

**Feminist subjects:
Issues of sexual politics and the problem of subjectivity**

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Synopsis

This dissertation sets out to re-describe (hetero)sexuality as a theoretical and political problem for feminism. I pursue this task two ways: by historicising both heterosexuality and feminist sexual politics, and by critically assessing the effects of the conceptions of subjectivity and power that have shaped primary feminist approaches to sexuality. I begin this project by examining a specific feminist attitude of antagonism towards post-structuralist theories, and drawing out its underlying ideal of feminism as a closed and coherent theoretical and political system. I argue that this conception of ‘proper’ feminist theory and politics has significant bearing on how sexuality – especially heterosexuality – can be conceived and dealt with. I also take up alternative feminist responses to post-structuralist theories: engagements which reflect very different notions of feminism generally, of subjectivity and power, and consequently, of (hetero)sexual politics. In the last two chapters, I examine some specific problems of sexuality, including anti-rape politics, and debates over the sexualisation of culture, in order to test the utility of the post-structuralist-influenced approach I have developed. Throughout the dissertation, I avoid a sole focus on corrective, theoretical critique, aiming to also acknowledge the significance of emotional affect, and historical location.

Statement of Authorship

This work has never previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any University and to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Michelle Singh

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter One: Encounters with Post-structuralism	18
Introduction	
‘The Professor of Parody’ in context	22
Shallowness and superficiality	29
Anti-foundationalism and nihilism	35
Loss and the female subject	43
History and feminist melancholy	49
Conclusion	55
Chapter Two: Methodology and theoretical orientation	56
Introduction	
Critical techniques	58
Subjectivity	64
The problem of power	78
Subjects of power and liberty	86
Ethics	91
Conclusion	97

Chapter Three: Feminist Sexual Politics **98**

Introduction

An overview of sexual politics 99

Focused reviews 110

Historicising heterosexuality 130

Conclusion 136

Chapter Four: (hetero)sexuality as askesis **138**

Introduction

Problematising Foucault's ethics of self-care 142

The utility of self-care 156

Self-care and the politics of heterosexuality 162

Heterosexuality and rape 169

Conclusion **179**

Chapter Five – Feminism looking out: cultural politics **181**

Introduction

The problem of the sexualisation of culture 184

The recent Australian context 186

Feminist responses to sexualisation 191

Historicising sexualisation	202
Problematifying representation	211
Conclusion	222
Thesis Conclusion	224
Bibliography	240

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Introduction

Defining and locating the problem

In this dissertation, I seek to re-describe heterosexuality as a feminist problem from an historical, anti-reductive, and specified perspective. Feminist sexual politics thus forms my main subject matter, which I define as: the *theoretical* issue of sexuality as an intellectual problem of ongoing feminist concern; the *political* positioning of sexuality as an arena of conflict, struggle, and resistance; and the *ethical* importance of sexuality as a site of subject formation and transformation.¹

In describing how heterosexuality might be re-cast as a problem of feminist ethics and politics, I have found that certain post-structuralist notions of subjectivity, power, and ethics offer the most useful tools. The work of a number of feminist writers in developing or adapting post-structuralist theories has been equally important, and has enhanced my re-thinking of sexual politics considerably (for example, Colebrook 1998, 2000; Gatens 2000; Hemmings 2005; Marrati 2006; Scott 2004, 2005; Taylor 2009, 2011).

From its emergence as an identifiable social movement during the nineteenth century, feminism has been concerned with issues of sexuality, alongside other political issues such as women's suffrage, and reforming education for girls and women. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century feminist campaigns around

¹Unless indicated otherwise, my use of the term 'feminism' in this thesis refers to an historically and culturally specific kind of feminism: the theory and politics that has emerged from the late twentieth century, within Anglophone contexts (Australia, New Zealand, Britain, and North America).

sexuality included: opposing the Contagious Diseases Acts in Britain, efforts to reform marriage and divorce laws, campaigns for male chastity and self-control, the Men's and Women's Club in London and their debates regarding ideal (hetero)sexual relations, and promotion of sex education and birth control for girls and women (Cott 1978; Dubois & Gordon 1983; Jeffreys 1985; Walkowitz 1986).

Since the second half of the twentieth century, the problematising of sexuality in feminist theory and politics has – arguably – increased and intensified.² For Anglophone feminists during the late 1960s and early 1970s, the concept of 'the personal is political' – the politicisation of individual and private conduct – formed one important part of an increasing emphasis on the sexual domain as fundamental to the problem of women's inequality. Disillusionment with the masculinist bias of 1960s sexual liberation movements also helped spark growing feminist criticisms of conventional heterosexual relations, as reproducing male dominance and female subservience (Greer 1970). Celebrated male writers like Norman Mailer, Henry Miller, and D.H. Lawrence were re-described by feminists as fundamentally misogynist, particularly in their literary portrayals of (hetero)sexuality (Millett 1970).

Clearly, feminist efforts to alter theories and practices of sex and sexuality were seen as parts of a broader transformative politics. For instance, the 1970s' re-conception of female sexuality as clitoral rather than vaginal – an intervention supported by scientific data – further strengthened attempts by feminist theorists to detach women from normative heterosexuality (Hite 1976; Whiting 1972;

² On a speculative level, insofar as sexuality has become a more important political site, influencing factors might include: post-Freudian medical discourses; the increased presence of sexology and its imperative of sexual happiness and fulfilment; the greater diversity and spread of popular culture; and a wider availability of leisure time and associated practices.

Koedt 1970). As envisioned by feminists, clitoral sexuality entailed female independence and autonomy in the wider social context, while the repudiation of penetrative sex was viewed as a literal refusal of male control and authority. During this period, the notion of lesbianism as a powerful ‘antidote’ to the general problem of sexuality and male dominance was also articulated, and gained increasing traction in many feminist circles and practices (Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group 1981; Rich 1986; Frye 1992).

By the 1980s, numerous problems of gender inequality and oppression were conceived in terms of sexuality. This forging of close links between key concerns helps to explain the intensity of feminism’s ‘sexuality debates’ during that decade. These debates were a series of ongoing exchanges conducted in academic journals, edited collections, and conferences. While they placed particular emphasis on the issues of pornography, and lesbian sadomasochism, the sexuality debates were also important in the wider context of sexual politics: effectively, they interrogated feminist conception of sexuality issues, the significance of lesbianism in relation to feminism, the links between sexuality and ethico-political subjectivity, and the competing imperatives of individual agency and structural forces.³

Disputes over different forms of sexual politics, and the limits that sexuality imposes on ethico-political subjectivity, were re-cast once again during the 1990s, under the impact of queer theories, and various post-structural, post-modern, and deconstructive perspectives. These last three, post-structuralism

³ The literature generated by these debates was considerable. Some of the key contributions included: Bos & Pack 1987; Chester & Dickey 1988; Coward 1982; Diamond 1980; Duggan 1988; Duggan et al 1988; Dworkin 1985; Ellis et al 1990; Ferguson 1984; Freedman & Thorne 1984; Hunt 1990; Jeffreys 1990; Linden et al 1982; Rubin 1984; Snitow et al 1984; Vance 1984.

specifically, are an essential part of my attempt to re-describe (hetero)sexual politics as a problem for feminism.

One of my key strategies is to pursue the question of feminism's encounters and collisions with theories of post-structural orientations, and the significance of these for feminist problematising of (hetero)sexuality. Feminists have expressed a range of different viewpoints about the possible consequences of these intersections or collisions. According to one influential argument, feminism has been variously threatened, attacked, infected, or seduced, particularly by French-influenced post-structural and post-modern theory (Jeffreys 1990; Gunnarsson 2011; Nussbaum 1999). Conversely, other perspectives suggest that non-feminist post-structuralist writers have, in different ways, *enabled* feminist politics and theory – even where feminism has been challenged, contested, or repudiated by them (Brown 1991; Hemmings 2005; Scott 2004; Wiegman 1999a, 1999b). Throughout my discussions, I track the ways in which these divergent perspectives have helped to shape different feminist accounts of subjectivity, power, and ethics – specifically in the context of sexual politics.

Central to my investigation are the conditions in which subjectivity has been problematised in feminist thought, as well as the question of how this ongoing concern limits and shapes feminist agendas, and responses to problems of culture and sexuality. Given the importance of sexuality as a site of critical feminist attention, and given the historical contexts of the inter-relations between subjectivity and sexuality, there are advantages in re-describing feminism and sexuality, using as points of departure the particular occasions on which subjectivity has been problematised.

The continuing resonance of sexuality's constitutive role in subject-formation, along with related moves to define and evaluate the politics of sexuality in general or totalised terms, have had significant bearing on feminist approaches to issues of heterosexuality. Thus, while de-naturalised and politicised in feminist theories and politics, heterosexuality has also been seen as fixed into unequal power relations, and conceived as creating a matrix of profoundly ambivalent, contradictory, even impossible 'sites' for women to occupy. It is my contention that anti-reductive approaches to the category of subjectivity – treating it as neither determined nor freely chosen, as constituted through localised practices, yet historically resilient – are useful alternatives to more totalising feminist characterisations of heterosexuality as a problem.

How the relations between power and subjectivity are understood – that is, either in general or in specified terms – has crucial repercussions for conceiving political agency and the goals and methods of social transformation. The conception of power itself, furthermore, is key to how its functions and effects are understood. In this dissertation, I adopt and utilise a Foucauldian-influenced theory of power as constitutive, technical, and non-normative, in the sense of being historically contingent and limited, rather than as a general phenomenon operating according to a single, unvarying principle (Foucault 1977, 1981, 1987; Patton 1994).

A statement of my ethical position

In order to address the problems I have identified, in the manner indicated, I must acknowledge my own ethico-intellectual position. My project is not one of corrective critique: it is not an attempt to identify theoretical problems and errors in existing feminist politics, with a view to then substituting my own,

ostensibly improved, theory of sexual politics. Instead of treating different forms of feminist theory and politics as de-contextualised rationalities, it attempts to acknowledge and critically assess them in reference to their specific contexts. This demonstration of the benefits of applying anti-reductive, non-precipitous accounts of subjectivity, power, ethics, and representation to problems that have been more typically understood in general, totalised terms aims to establish my own indebtedness to feminism, my intellectual orientation within it, and my aspirations for its ongoing significance.

Like any other social movement, feminism is historically and culturally embedded within, and operates in relation to, a variety of other fields of knowledge, political methods, and activism. Negotiations, even collisions, with queer theory and post-structural projects are instances of this embedded-ness within wider public intellectual and political domains, of feminist engagements with other knowledges, discourses, viewpoints, and subjects. These engagements are always productive by definition, although feminists have divergent views on the outcomes. These conflicting assessments regarding the various impacts of external theoretical and political forces clearly reflect different views of feminism's limits, its composition, and its ownership. Thus, where feminism is understood as a separate, discrete terrain, the impact of contestatory theories or debates tends to be seen as a threat, or an attempt at colonisation.⁴ Such conceptions of feminism as a coherently demarcated area of knowledge and subjectivity, a self-(re)producing entity originating from women's experience, have important repercussions for how issues of sexuality are problematised.

⁴ I describe some specific examples of this viewpoint in Chapter One.

The Chapters

In my first chapter, I examine divergent feminist perspectives on the question of whether post-structural theories jeopardise feminism's methods, priorities, and objectives. Obviously, this issue has no immediate link with (hetero)sexual politics, but through this opening discussion, I aim to show that disputes over post-structuralism's relation to feminism are indicative of broader disagreements concerning the identification of 'proper' feminist politics and the attributes of feminist subjects. In subsequent chapters, I demonstrate how these disputes have direct bearing on how sexuality is conceived as a feminist problem, and the consequences that ensue.

In examining feminist antagonism towards post-structural theories, I have found it useful to acknowledge, and allow for, the significance of different kinds of affect: a passionate attachment to a particular type of feminist subject; a melancholic nostalgia for an ideal 'time' of feminist politics; and a sense of anxiety and anger over the perceived incursions of post-structuralism into the terrain of feminism. Similar affective influences are also at work in recent forms of sexual politics, as I identify in later chapters.

The specific content of feminists' objections to post-structuralism can be generally summarised as follows: first, post-structuralist work over-emphasises and over-values textual, linguistic, and cultural matters, thus neglecting social and material issues – traditionally, the 'stuff' of authentic politics; second, feminism requires by definition a normative framework, which the anti-foundationalism of post-structuralist theory would deny; third and finally, the deconstruction of subjectivity threatens to annihilate the 'Woman' of feminist

theory and politics, thus ruling out possibilities for agency and social transformation. Indeed, as I suggest in Chapter One, the perceived loss of (female) subjectivity drives much of the conviction that post-structural theories are inimical to feminism.

These disputes have played out in numerous contexts, including both academic and mainstream publications and conferences, and I do not seek to resolve them, or to offer a judgement on which position is correct. Instead, I rehearse them here for two reasons: first, to demonstrate how feminist hostility to post-structuralism rests on certain normative criteria for authentic feminist politics; secondly, to begin establishing the yields of post-structuralist concepts for the tasks I undertake in this dissertation.

In Chapter Two, I set out in detail the methods and tools that I use in the next three chapters, and describe the overall theoretical and ethical framework of my project. This chapter does not set out a fixed framework, or a single methodology; further, the writers and the concepts that I utilise do not, on the whole, offer systematic ways of addressing issues. This applied approach to ethics and critical engagement approach is in keeping with my aim to explore and endorse particular post-structuralist approaches to problems; my model is developed from Foucault's description of "theory as a tool-kit":

the notion of theory as a tool-kit means (i) The theory to be constructed is not a system but an instrument, a logic of the specificity of power relations and the struggles around them; (ii) That this investigation can only be carried out step by step on the basis of reflection (which will necessarily be historical in some of its aspects) on given situations (Foucault 1977, p. 145).

Drawing on works influenced by Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze, I assemble a set of critical techniques which I then bring to the studies of feminist sexual politics over the next three chapters. In order to describe and explain these phenomena, I structure them into an overall list of related points. For example, I aim to treat objects of analysis (be they individual theorists, or types of cultural materials) as de-naturalised and historically situated. In evaluating these objects, I try to focus on their uses and effects, rather than inherent or underlying meanings. Notwithstanding some feminists' concerns over anti-foundationalist or anti-normative perspectives, I also argue for the advantages of forms of political engagement that do not require general assurances or guaranteed outcomes.

As previously explained, in examining (hetero)sexual politics, I assume that operative concepts of subjectivity play a vital part in how feminists approach problems of sexuality. Chapter Two therefore elaborates this claim, summarising the dominant theories of subjectivity that have been 'inherited' by feminism, and their general applications and impacts. Despite the historical achievements of these models, I contend that alternative or modified accounts of subjectivity may be in order for feminist sexual politics at this specific historical point.

Having discussed the topic of the relations between subjectivity and sexuality, Chapter Two then describes a broadly Foucauldian-influenced approach to theorising power in context-specific and non-normative terms. This conception of power offers an opportunity to re-conceive the political field so that power, even domination and inequality, are seen to operate unevenly, rather than in a pre-established, predictable fashion. From this perspective, power is not held by certain subjects or institutions, nor is it fixed in any particular sites or

populations. Its operations, and its effects, cannot be fully predicted (Foucault 1981, 1987; Patton 1994). I acknowledge some feminists' reservations concerning Foucault's re-specification of power, and am careful to explain how, in my view, this technical and 'neutral' account is able to retain strong ethical and political commitments. In particular, I discuss the repercussions of my adopted approach to power for ethical-political projects of self- and social transformation; most importantly, this involves very specific and qualified understandings of liberty and agency.

Further, the conception of gendered power relations as incomplete or flawed opens up an enormous array of possibilities for ethical and political negotiations, since all ethical practices, individual or collective, are assumed to be potentially significant, their effects unable to be fully measured in advance. Consequently, subjects' capacities for resistance and transformation will be more specific and provisional – and also multiplied.

Chapter Three examines the question of how (hetero)sexuality has been formed as a feminist problem. It conducts a brief overview of early 'second wave' arguments, the sexuality debates of the 1980s, and the engagements with queer and post-structural theories from the 1990s. One of the chapter's key concerns is to demonstrate how different ways of defining the relations between gender and sexuality, in particular, have produced different forms of sexual politics, and have been instrumental in defining the limits of possible transformation in heterosexual contexts.

However, this chapter does more than chart recent feminist sexual politics; it also pulls together the related 'threads' of my discussion: the particular feminist opposition to post-structuralist theories described in Chapter One, and a

normative form of sexual politics that has severely circumscribed ethico-political possibilities for heterosexuality, and its cultural representations. For example, one of these links is the assumption that materialism provides an unassailable ground on which to structure feminist politics. I aim to show that despite its deployment as a powerful rhetorical and political device, ‘materialism’ is often largely unexamined and de-historicised. This paradoxically un-materialist use of materialism also emerges as problematic at several points in the final two chapters.

In the middle section of Chapter Three, I pursue a closer engagement with three selected feminist texts which address different problems of sexual politics, and which were all written subsequent to the developments described in the chapter’s first section. While the three writers vary considerably in their subject matter and theoretical orientations, they share significant similarities: a distrust of post-structuralist theories and concepts; a tactical elevation of social and material matters over those of culture; a perceived need for a coherent feminist subject as the basis of politics; and a sense of a unified, normative feminism that has been lost, or is threatened with loss. In Chapters Four and Five, I note these features as defining characteristics of a certain kind of feminist engagement with sexuality issues in general and (hetero)sexual politics in particular; for example, heterosexual activity, participation, or interest is held in deep suspicion, or defined as inherently problematic.

In the third and final part of Chapter Three I present an argument for the importance of treating heterosexuality as an historical object, and offer some brief illustrations of how this might be achieved in practice. An historicised approach, as I describe it, foregrounds heterosexuality’s production and regulation, and its diverse character: under the general category of

‘heterosexuality’ are to be found married couples, youth, ‘promiscuous’ men and women, non-reproductive subjects, relations marked by differentials of age, social or economic status, culture and ethnicity, to name just some examples. These heterosexualities may overlap in certain ways, of course, but equally, they cannot be subsumed under one homogenising rubric. In particular, I note the significance for feminism of raising certain ethical questions: what is the use of rejecting heterosexuality’s claimed natural status, only to reinstate it as a structure, or totality? And what are the costs of foreclosing, within and because of heterosexual contexts, women’s agential capacities and responsibilities – and men’s?

The repercussions of treating heterosexuality as a universal category and rationally coherent object underscore the need for more specific and historicised approaches to sexual politics. Chapter Four therefore describes one way that this might be achieved, through exploring the applicability of forms of self-care – particularly as theorised by Foucault – for problems of (hetero)sexual politics, such as psycho-sexological models of normal sexuality, the ethical negotiation of power in sexual relations, and finally, divergent forms of feminist anti-rape politics.

Given that Foucault’s work on the care of the self has been a subject of contention among feminist and Left scholars, I spend the first part of Chapter Four describing the key points of debate, and clarifying the particular reading of self-care that I plan to utilise. This allows me to show the usefulness of Foucault’s work on the aesthetics of the self, as it relates to agency and freedom. Contrary to some of its critics’ negative assessments, the freedom of the subject which is upheld here is not a freedom from restrictions, or freedom

to act however one wishes. It is rather a particular kind of responsibility: the exercise of power over and on oneself.

Objections by some feminist and Left theorists to devoting theoretical and ethical resources to care of the self have been driven by a perception that it is a retreat into the apolitical, especially when contrasted with the assumed moral and political value of outward-directed models of ethics. Repudiations of Foucauldian self-care exemplify the feminist criticisms of post-structuralism in general that I describe in my first chapter: normative ideals of ‘proper’ politics (and the subjects of these politics); an insistence on the primacy of material matters and materialist viewpoints; and a suspicious attitude towards that which is perceived to be superficial or aestheticised.

Thus, my primary objective in Chapter Four is to demonstrate that, first, Foucault’s notion of self-care allows for a balance between self and other concerns – indeed, it enables a highly responsible and sensitive mode of ethical subjectivity; second, this has specific utility for theorising certain issues of (hetero)sexual politics. For example, the chapter notes that far from being inimical to feminism, self-care has in fact been extremely important in areas of feminist politics such as consciousness-raising, empowerment, and the politicisation of the personal. In explaining how self-care can be understood as deeply ethical, I also note that in Foucault’s view, the relation to one’s self is inextricably connected to relations with others, and embedded in one’s social context and historical location. The continual work on the self, and the degree of responsibility and accountability demanded by this practice of subjectivity means that it is far from a hedonistic, self-obsessed pursuit of pleasure, or flight from politics.

In the second part of Chapter Four, I consider the possible uses of this Foucauldian-influenced ethical subjectivity for specific matters of sexual politics. First, feminist critiques of normative medical models of ‘healthy’ sexuality have been essential in providing alternative possibilities for sexual subjectivity; through a discussion of the ‘clitoral model’ of female sexuality promoted by some feminists, I describe how an appreciation of these ‘counter-sexualities’ can be retained alongside recognition that they are strategic, not permanent or universal. Further, if sexuality is conceived as a continual ethical and aesthetic project of self-fashioning, this enables creative and diverse alternatives to emerge in response to the continuing regulatory ideals produced by psycho-sexological institutions, Female Sexual Dysfunction diagnosis being a recent example.

Second, in response to the influential feminist argument that heterosexual relations are irretrievably marked by power differences, such that women in them have no space free of domination, I stress that *all* relations are in fact marked by power (albeit to differing degrees), and the consequences of this cannot be assumed in advance without foreclosing the possibilities for ethical capacity. To illustrate this argument, I note recent feminist research on staff-student sexual relations in tertiary institutions, and on specific techniques used by people in negotiating their sexual subjectivities and relationships. This discussion indicates that the way in which heterosexuality is problematised in much feminist politics emphasises risk for women (at both the physical and psychic level), and a non-negotiable structure of inequality and domination; further, ‘everyday’ heterosexuality is positioned on a continuum of sexual exploitation, with rape as its logical endpoint.

In the final section of Chapter Four, I examine divergent feminist conceptions of anti-rape politics. On the one hand, I challenge a particular feminist conception of rape's inherent proximity to heterosexuality. At the same time, I consider how the re-descriptions of subjectivity, power, and sexuality made in this dissertation are useful for rethinking how rape might be understood, and how its effects and its prevention might be conceived.

While Chapter Four tends to look inwards, to the ethical formation of the self, Chapter Five turns to an outward-directed feminist gaze, examining the politics of representation as it pertains to sexual subjectivity specifically. This chapter begins with the general topic of the 'sexualisation of culture', or the commonly held notion that contemporary Anglophone public culture is characterised by an increased level of interest in sexual matters, and a greater level of visibility for sexual representations. I then narrow the focus to recent Australian debates over problems of 'sexualisation'.

In Australia, the question of sexualisation has become inter-connected with the issue of child protection, which obviously shapes discussion in certain directions (and not others). As specific examples, I examine the public and academic exchanges over the 2008 'Henson affair', and those around two influential reports on child sexualisation published by The Australia Institute in 2006. In examining this historical field, I identify within child protection arguments a marked anxiety about the need to regulate the sexual expression and behaviour of girls and young women. Further, despite the diversity of feminist approaches to cultural politics, in the Australian public sphere a specific feminist perspective – protectionist-oriented and similar to anti-pornography arguments – has been dominant. I focus on academic feminist Abigail Bray, who exemplifies this highly visible position, in which a feminist

material politics concerned with the welfare of girls and women understands itself to be under siege from a coalition of post-structuralists, artistic elites, corporations, neo-liberals, and sexualised public culture. As I have also described in Chapters One and Three, post-structuralism is again rendered culpable through its perceived lack of foundation, its absence of normative ethical standards, and its disconnection from material reality.

Rather than simply rejecting protectionist viewpoints, however, I aim to show the importance of situating the problems of sexualisation and child protection within their historical contexts: this exercise can offer ‘lessons’ on previous policies and social programs (identifying those more successful than others in achieving certain goals); it can serve to temper deeply felt concerns over children, adolescents, and teenagers; and in foregrounding the regulatory impacts on girls and young women, it may encourage caution about the degree of protection they are seen to require.

The final section of Chapter Five briefly surveys how the protectionist viewpoint has articulated its critique of pornography, again within the recent Australian context. There are obvious sympathies here with more long-standing anti-pornography arguments, found in the work of Catharine MacKinnon for example. Within these arguments, cultural representations are approached in quite general terms; their effects on audiences or consumers seen as uniform and powerful; portrayals of female sexual expression are highly troubling; the function of representation as misogyny is almost axiomatic; and finally, there is an intense level of negative affect towards sexually explicit images.

While I appreciate certain achievements of anti-pornography feminism, such as its insistent politicisation of culture, and I also acknowledge the popular and

dramatic appeal of its particular rhetorical style, I nevertheless argue for the advantages of more careful, specific, and technical studies of sexual representations: those which investigate, for instance, which people engage with certain cultural materials, and how and where they do so – rather than focusing exclusively on interpreting images and performing content analysis (a methodology which continues to predominate in analyses of pornography). In making this argument, I also discuss the concept of reparative reading, as it has been applied to sexual representations.

In summary, in making my case for a re-description of heterosexuality as an historical object for feminism, I argue for the utility of specific post-structuralist-influenced approaches to subjectivity, power, and ethics. Examining different feminist responses to post-structuralist theories in preparation for this dissertation has emphasised another issue of critical importance: the problems that I address, while certainly about theory, are also about much more. Questions of feminist subjectivity, sexual politics, ethical norms, and effective political methods are all suffused with affect: attachment, melancholy, passion, and risk. As the dissertation proceeds, I explore how awareness of this helps to account for both the advantages and limitations of predominant (hetero)sexual politics, and also can point to possible new developments. This project begins with a re-examination of divergent views on the relations between feminist and post-structuralist theories, to which I now turn.

Chapter One: Encounters with Post-Structuralism

Introduction

Post-structuralist, post-modernist, and deconstructive theories have not been the first to prompt feminist theory to re-consider its relations with ‘external’ intellectual and political forces. Marxist and psycho-analytic perspectives are among the best-known examples of a considerable history of encounters and confrontations. Feminism’s inter-connections with other forms of knowledge have resulted in extensive debates, discussions, and innovations, perhaps especially with regard to conceptions of socio-political change, and self-formation. Post-structural theories are a recent continuation of this history of engagement, and yet, there are certain differences; while some may have judged Marxist or psycho-analytic approaches to be incompatible or irreconcilable with feminist objectives, post-structuralist theories have arguably been conceived more explicitly as purposeful threats by their feminist critics, as deliberately destructive and seductive influences.⁵

Some feminists have therefore interpreted post-structural theory as inimical to feminism: as an obstacle to feminism’s progress as a political movement, and as a seductive distraction from proper politics. This problem can be approached as a purely theoretical dispute, with the solution a question of adjudicating between competing rationalities or theoretical frameworks. In this chapter my own strategy is to examine the roles played by affect and attachment,

⁵ Throughout this dissertation, for brevity’s sake, I tend to use ‘post-structuralist’ as a shorthand for those theories which can be grouped under post-structuralism, post-modernism, and deconstruction. I am well aware that these are not equivalent theoretical orientations. However, where a specific writer has used one of these terms – post-modernism, for instance – I also adopt it while engaging with them, to maintain a sense of continuity.

specifically an attachment to a certain conception of feminist subjectivity. I treat the term ‘subject’ in at least two ways: first, as referring to the ethical formation of feminist subjects, their capacities and values; and second, in terms of feminism’s objective terrain, its proper concerns and interests.

Framing feminist antagonism to post-structuralism in terms of this double perspective departs from rationalist accounts of feminist opposition to post-structuralism by foregrounding questions of normative subjects and limits, or boundaries: what counts as the essential ‘substance’ of feminism; those aspirations deemed more or less properly feminist; and the past and future trajectories of feminism as an ethically and politically transformative imperative.

In early 1994, I attended a ‘Summer School’ at the Australian National University, organised by a group of prominent Australian feminists who were preparing works for a new edited collection (Caine & Pringle 1995). As an audience of post-graduate students, one of our tasks was to engage with the drafted material of this book, which was substantially concerned with the impact on feminism of various then-current works by post-modern and post-structural theorists, especially Foucault and Derrida.

In our many discussions of the issues, one of the primary concerns was how to (re)conceive feminist conceptions of subjectivity and power, and the potential limitations of terms like ‘women’ and ‘patriarchy’. In general, it was a stimulating and frank exchange of views regarding concepts that were quite new at the time, and which had important repercussions for our field. At one point, co-organiser of the event Elizabeth Grosz responded to expressed anxiety among participants by asking us what it was we feared, why some of us

expressed such determination to hold onto categories such as a coherent notion of ‘women’, and why certain post-structuralist arguments were perceived as direct threats to feminism.

In this chapter, I consider what might be at stake in a particular feminist antagonism towards post-structuralism, an antagonism that cannot be explained or understood solely as a theoretical dispute. It is important to emphasise here that while the 1990s may have been a more intensive period of feminist engagements with post-structuralist writers and concepts, these encounters and disputes have by no means dissipated. My chapter discussion illustrates how this specific ‘moment’ in intellectual history nevertheless exemplifies a wider, and still relevant, set of problems: the status of ‘the subject’ in feminist discourse; the possibilities for ethics if norms are limited or absent; the relations between self-transformation and world-transformation; the demands of anticipatory imperatives; and the polarising of politics into cultural and sexual *versus* social and material issues. By considering the normative and affective features of these problems, I am also laying the groundwork for a later re-examination of the question of (hetero)sexual politics.

If the feminist versus post-structuralist ‘disagreement’ that I discuss here can be taken as illustrative of the problems of a normative feminism which is passionately adhered to, and seen as dependent on certain given foundations, then key questions are highlighted. For instance, what does (hetero)sexual feminist politics look like, if universal norms are seen as necessary, if present actions and decisions must be clearly linked to future possibilities, if cultural issues must be subordinated to social issues, and theory must be directly accountable to, and in the service of, political practice?

In her analysis of different histories of (academic) feminism, Clare Hemmings describes her interest in “the ways in which narratives of the recent feminist past, whether seen as successes or failures, fix its teleological markers in very similar ways...” (2005, p. 130). Rather than judging which narratives might be more accurate than others, she writes that “my concern is with which markers stick over others, and with where our narratives position us as subjects of feminist history and theory” (Hemmings 2005, p. 130). Hemmings’ comments prompt me to examine the ways that feminist perspectives which articulate themselves as opposed to, or suspicious of, post-structuralist theories, impose normative limits on feminist theory and politics.

In this chapter, I survey the broad context of feminism’s theoretical engagements with post-structuralism since the early 1990s, with specific attention to how these reflect different and passionately competing views of what feminism is, what it should aspire to, its future directions, and its past successes or failures. I aim to show, first, that the issues here involve *subject formation*: differing feminist actors with their own repertoires of techniques and capacities; and rival accounts of ‘proper’ feminist areas of interest and intervention. Secondly, I propose that this has direct and important bearing on sexual politics specifically – a topic that will be examined in later chapters.

In 1999, the U.S. journal *The New Republic* published an essay by Martha Nussbaum, entitled ‘The Professor of Parody’. This vehement repudiation of post-structural feminism, or what Nussbaum labelled as “the new symbolic type” of feminism (1999, p. 38), took the work of Judith Butler as its primary example. Nussbaum’s essay distilled many of the feminist objections expressed over the preceding decade towards post-structural theories. It quickly gained a paradigmatic status for subsequent reiterations of those disputes.

Both Nussbaum and Butler are prominent figures within feminism, and within the Left more generally. The basic points of contention between them therefore resonate with an importance that cannot be confined to a dispute between two academic feminists in North America. Neither is it a dispute that can be confined to the late twentieth century. Noting the numerous feminist responses to Nussbaum's essay in subsequent years, Robyn Wiegman counsels that "her position is regularly repeated, from within as well as outside the humanities, and the investment in what it stands for is not about to disappear" (2010, p. 81; see also Thomas-Williams 2008, p. 252). Ori Herstein describes Nussbaum's criticism of Butler as "an almost canonical example of this common critique" (2010, p. 44) – referring to the tendency to condemn post-structuralist theories as bereft of morals and political norms. Herstein, like Wiegman, stresses the broader significance of Nussbaum's paper:

Nussbaum's essay has gained a substantial presence within a broad intellectual circle, often referred to as a classic, effective, and accessible repudiation of what is sometimes labelled "postmodern" thought (2010, p. 73).

In this chapter, I have broken down the arguments around 'The Professor of Parody', and around feminism and post-structuralism more generally, into a set of specific problems, which I address in turn.

'The Professor of Parody' in context

A significant number of feminist engagements with post-structural, post-modern, and deconstructive theories share a conception of the *culpability* of these theories as interruptions, obstacles, or distractions impeding feminism's progress. Thus, perceived setbacks or defeats are traced back to their door (Hemmings 2005, p. 128; and Bell 2002, p. 578). One dramatic example is

Brodribb's accusation that "post-modernism exalts female oblivion and disconnection" (cited in Zalewski 2003, p. 124). Nussbaum's critique of Butler is perhaps the most prominent example of this response, yet as Wiegman notes, "Nussbaum is not alone in her postulation that post-structuralism has ruined feminism's good health" (1999b). In her 1999 essay Nussbaum indeed attributes the damaging predominance of "the new symbolic" feminism largely to "French postmodernist thought" (1999, p. 38); Gisela Kaplan (1993), Susan Bordo (1993), Susan Gubar (1998), Giminez (2005), Miller (2008), and Gunnarsson (2011) all concur.

Over-drawn hostility has had definite effects on the terms of engagement between post-structuralism and its feminist detractors. For example, related yet distinct terms such as deconstruction, post-modernism, and post-structuralism have generally been treated as interchangeable or equivalent, a move that subsequently allows for a standardised set of objections to be levelled against them (e.g. Downs 1993, p. 20). Giminez, for instance, condemns them as "theories for which everything is relative and discursively constructed" (2005, p. 13), and concludes that their influence on feminist theory has come to mean:

the adoption of principles (e.g., anti-essentialism, social constructionism, the reduction of social reality to discourse, relativism, the rejection of macro-level theories, the so-called "metanarratives") antithetical to the development of social analyses and political strategies useful for all social movements, including women's liberation (2005, p. 13).

It is interesting to note that the intensity of Giminez's opposition to post-structuralism leads her to dismiss even social constructionist and anti-essentialist concepts as "antithetical" to feminism.

In addition to conflating different theoretical perspectives into a common threat, Giminez does not reference or cite any post-structuralist, or feminist post-structuralist, throughout the whole of her lengthy discussion. Giminez asserts that many feminists fail to treat Marxist theory – her own preferred paradigm – with appropriate scholarly rigour and fairness, to the extent that “many feminist writers and their editors share a set of taken-for granted stereotypical beliefs about Marx and Marxism such that editors do not insist on citations to support the standard criticisms” (2005, p. 12, footnote 1). She does not appear to see any contradiction in her appeal to rigorous scholarly standards on the one hand, and her own comprehensive dismissal of post-structuralism on the other.

Similarly, Maynard (1995) makes extensive criticisms of post-structuralism, without identifying any specific theorists; her conception of ‘deconstruction’ is a composite of Lacanian and unspecified post-structuralist theories (e.g. see p. 270). Hildy Miller complains that post-modern feminists have dismissed and silenced alternative feminist perspectives, and presents a list of post-modern shortcomings – all without naming or referencing a single post-modern or post-modern feminist writer (her reference list contains only those feminists notable for their hostility to these theories, such as Linda Alcoff and Susan Gubar) (Miller 2008).

Other feminist authors have noted similar problems; for instance, in her copiously footnoted engagement with feminist legal scholar Robin West, Katherine Sheehan faults West for precisely the same practice: intense yet generalised criticisms of post-structuralism unsupported by citations of texts or authors. Sheehan finds this all the more surprising, given that West is mostly attentive and respectful to the numerous other theories and writers she discusses (2000, pp. 85-6). These examples illustrate Clare Hemmings’ argument that too

often, feminist critics “do not engage particular theorists, but petition their own and their readers’ idea of post-structuralism, commonly by reference to secondary source summaries” (2005, p. 129).

Feminists have certainly not been alone in problematising post-structuralism in this way; rather, in this they are part of a broader reaction among many Left-identified writers. Critics of this reaction, such as Judith Butler, have analysed “the notion that post-structuralism has thwarted Marxism...” (1998, p. 265), while Wendy Brown has noted that “cultural politics” and “post-structuralism, discourse analysis, postmodernism, [or] trendy literary theory...” have all been generally “held responsible for the weak, fragmented, and disoriented character of the contemporary Left” (1999, p. 23; Loizidou 2008, p. 34; Dempsey & Rowe 2004, pp. 33, 36). Indeed, Brown suggests that the hostility towards these modes of scholarship has effectively distracted attention from certain failures or limitations of left-wing politics itself (Brown 1999, p. 23).

My purpose in re-visiting these issues via Nussbaum’s critique of Butler is not to attempt a defence of Butler over Nussbaum – although my own intellectual orientation is indeed much closer to Butler’s own. It would be equally fruitless to attempt a synthesis of Butler’s and Nussbaum’s positions, as if feminist politics was simply a fractured rationality in need of reconciliation. As Rishi Chaudhuri suggests, in this dispute “we see tensions between Butler and liberal feminism that cannot be reconciled by an appeal to more thorough understanding, or by the search for a higher vantage point” (2009). Rather, Nussbaum’s essay and the subsequent reactions to it offer ideal illustrations of my proposition that there is much more at stake in feminist engagements with post-structuralism than rival or competing theoretical positions.

Much of the commentary around Nussbaum's essay supports the need to consider these theoretical disputes within contexts that cannot be reduced to their intellectual components. Thus a number of letters published in *The New Republic* in response to 'The Professor of Parody' emphasised dismay at what was perceived as Nussbaum's vitriolic style of engagement – this from Butler's allies and critics alike (see *The New Republic* 1999, 19 April). Elsewhere, other writers emphasised the same feature. Describing the essay as "a particularly venomous attack on Butler by Martha C. Nussbaum", Brookey and Miller (2001, p. 140) judged it to be unnecessarily distracting and divisive (p. 152). Kapur expressed concern "that the ascendance of postmodern feminism in its Butlerian incarnation has evoked such a vituperative and vitriolic response from an established scholar such as Martha Nussbaum. . ." (2000, p. 85). Sheehan suggested that Nussbaum's anger at Butler led her to forego the usual academic 'rules of engagement' (2000, p. 87, footnote 14). Many of these commentaries emphasised the point that passionate conviction was overwhelming rational debate.

On the other hand, U.S. writer Katha Pollitt described Nussbaum's paper as "a skilful and long-overdue shredding" (in Boynton 1999). What I find intriguing here is the underlying suggestion of just desert, or come-uppance, in Pollitt's comment. Why was Butler 'due' to be shredded? What provoked this degree of censure, and this impassioned language? I think that Barvosa-Carter is right to recommend 'unpacking' what may be involved in Nussbaum's harsh assessment, rather than simply rejecting it (2001, p. 130). For those feminists antagonistic towards post-structuralism, Butler's work epitomises all of the pernicious effects of post-structuralism upon feminism: it refuses to found itself upon a general subject category of 'woman'; it claims to eschew normative criteria; it interrupts linear or teleological visions of feminist progress; and it

appears to valorise theory, language, representation, and signs over politics, activism, and material issues.

In a review of an earlier work by Nussbaum, Bidy Martin noted that Nussbaum's hostility towards both literary theory and post-structuralism was based on "their assaults on truth, their putative lack of rigor, and what Nussbaum sees as their purposeful unintelligibility" (Martin 1997). Martin's comments can be equally applied to the argument expressed in 'The Professor of Parody', where Nussbaum charges Butler with adopting a deliberately difficult writing style, ignoring scholarly standards, and rejecting normative principles.

Undoubtedly, Butler's work has, by itself, had provocative effects on feminist theory, particularly in regard to questions of agency, resistance, and transformation (Barvosa-Carter 2001, p. 124). Also, her refusal to formulate any straightforwardly normative perspective on politics is, simply, infuriating for those who see this kind of foundation as essential (Kapur 2000, p. 85). In addition, Butler's perceived status as a 'star' of feminist and queer theory further complicates matters. The very processes of singling her out, making her exceptional and unique, whether revering or demonising, also reveal tensions among feminist intellectuals who deploy competing notions of feminist theory, and its proper relation to 'movement' feminism.

Nussbaum's essay can be seen as a culmination of the Butler-centred polarisation of feminist positions over the preceding decade. Barvosa-Carter has noted "the unusually intense celebration and vilification of Butler's contributions" (2001, p. 124) within feminism, well before Nussbaum's essay appeared. With the publication of *Gender Trouble* in 1990, Butler's work

quickly became widely known and discussed, especially among those working in feminist and gender studies, and the rapidly emerging field of queer theory.

Among some feminists, Butler's rising status inspired resentment, and a tendency to exaggerate or overstate her influence as an individual theorist. For example, in Rachel Torr's exhortation to feminism to abandon its 'star system', and cease adulation of individual theorists (2007, p. 60), she expresses intense "irritation" (in her words) with Butler particularly at several points in her discussion. Susan Hekman's critique of Butler's notions of self and agency also tends to over-state Butler's part in the destabilisation of identity categories, especially 'women' (2000, p. 291). Hemmings notes this disproportionate attention paid to Butler as figurehead:

Butler, the most cited of all, carries the heaviest teleological burden, frequently single-handedly inaugurating a move away from 'woman' as the invariant ground and subject of oppression, knowledge and resistance (2005, p. 125).

While writers like Torr, or Ermarth (2000, p. 116) are irritated and frustrated by the "star" status of Butler in particular⁶, Hemmings is concerned with the problematic effects of isolating and over-emphasising individual feminist theorists – problematic for both the work of these theorists, and for the way in which histories of feminism are represented and understood. For Hemmings, to the extent that Butler – or Donna Haraway or Gayatri Spivak, her other examples – are singled out as 'conduits' for post-structuralism's challenges to feminism (whether positively or negatively), they are effectively disconnected

⁶ In some writers' criticisms, Butler and others seem to be held responsible for their own privileged status (e.g. Torr 2007); others locate culpability in "the translators, recyclers and overviews of feminist theory" (Stanley & Wise 2000, p. 278).

“from their own feminist trajectories”, and their theoretical influences “consistently cited as male theorists”, all of which serves to underscore the perception that post-structuralism has functioned as an interruption, detour, or obstacle to feminism’s progress (2005, p. 125).

Notwithstanding the many feminists who have engaged more or less positively with post-structuralist theories, a tiny handful, with Judith Butler at its head, stands as representative of post-structuralism’s perceived challenges to feminism – sometimes in a positive sense, but usually not. Feminist work that is antagonistic to post-structuralist influences tends to concentrate on these primary objections: social and material matters are neglected in favour of more superficial questions of culture, language, and texts; anti-foundationalism denies feminism its necessary normative base; and the deconstruction of subjectivity – emblematised in the category ‘woman’ – both removes feminism’s *raison d’etre*, and forecloses on agency and political progress (Barvosa-Carter 2001, p. 130; Wiegman 2002, p. 26). Beginning in the following sub-chapter, I consider these objections in more detail.

Shalowness and superficiality

In *Unbearable Weight*, published in 1993, a time of concentrated feminist interest in post-structural theory, Susan Bordo took a mostly critical line towards post-structural and post-modern thought. Like Nussbaum, Bordo opposed a notional feminist ‘real’ to the abstract ‘Theory’ of post-modernism and post-structuralism; further, she argued, post-modern writing is heedless of material consequences, and thus lacks ethical limits (1993, p. 283). By contrast, in her review of the feminist writers bell hooks (*yearning*) and Jane Flax

(*Thinking Fragments*), Bordo described their work as “acutely postmodern” but stipulated that:

...because the insights that emerge are grounded in experience, the result is neither chaotic nor fanciful; rather the security and elegance of theoretical unity are replaced by the different satisfaction of having sometimes incommensurable realities (that is, real life) described with precision, intelligence, and honesty (1993, p. 285).

For Bordo, experience was a guarantee of truth and reality, whereas theory was fundamentally disconnected from them. This opposition between post-modern theory and the feminist ‘real’ was further established in her review of Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, which for Bordo was driven by two contradictory and opposing influences. On the one hand, in Bordo’s view, Butler displayed a commendable awareness of history, social institutions, normalisation, and domination. However, her “Derridean/ Foucauldian agenda” led her astray, rendering her books “signifiers without content” (1993, pp. 294, 295).⁷

Bordo thus assumed that the theoretical and socio-historical aspects of Butler’s work could be easily distinguished and separated. This conviction that language, the symbolic, and the textual can be coherently distinguished from the social, the real, and the material (*and* that the latter are more directly relevant and important to feminism) continues to characterise feminist work that is hostile to post-structuralism. As Hemmings describes it (a little wearily),

The (feminist) political must have been displaced by the (abstract) cultural in order to be reasserted, a focus on the text must have replaced a focus on the experiential and so forth. And

⁷ It is ironic that Bordo’s materialist critique of ‘symbolic politics’ used the language of semiotics to summarise the central problem in Butler’s work.

of course their absolute difference from one another must be maintained for the hierarchical and temporal separation of key terms to work (2005, p.128; Loizidou 2008; 34).

Joan Scott (with reference to a specific writer) has also taken issue with the unexamined assumption that “oppositions between language and experience, ideas and reality, texts and contexts, the textual and the social...” are “self-evident facts that need no justification” (1993, p. 442; see also Butler 1997, p. 267). Indeed, in ‘The Professor of Parody’, Nussbaum repeatedly charges Butler with over-emphasising the importance of texts, representations, and language, and therefore failing to offer any useful or concrete assistance to feminist objectives; for example, she argues that: “Hungry women are not fed by this, battered women are not sheltered by it, raped women do not find justice in it, gays and lesbians do not achieve legal protections through it” (1999, p. 45). In this, Nussbaum echoes an earlier complaint by Maynard against post-structuralism generally: “Not everything is sign or text, as any rape survivor, homeless person or starving child will testify. Such people experience ‘real’ phenomena with ‘real’ effects...” (1995, p. 273).

In upholding the importance of material and activist politics, Nussbaum highlighted contemporary Indian feminism as a counter-example to Butler’s ‘symbolic’ feminism (Nussbaum 1999, pp. 37-8), a move which provoked sharp critical responses from a number of writers (Chaudhuri 2009; Kapur 2001, pp. 79, 81; Spivak in *The New Republic* 1999, 19 April; Wiegman 1999b). In particular, these feminists argued that Nussbaum had over-simplified and homogenised Indian feminism in order to position her own approach as politically and morally superior to Butler’s.

During the 1990s in particular, feminist critics in general felt compelled to remind post-structuralists of the primacy of social and material concerns over those of language, signification, or discourse (Downs 1993; Maynard 1995, p. 269, 272). This subordination of ‘the cultural’ to the perceived materiality of proper politics has continued in some early twenty-first-century feminist criticism. Giminez (2005) and Gunnarsson (2011, p. 29) are examples of more recent feminist critiques of post-structuralism that also foreground its perceived “reduction of social reality to discourse or text...” (Giminez 2005, p. 13, note 3).

It is important to note that in many cases, when feminist materialism is upheld and defended against the discursive, linguistic, and textual excesses of post-structural and post-modern theories, the ‘materialism’ thus employed tends to be of a very specific type, although not always acknowledged as such. Kapur touches on this when she queries of Nussbaum: “Why is ‘material condition’ assumed to refer only to women’s experience of oppression and impoverishment?” (2001, p. 83). Despite the immense and diverse feminist scholarship on the inter-connections of theory and politics, language and the social, representation and the material (Ahmed 2000; Gunew 2003; King 2001; Stacey 2001; Wiegman 2010 are examples), feminist critics of post-structuralism frequently rely on a simplified and limited notion of ‘the material’, which is assumed to refer to social reality, and to be somehow distinct from theory, writing, and representation.

The notion that post-structuralism’s attention to discourse, language, and the symbolic is superficial also leads critics to charge that it distracts and seduces people away from politics ‘proper’. Clegg (2006) explains the prominence attained by post-modern and post-structural theories in terms of their superficial

focus on pleasure and consumption, and their implicit dismissal of more traditional political campaigns for social change. In Clegg's account, factors like the 'fall' of communism, and the growing dominance of neo-liberal market principles – with the consequent sense of defeat felt on the Left in general – help explain “the allure” of these more indulgent, hedonistic theories (2006, p. 312).

Nussbaum and others have suggested that post-structural and post-modern theorists have enticed potential activists away from real political work, onto the path of meaningless symbolic subversion (Barvosa-Carter 2001, p. 130; Bell 2002, p. 583; Herstein 2010, p. 48). In an interview, Nussbaum argues that “Butler is like the Pied Piper leading all the children away!” ... ‘If all these wonderful people drop out of politics, then there are that many fewer people left to fight against evil’” (in Boynton 1999). As Wiegman describes it, Nussbaum charges Butler with not only neglecting political practice, but actually obstructing the forward progress of feminism:

For Nussbaum, academic feminism as embodied in the work of Judith Butler is seen as *interrupting* feminism's historical continuity by luxuriating in theoretical pleasure and thereby abandoning practical politics (Wiegman, 1999; emphasis added).

This deeply held conviction that a 'proper' feminism and its political trajectory are under threat is also evident when Nussbaum accuses Butler of not being a 'real' philosopher. It may seem petty to focus on this issue – which might be viewed as a momentary lapse into *ad hominem* argument – but it has a particular significance to my discussion. First, on a professional or disciplinary level, Nussbaum asserts that Butler's work is, properly, literature; she also criticises Butler's use of philosophical authors (particularly J.L. Austin and Socrates), suggesting that Butler has misunderstood them, or has only read them

superficially. Second, Nussbaum situates her own work within a Socratic tradition of truth-seeking; Butler, on the other hand, acts as a charlatan, using the trickery of sophistry and rhetoric in order to dazzle and seduce her readers (Nussbaum 1999, p. 40).

As Brookey and Miller observe, Nussbaum sees Butler as preoccupied with representation and language – “symbolic frivolity” – while Nussbaum herself engages with material realities (2001, p. 140; Roman-Lagerspetz 2009, p. 209; Thomas-Williams 2008, p. 251). In addition, Nussbaum takes this contrast further, presenting it as a contemporary continuation of the Ancient Greek division between philosophy proper, “a discourse of the soul that yields a political praxis that is both moral and true”, and the amoral, apolitical “verbal manipulation” practised by sophists and rhetoricians (Brookey & Miller 2001, p. 140). This negative association of Butler’s writing with forms of rhetoric that lack the integrity of Aristotelian virtue is, of course, an example of rhetorical technique. Thus Vikki Bell points out that Nussbaum’s public criticism of Butler “is itself highly rhetorical” (2002, p. 583; Brookey & Miller 2001, p. 141).

For other feminist commentators, Nussbaum’s attempts at disciplinary gate-keeping are the most troubling aspect of her argument at this point. Indeed, the strongest condemnations on this count came from prominent feminist academics Linda Nicholson, Seyla Benhabib, and Nancy Fraser – all of whom have significant theoretical and political disagreements with Judith Butler. In a joint letter to *The New Republic*, Nicholson, Benhabib, and Fraser wrote that

One element [of ‘The Professor of Parody’] we found particularly objectionable was Nussbaum’s repeated attempts to dismiss Butler as a philosopher ... As one who has contributed

much to bringing literature and philosophy closer together, Nussbaum's questioning of Butler's attempts are disingenuous (1999, April 19, p. 46).

Nussbaum's antagonism stems primarily from her sense that Butler's work threatens the destruction of the kind of feminism that Nussbaum holds dear: "old-style feminist politics" (Nussbaum 1999, p. 38; Barvosa-Carter 2001, p. 130). The perception that post-structuralist theories threaten the destruction of traditional political methods is quite common in feminist and Left criticisms, and is often associated with the anti-foundationalist tendencies of many post-structuralist writers.

Anti-foundationalism and nihilism

For critics, feminists – and progressive social theorists in general – who make use of post-structuralist approaches, are ultimately left with no ground from which to pursue political objectives. The post-structuralist suspicion of generalised norms, totalities, and eternal truths has been interpreted as a sophisticated version of nihilism, relativism, or both, by its feminist and left-wing critics (Herstein 2010, p. 44; Moss 2004, p. 33). Thus Wendy Brown noted how James Miller construed Foucault's desire "to destroy the whole of society" as evidence of Foucault's amoral "nihilism", ignoring both the context of Foucault's comments, and their affinity "with a radical left tradition aspiring to uproot all existing social practices" (Brown 1999, p. 25, note 9).

When Clegg questions post-structuralism's utility for feminism, a key aspect of her argument is the pernicious influence of Nietzsche; specifically, his "perspectivism" which prohibits any truths or general principles, and also his "aestheticism and his fascination with the Greeks and Romans..." (Clegg 2006,

p. 314), which for Clegg implies superficiality and absence of moral principle.⁸

Downs makes a similar case against post-structural and post-modern thought:

Not surprisingly, the weapons forged in the contest against the totalizing aims of truth - aporia, discontinuity, and indeterminacy - offer scant ground for any constructive political and intellectual projects; one cannot dance forever on the edge of the volcano, alternating between a series of dazzling deconstructive acts and the hollow laughter of the muzzled other (Downs 1993, p. 423, footnote 24).

Such comments illustrate the perception that post-structural theories, however useful in a limited sense, lead ultimately to nihilism, relativism, and the neglect of material politics – all of which renders them dangerous for progressive social movements. Moira Gatens disputed this view some years ago, offering Susan Bordo, Nancy Fraser, Seyla Benhabib, and Sandra Harding⁹ as exemplars of this perspective (1992, p. 49). Gatens argued that post-structural theories of subjectivity “do not inevitably engender relativism, individualism, subjectivism or the abandonment of critical theory” (p. 41), and that to question foundations did not signify the loss of ethical dimensions, capacities, or commitment (p. 49).

For Wendy Brown, the antagonism to post-modern and post-structural theory was a specifically feminist form of “reactionary foundationalism”: an irrational attachment to certainty and order in the face of growing instability, found “across the political spectrum” (1991, p. 68). Brown listed feminist writers Nancy Hartsock and Christine di Stefano as examples, in particular their insistence that feminism secure a general concept of ‘women’ as its founding concept (1991, pp. 68, 82). In noting that such feminist critiques rely on a

⁸ The specific view of aesthetics as amoral and superficial – opposed to ethics, in short – is taken up in Chapter Four.

⁹ Gatens referred to these writers’ papers published in *Feminism/Postmodernism* (1990), edited by Linda Nicholson.

conception of ‘real’ women, and politics, as opposed to post-modernism’s perceived disdain for ‘the real’, Brown contended that feminist suspicions of post-modern and post-structural theory were more about fear of the loss of stable foundations and truths, and the consequences of this loss for political engagement (1991, p. 69).

In ‘The Professor of Parody’, Nussbaum put forth numerous criticisms, but Butler’s post-structuralist anti-foundationalism, her lack of prescription and normative criteria, appear to be the most serious grounds for criticism (Roman-Lagerspetz 2009, pp. 210-11). Butler’s refusal to articulate a universal mode of resistance, and her reluctance to predict political outcomes, were interpreted by Nussbaum as resignation, an advance acceptance of failure. Further, Butler’s stated Foucauldian unease with normative politics was labelled “moral passivity” at best; at worst, this refusal to articulate “a normative theory of social justice and human dignity” signified, for Nussbaum, a complete loss of ethical discrimination (1999, p. 11, p. 12), a point she emphasised by noting that “Foucault, we should remember, cheered for the Ayatollah...” (p. 12).

In Nussbaum’s highly critical reading, Butler promoted sexual “parody” and performance as the only political possibilities:

For Butler, the act of subversion is so riveting, so sexy, that it is a bad dream to think the world will actually get better. What a bore equality is! No bondage, no delight. In this way, her pessimistic erotic anthropology offers support to an amoral anarchist politics (Nussbaum 1999, p. 15).

Against this cynical and nihilistic perspective, Nussbaum advocated a feminism in touch with “the real” (a favoured and repeatedly used term in her writing). This preferred feminism is necessarily based on universal truths: of subjectivity

(women); of oppression and power (feminism's major critical objects); and of politics and resistance (feminism's methods). By invoking these truths, Nussbaum required that feminist theory, activism and politics be unified, coherent, and globally applicable. In her view, a politics and ethics focused on differences amounted to simplistic relativism, which she rejected as politically useless and morally bankrupt. Universalising approaches such as her own achieve real political results, while relativism accomplishes nothing – or even perpetuates inequality (Boynton 1999). The rival ethical positions of universalism and relativism are thus presented as the only conceivable options; the possibility of viable alternatives is denied.

Feminist critics of Nussbaum's argument here have identified a curious conservatism in her anticipatory requirement for feminist theory and politics. For example, in her insistence that theory must be written with an eye to its practical applications above all, she seeks to safeguard it against possible future mis-use (Barvosa-Carter 2001, p. 131; Salih 2003, p. 51). This underscores a fundamental difference between Nussbaum's and Butler's notions of feminism, as Chaudhuri points out: "The problems and, to a large extent, the solutions are clear to Nussbaum, and she sees the endless theorizing as distracting from clearly apparent action. To Butler the actions are often based on shaky ground" (Chaudhuri 2009).

This difference is not simply a case of competing styles of feminism; Nussbaum aims to do more than establish her approach as theoretically and tactically superior. Rather, she "claims for her views the status of 'truth,' whereas Butler, she believes, is simply playing word games with no interest or effort invested in discovering what is 'true' about gender and sexual identities" (Brookey & Miller 2001, p. 142). As Wiegman argues, in her insistence that her own form of

feminist engagement represents a real or proper feminist politics, Nussbaum seeks to dismiss or marginalise Butler's contributions as too far removed from material feminist concerns: "By reducing the effect of Butler's work to her own understanding of Butler's theoretical moves, Nussbaum reasserts the feminist political project as one unified around questions of state-based change" (Wiegman 2001, p. 518, note 2).

If Nussbaum's argument exemplifies a wider position adopted by critics of the 'new left', Butler's approach can also, as Chaudhuri suggests, be located within an existing tradition: "the attempt to historicize and critique what seem like natural unchanging truths is, in the tradition of critical philosophy, already resistance, and opens up the space of human freedom..." (Chaudhuri 2009). In response to critics who accuse Butler of writing in a deliberately obscurantist and difficult manner¹⁰, Sara Salih contends that Butler's writing style "is a self-conscious strategy with serious ethical and political aims" (2003, p. 44). Reading this kind of text is an ethical labour, with its own rewards: it aids the formation of a "politically dissident" subjectivity (p. 43).¹¹

Discussing left-wing critiques of post-structuralism, Butler has herself noted the frequent characterisation of post-modern, post-structural, and deconstructive

¹⁰ Nussbaum was certainly not alone in accusing Butler of employing an unnecessarily dense and jargonistic writing style; the year before 'The Professor of Parody' was published, Butler was named the winner of *Philosophy and Literature's* 'Bad Writing Contest', and Susan Gubar and Katha Pollitt had already criticised her for inaccessibility and elitism (Birkenstein 2010, p. 271). Nussbaum cited the 'winning' sentence, and then re-wrote it, in order to demonstrate Butler's intentional obfuscation – ironically, however, Nussbaum's simplified version was not an accurate rendition of Butler's original sentence, as Sheehan has also pointed out (2000, p. 87).

¹¹ Butler herself, and her supporters, have argued along similar lines: that her writing style should be seen as part of a tradition of 'radical democratic' work that purposefully attempts to provoke different ways of thinking, and seeing the world (see the essays in Culler & Lamb 2003). Interestingly, Cathy Birkenstein, an expert in academic writing techniques, insists that Butler's writing is in fact exemplary intellectual argumentation: on the whole, Butler's work is clear, technically well-crafted, and highly pedagogical (2010, pp. 274-5).

theory as “destructive, relativistic, and indeed politically paralysing” (1997, p. 266). The tendency to conflate deconstruction with destruction is a characteristic feature of these critiques. As she points out, this is despite arguments like Gayatri Spivak’s that to “...deconstruct a category is not to eliminate it, it is precisely to make an inquiry into a category that we cannot do without” (ibid).

Notwithstanding these assertions, when critics of post-structuralism turn their attention to subjectivity, they find that anti-foundationalism and anti-humanism have serious repercussions. In particular, the problem of how to theorise agency and resistance in reference to a post-structuralist re-conceptualisation of ‘subjectivity’ has proven highly contentious; indeed, some writers maintain that it is simply impossible. Maynard, for instance, assumes that the deconstruction of subjectivity is equivalent to claiming that there is no subject (1995, p. 270), and argues that “the idea of decentred and multiple selves effectively removes any notion of self-conscious or intentional activity” (p. 274). For Downs, “deconstruction forecloses altogether on the possibility of an authentic, meaningful subjectivity” (1993, p. 435). Hekman contends that in deconstructing modernist subjectivity (which she equates with *rejecting* it), Butler has adopted another extreme: “a substanceless gender identity” (2000, p. 293), and a notion of “the subject as fiction, fantasy, play” (290; also Gunnarsson 2011, p. 29). Nussbaum’s arguments against Butler likewise question how subjects with no essential properties, and no shared characteristics, can possibly exercise agency (1999; Barvosa-Carter 2001, p. 128).

In very similar terms, Clegg maintains that post-structuralism is not only “incapable” of theorising agency, but essentially “runs counter to the very idea

of agency (despite hints of a counter direction in the late Foucault)” (2006, p. 314). When feminists attempt to utilise or incorporate post-structuralist theories, she argues, they inevitably run into trouble, as “Agency is always having to be shoehorned in, with varying degrees of success, into theories whose impetus and genealogy are profoundly anti-humanist” (Clegg 2006, p. 315). This intriguing last statement – opposing anti-humanism to agency – underscores the profound extent to which some forms of feminism define agency (and hence politics) as contingent upon the presence of a coherent subject. Downs also reflects this assumption when she writes that Joan Scott (and her deconstructive influences) repudiate “that ingenuous chain of reasoning which links subjectivity and experience to the hope that oppressed persons, too, might find some agency in history” (Downs 1993, p. 414).

At this point, it is important to recall that critical interrogations of the subject have a long history, and a well-established status, within social theory in general.¹² For instance, in their influential 1982 work, Paul Hirst and Penny Woolley emphasise that “The modern conception of person is not an illusion or idea, it is specified by a mass of institutions and practices and individuals are designated in terms of it” (1982, p. 122). From this viewpoint, it is a mistake to treat current operative concepts of subjectivity as if they were false, or merely illusory. While neither essential nor fixed, they are nevertheless useful; they serve definite yet limited purposes, and they have real effects. To historicise the human subject is not to dissolve it; it is to make an effort to understand how it has come to be, what its limits are, and what its potentials might be.

¹² Mauss (1938 [1985]), Hunter (1990; 1991), Hindess (1986a; 1986b) and Hirst and Woolley (1982) are just some examples of important work in this area.

Notwithstanding the long tradition of those interrogations of the human subject which refer it to history, social institutions, and material practices, many critics – such as Nussbaum (1999), Deveaux (1994), and Bordo (1993), Gunnarsson (2011) – persist in their claims that to problematise subjectivity and identity, as post-structural feminists do, is effectively to repudiate these conceptual ‘tools’ that have been fundamental to successful feminist theory and politics. As Joan Scott has argued, “the now tired cliché that makes deconstruction synonymous with destruction...” (1993, p. 440) has become an entrenched and habitual charge levelled at post-structuralism, and feminists who use it.

Post-structuralism, post-modernism, and deconstruction have frequently been accused of forgetting that subjectivities, like other social phenomena, can be – and often are – both constructed *and* real (e.g. Downs 1993, p. 436, 448). Again, this is despite the fact that Butler’s work, and others’, belongs squarely in a broader intellectual endeavour which aims to historicise subjectivity (including sexual difference and sexuality), and therefore appreciate its non-essential yet durable character (Barvosa-Carter 2001, p. 125, 126; Brookey & Miller 2001, p. 144). Scott summarises the problem nicely, in describing “the entirely unfounded assertion that the critique of the concept of the subject as it has developed in the West since the seventeenth century somehow destroys ... that subject as an historical and political reality” (1993, p. 440).

The ethical investments, and passionate attachments, that may be at work when feminists reject post-structural accounts of subjectivity are perhaps especially intense when the *female* subject is the focus of critical attention; the deconstruction of ‘woman’ is therefore the focus of the next section.

Loss and the female subject

The destabilisation of a general category ‘woman’, as a foundational concept for feminist theory and politics, has been a complex and incomplete process, with multiple contributing factors, and it has not occurred in an intellectual void. Increasing theoretical and political engagements with questions of difference – engagements that have destabilised ‘woman’ – involve a range of cultural, historical, professional, and pedagogic factors within and beyond feminist intellectual and political circles. The growth of specialist areas within academia, and the shift to mass tertiary education, with a corresponding increase in student and academic diversity, are examples of social changes that have necessarily had effects on feminist theory and politics.

It is also worth noting that while feminist theory has undergone a more visible, and intensive, shift towards ‘differences’ since the 1990s, earlier feminisms were not oblivious to the problems inherent in universal categories of ‘woman’ – or ‘man’, for that matter – and more recent feminist theorists make ongoing use of the categories of male/female, masculine/feminine. It is not the case that feminist scholarship has moved progressively toward ever-increasing awareness of the importance of differences among women, and away from gender differences. As Joan Scott maintains, using an extensive array of examples, “We did not move neatly from identity to gender to a critique of subject formation” (Scott 2004).

Nevertheless, an array of feminist critics have designated post-structural or post-modern theory as the single most important ‘culprit’ in the perceived loss of feminism’s foundational category (Bell 2002, pp. 578-9). For these critics, the problematising of ‘women’ is perceived more in terms of post-structural

attacks on feminism itself, attacks which disrupt feminism's progress and challenge its legitimacy. Indeed, to a significant extent, the issue of feminist hostility to post-structuralism is inextricable from the deconstruction of the (female) subject. As Wiegman puts it, "both Tania Modleski and Susan Gubar worry that poststructuralist theory has denuded feminism of its *raison d'être* – speaking as and for women..." (2001, p. 515). Isolating Derrida and Foucault as primary "villains", Gisela Kaplan charges that they "have actually made women disappear into abstraction or they have turned them into immobile statues incapable of action" (1993, p. 158). And Gunnarsson agrees, citing Gubar's accusation that "'Women'... has become 'an invalid word' (1998: 886)" – thanks to post-structuralism (2011, p. 24).

Notwithstanding frequent assertions such as, "those who interrogate the concept 'women' never argue that it has no meaning and no effects, nor do they say that there are no women in history" (Scott 1993, pp. 438-439), for some feminists the deconstruction of 'women' means, categorically, the denial of its reality and its significance. Thus Gunnarsson, for instance, is compelled to remind feminists that "the category 'women' is vital since it relates to something real" (2011, p. 24). And numerous feminists have repeatedly posed the question: how can feminism continue to exist without the category of 'women'? (Deveaux 1994; di Stefano 1990; Hartsock 1990; Modleski 1991; Bigwood 1991). If the binding concept of a universal woman is lost, they demand, what kind of claims can be made in the name of feminism? "What, after all, as Linda Martin Alcoff puts it, 'can we demand in the name of women if "'women'" do not exist and demands in their name simply reinforce the myth that they do?' (2006: 143)" (Gunnarsson 2011, p. 30). And Clegg insists that "The basis for distinctively feminist theoretical and political arguments must return to the question of woman..." (2006, p. 310).

In my view, there is a tangible constraint operative in these assertions that feminism cannot continue to exist without a universal female subject, and by implication a foundational and primary system of gender difference. Again, this is as much to do with passionate investments as it is with theoretical differences – illustrated by the tone, as much as the content, of the following comment from Gunnarsson: “No matter how different women’s lives were, what feminists put their fingers on was that there was something quite disadvantageous about all women’s lives and that this something had to do with their being women” (2011, p. 32).

There is also a paradoxical character to this kind of feminist opposition to deconstructing ‘women’, that is worth elaborating on at this point. Most forms of feminist critical thought assume that subjectivity – especially gender – is constructed, and thus can be transformed or re-constructed. Further, feminist critiques of citizenship, for instance, or of liberal individualism, have exposed the presumed universality and neutrality of these models of subjectivity, and their necessary exclusion of different ‘others’. Hence, the notion of subjectivity as a construct, and a heightened awareness of the very real and painful effects of general theories of ‘the subject’, have been central to many forms of feminist theory and politics. Given this, the question must be asked: why have some feminists expressed such suspicion and antagonism towards post-structural deconstructions of the (female) subject? Why is this perceived as such a grave threat to the concept and political movement of feminism? Others have also found this puzzling. For example, Hemmings notes that:

...feminist poststructuralist theorists are repeatedly positioned as the first to deconstruct ‘woman’, and as either heroic in surpassing past mistakes, or responsible for the ills of feminism in general. I dispute this characterization of post-structuralism for the simple reason that one of the abiding concerns for the

majority of feminist theorists has always been, and remains, such a deconstruction (Hemmings 2005, p. 116; and see Brown 1991, p. 71).

This is also, importantly, a problem of subjectivity and linear political time. In order to explain this more fully, specific examples are necessary. With many other feminist critics, Susan Bordo professed herself “suspicious” of the deconstruction of subjectivity, given its emergence “just at that cultural moment” when women were becoming subjects (1993, p. 283; Flax 1991, p. 220; Modleski 1991). In very similar terms, Maynard aligned herself with Jane Flax: “like others, she distrusts the motives of those who dismiss the idea of a core identity at a time when women have just begun to claim agentic subjectivity previously only available to privileged white men” (1995, p. 274). Gisela Kaplan found it highly dubious that “Just as ‘woman’ was discovered by feminists, Foucault thought to celebrate the disappearance of ‘man’. While women just began to fight for social rights and justice Derrida suggested that ‘she’ did not really exist...” (Kaplan 1993, p. 158). And Downs ‘wondered’, “Does the feeling that one is a coherent and centred self become an expendable commodity only when one is (or becomes) privileged enough to toss it away?” (1993b, p. 450).

These comments raise some key questions. On what grounds can it be assumed that women only recently began to attain the status of subjects? Such a claim appears to define subjectivity as a single and unified entity, made accessible to individuals to the extent that they approximate an archetypal Enlightenment standard – epitomised in the subject-citizen. It also represents history – and feminism’s history – as a linear progression, with women ideally catching up, and attaining equality, with men. If post-structural theorists have problematised, not subjectivity in general, but the traditional rational humanist model of

subjectivity, then to what extent have they deprived women of something important? In what sense is this subjectivity a primary feminist objective? Given the diverse range of feminist critiques of the traditional rational subject, Wendy Brown also finds it perplexing that feminists would struggle to retain a female, or feminised, version of this besieged entity (1991, p. 71).

The perceived need for a universal ‘woman’ in feminism points to a specific conception of the relation between politics and subjectivity. Thus, for instance, the attachment of some feminists to the category ‘woman’ rests on a notional equivalence of knowledge and subjectivity; further, the experience of feminism as passionate attachment to women has clear repercussions for the status of ‘woman’ in feminist theory, and for how far its deconstruction can be permitted to go.

As I have noted, for some theorists, a coherent category of ‘women’ is a precondition of feminist epistemology and activism. Wiegman sees important connections between this perceived equivalence of knowledge and subjectivity, and the attachment to a general notion of ‘women’:

For many feminist scholars, belonging to women and belonging to women’s studies are thus completely compatible, if not seemingly identical, as the field’s object of study and the subjects who study ‘her’ are (politically speaking) one (1999b).

According to Wiegman, a predominant form of U.S. academic feminism – as embodied by Martha Nussbaum, Susan Gubar, and Susan Bordo – tends to conflate subject formation with knowledge formation (Wiegman 2000). In requiring contemporary feminism to either reproduce itself in these terms or risk destroying itself, this academic feminism excludes those subjects or

perspectives seen as ‘non-identical’, defining them as threats or betrayals (ibid; Scott 2004).

The emergence of women’s studies as an academic discipline, and feminism’s official entrance into university institutions, in concert with a very visible and active ‘women’s movement’, can be understood as a key historical moment in forming these ethical and affective passions. Biddy Martin, for example, recalls “the days when ‘love of women’ and Women’s Studies resonated with each other” (1997). Joan Scott likewise refers to ethical attachments when discussing the early, formative years of women’s history as an emerging discipline in U.S. universities. She describes a complex mix of passions:

All that libidinal energy devoted to women – as objects of inquiry, subjects of rights, students, colleagues, and friends, and enhanced by the excitement of trespass – we were boldly claiming a previously denied right of access to the field of history (Scott 2004).

While appreciative of these passions – indeed, she experienced them directly – Scott is doubtful that passion for women, as subjects and objects of investigation, is in fact the principal ‘motor’ of academic feminism. Perhaps the driving force thought to be ‘women’ may stem more – or as much as – from the excitements, enthusiasms, and rewards inherent in the formation of oneself as an ethical actor motivated towards intellectual endeavour and exploration. Indeed, Scott conceives of these erotic and passionate inspirations in terms of the drive for intellectual knowledge and discovery, thus acknowledging more of the dynamic and complex nature of intellectual, ethical, and erotic energies.

The importance of subjectivity in feminist anxiety over the loss of ‘woman’ is also indicated in Wendy Brown’s work. Normative feminism, in her view,

conceives of politics as practised by “separable subjects armed with established rights and identities”, rather than by “unwieldy and shifting pluralities adjudicating for themselves and their future on the basis of nothing more than their own habits and arguments” (1991, p. 69). Her conclusion is that the opposition to the de-centring of subjectivity is more a response to intellectual and social developments that call into question feminism’s “well of truth”: its reliance on “women’s experiences, feelings, and voices” (p. 71; and see Brown 1997).

Anxieties over the deconstruction of the female subject may, therefore, stem from the conviction that if feminism abandons a general, trans-historical notion of ‘woman’, it forfeits its own *raison d’etre*. Significantly, Wiegman explains that “I use the language of mood and feeling to indicate the depth of the attachment that feminism inculcates in the subjects who organize themselves under its sign” (1999b; Zalewski 2003, p. 125; Hemmings 2005, p. 120). The term ‘attachment’ underscores the significance of ethical passion and affect for many feminists. In these terms, if feminism loses ‘woman’, or consents to the loss, might this signify insufficient care and attachment to women, and thus to feminism itself?

History and Feminist Melancholy

I have suggested that feminist antagonism to post-structuralism can be usefully understood in terms of an equivalence of knowledge and subjectivity, and a sense of feminism as an attachment to women. This may be especially marked for those feminists who tend to privilege 1960s radical activist politics as a high point of feminism, and as an ongoing measure of success or failure (Wiegman 2000). Wiegman has described how a particular kind of feminism, historically

located in early second-wave activism, has been retrospectively unified and fondly remembered, and has taken on new life as the standard for feminism in general (1999b). Gisela Kaplan provides an illustrative example: “At the onset of women’s movements in the 1960s and 1970s, women expressed a feeling of universal sisterhood, a oneness in experience and a sense of unity of purpose” (1993, p. 158; also Klein, cited in Zalewski 2003, pp. 122-123).

The question of how to conceive of feminism’s recent past, especially the 1960s and 1970s, has generated significant debate and disagreement among scholars, and characterisations of past feminist politics vary considerably (see Clegg 2006, p. 311; Hekman 2000, p. 290, for contrasting versions). I need to specify at this point that my interest in raising this issue is not to adjudicate or privilege one particular narrative of early second-wave feminism. Rather, my concern is with the practice of elevating this period into an ideal standard for feminism, especially to the extent that it is juxtaposed with present feminism’s failures, and projected forwards as a guarantee for the future.

In ‘Feminism, Institutionalism, and the Idiom of Failure’ (1999b), Robyn Wiegman frames her analysis of feminism in temporal terms. Her topic is a particular kind of contemporary feminism – embodied by Martha Nussbaum and Susan Gubar especially – which mobilises an idealised past feminism in its judgement of late twentieth-century feminism’s “failure”. This perceived failure of feminism’s present is understood particularly in terms of the pernicious effects of post-modernism, post-structuralism, and their concern with differences (Hemmings 2005, p. 116). For Wiegman, this particular sense of feminism’s political time, of its place in history, is ultimately self-limiting; she therefore aims “to interrupt the temporality of the critical claim by inhabiting

the spectre of failure that haunts contemporary feminism” (1999b; Wiegman 1999a; Zalewski 2003, p. 128).

Wiegman therefore targets a kind of feminism which requires a continuous link between past, present, and future, and anticipates future feminism in terms of a specific past moment. When this forward progress is seen to be interrupted, culprits are sought. As Hemmings notes, “such apocalyptic feminist positions expect the present to resemble the past. When it does not, a radical break is imagined and the future abandoned, leaving only the cultivation of memory” (2005, p. 128). Joan Scott also highlights the predominance of linear and dialectical models of politics within feminism, and discusses their disadvantages. However, in her account, these forms of political engagement are declining, as feminism experiences “the loss of a grand teleological narrative of emancipation, one that allowed us to conceive of the cumulative effect of our efforts: freedom and equality were the inevitable outcomes of human struggle, we believed, and that belief gave coherence to our actions, defined us as participants in a progressive ‘movement’” (2004). This account of anticipatory activism as an historically embedded amalgam of intellectual and ethical elements echoes Foucault’s description of sexual liberation movements, in which “we ardently conjure away the present and appeal to the future, whose day will be hastened by the contribution we believe we are making” (1990b, pp. 6-7).

Significantly, Scott also argues that the failure or incapacity to fully interrogate feminism’s ethical motivations in historical terms, has serious consequences for academic feminists; indeed, it has immobilised some theorists in a disabling “melancholy”:

It is, I submit, at least in part, the inability to acknowledge directly the affective loss (the passionate idealization of women that drove women's history), that makes it (in Faue's words) 'so hard to see through the veil that hides the future from the present' (211). The 'veil that hides the future' is Freud's 'shadow of the object' – melancholy. *I take it to mean we have been confused about the source of our passion, mistaking 'women' for the excitement of the new and unknown* (Scott 2004; emphasis added).

A number of feminists have likewise employed a terminology of loss, affect, and melancholy in their examination of these issues. Wiegman suggests that "sixties political subjectivity was unique and transformative in its ability to offer *futurity in the present*, and it has been the loss of this political subjectivity that has generated the feeling of the present as a violent interruption of revolutionary time" (2002, p. 20).

Of course, this notion of loss is not confined to feminism, and in the last decade or so, analyses of melancholy among 'the Left' more generally have emerged – one example being the 'Left Conservatism' conference in 1998 at the University of California. In her paper on the subject, Wendy Brown explains Walter Benjamin's concept of "left melancholy" as an "epithet for the revolutionary hack who is, finally, attached more to a particular political analysis or ideal – even to the failure of that ideal – than to seizing possibilities for radical change in the present" (1999, p. 20). Brown also notes the association of this mindset with a nostalgic longing for an idealised object or time (p. 22); Hemmings describes feminist "melancholia" specifically as a yearning for an imagined unitary past (2005, p. 134, note 22). Similarly, Vikki Bell identifies "a melancholic attitude that regrets and seeks to rectify the fissile nature of contemporary feminist thought" (2002, p. 578).

Again, this mood of melancholy, for feminism, has been persuasively linked to the relative success and institutionalisation of women's studies, and feminist theory, within academia. The increased presence of feminism in universities inspires anxiety that academic success is ruining feminism: severing its links with 'movement' politics, and making it overly theoretical, unaccountable, irresponsible, and elitist (see for example Stacey 2001; Winter 2000).

Hemmings suggests that these anxieties play an important part in some feminists' dismissal of post-structuralism (2005, p. 135; Wiegman 2001, p. 515).

To the extent that this climate of melancholy affect prevails, it has important implications for the study of culture, and of sexuality issues. Butler has argued that the "nostalgia for a false and exclusionary unity is linked to the disparagement of the cultural, and with a renewed sexual and social conservatism on the Left" (1998, p. 270). Drawing on Stuart Hall, Brown similarly objects to "a particular intellectual straitjacket" that results from left melancholy, characterised by "an insistence on a materialism that refuses the importance of the subject and the subjective, the question of style, and the problematic of language" (1999, p. 24). Furthermore, she cautions that if the Left insists on adhering to principles and techniques specific to one historical period, then "it literally renders itself a conservative force in history" (p. 25).

Hemmings has directed similar arguments towards feminism specifically, in describing how nostalgia for an apparently unified and politicised past feminism charges contemporary (academic) feminism with failing to maintain forward progress, and of forgetting its accountability to movement politics. She goes on to assert that, "Insofar as such accounts confirm the belief that politics, reality and transformative feminist knowledge can never be found in or accessed via

poststructuralist accounts or tools, feminism contributes to the conditions of its own critical and political erasure” (2007, pp. 71-72).

I have noted in this chapter that feminist perspectives most committed to retaining a general concept of ‘women’ also tend to single out post-modernist and post-structuralist intellectuals, and their concern with differences, as the main architects of feminism’s current crisis. To the extent that this crisis exists, however, it can be treated as either a threat, or as an opportunity. For example, in considering some feminists’ antagonism towards the deconstruction of subjectivity, others have used this as an occasion to critically interrogate some of feminism’s central presumptions, such as a rationally coherent system of male domination. In short, these critiques demand that, rather than holding post-structuralism responsible for interrupting, impeding, or distracting feminism, we instead engage in an ongoing, critical scrutiny of feminism’s ‘proper’ subjects and objects.

Wiegman asserts that singling out post-structuralism as responsible for restricting, even undermining, feminism’s political capacities has become a common method of distracting attention from the necessary task of critically scrutinising “contemporary feminism’s own complex entanglement with failure” (1999b), and the consequent responsibilities of feminists to re-consider their objectives and methods, particularly in light of significant social, political, and epistemological changes at the end of the twentieth century. From this perspective, a perhaps unforeseen benefit of this precarious status is that feminism has been called to account, demanding increased responsibility and reflexivity from its practitioners. An ongoing interrogation has been launched on several related fronts: the category of ‘woman’, its usefulness and its limits;

the proper terrain of feminist inquiry and intervention; and finally, measures of ‘success’ and ‘failure’.

The use of more general categories of ‘women’ has at certain points in feminism’s history been highly effective and inspiring. Further, as Zalewski proposes, if the category of ‘women’ is indeed insufficient, it does not necessarily follow that feminism must simply discard it. Perhaps it can be used in different ways, and more deftly and sensitively too (2003, p. 129); in fact, she quotes Wiegman’s view that “the ‘theoretical inadequacy of women is *an important critical achievement*” (p. 130; emphasis added).

Conclusion

At the 1994 Summer School at the Australian National University, those of us who attended as postgraduate students were struck by how energised the organisers – Elizabeth Grosz and Rosemary Pringle in particular – seemed, in response to post-structuralist re-descriptions of subjectivity and power. The key points of interest in our discussions, such as anti-foundationalism, and the deconstruction of (humanist) subjectivity, were by no means accepted uncritically. However, the challenges and provocations posed by them were largely perceived in terms of opportunity, not loss or crisis.

While the primary focus of this dissertation is (hetero)sexual politics, I have begun my discussion by exploring the broader terrain of feminist responses to post-structuralist and post-modernist theories, and I have situated contemporary feminist politics within its particular intellectual and institutional contexts (the academy, but also progressive or Left theory). It is my contention that the Nussbaum-Butler ‘dispute’ was not an historically isolated moment amenable to

resolution by subsequent theoretical interventions. Instead, it continues to resonate and generate commentary among feminists because it exemplifies so well what is seen to be at stake in the encounters between post-structuralism and feminism, and because it illustrates deeply held investments in competing notions of feminism, its subjects and objects. And finally, it foregrounds the importance of issues of subjectivity, power, and ethics to feminist theory and politics. The conditions under which these concerns are conceived and disputed – not only by feminists but more broadly – is of vital importance to my own discussion of (hetero)sexuality.

Chapter Two: Methodology and theoretical orientation

Introduction

In this dissertation, I seek to re-describe heterosexuality as a feminist problem in historical, anti-reductive, and specifying terms. The task involves situating the issue within a field of actions, of problematisations. As such, it entails examining dominant forms of feminist sexual politics in terms of the understandings of subjectivity that inform them, yet it does so in ways that differ from what I am calling rationalist accounts. Two clarifications are important here. First, while I recognise that feminist theorising of ‘the subject’ has been important in shaping different forms of sexual politics, I do not assume that this can be reduced to ‘Theory’ as a set of – in this case feminist – truth claims. Rather than taking a rationalist approach and equate ‘the political’ with the repair of a bifurcated Reason and its subjects (Raulet 1988, pp. 26-27), my method is to refer the problem of heterosexuality to particular aesthetic-political practices. Second, I define subject matter, ‘sexual politics’, as follows: theoretically, in terms of sexuality as an intellectual problem within feminist scholarship; politically, regarding sexuality’s status as a field of contestation and dispute; and ethically, concerning its importance as a site of self-formation.

The problem of subjectivity – how it is theorised or conceived – may not be a rational surrogate for agency, ethics, and political action, but it is nevertheless a condition of their limits and possibilities. Put briefly, subjectivity is about the capacities and limitations of the self. Power in all its diverse operations is an important factor in forming or shaping these capacities and limits. Ethics, understood as techniques of the self, and a reflective attention to the conduct of the self, is by definition interconnected with subjectivity and power. Given this

interdependence of subjectivity, power and ethics, I maintain that there are good reasons for framing a critical account of feminism and (hetero)sexuality in terms of subjectivity. Further, as issues of sexuality have comprised an important site of critical feminist attention, and if, as argued by Foucault and other scholars of modern sexuality, subjectivity and sexuality have been closely interwoven and mutually defining in certain ways, then it seems clear that the investigation of feminism and sexuality *via* subjectivity is worth pursuing. In this chapter, I begin with a summary of my methodology as a set of critical techniques; in the second half, I describe the theoretical conceptions of subjectivity and power that I apply to my subject matter of sexual politics.

In carrying out this investigation, I use particular post-structuralist conceptions of subjectivity, power, and ethics. While these are drawn specifically from Foucault, Deleuze, and Derrida, certain feminist engagements with these writers are equally important to my project. In my view, this combination of theoretical sources offers the most scope for conceiving a sexual politics that is founded on neither a traditional humanist subject, nor structuralist re-conceptualisations of the same.

Critical Techniques

Recently, there has been an increased scholarly interest in studying the synergies between Deleuze, Foucault, and Derrida. For example, Patton and Protevi (2003) focus on links between Derrida and Deleuze, but also note links between these two and Foucault (see also Protevi 2001). Nathan Widder explains that he finds it useful to read Foucault's work on power through or via Deleuze (2004, p. 415). Within feminist scholarship specifically, intensive engagements with Foucault in particular (Huffer 2010; Lloyd 2005; Taylor &

Vintges 2004), but also Deleuze (Colebrook 1998), and Derrida (Grosz 2005), have demonstrated the potential gains for feminist theory and politics of continuing to use their work.

Some further brief qualifications are needed before I proceed. First, while I draw on Foucauldian work, and theoretical writing inspired by Deleuze and Derrida, I do not conflate them, nor do I try to downplay their differences, which are considerable. For the most part, they address different issues, have different priorities, and exercise different methods and techniques. Nonetheless, I have found their work enables a distinctive kind of critical approach to the arguments and textual materials that I deal with in this project, which I describe below; they also share an inspiring emphasis on the importance of change and transformation.

Second, in using these writers, I am not concerned to defend or ‘rehabilitate’ them for feminist purposes; rather, I intend to show how certain aspects of their work are useful for my tasks – while simultaneously trying to avoid an oversimplified eclecticism (Scott 2005). On an equally important note, while I see my approach as broadly Foucauldian-influenced, I keep in mind that his work does not comprise a closed, coherent system of thought, nor does it provide answers or solutions that would ‘finish’ an investigation of a problem (Boothroyd 1996, pp. 363-4). The same caveat applies to my use of Deleuze and Derrida; this is also illustrated by the fact that I draw equally or more on feminist uses of these three, than I do on their original work alone. It is the reiterations, variations, and refutations of their work in subsequent critical applications and contexts that is of primary concern to me, not their canonical status as such.

As a consequence, the feminist works that I use here are not simply secondary references that function as support and clarification of Foucault, Deleuze, or Derrida. It is not only these post-structuralist writers that are useful to my tasks, but also the work that certain feminist theorists have done *with* them; given the intellectual orientations of these feminist writers, the ways they develop these theorists' concepts and arguments multiplies and proliferates possibilities. For example, Christine Battersby has observed that Australian feminists Moira Gatens, Genevieve Lloyd, and Elizabeth Grosz have – in their own ways – long been interested in women's exclusion, from philosophy for instance, but their investigations of this – partly thanks to their open engagements with Foucault, Deleuze, and Derrida – are genealogical rather than structural: “the position of ‘otherness’ is neither static nor inevitable” (2000, p. 4). Vintges and Taylor, in *Feminism and the Final Foucault*, see Foucault's late work especially as “highly compatible with the aims and objectives of contemporary feminism” (2004, p. 4); in particular, they suggest, he offers re-conceived notions of responsibility, commitment, politics, and ethics (p. 2): “commitment without Truth ... and responsibility in the face of contingency” (p. 2). The yields from using all of these sources are multiple, and play out over the subsequent chapters. For present purposes, they can be condensed into five inter-connected points.

- A particular critical attitude

My approach to the literature and materials is not (or not only) aimed at exposing flaws and limitations, but also at de-naturalising and historicising the objects of analysis (for example, feminist conceptions of heterosexuality). I find the definition of “critique” used by Joan Scott (who takes it, in turn, from Barbara Johnson) to be very useful. Scott explains that this kind of critique is

not primarily focused on exposing errors or problems in a given theory, or even suggesting tools for improvement. Rather, the concern is to historicise and de-naturalise the target of investigation (2005, p. 115). This is neatly summarised in Jana Sawicki's succinct observation that to deconstruct is to "give an account of the process of construction of..." (1986, p. 36).

- Attention to effects rather than meanings

This has particular relevance when I approach recent problems of cultural politics; specifically, debates over visual representations of sexuality and gender that have been prominent in Anglophone contexts, across academic and popular domains. While the examination of a text or image in terms of its possible meanings continues to inspire interest and yields often fascinating outcomes, attention must also be directed to how it is used: by whom, in which contexts, via which technologies, for what purposes, and so on. As Joan Scott affirms, "One must be taught to ask of a concept or text or institution not what does it mean, but how does it work?" (2005, p. 132).

- An experimental attitude towards possible outcomes

This entails refusing to try to guarantee outcomes, or make specific assurances, the assumption being that a more experimental approach opens up new spaces of critical freedom. Foucault puts this well:

If you knew when you began a book what you would say at the end, do you think that you would have the courage to write it? What is true for writing and for a love relationship is true also for life. The game is worthwhile insofar as we don't know what will be the end (cited in Boothroyd 1996, p. 385, note 40).

In the works of Deleuze (and Guattari) and Derrida, there is a similar emphasis on the need to challenge and critique current thought and action, with a simultaneous refusal to tie this critical exercise to any pre-defined program or future vision (Patton 2007a, pp. 770-771; Patton 2007b, p. 5; Diprose 2000, p. 118; Grosz 2005, p. 89). To reiterate, this is not necessarily a matter of lack, or of loss; rather, as Paola Marrati observes, “it depends on a critical attitude towards what is given, on our ability to experiment, to open up the limits of that which presents itself as necessary” (Marrati 2006). In this sense, the absence of certainties offers a new horizon of possibilities and freedoms.

- The examination of problems *as* problems

Rather than identifying problems – in this case, problems in feminist sexual politics – and then attempting to solve them at the level of political rationality, I also examine how certain topics have been conceived as problems in the first place. This is obviously linked to the historicising critique I described above, and according to Marrati, it is an important lesson that Deleuze drew from Henri Bergson:

We [tend to] believe that the task of thinking consists in solving problems, in finding or producing correct answers and adequate solutions. What is dangerous about this conception of thinking, according to Bergson, is precisely the privilege it accords to solutions to the detriment of problems, the denial of the power of *problems as problems* (Marrati 2006).

For example, I consider how heterosexuality came to be so problematic for feminism, what effects this has, and whether it places limits on how heterosexuality can be addressed. Further, I intend to show how underlying

notions of subjectivity, power, and ethics are instrumental to the designation of ‘problems’ in sexual politics, and to proposed methods of dealing with them.

- An interrogative stance towards truth claims

To challenge what is taken for granted, what appears to be self-evident (even in one’s own thinking), is another important element of the critical technique and ‘attitude’ that I utilise here. To cite Scott once more, critique of this kind aims to unsettle, provoke, and irritate any established claims, any ‘Truths’ (2005, p. 122); however, this is not simply for the sake of it – it is motivated by an abiding distrust of any norms or normative systems “that appropriate for themselves the right to definitively legislate the final truth of the matter” (Healy 2001, p. 65).

Regarding feminist sexual politics specifically, there are a number of quasi-orthodoxies that I examine over the next three chapters. Briefly, these include: the significance of sexuality for subjectivity; the significance of sexuality for *feminist* subjectivity; the relation of sexuality to gender difference; the conception of heterosexuality as a basically stabilised and general relation of power; and the notion that sexual representations are difficult to reconcile with women’s liberty.

In critically examining these orthodox problems, my intention is not to dismiss them; it is not a case of claiming that they are founded on questionable assumptions, have no reasonable basis, and therefore must be discarded. Instead, I am trying to understand how these notions about sexuality developed, what they are based on, and especially what kinds of effects they have had. Where there are limitations, I will argue for them, and propose alternatives.

Along with the conceptions of subjectivity, power, and ethics that I describe in the following sections, in subsequent chapters I apply the broad set of critical techniques outlined above to a number of case studies. In Chapter Three, this proceeds via a brief overview of feminist sexual politics from the late twentieth century, followed by a more in-depth engagement with recent texts. I look to the kind of subjectivity that has been assumed by particular writers who have taken (hetero)sexuality as their problem. Rather than using the term ‘hetero-normativity’ as an entity, or subset of a general category of culture, I use it as an adjective, to describe particular contexts or phenomena. Indeed, ultimately, I propose that a general, structural concept of ‘hetero-normativity’ may not be a useful one for feminism at this historical point.

Within the next two, more focused, chapters, I cover a selection of small-scale case studies, comprised of texts and ‘problems’ that have been important in sexual politics, at different times in feminism’s recent history. The overall theme of the first of these chapters is ‘feminism looking in’. I focus on the possible utility of Foucault’s later work on ‘care of the self’ for difficult problems of sexual politics. A small number of feminist writers have already pursued this potential, and their work forms a ground for my own.

The fifth and final chapter is organised around ‘feminism looking out’, and deals with feminist approaches to the perceived ‘sexualisation of culture’ – an issue that has caught the attention of many contemporary academic and popular writers. I focus in particular on how these problems of sexualisation, ‘pornification’, and ‘raunch culture’ have taken shape in the recent Australian context, with reference to specific examples, such as 2008’s public scandal over Bill Henson’s photographs. In these investigations, I aim to be anti-reductive

and specific; for example, rather than ‘pornography’ as a general term, I point to cultural forms (films, photographs, YouTube), and contexts (computers, public venues, art galleries, cinemas). With regard to visual representations, I use a technical perspective, as opposed to a discourse analysis approach that would reduce occasions of cultural engagement to generalised questions of textual meaning (Hunter 1991).

Subjectivity

The topic of subjectivity is important to my approach for two reasons, both directly relevant to feminism and (hetero)sexuality. First, conceptualisations of subjectivity necessarily shape the limits and possibilities for conceiving of politics and ethics in any given theory. Second, sexuality is an important site of subjectivity. As argued by Foucault and other scholars, subjectivity and sexuality have been closely interwoven and mutually defining in certain ways (Davidson 2001; Foucault 1990a; 1990b). ‘Sexuality’ is a primary constitutive part of how modern subjects are defined, and how we see ourselves (Sawicki 1986, p. 27). My own inquiry into feminism and (hetero)sexuality therefore takes the *problem* of subjectivity as its point of departure, and as its ongoing theme.

The theories of subjectivity ‘inherited’ by much of feminism – and reflected and altered in numerous different strains of feminist theory – have been either individualist, structuralist, or psycho-analytic in orientation, with accompanying benefits and limitations – to which I now turn. The following brief survey of these accounts is necessarily schematic, but it serves to identify key features of the theoretical problem of subjectivity, with which feminists have critically engaged.

Rene Descartes' early modern rationalist account of subjectivity has been enormously influential across many domains. Descartes re-specified the mind-body relationship, defining the mind as transcendent, and the body as an object among other natural phenomena. He also described the self as independent of its relations or connections to others, and as located internally, through his direct equation of consciousness with self-knowledge (Warburton 2006, p. 45; Bordo 1986; Greenfield 1984, p. 40; Grosz 1994, p. 6). It has been argued that this notion of an inherent sense of self – at once individual ('I know myself') and universal (a true human nature) – marks the emergence of the primacy of the human subject, which comes fully into being in eighteenth-century philosophy, especially with Kant, before finding a home in the human sciences in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Greenfield 1984).

Feminists have had ambivalent attitudes to Cartesian subjectivity.¹³ On the one hand, aspects of it have been intensively critiqued and problematised in feminist scholarship. Descartes' conception of the mind-body relation – and its implications for sexual difference – is an obvious example (Bordo 1986). Further, many feminists have pointed to the limitations of a self-contained and self-sufficient individual as a model for human subjectivity. On the other hand, the Cartesian emphasis on the importance and power of self-knowledge endures in many domains, including feminism. The assertion of a true self, and the knowledge gained from it, still carries considerable moral potency in and across numerous cultural contexts. For instance, the injunction to 'look within yourself' recurs in many therapeutic and self-help contexts, and even in superhero narratives. Daniel Palmer writes that "The idea that we can uncover

¹³ In stating this, I am referring to 'feminists' since the mid-twentieth century, roughly speaking, as this is my area of discussion. Previous feminists' perspectives are beyond my current scope, and may well have been quite different.

the truth about who we really are, and that in doing so we will be liberated is almost ubiquitous in our culture” (1998). Many feminist approaches to sexuality have also foregrounded the need to interrogate and understand one’s own self, as crucial to the successful practice of feminist politics.

The significance of self-knowledge, after Descartes, was further elaborated by Immanuel Kant’s work especially. Through the division of the subject into noumenal and phenomenal, Kant in fact re-cast access to all knowledge, defining perceptions and experiences as mediated by an active process of representation. Of central significance here is the implied capacity of the subject to participate in the constitution of knowledge, and hence the emergence of representation as a site of debate, meaning, and struggle (Greenfield 1984, p. 41; Rohmann 1999, p. 218; Warburton 2006, p. 122; Thomasson 2009).

Karl Marx’s concerns with social struggle led to his conception of subjectivity as an effect of socio-economic structures or modes of production. While this was perhaps the most obvious departure from the Kantian framework thus far, it did not reject it entirely. Marxist theory did not abandon the general category of the subject; instead, it squarely foregrounded the importance of external structures in shaping subjectivity (Grosz 1990b, p.1).

A more thorough critical engagement with the subject was made in Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic approach, which introduced the unconscious as another, separate psychic domain, with further profound consequences for self-knowledge. The Freudian concept of the unconscious is potentially highly destabilising to the rational, unified subject of post-Enlightenment thought – as is the notional introduction of desire as a powerful force shaping subjectivity

and behaviour (Greenfield 1984, p. 43; Flax 1991, p. 53; Hutton 1988, p.122; Feury 1995, p. 18).

While Freud posited subjectivity as produced largely through the struggles of internal forces, and by familial relations, Jacques Lacan's re-working of psychoanalysis synthesised it with structural linguistics, defining subjectivity as an effect of entry into the Symbolic, the realm of language, discourse, and sexual difference, and as, therefore, neither innate nor endogenous to the individual (Hall 2004, p. 83; Grosz 1990b, p. 148; Flax 1991, p. 91; Ferrell 1996, p. 77; Feury 1995, p. 16).

It took the "Frankfurt School's" Adorno and Horkheimer to link elements of Marx and Freud to produce their influential critical theory account of the ideological function of culture in the production of 'false consciousness', a term that would seem to imply some kind of real or true subjectivity, at least potentially (Bottomore 2002, pp. 8, 23; Jay 1996, pp. 42, 268; Lowy 1984, p. 299; Adorno and Horkheimer 1997 [1972]; Held 1980, p. 92). Louis Althusser in turn re-worked the Marx/psychoanalysis combination by using Lacan, rather than Freud, to redefine subjectivity in terms of practices and effects instead of consciousness. His concept of 'interpellation', the process by which those social institutions in the cultural super-structure that he called Ideological State Apparatuses, convert individuals into subjects, and his refinement of structuralism – capitalism as a differentiated totality – further positioned culture as an important problem in its own right, and was instrumental in the formation of cultural studies, film studies, and many feminist interventions (Althusser 1971, pp. 153, 156; Hall 2004, p. 86).

In different ways, and not always overtly, these varying accounts of subjectivity have all been very influential, and often highly productive, for feminism.

Nevertheless, I contend that for sexual politics specifically, these perspectives also constrain the ways that subjects, their bodies, and their capacities may be theorised. In the following, I sketch out these constraints as I perceive them, in order to suggest that the specific challenges facing feminist sexual politics at this particular historical ‘moment’ may well demand alternative accounts of subjectivity. These alternatives and their possibilities are then described in the final part of this sub-chapter.

In Foucault’s view, modern subjectivity is profoundly paradoxical, and carries a considerable burden. In *The Order of Things*, he writes that with post-eighteenth century moral philosophy and the emergence of the human sciences, “man appears in his ambiguous position as an object of knowledge and as a subject that knows: *enslaved sovereign, observed spectator*” (1970, p. 340, emphasis added). There is, as Foucault notes, an inherent contradiction in this ‘anthropological’ idea of the human subject: the author and source of history is also an *object* of the human sciences, “governed by labour, life, and language” (1970, p. 341; Kemp 1984, p. 89). As conceived within the “empirico-transcendental doublet” of post-Kantian thought (Foucault 1970, p. 347), subjectivity is an oxymoronic state. It is “an untenable combination of two concepts: that of finitude (man as limited by his physical life) and that of sovereignty (man as origin by virtue of his conscious activity)” (Kemp 1984, p. 88; Palmer 1998).

My discussion of the limitations of post-Enlightenment theories of subjectivity is not intended to be comprehensive; instead, my aim is to briefly highlight some general features that are relevant in the context of my project. First, the

inter-relations of individual subjects and their social contexts tend to be notionally confined to a structure/agency binary. Consequently, subjectivity is understood to be shaped or determined by external forces, and subordinated to society; *or*, subjectivity is an inherent attribute, and society is produced by rational, free-willed individuals. Structuralist accounts, for instance, face the paradox of subjects who are socially determined, but must have the capacity for agency; how else to account for domination *and* resistance? (Herstein 2010, pp. 51-2). When humanism frames subjectivity, one particular kind of subject is made the necessary *pre*-condition for values, ethics, agency, and freedom.

A second limitation of post-Enlightenment theories of subjectivity, whether they are Kantian, Marxist/structuralist, or psycho-analytic, is that they tend to universalise subjectivity, and therefore cannot accommodate historical, cultural, or regional specificities – except as superficialities. They are normative, resulting in inevitable exclusions and inequalities (Purdom 2000, p. 20).

Universal subjectivity as normatively defined enables – or even requires – the simultaneous definition of non-subjects, those who lack the necessary attributes or capacities (such as rationality). These designations carry with them certain possibilities for social status and treatment (Bashford & Strange 2003, p. 4). In Europe and North America, well-known examples of ‘non-subjects’ have included: women, as legal ‘non-persons’; Africans as slaves, and later quasi-citizens; the mentally ill, or ‘insane’; criminal offenders; colonial populations; and those defined as sexual deviants. Similar examples can also be seen in Australian history since European settlement.

In *The Modern Girl*, Lesley Johnson describes the difficult legacy of these predominantly humanist models of subjectivity for feminism specifically. The attainment of full subject status has been an important objective in many

feminist contexts; Johnson cites Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and its call for women to 'grow up' as one example (1993, pp.2-3). However, as she points out, other feminists have rejected the implicit masculinity of these models of subjectivity, and their pretensions to universality and neutrality. Work such as Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* has sought to establish a different model of subjectivity and 'growing up' for women (Johnson 1993, p. 12).¹⁴ While appreciative of the value and power of this latter work in disputing more traditional notions of subjectivity, Johnson argues that it nevertheless retains two limitations: it is still normative, in its conception of a general *female* subject, and it also locates subjectivity within a linear developmental model (pp. 114-5, 154).

Alternatively, there are theories that are not based on a general, universal human subject. The work of Marcel Mauss in the early twentieth century, for instance, demonstrates the temporal and cultural contingency of modern subjectivity. From an extensive array of sources – anthropological, historical, sociological, anecdotal, and personal – Mauss disputed the presumed permanence of 'the person' as individual, internal, and coherent consciousness, and emphasised that:

one of those ideas we believe to be innate ... is the idea of 'person' (*personne*), the idea of 'self' (*moi*). Each one of us finds it natural, clearly determined in the depths of his consciousness, completely furnished with the fundamentals of the morality which flows from it. For this simplistic view of its history and present value we must substitute a more precise view (1985 [1938], p. 1; Hirst & Woolley 1982, p. 118; Hunter 1990, p. 403).

¹⁴ Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1978) is a similar example.

Mauss's work underscores a vital point: subjectivity is contingent and yet nevertheless enduring, and often experienced as an inherent and constant state. Historicity allows the simultaneous appreciation of both of these characteristics. In short, the currently predominant concept of the subject is historically and culturally specific, grounded in a particular time and place, and linked with particular forms of knowledge.

This kind of perspective offers a different way of conceiving agency, difference, and politics. For example, the notion of subjectivity as an ongoing series of practices without a designated end-point, instead of as an entity or being, refuses to treat it as pre-given, or as primary, especially as a starting point for inquiry into ethics, say, or power, or history. As Foucault explains,

What I refused was precisely that you first of all set up a *theory of the subject* - as could be done in phenomenology and existentialism - and that beginning from that theory of the subject, you come to pose the question of knowing, for example, how such and such a form of knowledge was possible (1987, p. 121; Boothroyd 1996, p. 373; McNeill 1998, p. 59).

Subjectivity understood as practice means that it is always specific and contextual (Palmer 1998). In the anti-reductive accounts provided by Hindess (1986a), Hunter (1991), and Hirst and Woolley (1982), for example, subjectivity is neither given nor unitary; however, social institutions or discourses may posit it as such, for particular purposes. Hirst and Woolley mention the classic Foucauldian examples of "confession [and] the courts", to which one could add psychiatric counselling and medical treatment, education, social security, and employment. In such contexts or institutions, it is useful to deal with persons *as if they were* unitary subjects (Hirst & Woolley 1982, p. 120). However, it would be over-simplifying and mistaken to assume that such

operative concepts of subjectivity are false, or merely illusory. While neither essential nor fixed, they are nevertheless useful; they serve definite yet limited purposes, and they have real effects.

From this viewpoint, relations between subjects and their social contexts and institutions are more nuanced than in structuralist or individualist explanations. Institutions, contexts, and locations do indeed shape subjects, but these dynamics are not always uni-directional, and not in accordance with a coherent governing structure or totality, such as capitalism, patriarchy, or heteronormativity. Foucault explains that while

the subject constitutes himself in an active fashion, by the practices of self, these practices are nevertheless not something that the individual invents by himself. They are patterns that he finds in his culture and which are proposed, suggested and imposed on him by his culture, his society and his social group (1987, p. 122).

Hindess puts it a little differently, in observing that an ‘actor’ will make certain decisions, and try to act on them; in this, they will be enabled or constrained by the particular ‘discourses’ that are available to them, and those they see as most pertinent at the time (1986, p. 103).

Thus, to argue that contemporary notions of the subject are not universal or timeless is not to suggest that subjectivity as currently conceived, practised, and experienced, is illusory, transient, or false. As Hirst and Woolley emphasise, for instance, “The modern conception of person is not an illusion or idea, it is specified by a mass of institutions and practices and individuals are designated in terms of it” (1982, p. 122). To historicise the human subject is not to dissolve

it but to understand how it has come to be, what its limits are, and what its potentials might be, how it might become something else.

Understanding subjectivity in terms of ‘becoming’, as in a Spinozist/ Deleuzian account, is one way of pursuing this historicised approach. In recent years, a number of feminists interested in alternative perspectives on subjectivity have become increasingly interested in Spinoza, and writers influenced by him such as Deleuze. Spinoza’s work offers a very different conception of subjectivity to the more dominant “Descartes-Kant trajectory...” (Purdom 2000, p. 21; Lloyd in James 2000, p. 41).

Gatens explains that “...for Spinoza subjectivity is always a becoming, and the identity of an individual is always a process which is in turn very much affected by the context in which the individual becomes...” (in James 2000, p. 49). Consequently, for Deleuze also, subjectivity is necessarily a matter of *acting* rather than *being* (Grosz 2002, p. 466), and is therefore never static, nor complete, “but an ongoing process. Our being is therefore a ‘becoming’” (Wang 2011, p. 153).

Spinoza’s conception of the mind/body relation has also been inspiring for feminists seeking different ways to theorise embodied subjectivity – which may in turn be of use in sexual politics. The overall Spinozist approach to this question is encapsulated in the phrase: “the mind is the idea of the body” (Purdom 2000, p.21; Lloyd in James 2000, p. 41). Battersby explains that Spinoza’s thought is a “philosophy of immanence” in its conception of mind-body, and hence of the self (2000, p. 10). Bodies – and thus subjects – do not have natures, or any other given properties. What they can do depends on their contexts, and their relations with those other bodies around them (Purdom 2000,

p. 21; James 2000, p. 47). As Lloyd observes, in this view of subjectivity, acknowledging the importance of one body's relations with the bodies around it inhibits solipsism or ultra-individualism (Lloyd in James 2000, p. 48). Deleuze's notion of bodies as "assemblages" is obviously informed by Spinoza's view that "human bodies are always parts of more complex bodies: the family, schools, institutions of all kinds, and ultimately, a body politic" (Gatens 2000, p. 66).

This focus on what bodies (can) do, rather than what they are, defines "the body as a social production..." (Purdom 2000, p. 22), and because mind and body are not separate, "For Spinoza, to imagine differently is to exist differently" (ibid). Gatens notes this too, commenting that knowledge in this view is "embodied" – "To know is not simply to have something happening in your brain. It is to exist in a different way than the way you existed before you knew that thing" (in James 2000, p. 56-7; Gatens 2000, p. 60). The Spinozist account is concerned with "a temporal and affective becoming of bodies" (Marrati 2006, note 8) – with what bodies are capable of doing. In this sense, it exceeds phenomenological conceptions of embodiment that focus on the experiences of bodies, or their being. This stress on the becoming, or possibilities, of bodies leads Marrati to propose that Deleuze and Spinoza re-cast the way that bodies are conceived as problems, thus transforming "the very way in which we ask our questions about bodies" (2006).

Throughout this discussion the conceptions of subjectivity that I have described are clearly anti-humanist: they repudiate general and normative models of the human subject. David Boothroyd observes that Foucault's work has been a primary force in "dislodging the subject from its seat of authority within the epistemological regime of anthropocentric modernity"; importantly, he

continues, Foucault has also shown that de-centring the subject is an essential criterion “for any possible ‘transformation’ of thought” (Boothroyd 1996, p. 363). In this final part of the discussion, I pursue some further repercussions of dislodging ‘human’ as the standard of subjectivity, a move which re-casts the ethico-political question of which subjects matter.

As indicated earlier, in universal theories of subjectivity, the basic standard of ‘human’, the term of comparison for all subjects or potential subjects, is white, western masculinity. Rethinking subjectivity, therefore, also involves re-conceiving difference, a problem that has been central for many feminists, and also for thinkers like Derrida. As Judy Purdom points out, within the terms of Enlightenment liberal theory, ‘difference’ cannot be thought of in pure terms; difference always means “different from...” (Purdom 2000, p. 19). Elizabeth Grosz credits Derrida with laying much of the groundwork for a richer, more complex, and more radical understanding of difference:

It is Derrida who demonstrated that difference exceeds opposition, dichotomy, or dualism and can never be adequately captured in any notion of identity or diversity (which is the proliferation of sameness or identity and by no means its overcoming or difference) (2005, p. 90).

Derrida’s conception of difference also shares some elements with Deleuze’s “plane of immanence” (drawn from Spinoza), as an alternative view of subjectivity and social organisation (Gatens 2000, p. 60). The question of difference, and the dethronement of the human subject from its seat at the head of living beings, have important connections with each other, and with possible new styles of political engagement. Recent work on the human/animal divide, for example, has demonstrated even further the dangers and limitations of a politics in which oppressed or marginalised subjects seek ‘equality’ by showing

that they meet the normative criteria of existing dominant models of subjectivity (Oliver 2009, 2010; Tuvel 2011). As Rebecca Tuvel argues,

efforts to prove that oppressed persons can and do meet the norms of the dominant (“rational”-white-male-human) class simply reassert the power of the oppressor and, even more dangerously, validates the idea that these norms should be met in order for the oppressed to earn the treatment they seek (2011, pp. 223-4).

Further, humanism by definition excludes *all* other living beings; an anthropocentrism that was problematised as early as Spinoza. For instance, feminists have found in Spinoza’s work the proposal that freedom and happiness are best pursued by rejecting transcendental ideas of humanity, and recognising instead that humans are part of ‘nature’, *in* nature – not outside or above it (Gatens in James 2000, p. 44; Gatens 2000, p. 60; Sharp 2009, pp. 85, 93).

Elizabeth Grosz’s concept of a “politics of imperceptibility” is another recent argument for rejecting a politics where a set of dominant norms of ‘Subjectivity’ – and thus, lives which count – dictates the terms of acceptance and equality. A politics of imperceptibility is intended as an alternative to humanist and ‘recognition’ based politics, traditionally a widespread strategy in feminism and anti-racist politics (Grosz 2002; Sharp 2009). In Grosz’s view, seeking recognition – for women, or queer/gay/lesbians, or non-whites – necessarily submits to a humanist ‘framework’, which in turn is always, ultimately, masculinist. Historically, a key feminist strategy has involved seeking to expand the notion of ‘human’, and thus render it less exclusive, hence recognition politics. While appreciating the power – and gains achieved – by recognition based politics, Grosz recommends turning away from the terms

of subjectivity altogether, to “forget about ‘the Other’ and affirm the irrepressibly agonistic dynamics of nature and bodily forces” (Sharp 2009, pp. 87, 90).

Given that many people in disadvantaged or oppressed populations do not necessarily feel permanently injured, or consumed with hatred over their social position, Hasana Sharp, drawing on Grosz’s idea of imperceptibility, sees much potential in “a politics grounded in a set of positive demands and aspirations rather than the negative exigencies of redress, reparation, and restitution” (2009, p. 91).¹⁵ For example, while feminist consciousness-raising practices are usually understood to be grounded in a politics of recognition, seeking visibility and validation, they can equally be focused on what we want, rather than who we are, or how we wish to be seen (Sharp 2009, pp. 100-101).

The problem of power

At the ANU Summer School that I mentioned in Chapter One, Elizabeth Grosz used the metaphor of honey to describe the re-thinking of power motivated by feminist engagements with post-structuralist writers, especially Foucault. As Caine and Pringle noted, “Some of the new understandings of power are well conveyed by Elizabeth Grosz’s suggestion that power can be thought of as running around and through us, like honey, in various degrees of fluidity and sticky congealment” (1995, p. xi). Post-structuralist theories of power have generated an immense and highly diverse array of critical responses from feminist writers, perhaps partly because feminism has a necessarily compelling interest in the problem of power. My own analysis of feminist sexual politics is

¹⁵ In my view, this shift in emphasis does not require that recognition-oriented forms of politics be discarded entirely; ruling out one style or tactic in favour of another militates against the provisional, experimental approach that I am advocating.

particularly informed by Foucault's work on power; the following discussion outlines my understanding of this work, and explains my rationale for choosing it.

Foucault's approach to the problem of power has generated significant debate and controversy among left-oriented intellectuals, including feminists. For some critics, Foucault over-extends and thereby abstracts the operations and effects of power; this deprives it of any useful meaning, and thus Foucault is accused of being incapable of normative judgement (Fraser 1989). For other feminist critics, his definition of power as 'neutral' or positive, promotes a nihilistic, romanticised celebration of inequality (Jeffreys 1990). Finally, Foucault is seen to theorise power as ruthlessly insidious and efficient in its deployment, thus offering no basis for hope in politics. For example, bio-power (Foucault 1990b) is read as an account of power's extension and the dispersal of its oppressive, controlling functions (Deveaux 1994).

Conversely, other theorists have emphasised the distinctive nature of Foucault's conception of power. In an early Anglo feminist engagement with Foucault, Jana Sawicki contrasts his approach with those Marxist and radical feminist perspectives that see history as a liberatory struggle, powered by "a revolutionary subject" (1986, p. 25). Sawicki notes that power in these accounts is seen as a possession or entity, functioning in centralised and 'top-down' terms, through repression and prohibition (1986, p. 26). This is precisely the definition of power that Foucault rejects (Colebrook 2000, pp. 84-5). Rather than locating power in one institution, structure, or social class, he argues that it is dispersed, and its effects are not necessarily comprehensive or uniform (Lemert & Gillan 1982, p. 136). Power can therefore be found in multiple locations, although there may be higher concentrations in particular sites (as

Grosz's honey image implies). Indeed, Foucault notes that certain people – and presumably by extension, institutions – can be 'denser' transfer points of power than others; for example, medical professionals, prison wardens, and priests (1993, p. 164).

In an important clarification, Foucault also notes that 'power' – a term he uses sparingly – is meant as shorthand for "relationships of power" (1987, p. 122). Power is a *relation* and an *effect*, not a static object, and thus not something that can be held or owned. It follows that it has no ultimate source or origin:

Power is not a substance. Neither is it a mysterious property whose origin must be delved into. Power is only a certain type of relation between individuals. Such relations are specific, that is, they have nothing to do with exchange, production, communication, even though they combine with them (Foucault 1981, p. 253).

The notion of power – or power relations – as specific and contextual, is central to Foucault's approach, and has significant repercussions for feminist analyses of sexuality. On numerous occasions, Foucault made a point of rejecting general theories of power, especially those positing a fundamental relationship between an assumed social totality and the power that reproduces it. For example:

Nothing is fundamental. That is what is interesting in the analysis of society. That is why nothing irritates me as much as these enquiries – which are by definition metaphysical – on the foundations of power in a society or the self-institution of a society, etc. These are not fundamental phenomena (Foucault 1993, p. 164).

Further,

when I speak of power relations, of the forms of rationality which can rule and regulate them, I am not referring to Power - with a capital P - dominating and imposing its rationality upon the totality of the social body. In fact, there are power relations. They are multiple; they have different forms ... in studying these power relations I in no way construct a theory of Power (in Raulet 1988, p. 38).

In these terms, the study of power takes place in relation to particular sites and relations. Its effects therefore cannot be defined in advance of those occasions in which it is identified as operating. Claire Colebrook connects Foucault's approach with Deleuze and Guattari's in *Anti-Oedipus*, insofar as both are concerned with the operations and effects of phenomena – such as power relations – rather than their meanings or origin (Colebrook 1998). This stands in sharp contrast to those theories that assume a general exercise of power within a social totality (Wang 2011, p. 146). “Systematic” theories are limiting, and “dangerous”, as Wang observes; they foreclose multiple possibilities (2011, p. 147). This has repercussions for feminist theories, notably those that locate (male) power in heterosexuality, or pornography, and define male domination as a coherent and closed system (e.g. Dworkin 1994; Jeffreys 1990).

Other feminist writers have questioned the utility of general terms like patriarchy or hetero-normativity, and theorised male dominance as material, with ongoing serious effects, but without recourse to notions of male power as evenly dispersed, exclusively possessed by men, and wielded equally over all women (Pringle 1995; Whitford 1991, pp. 201-2). A key insight here is that the conception of gendered power relations as incomplete or flawed opens up an enormous array of possibilities for ethical and political negotiations (Phelan 1991). Gatens finds this conception of power in Spinoza and Deleuze, and applies it to gender inequality (2000, pp. 64-65). As Grosz observes, “patriarchy cannot be a singular, unchangeable, megalithic, all-pervasive, and necessarily

effective containment of all possibilities of resistance. Patriarchy is fissured, incomplete, imperfect—which is the very condition of feminism” (Grosz 2005, p. 93, note 1). While she credits Derrida for this observation, Foucault’s view of power relations, in a different way, also enables such a re-thinking.

The most difficult and contentious aspect of Foucault’s work on power has perhaps been his insistence that power is a positive, productive force, and that it is immanent to its social context. In my view, interpretation of these claims is critically dependent on how power itself is defined. It is indeed the case that Foucault sees power relations as an inherent feature of all forms of social organisation: “I don’t believe there can be a society without relations of power, if you understand them as means by which individuals try to conduct, to determine the behaviour of others” (Foucault 1987, p. 129; Patton 1994, p. 6). This has often been understood to mean that we can never be free of domination and repression, and that political and ethical campaigns are therefore naïve, or even useless. For example, Monique Deveaux’s critique of Foucault centres on precisely this issue:

...feminists in particular should be wary of Foucault’s assertion that *all* social interactions are defined and thoroughly permeated by the exercise of power ... If we agree with [Nancy] Hartsock’s suggestion that feminists need to envisage a non-dominated world, we should not slip into fatalistic views about the omnipresence of power. This means rejecting Foucault’s assertion that absolutely *no* social or personal relations escape permeation by power (1994, p. 233; see also West, cited in Sheehan 2000, p. 118).

In fact, there are numerous demonstrations of Foucault’s explicit commitment to social and political change, like the following: “Criticism is absolutely indispensable for any transformation ... as soon as one can no longer think

things as one formerly thought them, transformation becomes both very urgent, very difficult, and quite possible” (in Olssen 2006). Foucault even characterises “critical philosophy” as “the challenging of all phenomena of domination...” (1987, p. 131; McNeill 1998, p. 63).

It is therefore essential at this point to clarify how this commitment to politics and change can co-exist with a non-normative view of power as a positive and inescapable force. To reiterate, this is most usefully achieved through attending to what Foucault means when he speaks of ‘power’. As Patton suggests, “In order to make sense of Foucault’s use of the term, ‘power’ must be understood in its primary etymological sense, as the capacity to become or to do certain things” (1994, p. 6; Colebrook 1998). This point also clarifies Foucault’s understanding of power as both positive and productive. ‘Positive’, in this sense, means simply that it *produces*, that it has effects, as in philosophical ‘positivism’, the critical practice of describing and analysing specific relations between phenomena. This meaning is of course distinct from the everyday usage of ‘positive’ with its affirmative connotations. If Foucault’s argument is read using this conception of power, the implications of his claim look quite different from how they would appear in populist rhetoric. Discussing power’s social nature, Foucault states that “to live in society is to live in such a way that action upon other actions is possible – and in fact ongoing” (in Patton 1994, p. 6). ‘Power’ refers simply to actions and effects; it is not force, domination, manipulation, or control, although it can certainly take these forms.

If one conflates ‘power’ with inequality and domination, as Deveaux does, then naturally the proposal that power is everywhere is ethically and politically unacceptable. The entry on ‘power’ in the *Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought*, for instance, draws convincing distinctions between power, authority,

force, and violence, but nevertheless considers power a limiting and controlling force that is possessed by some and not others: “*Power* is the ability of its holders to exact compliance or obedience of other individuals to their *will*, on whatsoever basis ... *Force* is a compulsion, sometimes physical (when it then becomes violence), invoked by wielders of power and authority” (1999, p. 678).

This implicitly negative conception of power also informs some readings of Foucault’s claim that “There is no power without potential refusal or revolt” (Foucault 1981, p. 253); or, ‘where there is power, there is also resistance’. In responding to this ‘maxim’, some writers conceive ‘resistance’ as a progressive force ranged against ‘power’ (Lynch 1998, p. 66), or place power and resistance within an endless dialectical spiral (Hutton 1988, p. 127). On the contrary, resistance in Foucault’s view is a *kind of* power, not its opposing force (Colebrook 2000, p. 79; Widder 2004, p. 412). As Colebrook notes, “There is no ‘outside’ to power – not because there is no resistance or no hope – but because power in Foucault’s sense describes the force of *any act, event, discourse or practice within the grid of possibilities*” (1998, emphasis added).

Examining Foucault’s non-normative conception of power in conjunction with Deleuze and Spinoza offers another way of clarifying this point. If ‘power’ is understood in similar terms to Deleuze’s ‘becoming’, or Spinoza’s ‘*conatus*’, the nature of its positivity and its significance is further underscored. “For Deleuze ... the notion of a power of existing (*conatus*) coincides with that of life” (Marrati 2006). Wang notes Deleuze’s reading of Foucault here: Deleuze “regards resistance as being more like an affirmative power of life – this is ‘passion’ in Foucault’s account” (2011, p. 153). In these terms, power relations could be described thus: when people act on others, and are acted on themselves, specific relations of power are produced, and something new can be

brought into being or created by the encounter between these ‘bodies’ or subjects.

While certain relations of power can be repressive, oppressive, or prohibitive, power, in its basic, elemental sense, is neutral. It follows that any attempt to designate a specific operation or relation of power as oppressive or dominating must examine the particular *effects* involved, rather than proceed on prior judgements. This non-normative conception has been criticised on the grounds that it empties ‘power’ of meaning, and therefore leaves no possibility for ethical or political discrimination (Fraser 1989). However, it is important to note that defining power as positive and productive does not mean that it is inherently benign or harmless, nor that practices of domination are merely one aspect of power’s multiplicity and infinite dispersal. Patton explains that:

One source of confusion is the failure to make the necessary distinctions between power, power over and domination. In his later discussions of power, Foucault does make these distinctions explicit, and in doing so refutes the charge that his approach is incapable of distinguishing forms of power that involve domination from those that do not (Patton 1994, p. 6; Foucault 1981, p. 253; Moss 2004, p. 45).

From this perspective, domination is a form of power, but not an inherent feature of power, nor its distortion or perversion. Foucault defines domination explicitly as a specific kind of relation which can develop between subjects already constituted through the ongoing, productive effects of power. His conception of a situation of domination is one “in which the relations of power, instead of being variable and allowing different partners a strategy which alters them, find themselves firmly set and congealed” (Foucault 1987, p. 114; Patton 1994, p. 8). Power relations are characterised by room to manoeuvre, and the possibility of resistance – even if these are minimal. However, in a relation of

domination “the relations of power are fixed in such a way that they are perpetually asymmetrical and the margin of liberty is extremely limited” (Foucault 1987, p. 123; Patton 1994, p. 7). Foucault cites the institution of eighteenth and nineteenth century marriage as a “paradigmatic” example of a state of domination (Foucault, 1987, p. 123). There is also another, less overt, form of domination discernible in Foucault’s account. Within particular knowledges and institutions, where the operations of power are “fixed”, and the capacities of subjects are limited, impeded, or “finalized”, the power–knowledge–subjectivity nexus operates as “a modality of domination” (Patton 1994, p. 12). Certain medical and psychiatric designations of sexual deviance or abnormality are examples of this kind of domination (ibid).

Foucault’s theory of power does therefore seem to provide criteria for ethical and political discrimination. However, his specified and non-normative view of power relations does not permit absolute condemnation even of domination. As Patton observes, “This indeed appears to be Foucault’s general position: the exercise of power over others is not always bad, and states of domination are not always to be avoided” (1994, p. 9). While this may seem unconscionable for some feminists, it can be seen simply as a demand for specificity and attention to detail – and therefore, accountability. Foucault’s example of an ‘acceptable’ context of domination is education, or “pedagogic relations”, and one could suggest that schooling does provide numerous instances where a degree of ‘stable asymmetry’ is in fact desirable. Other examples of this kind of domination could include parent/child relations, some instances of medical/psychiatric relations, and certain legal and/or police control of individuals, such as restraining orders or other measures designed to prevent persons harming others.

In summary, identifying a state of domination is not a sufficient basis for political or ethical judgement; other factors require attention also. In the critical investigation of relations of domination, key criteria might include: whether there is ‘more or less predictable control of others’; if the relation involves forms of exploitation or extraction; what the uses and practical outcomes are; and if the relation is permanent or temporary. This method demands careful attention, specific and detailed argument, and consequently responsible judgement. In my later chapters, I test its utility with regard to issues of sexuality in feminism.

Subjects of power and liberty

My final point in this discussion of power concerns the repercussions of Foucault’s account for subjectivity, and the question of freedom or liberty. The issue of subjectivity is indispensable; Foucault’s re-specification of power is essentially connected to his repudiation of general theories of the subject (Foucault 1987, p. 121; McHoul & Grace 1993, p. 59). However, while his anti-humanism obviously precludes any commitment to a universal concept of human nature, his studies of power nevertheless assume a particular kind of ‘subject of power’, which Patton describes as “a ‘thin’ conception of the subject of thought and action: whatever else it may be, the human subject is a being endowed with certain capacities” (1994, p. 3; Moss 2004, p. 46). The subject of power is a specific, historically located formation; accordingly, its capacities are not inherent, or universal, but learned, practised, and acquired, via the diverse techniques of social institutions and discourses. Similarities are evident in other theoretical approaches to politics; for instance, Todd May has argued that Deleuze’s notion of “micro-politics” assumes that subjects have the capacity to

exercise deliberation and decision-making, and thus to acquire ethical responsibility (May 1991, p. 34).

This ‘thin’ notion of the subject of power has important implications for politics and ethics. The specific constitution of modern subjectivity via the effects of power and knowledge means that subjects – by definition – bear certain historically acquired attributes and capacities, including the potential ability to resist the operations of power *in specific contexts* (Patton 1994, p. 3). Foucault has argued that “If an individual can remain free, however little his freedom may be, power can subject him to government” (1981, p. 253). This suggests a concrete relation between power (keeping in mind the specific definition used herein) and the liberty of the subject; power or government cannot be exercised on people if they lack the basic capacities for freedom (Gordon 1991, p. 5).

Foucault himself emphasised the centrality of human agents in operations of power: “Power is only a certain type of relation between individuals” (Foucault 1981, p. 253); or “action upon the action of ‘free’ agents” (Patton 1994, p. 5). I should also emphasise the qualified definition of ‘free’ being used here. Thus Patton notes that for Foucault, “‘free’ means no more than being able to act in a variety of ways: that is, having the power to act in several ways, or not being constrained in such a fashion that all possibilities for action are eliminated” (Patton 2006, p. 5; Gordon 1991, p. 5). As Sawicki puts it, “Free subjects are subjects who face a field of possibilities” (1986, p. 29) – a very limited conception, meaning one has some room to move, or more than one possible course of action at one’s disposal. This is obviously very far removed from ‘free’ meaning absolute liberty to do anything one likes, or complete absence of restrictions.

The capacity for freedom is consequently not an inherent quality or possession of ‘humankind’, as it was for Kant, but is enabled and circumscribed by the particular practices and institutions through which ‘subjectivity’ is itself constituted. Jane Bennett also contrasts Foucault’s freedom with Kant’s: Foucault’s sense of ‘freedom’ is always in relation to existing contexts and practices, and always immanent to power, not in opposition or transcendence of power (1996, p. 656).

Freedom in this sense is in fact a particular kind of responsibility: the exercise of power over and on oneself. In Foucault’s case, he asks subjects to properly consider and scrutinise *how* they are governed, and on what terms. Again, there are Spinozist echoes in this notional linking of agency, power and freedom: “For Spinoza ... human freedom (which should not be confused with free will, which Spinoza rejects) amounts to the power that one possesses actively to select one’s encounters rather than always being the plaything of chance associations” (Gatens 2000, p. 61). Elsewhere, Gatens explains how Spinoza used aspects of Stoicism to define citizenship in terms of responsibilities rather than rights, and notes that this assumed “a freedom that is not there to be claimed but can only be created” (in James 2000, p. 48). By contrast, if freedom is defined in more general terms, as an absolute condition or possession, as in some feminist perspectives, it is difficult to conceive of women’s freedom except in an abstract, future-pending sense; freedom appears more as something men have long enjoyed but women have yet to gain (e.g. Deveaux 1994).

The Foucauldian subject’s capacities for agency and resistance are not absolute: they are contextual and specific. Further, it is important to emphasise Foucault’s argument that ‘liberty’ is best understood as a *practice*, rather than a given state or abstract ideal:

I do not think that there is anything that is functionally – by its very nature – absolutely liberating. Liberty is a practice... The liberty of men is never assured by the institutions and laws that are intended to guarantee them [such as a Bill of Rights, or a constitution] ... simply because ‘liberty’ is what must be exercised (1993, p. 162; Foucault 1987, p. 115).

However, he does not propose that laws and institutions should be discarded simply because they cannot ensure freedom; on the contrary, their functions remain important to the practice of such freedom (Foucault 1987, p. 114). Presumably, many feminists would both recognise, and agree with, the broad thrust of this argument; laws governing rape and sexual abuse, for instance, cannot in themselves ensure women’s safety, but they are nonetheless essential as part of the practice of women’s freedom. If liberty is a practice, then, it can be understood as a profoundly ethical – and political – process. Indeed, the feminist concept of ‘empowerment’ has much in common with the Foucauldian theory of power, if empowerment is understood as an ongoing process of increasing the capabilities of subjects, and minimising or removing those limits which constrict our ‘field of possibilities’.

In later chapters I explore how these notions of power and freedom might ‘play out’ in relation to sexual politics. If power is reconceived along the lines suggested above, what are the possible consequences for sexual ethics and politics? If power is implicated in all social contexts and relations, what are the repercussions for social and institutional change, and for self-transformation, around issues of sexuality? For example, if there is no ‘outside’ to power, and no social totality, then politics need not be confined to all-encompassing or unconditional programs of social change; likewise, social and political problems

– such as gender inequality – do not require comprehensive or *a priori* explanations.

From this viewpoint, too, all ethical practices, individual and collective, are potentially significant, and their effects cannot be fully measured in advance. To conceive of politics as a more contingent matter is well-suited to the Foucauldian and Deleuzian notion of theories as “tool-kits”, as Dempsey and Rowe have observed (2004, p. 33), where theory is ““not a system but an instrument”” (Foucault 1977, cited in Dempsey & Rowe 2004, p. 34). In the same vein as Grosz’s comments on patriarchy cited earlier, Dempsey and Rowe cite J.K. Gibson-Graham, who queries the utility of representing problems or dominant entities (such as multi-national corporations) as omnipotent and absolute. Importantly, Gibson-Graham argues that this is not merely pessimistic¹⁶: it also pre-conditions the kinds of politics that can be defined as legitimate, and those that cannot (Dempsey & Rowe 2004, p. 48).

For sexual politics, the evaluation of practices of resistance “is a matter for historical investigation and not for theoretical pronouncement” (Sawicki 1986, p. 31). This enables the study of hetero-normativity, for instance, as a series of “dispersive discourses” (Wang 2011, p. 148), relations, and practices, rather than a monolithic entity with pre-defined operations. Hetero-normativity can be viewed as changeable and dynamic – but *not* simply in the sense of changing or adapting in order to dominate in ever more complex and insidious ways. It follows that subjects’ capacities for resistance and transformation will be more specific and potentially more provisional – which raises the question of ethics.

¹⁶ Dempsey and Rowe, with Gibson-Graham and Hakim Bey, remind us that practices and spaces of freedom *already exist* in the present; the determining power of corporate capitalism, for example, should not be over-exaggerated (2004, pp. 44, 48).

Ethics

In Patton's discussion of Foucault, "moral phenomena" – in which one would include ethical theories, and ethical practices – play a key part in the constitution of subjectivity: "Moral interpretations of phenomena are among the most important means by which human subjects act upon themselves and others (Patton 1994, p. 16). These comments highlight the significance of ethical concepts and practices in shaping relations of power, with ourselves, with other subjects, and with specific social institutions. My studies of feminism and sexuality in upcoming chapters are significantly informed by a technical, materialist tradition within ethical theory, wherein ethics is understood as contingent and specific, and as essential to the formation of the human subject. Broadly speaking, efforts at more specified ethical perspectives stretch back to Spinoza's seventeenth-century writing (Gatens 1992b, p. 45).

The idea that ethics are specific and contextual, and produced via particular historical and cultural processes, is famously expressed in Friedrich Nietzsche's *Genealogy*, a text which also had a profound influence on Foucault's approach to ethics (Olssen 2006). As Moira Gatens notes, against the prevailing wisdom that the moral values of a society are the creation of that society's rational citizens, Nietzsche argues that in fact, moral systems help to shape people into coherent subjects who apparently possess an inherent capacity for 'reason'. In other words, the rational self is not the origin of morals; it is an *effect*, and a necessarily specific one (1992b, p. 46).

In Nietzsche's concept of ethical subjectivity, being ethical is a constant process of self-creation, not a journey forward to an ever more perfect moral self, nor a gradual discovery of one's "true" nature (Diprose 1989, p. 31; McNay 1992, p.

89). Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's work on ethics (for example, in *Anti-Oedipus*) has been read in a similar fashion. For Brian Massumi, Deleuze and Guattari define ethics in pragmatic terms, rather than in reference to dichotomies of good/bad, or true/false. Ethics, simply, is about the subject's power to live fully in their particular, present situation or context (Massumi 1992; May 1991). For Deleuze, whose chief ethical inspiration is Spinoza, the measure of ethical value is "purely immanent", because "'good' and 'bad' are always a matter of what increases or diminishes the power of a given body, and the ethical question is whether a being can live up to the limits of which it is capable" (Marrati 2006; Gatens 2000, p. 61). This conception of ethics has significant potential regarding its application to a feminist 'politics of the personal' and sexual politics also, especially in its emphasis on increasing subjects' capacities.

To argue that our 'selves' and our ethical values are constructed rather than natural or essential, need not imply that they are easily altered or replaced (Gatens 1992b, p. 49). Certainly, the values that are seen as natural, or as God-given, or even as self-evidently the most rational, humane, and universal, are in fact the products of conflicts and competitions between particular groups (Olssen 2006); but these values have been marked, or inscribed, onto the very bodies of subjects – in what can be a "bloody" and violent process (Gatens 1992b, p. 48; Grosz 1992, pp. 196-7). This claim adds weight and historical dimension to a contextual, not relativist, viewpoint (see also Hirst & Woolley 1982).

Ethical beliefs and practices are therefore constituted within and across multiple, diverse institutions and practices – as are, indeed, subjectivities and power relations. This underscores their historical and cultural composition,

certainly, but also their necessarily resilient character. Indeed, the emphasis on cultural and historical specificity entails recognition of the resilient nature of social institutions, and requires detailed, responsible attention to drawing evaluative distinctions among different ethical and political phenomena. Gatens, for example, recommends an ethical approach based on contextuality and flexibility, not for their own sake but in order to better account for differences and to develop more useful and pragmatic responses to ethical problems. This means taking an *accountable* and *located* position:

If there is to be a genuinely polymorphous socio-political body, it is clear that it will need to be capable of discriminating and respecting differences among its members. This would involve institutionalizing the ability to *contextualize* actions and their meanings rather than taking a *relativist* stance toward issues of ethics (Gatens 1991, p. 139).

Specifying ethics and politics does not mean abandoning a capacity for normative judgement; instead, it is the condition for recognising that not all differences are equal. Such commitment to anti-reductive analysis refuses relativism and universalism alike; nor does it position these as mutually exclusive, and exhaustive, options for political engagements. This may provide a foundation for more effective actions and practices, and thus more political optimism – not less, as some have argued. As Shane Phelan notes, the problem is how “to intervene at particular points, rather than being swamped with despair at the magnitude of the task in front of us” (1991, p. 136). This perspective allows for multiple political engagements and practices that are not ultimately subsumed under one ‘umbrella’, because politics is not founded on a general problem or totality. The very diversity of constitutive institutions and practices assumes that politics, like ethics, is specific, and therefore must be continually re-articulated and justified.

While an absence of general normative criteria may be frustrating (or even interpreted as deliberately irresponsible), there seem to be deeply held, and well-reasoned, grounds for this. William Connolly, for instance, suggests that for Foucault – and Nietzsche – the refusal of ethical guarantees is in part a critical response to moralities based on the “transcendentalisation” of contingent phenomena, the entrenchment of “conventionality” for its own sake, the notion of an inherent and incommensurable ‘good’ versus ‘evil’ – and the very real problems and dangers that have resulted from them (1993, p. 366, 372).

The care of the self as an ethical practice, as Foucault has described it, can be seen as a kind of alternative to those moralities founded on unquestioned conventions, and generalities – and also an alternative to subjectivity conceived in terms of self-knowledge above all (Palmer 1998) . In later chapters I draw on this when analysing the limits of more predominant feminist conceptions of (hetero)sexual politics, and exploring other possibilities. As conceived by Foucault and Deleuze, the notion of self-care or self-creation seems far less superficial, and far more meaningful and political, than critics have assumed. It involves taking up a kind of challenge to not submit to unreasonable regulation, to contest domination, and to take responsibility for one’s own actions and capacities.

In Volume II of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault distinguishes between morality as a system of moral codes, in relation to which subjects conduct themselves, and the ethical relation of oneself to oneself, involving “transformations that one seeks to accomplish with oneself as object” (1990b, p. 29). These are by no means incommensurable, but at that late stage of his career Foucault’s interest was directed towards the latter, insofar as an ethical practice of the self allows the subject to exercise a greater measure of autonomy and

reflexivity in relation to the moral codes in question (1990b, p. 30; Bennett 1996, p. 655; McNay 1992, p. 85; Levy 1998, p. 79; Moss 2004, p. 37; Ure 2007, p. 32). The ethical focus of the subject thus shifts from over-arching, universal codes and imperatives to what Lois McNay refers to as “a ‘practical critique’, conducted at the level of the individual and taking the form of a radical self-criticism” (1992, p. 98). As Foucault describes it,

...all moral action involves a relationship with the reality in which it is carried out, and a relationship with the self. The latter is not simply ‘self-awareness’ but self-formation as an ethical subject ... this requires him [the subject] to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself (1990b, p. 28).

The historical importance of sexuality in subjectivity is critically important here. In the historical shift from ethical practices to more code-oriented moralities (particularly with the rise of Christianity), Foucault highlights the emergence of “the hermeneutics of desire” (Levy 1998, p. 81; Foucault 1987, p. 114), the inquiry into the sexual subject’s motivations and inner self, not just their actions. Psycho-analysis is a prominent illustration, but I am also interested in the way that certain kinds of feminist sexual politics problematise their object in this way. What might be the possibilities if sexual politics were to eschew a “hermeneutics of desire” in its dealings with heterosexuality?

Foucault’s interest in self-care has been most fully pursued in his exploration of ancient Greco-Roman ethics, and in Chapter Four, I elaborate on how this work offers useful directions for sexual politics. Here, I simply flag the most pertinent points.

First, as already indicated earlier, being ethical in this view is a matter of practices rather than overall adherence to general rules (Boothroyd 1996, p.

367). Further, these practices are not strictly organised according their different levels of importance; thus, care of the self is on a par with public, political, or citizenship practices – indeed, these are intimately related. There is not a fixed division or hierarchy between so-called ‘private sphere’ matters and those of politics and citizenship. ‘Care of one’s body’, and care of others’ bodies, are important ethical matters in their own right (Colebrook 1998).

Second, this style of ethics by definition demands a creative approach, including towards oneself (Levy 1998, p. 80). In Foucault’s reading of ancient Greco-Roman ethics, ethics “becomes a process of creative self-overcoming”; for instance, in negotiating problems, one can become something else, something more or other (Widder 2004, p. 427). This is also captured in Deleuze’s concept of ‘becoming’, which some writers have noted bears striking similarities with Foucault’s self-aesthetics (Palmer 1998). It follows that such an ethics cannot be mapped onto a teleological or future-guaranteed model; there may indeed be goals, but these are limited and specific, and do not represent an endpoint for self-formation (Levy 1998, pp. 79,82).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have described an approach to subjectivity, power, and ethics which is historically specific and anti-reductive. I have explained how re-conceiving these key categories in this way enables a different understanding of subjects’ ethical and political capacities, which I apply to particular issues of (hetero)sexual politics in Chapters Four and Five. I approach specific issues of sexuality with the assumption that subjects, in most cases, have the facility to engage with and possibly alter the social relations and situations in which they find themselves. These capacities are variable, and may be extremely minimal

in some cases; however, this conception of subjectivity transforms sexual politics into a more open domain of possibilities.

I have not set out a fixed framework from which to examine the problems I have set myself; further, the writers and the concepts that I have described do not, on the whole, offer systematic ways of addressing issues. I aim to show that this is an advantage, not a weakness, for feminist sexual politics, when I seek to apply this “tool-kit” model to particular instances of sexual politics; rather than requiring large-scale, comprehensive ‘solutions’, the issues that I discuss may be better handled with more specified methods. Before examining specific problems of (hetero)sexuality, however, I turn in my next chapter to the more general character of sexuality as a theoretical, political, and ethical object for feminism.

Chapter Three: Feminist Sexual Politics

Introduction

Within feminist sexual politics, sexuality's perceived significance as a constituent part of subjectivity, and as intimately bound up with gender relations, has rendered it a highly productive force – in both enabling and constraining terms. In turn, this has had important consequences for the ways in which heterosexuality has been understood and problematised. In this chapter I focus on how sexuality has been a varied problematic object for feminism, and I put forth an argument for (hetero)sexuality to be conceived in historical rather than structural terms.

My discussion begins with a broad overview of feminism's theoretical and political approaches to sexuality, from early 'second wave' feminism, through the sexuality debates of the 1980s, and then the 1990s encounters with queer and post-structuralist theories. This first chapter section provides an historical background for discussions of key moments and shifts in how (hetero)sexuality has been understood as a problem for feminism. The second part of the chapter is a more detailed focus on three feminist theoretical engagements with sexual politics, that were written after these important shifts.¹⁷ A closer discussion of these quite different accounts allows me to carefully assess more recent works on sexuality, and draw out significant similarities between them, without suppressing their distinctive features. In the final chapter section, I consider

¹⁷ Over the last decade, a number of scholarly feminist journals have dedicated special issues to problems of sexual politics, including heterosexuality specifically: *Australian Feminist Studies* (2011) on heterosexuality; *Hypatia* (2011), a 'found cluster' on sexual controversies; *Hypatia* (2007) "writing against heterosexism"; *Feminist Review* (2006) on sexualities; and the *Journal of Women's History* (2004), commemorating Adrienne Rich's 'Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence', first published in 1980.

what it might mean to approach ‘heterosexuality’ as an historical object: the responsibilities demanded by such a move and the opportunities it opens.

An Overview of Sexual Politics

At different moments in feminist history, specific forms of heterosexual relations have undergone considerable scrutiny. Examples include the nineteenth-century concern with marriage reform, and prostitution (Jeffreys 1985; Walkowitz 1986), early twentieth-century campaigns around ‘free love’ (Caine 1995, p. 9), and 1960s feminist literature and consciousness-raising groups (Greer 1970).

In 1960s and early 1970s feminism, heterosexual women were primarily seen as victims of an oppressive structure or regime – repressive of female sexual pleasure at best; at worst, a site of fear, pain, and danger, involving violence, rape, male control, and economic dependence. Later, especially with the publication of explicitly separatist arguments from the Leeds Revolutionary Feminist Group (1982), and *Lavender Menace*, heterosexual women were redefined as collaborators – even enemies – and heterosexuality as a site of safety, luxury, and moral hypocrisy. Heterosexual women, as Jane Gaines put it, were “protected as part of the privileged erotic majority” (1995, p. 394).

Thus, lesbianism came to be seen as the embodiment of feminist politics and feminist sexuality, and as a critique and repudiation of heterosexuality; as the 1970s slogan claimed, ‘feminism is the theory, lesbianism the practice’. From this perspective, lesbianism as an erotic practice or identity was less important than the identification of heterosexuality as the linchpin of male domination, or in Althusserian terms, as the mode of reproducing ‘good subjects’ for

patriarchal society (Althusser 1971). This argument is exemplified in Sheila Jeffreys' definition of heterosexuality as

...a political institution through which male dominance is organised and maintained. Sex as we know it under male supremacy is the eroticised power difference of heterosexuality. As a political system heterosexuality functions more perfectly than oppressive systems such as apartheid or capitalism (1990, pp. 3-4).

From such perspectives, heterosexuality's function in the oppression and inequality of women is unequivocal; it is a political *institution*, enforced on women, dependent on women's emotional, sexual, and physical labour, and functioning as the key to the patriarchal oppression of women.

During the 1980s and early 1990s, feminist theory and sexual politics maintained a focus on the political evaluation of sexual practices, but attention was largely turned towards the intense exchanges over pornography and lesbian sadomasochism which comprised the 'sexuality debates'. The 1982 Barnard Conference, 'The Scholar and the Feminist IX', and the anti-pornography legislation drafted by MacKinnon and Dworkin in the mid-1980s, are seen as important catalysts for these debates, which generated an enormous number of journal articles and edited collections.¹⁸

¹⁸ Key books include *Coming to Power* (1981), *Pleasure and Danger* (1984) and *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality* (1984), on one 'side', and *Against Sadomasochism* (1982) and *The Sexual Liberals and the Attack on Feminism* (1990), on the other. In the US and UK, *Signs*, *Feminist Review*, and *Feminist Studies* published numerous contributions to the debates. *Feminism and Censorship* contains papers from both 'sides', as well as some attempts to intervene from different perspectives. A range of campaign groups also participated or became subjects of debate, including Feminists Against Censorship (FACT), Campaign Against Pornography (CAP), and Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW).

Broadly speaking, central disagreements concerned the extent to which pornography should be defined as a primary site of men's domination and women's oppression, and whether or not the practice of sadomasochism compromised – or negated – lesbians' commitment to feminism. However, the ramifications went well beyond these specific concerns, and have exercised a continuing influence on subsequent feminist sexual politics. As a key focus of late twentieth-century feminist engagements with sexuality, the debates not only stand as an 'audit' of feminist sexual politics; they have also altered the terrain of that politics. In particular, whether explicitly intended or not, they have interrogated the usefulness of sexual identity, the relations between sexuality and power, and sexuality and gender, and the proper place of sexuality in conceptions of subjectivity and politics (Sawicki 1986, p. 33; Jolly 2005, p. 20).

Overall, these debates underscored the central status of sexuality in contemporary feminist theory and politics. Whether perceived as essential to women's freedom, or as instrumental in their oppression, sexuality had become a pre-eminent site of feminist critical attention and intervention. Anti-pornography arguments identified sexuality as the primary site for the deployment and reproduction of unequal power relations; those who also opposed sado-masochism, defined it as inherently oppressive, and when practised by lesbians, a double betrayal (Jeffreys 1990; Linden et al 1982). In response, advocates of lesbian sado-masochism tended to favour rights-based arguments, but also presented sado-masochism as a highly transgressive and liberatory sexual practice, especially to the extent that both mainstream society and feminism proscribed it (Rubin 1984; Samois 1981; Creet 1991). In these latter feminist perspectives, sexual freedom was not simply the absence of constraint; it held considerable revolutionary potential.

Both ‘sides’ in this debate sought the high moral ground as champions of women: as protecting them from violence and oppression, or as endorsing their freedom and protecting them from sexual repression. The intensity and even bitterness of these exchanges showed how sexuality’s perceived power in the constitution of ethical-political subjectivity continued to inform debate, even as it was called into question. However, feminist conceptions of heterosexuality specifically remained largely unchanged. Anti-pornography theorists concentrated on the oppressive nature of heterosexuality, as they perceived it, while ‘pro-sex’ theorists tended to associate transgressive or subversive potential with non-heterosexual practices (Beasley 2011, p. 30; Holmes, Beasley, & Brook 2011, p. 1).

In 1990s sexual politics, following the sexuality debates, the perceived relations between gender difference and sexuality were highly significant and contested issues. In certain feminist perspectives, sexuality and gender have been seen as mutually defining and inextricable, and central to the reproduction of male or patriarchal power; consequently, sexuality is primarily viewed as a problem of women’s oppression (Stein 2004, p. 255; Reynolds 1994, pp. 138-9; Albury 1997, p. 19). Catharine MacKinnon’s views on the power of sexuality, and its articulation through gender, are widely known, especially since her work with Andrea Dworkin drafting anti-pornography laws in the United States.¹⁹ Her overall argument against heterosexuality is similar to Jeffreys’ and Frye’s, noted above; however, lesbianism does not offer any guarantee of freedom in MacKinnon’s view, since all forms of sexuality are determined by the overarching system of sexualised gender oppression: “Sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism” (MacKinnon 1989, p. 315; 1982, pp. 515, 529; Diprose 1998, p. 2).

¹⁹ See Chester & Dickey 1988; Dworkin 1985; Maag 1985; MacKinnon 1987.

In the following representative statement, MacKinnon claims that:

...the sexualisation of aggression or the eroticisation of power and the fusion of that with gender such that the one who is the target or object of sexuality is the subordinate, is a female, effeminized if a man, is relatively constant. And that hierarchy is always done through gender in some way, even if it is playing with gender or reversing gender or same-gendering, it is still all about gender. Gender hierarchy is either being played with or played out. The hypothesis would be that the practice of misogyny as sex may have been present all along (MacKinnon 1992, p. 123; 1994, pp. 275-6; Dworkin 1981).

The U.S. Southern Women's Writing Collective has offered an even more extensive version of this argument: "As the systematic political practice of male supremacy – the concrete manifestation of male power over women – sex *is* our oppression" (1994, p. 513).²⁰

As gender oppression is seen to be reproduced primarily in and through sexuality, feminism, by definition, takes sexuality as its primary object – particularly heterosexuality. As Jeffreys has argued forcefully throughout her work, as long as women have sex with men, gender oppression will persist, regardless of what gains or transformations are achieved elsewhere (1990, p. 311).

Jeffreys, MacKinnon, and Dworkin are well-known proponents of this viewpoint, yet they are by no means alone (Butler in Osborne & Segal 1994). In different ways, many feminists have viewed heterosexuality as a relation of

²⁰ To clarify, the collective maintains that all forms of sex, including "nonfeminist celibacy, and autoeroticism", and also the ostensibly non-sexual practices of "footbinding", "battery", and "lynching" are all part of the enactment of patriarchal domination through sex (1994, p. 513)

inherent inequality. This view is based, in turn, on the notion of gender difference as a foundational, structuring hierarchy. If (gender) difference is associated with inequality, hierarchy, and opposition, moreover, sameness is consequently seen as a pre-condition for equality (Chanter 1995, p. 45). For example, Jeffreys advocates only a very specific kind of lesbianism, defined by absence of difference, including differences of race, ethnicity, able-bodiedness, and age. This forms an ideal space devoid of inequality or, indeed, any kind of power relation (1990). And throughout Stevie Jackson and Sue Scott's numerous works on sexuality and feminism, the term 'heterosexuality' is frequently defined in terms of asymmetry and inequality, and also used interchangeably with 'hetero-normativity' (Jackson & Scott 2007 p. 98; Jackson 2006). Further, when Jackson and Scott use the term 'gendered', it typically denotes hierarchy and inequality, not difference as such (Jackson & Scott 2007, p. 111).

With French feminist Christine Delphy, Jackson maintains that "gender, the existence of 'men' and 'women' as social categories, is a product of hierarchy ... Sexuality, in particular institutionalized heterosexuality, is woven into this hierarchy" (1996, p. 22). Jackson identifies herself as a "materialist feminist", and does not adhere to political lesbian principles by any means, yet she defines feminism thus: "It is women's subordination within institutionalized heterosexuality which is the starting point for feminist analysis. It is resistance to this subordination which is the foundation of feminist politics" (1996, p. 26).

This conception of gender is indeed common to many feminist perspectives identified as 'materialist',²¹ and yet it is notable that the very *materiality* of

²¹ Wittig, 1992; MacKinnon, 1987; Stevie Jackson, 1996; also Lynne Segal, 1987; Monique Plaza, 1978 are some examples. See Whitford (1991, pp. 15-16).

these accounts tends to disappear in favour of critique: differences are taken to be instances of the presumed totality. Insofar as gender only exists as a mechanism of male domination or patriarchy, it has no substance of its own outside of social hierarchies. Without these structures it would presumably cease to exist, which is certainly one of Wittig's central ideals (Wittig 1981; Butler 1990, pp. 19-22, 112-113; Whitford 1991, pp. 15-16). But if gender is seen as ideological, as imposed by patriarchal or phallogentric structures, and therefore as something that must be eliminated, then to what extent do we remain within a *materialist* framework?

On the other hand, in opposition to this subordination of sexuality to a problem of gender politics, other writers have sought to emphasise the *independence* of sexuality issues from gender. As David Valentine has noted, for opponents of anti-pornography feminism, separating sexuality and gender was an important conceptual move – it allowed sexuality to be theorised in more diverse ways, and without tying it inextricably to gendered relations of oppression (2004, p. 216). Further, the growing significance of queer theory throughout the period of the 1990s, provided considerable theoretical and political support for uncoupling sexuality from gender, in response to a perceived feminist tendency to assume they were one and the same – or more precisely, to reduce sexuality to a mechanism of gender's hierarchical power relations (Butler 1994, p. 3; Stein 2004, p. 256).

Gayle Rubin's 1984 'Thinking Sex' is a well-known early argument for the uncoupling of sexuality issues from feminism's gender politics. Rubin's main points have since been acknowledged, or challenged, in numerous discussions on sexual politics, and she anticipated many questions of debate between feminism and queer theory during the 1990s. In 1994, she re-stated her view

that sexuality and gender are not necessarily connected, and that issues of sexuality – and perhaps even those of gender – are not the sole province of feminism (1994, pp. 88, 89, 91).

Eve Sedgwick's discussion of sexuality and gender has also been influential. In *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Sedgwick considered the respective boundaries of feminist and queer theories in her "Axiom 2": "The study of sexuality is not coextensive with the study of gender; correspondingly, anti-homophobic inquiry is not coextensive with feminist inquiry. But we can't know in advance how they will be different" (1990, p. 27). Nor, one could add, can we know how they might overlap, or shape each other, in different contexts. In a nicely articulated balance of the demands of historicity, Sedgwick maintained that

The definitional narrowing down in this century of sexuality as a whole to a binarized calculus of homo or heterosexuality is a weighty fact but an entirely historical one. To use that fact accompli as a reason for analytically conflating sexuality per se with gender would obscure the degree to which the fact itself requires explanation (1990, p. 31).

Despite this measured statement, Sedgwick seemed to sharply distinguish between feminist and queer projects, in suggesting that "[t]here is a powerful argument to be made that a primary (or *the* primary) issue in gender differentiation and gender struggle is the question of who is to have control of women's (biologically) distinctive reproductive capability" (p. 28). At this point, Sedgwick implied both the reduction of gender difference to reproductive capacity, and the conflation of gender, heterosexuality, and reproduction (Butler 1994, p. 20).²² The apparent restriction of "gender struggle" to reproductive

²² Sedgwick's claim also designated women as the bearers of gender difference.

issues effectively narrows feminism's perceived terrain: employment, health, violence, education, government, culture, and sexuality are all significant areas of feminist concern, yet none are reducible to reproductive politics. At the same time, while control of "reproductive capability" is indeed politically vital, it is not always separable from sexuality issues, as attested to by gay and lesbian participation in reproduction and parenting.

Other contemporary examples of "a refusal of sexual difference in the theoretical constitution of 'sex' as a proper object of study" (Butler 1994, p. 3) included Wei Leng Kwok's contention that feminism's dependence on the limited and constraining category of gender meant that sexual politics required new theoretical foundations (1995, p. 138), and Jane Gaines' suggestion that the "politically suspect" and "perverse" problem of feminist heterosexuals might be better accounted for via queer theory, rather than feminism (1995, p. 394, 404).

Writers such as Cheshire Calhoun (1995) took this further, transposing the key terms to subordinate gender to sexuality. Lesbians, Calhoun argued, exceeded normative binary gender structures, and were therefore 'not-women'; thus, if feminism defined itself around *women*, it necessarily excluded *lesbians*. Further, in order to include lesbians, feminism would also need to admit a range of other sexual subjects such as "the gay man, the heterosexual and gay male transvestite, the male-to-female transsexual, the male lesbian and the like" (1995, p. 30). In Calhoun's view, the woman-focused feminist project should be to contest, and ultimately transcend, gender difference, via these non-normative sexualities (pp. 11, 22-23). In her argument, feminism *as the theory and politics of gender inequality* – however varied and contentious – is effectively erased.

Such tactics of notionally severing sexuality from gender met with objections from other feminist writers, especially to the extent that femininity was defined as a handicap or liability (Butler in Osborne & Segal 1994; Martin 1994, p. 105). For instance, Rosi Braidotti countered that gender was not merely a patriarchal imposition, nor an impediment to the freedoms and possibilities of sexuality (1994, p. 40; Butler 1994, p. 16). Biddy Martin disputed the tendency of some writers to present gender difference as inherently normalising, and femininity as an engulfing swamp, or maternal snare, while sexuality on the other hand was rendered as fluid and polymorphous, with almost unlimited capacity for subversion and transformation (Martin 1994, pp. 100-102, 104). Specific examples of this antagonism to gender were evident in work by Teresa de Lauretis (1993, pp. 144, 150), Sue Ellen Case (1993, pp. 295, 301-2), Calhoun (1995), and Monique Wittig (see Braidotti 1994, pp. 48, 50-51).

Contrary to the dichotomising logical force of many of these debates, it is possible, as I suggested earlier, to argue that gender difference is neither inherently unequal, nor reducible to an instrument of domination. Contesting gender inequality and injustice need not entail opposition to gender difference *per se*. As Moira Gatens (1986, 1988, 1992) has consistently argued, gender difference is not necessarily problematic; however, when this difference is routinely conceived in terms of hierarchy and dichotomy, it impacts powerfully on how feminists view heterosexuality also. If the transcendence of gender – and of heterosexual femininity – is seen as the ethical-political imperative underpinning feminist projects, there are significant constraints placed on the scope of feminism, its interventions, and also its subjects.

Alternatively, the relation between gender and sexuality can be viewed as historically contingent and dynamic, but not therefore simply arbitrary, as

“ethnographic and historical rather than purely theoretical ...” (Valentine 2004, p. 219; Stein 2004, p. 256). Judith Butler recommends such a “non-reductive and non-causal” (1994, p. 9) approach, because it “might accept the irreducibility of sexuality to gender or gender to sexuality, but still insist on the necessity of their interrelationship” (p. 24).

The fact that this more historicised approach was not prominent in many of the debates over gender and sexuality may well explain why feminist conceptions of heterosexuality were not fundamentally altered, despite the substantial and innovative work on sexuality and gender that the 1990s produced. As Chris Beasley has also noted, either gender and sexuality were seen as intertwined such that heterosexuality was the most concrete form of gender inequality, or they were separated, with attention directed to those sexualities seen as most liminal or transgressive – precisely those distanced from heterosexuality, and from gender (Beasley 2011, pp. 28-30).

According to some writers, much of the current scholarship on sexuality divides along quite similar lines. Thus, in recent theoretical writing on heterosexuality, the focus is mostly on issues involving oppression or exploitation (such as rape or trafficking); the possibilities of transgression, or even merely enjoyment, are largely reserved for non-heterosexual practices (Holmes, Beasley, & Brook 2011, p. 1). Insofar as hetero-*sexuality* is implicitly assumed to be hetero-*normative* on a theoretical level, its ethical and political possibilities are severely circumscribed.

Focused Reviews

I now turn to focus in more detail on some recent feminist analyses of (hetero)sexuality. While these texts are written from largely different theoretical perspectives, and their respective subject matter is also quite distinct, they nevertheless share a number of common themes, which I aim to draw out and assess. Briefly, the writers under consideration exhibit a mutual distrust of certain terms and concepts associated with post-structuralist and post-modernist theoretical writing, such as language, discourse, the symbolic, and a perceived subordination of social, material issues to the cultural domain in general. They also implicitly assume the necessity of a traditional revolutionary subject to any program of political change. And finally, they each – again, in different ways – make a call for feminism to return to an earlier form of political engagement that has been neglected amidst the distracting spectacle of post-modernist and post-structuralist theorising.

Criticisms of post-structuralist concepts can be seen in a range of recent feminist discussions of sexuality, and they are often articulated through a call for renewed attention to more materialist and sociological frameworks. For example, to cite Jackson and Scott note that, “Much recent social theory, influenced by post-structuralism, treats gender and sexuality as constituted through language and discourse” (2007, p. 96), in contrast to their own preferred framework of symbolic interactionism (p. 113). In lamenting the “disappearance of the social”, they locate responsibility for this within “a more general theoretical tendency within which the cultural is made to stand in for the social, leaving out of consideration both everyday practices and the material conditions in which they are embedded” (p. 113, note 4).

In Chapter One, I identified this kind of feminist antagonism towards post-modern and post-structural theories, and discussed its characteristic strategies. First, a specific notion of materialist feminism is defended against the perceived incursions of more superficial theories, oriented towards the study of language, texts, signification, and discourse (Brown 1999; Hemmings 2005; Scott 2004; Wiegman 1999). Second, the opposition to post-structural and post-modern theory tends to reflect a tenacious commitment to ‘real’ feminist politics, a clear conception of feminism’s proper methods and concerns, and a sense of betrayal towards those feminists who do not adhere to the same standards. In short, such arguments are driven by affect as much as theory, and there is a great deal at stake in their efforts to shape feminist politics.

In the following discussion, I aim to tease out the repercussions of this kind of feminist stance for sexual politics specifically. I do this by focusing on three different commentaries on sexual issues, all written in the years after the sexuality debates, and the subsequent impacts of queer and post-structuralist theories. Each of these authors seeks to protect or preserve a singular, normative feminism: to maintain its boundaries, its historical and intellectual trajectories, and its proper objects and methods.

The first piece is Elisa Glick’s (2000) argument for a renewed emphasis on materialism in feminist sexual politics. Glick’s object of critique is a tendency towards idealism in what she terms the “pro-sex movement”, which for her is comprised of feminist and queer libertarians, opponents of anti-pornography feminism, and ‘followers’ of Butler and Foucault. Her main objective is to uncover the political and theoretical lineage of this pro-sex movement, and its consequent limitations. Throughout her discussion, she makes frequent

reference to the problematic influence of post-structuralist and post-modernist theory on contemporary sexual politics.

First, Glick traces the sex-positive movement back to the ‘sexual revolution’ of the 1960s and 1970s, which she links in turn to the emergence of a 1950s *Playboy* culture of gentlemen’s leisure, and a materialist, consumerist pursuit of pleasure (2000, p. 26). In a striking echo of Foucault’s earlier argument in *The History of Sexuality*, which I cited in Chapter One, Glick claims that the various sexual liberation movements in the 1960s and 1970s –she lists hippies, ‘Cosmo’ single girls, Playboy types, swingers – elevated sexuality to the forefront of progressive politics:

they displaced the political onto the sexual by framing the pursuit of sexual pleasure in the vocabulary of revolutionary social change. In so doing, they became the forerunners of the contemporary ‘sex positive’ movement, which locates political resistance in the transgression of sexual limits (Glick 2000, p. 26).

Curiously, she then charges Butler (and un-named others) with deliberately obscuring these links: “Why is this connection between pro-sex and the logic of sexual liberation mystified by postmodernist and poststructuralist descendants of pro-sexuality like Butler?” (Glick 2000, p. 26). She then insists that the “*theoretical* refusal of the familiar story of sexual liberation does not undermine the *material* effects of this discourse’s valorization of transgression” (Glick 2000, p.27; emphasis added). It is worth noting that these “material effects” are not specified in Glick’s discussion. Further, there are many examples of public acknowledgement of the political and intellectual links between contemporary ‘pro-sex’ feminists and earlier sexual liberation movements (see Butler 1994, p.

7). What is more interesting at this point is Glick's claim that Butler is hiding something, and that this is couched in terms of a retreat into theory.

Second, Glick argues that 'pro-sex' valorisations of transgressive sexualities also derive from the identity politics of social movements of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s: civil rights, women's liberation, and gay/lesbian rights. In these movements, she claims, the initial focus on identity *and* collective politics ultimately withered into an exclusive emphasis on identity. Thus, "self-transformation is equated with social transformation..." (2000, p. 31), leading to disengagement with broader social contexts and institutions. The "pro-sexuality movement", Glick concludes, "is invested in politicising self-exploration, lifestyle, and consumption as political acts" (ibid).

For many forms of progressive politics, however, 'self-exploration, lifestyle, and consumption' are not substitutes for political action, but sites where agency is both formed and exercised; they are, in short, very political indeed. Also, the politicisation of these sites has a lengthy and 'respectable' history in feminism as a whole, not only among pro-sex advocates, but also anti-pornography feminists and political lesbians (Beasley 2011, pp. 27, 29). As Margaret Jolly notes, during the 1970s many feminists felt that altering their lifestyles, and their 'personal' practices – in short, "transforming private life" – was of vital importance, not instead of broader political and economic issues, but in concert with them (2005, p. 19; also Sawicki 1986, pp. 34-5).

Third, on a more theoretical level, Glick argues that many of the problems in pro-sex theoretical writings – especially Butler's – are caused by the "enormous influence" of Foucault; in particular, she claims, his work on sexuality and power has a significant and irreconcilable contradiction at its core (2000, p.23).

On the one hand, Foucault conceives of sexuality as always within power – Glick cites Nancy Fraser’s claim that for Foucault, “‘sex is an instrument of domination *tout court*’” (2000, p.24). On the other hand, he also holds to the notion of a utopian sexuality *beyond* power (2000, p.23). This paradox, in Glick’s view, structures Foucault’s work as a whole, and thus also shapes Butler’s, Rubin’s, and other “followers” (2000, p.24).²³

As I have already discussed in Chapter Two, however, Foucault does not adhere to either of these positions – sex as domination, or utopian possibility – although he does address both of them critically. He insists that sexuality is within power, but power as he conceives it is not equivalent to ‘domination’, while utopian ideals of a sexuality ‘beyond power’ are a chief target of his criticism in *The History of Sexuality* and other works (Gedalof 2000, p. 52). However, my purpose in this chapter is not simply to correct perceived theoretical errors; I am interested in how certain arguments are ‘built’, and the kind of affect that helps drive them.

After Foucault, it is Butler who, for Glick, represents many of the limitations in post-structuralist influenced writing on sexuality. Butler’s work, she claims, is circumscribed by her reliance on “post-structuralist and post-modernist theories of the subject which evade coming to terms with their own linguistic idealism” (2000, p. 34).²⁴ Butler’s explicit refusal to spell out how normative forms of sexuality and gender might be challenged is, for Glick, a serious problem, and

²³ Thus, while several writers have commented that Rubin’s work – ‘Thinking Sex’ especially – is characterised by an uneasy co-existence of Foucauldian theory with a libertarian critique of ‘sex negativity’, Glick argues that Rubin has inherited this contradictory emphasis from Foucault himself (2000, p. 25).

²⁴ Not one of these ‘theories’ or their authors are cited here, nor does Glick explain how they fail to account for their ‘linguistic idealism’. The extent to which Glick ‘mis-reads’ Butler is evident, in my view, when she writes that Butler “reveals gender as an ‘act’ inscribed upon subjects” (2000, p. 32).

she traces this “striking anti-empiricism” (2000, p. 33) to the “discursive” nature of Butler’s work (2000, pp. 32-3). And Butler’s rejection of coherent humanist subjectivity is simply further evidence of the disconnection between her high Theory, and real people and their practices (2000, p. 35).

Glick also links Butler with “other post-structural and post-modern theorists who have not confronted their relationship to a social totality...” (2000, p. 34), by which she means contemporary global capitalism. Indeed, she views post-modernism in general as the cultural expression and reflection of post-industrial, multi-national, commodity-driven capitalism (2000, p. 34).²⁵ ‘Post-modern’ theories, she claims, reduce politics to personal issues, lifestyle, fashion, and spectacle (2000, p. 30), and she links Butler with Sue-Ellen Case in accusing them of “suggesting that performance and style can dispense with political realities...” (2000, p. 29). In her critical reading of Queer Nation and ACT-UP protests (such as ‘kiss-ins’), her view of authentic politics is clearly underscored:

As queer and AIDS activists, we must consider the limitations of a site-specific activism that is expressed in symbolic and aesthetic terms, a focus on performance and display that avoids confronting political and economic processes as they function globally and are manifested locally (Glick 2000, p. 39).

While Glick’s stated intention was to problematise a form of sexual idealism in pro-sex and queer scholarship, her criticisms took in a wider terrain of debates and contestations, and were couched in familiar terms: social versus cultural; material versus discursive or symbolic; political versus theoretical; global

²⁵ Glick even suggests that post-modernist valorisations of ‘fluidity’ operate to the detriment of exploited populations in the first and third worlds (2000, p. 35).

versus local; and materialist versus post-structuralist feminism. Her discussion is an explicit call for sexual politics to return to “*authentic* forms of political resistance” (Glick 2000, p. 35, emphasis added). Thus, she assumes that there is an authoritative form of proper politics in place, and that to fault other writers for not adhering to this ethical and political model is a sufficient form of critique in itself. Further, as Irene Gedalof observes, Glick’s argument depends on a largely unexamined premise: that sexual politics must “follow a conventional model of emancipatory politics, in which an autonomous subject can only make normative claims from a position of transcendence” (2000, p. 51). In Glick’s case, this can be found in her normative insistence on confronting one’s relationship to the social totality, as well as in her raising of differences in the name of materialist politics, only to treat them as instances of that presumed totality.

Glick’s criticisms of Butler’s writings tends to assume that politics should conform to a specific, pre-established form, and that readers of Butler’s texts are positioned as either similar to herself (able to perceive the limitations of Butler’s ‘symbolic’ and ‘aesthetic’ approach), or as seduced into an individualist focus on self-transformation which lacks authenticity and connection to broader political concerns.

The suspicion of forms of politics perceived as aesthetic or theatrical is not confined to theoretical engagements: Christine Cooper’s severe appraisal of Eve Ensler’s *The Vagina Monologues* (TVM) reflects similar assumptions about feminist approaches to sexuality, and proper forms of feminist politics. Cooper’s assessment of the play – and its author – focuses on three broad areas of concern: “its aesthetic form” (2007, p. 727); its style of political activism;

and its focus on female corporeality. I have divided my own discussion accordingly.

The technical fact that this performance is in monologue form is one of Cooper's most serious concerns; she clearly feels that there is something inherently suspect about monologue as a literary or theatrical device. In particular, the fact that it precludes reciprocal communication between performers and their audience is very problematic for her; as she observes pointedly midway through, "There is no Brechtian or radical feminist theatre in Ensler's dramatics" (Cooper 2007, p. 753).

In Cooper's view, moreover, the aesthetics of *TVM* perform a kind of trickery, or seduction, of the audience:

The literary quality of the personal 'I' in *The Vagina Monologues* tends to be lost on or overlooked by viewers, even as its aesthetic appeal—the entertaining message—is what holds the promise of shifted mindsets and future feminist activity (Cooper 2007, p. 729, emphasis added).

What is more, "The aesthetic appeal of *The Vagina Monologues* makes a worrisome logic palatable as feminism" (Cooper 2007, p. 731).

Much of the material in *TVM* originates from one-on-one interviews that Ensler then re-wrote into monologue form; however, the interview transcriptions are published and accessible. Comparing the performances and interviews, Cooper repeatedly stresses the disjunctions between them, implying that Ensler has been somehow duplicitous in transforming the interviews into theatrical pieces, and criticising her for failing to include all interview details in the performance

(2007, p. 729, p. 747, p. 753).²⁶ Indeed, Cooper argues that *TVM* relies on “illusions” (2007, p. 749). For example, upon reading an interview postscript in which a lesbian sex worker questions Ensler’s write-up of their dialogue, Cooper claims that “A veil of artifice is torn away” (2007, p. 750), and that at that moment the pretension of *TVM* to be about real women telling real, unmediated stories, is exposed in all its artificiality (ibid).

This criticism is illustrative, above all, of the scale of the demands that Cooper places on *TVM*, the standards she holds it to. She refuses to treat *TVM as a play*, as theatrical performance, evaluating it solely in terms of authentic reportage and political activism. For Cooper, *TVM* and Ensler are contemporary manifestations of a specific kind of second-wave feminism which ultimately abandoned politics proper in favour of personal liberation – an argument which echoes Glick’s description of the origin of ‘pro-sex’ politics:

Empowerment through the flesh, particularly sexuality’s status as a unique indicator of women’s autonomy, places *The Vagina Monologues* in line with a certain outgrowth of this diverse (and sometimes fractious) era. Reformist and cultural, this brand of feminism moved, in the early 1970s, away from social transformation— economic and racial as well as anti-patriarchal—to embrace “a cult of the individual ‘liberated woman’” (Willis 1984, 93) (Cooper 2007, p. 730).²⁷

I noted earlier that Elisa Glick’s sceptical attitude towards more theatrical forms of activism is grounded in an assumed division between an authentic politics of social transformation, and a reformist, individualist politics of culture and sexuality. Cooper’s sharp dismissal of the political efficacy of *TVM* echoes this

²⁶ See, for example, Cooper’s discussion of ‘The little coochi-snorcher that could’ (pp. 742-743), where she accuses Ensler of erasing the life story of the woman interviewed, reducing her to her “vagina-self”.

²⁷ With the exception of an indirect reference to Gloria Steinem, Cooper does not provide any details of feminist writers, activists, groups, or texts that were involved in this personal liberation ‘cult’.

sceptical attitude: she describes the play's political orientation as "a liberal, humanist feminism fashionably dressed, easy on the eyes and mind, and one that ruffles just enough but not too many feathers" (2007, p. 731). Describing some of the 'testimonials' written by university students who have worked on campus productions of *TVM*, Cooper argues that their 'activism' is largely restricted to performing the play, and to individual, psychological transformation. She also questions if they have any kind of relation with the "grassroots activists" who receive funding from *TVM* profits (Cooper 2007, p. 754). With regard to audiences of the play, Cooper maintains that they are not challenged to engage in meaningful political action: only the limited and individualistic vagina= self style of political engagement endorsed by *TVM* (2007, pp. 753-4).

Cooper's normative ideal of authentic feminism then underwrites her concluding comments about Ensler's play:

Consuming a production, as a performer or a viewer, seems to be enough to make one feminist: by identification with its liberation of vaginas and/or contributing to its chosen cause... Feminism is 'no longer a free-form nexus of ideas and strategies but a way of living in the world' (Dent 1995, 71) (Cooper 2007, p. 755).

In my next chapter, I consider this very notion of feminism as 'a way of living in the world'; at this point, I note that first, Cooper sees this as a highly superficial kind of political engagement, and second, she opposes it to feminism as a 'nexus of ideas and strategies'.

Another primary limitation of Ensler's play, in Cooper's view, is its overt emphasis on women's (sexual) bodies. Given the long tradition in Western philosophy and culture of defining women in terms of their bodies, she finds it

simply baffling that “feminism of any stripe” (Cooper 2007, p. 733, note 15) would even refer to embodiment, let alone actually take up the “ideological baggage of this essentialist history” (2007, p. 733-4). Indeed, she describes “corporeality” as “a liability for women” (2007, p. 735), and is adamant that feminists cannot risk any entanglements with it.²⁸ This intense distrust of embodiment is also evident in Jackson and Scott’s insistence that “anatomical difference ... is itself devoid of significance” (2007, p. 97, citing Delphy). Explaining further, they state that:

The view of embodiment being advanced here does not deny the physical materiality of bodies – rather it emphasizes that bodies are not meaningful in themselves. All of us are embodied within social contexts... (Jackson & Scott 2007, p.101).

Interestingly, in arguing against feminist theories of corporeality, Jackson and Scott associate these with the pernicious influence of Foucault, and the dominance of intellectual theory (2007, pp. 97-98).

The reasons – historical, social, cultural – for feminists’ suspicion of essentialist notions of embodiment hardly need to be reiterated. But to characterise bodies as ‘devoid of significance’, as ‘not meaningful in themselves’, or to dismiss corporeality as “liability” and “ideological baggage” to be avoided at all costs, are not the only alternative possibilities.

²⁸ In support of her arguments, she cites, first, Simone de Beauvoir, who showed that femininity is socially constructed, not natural or fixed (Cooper 2007, p. 735), and second, Mary Wollstonecraft, who made very similar arguments refuting notions of women’s natural or biological inferiority (ibid, p. 736).

Feminist theorising of embodiment or corporeality²⁹ has clearly established the relations between bodies, power, subjectivity, and ethics, and demonstrated the utility of considering each of these in reference to the others, in their specific historical and cultural contexts. This work has enabled recognition of the significance of gender difference in corporeality, *and* appreciation of its historicity and its interplay with other differences. As Gatens maintains, “to claim a history for the body involves taking seriously the ways in which diet, environment and the typical activities of a body may vary historically and create its capacities, its desires and its actual material form” (1992, p. 130). As indicated in Chapter Two, feminist use of Spinozist and Deleuzian approaches to embodiment have particular promise for sexual politics; rather than a phenomenological focus on bodily experience, for instance, Spinoza and Deleuze direct attention to what bodies can do; how bodily capacities can be limited *or* enhanced; and the kinds of assemblages which they can enter into (Gatens 2000). It is difficult to conceive how this kind of approach would risk essentialism.

Cooper, however, addresses the issue of corporeality without reference to this extensive body of theoretical work. In her view, *TVM* reduces female sexuality to the vagina, and conflates women’s subjectivity with their vaginal sexuality (Cooper 2007, p. 732). She rejects Ensler’s own conception of vaginas as *metaphorically* representing women’s subjectivities:

Through metaphor, as Ensler names it, or metonym, as I do, the trope of the vagina is so easily naturalized (or accepted as natural) that it, ironically, loses its figurative status, cultivating a literal equivalence in the play. One’s vagina is necessarily one’s female self (Cooper 2007, p. 732).

²⁹ Gatens (1992, 1996), Lloyd (1989), Grosz (1990, 1994), Diprose (1994, 1998), Sheets-Johnstone (1992); Keane & Rosengarten (2002) are just some examples.

Cooper will not allow *TVM* to be metaphorical, because the vagina is so “powerful” and “seductive” (2007, p. 732), that it functions instead as metonymy, enacting a “literal” collapse of women’s subjectivity into a single body part.

This particular frame of reference, regarding corporeality and sexuality, clearly informs Cooper’s response to a piece in *TVM* entitled ‘Because he liked to look at it’. Her assessment here also indicates an implicit assumption that heterosexual relations are ethically and politically problematic, by definition. Briefly, the piece is narrated by a woman who hated her vagina, despite her awareness of the irrationality of her self-disgust, and her many efforts to overcome it. Eventually she meets a man named Bob, and when they have sex, his loving fascination with her vagina (he lies staring at it for hours) leads her to see it as he does, as beautiful.

In Cooper’s view, however, the scene is more sinister: Bob’s gaze is the objectifying, dehumanising, phallic ‘male gaze’, well-known from feminist literature on film and pornography (2007, p. 741). She also comments on the “unequal power relations between the lovers” (ibid.), and describes their first meeting as “a questionable encounter” (2007, p. 742). These descriptive details – the predatory gaze, the inequality, the implication that something here is dubious or sordid – are stated rather than explained, which leads the reader to assume that they must be inherent features of heterosexual relations generally, as there is nothing to suggest they are confined to this specific encounter.

This underlying premise of heterosexuality’s characteristic inequality is foregrounded in my final focus piece, Kathy Miriam’s rehabilitation of “the

radical feminist theory of compulsory heterosexuality and sex-right”, using “a phenomenological-hermeneutic perspective” (2007, p. 213). Miriam’s arguments share similar notions of proper politics, and normative oppositions, with Glick and Cooper; also present is the familiar theme of the culpability of post-structuralist theory, and those feminists who use it in their own work.

Miriam begins with the observation that the tertiary students she teaches tend to demonstrate a basic liberal tolerance for non-heterosexual sexualities, which may not have been present in the past. However, she notes, these same students continue to perceive heterosexuality as both natural and normal (2007, pp. 210-11). In her view, though, this is largely a problem of gender inequality, rather than homophobia or hetero-normativity. Her aim is to demonstrate that the radical lesbian feminist argument that linked heterosexuality to women’s oppression and men’s domination is essential to conceptualising and addressing gender inequality (Miriam 2007, p. 211).

Having identified the problem, in the form of systemic gender inequality, and her theoretical framework, Miriam then turns to Linda Martin Alcoff’s argument that feminism risks losing the crucial principle of “lived experience” – largely thanks to the impact of post-structuralism (2007, p. 216). Thus Alcoff “retrieves experience from the maw of a linguistic-discourse model of agency” (ibid). Miriam further argues that

poststructuralist intellectualism now construes experience as merely epiphenomenal, that is, as the “effect” of discourse/ ideas/language. With this move in feminist theory, our hold on sexual violence—its meaning in the world—slips... (ibid).

The terminology here is a little incoherent: effects are epiphenomenal, the reality of sexual violence lies in its meaning, and discourse, ideas, and language

are equivalent terms. Miriam does not cite any specific authors or texts at this point, but Judith Butler is once again presented as the primary culprit in post-structuralism's domination of feminist theory (2007, p. 215). With Butler, it is 'academic feminists' in general who tend to dismiss concepts like "lived experience", in Miriam's view, and they also dispute radical feminist critiques of heterosexuality, on the grounds that these critiques leave no space for women's agency (2007, p. 211, pp. 215-6).

Indeed, how agency is conceived is pivotal to Miriam's argument, and needs to be addressed further. Miriam's first move is to specify her own conception of agency, taken from a phenomenological-hermeneutic perspective. In this view, agency is not a measure of one's capacity to alter or to resist a given state of affairs; it is "how a human subject lives through her or his situation" (Miriam 2007, p. 213). "From this perspective [Miriam explains], there is no paradox in the idea of a female agency that reproduces or re-entrenches rather than overcomes domination, coercion, or victimization" (2007, p. 213). Stevi Jackson suggests a similar conception of agency:

In much recent theory agency is understood as operating only through resistance, but we all make choices and reflexively understand our social worlds even when those choices and reflexivity are mobilized only within the conventional and accepted (2006, p. 118, note 10).

It is worth noting at this point that Miriam and Jackson both assume that agency can be conceived in only two ways: as active resistance, or, in their view, as how one lives through a given set of social relations. Miriam does concede that this latter conception of agency is quite different from the capacity to affect or transform; even so, her defence of radical feminist critiques of heterosexuality on this point is rather disingenuous. When critics object that MacKinnon, for

example, precludes women's *agency*, they mean precisely women's capacities to act upon and/or transform the social contexts and encounters in which they live – in a more Foucauldian sense, their capacities to act as subjects of power.

Further, Miriam does not explain how we might designate different behaviours, say, as merely living through heterosexuality, or as exercising a degree of freedom (except that, by implication, it is clear that women in heterosexual contexts are not able to do the latter). Without specifying criteria, she effectively reserves the capacity to assess which agential practices are in women's interests, and which are not. Further, despite her stated desire to safeguard women's lived experience as a feminist concern, Miriam essentially assumes that she already knows what that experience is for heterosexual women.

While Miriam faults Butler's "purely linguistic" concept of agency for having "no resources for distinguishing agency in and of itself from freedom" (2007, p. 226, note 4), it is unclear how her approach can make this distinction itself; the only viable conclusion would be that freedom for women lies outside heterosexuality.

Catharine MacKinnon's work on the relation between sexuality and gender is central to Miriam's argument. MacKinnon's approach has been criticised as determinist, especially in the sense that she defines sexuality as produced by and for male domination. However, Miriam uses Merleau-Ponty to argue that, in fact, MacKinnon's point is "that gender is the ground of sexuality, rather than caused by or a cause of sexuality ... MacKinnon's theory is suggestive of the idea that gender brings (hetero)sexuality into being" (2007, p. 215).

For Miriam, then, gender does not cause (hetero)sexuality, but is a necessary pre-condition for it to exist. In making this clarification, she sees no apparent problem in positing sexuality as ‘brought into being’ by gender, itself understood solely as *gender inequality*. And this is a significant and neglected part of MacKinnon’s argument – the conception of gender as nothing other than an oppressive, hierarchical construct. As I suggested earlier in this chapter, this notion of gender as ideology impacts enormously on how heterosexuality is consequently approached.

In another clarification of MacKinnon’s approach, Miriam notes that

MacKinnon tends to conflate sexuality per se with heterosexuality, thus occluding new and potentially transformative forms of agency such as queer and lesbian sexuality. I concede that this is a difficulty with MacKinnon’s work—thus in the context of my own reading of her, I will, wherever it is feasible, use the term (hetero)sexuality in place of sexuality (Miriam 2007, p. 226, note 5).

This ‘difficulty’, however, is a deliberate device in MacKinnon’s work; as I noted earlier in this chapter, she maintains that all sexualities are structured by male domination. Miriam’s modification of MacKinnon on this point only serves to further isolate heterosexuality from any political intervention or transformation.

Miriam’s premise that heterosexuality is beyond redemption is further illustrated in her argument that a contemporary social emphasis on women’s sexual agency and pleasure is simply yet another method of ensuring men’s sexual access to women and girls (2007, p. 225). Indeed, she claims that “As women and girls are increasingly positioned as the autonomous negotiators of or decision makers in heterosexual relations, men’s sex-right becomes less

intelligible at an explicit level” (Miriam 2007, p. 225). To this extent, women’s capacity to direct and choose in sexual relations is largely illusory; worse, the insistence of some feminists on viewing women as sexual actors rather than victims has helped to extend and obscure men’s “sex-right”. The editorial summary of Miriam’s argument observes that women

experience their agency as a capacity to negotiate the terms of a male sex-right, taking as given the situation of domination and subordination in which they negotiate. Thus their lived hetero-relations include from the outset the male right of access to their bodies and sexuality (Callahan, Mann, & Ruddick 2007, xv).

This description of contemporary heterosexual relations has unmistakable similarities with Foucault’s explanation of how nineteenth-century marriage can be seen as a relation of domination, according to his use of the term. He notes that wives could use a number of small-scale tactics, there was some room for negotiation, but on the whole, the marriage was a relation of fixed and stable power inequalities, with minimal possibilities for resistance (Foucault 1987, p. 123; Patton 1994, p. 7).

Of course, Foucault was referring to a specific socio-historical example, while Miriam’s argument encompasses heterosexuality in general. This tendency to abstraction or generalisation is also evident when she offers material evidence for her thesis that increased sexual freedom for women only worsens their oppression by men. Her argument is characterised by frequent references to “mass culture”, its “hyper-sexualisation” of girls, and its increased “inducement to (hetero)sex” (Miriam 2007, p. 212)³⁰, together with claims that more women are practising more heterosexual sex, at younger ages. The increased numbers, and the younger ages, however, are inferred rather than documented, and the

³⁰ An issue that I examine in Chapter Five.

author tends to assume that if sex is more visible in cultural media, then people's actual behaviours will alter accordingly.

As material support for these arguments, Miriam cites (a) a study of 30 female U.S. university students, and (b) an article in *The New York Times* about new kinds of sexual encounters among teenagers. Although such sources are in no way unacceptable, her interpretations of them, and the extrapolations she makes from these interpretations, are extensive and in my view controversial. I am not convinced that these sources can bear the weight of her arguments.

In their arguments around sexuality and feminism, Glick, Cooper, and Miriam parallel those feminist writers hostile to post-structuralism that I discussed in Chapter One. In particular, these three share a sense that feminism (especially sexual politics) has been led astray, and must return to more authentic foundations. They also strive to re-establish and preserve a notion of proper feminist politics, to establish its boundaries, and to (re)connect this politics with a feminist agential Subject. As I noted in my main discussion, one effect of this is that very high standards are set for bona fide feminist subjectivity, and political activism. Another is that theory is defined as subordinate to politics, and accountable to it.

Most clearly, all three commentaries agree on who or what should be held accountable for the current shortcomings in feminist politics. The culpability of post-structuralism, post-modernism, academic feminism, and Theory is a common theme running through their work (albeit more implicit in Cooper's discussion). Significantly, they all uphold a specific kind of materialism against the amoral, apolitical excesses that they perceive in their 'targets': 'pro-sex' queer and feminist theory (Glick), *TVM* and its wider neo-liberal 'brand' of

feminism (Cooper), and post-structuralist feminism and mass popular culture (Miriam). In each case, the cultural and social domains are seen as distinct and separate; and issues of sexuality, culture, and so on are viewed as subordinate to a material politics of social transformation. Certain terms associated with post-structuralism and post-modernism, such as spectacle, rhetoric, language, signs, linguistics, and fluidity, are also linked conceptually to neo-liberalism, and commodity-driven global capitalism. Somewhat paradoxically, cultural representations of sexuality pose an urgent political problem for this feminist perspective.

Overall, this kind of feminist politics has a low tolerance for experimentation and uncertainty, and a preference for politics to be clearly connected to future outcomes. Again, this recalls Chapter One, where I reflected on the way that anxieties over loss of truth or loss of foundations play an important part in antagonistic responses to those theories perceived as threats or challenges. Further, there is a certain lack of accountability in these arguments, or lack of recognition that each author writes from a particular standpoint. Cooper's argument, for instance, is partly a product of a specific kind of feminist sexual politics that upholds clitoral sexuality as more liberatory for women; this helps explain her hostility to Ensler's vaginal focus. Cooper and Glick both belong to a tradition in feminism (and left politics more generally) which opposes proper materialist politics to a more superficial focus on culture and sexuality. Miriam's assumptions about how representations work on subjectivity, moreover, stem from a particular theoretical approach to cultural politics, not a universally accepted one.

Finally, a focus on self-care, lifestyle, and related issues is held in deep suspicion by these writers. This has significant bearing on how they, and those

who share their point of view, can conceive and politicise heterosexuality. In my next chapter, my objective is to demonstrate that rather than being an invariably superficial distraction from ‘proper’ politics, self-care can be highly political, courageous, and responsible – consequently, capable of being connected to more ‘macro’ politics in quite profound ways.

Historicising Heterosexuality

In this section, I outline some possibilities for anti-reductive re-descriptions of heterosexuality, which do not treat their object as universal and unchanging. Historical investigations of this kind emphasise the contingent character of heterosexuality’s normative and dominant status. A more contingent approach to the issue of heterosexuality is justified, given that the historical attainment of its normative status has not been a rational or linear progression. Different discourses and institutions have not been united in their conceptions of heterosexuality, or their objectives concerning it. Thus, during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, diverse social and cultural institutions such as education, pornography, health care, labour laws, and popular entertainment did not uniformly and consistently reproduce a single form of normative heterosexuality. Rather, modern heterosexuality ‘as we know it’ is the ongoing product of specific kinds of social organisation, gender difference, reproduction, corporeality, subjectivity, and power.

Since the 1970s, Foucault’s work has continued to be instrumental in developing specifying, historical approaches to sexuality. In Volume I of *The History of Sexuality*, he discusses how the concept of a social “population” developed as a site of regulation in western societies from the eighteenth century. Marriage, sexual practices, birth control, and birth rates all became

points of governmental concern in this context (Foucault 1990a, p. 26). The “socialisation of procreative behaviour”, as Foucault describes it, saw the heterosexual couple become a primary site for the regulation of fertility and reproduction (1990a, pp. 104-105). Middle class women’s bodies were identified as sites of hysteria, “saturated with sexuality”, medicalised and pathologised; while women’s function as wives and mothers became increasingly important, and linked to the health and fecundity of society as a whole (1990a, p. 104). Alongside the sexualised, hysterical woman, and the reproductive couple, Foucault placed the ‘perverse adult’ and the ‘masturbating child’ as subjects of heightened attention and regulation, which together “formed specific mechanisms of knowledge and power centring on sex” (1990a, p. 103).

Interestingly, Foucault suggested that even as social concern with “population” and women’s sexuality intensified, the heterosexual reproductive couple gradually drifted *away from* the formal attentions of modern sexuality: “Efforts to find out its secrets were abandoned; nothing further was demanded of it than to define itself from day to day. The legitimate couple, with its regular sexuality, had a right to more discretion” (1990a, p. 38). Undoubtedly, heterosexuality *is* a largely unexamined norm, and the positioning of “the couple” in the private sphere affords it a degree of protection not granted to other sexualities. However, there are two important qualifications required.

First, the protection of the private sphere has historically been double-edged; rights to privacy can be usefully advanced in defence of homosexuality, for instance, but on the other hand, privacy has also been deployed to conceal domestic violence and sexual abuse. The feminist politicisation of personal and private issues has led to valuable recognition that the private sphere must not be

exempted from social, public attention and intervention (Ross 1993, 226). On the other hand, this is not equivalent to arguing, as some feminists do, that the ‘right to privacy’ is inherently suspect, and the private sphere operates against women’s interests on a permanent, structural level (e.g. MacKinnon 1994, pp. 277-279). A more nuanced perspective might acknowledge the *ambivalent* benefits of ‘privacy’, its pros and cons, and thus re-draw ‘the personal is political’ in more qualified terms (Jaggar 1994, p. 480). For example, is it possible, even desirable, to place limits on politics in specific contexts? Should sexual relations and practices enjoy some degree of ‘private’ status? Can the protection granted to the private sphere, in certain instances, work to women’s advantage?

Second, as Foucault’s wording indicates, “discretion” and privacy were enjoyed by “the legitimate couple” – not heterosexual subjects in general, and this is an important distinction. His argument does not foreclose the historical investigation of heterosexuality. On the contrary, the identification of the strategically shielded site of ‘legitimate’ heterosexuality, and its apparently banal character, requires attention. It would be unwise and myopic to reproduce a powerful invisibility for heterosexuality, precisely by *not* treating it as an object of study, as an ongoing production, and as an important site for the regulation of populations and sexualities. As Tamsin Spargo reasons,

heterosexuality must have a history to be analysed. This analysis could be seen as a political necessity: what is the use, what are the dangers, of accepting that there is no such thing as a natural, unified homosexual identity if the presumption of a natural heterosexuality is unchallenged? (1999, p. 45).

Further, to acknowledge the more mundane aspects of the deployment of heterosexuality does not necessarily mean that its production has been largely

benign and uncomplicated. Lesley Hall has raised similar questions in arguing that histories of sexuality often overlook normative male sexuality as an object of investigation:

Unexamined ... and often assumed to be monolithic, unchanging, unproblematic, stands the 'normal' male. The implication tends to be that sexual discourses operated exclusively for his benefit and that there was no ambiguity or ambivalence in his position, no possible constraint upon him (Hall 1994, p. 249).

I contend, therefore, that the emergence of 'modern sexuality' involved not only the proliferation *and* policing of the 'perversions', but also the proliferation and policing of heterosexuality itself. The legitimate heterosexual, reproductive couple was not simply produced, and then exempted from governmental management, as it were; rather, it was *fashioned* and *normalised* in an ongoing process that necessarily implies gaps, forms of resistance, and agencies exceeding regulatory controls. Just as importantly, the category of the heterosexual has not emerged simply in general opposition to the homosexual; different, 'other' heterosexualities have also been designated as variously abnormal, deviant, or unhealthy, in contrast to normative ideals of heterosexuality. I offer some examples to illustrate this argument.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, certain large-scale social, political, and epistemological changes were instrumental in normalising and naturalising a particular kind of heterosexuality. These developments included: the increasing status of science, especially as a disinterested arbiter of social questions; the predominance of dichotomously opposed notions of gender

difference;³¹ the conventional positioning of sexuality at the centre of the self; the increasing regulation and promotion of reproductive heterosexuality; and the growing emphasis on motherhood as a natural, exclusive, and necessary vocation for women, especially those of the middle class.³²

On the other hand, specific heterosexual activities have at different times been designated ‘non-normative’, and proscribed as such. For example, from the early eighteenth century, certain non-reproductive heterosexual practices were increasingly restricted: male-female prostitution, use of birth control, and behaviours that fell under the legal definition of ‘sodomy’, often a rather vague and general category.³³ Even apparently ‘proper’ forms of heterosexuality, such as sexual relations and reproduction within marriage, were intensively scrutinised and regulated, and in the first half of the twentieth century, the erotic life of the married couple, and the ‘problem’ of women’s frigidity, were key pre-occupations of the growing ranks of psychologists and sexologists.³⁴

In many ways, the “reproductive couple” was indeed removed and shielded from the public sphere and public attention, as Foucault suggests. At the same time however, heterosexual relations, marriage, sex, and reproduction, have been subject to intensive, if not always consistent, scrutiny and judgement. Moreover, this ‘private’ status does not necessarily work to the advantage of all heterosexual subjects, as the examples of domestic violence and marital rape

³¹ Thomas Laqueur (1992) calls this a “two-sex” model, arguing that it came to dominate over – not replace – earlier notions of “one-sex”, or femaleness as essentially a lesser version of maleness.

³² Important references here include Abelove (1992); Gallagher & Laqueur (1987); Laqueur (1992); Schiebinger (1987). I am very much aware that there may well be other, equally significant, factors that I have not included here; I do not claim that this ‘list’ is in any way exhaustive or authoritative.

³³ In addition to same-sex behaviours, laws against sodomy have applied more broadly to non-reproductive sex. There are numerous instances of prosecution and punishment of ‘heterosexual’ persons under sodomy statutes (Creed 1995, p. 89; Van der Meer 1990).

³⁴ Padgug (1989); Simmons (1989); Trimberger (1984); Bland (1983); Jeffreys (1990); Hardy 2000, pp. 82-83.

amply demonstrate. The emergence of an identifiable and demarcated heterosexuality, and the disciplining of heterosexual bodies and subjectivities, took place alongside, or perhaps in tension with, the withdrawal of the heterosexual couple from public attention and the more overt deployments of sexuality.

The specific model of heterosexual relations as based on strict gender differentiation, defined against homosexuality, and tied to reproductive objectives, has indeed been a powerful normalising force. However, it does not necessarily follow that there is a single, determining structure which all heterosexual relations ultimately adhere to. Further, to suggest that some forms of heterosexuality are consistently rewarded and privileged, while others are invariably proscribed, is still an over-simplification. My argument here has nothing to do with placing some heterosexualities in a comparable position to gay or lesbian sexualities, for example, as categories subjected to injustice or oppression. The point is, simply, that to assume that the practice of a normatively privileged sexuality equates to being a privileged subject, relies on a static and structuralist notion of subjectivity, and conflates subjectivity with sexuality. Consider ‘welfare’ mothers with dependent children, for instance; certain current affairs television programs and tabloid newspapers feature them regularly.³⁵ Such women are heterosexual, and reproductive, and often married or partnered. Of what does their privilege, protection, or normative superiority consist?

³⁵ For example: *A Current Affair* ‘Cashing in with Centrelink’ (12 July 2010); *Today Tonight* (18 July 2005); *Today Tonight* ‘Faring well on welfare’ (03 October 2011); *The Daily Telegraph* ‘Fraud epidemic cost Australia over \$600m annually’ (04 April 2011).

Conclusion

The ways that subjectivity, politics/power, and ethics are understood obviously informs which sexuality issues are problematised, how they are problematised, and how they are subsequently dealt with. Unquestionably, feminist, queer, gay and lesbian politics have been highly effective in identifying multiple operations of hetero-normative institutions and structures, and their effects on sexual subjects; different forms of resistance and transformation have been devised and practised accordingly. However, if “the economy of heterosexuality” (Angelides 1995; Butler 1993, p. 113) is defined as a general, closed system, fundamental to the reproduction of gender inequality, and hierarchically opposed to homosexuality, the possibilities for ethical and political intervention are severely circumscribed from the outset. To dismiss heterosexual relations as beyond redemption is to assume that subjects – male and female – who engage in intersexual relations lack agential capacity and, importantly, ethical *responsibility*.

To be sure, broad conceptual terms such as ‘hetero-normative’, ‘phallogocentric’, ‘patriarchal’, ‘identity’, or ‘pornography’ do make it possible to theorise in generally applicable terms. Take, for example, the designative term ‘hetero-normative’, referring to the presumption of heterosexuality’s status as normal, natural, superior, and as defined through fixed gender differences. It makes a crucial difference if this term is used to denote a rational, closed system (as in Miriam’s argument, for example), or if it is used more adjectivally, to refer to particular institutions, discourses, knowledges, or behaviours, whose possible effects and connections are investigated and assessed, rather than assumed in advance. Such an approach requires more openness to experimentation and risk,

which by definition cannot be accommodated by the kind of politics upheld by writers like Glick, Cooper, and Miriam.

I propose that heterosexuality – and sexuality generally – be seen as a question of ethical-political capacity. The issue is not primarily one of whether women are living right or proper lives as feminist sexual subjects (an assumption foremost in Glick, Cooper, and Miriam’s arguments); it is how specific sexual relations and practices can enhance liberty. From this perspective, feminist sexual politics might, for example, adopt Deleuze’s re-articulation of ethical subjectivity as the cultivation of “love of freedom”, where he defines the “good individual” – or the good feminist – as one “who strives, insofar as he is capable, to organize his encounters, to join with whatever agrees with his nature, to combine his relation with relations that are compatible with his, and thereby to increase his power” (2007, p. 45). As I have discussed in Chapter Two, when politics is not automatically linked to a notion of social totality, different opportunities open up, and all ethical and political practices become potentially significant.

It was a key achievement of feminist sexual politics to deconstruct heterosexuality’s assumed natural and private status. But to the extent that feminism – or gay, lesbian, and queer theoretical work – conceives of heterosexuality as a rational totality and as historically constant, it remains within a general and ahistorical approach to subjectivity, with its inherent limitations. In the special issue of the *Journal of Women’s History* devoted to her ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’, Adrienne Rich offered some retrospective thoughts on her landmark essay. Despite forming her own criticisms of the article over the years, she nevertheless wrote that “What I believe has had lasting usefulness is the critique of the presumption that

heterosexuality is ‘beyond question’” (2004, p. 10). This seemingly simple and obvious claim –probably the most important legacy of Rich’s paper – could be the one issue that almost all forms of queer and feminist sexual politics would agree on: the significance of asserting that heterosexuality is not natural, not given, and not a standard of normality or humanity.

A vital task for sexual politics is to continue pushing this insight as far as possible, to pursue its ramifications – including with regard to heterosexuality itself, not in order to dismiss, eradicate, or transcend it, but to set the terms for re-conceiving it in more diverse, variable, and flexible ways, to insist that hetero-normativity and hetero-sexuality are not necessarily equivalent, and to remain open to the possibilities this may bring.

Chapter Four: (hetero)sexuality as askesis

Introduction

In this chapter I explore the significant benefits of a more explicit use of self-care in feminist sexual politics. Across many feminist perspectives, the privileging of self-other relations over self-care is commonplace, and the notion of self-aesthetics is experienced as troubling, even as inimical to politics and social transformation. ‘Proper’ ethical concerns tend to be understood as outwardly directed. These convictions are not confined to feminists by any means; rather, they are widespread in progressive theory and politics in general, as I discuss later in the chapter. Investment in other-directed ethics, as well as its status as political and moral imperative, may well contribute to the lower regard within which self-care is held, and an underestimation of its potential for sexual politics.

In Chapter One, I described Martha Nussbaum’s ‘The Professor of Parody’ (1999) as an influential caustic criticism of Judith Butler and “new symbolic feminism” in general. One of the salient features of that article was Nussbaum’s explicit contrast between her own, outward-directed feminism, and Butler’s perceived obsession with “personal self-presentation” and “cultivating the self” (1999, p. 16). As Robyn Wiegman observes, in taking this deliberately oppositional stance, Nussbaum deploys a traditional “sentimental formulation”,

...by transforming suffering into ‘real’ knowledge and making pain the defining feature of feminism’s relation to and understanding of the construction of female subjects. Intended as a counter to [Judith] Butler’s narcissistic entrapments in the self, Nussbaum’s language for social change – “working for others who are suffering” and for “the public good” – posits feminism

in a modality of identification that arises at the scene of women's disempowerment and loss (Wiegman 1999b).

In formulating feminist ethical imperatives thus, Nussbaum leaves only two possibilities: shallow self-care or moral focus on others.

Wendy Parkins' attempt to formulate an alternative to "the ineffectual debates found in postfeminist texts about the conflicts between personal choice, morality and politics" (1999, p. 378) is more thoughtful and nuanced than Nussbaum's essay – nevertheless, Parkins also defines 'proper' ethics as essentially other-directed, "as fundamentally concerned with the recognition of otherness" (1999, p. 378). Consequently, her response to the problem of balancing self and other in feminism is to give increased ethical weight to other-centred perspectives. It is doubtful if her argument could accommodate an ethics of the self that is not utterly 'infected' by extreme libertarianism or individualism.

An over-emphasis on other-centred ethics makes it very difficult to consider self-care as ethical; when juxtaposed against the moral value of self-other, self-care can collapse into selfishness and superficiality. Yet care of the self has been a vital and productive component of feminist praxis: consciousness-raising (known as CR in 1960s and 1970s feminism) is a typical example. Imogen Tyler has noted how the focus on personal transformation in 1970s feminist politics was caricatured by media commentators as a narcissistic, shallow obsession with the self, and a retreat from social and political concerns (2005, p. 36), and she identifies the same tendency in more recent media portrayals of feminism (p. 36). However, Tyler suggests that consciousness-raising practices call into question the assumption of work on the self as inherently apolitical; indeed, she draws on Derrida to suggest that a certain form of self-regard, even

narcissism, is a necessary pre-requisite to truly ethical relations with others (p. 33).

As Tyler's comments demonstrate, consciousness-raising – and self-care more broadly – will be perceived in different ways, depending on the notions of ethico-political subjectivity informing the act of problematising self-care. Consciousness-raising has usually meant the identification and repudiation of those aspects of the self that are seen as compromising women's freedom, and, in some forms, working towards a more authentic subjectivity. It therefore involves re-fashioning the self in accordance with particular norms of ethical conduct, embodied in figures such as the non-patriarchal self, the feminist self, or the woman-identified-woman (Tyler 2005, p. 32).

As it is typically understood, consciousness-raising creates a paradox for feminism's reliance on women's feelings and experience: if women's consciousness needs raising, what does this say about the claimed value of their existing feelings and experiences? (Ferrell 2000, p. 103-105). The concept and practice of 'the personal is political', for instance, grants considerable truth value to the voice of the female subject, yet retains a constructionist premise, as it seeks to re-make this self in accordance with feminist principles. The difficulty lies in simultaneously valuing the experiences, feelings, and stories of women, *and* rejecting those aspects of female subjectivity designated as patriarchally constructed.

Ferrell, for one, does not feel that these complexities are solely disadvantageous ones: "feminist practice took the empirical paradox it began with and nurtured it quite truthfully, finding strategies to deal with ambivalence" (2000, p. 106). Thus, consciousness-raising need not be dismissed as a misguided or mistaken

strategy. The crucial basis for assessing it involves distinguishing between self-transformation as a practice founded on an ideal, coherent feminist self and in accordance with general norms, compared to a technical practice which is limited, ongoing, and continually re-negotiated: a practice in which the feminist self is a provisional artefact.

An example of the latter approach can be found in *The Modern Girl* (1993), where Lesley Johnson re-reads feminist autobiographies – “awakening”, or “coming to voice” narratives – from a more specified perspective. Rather than retrospectively labelling these accounts as naïve or oxymoronic, Johnson offers a re-description of them as ethico-political techniques, situated in particular historical and cultural contexts, and serving quite precise political purposes. Like Wendy Brown (1991), Johnson applies Foucault’s work to her problem, and finds significant similarities between feminist awakening narratives and Christian confessional practices. Rather than being seen as liberating a more authentic self, consciousness-raising can be understood as a practice (or set of practices) which help to constitute a specific kind of political agent (1993, pp. 18-20).

Care of self is also important in those political techniques that are explicitly outward or other-directed. The formation of the feminist self as a reflective, responsive, and world-directed subject would logically seem to demand sustained attention to self-care. From this perspective, self-care and self-other ethics are best viewed as complementary and inter-dependent, and therefore their connections need nuanced articulation. In the following chapter section, my primary aim is to demonstrate that Foucault’s work on care of the self allows for precisely this kind of balance. In fact, Foucault’s self-aesthetics does not simply accommodate outward-directed ethical concerns and practices, but

enhances them. Further, this conception of ethics pre-supposes the formation of a particular kind of subjectivity, with certain highly useful capacities, particularly responsibility, and creative resistance to normalisation. It is qualities like these which recommend care of the self to feminist sexual politics – especially with regard to heterosexuality, as I discuss in the second half of the chapter.

Problematizing Foucault's ethics of self-care

In *The Use of Pleasure: The History of Sexuality* Volume II (1985), Foucault examined a number of ethical models drawn from historical literary sources. This second volume of his unfinished series on 'sexuality' included discussions of ancient Greek and Roman methods of self-care and self-formation.³⁶ In the third volume, *The Care of the Self: The History of Sexuality* Volume III (1986), in his final lectures at the College de France, and in several published interviews, he continued to pursue the overall theme of the care of the self, and its ethical potential in his own contemporary context.

Although he was very clear that he was not recommending any simplistic importation of ancient ethics into the present-day, there were a number of its features that Foucault found attractive and potentially useful, especially the relative lack of emphasis on moral codes or rules, and the absence of a "hermeneutics of desire": the assumption of hidden inner feelings, drives, and motivations behind people's actions, to be uncovered and deciphered with the right tools (Levy 1998, p. 81).

³⁶ Mark Olssen (2006) lists "the Greeks, the Romans, and the Renaissance (Burckhardt) as well as contemporary models" as influencing Foucault's ethics of "self-creation".

Perhaps the best known articulation of this is Foucault's proposal that "from the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art" (1983, p. 237). Also, "That life, because of its mortality, has to be a work of art is a remarkable theme" (cited in Ure 2007, p. 21).³⁷ As Palmer notes, this suggests a view of self-hood or subjectivity as "less like a thing present before us, and more like a work or a project to be carried out; whose truth is not passively deciphered but is dynamically created" (1998).

As well as generating much scholarly interest, Foucault's work on ancient Greek and Roman ethics has been subjected to numerous criticisms. In particular, his proposal that an aesthetics of the self has potential in a more contemporary context has proved contentious. In these criticisms, there are two primary threads: antagonism towards the perceived apolitical narcissism of self-care; and suspicion of the specifically aesthetic dimension of the 'art of living'.³⁸ These are closely related, yet distinct points, and I have tried to render them as such in describing them.

When the last two volumes of *The History of Sexuality* appeared, many critics and Foucault adherents alike saw the focus on self-care as an unexpected move away from politics as a topic, towards an individualised and superficial interest in aesthetics, akin to nineteenth-century dandyism (Levy 1998, p. 79; Widder 2004, p. 427; Moss 2004, p. 39), despite Foucault's own insistence that this was not the case (Bourgault 2007). Foucault's proposal that we treat our selves as "a work of art" prompted intense opposition, and the accusation that he had turned

³⁷ The linking of self-aesthetics to mortality, to human finitude, adds extra weight and depth to self-care; indeed, perhaps this was also what he had in mind in "the self is not given to us"?

³⁸ In feminist criticisms of self-care, as I describe further on, there is an additional dimension: the objection to Foucault having selected only 'male-centred' examples in his ethical studies.

away from politics towards a kind of resigned or fatalistic narcissism (Tobias 2005, p. 65; Boothroyd 1996, p. 362; Hofmeyr 2003, p. 48; Levy 1998, p. 79). These criticisms of a perceived flight from politics have obvious parallels with Martha Nussbaum's argument that Butler and her intellectual followers have lapsed into "hip defeatism" and political "quietism", as described in my first chapter.

Similar concerns were expressed by writers such as Terry Eagleton, who condemned the notion of self-aesthetics as "a feeble response" to the dominance of commodity capitalism, a sign that Foucault had given up on political struggle, and turned his focus to carving out a space for small-scale, individualist self-transformation (Bennett 1996, p. 659). Foucault's earlier claim that power permeates all aspects of social relations was interpreted as diffusing power to such an extent that it became meaningless. Coupled with the notion of aesthetics, the suggestion was that his work was (or had become) deeply fatalistic and callous (Bennett 1996, p. 669, note 27).

Another key objection to Foucault's self-care is that such a focus on one's self is inescapably solipsistic – it cultivates an ethically and socially isolated, ultra-individualist subject, who feels free to ignore or even exploit others (Bennett 1996, p. 660). Foucault himself anticipated this objection, noting that there is a strong tradition in Western thought that views self-care as ethically 'suspect'; Christianity, through its doctrine of *agape* (other-directed love), has been significant in the dominance of this view, though not solely responsible (1987, pp. 115-6; McNeill 1998, p. 59). Certainly, the assumption that care of the self is ethically dubious has been implicit in much of the opposition to Foucault's treatment of it. In some feminist responses, for instance, the notion that ethics is

properly a matter of care and attention to the other has generated much of the antagonism towards an aesthetics of the self.

Among progressive or left scholars more broadly, Michael Ure and Martin Jay concur that Foucault's and Baudelaire's self-aesthetics is "elite and narcissistic", and displays "minimal regard for others" (Ure 2007, p. 47; Moss 2004, p. 37). Similarly, Paul Healy worries that Foucault's aesthetic subject is unconnected and unaccountable – too Nietzschean, and not sufficiently Kantian (2001, p. 57). For Healy, Foucault's call to "create ourselves as a work of art" celebrates a radically autonomous sovereign self, along Nietzschean lines (p. 58).

Foucault's use of terms like 'aesthetics', and 'art of living', has been a second important point of contention. Jane Bennett (1996) and David Boothroyd (1996) have both observed that many philosophical and social theorists perceive aesthetics as "morally suspect" (Bennett p. 653), and tend to oppose aesthetics to ethics. For Terry Eagleton, Alex Callinicos, Richard Wolin, and Christopher Norris, aesthetics cannot be "seriously ethical" (Bennett 658); it has a place in contemporary social and cultural theory, but not within the moral or political realm (see also Widder 2004, p. 427). In particular, an over-emphasis on aesthetics (as perceived in Foucault's work) is viewed as superficial, concerned only with surfaces and appearances, and as reducing ethical considerations to mere matters of style. Thus, Eagleton asks: "What would a stylish rape look like, precisely?" (cited in Boothroyd 1996, p. 371). This deliberately emotive challenge, interestingly, points to the very site where some feminists have found enormous potential: the utility of self-care in contexts of abuse and violence, such as rape. I turn my attention to this issue later in the chapter.

These objections to Foucault's work on self-care, with their underlying normative assumptions of proper ethics and politics, tread very similar intellectual ground to the feminist repudiations of post-structuralism that I discussed in Chapter One. There are further parallels too; for instance, Foucault's critics argued that foregrounding aesthetics can work to hide oppression, cruelty, or violence – focusing on beautiful surfaces distracts us from these uglier underlying realities (Bennett 1996, p. 664). In this sense, Foucault was accused of finding power (meaning domination or hierarchy) too exciting and attractive, which recalls Nussbaum's claim that Butler finds "subversion" to be "so riveting, so sexy, that it is a bad dream to think the world will actually get better. What a bore equality is! No bondage, no delight" (Nussbaum 1999, p. 15).

The rhetorical opposing of aesthetics to material political struggle has often been deployed, in criticisms of Foucault specifically, and of post-structuralism and post-modernism in general (Bennett 1996, p. 659). However, Bennett contends that Foucault's work is itself materially grounded. The difference, she argues, is that Foucault does not posit a single entity or set of phenomena as *the* materiality which determines everything else (1996, p. 660). She also notes that for arguments purporting to be materialist, they – Eagleton in particular – exhibit a marked distrust of bodies and desires, which they tend to associate with the presumed hedonism of Foucault's aesthetic selves (Bennett 1996, p. 662; Boothroyd 1996).

Despite attempts to defend Foucault's account of aesthetics by noting its materiality, the very idea of making oneself a work of art is thought by its critics to be deeply insulting to people living in conditions of extreme deprivation, poverty, or exploitation, who are struggling to merely stay alive (Tobias 2005;

Callinicos in Bennett 1996, pp. 659, 669 fn 27). Similarly, feminist criticisms of post-structuralist and post-modernist theories have often stressed that oppressed people cannot afford the luxury of symbolic ‘play’, or aesthetic pleasures. To reference Nussbaum once more, in her repudiation of Butler, she argued that Butler’s apparent valorisation of performance, parody, and style was extremely offensive to poor populations, in India for example, who were more concerned with physical safety, and getting enough food and clean water. Interestingly, in response to Nussbaum, Kapur retorted that it was in fact insulting to assume that people living in poverty and oppression are *not* interested in, and do not need, ‘aesthetic’ pleasures (2001, p. 83). As I noted in Chapter One, Kapur (and others) argued that Nussbaum portrayed Indian women as utterly victimised, oppressed, and impoverished (pp. 82-83).

While Kapur’s point (that we cannot assume that people preoccupied with basic survival do not need beauty or pleasure) is in principle a valid one, neither Foucault nor Butler were recommending that we all behave as if life is a dazzling stage performance. In Butler’s case, the notion of ‘performativity’, which she articulated at the height of queer theory in the 1990s, is complex, and not linked to celebration or pleasure in any inherent fashion. In Foucault’s case, dismissal of self-aesthetics on these grounds evacuates it of its *askesis*, its disciplinary practices, and its ethical labour. Work on the self, as Foucault theorised it, is not equivalent to the self-denial or renunciation of asceticism (Bennett 1996, p. 668, footnote 4), but it is nevertheless a practice of self-discipline (Foucault 1987, p. 113).

The perception that aesthetics involves flight from material realities, and taking refuge in superficial luxuries, has had a significant bearing on critical responses to self-care. Indeed, the negative association of Foucault’s self-aesthetics with

the particular case of nineteenth-century dandyism (especially Baudelaire's writings) has been a common feature of the more antagonistic responses (Bennett 1996, p. 663).³⁹ Michael Ure's 'Senecan Moods' (2007) is a useful demonstration of how this kind of reading of Foucault is constructed, and what the consequences can be.

Ure has a specific and quite negative idea of 'aesthetics' in mind when he claims that in using this term, Foucault has misled his readers as to the serious, profound character of Greco-Roman ethics – by conflating these ethics with the far more superficial and narcissistic works of nineteenth-century dandyism (2007, p. 25; Hadot 1995; Connolly 1993, p. 374). When Foucault suggests that the self should be "a work of art", precisely because "the self is not given to us" Ure reads this as advocating an arbitrary, frivolous, and norm-less celebration of the self (2007, p. 48), a celebration of "the freedom of undefined, unrestricted self-invention" (2007, p. 25, p. 27). By contrast, he claims, "Like the Hellenistic thinkers, Nietzsche conceives this ethics as a continuous, difficult and sometimes painful labour that the self performs on itself, rather than as a heightening of narcissistic self-preoccupation" (2007, p. 24).

Ure presents the ancient texts, and Nietzsche's use of them, as "therapeutic", in contrast to Foucault's "purely aesthetic" and "misleadingly aestheticized" reading (2007, p. 22). Rather than the "radical creativity" of Foucault's aesthetics, he argues, it is best to understand Nietzsche and the ancient texts in terms of the psycho-analytic notion of narcissism (Ure 2007, p. 25). According to Ure, the ethical task, for the ancients and for Nietzsche, was to seek to purge

³⁹ To be sure, Foucault did list nineteenth-century dandyism as one of the few modern examples of self-aesthetics, and elsewhere in his work, he has shown considerable interest in writers like Baudelaire; but this does not support the claim that he saw dandyism as an ideal model for an art of living.

oneself of the narcissistic desire for control and mastery; to accept the wounds of the self and be reconciled to our limitations. Foucault's art of living, he argues, is in contrast an irresponsible attempt to flee from the self, a self-estrangement that is literally pathological, a "Baudelairean fantasy of 'unrestricted', open-ended self-invention" (Ure 2007, p. 48). The limitations and emptiness of Foucault's subject are caused by his "resistance" to psychoanalysis, and to the possibility of self-interiority (Ure 2007, p. 49). Unlike the Ancient Stoics' attempts to accept reality, Foucault tries to escape or outrun human finitude through an aesthetics of the self (Ure 2007, pp. 47-51).

Ure's application of psychoanalysis to ancient Greco-Roman ethical writings raises its own difficulties: not only is the psycho-analytic account of subjectivity not universal or trans-historical, but to assume that the ancients were grappling with the same set of problems as Nietzsche did, and that we apparently should, is highly problematic (see Hirst & Woolley 1982). However, my main reason for citing Ure's approach to Foucault is as an example of a particular definition of aesthetics – as superficial, unrelated to ethics, narcissistic, and apolitical – being used to call the uses and relevance of an art of living into question. My purpose is not so much to defend Foucault on this point, as to demonstrate a generalising problem in certain critical objections to self-care, and the way this militates against appreciating its potential application to politics, specifically, problems of sexual politics.

In feminist responses that are largely antagonistic to Foucault's research interest in the art of living, the criticisms have been very similar to those in the wider theoretical literature. For feminist critics, care of the self, as Foucault presented it, was perceived as "individualistic", "masculine" and antithetical to feminist objectives and ideals (Allen 2004, p. 236). In particular, his insistence that self-

care should be seen as prior to care for others (Foucault 1987, p. 118) has proven contentious, and is often read as an attempt to ignore relations with others altogether.

Amy Allen's criticisms of self-care are illustrative of this kind of feminist appraisal. Allen objects to Foucault's conceptions of power and self-care, particularly from the standpoint of "feminist relational models", which foreground "mutuality, communication, and reciprocity" (2004, p. 247). In her view, Foucault's account "founders" (p. 248) when it comes to questions of agency and transformation, because we only become capable of these *via* "communicative, mutual, reciprocal relations with others" (Allen 2004, p. 252).⁴⁰

In fact, Allen claims that reciprocity itself provokes a certain "anxiety" in Foucault. She cites an example in *The Use of Pleasure*, where he comments on how notions of the ideal erotic relation shifted from man-boy to husband-wife, and in doing so, displays a degree of uneasy distaste regarding the latter. Allen links this to the increased emphasis on reciprocity in marital relations, implying that Foucault prefers the more explicitly asymmetrical relation of adult male and boy (2004, p. 247). However, as Allen notes herself – on the same page – Foucault's historical account shows how the socio-cultural shift to marital relations "paved the way" for the dominance of reproductive heterosexuality as the model of normative and legitimate sexuality (p. 247). *If* Foucault shows apprehension in detailing these shifts, could *this* not be sufficient reason?

⁴⁰ Of course, the ideal of relational self-formation that Allen advocates is not a universal truth either; it is a product of a specific type of feminist orientation.

In a much earlier critical commentary, Rosalyn Diprose (1987) reviewed *The Use of Pleasure* soon after its translation into English. At this time, Foucault's earlier accounts of disciplinary power and the history of sexuality were becoming increasingly influential, and Diprose notes her own more positive view of these previous works, compared to her markedly critical, even antagonistic, stance towards Foucault's ethics of self-care. In particular, she finds fault with Foucault's promotion of an "aesthetics of existence", which she understands as "the art of living based on personal choice" (1987, p. 101). In Diprose's view, Foucault's recommendation that self-care be practised without "an analytical or necessary link" to "other social, economic or political structures" (Foucault in Diprose 1987, p. 101) presents an irresolvable difficulty. On her reading, Foucault promotes an ethics independent of social context, which is antithetical to a feminist perspective (Diprose 1987, p. 101). She appears to see Foucault's self-care as a kind of unfettered libertarianism, a cultivation of the self without norms or limits; consequently, she refuses to concede that it has any ethical dimensions.

Diprose also argues that Foucault deliberately glosses over the inherent inequalities of ancient Greek ethics, particularly the exclusion of designated 'others', and the dissymmetry of sexual difference. A master-slave model – 'I can only be a subject if you are an object'⁴¹ – sustains this mode of ethical self-formation (Diprose 1987. pp. 95, 101). The structural dissymmetry of Greek ethical relations and Foucault's apparent suppression of this problem must, for Diprose, apply equally to his interest in self-care's more contemporary possibilities. In fact, she maintains this reading over and against Foucault's explicit rejection of it, cited in her own discussion.⁴²

⁴¹ I have borrowed this phrase from Wendy Parkins (1999).

⁴² Diprose notes how Foucault described the ancient Greeks' emphasis on hierarchy and male virility as "quite disgusting!" (Diprose 1987, p. 101).

Finally, Diprose argues that Foucault's self-aesthetics may be a possibility for men, but is not (yet) for women: "the male body is already a work of art"; "men have a head start in the ethic Foucault proposes" (1987, p. 101). According to this argument, only those who are already subjects can engage in the "art of living". I make two criticisms of this argument: one theoretical and the other political. The former is to note that Diprose makes the problematic assumption that ethical self-care is exercised *after* the formation of subjectivity, rather than being constitutive of it. The latter is based on the potential costs of rejecting self-care on the grounds that women – unlike men – are not yet in a position to practise this kind of self-formation.

In her 1994 *Volatile Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz also foregrounded Foucault's apparent exclusion of women from his self-aesthetics.⁴³ Grosz noted that "By the time he writes *The Use of Pleasure*, Foucault is quite open about the fact that his privileged object of investigation, the 'techniques of self', refers only to men" (1994, p. 158). In itself, this would not necessarily pose a problem; however, she argued, it *is* a problem because Foucault goes much further to suggest

...that there was not a corresponding ethics of women's self-production during the classical age: he claims that women had to wait until the advent of an 'ethics of marital relations' in the Middle Ages, as if questions of moral self-regulation were not relevant to women up to this period (1994, pp. 158-9).

Foucault's alleged offence is a serious one, and forms a significant part of Grosz's dismissal. In response to this charge, there are at least two possible

⁴³ In another source, Grosz makes a similar claim that Foucault deliberately excludes women in his genealogical work on ethics (1992, p. 211).

defences of Foucault. First, it could be said that as part of his specific intellectual stance, he is deliberately not writing for others – in this case women – who need to write their own histories. In a footnote, Grosz anticipates this, and dismisses it by presenting “writing for others” or “writing only for oneself” as the only possible options – and the latter as an ethically compromised and disingenuous position (1994, p. 225). Second, one could argue that Foucault’s point about women’s exclusion refers to public, recorded sources, as his work on self-care derives from the study of written, literary sources from ancient Greece. Thus, he is not assuming that women were not concerned with ethical questions or conduct; rather, the problem is one of historiography, and he is pointing to the relative absence of more formal historical records of women’s moral concerns prior to the Medieval period.

In a sense, however, these responses are neither relevant nor required, as Grosz’s critique of Foucault on this point is unwarranted. It is difficult, in fact, to respond to her argument at face value, as Foucault does not “claim”, or even imply, anything of the sort. In *The Use of Pleasure*, his point that Greek ethics was “addressed to men” is indeed on the same page as a comment regarding “an ethics of marital relations” in the Middle Ages (1985, p. 22); but the points about marital ethics precede those about Greek self-care, and are illustrative of a broader argument, not a direct comparison. In short, Foucault does not claim that Medieval marital ethics were the first expression of female ethical self-formation.

In my view, these kinds of feminist criticisms are motivated by two principal factors. The first is a conceptual commitment to the primacy of other- or outward-directed ethics. Allen’s and Diprose’s accounts both suggest that self-care is quite incommensurable with feminist politics (1987, p. 97). Other

feminists have agreed: Jane Flax, for instance, argued that Foucault's self-aesthetics "precludes the possibility of enduring attachments or responsibilities to another... [and] is deeply antithetical to feminist views of self in relation to others" (1991, p. 217).

Second, an attachment to sexual difference as a foundational category is also instrumental in this feminist hostility to Foucault's work on self-care. This is most obvious when Diprose and Grosz agree that Foucault's ethics of the self is only directed to men, and only relevant to men (see also Braidotti 1986). Diprose argues that in Foucault's terms, the "art of living" is not a possibility for women, thus assuming a basic continuity of masculinity from ancient Greek society to the present. For Grosz, Foucault openly declares his exclusive interest in self-care for men, and even forecloses its possible extension to women.

In arguing thus, Diprose and Grosz both assume the categories of 'male' and 'female' to be internally homogenous, and historically continuous. To present ancient Greek and late twentieth-century masculinity as essentially equivalent, however, is to imply that male – and female – subjectivity, and the forces which shape it, have remained largely unchanged for well over 2,000 years. Thus Diprose assumes that Foucault's study of ancient Greek ethics codified in written form, and his favourable view of the possibilities for these ethics in a contemporary context, must be one and the same (1987, p. 102). This is despite her own citing of Foucault's refusal to simply transpose practices or beliefs from the past (Diprose 1987, p. 100). Indeed, he clearly did not advocate any wholesale or uncritical adoption of Ancient Greek or Stoic ethics (Foucault 1987; Levy 1998, p. 80; Bennett 1996, p. 670, note 41).

Further, while Diprose and Grosz both cite Foucault's well-known specification: "It was an ethics for men: an ethics thought, written, and taught by men, and addressed to men – to free men, obviously" (1985, p. 22), they ignore the important qualification being made. The category of 'free' – that is, not a slave – can be viewed as being equally important as the status of 'men'. Foucault not only acknowledges that Greek self-care was directed to men, he further specifies its application to a particular class of men. Rather than being completely blind to social differences and statuses, he is acutely aware of them.

Obviously, the feminist literature on Foucault – like all the literature on Foucault – is characterised by varying and diverse interpretations, and it is not my aim or purpose to advance a particular reading as *the* correct one. My interest in the problem posed by Foucault's account of self-care is in a seeming refusal by some of his feminist critics to take him at his word, and the subsequent move to pre-empt the importation or adaptation of this part of his work for feminist purposes.

The utility of self-care

Contrary to the criticisms discussed in the previous section, there is a strong case to be made for the ethical and political significance of self-aesthetics; indeed, in different forms, it already has a long-standing place in many political movements. First, though, it is important to emphasise that while care of the self for Foucault is inherently ethical, he was careful to stress that ethics is irreducible to self-care alone (McNeill 1998, p. 60). In fact, he explicitly rejected the possibility of self-care as any kind of 'solution' or discovery of a truth that will free its subjects from subjection. When asked in an interview if he felt that we should "actualise this care for self" in the contemporary context,

Foucault replied: “Absolutely, but I am not doing that in order to say: ‘Unfortunately we have forgotten the care for the self. Here is the care for the self. It is the key to everything’” (1987, p. 125).

Rather than looking to ancient models of self-care for a general solution to socio-political problems, Foucault saw them as constitutive ethical practices worth examining for their potential utility in contemporary circumstances. It was in this context that he problematised what he saw as Western philosophy’s focus on the Delphic “know thyself” over and above the Socratic “take care of oneself” (Bourgault 2011). Hofmeyr makes a similar point, arguing that to oppose self-creation to ethical subjectivity is “a false contradiction” (2003, p. 41).

Established and contrasting notions of ‘aesthetic’ have been important determinants of how Foucauldian self-care has been understood and variously assessed. For example, in seeking to clarify and defend Foucault’s self-care, Jane Bennett has turned to Friedrich Schiller’s late eighteenth-century work on aesthetic education, in which Schiller made a case for aesthetics being necessary to ethics as well as reason; neither alone is sufficient (1996, p. 654). The term “aesthetic sensibility”, referring to the cultivation and disciplining of the self into a responsive, ethically sensitive awareness, allows Bennett to argue that aesthetics is in fact essential to ethics (ibid). Bennett defends Foucault’s coupling of ethics and aesthetics, likening ethical self-formation to ‘the plastic’ arts of sculpture, pottery, and carving (1996, p. 667, p. 672, note 70).

David Boothroyd has also queried the manner in which ‘aesthetic’ and ‘ethical’ were presented by Foucault’s critics, especially Terry Eagleton, who scathingly accused Foucault of placing alimentary concerns on a par with the ethical

(Boothroyd 1996, p. 361). Boothroyd responded in part by questioning why alimentary issues should *not* be considered in ethical terms (see also Panagia 2009, pp. 141-42). As I noted in Chapter Two, a more complex understanding of ‘ethics’ encompasses not only political and civic matters, but also those that come under “diet, sexuality, [and] household management...” (Colebrook 1998); all of these aspects of one’s life can provide sites and occasions of ethical problematisation.

Further, against the view that care of the self means disregarding others, alternative accounts have interpreted Foucault’s conception of self-care as inextricably connected to the capacity to properly apprehend, and care for, others (Boothroyd 1996, p. 382; Panagia 2009, p. 148). Rather than being opposed to or in competition with self-other, self-care can in fact enrich self-other relations – or even be a foundation for them: “only a subject understood in terms of his/her autochthonous self-fashioning capacity and which sustains itself ‘before’ it encounters the Other, can *respond without* violating the other’s alterity” (Boothroyd 1996, p. 382).

Foucault’s work on Stoic philosophy, in particular, emphasises vital links between work on oneself, and responsibility to others and to one’s social context (Foucault 1987, p. 118, 120; Ure 2007, p. 23). Rather than self-care being a narcissistic obsession with oneself at the expense of others, then, Foucault’s conception assumes a basic connection between care for the self and care for others; how can one properly care for others if one has not first cared properly for oneself? These modes of ethical practice are not opposed or exclusive; they are implicated (McNeill 1998, pp. 60-61; Hofmeyr 2003, p. 47).

Some commentators on Foucauldian ethics have argued that care of the self, as conceived by Foucault, “turns on an essential openness towards alterity” (Hofmeyr 2003, p. 41, p. 56, note 17; McNeill 1998, p. 61). Further, self-care renders the self a stranger, and opens the self to all strangers and strangeness. The ethical practice of self-care in this sense is steeped in alterity, not narcissism (McNeill 1998, p. 62). As Hofmeyr puts this: “Proper care of the self, understood as an effort to affirm one’s liberty ... thus consists in violation of the self...” (2003, p. 45). The point, in this account, is first to avoid complacency and ossification, and second to attempt to avoid subjection, via ongoing, changing processes of self-transformation, with no endpoint or fixed *telos* (Hofmeyr 2003, p. 45; McNeill 1998, p. 62). Hofmeyr explains further that self-care “is a process through which constant pressure is exerted on our limits, [but] not to transcend them, for we need our limits as that which defines us” (2003, p. 46).

Therefore, to “stray afield of ourselves” can be seen as a technique we employ to protect our liberty; for instance, continually changing in order to prevent our self-government congealing into subjection or self-domination (Hofmeyr 2003, p. 57). This offers an alternative conception of ethico-political subjectivity to liberal models of mature, autonomous, and rational selves – but also to those notions of female subjectivity as inherently fragile, and lacking coherent boundaries.

Practices of self-estrangement and self-transformation are always situated within specific socio-historical contexts. I noted earlier Diprose’s rejection of Foucault’s concept of self-care on the basis that this aesthetics is un-connected to social structures, and thus to specific contexts, situations, and relations with others. She was not alone in this; Jane Flax wrote that, “I do not see how this

highly individualistic and atomistic quest for the ‘beautiful life’ could be reconciled with, for example, the care of children or with participation in a political community” (1991, p. 217). For many feminists and other left-oriented scholars, detachment from wider social structures equates to denial of social context.

However, in response, it could be argued that Foucault’s aim was to notionally separate self-care from theories of unified, determining systems, especially those that leave little room for the exercise of responsibility and liberty. Further, there are certainly many instances where feminists have sought to detach women – or the formation of femininity – from particular social structures or institutions (traditional marriage is just one example). Indeed, Diprose cites Foucault’s own recommendation “for ‘an ethics of acts and their pleasures which would take into account the pleasure of the other ... without reference to law [or] marriage’” (p. 103) – that is, *structures*. If Walker is correct regarding Foucault’s attraction to “a Greek-influenced personal ethics ... divorced from the coercions of any external power” (Walker 1994), is this a concept that feminists need necessarily reject out of hand?

I suggest that Foucault advocates a notion of ethics as work on the self by the self, without necessary, mechanical reference to a moral code or institution, or as he describes it: “‘a very strong structure of existence without any relation with ... an authoritarian system, with a disciplinary structure’” (in Walker 1994). This concept of ethics presupposes a capacity for liberty and self-formation in the subject, while also acknowledging its own technical nature and therefore its limits.

It is important to note the specific definition of freedom used here. As Bennett notes, it is different from Kant's and from Schiller's: for Foucault, freedom – or liberty – is contextual, historically situated, and implicated in power relations, rather than opposed to them (1996, p. 656). Further, his conception of transgression is not reducible to transcendence; rather, as I noted earlier, our limits are recognised as both necessary and enabling, as they help give meaning and shape to our actions (Hofmeyr 2003, p. 56).

The freedom of the subject in this sense is not absolute freedom from restrictions, or the freedom to act however one wishes. It is rather a particular kind of responsibility, the increase of one's capacity to regulate oneself and also to affect others – to exercise power, in terms of Foucault's elemental use of the term: “in its full, positive form, it was a power that one brought to bear on oneself in the power that one exercised over others” (Foucault in Patton 1994, p. 15). Patton thus sees Foucault's “cautious recommendation of the Greek practice of an ‘ethics of existence’” (p. 18) as offering “a different economy of power” for sexual subjectivity. Importantly though, Foucault distances his own concept of ethical subjectivity from the Greek dependence on structural inequality, and also from contemporary “discourses of truth about sexuality” (Patton 1994, p. 19).

Mark Olssen (2006) notes Foucault's “preference for a more Nietzschean emphasis on ‘self-creation’, or the Spinosian concept of ‘constitutive praxis’”. However, this ethical practice of the self is not an ungrounded, freely choosing one:

By ‘self-creation’ ... Foucault does not mean that each individual creates of and for him/herself as in the liberal conception of the subject ... Rather the individual uses the

existing ‘practices of the self’ that are ‘proposed, suggested and imposed upon him by his culture’ (Olssen 2006).

This is an essential qualification: “self-creation” does not refer to a rational self-contained subject, nor to a libertarian absence of constraints. It is rather a kind of interplay between the subject’s elemental capacities, and their particular historical and cultural context, including institutions, habits, expert knowledges, and disciplines (Bennett 1996, p. 660; Colebrook 1998; Hofmeyr 2003, p. 47).

It seems clear that Foucault does not envisage an ethical practice disconnected from any kind of context or institution. Explaining his notion of “‘how not to be governed’”, for instance, he insists that this is not a claim that “‘We do not want to be governed, and we do not want to be governed at all’” (in Olssen 2006). Rather than rejecting government *per se*, Foucault asks us to properly consider and scrutinise *how* we are governed, and on what terms:

Critique is a movement through which the subject gives itself the right to question truth concerning its power effects and to question power about its discourses of truth. Critique will be the art of voluntary inservitude, of reflective indocility. The essential function of critique would be that of desubjectification in a game of what one could call, in a word, the politics of truth (Foucault 1996, p. 386, in Olssen 2006).

The use of “reflective” here indicates that subjects do not engage in an absolute or uncritical resistance to government. Rather, they exercise an ongoing process of questioning and assessment, thus taking responsibility for their position and self-formation.

Self-care and the politics of heterosexuality

In the second half of this chapter, I explore in detail what an ethic of self-care, as I have described it above, may have to offer with regard to specific problems of (hetero)sexual politics. Obviously self-care will not be applicable to all issues of sexuality, and nor does it easily resolve the issues that I do examine here. My objective in what follows is to demonstrate its utility in particular contexts.

In order to conceive of sexual politics as an art of living, one must consider it historically and technically, which includes appreciation of the significance of sexuality to subjectivity, coupled with a sceptical attitude to this significance. When describing the importance of issues of sexuality for feminism, for instance, Margareta Jolly does not dismiss this as an exaggeration of sexuality's significance, or as an unwarranted and naïve obsession with sexuality. Instead, she stresses a number of historical and cultural factors which help explain why sexuality has been viewed as central to feminist politics: women's sexual behaviour has been subject to far more regulation than men's; consequences – pregnancy, loss of social status or family – have been potentially much more serious (2005, p. 19). In the same way, locating issues of sexuality – and feminism's theoretical and political responses to them – within their specific contexts permits us to identify where we may need to depart from these responses, while remaining indebted to their contributions.

Feminist efforts at countering prevailing norms of sexuality, especially those advocated by sexology, can usefully illustrate my argument at this point. In the 1960s and 1970s, an influential feminist argument held that women's sexuality was primarily located in the clitoris rather than the vagina. The re-inscription of female sexuality in clitoral terms represented an important response to the

theoretical and political problems feminists had identified with penetrative heterosexual intercourse (Hite 1977; Koedt 1973; Whiting 1972). It was also a critical intervention into the sexological theories and practices of the time. Twentieth-century western sexologists had adopted a psychoanalytic definition of ‘normal’ female sexuality as passive, incomplete, and vaginal.⁴⁴ Vaginal orgasm was thus seen as confirmation of mature feminine sexuality, which paradoxically was characterised by neurosis, dependence, and lack. The vagina was a physical lack, a hole needing to be filled, and women were psychologically incomplete, lacking ethical capacity and integrity (Dyer 2004, pp. 50-56; Lunbeck 2002, p. 261; Tuana 2004, p. 216).⁴⁵

Under these circumstances, asserting the primacy of the clitoris was for many feminists an empowering strategy for women to claim sexual autonomy and pleasure, and refuse the conventional model of male-female penetrative sex, with its perceived hierarchical associations (Bosley 2010, p. 659; Ehrenreich et al 1987, p. 67; Moore 2009, p. 4). Clitoral-centred sexuality formed the basis for an independent feminine sexuality that was not defined in terms of vaginal ‘lack’, and therefore did not require the penis for completion or wholeness. These feminist interventions gained additional credence from innovations in sexological research, most notably Masters and Johnson (1966), and the earlier work of Alfred Kinsey (1953). These studies lent scientific legitimacy to the argument that female sexual pleasure, and orgasmic potential, were located in the clitoris (Bosley 2010, p. 659).

⁴⁴ Although Freud is usually singled out as the culprit here, what is more interesting is why and how vaginal sexuality as an ideal feminine subjectivity became so entrenched in mid-twentieth century western scientific and cultural domains, especially in North America.

⁴⁵ The notion of women as ethically immature has, of course, a much longer history (e.g. Kant, Rousseau). However, what was significant about the quasi-Freudian ideal of vaginal orgasm was that it articulated this immaturity, and its possible transcendence, in terms of sexual physiology and response, and in a biomedical institution.

While the valorisation of clitoral sexuality was theoretically and politically useful, it also had limitations. Although it offered an alternative to psychoanalytic accounts of vaginal sexuality, it nevertheless retained the psychoanalytic model of the body as a series of hierarchically-ordered erotogenic zones. However, simply re-valuing one zone over another does not overcome all of the original problems. Further, rather than challenging the dominance of intercourse, the clitoral ideal of female sexuality sidestepped the problem by re-locating female sexual pleasure.

There are, of course, alternatives to investing parts of the body with inherent political significance. Luce Irigaray, for example, refuses to locate women's sexuality *anywhere* in the body – or she locates it *everywhere* (1985), while in Deleuzian-influenced perspectives, bodies are not constituted by pre-determined erotogenic zones; rather, erotic zones or sites are *produced* via surface effects and connections (Massumi 1992, p. 82; Grosz 1994).

It is equally important, however, to appreciate the 'clitoral model' as part of its particular historical and cultural moment. If it is seen as a strategic intervention, a protest against the imperative of vaginal sexuality, noting its limitations need not entail dismissing it as "misleading" or "phallogentric", as Grosz does, for example (1989, p. 114; 1986, p. 76). I noted earlier how Lesley Johnson re-specified feminist 'awakening' narratives as serving particular political and ethical purposes (1993). A similar strategy of re-description can be usefully applied here, particularly when coupled with the concept of sexuality as self-care, as outlined previously. Acknowledging the historical and cultural context of the clitoral model, as a reaction against a normative orthodoxy, allows us to appreciate its significance. With respect to its political rationale and purpose, it was a powerful concept with definite effects.

In her discussion of 1970s feminist texts on women's genital anatomy (such as *Our Bodies, Our Selves* from the Boston Women's Health Collective), Nancy Tuana is admirably forthright in her acknowledgement that revealing the definitive scientific truth about female sexuality was not exactly the point: "These cartographies were and are fueled by our desire to transform normative heterosexuality's vagina-only attention to pleasure" (2004, p. 211).

It is when or if such models transform from strategic interventions into normative orthodoxies, that they in turn impose constraints on sexual politics. For instance, some feminists felt it was imperative that female sexuality be located in a specific corporeal site, preferably the clitoris, as the most empowering and the least heterosexual option (Bennett 1993). When the clitoral model functions as a generalised ideal – "a new dogma", as Moore puts it (2009, p. 5) – the vagina is disqualified as a site of sexual pleasure, rendered a passive, nerveless organ, and penetrative sex is defined as reproducing oppressive heterosexist structures (Lunbeck 2002, p. 262; Segal 1994, pp. 107-108; Tuana 2004, p. 217). The assumption is that the vagina and sexual penetration are so heavily coded with passivity and submission that avoidance is the only viable option. To be penetrated, however, is not inherently a passive situation, and passivity does not signify consent to domination and powerlessness *by definition* (Snitow 1994, p. 183).⁴⁶

Alison Moore's approach to Marie Bonaparte, the early twentieth-century psycho-analyst, illustrates these points, and also demonstrates the significant yields of historicised accounts. Moore notes widespread feminist hostility to

⁴⁶ David Odell's discussion of Leo Bersani (1992) was of key importance to me in re-thinking the relations between penetration and passivity, and the presumption that passivity necessarily equates to submission.

Bonaparte, particularly regarding her negative conception of clitoral pleasure compared to vaginal, and the surgery she underwent to move her clitoris closer to her vagina (2009, p. 2). From normative feminist viewpoints, Bonaparte has been “anathematised” and “vilified”, but Moore argues for the importance of situating Bonaparte in her socio-historical context, and avoiding the tendency to employ “a reductive feminist/anti-feminist barometer” in evaluating her work (2009, p. 2). It is only by appreciating all the key aspects of Bonaparte’s historical context that we can reasonably understand her perspective on female sexuality – which does not equate to uncritical acceptance of it.⁴⁷ As Jocelyn Bosley argues,

The feminist or antifeminist meaning(s) of any claim, scientific or otherwise, can therefore be assessed only in terms of the socio-political *milieu* through which the claim was formulated, deployed, and inevitably transfigured (Bosley 2010, p. 659).

Interestingly, Moore also emphasises another aspect of sexology that has not received as much attention as the vaginal/clitoral hierarchy: the social and scientific demand that women demonstrate orgasmic pleasure in heterosexual sex, according to a specific “nervous” model of physical response (2009, p. 3).

Discussing her research on the psychiatric diagnosis and treatment of Female Sexual Dysfunction (FSD), Chloe Taylor suggests that psychiatry in the late twentieth century has shifted its primary focus “from managing abnormalities to intervening in conditions that are not even abnormal (in the sense of unusual), but are simply considered undesirable” (2010, p. 189). The category of FSD, Taylor contends, is not so much a medico-psychiatric problem as it is a

⁴⁷ I do not have sufficient space to describe Moore’s treatment of Bonaparte in detail; however, she provides an impressively in-depth picture of Bonaparte’s life story, intellectual career, and how both were powerfully shaped by contemporary gender relations in France, colonialist views of Asian and African sexuality, and Bonaparte’s own ambivalent position within French aristocracy.

“regulatory ideal” of proper female heterosexuality (2010, p. 191). Inspired by Foucault’s critique of medical and psychiatric ‘normalisation’, and his work on self-aesthetics, Taylor proposes abandoning normative conceptions like FSD, and considering sexuality as an aesthetic question:

While the two most common questions that people ask sexologists are “am I normal?” and “is my partner normal?”, we don’t want artworks or artistic performances to be “normal.” We want art to be extraordinary, and to demonstrate skill rather than to reflect nature. ... I think we can take up Foucault’s suggestion of an aesthetic approach to sexuality in more interesting, or at least non-normative, non-essentializing ways (2010, p. 196).

Tuana also makes an explicit connection between pleasures of the body, and Foucault’s art of living (2004, p. 215). This is not a naïve wish for sexual pleasures to be liberated from normative constraints; rather, following Taylor and Tuana, the problem of sexual politics shifts from devising alternative conceptions of sexuality in order to combat more dominant regulatory models, to a continuous re-fashioning of our sexual selves, depending on our current situation, and political objectives. Regarding feminist models of clitoral sexuality, for instance, we can appreciate their creativity and efficacy as repudiations of normative vaginal ideals, but without reifying ‘clitoral’ over ‘vaginal’, and recognising that the present moment may require something different.

Using Foucault’s art of living, as I have described it, a sexual aesthetics seems well suited to feminist subjects: it is accountable to present contexts; it furthers ethical engagements with others; it aims to continually enact different kinds of resistance to normalising institutions and ideals of sexuality; it assumes women’s capacity for agency – but also demands a high level of ethical

responsibility. Care of the self, as specifically defined here, enables care of others, and can militate against their exploitation or abuse.

If sexual subjectivity is practised as an art of living – as described earlier – then sexual encounters can have transformative possibilities. For example, inspired by Foucault’s recommendations for aesthetico-ethical practices of living, Moira Carmody (2005) conducted in-depth interviews with 25 Australian men and women, focused especially on how participants saw themselves as ethical sexual subjects. Carmody avoids over-generalising her findings, particularly given the small sample size; nevertheless, her research shows the extent to which (some) people understand their sexuality, and sexual relations, in terms of an ongoing ethical practice.

In the final section of this chapter, I discuss the yields of this aesthetic sexual subjectivity, by contrasting it with a more entrenched form of feminist sexual politics: one which problematises heterosexuality *as* gender oppression.

Heterosexuality and Rape

As I noted in Chapter Three, certain feminist perspectives – those identified with anti-pornography politics in particular – base their sexual politics on the assumption that sex is instrumental in maintaining men’s power over women. In these arguments, if sex conforms to an egalitarian ideal, devoid of power imbalance, dominance or submission, the integrity of the self is safeguarded; however, non-egalitarian sex, such as sado-masochism or penetration, poses a grave threat to women’s well-being. Specifically, pornography, heterosexuality, and sado-masochism are considered the most problematic forms of sexual practice, although sex in general is seen as enormously powerful and fraught

with danger for women. For feminists like Miriam, MacKinnon, Dworkin, and Jeffreys, sexual desire is not only objectifying and ‘masculine’, but also highly destructive to women, resulting in loss of subject-hood. The intensity of sexual experience, the intoxication and yielding of self, robs women of autonomy.⁴⁸ If sex in general is a risky enterprise, penetration only raises the stakes: the physical act of penetration forces open the female body, and at a psycho-symbolic level, it invades and shatters the integrity of the self (Dworkin 1979; Sanchez Taylor 2006, p. 47).⁴⁹

Obviously, there have been compelling social and historical factors motivating this kind of sexual politics, which I have no desire to trivialise, and sex can undeniably be destructive or invasive. Further, the general theme of sex as an act of male dominance, and female submission, has been a staple of sexological work; Wilhelm Stekel and Havelock Ellis are two notable examples (Moore 2009, p. 14). More recently, socio-biological explanations of sexual behaviour have recycled this idea that sex for women (not men) is a surrender of the self, seen as signifying consent to male control (Bosley 2010).

Ultimately, however, there are limits to feminist sexual politics defining (hetero)sex as fixed along these lines, especially insofar as this perspective has become a semi-orthodox one, rather than a strategic critical response. Other feminist theorists have questioned this protection-oriented sexual politics, arguing that it over-emphasises safety, and reproduces a long-standing somatophobia in its distrust of the sexual body (Diprose 1998, p. 3); and that it concedes the terms of a misogynist view of heterosexuality as enacting

⁴⁸ Both Dworkin and MacKinnon offer graphic accounts of women’s sexual position as ‘fuckees’, and the perceived consequences for self-hood (Cornell 1995, pp. 21, 23, 107). See also the arguments of the Southern Women’s Writing Collective (1990, pp. 515-6).

⁴⁹ Andrea Dworkin’s *Intercourse* (1979) is a particularly well-known example of this viewpoint.

women's violation and submission (Waldby 1995, p. 269; McKee 1997; Albury 1997).

In these scenarios of heterosexuality, the female body is *always violable*; it has “no recognisable boundaries” (Waldby 1995, p. 268). Consequently, the primary objective is seen to be safeguarding women's corporeality and subjectivity, through eliminating power differences in sexual relations (Ferrell 2000, p. 100). Specific notions of subjectivity, power, and sexuality in combination present women's bodies and selves as highly fragile, lacking form and boundaries – and therefore violable. In collapsing the penetrable sexual body with the more abstract notion of the incompleteness of female subjectivity, this manner of theorising sexual politics places all heterosexual practices on a continuum of violation and abuse, with rape as an endpoint.

Largely through the adoption of liberal notions of the subject as individual, autonomous, and self-determining, feminism has re-shaped how sexual violence is perceived (and experienced); sexual assault is understood as violating the subject's boundaries, the borders marking the limits of the self (Ferrell, p. 104, 110). However, defining loss of self as an inherently violating experience, as robbing us of our autonomy and agency, constrains how we can envision ‘safe’ – non-oppressive – sexual exchanges.

As I noted in Chapter Three, the assumption that power differences in sexual relations necessarily result in abuse or exploitation is an important tenet of those forms of feminist sexual politics that advocate women's withdrawal from heterosexuality. The broader idea here is that equality can only be ensured to the extent that sexual partners are as alike as possible in terms of social markers of difference (gender, race, age, class, disability). I argued that this is a very

constraining model, and also one which prioritises safeguarding women from abuse through avoiding power differentials. As bell hooks maintains, “it is more important to learn ways to be ‘just’ in situations where there is a power imbalance, rather than to assume that exploitation and abuse are the ‘natural’ outcome of all such encounters” (in Taylor 2011, p. 194). Indeed, most women (and men) deal with multiple kinds of power inequalities on a daily basis, at work for instance; however, sexual relations are seen as imbued with special significance in terms of their potential for damage and exploitation.

It is important to emphasise that this view of (hetero)sexual relations is not confined to one group of academic feminists, nor is it a thing of the past. Rather, it shapes contemporary forms of policy concerned with regulating sexual relations. Chloe Taylor’s discussion of staff/student sexual relations in academia, for instance, notes recent moves in U.S. universities to classify all sexual relations between staff and students as a form of sexual harassment, based on the assumption that the power imbalance inherent to such relations renders meaningful student consent an impossibility (2011, p. 191). “‘Good sex’”, Taylor observes, “is being defined as exclusively those relations that do not involve power...” (2011, p. 199).

In the literature on faculty/student relations examined in her study, staff are assumed to hold absolute power, while students are vulnerable and exploitable (Taylor 2011, p. 196). These are situations of domination, as Foucault defined it; there is no reciprocity. In reality, however, while a power differential is certainly present, it is not the case that students are powerless, without any resources or actions to take that can affect the staff member, or shape the relation between them.

While these contemporary approaches to sexual ethics may not advocate women's withdrawal from heterosexuality, their attempts to cleanse sexuality of power belong to the same kind of sexual politics. In assuming that the presence of power differentials must lead to exploitation or worse, and therefore that power must be expunged from (hetero)sexuality to render it safe, this approach places heterosexual relations on a continuum of (potential) abuse. Ultimately, that is, sexual assault and rape are positioned as proximate to 'everyday' forms of heterosexuality – despite the sincere motivating desire to separate them. In the following discussion, I argue for the conceptual and political dis-connection of rape and heterosexuality, and the possible application of a form of self-care to anti-rape theory and politics.

The starting point for this section is Foucault's proposition that rape be punished as a crime of violence, not sexuality (1977 [1988]; Henderson 2007, 226; Taylor 2009, p. 18). When Foucault queried why rape was not seen as equivalent to "a punch in the face" during a roundtable discussion in 1977 (Foucault 1988), he provoked – unsurprisingly – intense criticisms from feminists, and debate continues regarding the meaning of his comments.

Many feminists argued in response that rape was *not* like a punch in the face because sexualised parts of the body – unlike faces – are over-laden with meaning, and central to subjectivity (Alcoff 1996; Plaza 1981; see Henderson 2007, p. 248). Thus, to be raped is an especially intimate violation and shattering of self (Taylor 2009, p. 16). However, this can be seen as exactly Foucault's point, one that he frequently returned to elsewhere, in his ongoing concern with historicising the human subject. His work on this topic expressed a question: *how* has this come to be the case? In this case, is this the best way to conceive of rape? These questions point to the limits of defining rape as such a

singularly destructive experience, and the limits of conceptually situating it within (hetero)sexuality.

In Susan Brownmiller's influential 1976 book *Against our Will*, she explicitly argued that there was an inescapably anatomical dimension to rape ("men rape because they can"), and that there was nothing comparable that women could inflict on men (Henderson 2007, p. 242). While this is not a commonly aired view in the current context, a great deal of anti-rape theorising shares the view that rape is socially endemic, and that it is the worst kind of injury that can be done to a woman (Carmody 2005; Taylor 2009, p. 14). However, there are historical, and anthropological, studies which illustrate the point that the conception of rape as "always, already the *worst* form that violence can take..." (Henderson 2007, pp. 226-7) is in fact culturally and historically specific (Taylor 2009, 13-15).

Feminists have long emphasised the seriousness of rape precisely because it has often been trivialised in many contexts, particularly within marriage, when the woman concerned is a sex worker, or working class, or non-white, or if she has a 'sexual history'. It is therefore understandable that some feminist critics accused Foucault of trivialising the severity of rape, and of attempting to safeguard the interests of rapists. However, his query could be read quite differently. Questioning rape's sexual definition and the assumption that it is "universally self-shattering" (Henderson 2007, p. 227) can be theoretical preconditions for the difficult work of disconnecting the injury of rape from the inner essence of the sexual subject. The strategy would be one of denying rape its *sexual* force, disconnecting it from sexual corporeality, in order to work against its charged significance as a primary mechanism of male domination, and to render it less shattering as an experience (ibid, p. 230, note 18). Far from

denying the gravity of rape, the questions prompted by Foucault's statement can be ways to start questioning whether there are better ways of understanding and processing rape than by conceiving of it as uniquely violating, "a fate worse than death" (Taylor 2009, p. 14). If a rape does take place, if efforts to prevent it or escape from it have failed, is defining it as the ultimate violation of self actually the best tactic? In Foucault's suggestion about placing rape on a par with physical assault, there may be the possibility of conceiving – and punishing – rape in more 'pragmatic' ways.

Taking their cue from Foucault's remarks, and also applying his particular notion of power to the problem of rape, a small number of feminist theorists have sought to re-consider anti-rape politics (Marcus 1992; Henderson 2007; Taylor 2009). Sharon Marcus's 1992 paper on 'rape scripts' defined rape as one "specific technique" of gender inequality (Marcus 1992; Gatens 2000, p. 70). In her view, the notion of rape's inevitability is a particular point of view presuming to be universal; similarly, the would-be rapist attempts to impose their own 'reality' onto their potential victim. The intended victim, then, can refuse this attempt, or disrupt it, or confront it with a different imperative (Marcus 1992; Gatens 2000, p. 71; Henderson 2007, p. 243).

In similar fashion, Holly Henderson has explored the yields of focusing on the space *prior* to rape, by first taking up Foucault's proposal of "redefining rape as an assault", a significant shift which "effectively places it under the rubric of subject-subject violence" (2007, p. 232). The intention is to promote an approach to rape prevention focused on the temporal space preceding it: identifying points where the intended victim can fight back, can refuse to be defined as weak or violable, and possibly even stop the rape from occurring.

From this perspective, rape is “a sequence or process that can be undermined *before it occurs*” (2007, p. 229).

These approaches, obviously, assume that power relations, and subjects’ capacities, are rarely ever fixed in advance of specific encounters. The form of sexual politics that I described earlier, in which female subjectivity is fragile and easily damaged, is highly problematic from this viewpoint, which insists instead on women’s capacities to act on their surroundings. Henderson, for instance, advocates a “physical feminism” (2007, pp. 251-2) of self-defence, which positions “the female body as a direct force against the rapist...” (ibid).

Some feminist critics have objected that advocating self-defence makes rape prevention the sole responsibility of women (Henderson 2007, p. 233); further, they argue, if a woman learns and uses self-defence but is still raped, her trauma will be compounded by guilt and failure. The problem here is largely a problem *if* self-defence is put forward as an overall solution to rape. Also, I propose that there is no reason why women should not take (some) responsibility for rape prevention. There are different kinds of ethical responsibility, not all of them connected to culpability or fault. Further, women taking responsibility does not necessarily mean that rape will not happen, nor that if it does, we must be consumed with guilt for failing to stop it.

I noted above that many feminists rejected Foucault’s speculations on conceiving – and punishing – rape as a physical, not sexual, assault. In many ways, these responses mirror the repudiations of post-structural and post-modern theory that I have described from the beginning of this dissertation. Carine Mardorossian’s critique of Sharon Marcus is an especially interesting example: it illustrates the specific conceptions of subjectivity and power that I

have sought to problematise; however, it wields Foucault as a corrective to the perceived post-modern excesses of Marcus' arguments.

Mardorossian uses the phrase "post-modern feminism" throughout her essay, mostly in negative fashion. Typically, this apparently homogenous school of thought is not identified or described, except by inference, and by the now-familiar singling out of Judith Butler (2002, p. 747). In Beverley Allen's response to Mardorossian's essay, this culpability of post-modern thought is even more apparent. Allen (2002) has spent much time in Bosnia working on behalf of rape victims there. While this undoubtedly gives her viewpoint first-hand weight, she positions herself as occupying an unassailable moral ground when it comes to rape politics. Further, she uses this authority to caricature and dismiss feminist post-modernism generally:

There is nothing ludic about having severe violence done to you because you are a person of a certain gendered identity and a certain nationality in Bosnia during the war. No performance of gender can undo the other strata of your identity (Allen 2002, p. 778).⁵⁰

The perceived material reality of women's injured bodies functions, again, as a corrective device against post-modern and post-structural theoretical abstraction. Likewise, Mardorossian appeals to 'materialism' and 'reality' in her highly critical discussion of 'post-modern feminists'. In particular, she faults Marcus for ignoring the body's 'materiality', and the actual contexts in which

⁵⁰ Not surprisingly, Allen experienced a sharp disjuncture between working in Bosnia, and returning to the academic world in the US; rather than allowing for the differences between these sites, however, she holds up Bosnia as a 'real' against the ungrounded and irresponsible domain of the western university: "During the war, I was surprised that more North American academics making careers out of cultural studies did not flock to the Balkans. After all, so much of what we studied—ethnicity, gender, nationalism—had become matters of life and death there" (p. 779).

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subjects act. Like Judith Butler, she contends, Marcus has simply become distracted by the exciting free-play of textual possibilities, forgetting that discourse is not the same as reality (Mardorossian 2002, p. 755).⁵¹

These moves in discussions of post-structural and post-modern influenced feminist work are all quite familiar. What is unexpected in Mardorossian's argument, however, is that post-modern feminism, and Butler in particular, are held responsible for an unhelpful and limiting emphasis on "*interiority*", which has in turn reduced feminist anti-rape politics to a "therapeutic discourse" (2002, p. 758):

The extraordinary lacuna that characterizes contemporary postmodern feminism can only be understood, I argue, in the context of the general (re)turn to interiority that animates cultural theory today (of which Judith Butler is the most prominent example) (Mardorossian 2002, p. 747).⁵²

This misguided emphasis on interiority, Mardorossian contends, leads Marcus to ground her model of rape prevention in changing women's psychological make-up, which implicitly blames women for rape (2002, pp. 752, 757-8). "Feminists", Mardorossian concludes, "need to stop casting their anti-rape politics in terms of women's inner and psychological change" (ibid).

⁵¹ Given this emphasis on the material stuff of politics (a familiar move in critiques of post-modern or post-structuralist theory), it is all the more surprising to read the following: "Rape and domestic violence are in fact the only crimes whose rates have increased. The rate of other violent crimes has decreased by 7 per cent compared to 1998 and has reached an all-time low since authorities started keeping track of crime rates in 1973" (Mardorossian 2002, p. 744, fn 3). Readers are not given the source/s for these statistics, nor does Mardorossian explain which area of the world they apply to, or how 'other violent crimes' are defined.

⁵² It is much more common to see the work of Foucault, and Foucauldian-influenced feminists like Butler, and Jana Sawicki, being rejected because it is deemed incapable of accounting for the interior dimensions of women's lives (e.g. Deveaux 1994, pp. 234-5).

At this point, she has a specific part of Marcus' thesis in mind: that certain conventional ideals of femininity (politeness, passivity, a non-confrontational attitude) can work against women's efforts to challenge 'rape scripts'. The leap from this to psychological interiority and therapeutic discourse, however, is not sustainable. Nor is the universalising gesture of making Marcus' paper representative of feminist anti-rape politics *and* post-modern feminism.

Interestingly, Mardorossian then employs Foucault as a counter-active remedy to Marcus's approach. Foucault, she claims, was keenly aware that there are 'states of domination' in which self-reflexive practices of resistance are simply not possible. Marcus fails to appreciate this, and naïvely seeks to impose a version of self-care onto rape situations – which are in fact states of domination, where options for manoeuvring are non-existent (Mardorossian 2002, pp. 757-758).

With appropriate caution, I suggest that Mardorossian may be pre-emptive in defining rape as a fixed state of domination, *and* in ruling out any possibility for self-care in contexts of sexual violence. Foucault defined domination as a relation of fixed asymmetry; it is a highly specific situation. Marcus' approach assumes that in many cases, the actions and the outcome of a potential sexual assault are in flux, at least up to a certain point; the subjects involved face "a grid of possibilities" (Colebrook 1998). This seems entirely consistent with relations of *power* as Foucault defined them, and allows a great deal more scope for women to affect events.

The re-conception of anti-rape theory and politics that I have described in this section foregrounds the importance of women's self-defence, but gives extra depth to self-defence as a strategy; it has an immediate, pragmatic use, and it

has wider consequences for female subjectivity, which is re-defined in terms of its capacity to exercise power, and hence to negotiate power. Cultivating such a subjectivity could take the form of ethical self-care, or a specific art of living, one that is necessary and useful in the current historical context. Spaces and practices of liberty already exist here and now.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have considered how Foucauldian notions of self-care can be applied to some problems of sexual politics. Care of the self, in general, allows the cultivation of a subject who is properly able to care for others, because they have exercised power over themselves. It also means that sexual relations do not pose such a grave threat to their well-being – the subject is not fragile or violable.

There are, then, alternative possibilities to making coherent, integrated subjectivity a pre-requisite for non-oppressive sex – or recommending avoiding sex altogether. Sex does not necessarily threaten destruction – or promise liberation – and coherent subjectivity does not guarantee agential capacity. The Foucauldian-influenced approach to power that I have applied in this chapter enables the re-conception of heterosexual relations such that the exercise of power, and of agency, are temporally specific questions; heterosexuality is not permanently structured according to the dynamics of hegemonic male dominance.

Further, if we assume that women have the capacity to ‘self-shatter’ in sex without complete disintegration, sexual encounters can (sometimes) enable the

kind of self-estrangement that Foucault saw as an integral part of self-care. As Deleuze puts it with regard to desire:

Far from presupposing a subject, desire cannot be attained except at the point where someone is deprived of the power of saying 'I'. Far from directing itself toward an object, desire can only be reached at the point where someone no longer searches for or grasps an object any more than he grasps himself as subject... who has you believe that by losing the coordinates of object and subject you lack something? (2007, p. 90; Butler 1990, p. 167; see also Diprose 1998, p. 11).

An ethic of self-care, a forming of oneself as a work of art, also by definition involves relatively few over-arching rules or codes; but rather than simply living according to one's whims and desires, to practise self-care demands a high level of responsibility and ethical labour. This is given added depth by the absence of an inner self to be discovered and interpreted.

Finally, I have connected self-care with Foucault's notion of power, to propose that within heterosexual relations or encounters, one party cannot be defined in advance as 'holding' power while the other has none. In situations of assault or abuse, this approach means that the relations of power are in flux, and that power can be put to the use of the 'victimised' party also.

Chapter Five – Feminism Looking Out: Cultural Politics

Introduction

Chapter Four's discussions were shaped by the issue of ethico-political subjectivity, in its various forms as a specifically feminist problem. That chapter's thematic orientation was therefore focused on feminism 'looking in', towards the self. By contrast, the present chapter looks outward, to cultural representations specifically, and the question of how feminists have conceived the relations between representations and gendered subjectivities. The problem of representation has a general significance, as a matter of self-knowledge and communication. More specifically, for cultural politics, it is of vital concern for understanding and reconfiguring the relations between subjectivity and sexuality. Thus, subjectivity, sexuality, and representation are intertwined and mutually constitutive.

Representations of sexuality have been, and continue to be, important sites of feminist politics and dispute, not only between feminism and 'others', but also among feminists themselves (the debates over pornography are an obvious example). As a political and theoretical movement focused on individual and social transformation, feminism has necessarily concerned itself with issues of representation. Further, its intellectual heritage has had decisive effects on how these issues have been defined and dealt with. For example, late twentieth-century feminism drew on various Marxist-influenced concepts and principles, such as the notion that subjectivity is formed by external structures, and that social relations and classes are material effects of those structures (Pringle 1995). Psycho-analytic theories have been enormously influential as well, especially in their emphasis on powerful unconscious motivating forces, and the

centrality of sexuality (ibid). Finally, Althusser and the structuralist theoretical work influenced by him, effectively drew many of these Marxist and psycho-analytic notions together, and foregrounded the significance of culture and representation to subjectivity and politics (Althusser 1971).

From the 1970s especially, public, cultural representations of sexuality and gender have been key arenas of feminist engagement, and sexually explicit texts, especially in film and photographic form, have been among the most disputed cultural forms. More recently, as post-structuralist and post-modern theorists have called into question many of the foundational assumptions of feminist theory and politics – including concepts such as ‘woman’, male power, and patriarchy – many of the most influential tenets of feminist approaches to representation, such as the objectifying male gaze and pornography as misogyny, have also been problematised and re-theorised.⁵³ However, the form of cultural politics known generally as anti-pornography feminism has continued to powerfully shape perspectives on sexual representations. The consequences of the resulting theoretical and ethical fissures within the broadly feminist movement are various, but one is hostility in some feminist circles to studying culture in more specific terms, that is, without an over-arching framework that assumes misogyny to be axiomatic to existing systems of representation.

I have already noted – especially in my first chapter – how a powerfully affective dimension drives passionate attachments to certain categories, concepts, and methods, and how much of the feminist opposition to post-structuralism draws upon normative ideals of feminist subjects and feminist

⁵³ Carol Clover’s *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* (1992) and Linda Williams’ *Hardcore* (1989) are important examples of feminist approaches to representation which depart from the more ‘orthodox’ perspectives (see Sabo 2007).

politics. Affect is not in itself a grounds for criticism, however; all forms of politics – the variants of feminism included – have affective characteristics; for socio-political movements, which often place burdensome demands on their members, these have particular importance. My reason for noting the presence of affect here is in order to further examine a form of feminism that I described in previous chapters, especially its strong attachment to particular ways of conceiving and doing feminist politics. This feminist politics insists on moral and political certainties; reservations about universalism, for instance, tend to be cast as relativist or even nihilist. This can be seen in Nussbaum's and others' responses to feminist post-structuralism, which were discussed in Chapter One. In Chapters Three and Four I went on to describe other instances of feminist attachment to certainties. Now, in Chapter Five, I examine its influence in recent Australian cultural politics.

Issues of pornification, hyper-sexualisation, and raunch culture are among the current preoccupations of contemporary Western – or perhaps more accurately, Anglophone – cultural politics. The most prevalent feminist perspectives on these issues come from the tradition of politics I have just described: a broadly anti-pornography view of sexual representations, and a normative set of ideal feminist subjects and objects. In this chapter I aim to show that contemporary feminist engagements with cultural politics may benefit greatly from utilising different conceptions of subjectivity, sexuality, and representation.

The problem of the sexualisation of culture

Among many academic researchers, cultural commentators, and reporters and columnists, there is a loosely held consensus that western cultures have become highly sexualised, that this is largely unprecedented in historical terms, and that

children and young people are the most affected social groups. Terms such as ‘hyper-sexualisation’, ‘pornification’, and ‘raunch culture’ were developed as parts of this widespread problematising of sexualised culture and have served to focus the areas of concern. In these contexts, discussion of sexualisation generally refers to the overall increased visibility of sexual or sexualised images and content across the mainstream public sphere. Late capitalist corporate culture, neo-liberalism, and the unprecedented rapid expansion of information technologies are most commonly cited as causative factors (Attwood 2004, p. 16; Jackson & Westrupp 2010, p. 357; Jackson & Scott 2004, p. 234).

Feona Attwood, who has researched and published extensively on these topics, offers the following list of features that typify sexualised culture:

...a contemporary preoccupation with sexual values, practices and identities; the public shift to more permissive sexual attitudes; the proliferation of sexual texts; the emergence of new forms of sexual experience; the apparent breakdown of rules, categories and regulations designed to keep the obscene at bay; our fondness for scandals, controversies and panics around sex... (2006, pp. 78-9).

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As part of this focus on sexualisation, the notion that aspects of pornography have spilled over into mainstream culture has also generated debate. The term ‘pornified’ has become a widely used new adjective, reflecting the perceived cross-over of pornographic styles and aesthetics to the mainstream. To cite Attwood once more,

It is often claimed that in the last 20 years or so the boundaries between porn and art, porn and mainstream media representation have been tested as never before. Squabbles over the obscenity of art exhibitions have become routine. Mainstream publications incorporate language and iconography traditionally associated

with soft porn, carry advertising for sexual services and commodities and endlessly interrogate sexual pleasure (Attwood 2002, p. 98; see also Fine 2011, p. 17; Mulholland 2011, p. 124).

Inevitably, perspectives on contemporary sexualisation and pornification range from positive to highly critical, depending on the relevant underlying assumptions about sexual politics. For example, Brian McNair (1996; 2002) is a well-known proponent of the view that, for the most part, this is a democratisation of the public sphere, opening up sexuality and representation to more and more people (Attwood 2002, p. 82; Ciclitira 2004, p. 285). On the other hand, Ariel Levy offers a far more critical take on sexualisation; in *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, she argues that traditionally male ‘laddish’ behaviours and attitudes are increasingly taken up by women, but that this is simply participating in their own degradation (Levy 2006; Sabo 2007, p. 1). Other writers – Rosalind Gill, Judith Williamson – contend that prevailing representations of femininity appear to be sexually agentic and assertive, but ultimately offer very little diversity, and define women’s sexual subjectivity largely in terms of consumption and obsessive self-care (Gill 2009, also Attwood 2002, p. 83). On the other hand, Clarissa Smith is more interested in interrogating the concept of pornification itself: noting the widespread use of the term across popular and academic commentary, internet blogs, and government policy recommendations, Smith asserts that ‘pornification’ has come to function as a convenient, over-simplifying short-hand – one that appears purely descriptive, but is in fact laden with normative assumptions (2010, pp. 103-4).

The recent Australian context

In Australia, the issue of sexualisation has recently generated much public dialogue, in mainstream television and print media, academia, and levels of government. This coverage has been intensified by specifically local cultural controversies, such as 2008's Bill Henson affair, which forms one of the focus points in this chapter. Significantly, the issue of sexualisation or pornification has become closely linked to the problem of child protection in contemporary Australia, which inevitably shapes the ways in which discussions of the issues proceed. As I aim to show, however, where child sexualisation has become a heightened public issue of concern, the subjects perceived to be in danger are in fact usually girls, and usually 'tweens' and teenagers. This indicates that the crisis of (child) sexualisation has a great deal to do with the regulation of youthful female sexuality.

In 2008, the year of the Henson case, numerous issues around child protection were already in the Australian public sphere (Faulkner 2011, p. 44; Simpson 2011, p. 291, 295). The perceived increase in the sexualisation of children, and intensive targeting of them as consumers, had prompted the Australian Senate to hold an "inquiry into the sexualisation of children in the contemporary media environment" (Serisier & Pendleton 2008), headed by the Democrats leader Lynn Allison (Devine 2008). At the time, alleged cover-ups of child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church were frequent news items. Milton Orkopoulos, the NSW state government's minister for Aboriginal Affairs, was "sentenced to a minimum of nine years' jail on drug and child-sex charges" (Smee 2008, p. 61). The Federal Government's controversial Northern Territory intervention, focused on cases of child abuse in remote indigenous communities, was

ongoing, and the appropriate fate of convicted paedophiles once they had served their prison sentences continued to be a highly contentious issue.⁵⁴

A diverse range of public commentators therefore agreed on one issue at least: that we are living in an age of unprecedented child danger that demanded decisive action from the state. Columnist Miranda Devine summed up this position when she argued that, while current fears about child abuse and exploitation have created new restrictions, and even perhaps an overly suspicious culture, these were necessary prices to pay for child security (2008, p. 15). The need for child protection was so urgent, the threats to children so dire, that ongoing vigilance and a guarded attitude to others were necessary and legitimate responses. Such general claims, moreover, gained additional credence through constant repetition, especially when accompanied by lists of graphic and terrifying examples, including a flow of individual cases of abuse and neglect (see *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 24-25 May 2008, p. 38; Perkin 2008, p. 26; Condon 2008, p. 18).

Prior to the Henson case, The Australia Institute, a well-known left-oriented think tank, published two reports examining the sexualisation of children, and the targeting of children as consumers, by mainstream commercial media (2006a; 2006b). These reports (*Corporate Paedophilia* and *Letting Children be Children*) are important because of their widespread influence; the *Corporate Paedophilia* report in particular is cited in most discussions of sexualisation, and has assumed the status of proof that child sexualisation has become a general crisis. The political and philosophical orientation of the authors, Emma Rush and Andrea La Nauze, is grounded in “the wider feminist discourse on sexualization taking place in the Anglophone West which emphasizes the

⁵⁴ As demonstrated in the ABC *Four Corners* special report of November 2nd, 2009.

danger of media messages and their impacts on girls”, as Egan and Hawkes put it (2009, p. 390). The activist group Collective Shout, founded more recently by Melinda Tankard Reist, also continues this particular style of feminism (see their website, collectiveshout.org).

The photographer Bill Henson has exhibited since the 1970s. He is one of Australia’s best known artists, and also enjoys an international reputation (Smee 2008, p. 62). In late May of 2008, Henson’s latest exhibition was due to open at the privately owned RoslynOxley9 Gallery in Sydney. As well as buildings and bush landscapes, the show featured images of two naked adolescents, a boy, and a girl known as ‘N’, who was soon to become the centre of controversy. Around 3500 invitations were sent out to prospective attendees. The invitations displayed a small copy of *Untitled* (#30), which was one of Henson’s pictures of N.⁵⁵ One of the invitations was shown to *Sydney Morning Herald* columnist Miranda Devine, on account of her ongoing concern with the cultural sexualisation of young girls. In her column on Thursday, May 22nd – the day of the exhibition opening – Devine expressed outrage at the invitation image, and condemned Henson’s exhibition (Devine 2008a). On that same day, a listener emailed Sydney talkback radio station 2GB about Devine’s column and the Henson exhibition. After viewing the works on the gallery’s website, the station announcers spent the afternoon strongly voicing their disapproval, encouraging listeners to complain to the gallery, calling for a police investigation, and labelling Henson’s work ‘child pornography’. Hetty Johnston, the executive director of the child protection organisation Bravehearts⁵⁶, also looked at the gallery website in response to several emails. Upon viewing the site, Bravehearts faxed complaints to the gallery, the state police, and the New South

⁵⁵ *Untitled* #30 is one of a series of images of ‘N’, a 12 or 13 year old girl, photographed naked in a range of positions and attitudes.

⁵⁶ Bravehearts was founded by Johnston in Brisbane in 1997.

Wales Arts Minister (Marr 2008). By late Thursday afternoon, with police in the gallery, Henson and gallery owners Roslyn and Tony Oxley decided to cancel the opening, and the exhibition itself was temporarily closed.

The possible charges – against Henson and the Oxleys, as the gallery owners – included the production and display of images of children “in a sexual context”, “publishing an indecent article”, and possible internet child pornography charges related to the images being displayed on the gallery’s website (Tovey, Kennedy & Welch 2008, p. 1). On Friday, 30th May, the NSW Director of Public Prosecutions was given the police “brief of evidence” (Wilson & Trad 2008, p. 5). In early June, the DPP and police formally announced that there was not enough evidence for any of the possible charges and that consequently, neither the gallery nor Henson would be charged (Marr 2008, p. 123; Marr & Tovey 2008, p. 26).

Meanwhile, debates continued and intensified in a variety of media and other public domains. The number and diversity of actors, interests, and domains involved – the law and police; print, radio, and electronic media; local, state, and federal governments; citizen advocacy groups; arts bodies – complicated this public scandal, which was often marked by antagonistic, polarising rhetoric. Brian Simpson summarises the limitations of the key positions in this fashion: advocates of Henson’s work relied mostly on the ‘artistic merit’ defence, and thus failed to engage with or at least acknowledge the specific climate of anxiety over children (2011, p. 291), while on the other hand, those who called for the Henson pictures to be banned implied that child nudity was pornographic by definition, and refused to confront “the serious issue of the sexual transition from child to adult” (p. 292).

For journalist, intellectual, and media commentator David Marr, the Henson scandal was a moral panic: “When panic arrives, facts don’t count. Complexity disappears. All slopes are slippery. The only scenario is the worst-case scenario. Nothing is too small to worry about. And everyone has a high old time except the victims” (2008-2009, p.14). To an extent, Marr’s characterisation of the Henson affair as a moral panic is appropriate – but it does not capture all the complexity of the events. Mary Lou Rasmussen (2010) has cautioned against the tendency of researchers in social science or cultural studies to use ‘moral panic’ too indiscriminately when analysing public controversies. Rasmussen notes that it designates one side as irrational – in this case, Henson’s critics and opponents of sexualisation in general – and calls into question the authenticity of their motives. By implication, this bestows authority and objectivity on those who diagnose and successfully resist the panic (Rasmussen 2010, p. 120).

An unqualified adoption of the moral panic concept makes it difficult to avoid repeating merely corrective commentaries on the Henson controversy: commentaries that stage a resolution to the disputes, by pointing out where respective arguments ‘failed’ to resolve the problem at the level of rationality. The alternative is to examine these debates in terms of the operative conceptions of representation, subjectivity, and power that shaped the participants’ various positions, with attention focused specifically on how these reflected and attempted to shape competing notions of female sexual subjectivity and the public policy responses informed by those notions in turn.

In the Henson affair, a degree of generalisation and a lack of depth were perhaps unavoidable: however problematic the debates were, they were largely conducted across popular media sites that allow scant room for nuance, complexity or specialised knowledge; in some of these sites, too, the values and

terms of engagement are well-known and defined in advance. However, given the diverse range of sites available, it is still a concern that most arguments tread such well-worn and oppositional paths. Further, and more pertinent for the problem of feminist cultural politics, in some of the academic research and discussion on the Henson affair and sexualisation more generally, similarly polarised terms of engagement have also prevailed.

Feminist responses to sexualisation

Despite the fact that the Henson case concerned issues of representation, sexuality, and young girls as its primary themes, there was little variety in the public feminist responses to these events. The usual diversity of feminist perspectives on representation and sexuality was not evident in this public scandal as it unfolded. Although a wider range of views has been expressed since (at least in academic literature), at the time “the immense feminist scholarship that has developed around visual analysis, photography and the nude was largely set aside” (MacNeill 2010, p. 90).

Australian writer Linda Jaivin observed, prior to the Henson affair, that “Feminism was never one-size-fits-all on any issue, much less matters of sexuality” (2008, p. 66), but this more generous view was quite absent in the context of the heightened concerns with child sexualisation that had framed the debate. Notwithstanding the diversity and sophistication of feminist perspectives – on representation and sexuality issues in particular – the predominant feminist participants mostly aligned with the protectionist stance, as the issues around the Henson controversy were incorporated into a broader opposition to “corporate paedophilia” (Rush & LaNauze 2006). The existence of other feminist viewpoints, when acknowledged, was met with considerable

hostility, and dealt with by excluding them *qua* feminist (Hamilton 2009; McClellan 2008; Krohn 2009; Hazlehurst in Krohn 2009).

Australian feminist Abigail Bray has become a vocal contributor to discussions of youth sexualisation in Australia in recent years; in addition to academic publications, she has contributed to the anti-sexualisation collection *Getting Real*, and co-edited *Big Porn Inc* with Melinda Tankard Reist. In many ways, Bray's writing attempts to straddle the academic-popular divide, and in similar fashion to Catharine MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin, Sheila Jeffreys, and many feminist opponents of post-structuralism, her style is distinctly dramatic and polemical. In 'Governing the Gaze' (2009), Bray designated Henson's work as an especially problematic example of the broader cultural sexualisation of children. Her arguments on Henson, and the wider issue of sexualisation, turn on two central assertions: that cultural and academic elites routinely ridicule and suppress feminist perspectives on sexual politics, and that contemporary late capitalist culture celebrates and reifies adult-child sexual relations.

Bray argues that the defenders of Henson, and those who dismiss concerns about child sexualisation as moral panics, have disavowed and silenced those girls and women who are survivors of abuse (2009, p. 174). Significantly, she frames this in terms of a *feminist* voice drowned out or suppressed by a collective of neo-liberals, post-modernists, sexual libertarians, and 'pornified' media. In Bray's view, a 'feminist' perspective necessarily distinguishes itself by its opposition to the sexualisation of children. While she describes "a feminist gaze", for example, as "a collective interdisciplinary gaze, composed of a complex history of reading practices, a multiplicity of interpretive strategies, de-codings, visual and political literacies, cultural knowledges about the relationships between power, discourse and the body" (2009, p. 182), there

is in actuality only one kind of authentic feminist perspective acknowledged in her writing, at least in regard to sexual representations.

The practice of ascribing radically polarised systems of values to different ‘sides’ of the Henson case is not confined to feminist critics of post-structuralism; it is a typical feature of much of the critical commentary on the scandal. Thus, when Labor Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivered his verdict of “revolting” in response to Henson’s photographs of N, Robert Manne noted that those on the Left who had previously celebrated Rudd’s election victory were “appalled” (2008, p. 30). For Manne, the Henson disputes foregrounded the “gulf in values” between left libertarian academics and “ordinary people” (p. 30). The key issue in the Henson affair, he argued, was different sets of moral values that were ultimately “incommensurable and irreconcilable” (p. 30).

In presuming to represent the real interests of ordinary or average Australians, as distinct from cultural and academic elites, protection advocates such as Bray, Hetty Johnston, and Miranda Devine effectively appropriated the prestige of the traditional universal intellectual persona, taking it upon themselves to speak ‘under the level’ of their opponents and prod the conscience of ‘the public’ by appealing to its moral assumptions. The strategy was to articulate truths on behalf of a society seen as being too distracted, too hurried, or too self-absorbed to take a responsible position – and in doing so, share this position of moral censure with their audiences. In particular, the advocates’ claim to moral authority was accomplished by distancing themselves from academic expertise, complexity, and moral qualification. Thus, Johnston described her experience of the Arts and Censorship forum⁵⁷ hosted by the National Association of Visual

⁵⁷ A discussion conference, presented by the National Association of Visual Artists, held in Sydney after the Henson case, to consider the implications of events, and possible responses. While NAVA’s official position was supportive of Henson, they presented a range of speakers, including Hetty

Artists (NAVA), as facing down “the elite’s ‘fluffy, bullshit language’ and ‘waffle’”, and then commented: “I’m not a super well-educated person. I’m not as well read as I’d like to be. So I absolutely run the risk of being patronised to the point of being embarrassed or ashamed. I know my language is simple and my thought process is simple, and I’m proud of that” (in Condon 2008, p. 19). This combination of self-deprecation and pride, both respectful and dismissive of expert knowledge, is a common populist rhetorical technique that Johnston deployed with skill.

A perceived chasm between the morality of the ‘arts world’ and that of the ‘general public’ was frequently invoked in the disputes over Henson’s photographs. This was lent credence by a popular negative conception of the ‘arts community’. Barry Cohen, who was minister for the arts in the Hawke federal government of the 1980s, wrote scathingly in *The Australian* newspaper of how many artists defended Henson’s work, describing them as out-of-touch “luvvies”, “sneering”, “melodramatic”, and hypocritical (2008, p. 8). Cohen implied that this elite group looked upon the general public – the bearer of common sense and proper decency – as the “lower classes” and “lesser mortals”. Hetty Johnston similarly invoked popular suspicion of esoteric practices and nefarious motives when she maintained that “the arts community have felt they’ve been able to get away with this under the guise of art for a number of years” (Tovey, Kennedy & Welch 2008, p. 1; Sheehan 2008, p. 13; Albrechtsen 2008, p. 14; *The Courier-Mail* 28 May 2008, p. 8).

In her regular *Sydney Morning Herald* opinion column, Miranda Devine asserted that those who sought to place limits on artistic freedoms were

Johnston and Clive Hamilton, as well as those strongly opposed to censorship such as David Marr and Julian Burnside.

dismissed by “the arts community” as “wowers” and “philistines”. Even as she condemned Henson’s supporters for polarising debate, Devine claimed that the basic premise of David Marr’s *The Henson Case* (2008) was that those who did not support Henson were “philistines” and “rednecks”, unable to appreciate “the nuances of his art”. Because Australians fear being seen as culturally backward, she continued, most “fell into line” (2008b, p. 5). The philosopher and social critic Clive Hamilton similarly claimed that the majority of people had been cowed into silence, despite their misgivings about Henson, and morally confronting artworks in general:

The truth is that artistic provocateurs expect us to keep our discomfort private, an unwritten rule that for years has caused some gallery-goers to suppress their feelings about the ‘creepiness’ of some of Henson’s images. Yet when the disquiet is expressed in public it is derided as moral atavism or bourgeois sensibility (Hamilton 2008, p. 2).

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For Devine and Hamilton, this was a convenient rhetorical strategy, in that it assumed untold numbers of people who agreed with them, but who were too intimidated to say so.

In her discussion of the Henson affair, Bray employed a very similar style of argument, insisting that ‘the media’ in general defended Henson against his puritanical, pro-censorship critics (2009, p. 174).⁵⁸ Indeed, her favoured rhetorical strategy is to present advocates of child protection as struggling against an elite orthodoxy imposed by neo-liberals, corporations, “the intelligentsia”, and artists. Those who question child protection arguments, she

⁵⁸ When I read through the 2008 media coverage (mostly in major newspapers), my perception was quite different: I saw a mixed bag of opinions and views represented. I did think that overall, the dominant tendency was to sympathise more with protectionist views, and against Henson – but this was probably largely a product of my own bias in the opposite direction.

claims, do so in order to position themselves as part of the elite social groups of the educated, upper-class, bohemian, and avant-garde transgressives:

Henson's erotic images of naked girls circulated as icons of a besieged authenticity, radiating utopian longings for a future in which art and desire are finally liberated from the boorish forces of intolerance, the yoke of state censorship and reactionary CSA [child sex abuse] moral panics (Bray 2009, p. 174).

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Bray argues that while historically, such subject positions could only be occupied by the aristocracy, in the contemporary context, they have mainstreamed and become the new bourgeois class consciousness. This differs from Hamilton's previously noted view, which attributes 'bourgeois sensibility' to those who rightly found Henson's work 'creepy'. This is how Bray describes the new bourgeois orthodoxy:

The governmentality of the private upper-class art gallery—the compulsory celebration of sexual transgression, the genteel inbred world of experts, the obedient consumption, the polite regulation of aversion—is now expanded into the public sphere, becoming a normative technology of the progressive middle-class self (Bray 2009, p. 181).

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It is ironic that Bray appropriates the rhetoric and the anti-authoritarian spirit of Foucault to remind the 'elites' that there are limits to their liberty: not as Foucault did – to provoke critical reflection on the possibilities for liberty – but in order to advocate the wisdom of demotic compliance.

Both during and after the Henson affair, there were critical interventions that encouraged more reflective, considered engagements with works of art, even highly controversial ones. Henson himself, as well as author David Malouf, and art critic Sebastian Smee, offered possible resolution of the conflict through

attempting to reconcile studio-based intent with gallery exhibition, artist with audience, production with consumption. Malouf, for instance, described the “intense concentration” of an artist in producing a work, and suggested that ideally this is reciprocated by the viewer through their “attention – that deep interaction with a work ... that allows us to say we have experienced and understood it, taken it in” (2008, p. 227). He freely acknowledged that the reader, viewer or listener ultimately may not like a particular work of art, may feel it is sub-standard or objectionable in some way, “but we have first to do our own work of attending; of reading, looking, listening” (Malouf 2008, p. 228). This attentiveness, for Malouf, was clearly only possible with prolonged engagement, in the appropriate context (ibid; Perkin 2008, p. 2).

Likewise, for Henson, both the creation and the appreciation of artworks require a particular kind of subject possessing certain attributes, such as a capacity for reflection and contemplation, a sense of connection to others, and to history, and an appreciation of conceptual and moral ambiguity and complexity (2009, p. 53; Smee 2008b, p. 62). From this traditional humanistic perspective, the long-term experience of art cultivates a responsive, reflexive mode of being, and a compulsion to re-examine, to see afresh.

Traditional humanist appeals for moderation, however, were not sufficiently resourced to bridge the distances between their own positions, and the impassioned opponents of ‘sexualisation’. Indeed, Bray in particular is profoundly scathing of any argument that proceeds along these lines. In her view, they form “a dominant critical and cultural narrative that reads cultural anxieties about child sexual abuse as a reactionary hegemonic moral panic discourse” (Bray 2009, p. 175). Note here that Bray has equated sexualised images of children with sexual abuse of children – just as in anti-pornography

arguments, where sexualised images of women are defined as misogyny and abuse in action.

Attempts to defend Henson's work, Bray argues, must be located within a broader context where child protectionists are ignored, trivialised, and silenced by this allegedly dominant narrative. Her argument then takes the surprising step of positioning Henson's supporters, and those who contest the corporate paedophilia argument, within "a celebration of children's sexual liberation and agency as a form of individual self-empowerment that triumphs over the reactionary victim politics of CSA moral panics" (Bray 2009 , p. 175). This "glamorisation of child-adult sex as a heroic transgression of repressive sexual norms" (Bray 2009, p. 178) has a vested interest in the suppression "of the abject history of sexual harm against children" (ibid).

In Bray's view, this "aestheticised" discourse of the contemporary avant-garde is so dominant that it overwhelms and silences all opposition, so that child protection and anti-sexualisation viewpoints – even that of the Australian government – are routinely "shamed" and "humiliated" (2009, pp. 179, 180). The Henson photographs, contemporary pornified mass culture, the avant-garde: all are part of the glorification of sexualised children as a form of transgression and refusal of bourgeois conformity (Bray 2009, pp. 178, 179). Like Hamilton and Devine, Bray argues that those who question this dominant narrative are dismissed as lower-class, 'tabloid reading', philistines (2009, p. 185):

...to be disturbed by images of children in seductive poses is to be played by the hegemonic game of affective conformity, to feel like one of them, the others, the duped moral panic masses. Disgusted, outraged, horrified, angered? Such vulgar emotions are closer to tabloid headlines than they are to the genteel

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rational detachment required of the urbane reader (2008, p. 329).⁵⁹

The Foucauldian notion that sexual transgression is a socially and culturally prestigious gesture, while most dominant in Bray's arguments, has also been an important theme in other critiques of sexualisation. This is especially evident in Clive Hamilton's frequent assertions about post-modern academics who function as apologists for corporate paedophilia and pornography. Commenting on "the advertising industry and their academic supporters", he accused them of having both "a very postmodern agenda, [and] an old fashioned feminist view that girls should be able to explore their sexuality..." (in Devine 2008a). Hamilton also condemned "Post-modern sexual radicals who urge teenage girls to seize power by being sexually provocative... The same people defend the liberating possibilities of pornography..." (2009, p. 11).

I have previously described the hostility of some feminists to post-structuralism and post-modernism, to the extent that these are held responsible for the perceived 'ill health' or destabilisation of feminism. Surprisingly clear parallels emerge in more recent arguments against child sexualisation, pornography, and promiscuity/casual sex: academic proponents of post-structuralist and post-modernist criticism are seen to be allied with the corporate domain; they are held partly responsible for the crisis of over-sexualisation, and characterised as morally reckless, and disconnected from real life concerns.

Associating 'anti-foundationalism' with sexual radicalism and an unwillingness to condemn any form of sexuality or sexual representation is a common feature of social commentaries by Hamilton (2008a; 2008b; 2009), feminist and

⁵⁹ Bray also renders the avant-garde transgressive as a markedly masculine subject position, in contrast to the despised and uncultured femininity of its opponents (2009, p. 184).

psychotherapist Betty McClellan (2008), and Bray (2008; 2009). In each there is marked hostility to the perceived loss of foundations and universal categories. A refusal to make categorical judgements is seen as nihilism, apathy, or worse, as allying with corporate paedophiles. Like Bray, Hamilton identified and condemned a pervasive lack of moral boundaries and absence of sexual taboos in contemporary Australia:

For most Australians there remain only three [taboos]: incest, bestiality and paedophilia. The first two are now being eroded, and I suspect the internet has spawned a huge increase in desire for the third. For those who want to push the sexual limits, these are the only ones left (Hamilton 2008, pp. 3-4; Devine 2008, p. 5).⁶⁰

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In the same manner as Glick, Miriam, and Cooper (as discussed in Chapter Three), Bray associates contemporary, neo-liberal commodified capitalist culture with the opponents of ‘feminism’. Like Hamilton, she sees ‘sexual radicals’ and academics as allied with the exploitative mega-corporations of consumerist, market-driven capitalism. For instance, the numerous and diverse criticisms made of Rush and La Nauze’s *Corporate Paedophilia* report are dismissed as “a corporate-radical consensus that the ‘Corporate Paedophilia’ discussion paper is an expression of puritanical neo-conservative quasi-fundamentalist pro-censorship moral panic hysteria” (Bray 2008, p. 335).⁶¹

It is important to question the claim that Abigail Bray, Melinda Tankard Reist, or Hetty Johnston are, in reality, under attack from a powerful alliance of

⁶⁰ No doubt there are certain social zones where this absence of taboo is a reality, but *pace* Hamilton, they are neither majority nor mainstream.

⁶¹ In fact, the retail company David Jones is the only corporation to have publicly criticised the report; it took legal action in an unsuccessful attempt to have its name removed from the report, as it strongly objected to being associated with paedophilia (see <http://www.crikey.com.au/2008/05/07/david-jones-drops-corporate-paedophilia-case-against-think-tank/>).

academics, corporations, and avant-garde transgressives, seeking to protect their stakes in sexualised youth and culture. My own survey of the critical commentaries during the Henson affair found little evidence of feminist views other than the protectionist ones, yet Bray insists that this very perspective was suppressed and silenced, and still is. Regarding the wider issue and debate concerning the sexualising of culture more broadly, she writes that, “There are then, as the Henson case demonstrates, numerous blocks that are preventing a feminist contribution to public media debates about sexualised images of girls” (2009, p. 184).

I find this claim unconvincing. Since 2006 in Australia alone, there has been a Senate investigation into child sexualisation in the media⁶², and two well-publicised reports from The Australia Institute on the same issues (2006a, 2006b); regular anti-sexualisation columns by Miranda Devine appear in a mainstream daily newspaper; there has been a recent launch of an activist group, Collective Shout, which campaigns against sexualisation; there are numerous publications by Bray and colleagues like Melinda Tankard Reist, who also publish extensively on the topic of sexualisation; and there have been profiles of Hetty Johnston (Condon 2008) and Tankard Reist (Hills 2012) in the weekend supplements of major Australian newspapers. The position articulated by Bray and others does indeed have its critics; however, it is not suppressed or silenced as a matter of course. If this observation is indeed the case, the claims of a general prohibition are localised rhetorical tactics deployed by the authors making the claims, not empirically supportable reports on general objective conditions.

⁶² Commonwealth of Australia 2008, *Sexualisation of Children in the Contemporary Media*, Report, 26 June, www.aph.gov.au/senate/committee/eca_ctte/sexualisation_of_children/report/index.htm.

Historicising sexualisation

The debates around Henson, and sexualisation more broadly have been characterised by assertions that a feminism based on the category of ‘women’s experience’, and driven by the urgency of material gender oppression, is locked in struggle with the abstract ‘Theory’ of post-modernism and post-structuralism: a form of intellectualism lacking accountability and unwilling to acknowledge its own ethical limits. It is ironic, therefore, that these critiques have been unable or unwilling to locate their own ethical and historical contexts. In Bray’s reading of the controversial *Untitled #30* image, for instance, her particular kind of feminism – perceived by her as feminism *per se*– claims a direct link between painful personal experience and authentic feminist knowledge: “To an experienced streetwise feminist gaze”, she begins, “Henson’s photographs of thin, demure, virginal girls with down cast eyes, parted rosy lips, hands shyly crossed over their vaginas, highlighted budding breasts and hairless vaginal folds, are part of a long-standing history of heterosexual paedophilic objectification” (2009, p. 182). Then, with specific reference to the image of N, Bray writes that, “Her downcast eyes recall the difficulty of speaking back to adult men who defended their sexual interest as a compliment or a bit of fun, of being subjugated by a power I could not name and could not speak back to, of how much I wanted to break free and run” (ibid).

Clearly, pointing out the existence of multiple interpretations of this image by Faulkner (2011, p. 51) or Marr (2008), for example, would serve little purpose here. While the feminist tradition of politicising the personal, and speaking the private, has undoubtedly been vitally important in certain contexts, in this instance it is problematic: Bray’s insistence on a single meaning that is grounded in her own specific history confines the image of N to a universal

symbol of female sexual shame and fear. Whatever N's experience may have been in the production of this image, it has been suppressed, in favour of Bray's own autobiography.

A number of feminist critics have queried the unexamined, normative conceptions of age, sexuality, and gender difference which drive current anxieties about sexualisation – including scholarly interventions such as The Australia Institute reports. In their historical research into the constructions of childhood, for example, R. Danielle Egan and Gail Hawkes have examined a number of past 'panics' around child sexuality; they are particularly sceptical of The Australia Institute (TAI) reports' claims that this is a new era of the sexualisation of children and public concern about it (2008, pp. 311-12). Further, while they express strong political sympathies with The Australia Institute's overall critical focus on neo-liberal, market-centred philosophies, and the contemporary over-emphasis on consumption, they nevertheless object to what they argue is the use of ahistorical categories and assumptions in both of the reports on child sexualisation (Egan & Hawkes 2008, pp. 307-8). Joanne Faulkner likewise notes that childhood, sexuality, and gender are treated as mostly natural and universal categories in both TAI reports; she also draws attention to the way that childhood innocence and sexualisation can be mutually dependent terms, not fundamentally opposed ones (2010, p. 107; see also Gabriel 2009, p. 49).

To acknowledge the history, context, and precedents of heightened social concerns is extremely useful for gaining perspective and engaging in "cogent political analysis" (Abelove 1995, p. 14). In the recent popular and also academic discussions of sexualisation and its effects on children, there has been a tendency to assume that this is an unprecedented public crisis; the media space

devoted to life-permeating technologies, such as mobile phones, social networking, and the internet generally, lends apparent credence to this perception. Consequently, a frequent comment, even from very different viewpoints in the Henson affair, was that the current concern with the protection of children is unique, and uniquely intense. However, Jeffrey Weeks, writing in 1993, mentioned similar levels of intense pre-occupation in the UK, and compared these with three separate periods of heightened public concern over child safety in nineteenth-century Britain (the 1830s, 1870s, and 1880s) (1993, p. 3). Molly McGarry's account of Anthony Comstock's anti-vice campaigns in the United States during the nineteenth-century reveals a similar use of language and choice of targets for child protection campaigners (2000). These cultural histories suggest that it is not necessarily the case that contemporary society is characterised by an epidemic of child abuse, or even unprecedented public preoccupation with the topic (Thompson 2009; Faulkner 2010, p. 110; Simpson 2011, p. 298).

Public expressions of anxiety about sexuality and danger, furthermore, have often coincided with the advent of new technologies such as the telegraph, the telephone, cinema, television, and the Internet (Cassell & Cramer 2008, pp. 59-61), and also new forms of transportation, like bicycles, trains, and automobiles (Simpson 2011, p. 298). These examples point to another significant issue in the sexualisation literature: although the stated concern is about children and young people, the actual focus is, overwhelmingly, girls. As I suggested earlier, protecting girls from sexualisation frequently metamorphoses into a desire to protect girls and society from female sexuality. By contrast, boys do not figure significantly as a group in the ongoing debates over sexuality, representation, and ethical responsibility.

In his discussion of this ongoing issue, Alan McKee suggested that much of the concern about protecting children is indicative of adults' concerns and fears, and our normative ideals of what young people should be like (2010, p. 134). I note McKee's comments here with specific emphasis on the frequent slippage in protectionist arguments from 'children' to 'girls': a feature that reflects a desire to shape female sexuality in general, not simply to protect children. Others have also highlighted this skewed attention to girls, which is all the more notable because it is rarely accounted for in any explicit fashion by anti-sexualisation arguments. Brian Simpson, for example, observes that attention is directed overwhelmingly toward girls and young women; he suggests that this reflects (at least in part) anxieties about proper and improper female sexuality, as much as it does worries about children's safety (2011, p. 298).

In the arguments around Henson's photographs specifically, the focus was almost exclusively on girls and young women. Notwithstanding Henson having photographed both male and female subjects in roughly equal numbers throughout his career, and the fact that the 2008 exhibition also displayed images of a naked adolescent boy, the scandal raged only around the pictures of the female model. In the more general context of ongoing concerns over "raunch culture" and "corporate paedophilia", the focus continues to be on girls and the peculiar moral dangers posed by the Internet.

Hetty Johnston echoed this view of the internet's dangers when recommending that police investigate N's parents: "What parent in their right mind would allow their 12- or 13-year old to strip off naked and display themselves all over the internet?" (in Tovey, Kennedy & Welch 2008, p. 1). Johnston's wording is indicative; it evokes more of a concern with appropriate female modesty and the maintenance of barriers of discretion, than it does concern with the girl's safety,

and others'. She re-casts N's modelling for Henson, and describes it as if N deliberately stripped and performed in front of a webcam. Some girls do, obviously; the application of it to N is therefore highly suggestive of a moral failing on her part and on the part of those who should have been her guardians.

Egan and Hawkes find the focus on girls in both of The Australia Institute reports to be deeply problematic, for two primary reasons. First, they question the implied assumptions about *boys'* relations with media and sexuality: are boys seen as less vulnerable to cultural sexualisation? Is sexualisation only really problematic when it happens to girls? Why are girls seen to require such high degrees of protection and regulation? (Egan & Hawkes 2008, pp. 309, 318).

Second, Egan and Hawkes contend that the reports tend to problematise the *expression* of female sexuality, rather than representations of it: "How does a report that seems to place the welfare of girls at the centre often render their voices and their sexual decision making impossible and even pathological?" (2008, p. 308). Institute director Clive Hamilton appeared on SBS current affairs program *Insight* to discuss both of the reports, and Egan and Hawkes note how, in his commentary,

A slippery slope, eroded girlhood innocence is especially vulnerable and thus susceptible to shift from purity to 'slutty' with exposure to sexualising materials. Here, the gendered dimensions are made explicit. Female sexuality is both more corruptible and more socially disruptive (Egan & Hawkes 2008, p. 311).

If, they conclude, “The problem of premature sexualisation is the danger of girls aspiring to ‘slutty behaviour’”, as Hamilton put it, “this logic *vilifies sexuality as opposed to sexism*” (Egan & Hawkes 2008 p. 319).

The recent increase in the public advocacy of female virginity in Australia⁶³ illustrates many of the assumptions that inform anti-sexualisation perspectives, including the notion that sex – that is, intercourse – has an indelible impact on the female self, and thus must not be undertaken casually, too early, with the ‘wrong’ person, or with too many people (Maguire 2010). As Steve Biddulph insisted, “if you hurt someone’s sexuality you hurt their soul” (in Krohn 2009). By contrast, Emily Maguire has argued that there is a strange parallel between ‘virginity porn’ and abstinence education: “teenage girls are treated as delicate halfwits, so vulnerable that sex with a man causes their hot, sexy bodies to bleed and break, and their soft, squishy hearts to be forever changed” (2010, p. 39).

In his advocacy of sexual restraint for young women, Clive Hamilton implied that casual, mindless, soul-destroying promiscuity was the only alternative to remaining chaste (2009). When Federal Opposition Leader Tony Abbott added his voice to the public promotion of female virginity, with specific reference to his own daughters, Hamilton’s polarised morality was echoed by Jess McGuire from the ‘Defamers’ blog; she countered Abbott’s critics with “‘What’s Tony supposed to tell his daughters? Have completely unpleasant intercourse with the first meat-head footballer who shouts you a few drinks with my blessing’?” (in

⁶³ In the United States also, under the former president George W. Bush, government-funded campaigns promoting virginity and abstinence among young people were an official requirement in schools across the nation (Sabo 2007, p. 7).

Maguire 2010, p. 34). Neither McGuire nor Hamilton allowed for the possibility that these are not the sole options for girls and young women.

In much of the literature and commentary that is opposed to sexualisation, there are distinct parallels with forms of feminist sexual politics which seek to protect and 'immunise' subjects from their own bodies and desires, not just those of others. This was noted by Kylie Valentine, who identified the high visibility of protectionist arguments in the Henson case, and their parallels with anti-pornography feminism. Valentine suggested that the terms of child protection, especially its emphasis on sexualisation as injury,

resonate with particular feminist arguments against pornography. Anti-pornography feminism, associated most closely with Americans Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, and Australian Sheila Jeffreys, argues that pornography is the means by which women are objectified and gender domination perpetuated (Valentine 2008).

For protection advocates, young people are so vulnerable that they should be 'cordoned off', but not only in the interests of their own safety and protection from potential predators: this protection is also from their own bodies and desires (Valentine, G. 2004, p. 99; Cassell & Cramer 2008, p. 64). Indeed, in the Henson debates, there was considerable ambivalence, and slippage, between the need to protect children from paedophiles, and the need to protect children from themselves, specifically their sexualities.

While concerns about children's and young people's possible vulnerabilities are deeply felt and legitimate, a program of repudiating sexuality, and sealing up and protecting bodies, is not the only way to effectively safeguard these populations. There are numerous historical precedents which offer a rich source

of information, of ethical and policy ‘lessons’, that contemporary analyses and programs can draw on, in seeking to maximise young people’s safety and health. Within feminist theory and politics on rape, and on heterosexual relations, as I have argued in previous chapters, approaches that assume the need to protect women from pre-conceived dangers may be distinctly less effective than those more open to contingencies, and more focused on equipping women to handle risks themselves. In the same vein, programs which emphasise protection and control tend to discount the agential and regulatory capacities of young people, especially girls – regardless of the sincere motivating desire to shield them from harm. Writing from the recent North American context of heightened parental and governmental concerns over the risk of young people being sexually exploited online, Cassell and Cramer raise similar objections to the specific character of the concerns, and consequent interventions (2008, p. 54). In particular, they contend that the anxieties over girls using the internet over-emphasise risk and the need for protection – and therefore discount girls’ capacities for agency and self-regulation, and also their proficiency as users of communications technologies (2008, p. 64).

A more enabling approach, furthermore, requires less precipitous assumptions regarding how girls and young women interact with and negotiate popular culture; for instance, avoiding the assumption that “girls who express sexuality in any way that mirrors popular culture are de facto tainted by the market” (Egan & Hawkes 2009, p. 396). In Hamilton’s advocacy of sexual restraint, for example, girls who have ‘casual’ sex are presented as victims of cultural pressures to conform to the norms of hyper-sexuality; however, those who abstain are exercising choice and independence. The assumption is that mainstream culture is conformist, while religious and (conservative) familial influences are not (Hamilton 2009, p. 10; Bray in Krohn 2009). Against this

limiting framework, Egan and Hawkes propose that sexualisation be re-defined “as a process rather than an unwanted outcome” (2008, p. 318), and also “that innocence should be removed as the criterion against which a girl’s relationship to sexuality gets measured” (ibid). Indeed, it is a serious over-simplification, and a disservice to young people, to divide their potential subjectivities into ‘true’ manifestations of natural innocence and vulnerability, and ‘false’, consumerist, exhibitionist, sexualised products of corporate culture.

There is, finally, an additional element to the regulatory ideals that underpin many anti-sexualisation arguments. As Robbie Duschinsky has observed (2010, p. 101) the notion of ‘the child’ or childhood that is defended in child protection arguments is itself deeply marked by class (and racial) differences: the innocent child is a white middle class child. Indeed, the behaviours and character traits that are ‘demonised’ – ‘trashy’, casual sexual attitudes and behaviours – are those that have a long history of association with working class and non-white children. Claire Charles has also noted that protectionist or anti-sexualisation arguments reflect a specific norm of proper female sexuality, inflected with middle-class standards of tastefulness; ‘hyper-sexuality’ in young women and girls is usually associated with lower/working class styles and behaviours, and defined in terms of lack of restraint or propriety (2010, p. 64).

Ariel Levy’s *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, (2006) an influential argument against sexualisation, places a clearly lower-class style of sexualised femininity at the centre of her critique of ‘raunch culture’: “a tawdry, tarty, rumbustious and cartoonlike version of female sexuality”, as Kristjansson puts it (2008, p. 4). The ideals of sexuality and relationships that inform and shape the arguments of academics like Clive Hamilton, Abigail Bray, Rush and La Nauze, commentators like Miranda Devine, and social campaigners and authors like

Tankard Reist and Hetty Johnston, are upheld as universal, even natural, models of healthy, proper/normal ways of living. But they are in fact highly specific, culturally, socially, and historically, and reflect a particular set of class and racial values and norms. This does not in any way render them invalid; what I am questioning is their unexamined exemplary status as universal norms meant to guide public policy.

Problematizing representation

The arguments of contemporary opponents of sexualisation share an overall set of assumptions regarding cultural representations, their coherence and ubiquity, how they work, and their effects. The intellectual antecedents of this politics of representation are visible in the compelling and influential style of feminist politics that can be broadly termed ‘anti-pornography’. Like Robbie Duschinsky (2010, pp. 94-5), I see quite clear connections between anti-pornography feminism, its form of anti-rape politics, and the current arguments against sexualisation that have played out in Australia since the mid-2000s. In this final chapter section, I explore these connections, and their repercussions.

Undeniably, anti-pornography feminism has focused attention on the widespread existence of misogyny in cultural representations, and the significance of this as much more than ‘just images’. Nevertheless, I believe that contemporary feminist politics also needs alternative ways of studying and theorising representations – particularly sexually explicit ones.

As Feona Attwood observes, the conceptual association of “pornography, objectification, and violence” (2004, p. 8) that is standard in anti-pornography perspectives has also become widely influential in feminism generally, such that

“most analytical accounts of sexual representation take it as the starting point for discussion, the point that enables a clear position to be taken and elaborated” (p. 8). This, in turn, means that cultural materials are dealt with in fairly standardised ways – and this can be seen in current Australian public discussions of sexualisation.

A primary example of this is the power attributed to cultural images in these accounts. Feminist critics of post-structuralism often object to its perceived focus on signs, texts, and representation, arguing that these should be subordinated to material political concerns; interestingly, however, pornography seems to be an exception to this, insofar as pornographic representations are treated as very material and concrete indeed, in both their meanings and their effects (see Shrage, 2005, p. 47, who lists Martha Nussbaum and Catharine MacKinnon in this context).

In the public debates about Bill Henson’s work, the perceived power of images was indeed predominant, and compounded by the attribution of a certain unmediated reality to photographs, compared to other forms of representation (Devine 2008, p. 13; Munster 2009). Here, and in wider discussion of sexualised representations, the assumed links between nudity, powerlessness, and objectification, together with the conviction that such images force viewers to adopt dominating, predatory attitudes, constituted a powerful logic. For child protection advocates, part of the worry about adults – and children – looking at images of naked children arose from the notion that to be aroused, or experience pleasure in looking, will necessarily metamorphose into actions against children in ‘the real world’ – the same operative assumption driving most anti-

pornography arguments in feminism.⁶⁴ As Egan and Hawkes put it with regard to the reports from The Australia Institute, these arguments “assume a hypodermic model of cause and effect. Images produce action” (Egan & Hawkes 2008, p. 314).

The claims made about how young people are affected by sexualised culture are also problematic in terms of what is defined as an undesirable or harmful outcome. While Rush, La Nauze, Bray, and Tankard Reist foreground their concerns for the safety of girls, and while these are undeniably genuine, this safety seems to depend on the absence of sexual expression and activity (as suggested in my previous discussion of the innocence standard) (Egan & Hawkes 2008, p. 316; 2009, pp. 390-1). This is most clearly demonstrated in the *Corporate Paedophilia* report, where Rush and La Nauze connect young children’s exposure to sexualised representations with two separate sets of data – one showing earlier intercourse among adolescents, and another showing more frequent sexual activity among older teenagers (Rush & La Nauze 2006, pp. 41-43; Egan & Hawkes 2008, p. 316). The causal links between these three are asserted, rather than established; further, it must be queried how the last one in particular can be designated as a negative phenomenon, unless casual, ‘promiscuous’, and experimental sex has been pre-defined as problematic.

Claire Charles’ analysis of sexualisation, based on research undertaken with a specific group of teenage girls, offers a more complicated – and less pre-determined – set of results. Charles notes that opponents of sexualisation like Tankard Reist tend to assume that girls will uncritically adopt the norms

⁶⁴ Although the relation between representations and actions is an extremely complex question, especially in the context of scientific research, there seems to be little convincing empirical evidence that directly links sexual abuse with the use of pornography or other explicit materials (Ciclitira 2004, p. 286; Smallbone in Marr 2008, pp. 70-71).

embodied in dominant cultural representations of femininity. But she stresses that rather than asserting this link, it must “be based on rigorous research” (2010, p. 68), which investigates how girls from a range of class, ethnic, and racial contexts engage with different ideals of femininity – not all of them drawn from popular culture. Her own study of girls at an upper-class private high school, for instance, found that:

At times, being sexy and raunchy is positioned in opposition to the ideals of working hard, taking responsibility for one’s economic security and making a difference in the world. At other times, however, a flirtation with hyper-sexuality is evident, alongside a desire to be self-determined and successful (Charles 2010, p. 68).

This acknowledgement of contingencies is absent from much of the public commentary on the topic. Thus, when Clive Hamilton sought to demonstrate the higher visibility of sexual imagery in the contemporary public domain, he conflated a considerable variety of representations, cultural technologies, and viewing occasions: Bill Henson’s photographs, pornography, ‘tween’ marketing, music videos, television programs, fashion, and advertising, were all held responsible for a single problem: the over-sexualisation of children (2008; see also Krohn 2009). This points to another problematic feature of anti-sexualisation literature, both popular and academic: the conflation of diverse and disparate cultural phenomena into an amorphous, sexualising threat, such that the Henson images, *Dolly* magazine, Bratz dolls, the marketing of adult fashion to children, nude representations of youth, child pornography, acts of paedophilia, and child abuse are placed in the same category, or along a continuum of sexualised risk and harm (McKee, 2010, p. 133; Smith 2010, p. 108). These connotations parallel those feminist perspectives that align heterosexuality, pornography, sexual abuse, and rape.

A recent essay in the left-leaning current affairs journal *The Monthly*, by Cordelia Fine, illustrates the visibility of this particular feminist approach to sexual representations, and which straddles the academic and popular domains. In her discussion of the ‘pornification’ of mainstream culture, and the expansion of the pornography industry, Fine (2011) begins by acknowledging that while there have been profound shifts in gender equality in some areas – Australia’s first female Prime Minister, for instance, and women’s increased presence in academic and other professional sectors – pornography has increasingly become a site where brutal male power reigns supreme (2011, p. 17). As her discussion proceeds, it is clear that in her view, pornographic representations have indelible effects that pervade social relations generally.

Fine reviews and draws on Gail Dines’ *Pornland* (2010) and Melinda Tankard Reist and Abigail Bray’s *Big Porn Inc* (2011). She mentions *The Porn Report* – Lumby, Albury and McKee’s investigation into Australians’ use of pornography (McKee, Albury & Lumby 2008) – but her sympathies are obviously with the two former books. Fine, Dines, Tankard Reist, and Bray all exemplify a currently widespread approach to sexual representations which tends to slip between terms such as sexualisation, objectification, violence, and sexual abuse; where hard-core pornography is defined as violence *per se*; and where an underlying normative ideal of healthy sexuality prevails, especially for girls and young women. For example, Fine takes descriptions of specific pornographic scenes from Dines, as well as from Tankard Reist and Bray – who have already presented them in the worst possible light – and presents them as demonstrating the ubiquity of sexual violence in porn (2011, p. 17). However, reading these scenes *as* violence is extremely contentious; further, it assumes that readers will share a general aversion to semen, anal sex, and multiple sexual partners. As

Karen Ciclitira has noted, applying the label ‘violent’ to sexually explicit representations is a highly subjective exercise: for some viewers, vigorous penetration is violent, while others restrict this description to obviously non-consensual rape and torture scenes (2004, p. 286).

“These books”, Fine writes of *Pornland* and *Big Porn Inc*, “paint a bleak picture of *the effects* of commercial porn...” (2011, p. 17; emphasis added). In fact, however, they paint a bleak picture of the content of pornography as the authors perceive it, and of the effects that they presume it has on those who consume it, especially boys and young men. Further, despite *The Porn Report’s* findings about the numbers of women using pornography in Australia, female consumers of porn are conspicuously absent in these accounts (Kennedy & Llewellyn 2011, p. 258; Ciclitira 2010, p. 297).

Contrasting definitions of ‘violence’ in pornography offer perhaps the clearest illustration of the paradigmatic differences between anti-pornography perspectives and others. As Fine notes, in *The Porn Report*, Alan McKee’s analysis of adult movies available in Australia found that only 2% contained sexual violence, and she contrasts this with a U.S. study which reported sexual violence in almost 90% of videos examined. To explain this considerable discrepancy, Fine asserts that McKee’s definition of what counts as ‘violence’ is far too narrow; in his study, McKee classified pornographic scenes as ‘violent’ only if obvious non-consent, pain, or displeasure, were shown.⁶⁵ According to Fine, Dines, Tankard Reist, and Bray, this is highly naïve; feigned female pleasure in pornography, they argue, renders actual violence and aggression

⁶⁵In Australia, pornography is also subject to different, and more stringent, regulations. This national and cultural difference may have been another relevant factor, although Fine makes no mention of it.

invisible, but McKee misses this completely, in focusing only on what actually *looks like* non-consensual violence (Fine 2011, p. 18).

The argument that women's simulated pleasure in pornography scenes is a façade that conceals male power, violence, and abuse is problematic on several counts. Fine's central examples, drawn from Dines, and Tankard Reist and Bray, are instances of "ass to mouth" penetration, and ejaculation on women's faces: these acts are explicitly defined as "degrading" *per se* and therefore violent, and the authors assert that any pleasurable response from women in such scenes is obviously a pretence (2011, p. 18).

Obviously, Fine, Tankard Reist, Bray, and Dines are aware that pornographic films are like any other film insofar as the participants are acting, hence, all of the actors' responses are feigned to some degree. Presumably, the ideal solution to this problem would not be to portray women as uniformly upset, resistant, or disgusted when engaging in these sexual acts. The most likely possibility, then, is that the preferred outcome would be not showing these kinds of acts at all; for Fine and others, it seems inconceivable that women would ever voluntarily participate in, much less enjoy, sexual acts like anal, oral, or double penetration. This assumption is made explicit when Fine writes: "I would like to think many men watching this material would simply find it very off-putting if the woman showed how she *really* felt about being doubly penetrated... or having ejaculate shot in her face" (2011, pp. 18-19).

Analysis and policy around pornography, Fine asserts, "...requires honesty about what porn is actually like" (2011, p. 20), which implies that anti-pornography writers *know* what it is 'actually like', and those who disagree with them are duplicitous or deluded. I should also add that it is inevitable that these

anti-pornography writers will see more violence in pornography, given that they define acts like anal and double penetration as violent *per se*; further, ‘objectification’, ‘degradation’, and ‘violence’ are almost indistinguishable in their accounts, and sexual acts perceived as ‘degrading’ are equated with acts of ‘violence’ (Fine 2011, p. 19).

Fine concludes with a call for the “eroticisation of equality” (2011, p. 21). The conviction that sex must be free of power, and differences, is found in anti-pornography and anti-sexualisation writing, and reflects a shared ideal of healthy sexuality. Overall, these arguments about pornography reflect limited notions of how representations of sexuality can function, and what kinds of relations people can have with them. Amanda Kennedy and Cheryl Llewellyn’s review of Dines’ *Pornland* provides a succinct summary of problems very similar to those I am noting here: “Ultimately what Dines gives us is ideology instead of evidence, predetermined conclusions rather than analysis, and moralism in place of real options” (2011, p. 258).

The preceding discussion of sexual representation also points to an especially compelling aspect of both anti-pornography and anti-sexualisation perspectives: their use of a highly dramatic, personal, and rhetorical style of address, which is permeated with what Susanna Paasonen calls “negative affect” (2007, p. 47). While anti-pornography writers, obviously, also stress the more macro-political problems of “exploitation, sexism, racism and misogyny” in porn, their arguments are suffused with deeply personal narratives “of hurt, sadness, anger, frustration, fear and nausea” (ibid; Ciclitira 2004, p. 289). For example, Paasonen notes that in the documentary film *Not a Love Story* (1981), “feminist author Robin Morgan is moved to tears while describing the rage that she feels is inseparable from feminist consciousness and the pain of awareness”

(Paasonen 2007, p. 48). Abigail Bray was also “moved to tears” at the 2011 launch of *Big Porn Inc*, as she and co-author Tankard Reist described some of the pornographic content they had viewed in writing the book (Hills 2012, p. 14). In the previous chapter section, I described how Bray’s reading of Henson’s *Untitled #30* was driven by her own experiences of sexualised shame, fear, and anger.

Compared with the public disclosure and retrospective rationalising characteristic of autobiography, more measured critical approaches to cultural materials, such as post-representational or cultural technologies perspectives⁶⁶, can seem emotionally detached; however, while they lack the broad popular appeal of sexual confession, they have considerable advantages for feminist cultural politics. There is much to gain from assessing cultural materials – advertisements, music videos, television programs, films – in terms of who uses them, and how and where they are used, instead of the almost exclusive attention to ‘content analysis’, or image interpretation, which remain the dominant techniques used in more universalising critical commentaries on the problem of representation in contemporary culture (e.g. Tankard Reist & Bray; Jackson & Westrupp; Hardy 2000).⁶⁷

As I indicated earlier, cultural consumption in anti-sexualisation accounts is frequently treated as a passive, non-agential practice, an automatic response to cultural stimuli (e.g. Jackson & Westrupp 2010). By contrast, modes of consumption can be critically assessed as creative practices with specific

⁶⁶ Significant examples include Chartier (1988); Hindess (1986a, 1986b); and Hunter (1984a, 1984b, 1990).

⁶⁷ Simon Hardy’s work, which is on the whole highly sensitive to context and history, is an example: in his discussion of pornography, “the erotic” is assumed to adhere to a hegemonic totality of male domination, and representations have an uncomplicated relation to ‘reality’. Even in the section titled ‘The social uses of eroticism’, actual users and uses are absent (2000, pp. 87-89).

institutional and technical conditions and contexts, rather than being understood as a unified phenomenon, and cast in the role of a general problem of representation (Chartier 1988; Hunter 1984a, 1984b). What I have been calling less ‘precipitous’ accounts have been well-established in scholarly literature for some time, yet they have not been taken up in feminist work in any systematic fashion. Because these appreciations of the contingencies involved in issues of representation and culture are committed to an anti-reductive strategy, they have enormous potential for feminist research, particularly as feminists address the problem of an increased sexualisation of the public sphere.

Non-precipitous, cultural technologies and capacities-focused approaches to feminist scholarship do, of course, exist. One of these is Susanna Paasonen’s (2007) use of Eve Sedgwick’s definition of “reparative” and “paranoid” interpretations of cultural materials, which acknowledges the importance of affect, as well as rationality: a balance that may well be attractive to many feminists. In noting this example, I am drawing on Paasonen more than Sedgwick herself, for the simple reason that Paasonen’s discussion specifically relates these terms to feminist readings of pornographic texts, and is therefore directly relevant to my current needs. For Paasonen, paranoid readings involve a:

compulsive will to knowledge through uncovering and revealing the hidden workings of power which have been known from the start ... Paranoid reading generalizes and tends to be tautological as it can only ‘prove the very same assumptions with which it began’ which ‘may be experienced by the practitioner as a triumphant advance toward truth and vindication’ (Sedgwick, 2003: 135) (Paasonen 2007, p. 45).

Unsurprisingly, Paasonen views anti-pornography feminism as a primary example of a paranoid reading position, as it “figures pornography as a monolithic text embedded in negative affect. ... the outcome of the analysis is

knowable beforehand and no surprises are welcome or even possible” (2007, p. 48).

By contrast, the reading style termed reparative “is more geared towards positive affect, imaginative close reading and surprises in encounters with texts... reparative reading is partial in perspective and does not present unequivocal outcomes” (Paasonen 2007, p. 45). Paasonen emphasises that taking up a more reparative stance does not signify progress or enlightenment, so much as an “increased self-reflexivity” (ibid). Correspondingly, no response to pornography is innocent, whether it is one of disgust, arousal, shame, rage, anxiety, or pleasure (Paasonen 2007, p. 55), hence reparative reading can also be termed ‘implicated’. A reparative feminist reader of pornography, then, will take into account both the initial, immediate response to the text in question, and the more considered or reflective reactions; they will be accountable for the specific conceptions of “power, sexuality and representation” that they have brought to the material; and finally, they will resist framing their own responses as “templates for reader or viewer reactions in general” (Paasonen 2007, p. 55).

Kath Albury (2009) has outlined a very similar approach to pornography, using both Sedgwick’s paranoid/reparative terminology, and Foucault’s work on self-care. She finds much of the current debate around pornography and sexualisation somewhat limiting: “simply naming an image (such as pornography), practice (such as anal sex) or group (male porn consumers) as ‘sexist’, ‘oppressive’ or even ‘hegemonic’ seems to me to be a frustrating political strategy” (Albury 2009, p. 649). Her implicitly technical and historical approach is evident when she suggests that we move away from assessing pornography in terms of whether it offers ‘good’ or ‘bad’ representations of

gender and sexuality, towards considering what it can show us about how sexual practices and subjectivities might be changing (Albury 2009, p. 650).

Paasonen and Albury's emphasis on reflective and measured readings offer alternatives to Bray's passionate affect and the traditional liberal humanist advocacy for the redemptive powers of art. There is an enormous gap between the reflective engagements recommended by Malouf, for instance, and Bray's 'streetwise feminist gaze', the gut reaction, at the other end; neither account is intellectually or ethically equipped to bridge this divide. What Paasonen and Albury both offer is the recommendation that we practise and attend to both kinds of readings; neither is designated more authentic nor feminist than the other. Responses experienced as instinctual, immediate, on the one hand, and those clearly derived from specific trainings and disciplines, on the other, can be equally valid.

Conclusion

Writing from the UK, Robbie Duschinsky commented on his interest in discussions of sexualisation as they have developed in Australia specifically. I note Duschinsky's remarks here, as they highlight some of the reasons for my own focus on this context:

Personally, I am fascinated by the controversy within Australian feminism on the issue, which is instructive due to the sheer quality of discussion it has produced from some commentators. The issues and divisions of 'second wave' feminism visibly live on; but in their refraction through new themes and practices they have accrued different meanings and provoked altered questions (Duschinsky 2010, p. 95).

I have aimed to show how a particular feminist perspective on pornography, rape, and sexual abuse, influential since the 1970s, has powerfully shaped recent discussions regarding sexualisation. Duschinsky (2010, pp. 94-95) suggests an historical, political, and rhetorical link between 1970s second wave radical feminism, its foregrounding of rape victims as a paradigmatic symbol and expression of the sheer extent of male domination and contempt, through to anti-pornography politics, and more recently, “child sexual exploitation” (95; Angelides 2004, p. 147). Similarly, Simon Hardy describes an overall form of sexual politics which foregrounds sexual violence as the primary factor in gender inequality (as cause, or enactment), and stresses the proximity of pornography to rape and prostitution (2000, p. 78). Significantly, Hardy suggests that anti-pornography politics are, more broadly, a product of the “problematization of heterosexual eroticism” (2000, p. 79).

Through my examination of public debates over the sexualisation of culture in Australia, I have identified the continuing influence of this kind of feminist sexual politics in a contemporary context. While appreciative of its contributions to cultural politics, I have problematised this model by first, locating protectionist, anti-sexualisation arguments in specific historical contexts, and second, pointing to more qualified approaches to sexual representations. On a more specific level, research into uses of cultural materials – for instance, by girls and young women – may benefit from adopting a more measured and technical method of investigation, and this does not necessarily mean a loss of ethical or critical capacity.

Thesis Conclusion

My primary task in this dissertation has been to re-cast heterosexuality as a problem of feminist sexual politics, by foregrounding its historical character, and by focusing on operative notions of subjectivity as they inform how the closely related concept of sexuality is approached. For feminism, as for any politically motivated socio-political movement, the operative theories of subjectivity will condition and constrain the possibilities for social and self-transformation, just as they also shape and enable these possibilities.

Conceptions of the subject are therefore important markers of the limits of feminism's ethical and political promise.

Sexual politics is necessarily about subjectivity, given the historical connections between sexuality and subjectivity characterising the modern era. It is also obviously about operations and relations of power, as feminism has been instrumental in demonstrating. My examination of (hetero)sexual politics acknowledged the significance of these connections, while treating them in anti-reductive and technical terms.

In examining recent forms of feminist theory and politics, I have made a conscious effort to avoid a merely corrective attitude to my subject matter. This is a matter of both intellectual ethics or courtesy, and of methodology: assuming the significance of affect and attachment in different viewpoints and arguments has allowed me to appreciate and contextualise divergent feminist positions to a greater extent than if I treated them as only matters of theory or rational exchange.

For example, in my first chapter I identified the constitutive roles of melancholy and nostalgia in some feminist viewpoints, particularly the retrospective moulding of 1960s feminist activism into an ideal golden age, against which current feminism cannot help but fall short. Rather than dismiss this tendency as mistaken fantasy, I have situated it within Left melancholy more broadly, and expressed concerns over imposing *any* coherent version of the past onto feminism's complex history. Current forms of feminism are severely constrained if permanently held to account *vis a vis* this past revolutionary moment when Theory and Politics seemed to meet in a perfect synthesis.

Historicising different feminist positions in this way allowed me to acknowledge their contributions and utility, while refusing to reify them as permanent standards for politics. The same strategy proved useful in many different contexts; for instance, noting critical theory's long-standing tradition of questioning the Subject helps to moderate the accusation that post-structural theory has destroyed subjectivity – and therefore agency, politics, and freedom. The historicising of the subject – its deconstruction, properly understood – is not a recent, post-structural or post-modern invention; it has a longer and broader history.

In my first chapter, I examined contrasting feminist receptions of post-structural theories, and the implications of these differences. The relevance of this issue for sexual politics lies in its foregrounding of specific questions about feminist theory and politics – which in turn have a profound effect on how sexuality is problematised. These questions can be summarised as concerned with: the status and conception of subjectivity in feminism; the possibilities of ethics without universal normative criteria; the relations between self- and world-transformation; the role of anticipatory imperatives in theory and practice; and

perceived divisions between social and cultural matters. Post-structuralism has not introduced these issues – they were already significant feminist concerns – but it has, arguably, intensified them, and helped to pose them in different ways.

Through Chapter One’s discussion of feminism and post-structuralism, I identified important links between normative forms of sexual politics, and the hostility of some feminists to anti-foundationalism as a political and theoretical outlook. This hostility can be seen in a certain refusal to grant significance to political methods that are not situated within a general, coherent theoretical framework. More specifically, the assumption that foundational categories and judgements are essential for effective politics is implicitly reflected in forms of sexual politics that dismiss efforts to practise ethically conscious and local forms of (hetero)sexuality. Against such assessments, I have argued that the loss of certain foundations and guarantees may well have specific advantages for sexual politics. Rather than creating a lack, it may be precisely what is required to open new possibilities, for exploration and evaluation, in re-making the ethical and political potential of (hetero)sexuality.

This discussion helped lay the groundwork for my argument that more technical and historicised notions of subjectivity and power – which I draw from particular post-structuralist approaches – enable a productive problematising of sexuality. Specific post-structural concepts also informed my methodology in general, which I described in the second chapter. Where some feminists point to deconstructions of subjectivity, and re-descriptions of power, as among the gravest offences of post-structuralism against feminism, I have explained how feminists might in fact use these to re-conceive heterosexuality as an ethico-political problem.

It has also been important to demonstrate that an experimental, ‘toolkit’ approach to theories and theorists can be just as useful as the systematic application of one method or framework. For my tasks in this dissertation, this was an effective method, especially given that I made use of a range of concepts from different post-structuralist writers, and given that feminist re-workings of these writers were equally important sources in my discussions.

Examining (hetero)sexual politics in feminism as a kind of quasi-orthodoxy, and hence relatively static at this point in time, is another tactic inspired by post-structural and deconstructive forms of criticism, and underscores the importance of historicising one’s object of analysis. Later discussion of smaller-scale case studies in Chapters Four and Five, for instance, demonstrated that situating issues of (hetero)sexuality in their socio-historical contexts can show how they came to be problematised, and the specific nature of this problematisation.

As part of Chapter Two’s description of my theoretical orientation, I turned to the question of subjectivity, noting first that influential models of the subject – Cartesian, Kantian, Marxist, and psycho-analytic – have been undeniably important and productive for feminist theory; nevertheless, these also have limitations that have a direct bearing on how issues of sexuality are conceived. These limits include: the difficulty of accounting for agency and political action from within structuralist orientations; the tendency to generalise or universalise notions of subjectivity, with the resulting exclusion of diversity and difference; and the assumption that subjectivity is a normative and static state that is either presently attained, or yet-to-be. Historically, for some feminist projects, the key priority has been to compel prevailing categories of subjectivity to accommodate women (or certain women). Nineteenth and early twentieth

century suffrage campaigns are well-known examples – and ones which emphasise the point, again, that it is of critical importance whether specific political programs are strategic, or general in scope.

I then described different efforts at historicising subjectivity, and what can be enabled by them. In particular, this underscores the necessity of discarding any notion that women's subjectivity (and any other categories, such as non-white, or non-human) is incomplete but gradually drawing nearer to a general ideal. This assumption is implicit in certain arguments against deconstructions of the subject that I noted in Chapter One, and in those that perceive women as structurally vulnerable to rape, which I discussed in Chapter Four.

In explaining the Foucauldian-influenced approach to power that I used, I was careful to specify my understanding of it, and what it could offer to sexual politics. Rejecting a general theory of power, for instance, means that male domination cannot be defined as universal or timeless, nor as functioning through structures like 'heterosexuality' or 'pornography'. Further, my descriptions of the relations between subjectivity, power, and liberty mean that in most contexts, women (and men) will have capacities for ethico-political action. Instead of wishful thinking, or denial of the reality of male domination, this can be grounds for cautious optimism. As I pointed out in the second chapter, it means that within heterosexual relations, there are already degrees of liberty, and hence ethical and political negotiations to be practised, in the present.

My third chapter marked the start of a detailed engagement with feminist approaches to sexuality, beginning with an overview of sexuality as a political problem for feminism, from the mid-twentieth century onwards. Through the

sexuality debates in the 1980s, and 1990s Queer Theory (and re-formulations of gender-sexuality relations), the tendency to problematise heterosexuality in fairly stable terms as a relation of unequal power persisted, mostly unquestioned. Within many forms of feminist and queer sexual politics, the conception of gender difference as a non-malleable structure of hierarchy played a significant part in maintaining this inertia around heterosexuality. When heterosexuality is treated in ahistorical terms, and assumed to be unvaryingly normative and oppressive, the possibilities for politics, and liberty, are themselves severely constrained.

I then conducted a more focused engagement with three selected texts, all published subsequent to the impact of the sexuality debates and Queer Theory. All three – Glick, Cooper, and Miriam – held certain feminisms to account, according to a normative set of criteria for ideal feminist theory, politics, and subjectivity. Their targets, unsurprisingly, fell short. These three writers also shared, with many of the theorists discussed in my first chapter, a manifest commitment to feminism as a discrete and singular socio-political body. Consequently, external ‘threats’ were identified as responsible for problems, shortcomings, or setbacks – particularly those associated with post-structural or post-modern theories.

I identified additional characteristics already familiar from Chapter One’s discussion of feminist antagonism to post-structuralist theory. The conviction that feminist politics requires feminist ‘Subjects’, and an underlying nostalgia for a more authentic form of feminism, were significant elements in these discussions. Further, a marked suspicion of concepts associated with post-structuralism, post-modernism, or deconstruction, such as ‘symbolic’, ‘textual’ or ‘language’, was expressed alongside an elevation of social and material

matters over those of culture. This move, ironically enough, was only possible because the materiality – the local integrity – of the objects being commented upon, had been set aside. Interestingly, while these writers opposed material, social reality to cultural, sexual, and aesthetic matters, representations of sexuality were assumed to wield a crucial determining influence over audiences or consumers. This somewhat paradoxical deployment of materialist arguments appeared again in Chapter Five, when I examined protectionist views of sexualised representations.

Finally, I observed that this form of feminist politics is marked by a distinct wariness of uncertainty; present political methods should, ideally, have a tangible connection to specific future outcomes. As I have emphasised repeatedly, this is not problematic by definition: certain political objectives will require this kind of connection, but others will only be constrained by it. In my appraisal of these accounts, I tried to avoid suppressing their differences, and above all, to avoid responding to them on a solely theoretical, corrective level. While I did take issue with certain arguments, I framed this in terms of identifying how these normative feminist perspectives had been developed and assembled, and what kind of basic assumptions and affective motivations had driven them.

In the final part of Chapter Three, I set out some of the gains made possible by treating heterosexuality as an historical object rather than a unitary, unchanging entity. I began this elaboration by clarifying my understanding of Foucault's well-known description of the 'reproductive couple' and its retirement into the shadows of the private sphere. I argued, first, that far from signalling the end of historical inquiry, this apparent withdrawal from public visibility demands that heterosexuality be subjected to detailed scrutiny. In the constitution of modern

heterosexuality, important connections have formed between subjectivity, gender difference, and sexuality. While these links are not naturally given, they can nonetheless be highly resilient, as they are formed and sedimented through practices and within institutions.

Overall, this chapter drew attention to the fact that while feminist (and queer, gay, and lesbian) scholarship and politics have contested – often brilliantly – the presumed natural and normal status of heterosexuality, they often re-defined it as a homogenous structure of either gender inequality or hetero-normativity. I aimed to show how this generalising move is produced through the inter-connection of specific conceptions of subjectivity, power, and ethics, and that it leaves those subjects who practise heterosexuality with very limited scope for agency – or responsibility. By contrast, I proposed re-defining heterosexuality – or sexuality in general – in terms of ethico-political capacity, and a love of freedom (according to the very specific definition of freedom that I described in Chapter Two). These points clearly resonate with Foucault’s interest in ethical practices, and in care of the self, or the arts of living – which my next chapter took up in relation to heterosexuality.

Taking its cue from Chapter Three’s closing suggestions, my fourth chapter explored the possibility of utilising Foucault’s care of the self to re-consider certain issues of heterosexual politics. The first part of Chapter Four focused on this area of Foucault’s work and its divergent receptions among Left and feminist writers, in order to clarify my own understanding of it, and to position it, and myself, in the context of theoretical disputes over how self-care relates to politics.

Within Left and feminist theory, the notion of self-care in general has had a somewhat dubious reputation, especially when juxtaposed with other- or outward-directed ethics and politics, which are often seen as more authentic, legitimate, and praiseworthy. My discussion therefore explained how care of the self, particularly as Foucault described it, can in fact be understood as profoundly ethical, and essentially connected to other-directed concerns. Locating self-care within contemporary feminism, as important to politics, theorising, and self-formation, also helped to underscore these points.

For his critics in general, Foucault's interest in self-care and the arts of living was problematic on several counts: it appeared defeatist, a flight from politics and material realities; it promoted a narcissistic obsession with the self; and its perceived emphasis on style and beauty was unacceptably superficial. In addition to these charges, feminist critics argued that care of the self as Foucault described it was masculinist and individualist, and even inimical to feminist objectives and values. Indeed, I suggested that some feminist repudiations of Foucault's writing on self-care were predicated on an implicit refusal to seriously consider its possible uses, even to the extent that Foucault's own cautions and qualifications were ignored.

Given these objections, my first major task in Chapter Four was to clarify how I saw care of the self as a potentially valuable tool for (hetero)sexual politics. I focused particularly on these points in making my case: self-care as I understand it, is historically grounded in specific contexts and locations; it is necessarily contingent, flexible, and responsive; and it is an *askesis*, an intense and ongoing ethical labour on the self, which cultivates a mode of subjectivity with deeply ethical and sensitive attributes.

This exercise meant I was then in a position to explain how and why sexuality can be seen as an art of living, and a mode of self-care. First, taking my cue from the historicised and technical emphasis of Foucault's approach, I re-examined feminist efforts to locate women's sexuality in the clitoris, in reaction to prevailing mid-twentieth century norms of healthy heterosexuality that defined penile-vaginal intercourse as 'real' sex, and thus identified the vagina as the site of sexual pleasure in 'normal' women. While the feminist model of clitoral sexuality can be problematised in a number of ways, I suggested that situating it in its specific context – conceiving it as an art of living appropriate to its time and place – allows a better understanding of its strategic aims, an acknowledgement of its (substantial) gains, and an overall appreciation of its significance. Taking this kind of approach to issues of sexual politics, I argued, also means that feminism is not permanently beholden to established methods, and can see when alternatives may be required. Otherwise, to paraphrase Hemmings from Chapter One, we risk contributing to our own critical and political erasure.

For the remainder of Chapter Four, I drew on this conception of self-care, and the specified notions of subjectivity and power that I described in Chapter Two, to critically appraise an influential form of feminist sexual politics: one which identifies (hetero)sexuality as instrumental in maintaining male domination over women. This perspective, found in anti-pornography arguments but also quite widespread within feminism generally, stresses the necessity of egalitarian sex, meaning sex devoid of power differentials. The conceptual association of equality with sameness, and the perception of sex as dangerous and destructive, means that heterosexuality tends to be defined as inherently oppressive and exploitative. I noted that this view of heterosexuality is by no means confined to

a small number of feminist academics; for instance, some policies regulating sex between university staff and students are informed by the same view.

Again, I have tried to acknowledge the significance of historical context in the emergence of this kind of sexual politics, and the reasons why some feminists have placed so much emphasis on protecting or detaching women from heterosexual relations. Rather than dismissing these reasons, I have identified this form of sexual politics as problematic to the extent that it has a continuing semi-orthodox and institutional status – and uses a mostly uncontested definition of heterosexuality as, always, involving exploitation. At this point in Chapter Four, I observed that this way of problematising heterosexuality places it on a theoretical continuum that ends in rape, and consequently constrains both heterosexual politics, *and* anti-rape politics. I then described how different conceptions of subjectivity and power can enable sexual encounters to be seen otherwise; however, my primary objective was to disrupt the conceptual proximity of heterosexual sex and rape. To this end, I examined the feminist debates that ensued over Foucault’s proposal that rape be re-defined as a physical, not sexual, form of assault.

Interpretations of Foucault’s argument on this issue have been varied, and my intention was not to advance a resolution; instead, I aimed to follow up this provocative suggestion and discover what it might entail. In rejecting the idea that rape might be equivalent to a punch in the face, many feminists insisted on the singularity of rape as a sexual injury that is uniquely destructive of the female self (even a fate worse than death, for some). In response, I considered what the yields might be of refusing the status of rape as so powerfully, so uniquely, destructive and damaging. What might be enabled by historicising and culturally specifying this view of rape as ‘worse than death’? Considering these

questions, particularly with regard to the notions of subjectivity and power which produce the definition of rape as ultimate violation, led me to identify certain limitations in using prevailing anti-rape politics as a universal model: it tends to be ahistorical in its conception of sexuality, violence, and power; it constrains options for theorising and politicising rape; and it implicitly concedes enormous power to men in general (not only men who rape), by defining them as subjects with inherent power to ‘shatter’ and ‘break’ women.

To expand on this argument, I examined some Foucauldian-influenced feminist work which focuses on changing the nature of the space and events prior to the enactment of rape, and other feminists’ criticisms of these approaches.

Interestingly, these latter arguments return once again to the culpability of post-structuralism and post-modernism, and the pernicious influence of Judith Butler in particular. However, from Sharon Marcus’ and Holly Henderson’s work on rape prevention, I suggested using care of the self to envision a form of self-defence for women that is a mode of living, a cultivation of a strong subjectivity with distinctive capacities and comportments. Such a strategy is not, and could not, be an entire anti-rape program by itself; however, it has advantages for women that may go well beyond preventing sexual violence.

While Chapter Four’s discussion was primarily oriented inwards, to feminist subjectivity, my fifth and final chapter turned a feminist gaze outwards, to the equally significant terrain of cultural representations of gender and (hetero)sexuality. I noted the general importance of representation to feminism: as formative and transformative of subjectivity, gender, and power relations. One of my key arguments in this chapter was that a specific ‘protectionist’ feminist approach to representation –one which shares many assumptions with anti-pornography perspectives – is the most visible and influential form of

feminist cultural politics in Anglophone contexts at this time. It also has important features in common with the normative styles of feminism I first described in Chapter One. My critical scrutiny of protectionist politics proceeded on two levels: first, I explored the advantages of placing this perspective within historical contexts, and second, I examined its operative assumptions about representation, sexuality, and subjectivity.

Chapter Five reviewed the wider context of the perceived ‘sexualisation of culture’, before focusing more specifically on recent Australian disputes over sexual representations. In describing the public concerns over the sexualisation of children and young people – using the Henson affair, and reports from The Australia Institute, as my main examples – I argued that the anxieties expressed have been overwhelmingly about girls and young women, and are as much about regulating girls’ sexual behaviours and attitudes as they are about protecting them.

Regarding the Henson affair especially, in reviewing the disputes of May to June 2008, it was strongly tempting to resolve the differences by diagnosing a moral panic among Henson’s critics and opponents. Instead, I aimed to examine the divergent viewpoints in terms of their underlying conceptions of subjectivity, power, and representation. I paid particular attention here to feminist protectionist arguments that have become prominent in recent years. As I noted in analysing its characteristic features and rhetorical techniques, this form of feminist politics draws on normative categories of feminism and female sexuality; once again, post-structuralism and post-modernism are foregrounded as malign influences – in this case, associated with elitist avant-garde libertarians setting out to shame and silence those who attempt to regulate sexual representations in order to protect children.

Without simply dismissing protectionist arguments, I sought to highlight the unexamined and ahistorical assumptions that drive many of their claims – particularly the generalised categories of childhood, sexuality, and gender. Referencing examples of past public concerns over young people, sex, and new technologies also served to situate protectionist viewpoints historically and culturally, and further highlighted the fact that girls and young women are usually the focus of concern – not only regarding their safety, but the regulation of their sexual interest and expression.

These latter problems were elaborated again in discussion of recent pro-virginity campaigns in Australia (and the United States). Calls for young people to exercise sexual restraint have been disproportionately focused on girls; these viewpoints forge intense links between female subjectivity and sexuality, and define both as fragile yet simultaneously volatile, dangerous to the rest of society. These understandings reflect a distinct lack of imagination regarding girls' and women's capacities for ethical responsibility, which has in turn influenced certain forms of policy, as research on Internet safety guidelines demonstrates (Cassell & Cramer 2008). More information is needed, with regard to how these operative assumptions inform policies and regulations, and also to gather more empirical data about how girls already navigate issues of sexuality, safety, and pleasure (the interviews conducted by Emily Maguire [2010] are an example of this).

In the final section of Chapter Five, I shifted focus from this more historicising approach, to examine how representation itself is conceived in protectionist viewpoints. Many feminist critics of 'sexualised culture' draw on the arguments and rhetoric of anti-pornography politics, and I have identified a series of shared

characteristic features. For example, these approaches often collapse terms such as nudity and objectification, or pornography and violence; they conflate diverse sites and forms of representation and consumption; they attribute immense power to cultural images in (negatively) shaping attitudes and behaviours; their aim of protecting girls and women tends to involve controlling their sexual behaviours; and female sexual expression is often defined as problematic or suspect. These forms of sexual politics also share a rhetorical style marked by “negative affect” (Paasonen): a highly personal, autobiographical address suffused with anger and sorrow, which can be found in Andrea Dworkin’s 1981 book *Pornography*, and Abigail Bray’s recent response to Henson’s photographs of N.

More technical approaches to cultural materials, I argued, do not need to supersede these engagements; nevertheless, a great deal of useful information can be gained by asking into users and uses, different contexts, capacities, and trainings, and by re-defining consumption as an active and creative process – which does not equate to the simplistic assumption that this process is always beneficial or liberating. At this point in my discussion, I noted feminist work that examines sexual representations from this technical perspective. Kath Albury, for instance, has described an ethically sensitive and accountable reading position from which to investigate pornographic texts (Albury 2009). Once again, post-structuralist theories and concepts, and feminist adaptations of these, offer ways to re-examine sexual representations. More empirical research in this vein on children and young people’s engagements with culture could be significantly informative for public policy in general, and media regulation in particular.

In this dissertation, I have approached my central problem of (hetero)sexual politics by examining and historicising the constitutive notions of subjectivity, power, ethics, and representation which inform different feminist approaches to sexuality. Throughout these discussions, I aimed to show how specific post-structuralist-influenced techniques and concepts are especially useful to re-describing heterosexuality as an ethical and political question. Finally, in pursuing these tasks, I have tried to embody a particular spirit of feminist critique: one which Joan Scott describes as a form of desire, a passionate “flight” from “the tyrannical powers of orthodoxy” (2004). This kind of critique – in all its variety and multiplicity – inspires feminism’s ongoing and changing originality, and thus its indispensable contributions to freedom.

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