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Recognizing Men: A Feminist Vision

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Sexuality, conceived as a space of gendered communication, recognition, and exchange, is presently the site of tremendous dislocations and imbalances between men and women. Yet this dramatic scenario of conflict and re-evaluation continues to elude our conceptual grasp, for the most part. The pornography debate gains significance from the fact that it has been a political vehicle for women—on both sides of the issue—to begin to assert and articulate fundamental changes in male and female forms of sexual agency. In this article, I will analyze the underpinnings of the pornography debate, and then attempt to move beyond it to identify terms more adequate to the renegotiation of the sexual dynamic between men and women.

The first thing to notice about the pornography controversy is the political form it has taken. Each side in this debate, both Anti-Pornography feminists and the opposing Anti-Censorship feminists (hereafter AP feminists and AC feminists), has been able to drape itself in the resonant, flowing texts of 19th-century liberalism. In fact, one can even trace the political *leitmotif* of each side back to a single political source, John Stuart Mill's now classical statement of democratic political agency in *On Liberty*. The AP feminists rally behind the claim that pornography harms women. Whether focussing on a notion that it encourages and increases actual violence against women, or more broadly condemning pornography as a sort of environmental pollution harmful to men as well as women in its degrading attitude to human bodies, AP feminists identify pornography as a public harm.¹ It was J.S. Mill who first proposed a Harms Principle as the justification for government curtailment of individual activities, and discussion today over whether or not a government may intervene to abridge a particular individual freedom is still formulated primarily in Millian terms of whether or not a harm has actually been committed, and whether the act of government intervention will be capable of eradicating this harm without creating greater harms as a result of the intervention.² The AP movement thus enables feminists to enter the mainstream legal and political structure as morally indignant citizens, expressing legitimate anger at the harmful activities of the pornography industry, pressing for legal measures to deal with this social problem. The frequent alliance between AP feminists and members of religious or conservative groups serves, in a sense, to emphasize the objective nature of the social harm at stake, when citizens with such disparate political agenda band together to oppose it.

The AC feminists, on the other hand, assert a civil libertarian belief in the need for an untrammelled freedom of expression, a position also given its most dramatic exposition by J.S. Mill in *On Liberty*. Mill maintained that the freedom of expression is one of our most precious possessions, as well as a necessary bulwark against the narrow-mindedness and tyranny of the majority within a democracy. Following this lead, AC feminists warn that in advocating any sort of governmental restraints upon free speech, women are foolishly upholding a principle of censorship likely to be turned against them. Feminism is precisely the sort of minority viewpoint which must rely on the principle of free expression rather than upon the sympathy of the majority in order to have its words heard. AC feminists do not have to deny the testimony of women proclaiming the harmful effects pornography has had on them; their position is that the harmful effects of censorship are greater than the harms of the pornographic material. To this end, AC feminists argue that pornography is primarily a reflection of more fundamental economic and political forms of male domination, so that in opposing pornography women are fighting a symptom rather than the basic harm itself.³ Furthermore, AC feminists claim that the sexual representation of women's bodies is so ubiquitous, the daily fare of sexually objectified women on TV, in newspapers, books, magazines, so much a part of mainstream contemporary culture that no reasonable standard for censorship could be determined or enforced.⁴

Impeccable liberal reasoning supports but also limits the claims of each side. The AP movement has been a powerful vehicle for the expression of female sexual and social anger. Women today are angry at how men look at them, both literally, as represented by pornography and sexual innuendos offered in inappropriate social spaces, and metaphorically, in terms of the economic valuation of women's work, etc. It is not clear that different women intend to express the same thing in opposing pornography, and perhaps rather evident that their opposition stands for many different things. But this massive female voice of concerned citizenship, rendering public judgement upon an everyday male visual ritual must be taken seriously.

One could make an interesting comparison between 19th century "social purity" movements which focussed their ire upon the seductive evils of alcohol and prostitution, and the 20th century AP movement which directs its anger at male sexual objectification of women.⁵ The earlier movements displaced their underlying criticism of male treatment of women with their focus on alcohol or "bad women," providing many men with grounds for evading the criticism. The 20th century AP movement has honed in on a more elemental level of sexual conflict between men and women, potentially indicting all men in their sexual vision of women. The AC feminists are less confrontational in their support for a principle of unrestricted female participation in sexual pleasures. Yet the implications of this position are also radical; a conscious female pursuit of sexual pleasure will involve new female expectations and demands within sexual interaction.

Finally, these limitations in both positions illustrate Marx's belief that radical transformation cannot be brought about within the framework of liberal political institutions. The major issues of sexual recognition and interaction between men and women are no more than symbolically present in the debate over the right of individuals to buy and sell the pornographic commodity. Moreover, feminists on both sides of the issue had to adopt somewhat compromising positions in order to make their arguments within the confines of liberal political agency.

In order to attack pornography as a harmful act warranting governmental restraints, AP feminists had to proffer women as its victims, as harmed. But if sexual objectification does really harm women, feminism is in dire straits. For the AP movement is pointing to a social phenomenon which looms too large to possibly be controlled by government intervention. In supposing pornography an obstacle to women's liberation, the AP movement commits women, and feminism, to a battle they seem likely to lose. There is another sense, however, in which the AP feminists have chosen an opponent not large enough, trivializing the effort to understand and oppose the continuing subordination of women. It would be wonderful to imagine that if we could only reach out and crumple enough demeaning images of nude women the social status of women would immediately rise to that of men. Pornography stands in for live male visions of women. The gendered forms of social recognition and inter-subjectivity which continue to generate a patriarchal sexual dynamic surely permeate the social space between live men and live women.

AC feminists, too, are compromised in their liberal political stance, defending free expression and pleasure in the sexual realm. Superficially they can claim to be making an argument for female sexual agency parallel to that which feminists make with respect to women's participation in the economic and political realms. Within economic and political spheres, the oppression of women has traditionally been identifiable with the exclusion of women, rather than with formal gendered hierarchies within these social structures. Economic and political relations are at least formally defined as relations between equals; so the struggles of women have been waged in terms of demanding rights to full inclusion in these relations. Sexual biases operate to make people unequal, but they are not legitimate elements within transactions defined by the interested production and exchange of material goods, or within abstract political relations of representation. AC feminists portray women's new sexual situation as involving a similar expansion of participation rights. Prior to contraception, the long term consequences of pregnancy placed severe constraints upon women's pursuit of sexual pleasure. Now with contraception women can participate in the sexual economy of pleasure and desire on the same terms as men.

But how valid is the analogy from economic and political relations to the situation of women in sexual relations? While women were traditionally excluded from the former sets of relations, women were always included within sexual structures of

interaction. This means that gender hierarchies are fundamental to the relations and rituals of sexual pleasure and exchange, the domination of women a structural element of our sexual economy. Perhaps no conception of equal sexual participation is really possible without a thoroughgoing evaluation of the gendered asymmetries of the sexual dynamic, and the conscious articulation of non-patriarchal practices. The AC feminists attain their confident, liberal stance in support of free sexual expression in exchange for a significant critical lapse.

Despite their differences, AP and AC feminists share what I find to be an incorrect reading of the current situation of women and men. AP feminists emphasize the sexual oppression of women by men, while AC feminists tend to borrow from a marxist tradition which stresses the more material economic and social forms of women's oppression. In either case, the feminist stance is seen as one of making moral and political arguments for enacting voluntary social changes to end the oppression of women. I think one can interpret the situation rather differently.

I will argue that we are presently living in the wake of major changes in the social positioning of women and men which we have yet to come to terms with. Feminism is not so much a matter of moral and political pleas for change as it is a movement for necessary social reconstruction. While the political component of feminism is surely important, its function may be primarily one of providing a public forum within which people can seek institutional accommodations to changes already confronting them. In the words of Mary O'Brien, "the feminist revolution is not something which is going to happen or which might happen; it is something which is already happening."⁶ O'Brien, however, attempts to extrapolate from Marx's theory of a revolution in the relations of production; she represents the feminist transformation as a revolution in the relations of reproduction. I will eschew this direct parallel with Marx's theory of social change. Using instead the model that Marx himself relied upon, I will argue that the feminist revolution, like the earlier cataclysmic change from feudal to modern European society, is about transformation in our notion of individual agency. As women come to be included in the group of people to whom we attribute full or unrestricted social capacities and obligations, our notions of individuality and social connectedness must be radically altered, just as they were in the tradition from feudal hierarchies to modern democratic relations.

I agree with Catharine MacKinnon, a leading figure within the AP movement, that sexual relations have been the site of women's primary oppression, just as work relations have been the primary scene of proletarian oppression. MacKinnon goes on to argue, however, that women will be liberated through reclaiming their sexuality, thinking to make an analogy with the theory that workers liberate themselves by gaining control of their work lives and conditions.⁷ I dispute such a narrow interpretation of either feminist or proletarian struggle. The sexual oppression of women occurred insofar as women were confined to a sexual role, their sexuality and sexual

relations with men utilized as the basis for excluding them from other spheres of social activity, as I argue more fully below. Class oppression, too, can be understood most fully if we notice the extent to which workers were confined to their labors, the physical domination over the body of the worker identifiable with his exclusion from other human endeavors. In either case, the liberating struggle is aimed at attaining an egalitarian mode of existence within the former realm of oppression, and also at moving beyond this sphere of activities.

The strange character of contemporary gender relations is due to the fact that women have gained a large measure of control over their sexuality and have moved beyond the restricting sphere of sexual relations without attaining equality anywhere. In shouldering a host of new social and economic obligations, women have gained, or had thrust upon them, the responsibilities of double gender social agency. Women are now expected to fulfill not only traditional female roles of reproduction and nurture, but also, in many cases, the traditional male roles of economic and political support of a family. The new social capacities and responsibilities of women have not, however, resulted in egalitarian forms of recognition and exchange between men and women. Pornography gains its meaning in this liminal territory of gendered social relations, mediating and qualifying the new economic and political activities of women through a lens of traditional sexual recognition.

Actual sexual and economic/political capacities and responsibilities have been transformed with contraception and women's public employment. Yet in an age when, as Marx said, we carry our social relations to others, jingling in our pockets in the form of money,⁸ forms of representation, recognition, and value are as significant as actual social relations of power and responsibility. It is in this specifically modern context of media and representation, of mediated social relations and forms of community that new structures of individual and social agency now have to be created. Women find themselves central characters, earnest, hard-working characters in social narrative limbo. There is clearly no contemporary story without women at the hub of events, yet the relation of women to the traditional couplet of "men and events" is as unclear as ever.

In the remainder of this paper, I would like to explain why gender relations are presently generating a need to rethink not only our notions of sexual agency, but our broadest categories of social agency as well. By agency, I refer to the capacities, responsibilities, and recognition for particular acts which we socially confer upon individuals, consciously including the category of recognition as a fundamental component of agency, in a sense not previously emphasized. There are, of course, different types and degrees of agency. There are three reasons why I see the sphere of sexuality as so dynamic today. 1) Traditional male sexual agency was identified with the male ability to impregnate a woman, to act on her in a way which she could neither refuse nor reciprocate. Male sexual agency was thus defined in direct opposition to female

sexual agency. 2) The power which contraception gives to women to be “determinate in the last instance”⁹ with respect to reproduction gives women a new ability to negate the male power of impregnation, thus denying traditional male sexual agency. 3) There is a tremendous state of social disequilibrium today stemming from the fact that actual social power relations between men and women have shifted so radically (within economics as well as within sexuality) without a commensurate shift in the forms of gendered social recognition and subjectivity. This is the phenomenon I now investigate.

The social logic of traditional male sexual agency has not been adequately articulated in its existence as a particular, ritualized male-female dialogue. Let us review the traditional gender asymmetry in matters of sexual effectivity. A man was, *qua* man, physically capable of getting a woman with child and leaving her with child. Because of his relative size and strength he was generally able to do this with or without her consent. He was able to leave his indelible mark upon a woman, capable in his act of momentary pleasure, of imposing upon her both an involuntary labor of reproduction, as well as a future life of motherhood. This rather amazing asymmetry of male sexual power and female sexual obligation was a basis for the further social elaboration of gendered forms of social recognition. Since a man had the capacity at any moment to act sexually upon a woman, a mere look of sexual interest was enough to convey this possibility to a woman, and to constitute an act of intimidation. A woman was forced to recognize herself as the object of this male’s sexual interest, and the potential repository of his seed, as well as the extensive physical and social obligations this seed carried with it. Thus threatened, any woman could be reduced to acceptance of her generic sexual vulnerability, and rendered subject to demands for lesser acts of service or obedience. In other words, through an act (such as a gaze) communicating sexual interest, a man asserted his potential sexual power as a grounds for the social control and subordination of a woman, exacting various acts of service from a woman wishing to forestall his sexual threats.

By accepting the sexual demands of one man, and agreeing to serve him, a woman could secure his protection from the sexual threats of other men, so long as she was willing to remain in a private space where this protection was possible. Thus can the exclusion of women from public spaces of performance and recognition be understood, the asymmetry of sexual agency constructing the boundaries, or responsible for enforcing the boundaries, of women’s traditional social agency. To be present in the public spaces of social recognition and acclaim meant for women to be vulnerable to the gaze of male sexual recognition, reduction, and intimidation. Dominant male sexual agency was fundamentally linked with exclusive male social agency, as well. (Notice that in the age of television and electronic media, women may have begun to achieve new forms of social participation even without access to contracep-

tion, insofar as the camera's eye makes it possible to perform in the safety of one's home, and yet receive public recognition for one's acts.)

The extreme limits upon traditional female social participation and performance can be seen as predicated upon women's *recognition* of what men could do to them, upon recognition of male sexual agency and the heavy social obligations a woman incurred by making herself prey to such male sexual recognition. Within the normal orderings of social metaphysics we are accustomed to thinking that actions occur, people perform, in response to which recognition follows. Recognition is a secondary phenomenon, and is even somewhat arbitrary, sometimes failing to occur altogether, at other times exaggerated or simply a misrecognition of the actual performance or occurrence. Recognition exists within the order of perception or knowledge, and follows, or presumes to follow the existence of some social phenomenon, with more or less actual correspondence to it.

I am maintaining, however, that for women, the logic of social reality has been such as to reverse this. The traditional social logic for women began with their recognition of what men *could* do to them, and the social consequences of this possibility. One can see in women's recognition of the asymmetries of gendered sexual agency why women remained so long and so willingly within a limited social sphere. In female recognition of male sexual agency lay the grounds for women's abstention from performance and interaction in the public sphere. In their recognition of what men could do to them was the "seed" of all their further recognition of men's actions in the world, as well. The male gaze of sexual interest gained its power as a promissory act, and the responding female gaze not only acknowledged male sexual potential, but also elaborated on it. Women invested the male subject with the powers of social activity which they could readily imagine and plan, despite renouncing the possibility of accomplishing such things themselves. Female self-realization rooted itself vicariously in recognition of male social potential. A woman's gaze of fear and acquiescence in male sexual power thus existed on a continuum with a gaze of faith in other male powers. It became a gaze of female empowerment insofar as such faithful female recognition of that which did not yet exist encouraged and supported those males whose performance could bring new things into worldly existence.

In traditional relations between men and women, the rituals of social recognition not only preceded performance, but often were sufficient in their suggestion of performance, completely substituting for it. It is not the male act of impregnation, but the communication of his capacity to do so, the chain of recognitions ensuing upon a male sexual gaze and the female reception of this gaze, the mutual accord over what this meant that makes sense of traditional gendered subjectivities. Patriarchal power was a power that existed at its very source in the subjunctive form, in the communication of possibility. Unlike the whip of the slave master, the violent, coercive meaning

of which presence could not be denied,¹⁰ male phallic agency was long ago accepted, domesticated, and submerged within elaborate gendered rituals and practices.

It is precisely this subjunctive nature of traditional male sexual dominance that allows us to begin to understand the peculiarity of current gender relations. On the one hand, access to contraception directly contravenes traditional male sexual agency, undermining if not directly confronting all forms of exclusive male social agency erected on the basis of sexual threat and intimidation. The balance of gendered sexual and social agency has shifted dramatically. On the other hand, men have not, for the most part, given overt acknowledgement or even signs of privately recognizing the major historical loss of power they have suffered. Nor have women had the hubris to develop and insist upon the most radical social implications of contraception and the economic autonomy of women. Far from seeming an association of victors, feminism tends to present itself as a movement of morally indignant victims. The "generous," anticipatory of women's traditional recognition of male power persists in a perverse form. Yet if male performance has been typically held in abeyance, always the absent and disembodied power which men and women took for granted, then the demise of actual sexual agency may understandably have little immediate effect. Insofar as gendered sexual recognition had attained a state of relative autonomy from the actual assertion of male sexual agency, neither male nor female sexual status would be immediately altered by such a change in performative capacities.

Pornography, in fact, seems a plausible symptom of the change in the distribution of sexual agency at the level at which men are most likely to experience it, at the level of intimate sexual dynamics. We can define the sexual gaze broadly as, not merely the specific visual gaze of male sexual intent, but any form of communication which conveys traditional male sexual agency, thus initiating the ritualized dynamic of gendered subjectivities and recognition identified earlier. Pornography can be identified as a material projection of the sexual gaze; insofar as the images of pornography exist primarily to satisfy the sexual gaze, we can read back from the pornographic image to the male gaze.

The question is why men are directing such gazes of sexual power and interest towards mere pictures. The answer may be that the pictures, like traditional women, cannot say "No." Of course, these pictures can also not say "Yes," but neither could traditional women! The sexual recognition which men traditionally received from women was in the nature of a passive acquiescence to a male communication of willfulness. Women today often continue to experience themselves as victims, in accordance with traditional gendered subjectivities, as the massive anger evoked by pornography attests. But these same women can and do say both "No" and "Yes" in response to the male sexual gaze today; the actual perquisites of contraception and economic autonomy have altered the traditional sexual dialogue. While women can now say "Yes" and "No" to actual male sexual performance, the old-fashioned male

sexual gaze, in its perfunctory ubiquitousness, typically seeks only recognition of its subjunctive capacities. The new realism of female response may create consternation and fear in men who assume the traditional genteel sexual dialogue of patriarchal assertion and recognition.

The male turn towards pornography can be seen as a retreat to a less threatening focus for the sexual gaze he is so accustomed to casting upon women. Discomfited within live interactions by the new modes of female recognition his gaze evokes, a man turns to a female sexual image pacified by actual two-dimensionality rather than by unstable social mandates. In redirecting the aggressive sexual gaze towards mere paper and celluloid images of women, men are accommodating to the reduced scope of their sexual dominance. Yet the form of this male response may be troubling; the turn towards pornography may indicate a desire to disengage from more risk-laden live gendered interactions.

Women's responses to pornography may also be interpreted in terms of a basic separation dynamic, as we will later see. But it is the moral indignation of women today which provides the symptomatic female response to the transformation of gendered agency. Women continue to experience themselves as victims, articulating the plight of women in terms of the need for men to act more humanly or fairly towards women. In the economic and political realm women can alter their status in accordance with male categories of performance, becoming doctors and lawyers and gaining social recognition somewhat comparable to men. Even within traditionally devalued female occupations women are demanding recognition of their "comparable worth," measured in traditional economic units of value. But in the sexual sphere the situation is more difficult. Women have completely new choices, and these choices allow individual control and effectivity of a broad degree. Yet the new sexual agency of women is not in accord with traditional standards of male sexual agency, and so the sexual identity of women today is indeterminate. Women are invisible in their new situation; and both men and women may slip into the old patterns of sexual recognition and self consciousness for lack of any better narrative of sexual interaction.

Women's new sexual agency means they can now choose momentary sexual pleasure, can act on immediate sexual desire in the way analogous to men. By not using contraception women can act to create life, voluntarily undertaking a creative obligation which they formerly accepted without choice. Female interest in men may now appear highly ambiguous, the difference between a desire for pleasure and procreation being very great, but not necessarily manifesting itself outwardly to male eyes.

Women have not, of course, gained the power to act on men in any way comparable to the way in which men traditionally acted on women. Women's sexual aims have a reflexive quality far different from the aggressive quality of traditional male desire.

Women seek pleasure, or they seek to create life, but in neither case do they impose anything tangible upon a male sexual partner. A man may derive sexual pleasure, or he may choose to take responsibility for a life he helps create, but his responses today are voluntary. He never did possess the sort of sexual agency women now possess, the ability to choose to bring forth life out of his own body. But formerly, he could feel himself possessed of a woman's body and its powers. Now women have not only the power to say "yes" and "no" to men; they also have the power to say "yes" and "no" to new life, directly.

Yet there is something cruel and paradoxical about this new agency of women. In acquiring control over their bodies and the creation of life in their bodies, women have also, in many cases, found themselves solely responsible for every other aspect of their lives and those of the children they bring into the world. In taking back control over their bodies and their lives from men without gaining control over men's bodies and lives, women freed men from a marriage/paternity bond which was, in the past, not much more voluntary for men than for women. A 50% divorce rate indicates that the gendered connection of love and domesticity becomes a tenuous one when no longer enforced by patriarchy.

Women suffer a new victimization, apparently grounded in the decline of traditional male power over their lives. It is not adequate to label this a shift from private to public patriarchy, as theorists such as Carol Brown have argued.¹¹ Women are exploited in the workplace, sex being just one more grounds for devaluing labor. But the particular problem I am referring to is not one of domination or exploitation. I am pointing to the recent phenomenon of gendered disengagement, and the negative social effects experienced by women with this decline in gendered communities sharing economic and domestic responsibilities. Both pornography and divorce are social institutions which indicate a strong tendency for patriarchy to end in the separation of men and women rather than with the construction of a new set of egalitarian relations between men and women.

This separation dynamic is not terribly hard to understand. Given the major displacements and shifts in male and female social positions, men can no longer find women in the same places, and vice versa. The responses are twofold: The old forms of social recognition are repeated with fervor and anxiety. Yet the resulting friction of misrecognition yields anger, conflict, and separation. It is very upsetting to discover that things, or people, are not where you think they are. This is particularly true within sexual relations, since male and female forms of subjectivity have been built upon complementary acts of recognition. To find that the other sex is not where you thought they were, is at once to find one's own self knowledge called into question.

One can analyze the psychoanalytic theories of Freud and Lacan as elaborate conceptual defenses of an exclusive male sexual agency. Freud's efforts were directed towards choreographing the dynamic of sexual recognition, while Lacan has pro-

vided a theory in which separation from the (m)other is the fundamental requirement for self recognition.

It is not accidental that Freud was concerned with both sexuality and problems of self knowledge. His theory was in part, of course, a culminating development in the 19th century's discover of knowledge as a reflexive expression of self rather than world. Beginning with Kant's theory of the mediation of external reality by our internal categories of understanding, and continuing with Marx's notion that knowledge is determined by class, J.S. Mill's glorification of ideas as the ultimate expression of the individual was but a further variation on the theme of the expressive subjectivity of knowledge. Freud's belief that our knowledge of the world and of ourselves had to be understood in terms of an underlying sexual desire was entirely in keeping with the 19th century assault on earlier notions of objective knowledge.

Yet in making sexual desire a grounds for the misrecognition of self and world, Freud was introducing a dialogical component absent in the other theories of expressive knowledge. Why would he see male sexual agency and the necessary repression of sexual desire as the source of distorted knowledge of self and world? It is hard not to suppose his theory was evoked at least partially in response to the fact that women in the early 20th century were no longer in a fixed place relative to male knowledge and desire. With Margaret Sanger as well as suffrage in the winds, female sexual and social choices were expanding, the exclusivity of male sexual and social agency beginning to wane. Even if sexual agency was only half so fundamental to man's conception of self as Freud maintained, one would expect this diminution in the male capacity to determine exactly where women were (in both the physical and epistemological senses) to be highly disorienting. But the difficulty in assessing Freud lies in the fact that his theory was, at its most fundamental levels, both a response to and a denial of the changing place of women in society. Freud's theoretical achievement was to install a metaphysic of "male sexual desire" as a new basis for exclusive male sexual and social agency in an age when such male domination could no longer rest upon the actual male power of impregnation.

No great theorist is ever merely describing the social relations which exist; Freud was responding to a situation of incipient social confusion about gender roles by offering a new ground for believing that traditional gender roles were of continuing and eternal legitimacy, despite increasing appearances to the contrary. He was able to do this by capitalizing on the relative autonomy which, as we saw earlier, had long existed between the social recognition of male sexual and social agency, and the actual male power of impregnation upon which it rested. Freud merely substituted "male desire" for the actual social power men had exercised over women. Contraception, along with economic and political rights contravened the latter; but nothing could contravene the former in its metaphysical plausibility.

With his principle of male sexual desire, Freud was subtly registering an altera-

tion in the dynamic of intersubjective social recognition between men and women. In the past, women's recognition of the inevitability of male sexual interest and the consequences of the male capacity to act upon a woman was a pivotal component of patriarchy; hence the curious instability and civility of this longstanding relation of domination. Freud was confronted with a situation in which such female recognition was becoming an unpredictable grounds for male social control. Male sexual recognition of women thus had to become a more aggressive act. Freud's metaphysical principle of male desire put teeth back into a patriarchal dialogue which had begun to go slack.

We tend to think of Freud as primarily concerned with the psychoanalytic project of revealing the unconscious self; we criticize him for his ahistorical analysis of sexuality. Yet much of the power of Freud's theory of the unconscious derives from its ability to both isolate and shield from attack the newly vulnerable male sexual agency. Freud bolstered a long tradition of male self recognition through his theory of male desire, providing a new metaphysical grounds for patriarchal social recognition. His theory makes explicit the advent of conflict within the dialogue of male and female social recognition.

Lacan too takes the project of male self-recognition as the goal of psychoanalysis, but he modifies the term of the problematic. A Freudian genealogical quest to reveal the origins of sexual agency becomes in Lacan a quest for separation from and delimitation of the (m)other.¹² For Lacan self recognition begins with a deceptive, illusory vision of oneself as whole and complete in the mirror stage, initiating a futile, life-long effort to substantiate this vision. The mother's gaze is the human counterpart to the mirror; in her desiring eyes one is first seen as whole, both idealized and misrecognized. Thus selfhood requires that one separate oneself from the (m)other in whose body and desiring gaze one has been constituted. In recognizing her as castrated, thus partial, one is enabled to break off from her, see oneself as separate from this being previously presumed to be the world. Separation only comes with this delimiting of the mother, and selfhood is only assured by the child's subsequent acknowledgement of the alternative and greater power of the father and the law, who threaten his own castration should he return to seek completion or satisfaction of desire in the mother. Thrust into a world in which his selfhood is both grounded in and denied by the hierarchies of social institutions, a world in which as Lacan says, a person can only recognize himself concretely as a "stain," or in terms of his "mimicry" of a given social image,¹³ the self can identify fully only with his unbounded desire to seek self completion. The sexual satisfaction of desire is as impossible as any other satisfaction, finally, but a woman must be recognized as partial, castrated in order to make even such momentary acts of merging safe for the desiring male, who yearns for completion, but finds *himself* only in separation.

According to this model of self-recognition, women never gain complete separa-

tion from the mother, their character never adequately formed through acceptance of the authority of the law, their desires for completeness never directed outward towards worldly accomplishments with the same intensity as those of men. Women start with an incompleteness too great to admit of even the male fantasy of completeness through self-activity on this view. This metaphysically designated incompleteness is, however, serendipitously available as an illusory source of momentary completeness at pivotal moments in the male narrative of selfhood through separation and phallic desire.

Without acceding to the adequacy of this narrative of selfhood, we can certainly admit that insofar as selfhood involves the separation from and delimitation of others, women have not previously been in a position to engage in such self definition. Subject to male impregnation and denied activities in the public world, women had no choice but to identify strongly with the husband who so intimately determined her bodily as well as her social future, as well as with the children who went out into the world in her name. Women's new control over reproduction and their new participation in the public sphere means, however, that they can separate more fully from men, seeing their relationship to men in a more delimited, objective fashion.

It is possible to interpret the pornography controversy in symbolic sexual terms as a female mythology of separation from the male world which has engulfed women as surely as any mother has initially engulfed her child. The male child's separation from the mother in which he has been merged involves the castration dynamic: seeing the mother as castrated, wanting to complete her and refind the old sense of completeness in merging with her, but finally coming to fear her insofar as the mother is associated with castration, not only her own castration, but potentially his. We might construct a parallel female mythology of separation from the male world with which women have been merged, in terms of the female child's recognition of "the father who could rape a woman." The pornography controversy would then be seen as focussed not so much on pornography, *per se*, as upon "men looking at pornography." In thus observing "men looking at pornography" women are objectifying and delimiting the desiring, and thus lacking and incomplete male sexual being. In focussing on the sexual neediness and partiality of men, women can experience their own sexual agency of wanting to satisfy this male desire, while also finally seeing the dangers inherent in the situation. While the male fears of castration are initially grounded in threats of the father, gradually coming to be associated with the very existence of the desirable woman, female fears can be seen as initially grounded in the exemplary threatening fate of their own mothers, also gradually coming to be embodied in the existence of the desirable man.

Both sides of the pornography debate can be understood as responses to such a female Ur-separation mythology. Laura Mulvey analyzed two forms of male response to the anxiety evoked by the image of women in films, women at once alluring and

threatening in their associations with castration. She has designated one response as that of “voyeurism,” a preoccupation with the trauma of the guilty female act itself, which she associates with the “film noir” narrative, in particular. In these films, “pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt [to the woman who threatens castration], asserting control, and subjecting the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness.”¹⁴ The AP feminists indeed respond to the anxiety produced by “the man who can rape women” by asserting his guilt, and attempting to punish and control him. Mulvey also identifies a second means by which the male subconscious deals with the anxiety of the castrating woman, however. “Fetishistic scopophilia,” involves building up “the physical beauty of the object, transforming it into something satisfying in itself,” according to Mulvey.¹⁵ This fetishization of the threatening female is accomplished by focussing attention on the perfect erotic female body outside of any particular narrative context, denying the traumatic original story of castration. AC feminists, in their insistence that “men looking at pornography” can be seen as merely engaging in a form of sexual fantasy similar to women’s enjoyment and addiction to Harlequin novels,¹⁶ are choosing the fetishistic response to the anxiety produced by the male who can rape women. AC feminists abstract male desire from its frequent social context of intimidation and hostility, and portray the dynamic of desire as titillating and potentially even-handed between men and women, as of course it is.

At the limits of this fetishizing response to “the desiring male who can rape women” is the decision to sexually objectify him as an object of female desire. In earlier versions of this paper, I proposed that women appropriate the male sexual gaze, turning it upon men as an expression of our new sexual agency, and also inhabiting it as men always have, as a metaphor of our more general social agency. I maintained that the female gaze of sexual objectification of men could be offered as an act of aesthetic or erotic appreciation rather than as act of aggression or hostility. The point was to represent ourselves to ourselves and to the world as sexual and social agents through an act of recognizing men as a sexually delimited object of our appreciation and desire. The response to this proposal has been mostly negative, many women repudiating the very idea, and others claiming that it is utopian insofar as women do not have phallic desire, and so lack grounds for sexually objectifying men.¹⁷

I have no idea whether women possess the sort of sexual desire which could manifest itself in such a sexual gaze. Women have never possessed the social right to look at men in a sexually assertive, demanding way. But consider the gaze which the mother directs at her child. Not usually considered as erotic, it is certainly an assertive gaze of desire and appreciation, and might indicate that the category of phallic desire is much too narrow to comprehend the forms of desiring human recognition.

The male sexual gaze is, however, in contemporary society still very bound up

with the traditional male communication of sexual intimidation and aggression, and for this reason it is not readily available to women as a signal of appreciative sexual subjectivity. It says what men have always said, rather than what women now may want to express in a situation of sexual interest. Moreover, a sexual gaze today may convey an aggressive demand which women do not possess the social power to stand behind, actually endangering a woman who so gazes at a man. For these reasons, I would no longer advocate it broadly as an expression of female sexual agency.

Given women's previous engulfment in the male world, however, some sort of symbolic mythology of delimitation and separation seems appropriate and useful for women. The pornography debate, in its voyeuristic, guilt-finding AP form, as well as in its fetishizing AC response, may serve this purpose for women today. In focussing attention on "men looking at pornography" it provides women with a counterpart to the male mythology of the castrated and castrating woman.

Women need to ask what comes after this separation, however, when oneness and identification with the father becomes impossible. Men tear themselves away from the mother only to find themselves again within the gaze of law and social roles. Men are "subjectified" or interpellated, seen all too completely, they often complain, as part of the social order.¹⁸ The situation for women is quite different. After her Ur-separation from "the father who can rape women" a woman finds herself outside the place assigned by law and male authority. Women are unseen, unrecognized, and undesired in their new agency. Feminism is not a chorus of victors yet. There are several different ways to respond to this situation. I think women have unwittingly accepted a male interpretation of their situation which has kept women from recognizing the transformative possibilities within their situation. Women have followed the modern male in his quest for self-recognition, rather than attempting to inhabit their new lives *expressively*. Women need to articulate and express who they are, but with the aim of then reaching out to forge new connections and weld together a new social construction of "women and men and events." Feminist theory seems stalled, for the moment, in the phase of self articulation.

Lacan, in explaining his theory of the subjectivity of desiring vision, illustrates his theory with a story from his youth which is likely to have great resonances in the experiences of many women. The young Lacan is out to sea in the boat of a sardine fisherman in Brittany. As a young intellectual from Paris, he felt he was sharing in a practical, physical experience of work and danger. The fisherman pointed, however, to a small sardine can floating in the water, exclaiming "You can see that? Do you see it? Well, it doesn't see you!" The fisherman found this "highly amusing," while Lacan did not.¹⁹ Lacan, seeking an explanation, proffers his notion of the subjectivity of desiring vision. The fisherman's laughter stems from the fact that he, like the sardine can, could reflect light or awareness in Lacan's presence, without really seeing him at all. This is possible because, Lacan claims, it is the subjectivity of desire rather than

of perception which explains differences in knowledge. We think and desire to see ourselves as in a particular place, and then we find that according to someone next to us who surely ought to be able to perceive our presence, we are not there at all. The fisherman could not see Lacan because his worldly desires were so disparate, as embodied in his relation to the floating sardine can. Of course, Lacan's solution to this problem of not being seen was obvious; he could restore himself to reality by returning to the company of people whose subjectivity of desires did not diverge so absolutely from his own.

This is a very suggestive scenario in that it captures the essence of a problem women frequently experience today in the course of daily activities. Women were not present in economic, political, or cultural spheres as full participants until recently; our theories and visions of public agents prepare us to recognize men engaged in such activities, and not women. Most any woman could mention a hundred instances when she felt like the young Lacan earnestly out to sea off Brittany, brought up short by the fisherman and the sardine can which glinted at him knowingly in the sun, but failed to recognize him. But the problem strikes women much closer to home. It is often within a chosen profession or social activity that the startling incident occurs. Sometimes women are simply not recognized at all, not called on when they raise their hands at a meeting, as if female hands themselves were invisible in male social spaces. At other times a women will speak in the midst of a discussion, and it will be as if she had said nothing at all.

Women cannot afford simply to leave the boat in Brittany as Lacan did, and return home to be amidst people whose subjective desires allow them to include women in their vision. Women, in fact, remain on the job, in the meeting, demanding recognition of their presence from men, as they must. And yet, in feminist theoretical efforts, I think women do tend to throw up their hands and leave the boat, accepting the notion that men, in the subjectivity of their male desires, cannot understand the present situation of women. Feminist theory tends to leave the world of men, focusing on describing women, and relations between women. There is a great deal of justification for this. Women's lives, women's desires and values have been ignored within the history of social theory. There must be a vast project of excavation and articulation of where women have been and what they have been doing for hundreds of years.

The current feminist immersion in the theoretical project of articulating where women are now concerns me, however. It is here that I think there is a danger in the current emphasis on self-recognition. It is still the case, of course, that male lives are generally the focus of theory and daily description. We do need to make women visible in their daily practices and in their qualitatively different experiences. But can women finally make themselves socially visible by engaging in acts of self-recognition?

The psychoanalytic model prescribes that when one feels embattled or unsure of oneself, one must engage in a process of self analysis, recovering one's original desires. Lacan specifies further that this involves fighting free of the desires of others in which we are enmeshed and suffocated. This is a seductive vision for women, who so frequently feel embattled in the world of men. And yet a response of defensive self-analysis speaks to the current male dilemma of "interpellation," not to that of women. Women are paradigmatically on a boat in Brittany, unrecognized, and this is the problem they must solve. For men to find themselves on a boat in Brittany is a rare and, perhaps, even a refreshing experience, all too easily "solved" by returning from vacation. Men are paradigmatically "too well seen" today; Lacan's concept of "misrecognition" is a defensive effort to recreate a space of privacy for the individual man below the social surface of events. According to this theory, recovery of the individual male self seems to require a retreat from social descriptions and relations. Women are unrecognized rather than misrecognized in their new agency, for the most part; this theory does not pretend to speak to their particular situation.

I want to suggest that in accepting this problematic of self-recognition from men, women are sacrificing the strength of their current situation, which in large degree, lies in the fact that women's actions as new social agents are not defined within any already determinate set of social practices and beliefs. The discomfort within the feminist community with the work of a theorist such as Carol Gilligan, for example, is generated by precisely the concern that a theory which attempts to define a single female psychological type in opposition to an ideal male psychological type will inevitably prove to be inadequate to the variety of possible female character types.²⁰ The current assumption within feminism, however, is that the critique of the Gilligan type of theory is part of a critique of "universalizing" theories of all sorts, and that a more pluralistic approach to the investigation of women's lives is the answer to the problem.²¹

Two issues are being confused here. The recent consternation over theories which attempt to articulate female experiences is not so much a response to supposed universalizing claims of a theorist like Gilligan,²² as it is a reaction to the fact that women's lives, characters, goals, values, are presently in a state of flux and transition. *Any* description of how women feel and think in the United States today is fraught with methodological contradictions; not only are women's lives undergoing changes, but our very conception of what it means to be a woman is also changing. This implies that current efforts to describe women in previous times are as problematic and uncertain as descriptions of women in the present.

The emphasis on pluralism within feminist theory today is in some ways an evasion of this problem rather than a solution. Certainly women need to uncover and make available as much information about women as possible, cultural and historical varieties of female experience contributing to an ever richer picture of women's lives.

But women also need to understand the nature of the world surrounding them. Why do feminists so frequently confine themselves to an analysis of women? Feminist theorizing about women, like all other female acts of agency, occurs in a world still dominated by men and male conceptions. Men have articulated their struggle to retain a sense of agency in terms of the recognition of self; and yet they seem to have reached a *cul de sac*, desire emptily spinning its gears somewhere below the mis-recognized social self. Can women come up with a new method of achieving recognition as social agents, before sinking into the apparent trap of self definition?

I will suggest, in this final section, that women can best express and develop their new agency by turning their gaze outward: Women must look upon men, positioning them anew, and defining the social space which newly exists between men and women. The goal of this effort, is to create a social space in which women can act as fully connected social agents. Beyond merely clearing away old sexual baggage which people still stumble over, it involves re-thinking and re-making the connections between women and men which give women the basis for social effectivity. I argued earlier that women experience a new and peculiar sort of victimization based upon the fact that when the bonds of patriarchal domination in sexual or family relations are sufficiently undermined, the sexual or familial relations themselves are called into question. Women feel victimized by the fact that the critique of male domination in personal relations does not necessarily lead directly to egalitarian relations, but often seems to lead to hostility, conflict, and *separation*. If we accept this as a problem, the question is one of how to reconstruct relations between women and men on a new basis. Since women are not themselves sure of their goals or who they really are or want to become, and do not want to be limited by a particular description, there is no point in demanding male recognition of "who women really are." Women can, however, assert their new status as agents by casting their gaze outwards and describing the new position of particular men in relation to themselves as agents.

Such acts of social description are both utterly warranted and utterly difficult, for reasons that are hard to appreciate given our current notions of social reality. When a woman raises her hand in a meeting and is not called upon, or when she speaks and her words are simply discounted, we are not witnessing any problem of knowledge previously identified. Assuming it is not a problem of visual or auditory perception, and it is also not a problem of radical differences of desire insofar as the people attending the meeting all share a similar professional concern, the problem lies somewhere new.²³ Perhaps it lies not in the subjectivity of perception or in the subjectivity of desire, but rather in the subjectivity of *women*, themselves.

Sometimes when teaching Kant's categorical imperative, I casually assert that if the Nicaraguan General who so fatefully visited the chambers of Nora Astorga several years ago had regarded her as an end in herself, he would be alive today. I think there is some truth to this claim. Insofar as Astorga was a known opponent of

Somoza, it would seem foolishly risky for Somoza's General to make such a private visit, unless he failed to take her principled opposition to his regime seriously. The response of my students confirms my notion that the subjectivity of women is a meaningful way to frame this issue. Everyone sees the point, and the charge of momentary sexual hostility dividing the class is tangible.

Women and men have long occupied very different social spaces, sexual narratives being one of the only grounds for mutual recognition. Women, however, have traditionally exercised extensive influence in society through their desiring recognition of the prospective agency of men and children. It is such acts of constructive recognition which are called for in women's new situation, as well. Many feminists are focussing today on the maternal relationship, considering it a model of nurturing female relations, as well as a site of traditional female power. It is interesting to notice that the woman's nurturing relationship to a child, encouraging its developing personhood, involves a recognition of a child's prospective power to act in the world very similar to a traditional woman's recognition of adult male worldly agency. In either case, it is as much a recognition of human potential as it is a recognition of deeds actually done. It is a gaze of nurturing faith, meant to empower a child or a man rather than to evaluate their actions or their place in the world. Women today surely yearn for such a generous, nurturing gaze from men as they return home at night from a hard day in the world. But although men may be learning from such a generous form of desiring recognition within newly intimate fathering relations, they can no more be presumed capable of gazing at women in this way than women can be presumed capable of casting sexually aggressive gazes at men.

Women have long wielded social influence through a gaze of desiring, anticipatory recognition. Seemingly a basic form of constructive social interaction, women can continue to exercise this capacity in their new position as social agents. Women no longer need to empower men to act on their behalf. Women do need to describe the new social space between men and women in such a way as to re-align the vectors of possible social connection between men and women. Women must describe to men their new position in the world in relation to female social agents. Only if a man knows that he now stands in *her* world, as well as where he stands in *her* world, can he recognize Her appropriately in the future.

There are those who say that women today embody "Difference," a deconstructive principle in a world of phallogocentric illusions of social truth and stability.²⁴ In saying this, one implies that men, in contrast to women, still occupy their old assigned places in the structures of Law and Authority. Yet if we take the new social agency of women seriously, it is clear that men can no longer discover themselves in the old places either. Men seem blinded and immobilized, however, by their conflation of agency and self-recognition. Women need to recognize the futility of this male equation, and carefully extract the creative social power of desiring, generous recog-

nition from the subordination relations of traditional womanhood. Women can then, perhaps, begin to “hail”²⁵ men as participants in a world of “women and men and events,” celebrating the new subjectivity of women, and men as well.

NOTES

1. See for example, Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1979). See Heidi Hein, “Libertines, Libertarianism, and Liberty,” p. 10, for the interesting notion of pornography as a variety of environmental pollution.

2. See Marvin Glass, “Smash Smut: For Censorship and For an Alternative Feminist Culture,” an unpublished manuscript, presented at the annual Society of Socialist Studies meeting, June 1, 1985, in Montreal.

3. See Ellen Willis, “Feminism, Moralism, and Pornography,” in the *Village Voice*, October, November, 1979.

4. See *Women Against Censorship*, ed. Varda Burstyn (Vancouver: Douglas and McIntyre, 1985).

5. See Judith R. Walkowitz, “Male Vice and Female Virtue: Feminism and the Politics of Prostitution in Nineteenth-Century Britain,” in *Powers of Desire*, eds. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983).

6. Mary O'Brien, *The Politics of Reproduction* (Boston: Routledge, Kegan, Paul, 1981), p. 201.

7. Catharine A. MacKinnon, “Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda for Theory,” in *Feminist Theory*, eds. Nannerl Keohane, Michelle Rosaldo, Barbara Gelpi (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1981).

8. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), pp. 158-162.

9. I take this felicitous phrase from Louis Althusser. See Louis Althusser and Etienne Balibar, *Reading Capital* (London: NLB, 1970).

10. See Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982), p. 4.

11. Carol Brown, “Mothers, Fathers, and Children: From Private to Public Patriarchy,” in *Women and Revolution*, ed. Lydia Sargent (Boston: South End Press, 1981).

12. See Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, *Jacques Lacan and the Philosophy of Psychoanalysis* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1986), for a philosophically perceptive account of Lacan's reworkings of Freud's theory of childhood.

13. Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. J-A. Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Norton & Co., 1978), pp. 97-100.

14. Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” in *Screen*, vol. 16, no. 3 (Autumn, 1975), p. 13.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 14.

16. See Ann Barr Snitow, “Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different,” in *Powers of Desire*.

17. Linda Nochlin expressed the interesting concern that my proposal was “utopian” upon reading an earlier version of this paper. This comment sent me back to feminist film theorists such as Ann Kaplan to better understand their view of women's capacities to gaze. See Ann Kaplan, *Women and Film*, (New York: Methuen, 1983).

18. See Michel Foucault's notion of the “subjectification” of people within a variety of social discourses, in *Power/Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1972). See also Louis Althusser's notion of the “interpellation” of people within society, in *Lenin and Philosophy* (London: NLB, 1971).

19. Lacan, pp. 95-96.

20. Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1982).

21. See, for example, Linda Nicholson, *Gender and History* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1986).

22. Gilligan is actually careful to limit her theoretical claims. At a conference at SUNY Stony Brook, entitled "Women & Moral Theory," in March, 1985, dedicated to her work, she created great consternation for those prepared to criticize her "universalizing theory" the next day with her opening address. In the address, she elaborated on a recent study in which only 50% of the women applied the "responsibility and caring" morality, while the other 50% applied the male "justice" model. The same study indicated, she said, that men as well as women, knew of and were capable of applying both models.

23. Someone might claim that male sexual desire distracts men so greatly they cannot deal with women as serious colleagues. But homosexual men seem capable of valuing the ideas and words of male colleagues, despite their bodily presence.

24. See M.A. Doan, P. Mellencamp, L. Williams, eds., *Re-Visions: Feminist Essays in Film Analysis* (Los Angeles: American Film Institute, 1984), Introduction.

25. I also take this term from Althusser's "Ideology and the State," in *Lenin and Philosophy*.