany in turn drives toward collapse, as together they accumulate similarities that ultimately make a quantum leap from porn being *like* life to the implicit assertion, in “the women used in pornography are used in pornography,” that porn *is* life.

The perception that there's something reductive about Dworkin's work, in conclusion, functions as a working picture of what *Pornography's* conceptual project is. In this picture, Dworkin performs reductive readings of individual pornographic objects, in order to paint a reductive picture of porn as a whole (all of it represents sex as violence), in order to argue, reductively, that porn *causes* sex to be sexual violence – all in order to ban it. It is Dworkin's readings that are at the crux of a sense of how *Pornography's* argument goes wrong. They mark the place where, readers imagine, her reductiveness methodologically begins (she fails to draw the right conclusions from her examples, fails to confront her examples inductively) and/or the place where Dworkin's reductiveness is damningly evidenced, shown up by the examples that

¹⁶Dworkin, *Pornography*, 200-201.

are meant to support it – as indexed by the way the readings that support her argument have to “sweat” too much to contain a pornography whose nuance and semantic plenitude exceeds them.

II. Who’s reading whom? *Pornography* as hermeneutic game

I’ve spent so much time discussing critics’ judgments that *Pornography* is reductive because I think these descriptions capture something right about reading it. To constantly feel pushed to the edge of thinking the whole text just falls apart, doesn’t work, is too clumsy to coordinate its own high-octane assertions, to feel alternately enraged or embarrassed by all this depending on how you allow yourself to be recruited by the text – these are primary features of the experience of reading *Pornography*. I take it that all of these descriptions of Dworkin’s work, the myriad ways we have of describing qualities cognate to its reductiveness, are descriptively right about what *Pornography* does to its reader; they capture, in detail, when and where *Pornography* feels reductive -- but they are analytically wrong about what her reductiveness means.

What Dworkin’s reductive claims mean is routed through what reductiveness does, and what it does is copiously recorded in these descriptions of what it is like to read *Pornography*. It outrages, it disgusts, it shames, it leads critics to desperately want to say where, exactly, this thinking goes wrong. And yet, if *Pornography* makes it so that it is difficult to agree with its blunt, reductive claims, it is also difficult to dismiss them as wrong, fully contradictory, incoherent. This, too, is a primary experience of reading Dworkin. What *Pornography*’s reductiveness does is to draw its readers into this negotiation, into a kind of hermeneutic contest with *it*, a contest orthogonal to the one Blair and Bauer imagine Dworkin is in with porn. To seek to “win,” to be drawn into the desire to settle the provocative, even upsetting argument

Pornography makes, either by being able to accept/agree or reject/dismiss it, is ultimately to let *Pornography* shift the way we as readers assemble its overall meaning from its claims.

What distinguishes the sense that Dworkin's work is reductive from the sense that it is simply erroneous is the way reduction is also a style—formal, patterned, and intentional—with aesthetic as well as cognitive effects. We can see this in the way readers perceive Dworkin's reductiveness not just as a quality of her readings (*vis-à-vis* the original pornographic texts they read), or her arguments, (*vis-à-vis* the nuanced way representations “really” relate to the world), but a quality of her sentences. Recall the way one of the central introductory sentences of *Pornography* employs the kind of reductive confluents that connect its style to MacKinnon's, to wages for housework, to Atkinson's radical feminism: “The major theme of pornography as a genre is male power, its nature, its magnitude, its use, its meaning.”¹⁷ Each elaboration in this sentence raises a question about what “male power” might mean, unsettling the initial way the sentence stabilizes the meaning of porn with a straightforward declarative claim: is male power the kind of thing best understood as having a nature? Or is it best understood as a purely symbolic phenomenon, as something that *means*? But if Dworkin's locution seems to open up a questioning, deconstructive vein, it does so only to shut it down, to double down on declarative certainty in both the stability of porn and the metaphysical weight of “male power” as her possessive locution – *its* nature, *its* magnitude – folds each of those potential questions about the *meaning* of male power into *aspects* of male power. The force of this sentence is reductive, a *closing down* to singularity.

Pornography produces that same pattern of negotiation in its reader, opening up possible meanings and then shutting them down, when it arrives at the reductive definition of

¹⁷Dworkin, *Pornography*, 24.

pornography as the graphic depiction of women as vile whores. This definition, in chapter 6, prompts one of the most common reactions to Dworkin: the desire to immediately offer counter-examples. What about, the reader thinks, *I Love a Laddie*, one of Dworkin's first demonstrative examples, a collection of short stories about gay sex? Maybe, the reader starts to think, she means "whoreish" broadly, maybe any porn that *includes* a negative depiction of women is about women as vile whores? Or maybe she means "women" broadly? Without directly contradicting itself, *Pornography's* definition of pornography does not quite seem to fit its own examples (the ones Elaine Blair imagines are "pre-selected" to prove her point). If we wouldn't want to go out on a limb to defend *I Love a Laddie's* depiction of its minor women characters or its less minor feminized male characters as not in the least bit whoreish, it nevertheless seems like a stretch to say that what *I Love a Laddie* is, essentially or fundamentally, is the graphic depiction of women as vile whores. If *I Love Laddie* is a paradigmatic example of what porn is, then it seems to exemplify that porn has other priorities besides the myopic depiction of women as whores. And the reason *Pornography* makes its own climactic definition of pornography feel like stretch is precisely because of what Dworkin herself says, because she spends quite a bit of time pronouncing, in a syntax with equal declarative singularity to chapter 6's assertion that porn is the graphic depiction of women as vile whores, that what *I Love a Laddie* is fundamentally about, to the exclusion of all other themes, is a myopic celebration of the glory of dick.¹⁸

If the reductive definition of pornography in chapter 6 predictably provokes the reader to question what Dworkin *really* means, to massage what she *could* mean by querying whether she might actually mean it more abstractly, ironically, metaphorically, this is a process *Pornography* immediately perceives, names, and shuts down. As if hearing and pre-empting the reader's

¹⁸Dworkin, *Pornography*, 65-76.

natural next question, “okay, but maybe the definition of the word does not capture all the examples of the genre?,” the next paragraph of chapter 6 begins: “Contemporary pornography strictly and literally conforms to the word’s root meaning: the graphic depiction of vile whores.” It follows: “The word has not changed its meaning and the genre is not misnamed.” And, for good measure, the next paragraph strictures: “The word *pornography* does not have any other meaning than the one cited here, the graphic depiction of the lowest whores.”¹⁹ *Pornography* narrows, stabilizes, secures the meaning of pornography as it also works, with what seems like a desire for almost totalitarian control, to stabilize its own meanings: I am about this; I am not about that; you may read me saying this; you may not understand me to be saying that. Deconstructive processes introducing uncertainty, complexity, instability (maybe she means “whore” metaphorically? Or “women” abstractly?) are opened up only to be shut down (no, she doesn’t: contemporary pornography strictly and literally conforms to the word’s root meaning).

And so to read *Pornography* feels like being funneled and boxed in, to a definition that is so insistently flat, concrete, and literal that it can’t be reconciled with equally reductive, declarative claims and readings threaded through the rest of the text. The reader is brought to a hermeneutic impasse. You cannot *just* think Dworkin is wrong: you must think Dworkin is pig-headedly, almost bafflingly wrong, that she cannot even see the way her own examples contradict her confidently certain definitions, all the while confidently asserting that those definitions are certain. You cannot just agree with Dworkin: you must agree immediately, straightforwardly, and fully, since Dworkin insists all the while that she means *exactly* what she says and she means it literally. *Pornography* creates a hermeneutic impasse that seems to herd

¹⁹Dworkin, *Pornography*, 200.

readers into these positions, as it also animates readers – some readers, anyway – to resist being herded.²⁰

Holding us suspended between the two poles—not knowing how she can mean all of the things she’s saying, and her insistence that she means each one of them, literally—*Pornography*’s reductiveness drives readers to look for a new strategy, a way out of this explicitly disavowed way of recuperating what Dworkin means, a negotiation in which the meaning of one statement made by *Pornography* is massaged into agreement with the meaning of another in a text that is imagined to be a closed system. The failure of this closed system in which two reductive claims both try to interpret, but contradict, each other, displaces this semantic negotiation between it and itself, as a negotiation between Dworkin and us: as it “sees” our responses, as it invites us into a hermeneutic game it pushes us to query not *what* *Pornography* means but how *we* hear its meanings. Dworkin is actually quite explicit about this. Just before the litany of confluences Dworkin arrives at in chapter 6, in which she claims that porn is “objective and real” and so makes claims that seem to reduce representation to documentation of reality, restaging the issues at the heart of her and MacKinnon’s total argument, Dworkin writes: “Whores exist only within a framework of male sexual domination. Indeed, outside that framework the notion of whores would be absurd and the usage of women as whores would be impossible. The word whore is incomprehensible unless one is immersed in the lexicon of male domination”²¹ The word pornography may conform literally and exclusively to

²⁰This is not to say that many readers don’t embrace the chance *Pornography* offers of wholeheartedly agreeing or disagreeing with Dworkin. Mostly they have, and as I will argue in the conclusion, I think *Pornography* produces the hermeneutic impasse I’m describing not just in and through the text-based experience of reading this passage individually but as a polarized interpretive community that stages this impasse out loud as readers let the text situate them into one of these positions. Producing the spectacle of a set of readers eager, too eager, to explain what’s so simple-minded about *Pornography*’s thinking is part of its arsenal of intended effects. It’s just to say that, the more one desires to be the nuanced reader of *Pornography*, to avoid the methodological errors one *wants* to accuse Dworkin of, the harder it is to suppress or ignore the barriers she puts up to resolving the text as either straightforwardly confused and self-contradictory, or else submit to agreeing with it entirely and literally.

²¹Dworkin, *Pornography*, 200.

the graphic depiction of “whores” – but the target of that confusingly straightforward definition is not creating a new, more accurate picture of what we think pornography is; the target of that definition is the conditions of pornography’s intelligibility. We are not supposed to shift our sense of what Dworkin means by the word whore; we are supposed to ask *how* whore means, literally what concepts or frameworks we bring to this statement that animate a meaning for us, that make “whore” an intelligible concept. And, in the sentences that follow, if we can’t understand how she can insist that what porn represents is so like real sexual violence that it *is* sexual violence – does she mean its representations cause sexual violence? that they require sexual violence in order to be made? – the collapse that forecloses ameliorating readings pushes us to query what frameworks we bring to those sentences, such that when we hear “it is objective and real because,” we hear “there is no distinction between representation and reality.”

Reductiveness drives us to query the assumptions we bring to pornography in the first place. A certain picture of what *Pornography* is doing – reading pornography reductively to argue that it all means the same thing – ultimately subverts itself, and this forces us to shift our sense of *how* it is actually arguing, how we are assembling our sense of what the text as a whole means. *Pornography* works to shift our sense of what kind of thing *it* is, in order to shift our sense of what kind of thing *porn* is.

III. Reading *as if*: What porn is, how porn means

What shifts in our reading of *Pornography* when we consider the way *our* frameworks actualize meaning is our sense of the moment where Dworkin confronts porn, which critics have taken to be such a load-bearing juncture for the rightness or wrongness of her argument: our

sense of her reductive readings. *Pornography's* readings aren't, sincerely, readings; likewise, its paraphrases aren't, functionally, paraphrases.

To see Dworkin's readings this way makes sense of what is so odd about them. On the one hand, they conform to a tee to the model of close reading, and it is exactly this deep, almost exegetical approach that makes them feel so reductive – in the sense that they repeatedly “find” the meaning of the whole text in the symbolic meaning of its individual details. They pin so much – a symptomatic reading that assigns a certain meaning, an ideological message – on a little: for example, on the fact that in *I Love a Laddie*, Mary (virginal) serves as lesbian figure who motivates the glory of dick (specifically Rod's dick) by supplying the logic of castrate-or-be-castrated, because her last name is Moray, the name of “numerous kinds of savage, voracious eels: the vagina dentata castrates, as does the lesbian.”²² On the other hand, the readings are as frequently reductive because they are clumsily *unorthodox*, weirdly flat-footed and literal-minded, as they are too studiously orthodox. For example, in her reading of a photo spread called “Playboy's Roving Eye,” which depicts a woman it calls an “exquisite volunteer” being penetrated by lasers, with accompanying text that explains “Playboy has eight foreign editions and that the favorite of the editors in the United States is the German one” because the German editors' taste “runs to the technological.”²³ Dworkin argues that this photo eroticizes the concentration camp, appealing, in a studious, several-page consideration, to several studies attesting to the use lasers of as military weapons, as if the question of what the photo spread means turns on the factual question of whether lasers are truly dangerous. When Dworkin's readings are not too strictly hermeneutic and muscularly symptomatic, they can seem naively

²²Dworkin, *Pornography*, 43.

²³Dworkin, *Pornography*, 139.

credulous, as if she really is guilty of not being able to make the basic distinction between what's inside the boundaries of the text versus what's outside them.

It is this mix of qualities that lead critics to simultaneously identify Dworkin as an egregiously reductive reader, as Elaine Blair does, and, at other times, to see Dworkin primarily and classically as a literary critic, as Leah Claire Allen does when she argues in "The Pleasures of Dangerous Criticism" that Dworkin is a foundational figure for feminist literary criticism working in the vein of Kate Millett.²⁴ In a way, both these readings are right: Dworkin's readings exaggeratedly perform the maneuvers of classical literary criticism, and exaggeratedly violate the parameters literary criticism sets up for parsing the meaning of representations by reading the text as if it were "real," that is, as if it documented sex indirectly and indexically, with instances of porn standing as evidence in the way sociological data stands as evidence. They are reductive in the sense of *reductio ad absurdum*: they read porn as if it really were the kind of thing porn invites us to see it as, seizing its suggestion and driving those reading paradigms to their logical conclusions until they manifest the basic misfit between how they account for what porn is doing and what porn is really doing. These readings at once underline that porn is not that kind of thing, and that our ways of approaching it fundamentally rely on its inviting us to see it as that kind of thing.

In this sense, *Pornography* is a text engineered to reroute the patterns of thought at play in the fierce porn debates in which Dworkin was enmeshed, and in the discourse about obscenity from the 1950s and 60s that informed it. That discourse was roughly born in the 1957 case *Roth v. United States*, in which the Supreme Court ruled that obscene materials were "utterly without redeeming social importance," and solidified with the 1973 ruling in *Miller v. California*, which

²⁴Allen, "Pleasures of Dangerous Criticism," 51.

proposed a three-part definitional test for the obscene that included “whether the work lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value.”²⁵ *Miller*, in short, enshrined in law a discursive pattern that *Roth* began, a process that set the liberal legal mind to work drawing definitional distinctions and generic boundaries. To be able to rule that a text was or wasn’t obscene was to be able to say definitively that it was or wasn’t literature, that it did or did not constitute valuable sociological or scientific data about human sexuality. During and after these fifteen-odd years of legal contest, literary critics, cultural commentators, and psychologists jumped publicly into the fray. Debates turned alternately on defining porn in a certain way, in order to draw out conclusions about whether it was or wasn’t harmful and whether those harms meant it should or shouldn’t be protected as speech – and then, in turn, either interrupting such arguments at the level of their definitions or objecting to what they entail.

So, for example, in a 1970 anthology called *Perspectives on Pornography*, one may find Susan Sontag’s particularly prescient parsing of these argumentative patterns in “The Pornographic Imagination,” where she writes that pornography has been held “firmly within the limits of the discourse employed by psychologists, sociologists, historians, jurists, professional moralists, and social critics,” and that understood in this vein, “all pornographic texts have the same status; they are documents,” but just because we can see porn as a document of (criminal, or infantile) sexuality does not mean some of it is not also literature.²⁶ Anthologized alongside this essay, one may also find Anthony Burgess’s argument that pornography is only harmless insofar as we don’t mistake it for literature and let it corrupt our aesthetic sensibilities, since pornography (presumably unlike literature) is an implement for stimulation that anticipates

²⁵Amy M. Adler, “Postmodern Art and the Death of Obscenity Law,” in *Yale Law Journal*, 99(6) (1990), 1361.

²⁶Susan Sontag, “The Pornographic Imagination,” in *Perspectives on Pornography*, ed. Douglas A. Hughes (New York: St. Martin’s, 1970), 132-133.

discharge in reality, and Peter Michelson's argument that porn may be an "index of mental imbalance or even potential criminality, but it is certainly not a cause."²⁷

When anti-porn feminists themselves jumped into the broader debates about porn in the 1970s, they were committed to their own project of drawing definitional distinctions and generic boundaries. In a letter to what was then tentatively about to be called the Women's Anti-Defamation League (later, WAP, Women against Pornography), Gloria Steinem writes that if they were to take out an ad about porn, it should:

distinguish between (and among) pornography (making it clear that it is "the selling or writing of harlots," and thus by definition sexual dominance and exploitation of women) and any material that is related to legitimate sex education, or to erotica.... We do not mean what an Anita Bryant means by pornography (which would restrict all educational material and erotica, especially if non-heterosexual). We also don't mean what the [Presidential Commission on Pornography of 1970] and other "civil libertarians" mean (which would justify real pornography by pretending it is nothing but erotica).

I think we failed to do this properly in our first draft, and I do think it's important that we explain the distinctions clearly, and stick with them.²⁸

If the developing anti-porn definition of pornography as "the selling or writing of [harlots]" is recognizably the source of the etymologically rigid definition of pornography Dworkin arrives at in chapter 6 of *Pornography*, this letter makes it equally clear how differently *Pornography* is thinking about the questions of how to stake out a political position with respect to porn that this letter confronts. It should not come as a surprise that one of the authors of the first draft to which Steinem refers, who failed to make the distinctions clearly, was Dworkin. *Pornography* seizes exactly on language that feminists like Steinem and Robin Morgan first used to draw a distinction between porn and erotica, and drives it toward a reductive definition of porn, against this kind of boundary drawing and distinction making. In fact it explicitly announces that it is

²⁷Hughes, *Perspectives on Pornography*, xvi, xix.

²⁸ Gloria Steinem, undated Letter to "Women's Anti-Defamation League." Papers of Andrea Dworkin 1914 – 2007. Schlesinger Library, Cambridge, MA.

precisely *against* this kind of boundary drawing and distinction making as its first order of business; its short preface announces: “This is a book about the meaning of pornography and the system of power in which pornography exists,” and goes on to hem in this definition of itself so as to prohibit the kinds of distinction-making questions *Perspective on Pornography* dramatizes (around what texts are *negative* versus what should be proscribed, around sorting sexual representations into good and bad categories like obscenity/erotica): “this is not a book about the first amendment,” it asserts; “this is not a book about obscenity,” then: “with respect to both obscenity and the First Amendment: this is not a book about what should or should not be shown; it is a book about the meaning of what is being shown”; “this is not a book about the difference between pornography and erotica.”²⁹

We should think of this as Dworkin’s style as method: seizing, inhabiting language, and driving it to extremis in order to make it give up what it meant and the way it originally thought. This is also how Dworkin’s readings work on pornographic examples. To demonstrate, we can look at Dworkin’s reading of Georges Bataille’s famous novella *Story of the Eye*. Dworkin’s pronouncement on what she takes *Story of the Eye* to be about is as follows: “Death is the stunning essence of sex. The violence of death is the violence of sex and the beauty of death is the beauty of sex and the meaning of life is only revealed in the meaning of sex which is death.”³⁰ It is because Bataille has written a novella that tries to suggest that Death, in this abstracted sense, is the essence of sex, she writes, that the text symptomatically evidences, again, that literal death (lowercase, actual), violence against real women, is the essence of sex for men:

²⁹Dworkin, *Pornography*, “Preface.”

³⁰Dworkin, *Pornography*, 174-175.

“The grand conceptions – death, angst – cover the grand truth: that force leading to death is what men most secretly, most deeply, and most truly value in sex,” she writes.³¹

This reading of Bataille is exactly the kind of thing that has made “reductive” Dworkin’s epithet. It takes a famously weird text, a text whose eroticism includes a roster of strange images and fantasies; it reproduces these images and fantasies in an exhaustive blow-by-blow gloss, including dropping eggs in a toilet, the sensuousness of eyeballs and bulls’ testicles, streams of liquid, “showers”; and it asserts that this text has *a* meaning, singular. But it is more difficult than it immediately seems to put your finger on where or why this reading prompts a sense of its own reductiveness. When Susan Sontag offers almost exactly the same reading of Bataille in “The Pornographic Imagination,” it does not provoke the same recoil against Sontag’s lack of nuance – in fact, Sontag’s reading is offered in support of the idea that Bataille is a nuanced, literary pornographer: “One reason that *Histoire de l’Oeil* and *Madame Edwarda* make such a strong and upsetting impression is that Bataille understood more clearly than any other writer I know of that what pornography is really about, ultimately, isn’t sex but death.” And: “[Bataille conveys this insight] not by devising sexual acts whose consequences are lethal, thereby littering his narratives with corpses (In the terrifying *Histoire de l’Oeil*, for instance, only one person dies)” but by “invest[ing] each action with a weight, a disturbing gravity, that feels authentically ‘mortal.’”³²

It is when Dworkin argues positively that *Story of the Eye* therefore stands as evidence that death (literal), not Death (figurative), is the essence of sex, that the reading starts to feel reductive in the sense of mistaken. Dworkin writes:

Religious rebellion – for instance, the torture and rape of a priest – also heralds a class act. The priest as the man in skirts, feminized because he has turned away from

³¹Dworkin, *Pornography*, 175.

³²Sontag, “The Pornographic Imagination,” 156-158.

masculine sexual action as a way of life, is easily viewed as a symbol of the repression caused by religion, whereas it would be more realistic – but less comfortable – to see him as a substitute woman. His true sexual nature is revealed in his erection and he is punished for having denied it – for his sexual downward mobility as it were. Marcelle is the more conventional victim, anatomically female, passive, shamed by her own sexual desire. Her violation and death are in the normal course of things, in the nature of sex itself. The violation of a priest passes as a rebellious idea.³³

Dworkin then goes on to note that Bataille has outlined a sequel to *Story of the Eye*, published in 1967, in which Simone ends up in a Nazi death camp and is beaten to death: “This makes very clear the tally of female deaths: very young girl on bicycle, Marcelle, whore in the pigsty, priest as feminized male, and later – much later because she is so cruel – Simone. The death camp is eroticized in the man of intellect after Auschwitz.”³⁴

What is off-putting, what feels *wrong*, about this reading hinges on Dworkin’s conclusion that the “tally” is “clear,” as if Dworkin has completed the work of proving something simply by revealing that the number four is a self-evidently high death count. How or in what way this tally is conclusive is actually not clear. On the one hand, the high tally sounds like a way of saying that sexualized death is such an overridingly constant trope of *Story of the Eye* that we have to conclude that its literary meaning is “death is the essence of sex,” thereby demonstrating that a death made actual by its concrete specificity, the deaths of women, not Bataille’s symbolically human Death, Death as angst, is the essence of sex for men. It sounds like a symptomatic, against-the-grain feminist reading, à la Kate Millett. But if this tally is a novelistic trope, it actually isn’t overridingly constant: the emasculated priest has to be wrestled into shape to count as a female death; an extratextual “end” to *Story of the Eye*, noting the death of its main character years later, defines the meaning of the original text in a way that seems to run roughshod over any distinction between text and meta-textual commentary. It is, in fact, the unschooled idea that

³³Dworkin, *Pornography*, 175.

³⁴Dworkin, *Pornography*, 175.

a trope determines the meaning of the text by brute frequency and repetition (as if Dworkin were a student relying on simple models of pattern recognition) that suggests she means that the “high tally” is sociologically conclusive, that what is damning about *Story of the Eye* is not what Bataille means through the novella as literary whole, but that it is damning indexically, read as a document recording instances, each standing on its own, that by virtue of its existence and implied function records that men (their author, their readers) find violence titillating. That Dworkin’s reading does not take any account of the meaning-bearing weight of these plot junctures or characters – as if the minor death of the girl on the bicycle, a passing event, determines the meaning of *Story of the Eye* as a whole, just as much as the climactic death of the priest – suggests that the tally is damning *as data*. And yet, in order for these moments to become data points, they have to be subjected to highly symbolic readings (e.g., the emasculation of the priest) that derive their meanings from their place in a representational whole, from the presumption that we read *Story of the Eye* as a novel.

All of this is to say that what feels weird about Dworkin’s conclusion that *Story of the Eye* betrays a high death tally is that it seems to confuse the framework of the argument in which that tally is being said to be damning. Dworkin’s reading proceeds, simultaneously, as if the meaning of *Story of the Eye* should be construed as a novel’s meaning, and also construed as a document’s meaning. She proceeds to confront *Story of the Eye* as if it were both of these kinds of things – reading it in ways we routinely take to be mutually exclusive, even contradictory – in order to show that we bring both of these assumptions to Bataille, that Bataille invites them. She does this by ironizing the way Sontag reads Bataille; here, Sontag is the dummy reader, a stand-in for how “we” read. Sontag claims that Bataille is literary because he doesn’t litter his text with bodies, like the Marquis de Sade does. Dworkin’s glib response is not to correct her low (and

wrong) body count with a self-evidently high one. It is to underline the absurdity of debating whether the amount of death in this text is self-evidently anything. Dworkin's reading takes up the paradigms through which Sontag finds value in Bataille and makes Bataille's text strain against these paradigms. The force of this strain is to undercut the sense that *Story of the Eye* is like a novel, or a document, so as to undercut the sense that it "reveals" anything at all, that there is a ground against which its body count is relatively high or low, its depiction more or less authentically mortal. As Dworkin disables representation and documentation as plausible frameworks for what *Story of the Eye* does, she identifies that its invitation to read it within these frameworks is integral to its function as pornography. It is not by virtue of its transgressive representations (number of bodies, either fucking or dying) that *Story of the Eye* is so erotically thrilling, it is by virtue of the interpretive revelation it performs (that sex really means death) that it discharges pleasure.

Dworkin's style is pitched toward making us feel that to get purchase on what porn is, to decode it the way we would a representation, to use it to demonstrate truths about reality the way we would a historical document, is like trying to figure out wife beating by figuring out fridge cleaning: what gets offered up as a means of getting explanatory purchase over the phenomenon is really the disingenuous means by which that phenomenon invites your participation in it. To read porn in these frameworks is to play into what porn does, which is why Dworkin's readings underline the way porn itself invites us to see it as documenting or indexing an act of sex, even as it also clearly represents something fantastical, declaring its representational status by presenting itself as fiction with an inept grasp of realism. Porn bakes hermeneutic depth – the level of the actual and the level of the mediated fiction – into itself; this is how it produces pleasure as a revelation of truth about women. This woman here, it says, wasn't "really"

penetrated by lasers, she “isn’t” the character she is acting – “woman penetrated by lasers” – but the photo spread’s quip that the German editors’ taste runs toward the technological, the little metanarrative it recounts of porn being passed among an international circle of *Playboy* editors, points backward to the scene of its own making, where (it implicitly imagines) she *was* in a room naked, at the mercy of a paycheck, being photographed by so many men. Dworkin’s mode of reading persistently underlines this when, for example, she reads the porn as if she really believes the fantasies of its documentary status, as if she really ought to be worried about working conditions involving the dangerous weapon of lasers. It is this difference, this likeness, that constitutes porn’s aesthetic and erotic pleasure in Dworkin’s account, the way it both affirms and denies: *this* (what it represents) didn’t happen, but (by virtue of the evidence of its creation, its circulation, its use, sometimes, by virtue of its mediation) something like it did happen, will happen.

IV. Porn’s interpretive grasp

Dworkin’s reductive style thus points, over and over, to the fact that porn is doing what her readers have largely taken *her* to be doing: it isn’t Dworkin who takes porn to reveal something about real sex, something extractable by decoding its meanings – it is *porn* that takes porn to reveal something about sex, when it creates a distinction between what it represents and what it documents, when it implies that it is fantasy, that this obviously doesn’t *really* happen, and yet its existence testifies to the fact that something like it *does* happen (someone else is fantasizing with this, someone did something that inspired them to make this, this is what “we all” “really” want), and it distills what is sexual in its likeness to the happenings it indexes. For

Pornography, the problem of porn is this power to distill, to interpret – that is to say: reduction becomes interpretive, becomes insight, when its paring down becomes paring down to essentials.

When we stop seeing *Pornography* as “reading” porn, we stop feeding into porn’s enabling invitation to see it in a documentary and representational framework. When we correspondingly stop seeing *Pornography*’s examples as neutral presentations that Dworkin will then decode – when we stop seeing her glosses as glosses – we see the extent to which the problem with porn is its ability to position itself as an interpreter of women as sex, and sex as women – a problem *Pornography* underlines by stripping from porn what makes it seem interpretable and driving it into the flatness of informational statement.

In first few sentences of Dworkin’s gloss of *Whip Chick*, that testament to sex’s many subtleties, the prose resists a natural narrative flow. It demands that the reader parse what is narratively happening by referring to the tag lines and information that it presents:

In *Whip Chick*, Scott Healy, who has a big cock and is a superstud, fucks Mrs. Alice Waverly in a motel. She thanks him. Alice and Scott are seen at the motel by Cora Hertzell, a professor at a local college. Alice is outraged that Cora, a teacher, is at the motel. She determines to rid the town of Cora. Scott’s nephew Chris has a crush on Cora, his teacher. He thinks about how she moves like a stripper, then he masturbates. He thinks he is too old to masturbate but his image in a mirror seems to tell him that he cannot help it.³⁵

What makes it so difficult to track that Chris is Scott’s nephew, Cora is Chris’ teacher, Scott fucks Mrs. Alice Waverly, Mrs. Alice Waverly wants to rid the town of Cora (Chris’ teacher), as if one hasn’t been handed a summary but a *dramatis personae* in sentence form, has to do with the structures that have been removed from this prose. The first sentence leads with a phrase – “In *Whip Chick*” – that would lead the reader to expect the rest of it to be a kind of introductory summarizing sentence, extending over the whole of the book – but it makes a first stop at the

³⁵Dworkin, *Pornography*, 30.

outsized detail of Scott Healy's epithetical cock and closes out by spanning over what is only (?) ambiguously (?) a scene (in *Whip Chick*, Scott Healy fucks Alice Waverly in a motel – just the once? For the whole book?). In the next sentence, the gloss seems to jump precipitously from scene to moment – “she thanks him.” What this gloss of *Whip Chick* lacks is *gloss*, or rather, that thing that makes gloss possible, a differentiation between the discursive levels of its sentences. The gloss of *Whip Chick* trips through temporal shifts, a shift from narration to scene, from summing up what *Whip Chick* overall is about, to what happens at the beginning, to what happens in a scene (“she thanks him”) because it does not allow any of its sentences to rise above the others in order to speak the proverbial “once upon a time.”

If it is true that these paraphrases can still be titillating to readers, it's also true that reading them is like looking at porn through a glass darkly. What they do is make the reader work to reassemble the porn. If the summarizing technique of *Whip Chick*'s first sentences means that “she thanks him” makes the reader trip up for a second, registers at first like a non-sequitur because we lack any preceding story at this level of fine grain, we are nevertheless provided with all the information needed for porn to happen. That information is that Scott Healy is a superstud with a big cock: big cock + gratitude is an intelligible, fully rationalized sequence in the context of pornography – to be fucked by a big cock is ravishment, is a gift from the proud carrier of the phallus. Dworkin's glosses don't describe the porn, they work on it: they strip the porn down, they try to show us that porn works not on the level of narrative but at the level of meaning – it distills the sexual, becomes fantasy, when we seamlessly connect big cock + gratitude and thereby grasp a meaning (cock is value). Dworkin's glosses slow down the process by which we grasp that meaning in order to make it visible to us that this is what we are doing. Big cock + gratitude shimmers between being the minimum information needed to supply the

missing narrative, and being what Dworkin wants to drive into being, the mere assertion of information, like a statement, “cock is value.”

How we see *Pornography* shifts how we see pornography: Dworkin’s glosses flatten what sound like interpretive claims because of their power to distill sex, to stand outside and speak about women, into statements of information. This is what reductiveness as a style does in *Pornography*: the book teaches us to pry apart the syntax and forms of reduction from their semantic implications. It is the declarative structure, the penchant for connotations, identities, and definitions that follow the structure “X is Y,” that cues the reader to switch her sense of what the language is doing – to switch from understanding a set of sentences to be language that neutrally describes porn, simply conveying what the porn itself says, to claims Dworkin is making *about* the porn. We’re defamiliarized from that seamless transition from verbal cue to conclusion that casts the following sentences as making the switch from a description of *Story of the Eye* to a reductive interpretation of it: “In the world of high-class literary pornography, of which *Story of the Eye* is fairly typical, force is imbued with meaning because it is the means to death. Death is the stunning essence of sex. The violence of death is the violence of sex and the beauty of death is the beauty of sex and the meaning of life is only revealed in the meaning of sex which is death.”³⁶ Reductiveness creates the grooves into which a reader falls in order to assemble a picture of *Pornography* in which “death is the stunning essence of sex” sounds like a claim Dworkin is making, for which *Story of the Eye* is evidence – a picture that continues to register, in the passages that follow, as *wrong*, as *too reductive*. Similarly, we have to dislocate our sense that some parts of the text stand over and above other parts of it: if the definition Dworkin arrives in her penultimate chapter, that “pornography is the graphic depiction of vile whores,” reads like

³⁶Dworkin, *Pornography*, 174.

a reductive claim that can't be reconciled with how *Pornography* itself has (elsewhere, reductively) read pornography, we are pointed, by that impasse, to ask where the weight of Dworkin's argument really lies (who speaks for *Pornography*, the Dworkin of chapter 1, or chapter 6?), to drill down on what it is that suggests *those* claims are what the readings of porn are pointed toward, arrive at, are motivated to prove. We learn to pause between registering the felt reductiveness of those sentences and taking in the semantic action they cue, which is to cast themselves back over the rest of the text; we learn to hold that text up to see if those sentences do, in fact, fit it. We dismantle the sense that syntactically reductive language stands outside or speaks about some other language, which is to say that we learn to boil down the explanatory leverage wife battery has over its victims – the power it has to make her testimony about *it* say something about *her* -- to a mere set of syntactical cues

Likewise, the right way to read Dworkin, sans the assumption that she's approaching porn by decoding it the way one would a representation, or a document, is flatly. In the sentences "The valuation of women's sexuality in pornography is objective and real because women are so regarded and so valued. The force depicted in pornography is objective and real because force is so used against women," we learn to un-hear the directional or revelatory force that the parallelisms in these sentences imply, either that the likeness between porn and life suggests that porn causes real sex to be violent, or that the likeness between sex and life suggests that porn's violence is objective and real because it reveals something objectively real about sex.³⁷ To pry oneself from reduction's semantics means hearing the *because* in these sentences as expressing no causal or explanatory force linking porn's representations to a reality they document, reflect, or habituate in us. Hearing these sentences in the way *Pornography* drives us to is to hear them

³⁷Dworkin, *Pornography*, 200-201.

merely expressing a contingent circularity: porn is “objective and real” in the sense that this likeness between life and porn happens to obtain, because we *do* see porn as representing and documenting sex – and therefore porn happens to represent and document what sex is to us. The same assumptions that mean we can only hear these statements in one of the two ways that have driven the debate about the anti-porn position round and round in circles is also the set of assumptions that actually *do* make porn “objective and real” in the sense that so long as we hear these sentences through the frameworks we bring to them, porn is not a genre but a semiotic operation, a frame we bring to mere information, like the non-sequitur “big cock” and “she thanked him” that sutures it into something that distills the sexual, that stands in for sex itself. *Pornography* drives us to hear these sentences with the kind of circularity and groundlessness to which Dworkin’s glosses also drive, the register in which she would like us to hear porn’s claims: to shift from seeing porn as a representation or document of some real thing, “sex,” to a set of informational statements made in a closed system, only capable of becoming something that pleurably distills sex by virtue of an artificial depth internal to itself, constructed from the frameworks it disingenuously invites us to read it in.

Coda

Returns, Rethinkings, Reduxes

There is something we want from the sex wars. Something about that moment of the 1970s, its heated debates about sexuality, porn, and free speech against a backdrop of austerity and backlash, has seemed necessary for understanding this moment – characterized by #MeToo, student activism around Title IX, the Women’s March, yes, but also characterized by “don’t say gay” and anxieties about the indoctrinating power of the YouTube algorithm, the rise of a new right wing particularly animated by the “truth” of “biological sex” and with affinities for tech utopias that involve free-speech fundamentalism.

We might say that Andrea Dworkin is to the sex wars what the sex wars are to the Second Wave: the paradigm of a paradigm, the apotheosis of an apotheosis, what is at once over-identified with an object we, as a collective, desire/repudiate and that aspect of the thing we think we have to repudiate in order to desire it. What we “need” from the sex wars has to do with seeing that moment as the end of something the Second Wave had that we shouldn’t do without. Or with seeing it as the moment feminism became the mistake we need to avoid repeating. Or, it has to do with seeing them as the beginning of a schism between, say, feminist and queer theory that we should rectify. We dive back into the sex wars to retrieve a politics we lost (a political critique of sex); we trace our steps forward from the sex wars to figure out where some branches of feminist politics went wrong (i.e., into carcerality). We must make the way the questions of the past animate the issues of the present manifest, and distinct, in order to see the issues of the present clearly. Studies such as Amia Srinivasan’s *The Right to Sex* (2021), Brenda Cossman’s

The New Sex Wars (2021), and Lorna Bracewell's *Why We Lost the Sex Wars* (2021) share the sense that armed with historical distance or new critical insight, we can see the disagreements of the sex wars with more nuance, we can avoid getting sucked into the vitriol that rendered disagreements not just substantive but intractable. As Cossman writes, "In *The New Sex Wars*, I return to those debates [the sex wars] but with a different analytic sensibility that makes room for questions foreclosed by a 'for or against' frame. Building on feminist interventions that have offered more nuanced retellings of the sex wars, I explore how approaches to the regulation of sex and sexuality that eschew either/or thinking can envision sexuality, agency, and law as zones of ambivalence."¹

And yet, the sex wars resist attempts to render them anew with nuance. Wading into the history and the fray armed with the best intentions to "dwell in ambivalence," as Srinivasan writes; to see beyond a "for or against" frame, as Cossman does, to think beyond the "reductive dualisms" of the "catfight narrative" in order to "rethink the sex wars in richer, more dynamic, more complex terms," as Bracewell does, for all the insights gained through careful historicizing, distinction between legal and cultural facets of the issues, and the identification of muted sites of disagreement, these accounts still leave something about the sex wars feeling uncannily intractable, in the same way that the sex wars originally felt uncannily intractable.² This uncanniness, as I've been arguing, is not a reflection of the value of these critics' thinking but of the structure of the sex wars themselves. To give just one example: in *The Right to Sex*, Srinivasan presents a brilliant argument that we have an urgent need for what she calls a feminist political critique of sex – not just for the reasons supplied by the old, anti-porn argument that

¹Brenda Cossman, *The New Sex Wars: Sexual Harm in the #MeToo Era* (New York: NYU Press, 2021), 5.

²Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex: Feminism in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2021), xv, 90; Cossman, *The New Sex Wars*, 5; Lorna Bracewell, *Why We Lost the Sex Wars: Sexual Freedom in the #MeToo Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021), 9.

without such a critique we are left to believe that the rape fantasy is primordial but also for all the reasons that the sex-positive feminists wanted, in Srinivasan's understanding, to protect sex from politics. But then Srinivasan just as convincingly argues that any conceivable form of political action – legalistic, testimonial, cultural, even pedagogical – winds up threatening sexual minorities in the very ways that sex-radical feminists like Gayle Rubin first objected to, until all we are left with is the sense that sex is some central but overlooked locus of the political, which we urgently need to realize and confront, but all we can viably *do* to or about sex is introspect on the harms of our own sexual preferences and try to shift them. This feels quite familiar: we're caught between two mutually exclusive feminist goods.

In the sex wars, positions on how feminism should regard or orient itself toward sex seemed to inexorably become viciously opposed sides – in spite of the fact that there is nothing explicitly contradictory in acknowledging the contrary ways sex affects women's lives for good and for ill. The relationship between pleasure and danger is not dialectical. Opposing rape and promoting women's liberation from the demand to be "chaste" and the punishment for being whores seem like two political goods in which feminism can and should be simultaneously invested, even like compatible political aims. Feminists such as Carole Vance and Gloria Steinem, on opposite sides of the sex wars, repeatedly insisted that, for example, "sexuality is simultaneously a domain of restriction, repression, and danger as well as a domain of exploration, pleasure, and agency."³ "The sex wars" is the name of a question about why feminist ideas about sexuality that seem legible in their nuanced tension continued to get rendered, "reductively," as absolutely opposed.

³Carole Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 1.

In the sex wars, the desire to “solve” this problem or answer this question led again and again to attempts to add complexity, to accommodate complexity, in our picture of sexuality. As Rubin writes of anti-porn feminism in *Thinking Sex*: “It presents the most disgusting pornography, the most exploited forms of prostitution, and the least palatable or most shocking manifestations of sexual variation. This rhetorical tactic consistently misrepresents human sexuality in all its forms. The picture of human sexuality that emerges from this literature is unremittingly ugly.”⁴ To produce a better picture of female sexuality – over and against what patriarchy tells us about women’s frigidity, over and against the punishments it offers women who embrace their sexuality – was the avowed task the Barnard Conference framed for feminism. But Dworkin and MacKinnon are emphatically not trying to present a *picture* of sexuality. Dworkin’s work is about ruthlessly undercutting the assumption that pornography represents or documents sex, and the implication that falls out from it, that sex out there, waiting to be represented by it. And the frameworks of sex-positive feminism, its assumptions that we must testify to our real sexuality, represent it better, document it better, are the inputs that fuel the engine of *Pornography*’s reductiveness, what it has learned from the Second Wave’s development of an objective stylistic mechanics. Reductiveness is an engine that takes the assumption of porn’s representational aims (what kind of thing *it* is) and the corresponding assumptions about what we do to or with such objects, that we interpret them (assumptions about what kind of thing *Pornography* therefore is) and spits out a set of irreconcilable positions. It irritates and elicits the reader’s engagement with these extreme claims; it solicits the reader’s desire to correct Dworkin’s obvious self-contradictions, or the reader’s desire to distance her own nuanced thinking from the spectacle of Dworkin’s uncontrollable dogmatism, her

⁴Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality,” in *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 166.

immanence. It prompts polarized discourse that takes the shape of the same uncanny hermeneutic impasse I have described *Pornography* as staging. The sex wars *are* this kind of discourse. The “sex wars” as a discourse shares with the much more limited discourse of *Pornography*’s reception and the kind of interpretive community it creates, and the encompassing/more expansive discourse in which the “Second Wave” is metonymic for a disavowed critical *other* to various feminist theories, the same repetitive, polarized structure that compels us to expose, “solve,” shift, try again – a repetition compulsion.

To read abstraction, literalism, reductiveness as styles that produce this repetition compulsion “solves,” for example, the sex wars, gets us “out” of what the sex wars as a “problem” shares with the metonymy of the “Second Wave,” not so much to the extent that we let what it “says” prescribe us different “solutions” (which, if *The Right to Sex* is any indication, always seem to pit necessary goods and interests against one another), but first to the extent that we learn to practice with it and think differently with it. This is ultimately what I understand the Second Wave to have done in developing this style in the first place: in response to the reactions that certain claims and utterances produced that indicated that *gender* is a certain stylistic mechanic, they experimented with and *practiced* using a style they saw each other using. To do feminism, to think in feminist terms, we might say, is not to adhere to a position so much as it is learning to think in a certain way, to see what the style shows us and read the way the style demands, and so be able to see things in a certain way. In this way what the Second Wave does is not unlike what Sarah Ahmed does when, in *Living a Feminist Life*, she notes – “Through feminism you make sense of wrongs, you realize that you are not in the wrong; But when you speak of something as being wrong, you end up being in the wrong all over again... We become the problem when we describe a problem” – a discursive pattern that Dworkin’s and

MacKinnon's work plays on.⁵ They write knowing that they cannot say that *we*, society, men, see sex as metaphysically degrading, without having responsibility for what they are simply (ironically/non-ironically) quoting – so that *they* are saying sex is rape. Like an incredibly long and particularly dark game of “Who’s on first,” Dworkin kept saying over and over: *you* cannot see sex without seeing it in relation to how you see rape. And her readers say: *you’re* saying sex is rape. And Dworkin might say: that you cannot but hear me as saying that sex is rape is what I am saying. To describe the problem is to be the problem, in Ahmed’s terms. You cannot try to get the better of porn without porn getting the better of you, in Elaine Blair’s terms. To point to wife battery is always to wind up made to be pointing back at yourself, in Dworkin’s.

How does learning to practice with – to read and think with, as well as to “write” and perform and act with – reductiveness as style “solve” the sex wars? I think the best way to answer is to offer some tentative forward-looking practice with examples. Take, for example, some of the more complicated and anxiety-inducing incidents of the #MeToo moment – not the Harvey Weinsteins, Charlie Roses, and Roman Polanskis, but the Andrew Cuomos and Aziz Ansaris and Louis CKs. The “sounds like a bad date” crowd, the testimonies that launched a thousand hand-wringings over the extra-legal vengeance of the too-militant #MeToo mob and had men anonymously confiding in the New York Times that they had been inspired to simply stop having one on one meetings with women because they simply couldn’t know where the line was; one might accidentally be construed as sexually harassing at any moment. For example, in Governor Cuomo’s case, one might give one’s coworker a friendly pat on the stomach and find oneself ousted from high office. Is this an instance of sexual harassment? How would we know? The iffy-ness of this example is indicative of how we parse what sexual harassment and sexual

⁵Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

violence are: I would hazard that it is immediately apparent to most people that Cuomo's explanation for this – we all give unconsciously spontaneous pats on the stomach to our employees now and then! – is comically *off*; at the same time, the gesture is obviously not violent, and not obviously sexual. To be confronted with this kind of example is to start asking oneself questions like “where is the line” on what is and isn't sex? Where is the line on where sex is and isn't appropriate? We might start to be engaged in some of the questions I hope I have shown are at the heart of work like Federici's, Dworkin's, and MacKinnon's: what is and isn't a workplace, what kinds of activities, waged or unwaged, count as work, what makes some context count as work? What is sex/not sex/violent sex/ sex as definitionally opposed to violence? We are engaged in a representational or correspondence imaginary, between that act and some definitional ambit of the sexual; at the center of the imaginary is an act that most corresponds with the overt definitional center of rape – a dark alley, a gun, a stranger, physical force. A touch on the stomach is not the right *location* for sex, it's on the margin of what can or can't incontrovertibly be encompassed in acts that are “sexual” because teleologically on their way to, synecdoche of, sex as penetration. This is the kind of thinking that worries sex positive feminism and queer theory: it imagines that because what we are doing is making nuanced distinctions between acceptable workplace sex and unacceptable sexual harassment, between sex and sexual *misconduct*, we are searching for an ability to draw a line, a heuristic for definition of good/bad, obscenity/speech, sex/rape, and so on; we are trying to establish norms by making fine distinctions (i.e. between the sexual content of a touch on the shoulder, a touch on the stomach, a touch on the ass, the kinds of fine distinctions that lead hand-wringers to worry that we simply can't touch each other at all, that the workplace is made a space of paranoid distance from each other, that we are becoming Puritannical prohibitors of the sexual). To imagine a politics that

works against sexual violence as one that establishes norms of acceptable sex/unacceptable violence or coercion is to create the sex wars, to create, basically, a conceptual opposition between feminism and queer theory, which is (rightly) definitionally opposed to establishing norms as a form of political/moral thought. This practice of making fine-distinctions and drawing difficult boundaries (erotica / pornography, obscenity / properly free speech) is also precisely the sort of thinking Dworkin insists in *Pornography* that she *is not doing*. To read this scenario thinking with feminist style might be, for example, to take up Dworkin's sense that her book is not about what something (porn) is, but about what it means. The stomach touch is a gesture that is overburdened by a reading of it as "sexual violence": vis a vis "sex itself," it is not a strong representation of "sex," to say that it represents sex is to be overreading, too reductive about the nuance of the situation, which may have a sexual undertone, a resonance of the sexual, but it surely is a stretch to call it *sex*, let alone coercion or violence. Vis a vis what "sexual harassment" most centrally or literally refers to, the stomach touch maintains its sense of figurativity, even its "fictionality" (it is only a tepid imagination of "real" sex), the way it seems natural to discuss secretaries being pretty packages but wrong to deny the connection such talk has to the possibility of unwrapping them. The stomach touch is a gesture that invites us to see it as not-quite-a-central-example-of-sex, when we think about what sex *is* in a referential/representational way – a disingenuousness that is what actually allows it to effect sex. If instead we understand the stomach touch as, for example, a situation of address, a communication of meaning, what it *means* is about its own intentionality. It is too intentional to be an accident; it *announces* itself as speech that cannot be properly testified to as an instance of sex. Its control of meaning *is* what makes it sex; it enjoys its own power *as* sex – not the power to force, to rape, but the power to control meaning, it interprets the situation of work and its power dynamics as "really" the

situation of gender, and *its* power dynamics, an insight which is enjoyed as sex. Now consider practices like public masturbation, grabbing someone's ass while you all pose for a picture, what it enjoys by virtue of what it *says* to someone about its own audacity to court the possibility of documentation.

What we need from the sex wars is not a “solution” but this grasp of the problem: a grasp of why a representational imaginary involves us liberal-legal distinction-making, why, thinking it can get explanatory purchase on porn, and sex, and gender, it participates in them. We look back to the sex wars, or to the Second Wave, not to recover a political critique of desire we have since lost but a politics of gender – but one that understands the contours of what is depoliticizing about our current modes of thinking gender, that understands gender itself as something that resists the political. Making nuanced distinctions between acceptable sex and workplace sexual harassment, sussing out definitional boundaries: these are the ways sex invites us to parse it (as, for example, a resonance, an aspect, the innuendo of something else that *asks* for interpretation) and they are, to my mind, the ways it resists the political: that is, the way it resists being understood as a *cause* or a source of explanation, the way it denies the antagonism it also recognizes when it uses that antagonism to animate pleasure as insight. Think, for example, about how our culture currently thinks it can ameliorate the “problems” of sexual harassment and rape with the products of the HR department – i.e., the sexual harassment “training.” The sexual harassment training at the University of Chicago, for example, is a comic mishmash of legal plausible deniability and naively optimistic pedagogical desire. It is invested in its user's ability to recognize fine distinctions between situations of sexual abuse, emotional abuse, and “academic abuse” – sometimes, it wants us to know, some situation can display all of the above! Likewise, its examples are “nuanced,” ostensibly with the intent to help its users understand that

sexual coercion is not always the glaringly obvious example of force by a stranger in an alley: one woman doesn't like to be hugged or touched, and her friend gets close enough to her that he fails to ask her each time he plans to hug her – a violation, the training teaches us. A gay couple argue about whether to try a new sexual position; one partner's repeated insistence after the other's expression of reluctance is another violation. The training goes to great lengths to mix-and-match the actors in these scenarios, and if this is presumably out of a desire to make sure, again, that we are able to recognize some stably defined thing called "sexual harassment" in all its versions, that we are not able to say things like "rape can't happen in marriage" or "gay couples don't experience domestic abuse," it also has the slightly dystopian dark comedy of seeming to want to insist that everyone has a chance to be included in the identity of victim or abuser – sexual harassment is queer and multiracial, it is for all cultures and colors of the rainbow! The sexual harassment training – as the term training implies – implies that to make sexual harassment recognizable in its many types is to teach students and workers to avoid it; sexual harassment is a mistake born from residually bad cultural habits, like falling into a pothole; it is residual because its stereotyping has been so overwhelmingly negative that we are incapable of seeing it in its more ordinary and day to day incarnations. The training envisions sex as a zone normatively denuded of negative affect, a clinical contractual exchange. It is an irony of the deepest kind that this "pastoral" vision is attributed to the likes of Dworkin and MacKinnon, whose vision of sex is otherwise excoriated for being searingly negative and whose own language is, to put it mildly, nothing like the elementary explicitness and "I statements" prescribed by the training.⁶ The sex positive feminist and queer critics of #MeToo (as Brenda Cossman points out, these critics are actually a mixed bag of allegiances and include the likes of

⁶Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?" in *October*, Vol 43: AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism (Winter 1987), 215.

Katie Roiphe, Margaret Atwood, Daphne Merkin, Laura Kipnis, and Bari Weiss – but let’s call them, shorthand, the “sexual freedom as sleeping with your students” crowd)⁷ as well as its right wing critics understand something about this vision when they say that sex doesn’t work like this (the comedy/irreality of formally and explicitly asking for permission for every gesture, touch, progression), or, more, that to make sex work like this, to denude power from sex, is to prohibit sex itself. To think with Second Wave style is to object to this not because it is desexualizing or a bad interpretation of what sex is like (which is, Dworkin teaches us, the same thing) but because it is depoliticizing. It thinks gender, and sex, are a set of norms, which we must disrupt and from which we seek to free ourselves; it is so busy teaching us to recognize the types of “mistakes” we make in gender that it can not ask, what causes sexual harassment? And: what does sexual harassment cause?

To follow feminist style through to the conclusion that the Second Wave was not, or not only, about representing women’s experiences is to see that the “impossibility” of feminism is not the paradox that we must strategically essentialize in order to deconstruct “women.” If what we need from the Second Wave, now, is a truly political sense of gender, what that means is not that we need feminism in order to get better representation for a particular group, women (whether that better representation comes from filling “women” with new content or freeing women from the normative restrictions of being “women” by deconstructing its meanings). We need this feminism, a feminism that thinks with Second Wave style’s modes of thought, because gender is glaringly, everywhere and overtly an element of an evolving 21st century political landscape and yet marginal to our sense of what’s driving it – gender is observed, but not explained, or rather, it resists *constituting* an explanation. Consider, for example, the way this

⁷Cossman, *The New Sex Wars*, 19-30, 128 – 140.

astonishing 2022 article in Rolling Stone, “Shootings Have Surged – And Gun Companies Have Made Billions” (part of its ongoing coverage of gun violence with the nonprofit, The Trace) conceptualizes the politics driving and being driven by the politics of guns in the US in, essentially, Marxist terms as an expression of the insatiable drive toward expansion. Its rhetorical aim is unquestionably to expose to the reader that market incentives are a cause of gun violence, that gun violence is profitable:

Over the past fifteen years, gun sales have followed the nation’s election cycle, spiking when Democratic elections aggravate fears of gun control, and dipping when Republicans come to power. Gun sales ballooned in the aftermath of the Sandy Hook school shooting, when President Barack Obama pledged to enact stricter gun reforms. Though few of his promises were realized, the industry enjoyed unprecedented prosperity for the remainder of his presidency.⁸

Of this link, the article writes, one editor at the trade publication *Shooting Industry Magazine* wrote, with stunning cynicism, in 2021: “There are many words we could use to describe the past two years...Unprecedented, relentless, eye-opening, stretching, tumultuous, frustrating, to name a few. But here, let’s focus on another: opportunity.” Crime is, the article reports, citing sociologist David Yamane, a core part of the industry’s marketing strategy – prompting an anti-porn style debate about whether this marketing, and industry itself, *cause* the gun violence they stoke imagination of to sell guns, or merely represent – and capitalize on – the reality of increasing gun violence. In a 2023 article published just after the shootings in Lewiston, Maine, Rolling Stone argued even more explicitly that shifts in the gun lobby’s marketing over the 2000s, its attempts to expand its market beyond hunters and sportsmen, has been the cause of increased gun violence: “Mass Murder is a Choice. The Gun Industry Made

⁸Champe Barton, and The Trace, “Shootings have Surged – and Gun Companies Have Made Billions” in *Rolling Stone*, May 27, 2022. <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-news/gun-profits-surge-violence-1359155/>.

It.” The chosen imagery for this push, writes Tim Dickinson, is overtly militarized, as well as almost comically gendered:

The Lewiston attack was a logical expression of what gun manufacturers now market assault rifles for – deadly domination. The industry pitches ‘battle-proven’ AR-platform assault rifles to civilians with imagery of special-forces troops and taglines like “Core Combat,” “Use What They Use,” and “Your Mission Awaits.” Such slogans dovetail with even more reckless marketing from makers of ‘tactical’ accessories – who pitch “gear for your daily gunfight,” ‘assault packs,’ and carrying cases with names like “Urban Warfare,” and even “Coffin.”

The industry’s alpha-male sales pitches promise buyers the power to “control your destiny.” According to law-enforcement records, Card had been haunted by phantom voices – including taunts that he had a “small dick.” The Ruger SFAR, with its thick barrel, is marketed without subtlety as “Bigger and Stronger Where It Needs to Be.”⁹

The gender content of the gun phenomenon is at once both glaringly obvious and also symbolic; it is the discursive surface of what these articles describe, a surface that is *explained* by the underpinning structure of market motives, the drive to expand a pool of buyers at any cost, and so on. It is hardly interpretive at all to say that the libidinal drive for gun ownership, as the circular means by which to “protect those you love” (from a liberal/secular tyranny in some hazy future Civil War) and also the thing that needs protection (the right to gun ownership – ironically, the Civil War for which one might need guns will be provoked, in this imaginary, over the last and symbolic straw, the attempted prohibition of guns), is phallic. As Dickinson wryly notes, it is unsubtle. The pedagogy of reading our culture has taken from what it thinks feminism is doing, a hermeneutic mode that is of course Freudian, is very good at identifying that this phenomenon is *gendered*; it can grasp gender as an aspect, a symbolic resonance; it can produce the kind of reductive exposure that might flatten everything to a singular cause, the kind of explanation-as-exposure that Susan Sontag critiques when she accuses feminism of being too simple-minded to account for history. Sontag’s comment that we don’t get much explanation

⁹Tim Dickinson, “Mass Murder is a Choice. The Gun Industry Made It,” in *Rolling Stone*, November 11, 2023. <https://www.rollingstone.com/politics/politics-features/mass-shootings-gun-industry-greed-ravaging-america-1234874423/>.

from insisting that any kind of historical eventfulness is “really” caused by the singular impetus of patriarchy is both more perceptive about feminism than we often are and less perceptive than I think Second Wave style was: it is another way of saying that gender resists the political, as a concept, that its conceptual operation is to shimmer between an aspectual status (of something else) and a bedrock, a structure so deep and static it cannot function as a certain kind of thought, the kind of thought we can practice with. We might say, thinking with Dworkin’s sense of pornography, that because it so schematically and robustly interprets – as Freud shows us – it is not subject to interpretation itself. For Sontag this is the end of, or impossibility of, feminism; for the feminist style as I have understood it, it is the beginning of feminism – one that can ask whether to expose the market rationale behind advertising guns as “bigger and stronger where they need to be” is the kind of conceptual plot that can properly explain, and work against, what is happening here. Materialist exposure in these articles is shockingly effective, and impotent at the same time: it does not understand that to show people that an industry, or a person (i.e. Donald Trump) is manipulating them for its own or their own self-interest, that they are being made dupes of a market-driven propaganda, is to run up against something else – one has the sense that to Alex Jones’ adherents, the idea that Jones is “manipulating” them with propaganda (that is, propaganda that the liberals are coming for their guns, that Sandy Hook shooting was staged) to sell snake oil supplements for his own enrichment fails to dispel or disrupt the political mechanics of what Jones stands for. It is a bit like expecting the revelation that the woman having enraptured sex in that video is actually a paid actress to throw cold water on the fantasy-function of the porn; quite the opposite, the “casting couch” and other meta-narratives of its own material production are a favored schema for porn. What must be explained *as* gender, in the sense feminist style works to understand it, are the logics that thread together so much of what

drives the right wing right now: a fetishization of “science” and technology as knowledge as such, the insistence that the “commonsense fact” of the genitals stands for some kind of knowledge as such, the ideological attachment to “free speech” as the experience of being able to utter speech that is not attached to oneself as a speaker, speech that has the interpretive authority to attach others’ speech to them.

A feminism that learns how Second Wave style thinks would not be another Second Wave: to understand style as itself something feminists *did* and practiced is to provincialize the particular ways they interpreted what style meant in aims, strategies, and actions. To put it simply, the anti-porn ordinance is not the final interpretation of what anti-porn reductiveness means, the kinds of actions its insights might give rise to. A feminism that learned what I hope *Abstract, Literal, Reductive* has learned from the Second Wave would be a feminism that can comprehend gender and sex not just as mimetic discourses exerting normative pressure on individual bodies, but as an animating cause of and explanation for politics. It would be a feminism – and not *just* a feminism – that is not exhaustively committed to the conceptual gesture of exposure. It is a feminism that, instead, can analyze or *explain* the aesthetic pleasure this kind of revelation produces as sex, as gender, as politics, rather than just participating in it. It is a feminism that is concerned less with how gender represents us and how it normatively constructs us than it is with how gender engages and addresses us. As Amia Srinivasan so insightfully implies, I think, in her essay “The Right to Sex,” for us to forsake explaining what gender produces is not for us to nobly turn our attention to less bourgeois, less trivial political causes, or to put our “own” suffering/political oppression on hold for the sake of others’ more urgent claims – it is to abandon the field and to leave a vacuum in feminism’s place.¹⁰ This is

¹⁰Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, 75.

what the example of Elliot Rodger, who performed a mass shooting and suicide in Santa Barbara in 2014, and who, to large swaths of the digitally mediated right-wing, is known as “the supreme gentleman” stands for for Srinivasan: to explain his own alienation, Rodger observed the world and saw a raced, classed, sexual hierarchy; a hierarchy that was really there; the cause, he “realized,” of this political hierarchy was gender: women were the all-powerful gatekeepers of a resource, sex, that by rights should be equally distributed to all.¹¹ Gender, in other words, works; it animates “insights,” it can be mobilized as explanation, it interprets while seeming to be interpretable, whether feminists seek to explain it or not. But if not: feminism is not the only political mode that has grasped gender as a politics, as explanation, and as drive, even if it is the only political mode that tries to assert that gender is political.

¹¹Rodger, Elliot. *My Twisted World: The Story of Elliot Rodger*. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/05/25/us/shooting-document.html>

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