“Thank You for Being a Friend:” The Politics, History, and Fandom of *The Golden Girls* and Its Feminist Message for the Coming Decade

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I. Introduction

*The Golden Girls*, originally produced in the 1980s and early 1990s, was remarkable in that it challenged the dominant cultural and political ideology of what has come to be referred to as “the Backlash Era.” In a time in which women-centered shows were shunted from the networks, *The Golden Girls* was unique not only because it remained female-centered, but also because it maintained its popularity during the entirety of its run. Even after it left primetime its legacy continued as it was picked up in syndication, and it continues to run on two separate networks. Those networks, Women's Entertainment and the Hallmark Channel, have begun using the series as a means of bolstering their own identity as a particular kind of network, just as Lifetime (who originally held the rights to the syndication of the series) utilized it. Despite the fact that it has changed networks several times (each of whom used it as a commodity, though in markedly different ways,) the types of audiences associated with the series have remained largely the same in terms of composition, divided between scholars and laypeople. With regard to interpreting the “meaning” of the show, on the one hand are those scholars who read the show through the lenses of feminist or queer theory, while on the other are the audiences themselves. The Internet has changed the way that audiences interact with the series; audiences have begun to more intimately interact with the characters of the series, through such various means as online Wikis, discussion posts on the television network's Websites, and various other methods. Central to all of these groups, from the networks to the scholars to the numerous fan groups, is the power of the show’s essential messages about the rights of the elderly, sexuality (especially of aging women) the AIDS pandemic, and the rights of the LGBT community. Thus, I will argue that these messages make the series appealing to various networks, especially those that identify as woman-centered, as it allows them to construct their brand as the ultimate woman's network. Furthermore, this new use of the series illustrates that, while it was always a commodity—which I here define as an object of value in the cultural marketplace, a concept especially important for a series as politically potent as *The Golden Girls*—the ways in which it has been used have shifted as it has passed from the world of the dominant networks (NBC and CBS) to those such as Lifetime and WE. At the same time, its audiences, scholar and layperson, female and LGBT, have each found something about the show's message that appeals to them, ensuring its continuing popularity throughout almost two decades of syndication. Clearly, the idea that women, especially older women, can be empowered continues to have an appeal, illustrating that the show's political and cultural power remains as powerful today as it was when it was originally produced. Perhaps even more importantly, its continuing popularity ensures that its message of female empowerment will continue to remain in the public sphere well into the
coming decade.

II. The Feminist Politics of *The Golden Girls*

*The Golden Girls*, written by Susan Harris, originally aired in 1985, and the series was immensely popular throughout the 1980s, regularly ranking high in the Nielsen ratings. However, its ratings began to slip beginning with the seventh and final season, and it soon became a victim of what some have characterized as NBC’s attempt to appeal to a younger audience, part of what Becker has characterized as an attempt on the part of all the networks to shore up their slumping ratings. He notes, for example that when “NBC announced its prime-time schedule for the 1992-1993 season, several successful but older-skewing shows of its own had been canceled in what some advertisers called ‘granny dumping’ (97). This willingness to abandon the series despite its continuing popularity indicates not just the network’s bias against an older demographic in favor of what Becker calls “the slumping generation” (those between 18 and 49,) but equally indicates that a younger audience (at least at that historical moment) was assumed to not see these kinds of series as appealing as its replacements (which included such series as *Mad About You, Here and Now,* and *Homicide: Life on the Street*) *The Golden Girls,* it seemed, belonged to another age.

Throughout this seven-year run, *The Golden Girls,* unlike may other series of the era, continued to not only retain its all-female cast, but also to address some of the thorniest social issues of the day. Although Susan Faludi dismissed the series in her breakthrough book *Backlash* by stating “the heroines were confined to the home in non-threatening roles in a strictly all-female world,” I disagree (159). Not only do the women frequently venture outside of the home for their various occupations and various political and social causes, but they also take a progressive stance on many very significant social issues of the time. Furthermore, the fact that the series consistently maintained its all-female cast not only shows how it defied the force of the backlash, but also served as a place of community, where female audiences could interact with these characters and the issues they addressed in intimate, female-centered setting. The home, far from being a prison for these women or their audiences, was instead a place where they could interact with one another in an intensely personal way, and the fact that it remained so popular among its viewers stands as a testament to its power to move women. Furthermore, the home became a place where these four women could address some of the most pressing issues of the period. The fact that it was four older women who were doing these things makes it all the more remarkable in a period in which most women of their age were not allowed such a significant voice. Among the many issues addressed throughout the series run were the mistreatment of the elderly by mainstream culture, a responsible embrace of sexuality, and the rights and acceptance of those in the LGBT community.

Although in a broad sense the series was affirming and welcoming to the elderly as a
result of the ages of its characters, it also made specific commentary about the ways in which society often mistreats or ignores the elderly. The most scathing critique of this cultural phenomenon occurs when Sophia rescues her friend Lillian from a nursing home which has severely substandard operating procedures. However, faced with the difficulties of caring for another elderly person, Sophia and the other women find themselves unable to give adequate care. When Sophia and Dorothy confront the director of the nursing home about his operating procedures, the only thing he can tell them is that, since most of his patient’s care money comes from the state, there are only a certain (and very limited) number of services he can offer to his patients. Faced with the uncaring necessities of an economic and cultural system that cares little for the elderly—especially women—after they have reached a certain age, Dorothy and Sophia discover that they remain virtually powerless to do anything to ameliorate Lillian’s deplorable condition. It is only when Blanche generously donates her extra money that Lillian’s future is secured at a better nursing home. This particular incident underscores the message that has occurred throughout the episode, that only with adequate funding can nursing homes and other facilities for the elderly hope to adequately care for their patients. When these institutions are forced to rely upon insurance companies or, even worse in some cases, the state, then the people who live within them suffer as a result and experience the same misfortune as Lillian. The commentary issued by the series on this issue was radical (and indeed could still be considered to be so) is because the elderly, especially those in nursing homes, are all too often relegated to the sidelines of society. Rather than continuing that trend, The Golden Girls tackled it head-on and showed the flaws inherent in the system.

Perhaps the series’ most controversial commentary centered on the issues of sexuality, especially of the character Blanche, although all of the characters embraced their sexual natures (something I discuss in more detail below) Equally importantly, Blanche and the other women exhibit a responsibility about their sexual activities that signifies their knowledge and appreciation of the dangers that often accompany sexuality. For example, both she and the others consciously practice safe sex, even going so far as to announce it in a crowded pharmacy, pointing out that, though they might be sexually active, they do so responsibly. What’s more, Blanche also points out that she always makes sure to know the sexual history of the men she dates, ensuring that she is conscious of her responsibility to maintain both her health and that of the men with whom she associates. Sexuality, therefore, far from being a means for men to control these women, instead becomes both a defiant act and a statement about the importance of sexual responsibility.

This sense of sexual responsibility finds its fullest expression when Rose believes that she might be infected with HIV, a situation that forces the characters to evaluate their own biases about the link between sexual morality and the disease. Rose, in understandable confusion and near-despair, complains that this sort of thing isn’t supposed to happen to her; unlike Blanche, she has maintained a strong sense of
sexual morality. Blanche responds critically noting that “AIDS is not a bad person’s disease, Rose. It’s not God punishing people for their sins.” This conversation forces both the characters and their audience to critically examine the commonplace assumption in 1980s AIDS discourse, which continues in some venues to this day, that HIV and AIDS is either a form of punishment (in that it is the inevitable result of sexual promiscuity) or stems from an innate death wish on the parts of those practicing this “irresponsible” sexuality. Instead of perceiving this disease as stemming from some manner of wrongdoing on the part of the effected, Rose comes to understand that it is an unfortunate affliction that can happen to anyone, and that even the most responsible person can become infected.

Equally importantly, this episode shows the ability of the four women to not only more fully appreciate the agony suffered by those who are actually suffering from AIDS, but also points out the unhealthy and ignorant biases that sometimes afflict even the closest friends of an AIDS patient. After Rose learns that she might be infected Sophia, in a panic that she might be infected if she drinks from the same cup, marks all of Rose’s cups with an “R.” When Dorothy reprimands her, she responds that even though she knows that she cannot get AIDS simply from drinking from the same cup her fear overwhelms her, despite her best rational judgment. Dorothy then informs her that the stigma attached to those with AIDS makes it all the more necessary for them to stand by Rose. In a moment of solidarity, Sophia drinks out of an “R” cup, indicating her overcoming of her fear. This entire episode indicates a critical comment not only upon those who condemn those who have AIDS, but also those who let emotion cloud their judgment and therefore contribute to the growing fear and paranoia about the disease. It therefore claims that compassion and reason should rule our interaction with AIDS patients, rather than knee-jerk emotional reactions and that the stigma and aversion people have developed indicate more about the culture at large than it does those with the disease.

Although the series does not comment on the affect of AIDS on the GLBT community explicitly, it does comment on societal discrimination. In two episodes, Blanche must come to accept her brother Clatyon’s homosexuality and, even more importantly, his decision to get married to another man. Even though her acceptance is initially reluctant, the fact that she openly accepts him sends a clear message that members of the GLBT community should not be shunned and furthermore underlines the necessity of familial acceptance in the lives of gay men and women. Even more importantly, when Clayton decides to marry his partner, Blanche must come to grips with this fact. At the end she says, “I still can’t say I understand what you’re doing, but I do intend to try to respect your decision to do it. I want you to be happy.” Although her acceptance is conditional at best, it still signals awareness on her part that compassion and understanding, rather than unreasonable rejection, should inform and shape relations with the GLBT community. It is also worth noting how truly revolutionary this mention of gay marriage is, considering the relative dearth of openly gay characters, let alone gay issues, aired on television in the 1980s.
III. The Network Presence of The Golden Girls

Although the series ended in 1992, Rue McClanahan, Betty White, and Estelle Getty did return for a spin-off series, The Golden Palace, which was picked up by CBS in its ongoing appeal to a broader (yet still skewed toward the older) demographic (Becker 97). In this new incarnation, the three remaining women took up running a hotel, a very different proposition from the domestic sphere that had so characterized its predecessor. Although the presence of this series seems to suggest that CBS assumed an audience existed for more adventures, it only lasted one season (twenty four episodes,) before it was canceled. Although the failure of the series has commonly been attributed to under-impressive ratings and, presumably, a lack of interest on the part of those younger audiences that NBC had made such an attempt to court, I believe there are a couple of other factors that cannot be ignored. The lack of Arthur removed an element that was essential to the functioning of the series for, as Amanda Lotz notes in Redesigning Women, Dorothy was almost always associated with the “feminist voice.” As a result of this lack, the follow-up series did not address the same range of issues that its predecessor had, nor did it address them with the same aspect of critical evaluation. Without this razor-sharp social and political commentary, The Golden Palace was doomed to fail. It is important to note, however, that while the spin-off series ultimately failed, the original had already entered into syndication, indicating that its popularity was already well-established.

In the early 1990s, the television network Lifetime acquired the exclusive rights to broadcast The Golden Girls, and for several subsequent years the series would accompany other female-centered series such as Designing Women, Murphy Brown and, more recently, series such as Desperate Housewives. Lifetime retained exclusive control over the series throughout the 1990s and through much of the 2000s as well. Indeed, The Golden Girls was the only one of these series to remain on the network's lineup without a cessation. Even more importantly, Lifetime was responsible for the production of several “Intimate Portraits,” documentaries that detailed the life of each of the four main actresses of the series. This emphasis upon their real-life personas seems to indicate the network’s acknowledgment that viewers have a decidedly personal relationship with the characters, a subject I will return to in my discussion of the series. Furthermore, during the time that it maintained control of The Golden Girls, Lifetime made a concerted effort to maintain a strong viewer interest in the series, even going so far as to offer viewers an opportunity to meet the three actresses then still maintaining a presence in public life (Estelle Getty had retired from acting due to serious health issues).

To further personalize the series and to take advantage of the evident popularity of the series, in June 2003, Lifetime produced a reunion show that reunited Arthur, McClanahan, and White who reminisced about their time on the show. The special also featured a number of clips that highlighted those episodes and incidents that the actresses found to be most entertaining. This reuniting of the characters from the
original cast again indicates a desire on the part of the network to further capitalize upon the popularity of the series that had formed such an integral part of its lineup. According to one of the fan sites (blancheonline.com,) the reunion was the most popular special ever run on Lifetime, indicating that Lifetime's re-commoditization of the series, at least according to the numbers, was a success. Clearly, Lifetime's largely female audience continues to find something pleasurable and empowering about the women in the series.

The fact that *The Golden Girls* remained such a fixture on Lifetime indicates a certain kind of viewership, considering the fact that for many years Lifetime was the only cable network specifically designed for women. Lotz claims that “Lifetime might be understood as the CBS of the women's cable networks [...] It uses a network-era strategy of seeking a broad and heterogeneous female audience, comparable to that utilized by the broadcast networks from the 1950s through the 1980s” (54). Although Lotz's discussion largely focuses on Lifetime's original programming as an attempt to establish a Lifetime “brand,” I see *The Golden Girls* as another attempt of Lifetime to establish itself as the network for all women. Realizing, as CBS did, that the series had serious earning potential, Lifetime kept it as part of its line-up and utilized all of the considerable resources at its disposal to ensure that it could fully exploit it and add it to its growing collection of syndicated television series, which in recent years has come to be characterized by such series as *Will and Grace, Frasier,* and others.

For the Lifetime network, as for NBC and CBS before it, *The Golden Girls* was a commodity but a politicized and distinctly gendered commodity. Although it was certainly a commodity when it ran on the original networks, in some sense it was a “generalized” one; although it was clearly intended for a particular audience group (an older, female demographic,) it was not meant to brand NBC as a “woman's network.” It was, in other words, just another aspect of NBC's comedy line-up. This drastically changed, however, when it passed into Lifetime's explicit control. As mentioned earlier, Lifetime consistently brands itself as “television for women,” indicating its belief that *The Golden Girls* fits into its rubric of what is meant to be entertainment specific for women. Indeed, *The Golden Girls* was a crucial element in helping Lifetime brand itself as a network intended solely for women. Furthermore, the fact that Lifetime kept its control over the series for almost twenty years indicates its recognition of the power and popularity of the series among its various female audiences.

Furthermore, it is clear that Lifetime saw the nature of the series, with its messages of female empowerment and community, as well as its commentary on social issues, to be of particular relevance to women. According to Lifetime's own website, they are committed to offering “the highest quality entertainment and information programming content that celebrates, entertains and supports women” and they also claim to be the “preeminent television destination and escape for women,” both of which in turn suggest that *The Golden Girls,* when it was in Lifetime's control, was
seen to be an essential part of this project. There is something more at stake here than just attracting viewers; Lifetime, in making sure that the series remained in consistent circulation (and a very wide circulation at that) ensured that the empowering messages (both implicit and explicit) present in the series continued to reach those women who could most benefit from them.

In late 2009, Lifetime’s exclusive rights to the series expired, and so it passed into the joint control of the Hallmark Channel and Women’s Entertainment. Obviously, these two networks represent widely different demographics and ideologies. The Hallmark Channel states that it is “the quintessential 24-hour television destination for family-friendly programming.” This strikes me as particularly ironic, given the fact that *The Golden Girls* is not what one would typically identify as “family-friendly,” since it often includes adult situations and language. Upon closer inspection, however, this is not as strange as it seems. On the one hand, it is clear that Hallmark is using *The Golden Girls* as it has used other popular series that no longer run on the air (including *M*A*S*H*, *Cheers*, and *Little House on the Prairie*) to reinforce their standing and to bolster viewership among an audience nostalgic for these series. At the same time, Hallmark uses a deliberate set of editing practices to make *The Golden Girls* more palatable for a “family” audience. For example, most “inappropriate” words are deliberately bleeped out, indicating that these words are what are deemed unsuitable for family viewing. Most of the other “adult” aspects of the show, such as Blanche’s overt sexuality, to say nothing of the many themes explored by the show (which were controversial upon its inception) remain intact. This seems to indicate that not only has the series’ commentary on these subjects remained relevant enough to be included, but that such commentary is consistent with Hallmark’s avowed family-friendly orientation. Clearly, progressive, popular, and feminist politics is not, as might be assumed by some, completely at odds with maintaining a family-friendly image.

Unlike Hallmark, which has repackaged *The Golden Girls* as “family entertainment,” the Women’s Entertainment Channel has attempted to keep the series closer to its woman-centered roots. The channel claims that it is “the premier source for women looking to satisfy their curiosity with fascinating, original stories and entertaining, informative content that is relevant to key stages of their lives. WE TV’s programming gives viewers compelling perspectives on women’s lives that range from provocative to extraordinary.” Clearly, the network believes that *The Golden Girls* fits into this rubric. However, it remains unclear exactly which “key stage” of their lives the series is meant to represent, and the series can hardly be claimed to be original. What, then, is the purpose of having *The Golden Girls* occupy such a prominent part of its lineup (in fact, the series is only one of a couple of mainstream series on the network, one of the others being *Ghost Whisperer*)? It’s possible the network believes that *The Golden Girls* will fill a niche that is not currently occupied and that its relation to female audiences retains as much power as it did (if not more so) during its original broadcast. Like Lifetime before it, WE seeks to use the series to
complement and cement its image as a network centered on the needs of women. Again, like Lifetime, WE seems to believes that the messages contained in the series are worthy and supportive of women.

*The Golden Girls* has come to represent a struggle over female representation in the cultural sphere, especially as it relates to women's programming, because it has served a similar purpose for two different, competing networks. This is especially important when considered in the light of what Lotz has described as the segmentation of the female viewing population. She considers WE’s claim to represent all women as “true only of women for whom dating, fashion, and style are of prime importance” (61). Clearly, *The Golden Girls* does not fit neatly into this formulation, and I would argue that it signifies a claiming of a different kind of female audience, one that has traditionally been associated with *Lifetime*. Although the series remains a commodity, it is one that is used to bolster WE's identity as the newest network for *every* woman, rather than just the young. Furthermore, this shows how the series is also continuing to reach new audiences, allowing its empowering message to reach the younger female demographic that constitutes the majority of WE's viewership.

Despite their differences in purpose and their assumptions about audience, all three networks have appropriated the series to bolster their own original programming and movies. Lifetime would often show the series several times in a given day; Hallmark gives the show its own morning and late-night blocks, while Women’s Entertainment takes over in the afternoon. The passing of two of the main actresses from the series has reinforced the enduring popularity of the series while simultaneously indicating the willingness of the networks to respond to the desires of their fans in order to protect the status of their important commodity. With the deaths of both Estelle Getty and Beatrice Arthur, the networks were forced to take account of their viewers’ preferences and launch a special memorial run of the best episodes of that particular actress. In Hallmark’s case, the Arthur retrospective was only expanded after fans had made their wishes known. As observed by Adam Bryant of *TV Guide*: “after being flooded with calls in support of a Memorial Day *Golden Girls* marathon tribute Bea Arthur, Hallmark Channel has decided to give fans more of what they want. And sooner” (Bryant). On the one hand, these retrospectives illustrate the awareness the networks have of this series’ continued popularity and their ability to sense that the death of an actress can serve as a tremendous ratings booster (as morbid as that may sound to some). Even more significantly, however, the Hallmark case in particular illustrates the ways in which viewers, rather than networks, have come to characterize, exemplify and produce the perennial popularity of the series and thereby its messages.

**IV. The Online Female Fandom of *The Golden Girls***

All three networks have sought to personalize *The Golden Girls* by offering a number of activities that users can partake in, including trivia such as the “Which Golden Girl...”
Are You?” Quiz and more. This personalization has potential consequences that are both political and empowering in nature. The quiz is especially revealing, as it indicates awareness on the networks’ part of the immensely personal appeal these women have for their audiences. In creating a quiz that actually allows the viewer to explicitly associate herself with the characters in the series, the networks ensure that viewers will remain involved to an extent not possible during its original airing. Although Lynne Joyrich in discussing the personalizing of and identification with fictional characters has claimed that “as consumers continue to search for the path to the 'real' self, they are led in circles, a situation which reinforces rather than resolves this sense of weightlessness and the process of rationalization” (56), I have a more positive reading of this process. On the one hand, the series' very powerful feminist politics can serve as a positive role model. On the other hand, the quiz allows female users of the website to continue creating the kinds of female community that also formed an integral part of the series' appeal. Furthermore, the types of questions asked on the poll are structured in such a way that they represent a wide cross-section of women, allowing those who take it to find a sense of belonging, community, and inclusion.

Female fans have also begun to make their presence known in a variety of other ways, including a Golden Girls Wiki, numerous discussion posts, and a number of fansites, one of which is blancheonline.com. Of particular note is a “floor plan,” which essentially creates the house that the women inhabit throughout the duration of the series, located on the website blancheonline.com and drawn by one of the fans of the site. This floor plan is especially important in that it allows users to enter into the “safe space” manufactured by the women of the series, a space in which anyone, gay or straight, young or old, could find acceptance. Although these online practices may strike some as eccentric or obsessive, what strikes me as particularly important about these groups, however, is the fact that these communities would not have been possible when the series was originally on the air, and so they represent a different kind of viewing. Entities such as the Wiki and other sites allow fans, both established and new, to develop new ways of interacting with the series that were not possible when it was produced or possible on those websites controlled by the networks that control the television series itself. Furthermore, these online communities, whether they be found on the networks' Websites or independently owned can, as Sharon Mazzarella notes, serve as sites where women can produce media of their own, even if only in the context of a fansite (145-146). Although her discussion focuses specifically on young women I would argue that it can be applied to women of all ages. In essence then, the women who build their own Websites are forging their own media and thus spaces for themselves where they can not only enjoy the series, but also find enjoyment in their relationships with other users and fans of the series. Equally importantly, they are showing the world that they have the power to create identities and communities for themselves.

Although many of the fan sites devoted to The Golden Girls do not specifically
mention the series' politically empowering aspects, there are several that show just how powerful an impact this series has had upon its female audiences. In a post by a fan known only as “lovemysadie,” the author speaks of the ways in which her daughter has come to identify with the series: “[She] has clearly found this show to be the most positive and influential half hour of each and everyday […] She tells me, ‘Mom, this is what lifts my mood. If I am frustrated or sad, all I have to do is put on one of the episodes.’” This particular post illustrates the powerful ways in which the series' audiences often respond to it. Unlike other series with a strong fan following, The Golden Girls is significant in that it not only provides women with a positive role model for how to practice their own feminist politics, but also provides a means by which women, both young and old, can find pleasure in the shared experience of viewing the series itself. As the above anecdote illustrates, the series crosses generational boundaries, allowing women to create a sense of community not unlike that created within the show. In fact, it is precisely that message of female solidarity that makes it so appealing and uplifting to those audiences who so fervently enjoy it.

V. The Golden Girls as Gay Icon

In all of its various manifestations, however, the series has remained a perennial favorite among both LGBT viewers and critics, although for different reasons. For scholars, the series' social commentary and affirmation of GLBT issues and persons has proved to be of the most interest. Steven Capsuto in Alternate Channels, for example, notes that the series was very affirming of homosexual relationships, focusing especially on the episode “Scared Straight” that I discussed above. He notes that The Golden Girls typifies the early 1990s approach to gay relationships; rather than enforcing a conversion upon a straying gay character, The Golden Girls instead “acknowledges that a heterosexual can try to be happy for a gay couple, even without comprehending why the couple are together” (356). Capsuto sees these messages as positive, precisely because The Golden Girls marked such a difference from the series that came before it; thus, he sees it as encouraging and affirmative. This interpretation shows the ways in which the message of the show is what makes it important, rather than the ways in which individual audience members partake in or respond to it.

On a similar note, Alexander Doty sees potentially empowering notions in the women's homosocial relations with one another; in essence, the fact that they continually make jokes and double entendres allows a queer and potentially subversive reading. At the same time, however, he also notes how The Golden Girls and other series like it can also be conceived of as homophobic, in that they continually draw a distinction between homosexual relationships as such and those of “just friendship.” He notes that “with the surfaces of their characters, actions, and mise-en-scene insistently straight-coded, these sitcoms are allowed to present a wide range of intense women-bonding that straight audiences can safely enjoy because the codes of lesbian femme-ininity can also be read as representing the straight feminine” (44). Other scholars, including myself, find the series significantly
less problematic. Nevertheless, his argument also points out the ways in which the
series has been read by queer viewers as empowering and affirming, if in a
somewhat troubling way. Again, however, his argument does not address the ways in
which specific gay audiences react to the series and these messages that it projects.

However, the series has also been popular among gay audiences, and from the
beginning it seems to have served as a means of finding a common identity and
enjoyment. In a recent interview with the Wall Street Journal, Betty White noted that
"[t]here has always been a huge cult following for the show in the gay community.
When the show was originally airing, the gay bars on Saturday night would all shut
off their music at nine o'clock, put on the show, and then start up the music and start
dancing again afterwards. We always got such a kick out of that" (Barnes). Although
she does not go into particular detail about why she believes this to be so nor the
consequences, I believe that the fact that The Golden Girls occupied such a central
role in gay culture, especially social settings, indicates the ways in which gay men
have associated with it. They felt it to be both welcoming and affirming, so much so
that they were willing to embrace it in communal settings. As with female audiences,
gay male audiences clearly saw the series as a means of attaining and reinforcing a
sense of community. This has always been a pivotal concern for the GLBT
movement, which has continually had to create its own community in the face of
mainstream rejection.

Another explanation for the show’s appeal to gay men is offered by Brent Hartinger, a
poster at AfterElton.com (a website that collects a number of news bits and reviews
about gay and bisexual men in the entertainment industry) who argues that The
Golden Girls “championed to the world the truly radical notion of the “chosen family”
— a rare occurrence among heterosexuals, but an almost universal one for out gay
people.” Like Doty and Capsuto, Haringer does see the radically welcoming potential
of the series; even more importantly, however, he also seeks to understand why it is
that particular audiences find it appealing. However, he does not fully explain why
this notion of the “chosen family” is so appealing to gay men and women. In
numerous episodes, the women make it clear that this is a family that they have
deliberately chosen to create, and they hold to this family even in the face of
enormous outside pressure. Furthermore, this creation of a “chosen family” allows
these women to create a woman-centered space, one in which men, while certainly
welcome on a temporary basis, are nevertheless never part of the main action. Even
more importantly, this chosen family is accepting to all comers, regardless of their
orientation. Thus, we find this family accepting those that a larger society has
rejected, including and especially those who are GLBT. Dorothy’s friend Jean and
Blanche’s brother Clayton are two notable example of this acceptance. Furthermore,
this notion of a family made by choice allows for a negotiation on the part of gay
viewers, a means by which they can find the acceptance that they sometimes are
denied by their family and by mainstream culture in general. The fact that The
Golden Girls so clearly espoused and supported a lifestyle built on a chosen family,
therefore, would make it all that much more appealing to gay audiences.

For the GLBT community, as with the series’ female viewers, there is also an element of personalization involved, due in large measure to the ways in which the women as individuals outside of their roles on the screen have come to be associated with the rights of the GLBT community. Arthur and McClanahan won GLAAD Awards and Estelle Getty and Betty White have been very accepting and supportive of the GLBT community. As a result of this, many gay men have come to associate very sincerely and personally with these women. One poster on AfterElton, upon hearing of Estelle Getty's death noted that “I always enjoyed Estelle’s work in The Golden Girls as she represented the ideal mother/grandmother for someone with my temperament. Nothing against the real thing, but the acerbic laughter made me smile,” while other posters on this thread noted their love and appreciation of her and her consistent support for the GLBT community. Similar posts also occur on Bea Arthur's death announcement, although these also include testimonials from gay men describing how the series served as a bonding experience with members of their family.

Finally and most recently, the death of Rue McClanahan on June 3, 2010 brought out a renewed wave of mourning and grief from those in the gay community. Again, the posters on AfterElton were active, and there are two that are particularly illuminating. A poster named simply Morgan states that “I always wished each and every "GG" was my grandma when I was a kid. Naughty and full of life. I loved my grandma but she was NOTHING like these funny fabulous ladies on my TV every week. I'm sure I'm not alone when I say as a gay man I LOVE brassy bossy funny ladies! Lucy, Carol, all the "Golden Girls." Similarly, a poster known as Warren notes that he spent a great deal of quality time watching the series with his grandmother thus pointing out the ways in which the series provided gay men with the opportunity to forge bonds with the precious members of their family. Although McClanahan was primarily known for her portrayal as Blanche, several of the comments on this post reveal that her presence in GLBT-friendly media, ranging from films of the 1970s to her recent work in the gay-themed series Sordid Lives. A number of Facebook pages and groups were also formed in McClanahan's memory, illustrating the powerful presence she continued to have in the lives of many.

In all of these instances, the thing that makes these women and their series so appealing stems from two factors. First, gay men feel accepted in the lives of these women in a way they are often denied in mainstream culture; secondly, the series serves a means of bonding with family (especially mothers and grandmothers,) an important and vital aspect of many people's lives. This bonding is especially important for gay men, who often face rejection from their beloved families as a result of their sexual orientation. Thus, through both the diagesis of various episodes and through the star text of its primary actresses, The Golden Girls offered (and continues to offer) members of the GLBT community (especially gay men) a warm, welcoming, and safe atmosphere in which powerful emotional bonds can be forged.
and maintained. Although the deaths of these actresses is tragic, they bring these various elements into sharp relief, allowing gay men and women to find solace and solidarity even in the face of these unfortunate and saddening events. Even death cannot stop the empowering and welcoming nature of these women and the series for which they are so well-known.

VI. The Golden Girls and a Feminist Decade

Due to its continued network presence and its increased fandom as well as the potent feminist politics embedded in its comedy, the series should be considered an emblem of feminist power in the popular culture realm, both now and in the years to come. It is particularly important for the messages it contains about the sexual freedom and empowerment of older women and for the many messages it sends about the power of female community and solidarity, across both age and class lines. These last two are particularly important, considering the rift that is commonly perceived (whether it really exists or not is up for debate) to exist between the older and younger generations of feminists.

In an era in which the feminist voice in popular culture has been disrupted and taken over by more dominant discourses about having sex as the sole means to empowerment, The Golden Girls offers a welcome reprieve and a model for feminist discourse in the coming decade. Of course, it cannot be denied that sex forms a prominent part of the series. I would argue that that emphasis on sexuality is peculiarly empowering because of the age of the women. Kathleen Rowe, author of The Unruly Woman, notes that:

Her [the unruly woman's] sexuality is neither evil and uncontrollable like that of the femme fatale, nor sanctified and denied like that of the virgin/madonna. Associated with both beauty and monstrosity, the unruly woman dwells close to the grotesque […] The unruly woman often enjoys a reprieve from those fates that so often seem inevitable to women under patriarchy, because her home is comedy and the carnivalesque, the realm of inversion and fantasy where, for a time at least, the ordinary world can be stood on its head (11).

All four of these women, from the provocatively sexual Blanche to the rather austere “manly” Dorothy, from the pure and virginal Rose, to the aged Sophia, exhibit a disruptive sexuality due to their age. In a culture that still systematically derides older women as either asexual or, even more perniciously, as sources of amusement (witness the “cougar” phenomenon, in which older women going after younger men are, either implicitly or explicitly mocked) the fact that these women so openly own their sexuality makes them models of empowerment. Although sexuality is an essential aspect of their lives, they do not use it as a crutch nor as the only way that they empowered. Their sexuality is, instead, part of a larger package of traits that allow them to be empowered and to serve as role models for older women who, despite what the larger cultural discourse may tell them, are still very much interested in a sex life.

Blanche is the most potent example of a woman in control of her sexuality, and as
such can be seen as a bridge between the older generation of women and a younger, more sexually liberated generation. As the youngest of the three women, at the most basic level she has an appeal for younger women who see in her the same sexual liberation that they also desire. However, her sexuality is also disruptive to the overall social order in that she continues to blatantly use her sexual currency, despite the cultural mythology that says that sexual older women should be mocked. Blanche, however, remains in clear control of her sexual power, and it is the men who come to her for her favors, rather than the other way around. Although her sexual exploits are often a source of amusement for the other characters, it is not the kind of belittling humor that is often currently attached to women who are known as “cougars.” Furthermore, her speech indicates an ownership of her sexuality that shows that she is not ashamed to be a sexually active and engaged older woman. Even more importantly, she claims a responsibility for her sexuality that ensures that she remains in control. Not only does she consistently make sure that her partners are free of STDs, she also makes sure that she carries protection should the need arise. Blanche, then, combines the sexual liberation of a younger, “Third Wave” generation with the responsibility of an older, “Second Wave” sensibility.

Furthermore, the series illustrates the ways in which women can form a welcoming and embracing community, both within the narrative of the series itself and through its increasingly inter-generational fandom. As the above example shows, women of many generations can come together and watch the show together, an important joining of feminist generations that, if mainstream media is to be believed, happens all too infrequently. Kellie Bean, in her book *Post-Backlash Feminism: Women and the Media Since Reagan/Bush* notes that, “a group of self-described ‘young feminists’ announce their intent to battle generational prejudices against youth present within the upper echelons of the movement and create their own brand of feminism” (67). What the continued popularity of the series shows is that feminist politics of the Second Wave variety continues to have an appeal, even to those young women who may have more in common with the ideologies and politics of the Third Wave. Rather than pointing out the differences between generations, the series both implicitly and explicitly forges connections across generations, with its unique mix of sexual empowerment and the frequent generational mixing that occurs throughout the series. As feminism continues to develop throughout the next decade, *The Golden Girls* will serve as an important reminder of the importance of feminists reaching across generational boundaries in their ongoing fight for women’s rights.

Even more importantly, *The Golden Girls* reminds us that, even though we are commonly said to live in a “post-feminist” age, when feminism’s work is supposed to be done and finished, there are still many critiques to be lodged against the dominant culture. Bean notes that “the work of feminism is not done—women and children still make up the majority of the poor and underinsured, for example, are more likely to be abused and homeless than men—yet, the spokeswomen for this wave insist that feminism must turn its attention not toward issues of social justice but toward the personal concerns and disappointments of women like them” (66). What makes *The
Golden Girls unique, then, is that it takes the best of both Second and Third Wave Feminism and presents them to an increasingly younger audience. Since so many of the problems that were addressed by the series, including the plight of the elderly and homeless, the fear of world war, the victimization of women, and discrimination against the LGBT community continue to be potent issues today, its relevance continues to grow along with its increasing fan base. The Golden Girls, then, has a central role to play in the coming decade, especially considering the fact that there are remarkably few recognizably feminist series now on the air. Although each of the groups that interact with the series have differing purposes in supporting The Golden Girls, ranging from the brand-driven capitalism of the networks to the community-building of its fans, to the affirmation of GLBT identity, each shares one thing in common, their reliance upon the many meanings produced by the series. There is no single meaning that should take precedence over others. It is precisely this multiplicity of meanings that makes the show so significant and so easily appropriated by the various groups that have sought to either control or, in the cases of audiences, enjoy it. Although there are multiple audience groups that partake in The Golden Girls fandom, they all share a desire to become involved in the series in one way or another. While other series have enjoyed a similar popularity in the world of fandom, The Golden Girls is largely unique in that its political message has continued to remain in the cultural domain as a result of its continuous presence. Even those series that featured all-female casts, such as Designing Women (which was never quite as overtly political as The Golden Girls,) have not remained in syndication as long or as consistently as The Golden Girls. Clearly, its politically-charged feminist message still serves a perennial source of enjoyment and empowerment for the women who consume it. Furthermore, its release upon DVD has opened up entirely new audiences, who can now access the episodes as they were originally aired, i.e. uncut and unedited. Its syndication and release on DVD ensures that it will continue to be a source of community, empowerment, and a powerful feminist force for an entirely new set of audiences. As it moves into its second date in continuous circulation, The Golden Girls will no doubt continue to be of interest to women of all ages who, one can hope, will see in its revolutionary message the power to change their reality and forge a new feminist decade.

Works Cited


Collection Strategies: Some Thoughts on How European Museums Deal with Gender Imbalance

By Martin Sundberg

Annie Warhol, Jacqueline Pollock, Miss van der Rohe, and Joséphine Beuys are only some of the names the visitor encounters at the entrance of the Centre Pompidou in Paris. Except for Louise Bourgeois, there are only women represented.

Obviously there is something wrong with the first impression, and without doubt the visitor is facing a work of art. The French artist Agnès Thurnauer has created a series of circular name labels, Portraits Grandeur Nature, where the artist’s gender has been changed. The agenda of the exhibition elles@centrepompidou is set out already in the entrance hall, in an exhibition spanning from modernistic pioneers to contemporary art and where the criteria for inclusion is the female gender.

The exhibition is vast and divided into more or less traditional themes like pioneers, the body, and immateriality. Since it opened in May 2009 it has been partially rehung several times and the exhibition will change continuously until it closes in spring 2011. Initially the exhibition was to be on view for a year only, but the major public success has prolonged it for another year. The changing installation, accompanied by the ambitious website, provide for a flexible situation that can easily be adjusted according to circumstances. The general ambition is to present unknown works from the collection, to present women artists who have been neglected by museums and art historians during the 20th century, and, not least, to show that these artists don’t have to be hidden away in favour of established, canonised male artists. The presentation of the collection can also be seen as an experiment. Is it possible, limited to the collection, to present a thematically oriented exhibition with only women artists?

In France, like in many other Western countries, feminist art history and museological work still has to struggle against the male mainstream. After forty years of work by feminist art historians such as Linda Nochlin, Griselda Pollock and Germaine Greer to name but a few distinguished examples has changed academic writing, the situation at the museums has hardly changed at all. Male modernist artists are shown in lavish retrospectives; Andy Warhol, Max Ernst, and Salvador Dalí are succeeding each other now as well as during the 1960s--before the feminist wave. Centre Pompidou is no exception. Large retrospective exhibitions, for instance with Pierre Soulages--one of the established French abstract artists after World War II--Lucian Freud and Wassily Kandinsky, are shown parallel to elles.

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1 In the catalogue and on the website, all the themes are presented: Pionnières, Feu à volonté, Corps slogan, Eccentric abstraction, “Une chambre à soi”, Le mot à l’oeuvre, Immatérielles, Autour de l’exposition.
2 The exhibition opened on May 29, 2009, and was to be on show for a year. Now it will close February 21, 2011.
3 For the homepage see: http://www.ina.fr/fresques/elles-centrepompidou/Html/PrincipaleAccueil.php (April 26, 2010).
4 It is quite astounding that Warhol, Ernst, and Dalí were shown during 2008–09 at Moderna in large exhibitions, and that the same artists were shown at Moderna in the late 1960s and early ‘70s. Time does not seem to have changed.
Because of this situation, it is liberating that elles@centrepompidou embraces such a free form. Some of the galleries in elles have changed parallel to the Soulages exhibition and the curator responsible for elles, Camille Morineau, has chosen to highlight one of the participating artists with some additional works. Judit Reigl, born in 1923 in Hungary and living in France, is hardly a big prolific name even though she has been working as long as Soulages and embraces similar ideas. Why haven’t I seen her poetic, informal compositions before? Soulages’ darkness suddenly fades away in comparison with these low-key paintings and forceful drawings.6

Centre Pompidou has chosen an interesting strategy in order to present their collection. Elles is not only a welcomed opportunity to see what usually is hidden away, but also, according to Camille Morineau, an opportunity to declare what so often is missing.7 In order to see the missing parts, the collection’s blind spots, the visitor has to be well acquainted with art history. That might be asking a lot since those artists normally not on display are also those women artists neglected by art history and less exposed anyway. Nevertheless, this choice has proven to be fruitful in order to persuade collectors and galleries about the necessity of certain artists’ works. The exhibition has led to several donations, such as Untitled (Room 101) by Rachel Whiteread, and not least to a massive public interest. So the exhibition has led to an expansion of the collection, facilitating future improvements.

This large, visual manifestation of absence in the collection can be compared with Moderna Museet’s (in the following: Moderna) project The Second Museum of Our Wishes. The aim of the project at the Swedish museum of modern art was to acquire works by female modernist and modern artists and it was grounded in the curators’ opinion that there were certain artists lacking and that the museum should try to acquire works by them. Timely, in connection with the museum’s 50th anniversary celebrated in 2008, the museum asked for support in order to be able to acquire works. The curators, especially some of the female curators, had since long been discussing the necessity of including women artists’ works in the collection, and these thoughts were developed by the director Lars Nittve into the initiative that was publicly announced in an article and a letter to the government in spring 2006.8 Nittve referred to the exhibition The Museum of Our Wishes that took place in the early 1960s, an initiative of the Friends of Moderna (Moderna Museets Vänner), and which had the effect that the museum could acquire some thirty works of art—all key works in the collection today and all made by men.9 This so-called mistake was to be rectified through new purchases of women modernist artists. The new project did very well. Several works of art and roughly 40 million Swedish crowns were donated to the museum, mainly by private donors, but also by the government. New works were then incorporated into the collection—by artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Tora Vega Holmström, Anna Kagan, Lee Lozano, Carolee Schneemann, and Monica Sjöö to name just a few.10

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6 This room dominated by the works of Reigl was on view as I visited the museum in December 2009.
7 Interview with Camille Morineau by the author, Paris, December 18, 2009.
8 Lars Nittve, ”Slentrianmässig prioritering av manliga konstnärskap”, Dagens Nyheter, April 18, 2006.
10 Works by the following artists were acquired: Louise Bourgeois, Judy Chicago, Susan Hiller, Tora Vega Holmström, Anna-Chaja Abelevna Kagan, Hilma af Klint (through an agreement on a loan), Mary
Compared to an exhibition like elles, this Swedish project was invisible at first, an abstract plan that initially left no traces. But in the course of time new works were purchased and the list of names that was presented in the beginning became more and more real. The project was never turned into an exhibition per se, something that hardly could have been done with such differing works irrespective of their quality. On the other hand, the new works have been included in the galleries reserved for the collection as well as in temporary exhibitions. To work with the art on a daily basis is a more subtle and maybe more effective intervention than to present all at once and then to stow it away in a storage again. The goal, to present another art history and to nuance the picture heretofore introduced by Moderna in Sweden, has been achieved, at least in part. And, importantly, some works have led to solo exhibitions. It is for instance hard to believe that an exhibition like the Lee Lozano retrospective in spring 2010 would have come about without the purchase of the painting Punch, Peek & Feel. The project The Second Museum of Our Wishes functions in the first place as a reminder. Yet it is a process that needs continuous attention and development in order to achieve lasting results, a point to which I will return.

Some few works don’t make a difference in a collection where the gender imbalance already is great. If for example the collection of Swedish 20th century art is scrutinised, approximately 25 per cent of the works are made by women artists. Then, looking at the statistics, two works by Tora Vega Holmström and Monica Sjöö are only drops in the ocean. Nevertheless, the important thing is not to count the number of works, but to see to the possibilities that are generated. A single work might have a greater potential than a comprehensive group of works.

The imbalance is of course not only due to the exhibition The Museum of Our Wishes on display in 196==i.e. five years after the opening of the museum--that is made the scapegoat. Nittve’s choice of title for the project--The Second Museum of Our Wishes--might be smart, but it is problematic all the same for at least two reasons. Firstly, the exhibition organised by then-director Pontus Hultén and critic/curator Ulf Linde, which itself was a good initiative, is presented as a failure. This judgement is based on today’s knowledge and the possibility to look back on the 20th century with a certain distance through the feminist theories developed afterwards--but how will future generations judge The Second Museum of Our Wishes? Secondly, the new project is placed in the shadow of the museum’s famous 1960s. Instead of developing a new idea, an old and successful one is recycled that goes hand in hand

Kelly, Barbara Kruger, Lee Lozano, Alice Neel, Lioubov Popova, Carolee Schneemann, Monica Sjöö, and Dorothea Tanning.

11 To name just one example, Judy Chicago’s work Car Hood (1963–64) was shown in the exhibition Time & place: Los Angeles 1957–1968, Moderna Museet, October 4, 2008, until January 6, 2009.
12 Lee Lozano’s work was shown in a retrospective exhibition from February 13 until April 25, 2010. The show was presented in the major gallery for temporary exhibitions and was one of the first in that space dedicated to a female artist. The curator was female.
13 These statistics are based on my own research, looking into the database of Moderna, and the results are preliminary. They will be developed in a future research project on the representation of women artists in the collection purchased during the 20th century.
14 That the priorities behind the acquisitions were routine like is Nittve’s expression, see the above mentioned article. Dagens Nyheter, April 18, 2006.
with a nostalgic view on the 1960s as the decade when Moderna still was an institution to count on.\textsuperscript{15}

Both Centre Pompidou's display of the collection and Moderna's project strive to visualise problems connected with a gender-oriented examination of the collection. Where the one museum shows what is there, the other museum chooses to point at what is not. Yet the aim is the same: to increase the collection and at least to some extent be able to alter the current circumstances. Thinking of the public, it is of course grateful to present an exhibition, but to display the absences, as pointed out, is not easily done. However, another effect of knowledge production is achieved. The public encounters works seldom seen, they can discover new artists, and they can grasp the collection more comprehensively--which in future allows them to pose specific questions like why Judit Reigl hasn't received a retrospective exhibition or why Joan Mitchell isn't represented through more works in the collection of the Centre Pompidou. Exactly these possibilities that arise through the generation of new knowledge are paramount in order to develop a future feminist discourse. There is definitely a need to further increase an awareness of these issues in the consciousness of the general public and at the museums themselves. Moderna continues to hide the women artists that are present in the collection. Through the project the public has been made aware of who is missing, at least some names have become more commonly recognised, but that there are women artists in the collection whose works are rarely shown is a fact that is kept quiet.\textsuperscript{16} Naturally it generates less press publicity to show works on paper and photography by lesser-known Swedish women artists than to present a list of world-famous, established artists. It should also be acknowledged that the quality can differ a lot between works in the collection. Since Moderna has a national responsibility to collect Swedish art, it also means, and this is particularly relevant for the early decades, that acquisitions were made on a broad basis. Here lies another problem: the works Moderna wished to incorporate into the collection were made by already established artists. They were already part of an historical art canon. It is no coincidence that the only female artist Agnès Thurnauer mentions, and in fact turns into a male, is Louise Bourgeois--one of the artists selected by Nittve. Unfamiliar artists, who presumably also are lacking in the collection, are bypassed once again. The list does not only imply new possibilities, in a way it also functions as exclusion.

Both these museums place their finger on a problematic area and open up for further discussions. It is a difficult situation to solve and a disadvantage is that both museums only acknowledge the situation of women artists when there are many other neglected areas, for instance seen geographically. An important task for the future is to create an awareness of the problems and a wish for a dialogue with various participants so that the situation might be changed over time. That calls for an open mind and a desire really to cause a change. The projects show that the ambition is there; nevertheless, both require an active follow-up--a workload the museums alone cannot answer to. The public as well as the art historians have to


\textsuperscript{16} In the original article by Nittve, the list included Paula Modersohn-Becker, Frida Kahlo, and Hannah Höch to name just a few, artists whose works haven’t been purchased.
grasp this chance to demand more of the museums that after all are public places. The processes have been initiated, but the projects must not be seen as concluded once Moderna celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2008, or once the Centre Pompidou changes the display of the collection again. These projects must not be seen as short-lived campaigns, but as starting points for continued work, thought and debate.

The demands that have to be made shall also emphasise the interest of the public and encourage critical self-reflection on behalf of the museums, both in terms of time and place. The process of critical thinking must be kept alive. One positive initiative at Moderna is a research project on the newly acquisitioned works of art. This might challenge the museum’s own comfort—some new acquisitions are certainly not enough. In other words, these projects are great opportunities to make a halt in daily business and reflect on the criteria for the choice of acquisitions as well as to what kind of art histories the museums want to present. But this also goes for the public: what kind of exhibitions do they want to encounter in these public spaces? Attention and awareness can lead to many diverse collections and exhibitions that rise beyond the momentary spectacle.

17 The project “In the shadow of. Women modernists from a gender-oriented art history perspective, in connection with Moderna Museet’s project The Second Museum of our Wishes” is a three-year-project financed by the Swedish Arts Council. It was initiated by Anna Tellgren, curator of photography, and the author in 2008.

18 An earlier Swedish version of this article has been published as: “Centre Pompidou synliggör det som inte finns”, Svenska Dagbladet, February 23rd, 2010.
“Bernarda Alba and Frogs with No Tongues”  

By Thomas Blake

Completed in 1936, just months before his abduction by Franco’s secret police, Lorca’s *The House of Bernarda Alba* depicts a domestic world in which swift and violent punishment greets any and all insubordination. As an aggressive and overbearing woman, Bernarda rigidly outlines the parameters of acceptable behavior for her children. The drama can be read allegorically; Bernarda Alba, like Francisco Franco, seeks total control of her “subjects.” By presenting the devastating effects of Bernarda’s inflexibility, the playwright exposes the dangers of a totalitarian state. The play, however, assumes a richer complexity when read as a different type of cautionary tale. By exploring the extent to which Bernarda Alba embodies the maternal role as outlined by phallocentric psychoanalytic theory, the dangers of a patriarchal economy become evident. By reducing the maternal to that which merely defers to paternal law, Lacanian psychical architecture denies the feminine ontological viability and threatens to construct a world in which difference is neither respected nor acknowledged. Similar to the thematizing dynamic of a fascist, one-party state, a patriarchal culture perpetuates the notion that male subjectivity is not simply a mode of signification but the standard for all psychical formation. As a mother “dutiful” to this premise, Alba acquiesces to prevailing ideology despite its impact on feminine agency. Furthermore, she aggressively endorses this asymmetrical Symbolic order and endeavors to engender in her daughters the willingness to subscribe to oppressive cultural norms. Unable to *speak herself*, opting instead to transmit prevailing ideology, Alba functions as a gear in an androcentric machine. In so doing, she renders herself and her children mute.

Widowed at the onset of the play, Bernarda Alba ascends to power as an aristocratic matriarch in the patriarchal culture of Andalusian Spain. One might imagine that, no longer straitjacketed by inherited notions of “appropriate” feminine conduct, Bernarda would transform her home into an oasis far removed from the injustices of the outside world. Sadly, Bernarda actively reinscribes an overtly misogynistic social structure. Graver still, Lacanian conceptions of subject formation imply that any possibility for her to do otherwise is illusory.

For Lacan, functional subjectivation occurs only through disavowal of the mother. Prior to the mirror phase, that is to say before the child possesses a sense of its own autonomy, the mother, by meeting all of the child’s demands, represents the fullness (the absence of Lack) that all human beings desire. Once the child becomes aware that s/he exists independently of all other beings, the phallus replaces the mother as emblem of fullness. Devoid of a phallus, the feminine-maternal mutates into the emblem of Lack, represents the threat of castration, and becomes the absolute other, the unintelligible. As a result, subjectivity, as simply the illusion of wholeness, an illusion, to be sure, that must remain intact for the human psyche to remain unfractured, occurs only through rejection of the mother. Lacan’s metaphor in *Seminar XVII* depicts the urgency of matricide.
The mother is a big crocodile and you find yourself in her mouth. You never know what may set her off suddenly, making those jaws clamp down. That is the mother’s desire...There is a roller, made of stone, of course, which is potentially there at the level of the trap, and that holds and jams it open. That is what we call the phallus. It is a roller that protects you, should the jaws suddenly close. (qtd. in Fink 84)

Though briefly the emblem of fullness, the maternal ultimately functions as a monstrous threat to life and autonomy. The manifestation of maternal desire equates here to utter destruction of the subject. Only by severing ties to her can healthy subjectivation occur. Since Lacan argues that the pursuit of wholeness dominates the entire human psychological trajectory, rejection of the Lack becomes the rejection of the feminine-maternal. The subject cleaves itself from the maternal and pursues the phallus by aligning itself with the law of the father. Lacan concludes, therefore, that culture forms “along fundamentally androcentric and patriarchal lines” (Seminar II 204).

Returning to the play, Bernarda Alba depicts this Lacanian dynamic. Imposing her command on the household, she confines her daughters to the domestic sphere as a gesture of respect for the patriarch. “During our eight years of mourning, no wind from the street will enter this house! Pretend we have sealed up the doors and windows with bricks. That was how it was in my father’s house, and in my grandfather’s house” (205). In deference to paternal law, Bernarda perceives the continuity of traditional values as justification for imprisoning her daughters. Moreover, Bernarda embraces these cultural practices without question. This exemplifies the extent to which prevailing ideology subsumes the feminine-maternal, or, as Lacan puts it, “the Symbolic order literally submerges her, transcends her” (Seminar II 204). By wholeheartedly conforming to social expectations, Bernarda Alba exhibits a total disregard for her children’s desire, and although they resist her rigid authority, she asserts her power relentlessly. “In here,” she pronounces, “you do what I tell you to do” (206). Ironically, however, these “orders” are not her own; she simply recycles dominant ideology.

It is here that we begin to see how The House of Bernardo Alba becomes Lorca’s disturbing portrait of the maternal function. Insidiously, since Bernarda occupies a position of authority, she appears to be far from a passive figure. In actuality, however, she takes the mantle of power and simply re-broadcasts the same cultural messages that prevent her and her daughters from experiencing a sense of self-actualization. With the exception of Angustias, courted by the young philanderer in the village, Pepe el Romano, Bernarda confines her family to the home, extracts her children from society, and renders her daughters ineligible for marital union. The youngest of these women, Adela, most firmly resists her mother’s authority. In open rebellion, Adela cries, “I can’t be locked up...I don’t want my skin’s whiteness lost in these rooms. Tomorrow I’m going to put on my green dress and go walking through the streets. I want to go out!” (1026).
Refusing to be confined, renouncing her mother’s orders to wear black, and unwilling to sublimate her desire, Adela eventually consummates her relationship with Pepe in an act of revolt against what she deems unjust cultural codes. By the end of the drama, however, once abandoned by Pepe and defeated by her mother’s unbending power, Adela kills herself to avoid a life of confinement.

*The House of Bernarda Alba*, as a theatrical production, functions via confinement. Since observers of the play sit with their backs to the fourth wall, Nina Scott argues, “the viewer becomes as much a prisoner of the house as the five daughters” (298). Since the entirety of the play’s action takes place within the Alba home, the audience is as confined to the setting as the characters are. C.B. Morris echoes this sentiment by claiming that the house is “the space that encloses the reader or spectators together with the characters on stage” (“The Austere Abode: Lorca’s *La Casa de Bernarda Alba*” 129). Through this closure, the play enacts a dynamic of subjection.

This confinement, however, emerges in the play’s structure, as well. The ideological closure represented by the dutiful mother’s passive reception of patriarchal authority also becomes apparent in the relative closure of Lorca’s dramatic form. We may observe that closed form by recognizing the remarkable extent to which the play conforms to Aristotle’s analysis of tragedy in the *Poetics*. The Benavides-Albas are members of a landowning, aristocratic class. The drama transpires “within one revolution of the sun” (Aristotle 94). Adela experiences a moment of recognition during which she understands the gravity of her situation: her forbidden love for Pepe will never materialize into the relationship she desires. After Bernarda fires a gun at Pepe, he “ran off on his horse,” presumably never to be heard from again (287). Furthermore, Adela’s recognition, in classical fashion, is accompanied by her reversal of fortune: the young woman kills herself immediately after discovering that she will never be united with her lover. Finally, the tragic climax of the play, the catastrophic suicide, stems from hamartia: Bernarda’s decision to forcibly control her daughters and Adela’s refusal to conform to maternal (cultural) authority contribute equally to Adela’s destruction.

To be sure, however, a “tragedy” functions insofar as it conforms to a particular worldview. There must be dominant and clear-cut notions of concepts like justice and appropriate conduct to which the audience can relate, so the audience can understand that which is “tragic” about the tragedy…so “that which is terrifying and pitiable can arise from spectacle” (Aristotle 101). According to Lorca, therefore, the more accurately a theatrical production depicts “realistic” socio-material conditions, the more effectively the performance will impact the audience. Autor, from Lorca’s *Play Without a Title*, articulates this aesthetic: “reality begins because the author does not want you to feel that you are in the theater, but rather in the middle of the street” (qtd. in Soufas 14). In stark opposition to Brechtian alienation, Lorca seeks dramatic representation “so real” that it renders Symbolic structures as accurately as does “a photographic
document” (Stainton 430). Instead of jolting the audience from the complacency of observation, as Brecht does, Lorca asserts that the more closely a work of art simulates the Symbolic, the more capable it is of eliciting empathy and the more capable it is, therefore, of initiating change.

While conforming to a “classic” Aristotelian definition of tragedy and reproducing Scribe’s formula for the “well-made play,”

Lorca produces a text that conforms structurally to a tradition it seeks to subvert. For some feminist critics, realism constitutes a flawed mode of representation. Sue-Ellen Case suggests that realism merely replicates existing social structure and therefore validates it through reinscription. When situated in a “patriarchal systems of signs, women do not have the cultural mechanisms of meaning to construct themselves as the subject rather than the object of performance,” so feminine subjectivity, within a phallocentric context, can only be alienated by and from “the system of theatrical representation” (Feminism and Theatre 120). Along similar lines, Cixous claims, “it is always necessary for a woman to die in order for the play to begin” (“Aller à la Mer” 546). In short, like Case, Cixous suggests that since social systems have been historically shaped by phallocentric conceptions of subjectivity, the male universal subsumes the feminine in any “realistic” representation of culture.

These critiques of realism stem from the notion that aesthetic reproductions of the Symbolic order implicitly validate the cultural practices of which that order is comprised. According to this logic, therefore, the structural composition of a text like The House of Bernarda Alba undermines its subversive content by mimetically reconstituting the oppressive material conditions the work seemingly rejects. For the “anti-realist,” realism, in Lacanian terminology, yields to the law and to its regulation or legitimates cultural structures by re-presenting them. I patently reject this claim. Realism does not seek to recreate “reality” in an effort to (re)convey a fixed Symbolic order. One need only read works by Miller, Hansberry, Friel, Soyinka, or Wilson (and countless others) to discover this. Though experimentation in form and deviations from “traditional” modes of representation effectively disturb conceptions of “reality” by constructing alternate worlds onstage, any drama that implements intelligible dialogue ultimately anchors itself in the Symbolic order from which it seeks refuge.

From a different tack, as theorists like Irigaray and Bhabha urge subjects to incorporate dominant socio-linguistic practices through mimicry in order to reshape ideological terrain, Lorca appropriates traditional modes of representation in an effort to undermine oppressive and hegemonic Symbolic structures. By depicting the subjugation of women, a dynamic familiar to occupants of a patriarchal society, Lorca explores how societal practices, when deeply embedded within the cultural psyche, impinge upon the subject’s capacity for agency. This is yet another way that the play, as an artistic response to and performed expression of Symbolic structures, can be positioned within a feminist-psychoanalytic framework.
And it is from within this framework that we can see Bernarda Alba as a paradoxical figure. On one hand, she articulates a fierce independence. When her loyal servant, Poncia, suggests that the mistress’s five daughters are too old to be unwed, the matriarch replies, “None of them has had a suitor – nor needs one! They can get by very well” (211). To be sure, the Alba house is devoid of men. Even the servants are women. With the patriarch no more, the scene is set for the women to exist in harmonious autonomy from oppressive paternal law. After all, there appears to be no specific, identifiable male authority figure to which Bernarda must defer. Perhaps for this reason critic John Gabriele proposes that Lorca portrays three generations of women who—except for reasons of procreation—have survived with no apparent dependency on men and only minimal contact with the outside world. Moreover, there is here every indication that the cloistered lives of the Benavides-Alba women will continue unaltered in the coming years. (188)

This reading endows these women with far more agency than they actually possess. First, the daughters have not actively elected to remain confined in the home. Secondly, and more importantly, Bernarda’s locks her children up in deference to the traditions of an overtly patriarchal system. In this regard, what Gabriele deems survival with no apparent dependency on men is illusory. Cultural law informs every decision Bernarda makes.

More troubling still, instead of explaining the legitimacy of the cultural practices she perpetuates, Bernarda only articulates a powerful urge to fit neatly into the social fabric of her community. Like the tortured heroine in Ibsen’s Hedda Gabler, Bernarda Alba is terrified of scandal. When her own mother, Maria Josefa, wanders away from the house, Bernarda instructs a servant not to let the old widow near the well. The servant informs her mistress that Maria Josefa’s safety is not at risk, and Bernarda exposes her real concern. “It’s not that. Out there, the neighbors can see her from their window” (207). From this perspective, one conforms to the Symbolic order, one is interpellated, not because the Symbolic order offers refuge from the ontological void, but because one fears that deviation yields derision. From Bernarda’s vantage point, Maria Josefa is a liability. As Bernarda transmits inherited ideology, her mother voices dissent: “I don’t like to see these old maids, itching to get married, their hearts turning to dust. I want to go back to my own village! Bernarda, I want a man so I can get married and be happy!” (224). Maria Josefa, therefore, opposes the two primary sanctions that her daughter has imposed. Bernarda has forbidden her children from seeking male companionship and confined them to the home. Maria Josefa yearns for both physical freedom and intimacy.

Bernarda cannot identify with her mother’s desire. Maria Josefa, after all, wants to liberate herself from the confines of tradition. She wants to remarry and pursue her own interests. In this regard, Maria Josefa functions in stark opposition to the Lacanian conception of maternity. She exclaims, “I want to get away from here! Bernarda! To get married at the edge of the sea, at the edge of the sea!” (225).
There is an obvious disconnection here between mother and daughter, a gulf that, from a psychoanalytic perspective, has profound implications. Psychologist Lisa Baraitser states that the child has a persuasive “need to recognize the mother’s subjectivity as a locus of self-experiencing beyond that of the child. If the child does not have a mother whose subjectivity is recognizable, then the child cannot hope for recognition herself” (223). Although Maria Josefa clearly possesses subjectivity, her worldview does not correspond to prevailing ideology. She wants to act in accordance with her own desire instead of buckling beneath the weight of social expectation. Morris argues that Maria Josefa’s “dreams of marriage on the seashore and of children imply an escape not only from the house in which she is a prisoner, but from the village in which that house stands as a fortress of stern values and stiff traditions” (139). Bernarda, however, cannot understand this impulse. Maria Josefa, departing from the notion that the feminine-maternal should capitulate to dominant modes of thought, becomes the literal madwoman in the attic. As a deviant from normalized modes of being, Maria Josefa must be kept under lock and key. Instead of internalizing her mother’s revolutionary attitude, Bernarda deems her mother insane. Precisely who is “crazy” here is ambiguous. Although Bernarda subscribes to the mandates of communal will, her unwavering resolve to perpetuate phallocentric ideology at her own expense teeters on the brink of insanity. Since Bernarda cannot recognize her mother’s unconventional attitude, she defaults to prevailing ideology. This proves disastrous. Bernarda does not tolerate her mother’s dissent and orders the servants to “Lock her up!” (224). Once again, Bernarda relies on confinement to impose her power. If her subjects challenge her authority, their movements, their agency, must be restricted.

To be sure, however, Bernarda’s subjects are all females, and in this Andalusian Vega, women, behind barred windows of the guarded home, embroider bolts of linen while the men wander in the openness of olive groves. Out in the fields, there exists for men a freedom to pursue desire, a freedom clearly denied the women of the village. Functioning as a bridge to the outside world, Poncia relays to Adela and her sisters sordid tales from the groves. As if to torture young women unable to express their sexual desires, Poncia tells of how a prostitute, “dressed in sequins” came from far away to please the men of the village, and “fifteen of them paid to take her into the olive grove” (240). Furthermore, Poncia admits, “years ago, another of these women came, and I myself gave money to my oldest son so he could go. Men need these things” (241). In keeping with a patriarchal power structure, however, Poncia speaks harshly of any woman who pursues sexual desire. For example, as Poncia explains that Librada’s unmarried daughter has become pregnant and “to hide her shame, she killed it and put it under some rocks. But some dogs, with more feeling than many creatures, pulled it out, and as if led by the hand of God, they put it on her doorstep. Now they want to kill her. They’re dragging her down the street, and them men are running down the paths and out of the olive groves, shouting so loud the fields are trembling” (260). They, of course, are the men of the village. Though one of them impregnated this woman, Librada’s daughter protects the identity of the father.
Horrifyingly, Poncia nods with approval as Bernarda, eager to punish indecency, shouts, “Finish her off before the Civil Guard gets here! Burning coals in the place where she sinned!” (261). In a frenzy of perverse aggression, Alba calls for a swift and brutal response to unsanctioned desire.

The matriarch reacts so violently because frivolous indulgence of sexual appetite is a luxury that only men can enjoy. Nowhere does this double-standard emerge more clearly than when the family stallion beats against the walls of its stable. Bucking against its confinement, Bernarda suspects that the animal is “too hot” from the sexual repression that has been imposed upon it. Her response to the horse is a crystallization of her views on sexual practices. “Let him out so he roll around in the piles of straw... shut the mares in the stable, but turn him loose before he kicks down the walls!” (264). The parallel between the stallion and the Alba daughters is obvious. The young Alba women are as imprisoned as the horse, but the daughters, as daughters, are in a double bind. They are relegated to the stable of cultural law, but they have even less freedom of movement. As women, they need to be locked up like mares; they cannot enjoy any reprieve from the harshness of their subjection. Men, however, out of the stable and galloping through the olive groves, appear exempt from rigid behavioral codes.

As a microcosm of society at large, the Alba home mirrors the tensions of an androcentric culture. Though patriarchal practices are imbedded in ideological, religious, and community systems, and though “appropriate” feminine conduct, as Bernarda so clearly articulates, is to conform to these systems, there is inevitable resistance to oppressive traditional values. There are obvious instances of overt revolt; Librada’s daughter and Adela both refute the law and pursue their sexual impulses. These women, however, are destroyed by their open refusal to sublimate desire. Yet Librada’s daughter and Adela are outliers; they “stand out” insofar as they patently and publicly denounce cultural authority. In this oppressive environment, rueful conformity is the more common trajectory. Adela’s sisters verbalize the psychological impacts of assimilation. Magdalena declares, “Today people are more refined. Brides wear white veils, just as in the cities, and we drink bottled wine, but we rot inside about what people will say” (215). Although she is the daughter of a wealthy, aristocratic, landowning family, material privilege provides her little salvation. Obliging cultural norms has a far greater impact on her than do the luxuries of an aristocratic existence. Obviously, Bernarda, too, has been subjected to patriarchal codes throughout life. Though she has elected to wholeheartedly conform to the mandates of paternal law, the matriarch is clearly motivated by fear—Bernarda is motivated by the compulsion to “fit in,” *rotting inside because of what people might say*. Amelia goes so far as to claim, “To be born a woman is the worst possible punishment” (241). Woman must be subordinate to male authority; she must sublimate her desire. Although all people are subjected to the parameters of the order, these women (and all women occupying a patriarchal social structure) are far more confined. Not only must they answer to cultural codes that demand their deferral to paternal law,
they must endure the tyrannical reign of a mother that respects these codes to the letter.

For Angustias, the injustice of the system produces jealousy and rage. Fully aware that her sisters’ resent her engagement to Pepe, she states, “envy is eating” her sisters alive, and this envy causes familial relationships to deteriorate (233). In a fit of resentment, Martirio steals Angustias’ picture of Pepe. Furthermore, Martirio, having seen Adela’s “petticoats covered with straw,” tells Bernarda about Adela’s affair with Pepe (285). Even still, Martirio describes Adela as “fortunate a thousand times over” because “she had him” (288). Trapped by a fiercely controlling mother, the daughters seek escape through marriage. In her critique of Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis, An Ethics of Sexual Difference, Irigaray explains how patriarchal social structure breeds rivalries among women. "If we are to be desired and loved by men, we must abandon our mothers... which destroys mothers... which destroy the possibility of love between mother and daughter. The two become at once accomplices and rivals in order to move into the single possible position in the desire of man. This competition equally paralyzes love among sister-women" (102). In the Alba home, the acquisition of a man guarantees emancipation from Bernarda’s harsh rule; for Freud and Lacan, a woman births a child to fill her phallic lack. In both cases, (the illusion of) female subjectivity can only be actualized by the male subject. These notions coalesce when, vying for Pepe’s attention by condemning Adela’s relations with him, Martirio shouts to Adela, "My blood is no longer your blood! I try to think of you as a sister, but I see you only as a woman!" (283).

Fully aware of his effects on family harmony, Maria Josefa declares, “Pepe el Romano is a giant. All of you want him. But he is going to devour you because you are grains of wheat. Not grains of wheat. Frogs with no tongues!” (281). Without tongues, these frogs are powerless to feed their sexual appetites. Moreover, these women, without tongues, can neither adequately articulate their frustration nor can they participate in the public dialogue that serves to construct the very laws to which they are subordinated. In addition, Maria Josefa describes Pepe as a giant because he is the emblem of freedom from their mother’s unrelenting domination. For Maria Josefa, however, Pepe only personifies an oppressive order. Alba, however, is unbending in her fidelity this order. At the same time, she articulates dissatisfaction similar to her daughters’. In a fit of frustration, Bernarda declares, “Things are never the way we would like them to be!” (255). In this tragic moment, displays overt hostility towards the system she goes to such great pains to perpetuate. Though dutifully endorsing the law of the land, she clearly recognizes, if only briefly, that the cultural practices she transmits limit agency, suppress desire, and engender bitterness. Moreover, the “we” to whom she refers is ambiguous. Though she could be speaking to the experiences of the Benavides-Alba family unit, Bernarda, knowingly or not, delves into the trauma of subject formation. The “we” designates the audience and actors alike, and refers, therefore, to all subjects confined to the limits imposed by a Symbolic order. The very act of “participation” in culture constitutes
conformity, to some extent, to clearly delineated codes of conduct, an obligation that fundamentally suppresses agency and personal freedom. Further still, the “we” denotes women in particular, subjects who occupy a patriarchal Symbolic to which they must answer but which they have not constructed.

Like Librada’s daughter, Adela seems to combat this passivity when she speaks out against Bernarda’s fascistic rule. “The shouting in this prison is over! (She seizes the mother’s cane and breaks it in two.) This is what I do with the tyrant’s rod!” (285). In an act of defiance, Adela rejects the law of the home. Clearly, the youngest daughter expresses adamant revolt against maternal authority. She pursues her desire in spite of Bernarda’s maniacal fidelity to tradition and cultural practices. For Robert Lima, Adela’s revolt signals revolutionary self-assertion. “Adela is transformed into a heroine fighting boldly, if hopelessly, for her cause” (285). The young woman’s resistance against the Symbolic order, although a futile endeavor, is an admirable and epiphanic moment. Gwynne Edwards suggests that Adela’s behavior is autobiographical, indicative “in many ways of his resistance to the conservative value of Spain in which he lived, and to that extent the play was highly prophetic, Adela being a projection of Lorca himself” (181). If one reads The House of Bernarda Alba as the author’s expression of socio-political concerns, Adela’s revolt and subsequent suicide mimic the playwright’s refusal to pander to an unjust regime.

Upon further analysis, however, Adela’s revolt against maternal authority is not quite the exertion of power it may appear; despite her efforts or intent, she does not transcend cultural law. After all, in her cane-breaking rant, Adela shouts, “No one gives me orders but Pepe!” (285). Adela has, in fact, internalized her mother’s worldview; women are at the mercy of a patriarchal order. Adela clearly rejects her mother’s “law,” but maternal authority, in this play, controls insofar as it transmits male subjectivity. Accordingly, when Adela revolts against Bernarda’s fascism, Adela is rejecting the messenger but not the message. Even in her act of insubordination and total disregard of her mother’s authority, Adela embraces the role of that which enables male subjectivity. What on the surface may appear to be utter disregard for traditional values is, tragically, simply an unconventional endorsement of these values. Again, this inability to break out of ideological closure evidences itself in the very closure of “conventional” dramatic form Lorca employs.

Though Adela ignores Angustias’s “right” to Pepe, and bypasses the necessity for marriage in pursuit of her sexual satisfaction, she embraces the underlying structures of a phallocentric social economy. That is to say, she reduces herself to the status of object and is thus in collusion with her own oppression. “I will put on a crown of thorns… like any mistress of a married man” (284). This moment is even more powerful in Ian Gibson’s translation of The House of Bernarda Alba, taken from the 20th edition of Lorca’s Obras Completas, published in 1978, in which Adela states: “After tasting his mouth I can’t stand the horror of these ceilings any longer. I’ll be whatever he wants. With the whole village against me,
pointing at me with their burning fingers, persecuted by people who claim to be decent—in full view of all of them I’ll put on the crown of thorns worn by the mistresses of married men” (925-6). Her reference to the Messiah here is foreboding; as Christ’s resolve results in his martyrdom, Adela’s resoluteness will be equally fatal. The burning fingers of people who claim to be decent eradicate or ostracize that which deviates. At the same time, however, what appears to be Adela’s will to power is actually an illusion. Claiming that she will be whatever he wants, she will mold her subjectivity around his projection of desire. Unwilling to be the daughter Bernarda demands, she elects to be the woman for whom Pepe el Romano yearns. Each “identity,” however, is prescribed. She merely changes the setting of her confinement. “I will go to a little house, alone, where he will see me whenever he wants, whenever he feels the need” (284). Adela has occupied a home in which her movement has been restricted. Her relocation situates her in the same position. Only this time, her movements are restricted, not by her mother, but by Pepe el Romano. Essentially, she, as did her mother, dutifully conforms to the absolute power of male authority.

Though Lacanian theory implicitly deems this submission inevitable, Julia Kristeva, offering a feminist “corrective” to the Lacanian paradigm, re-imagines how the feminine-maternal relates to the law. By occupying a conceptual space from within which cultural laws can be validated, transmitted, thus codified, the maternal function operates as the mediator of the law. In this capacity, therefore, the mother possesses the potential energy to put the law “on trial,” only yielding to Symbolic structures that meet to her socio-ethico-political conceptions of justice. Undoubtedly, Bernarda Alba does not put culture on trial. From a Kristevan perspective, dutiful acquiescence to cultural norms because they are the norm is dangerously problematic.

Feminine perversion (pere-version) is coiled up in the desire for law as desire for reproduction and continuity, it promotes feminine masochism to the rank of structure stabilizer (against its deviations); by assuring the mother that she may thus enter into an order that is above humans’ will it give her her reward of pleasure. Such coded perversion, such close combat between maternal masochism and the law have been utilized by totalitarian powers of all times to bring women to their side, of course, they have succeeded easily. (“Stabat Mater” 328)

Kristeva argues that feminine conformity to patriarchal social structure is perverse. More aptly, the mother who legitimates phallocentric ideology becomes the pere-version, the maternal version of the father.³ Feminine perversion, reflecting that which ensures reproduction and continuity, sanctions the reproduction of continuity. Kristeva suggests here that a mother’s willingness to step into that conceptual space points to the perversive. Furthermore, Kristeva alludes to the extent to which totalitarian regimes espouse this conception of the feminine-maternal. Indeed, The House of Bernarda Alba warns of these perversions.
The fact that no men ever emerge in the drama only accentuates Bernarda’s perversion. The patriarch has died but lingers as an absent master. Pepe el Romano shapes the action of the play, but he never materializes onstage. *The House of Bernarda Alba* presents an exclusively feminine space, yet depicts a world of women shaped by unseen men, men invisible because a) in a literal sense, they never appear in the production, and b) shapers and purveyors of the law (like Kierkegaard’s *crowd* and Heidegger’s *they*) exist only as a nebulous, unintelligible mass. Bernarda Alba portrays the effects of this omnipresentinvisible patriarchal force, and she characterizes its version of the maternal function as a *dutiful mother* upon which the androcentric social structure (or a fascist state) depends. Repression of the feminine follows when the mother uses her position to transmit and perpetuate the priorities and practices of patriarchal conditions. For Lacan, this version of the mother is not a version at all; passive deferral to paternal law is the maternal function. Since Lacan claims that women are devoid of “their own” subjectivity, the feminine-maternal is that which enables the Law of the Father, enables male subjectivity. In *Seminar XX*, Lacan posits that “there’s no such thing as Woman because, in her essence...she is notwhole” (72-3). Since woman has no subjectivity that is *her own*, the Lacanian notion of the maternal function eerily coincides with Bernarda’s conception of her parental role.⁴ Kristeva’s concept of *pere-version* responds to this disturbing aspect of Freudian-Lacanian psychodynamics, dynamics informed by inherited phallocentric presuppositions. Bernarda’s daughters have, from their mother, internalized this message, and this becomes most clear, perhaps, when Martirio laments, “I do things I have no faith in, but I do them like clockwork” (212). Just as Bernarda thinks that societal norms should not be questioned, Martirio has no faith in the legitimacy of her material reality, but, as do her sisters, she robotically conforms to cultural expectations.

Federico García Lorca zeroes in on this sense of powerlessness. A fascist regime presents itself as the apex of political evolution, and, in so doing, broadcasts ideological maxims as inherent truths. Similarly, Lacan relegates the maternal function to a position of passivity, and, in so doing, wields biology as justification for this relegation. It is in this context that we read *The House of Bernarda Alba* as a call to arms. Human agency, the locus of power and freedom, must be preserved at all costs. Ironically, however, Lorca provides no alternative to fascism. Instead, he depicts the horrors of a world in which no such alternative exists. Simultaneously, this play proffers no replacement for the dutiful mother; on the contrary, the work conveys a narrative in which only she rears our young. Though the universe Lorca presents to us is fictional, the tragedy is very real.

But what is most “real” about *The House of Bernarda Alba* are the psychical consequences that subjects endure when confined to a Symbolic order in which oppression is normalized. Furthermore, when the horrors of material conditions are amplified, examined, and laid bare, we—the subjects—often uniformly recoil from the representation or reject them altogether. In a Lacanian sense, we are
overwhelmed by exposure to the Real. We are traumatized by the phantasm of unmediated, unpolished, unadulterated access to this...this...thing. These glimpses into reality result in denial and terror. In a recent New York Times editorial, “How China Got Religion,” Slavoj Žižek identifies this bizarre phenomenon.

“Culture” has commonly become the name for all those things we practice without really taking seriously. And this is why we dismiss fundamentalist believers as “barbarians” with a “medieval mindset”: they dare to take their beliefs seriously. Today, we seem to see the ultimate threat to culture as coming from those who live immediately in their culture, who lack the proper distance. (10/11/07)

Accordingly, we can deem Bernarda Alba a freakish expression of conformity to traditional values because she exhibits a medieval (uncompromising, unflinching, unconditional) adherence to the Law. In Bernarda’s case, as in our own, the Law is real. Traditional values exist. The repression of feminine agency, certainly in Andalusia during the mid-twentieth century, was not an invented set of circumstances employed merely for literary technique. Bernarda, however, follows the letter of the Law. In so doing, she exposes its rawness, its weirdness, and its injustice. But she does more than that...she dutifully inculcates the Law in her children. This process functions as a perverse revelation for the audience/reader. For this matriarch, men and women exist on different planes; society views and treats them differently. Women should propagate existing ideology regardless of its impact on them. Adela cannot bear this existence, so she embraces suicide as the only answer. With Pepe gone, she is unable to pursue her desire, and with her secret revealed, Adela’s confinement to the home looms as an inevitable certainty. She hangs herself in her ultimate act of defiance. Sadly, however, Bernarda undermines the revolt when she barks, “cut her down. My daughter has died a virgin. Carry to her room and dress her in white. No one is to say a thing. She died a virgin” (288). Under these oppressive circumstances, Adela perceives suicide as an empowering expression of freedom. Metaphorically, this may be so, but one cannot deny the material reality of the situation. First, there exist profound problems when self-destruction constitutes the only method through which one can attain “freedom.” Second, Adela’s suicide could have served as a revolt against the injustices of an asymmetrical social structure in which men are active and women are passive, but Bernarda silences Adela’s rebellion by dressing the “virgin-corpse” in white. In this play, then, there exists no escape from the totality. As reader, as audience member, as critical thinker, one seemingly cannot help but ask why these circumstances could be tolerated. One either asks this question, or one dismisses the entire situation as absurd, unrealistic, unbelievable...as fiction. Culture, Žižek tells us, signifies that which we exercise without taking seriously. If we take it seriously, if we behave like the atavistic Bernarda, we risk uncovering its strange contents and complying with them without question. Characters like Bernarda Alba do not disturb us because they are implausible or unrecognizable; they are disturbing because they are “so outrageous” and “because they spill the secret of what we have done for so long: respectfully tolerating what we don’t
take quite seriously, and trying to contain its political consequences through the law” (Žižek *New York Times* 10/11/07). Bernarda shatters our capacity to enjoy a comfortable lie...the illusion that law and order and justice are synonymous, interchangeable.

To the extent that she reveals to us that which is concealed determines the extent to which we recoil in horror from Bernarda Alba. She may well be emblematic of a terrible mother, a horrific oppressor, or an intolerant tyrant, but this woman is a powerful manifestation of cultural conditions. If women are denied subjectivity, if culture, via philosophy, psychoanalysis, law, politics, or tradition, sends women a message that they are passive bodies that are to perpetuate existing norms, the maternal function is reduced to an instrument of the state. If one is tempted to read thinkers like Lacan or Kristeva as purveyors of theoretical abstractions with little relevance for the person waiting at the bus stop, consider Bernarda Alba. If phallocentric ideology is transmitted indiscriminately from society to its subjects, from parent to child, from mother to daughter, the machine rumbles forward.

Notes

1 Elizabeth Grosz explains that fetishism results when a subject refuses to reject the mother. She elucidates also why fetishism is more common in males. “The fetishist demands that the mother have a genital organ the same as his own. His disavowal functions to ward off threats of his own organ, threats which force him to acknowledge the possibility of its loss. In place of the missing maternal phallus, he will position the fetish (shoe, raincoat, underwear, etc.)” (*Jacques Lacan: A Feminist Introduction* 118).

2 Nineteenth century French playwright, Eugène Scribe, produced over 250 plays between 1815 and 1855. His legacy, however, is his structural approach to drama. His concept of “the well-made play” relies on a formulaic structure. Lee A. Jacobus defines this structure as the following:

   1. A careful exposition telling the audience what the situation is, usually including one or more secrets to be revealed later.
   2. Surprises, such as letters to opened at a critical moment and identities to be revealed later.
   3. Suspense that builds steadily throughout the plays, usually sustained by cliff-hanging situations and characters who miss each other by way of carefully timed entrances and exits. At critical moments, characters lose important papers or misplace identifying jewelry, for instance.
   4. A climax late in the play when the secrets are revealed and the hero confronts the antagonist and succeeds.
   5. A denouement, the resolution of the drama when all the loose ends are drawn together and explanations are made that render all the action plausible. (647)
In plays like Molière’s *Tartuffe*, Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler*, and Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest*, this structure dominates the action onstage.

Considering French etymology, French *pervers* in English means “perverse” or “contrary to.” The prefix, “per,” derives from the Latin and, according to the OED, signifies “away entirely, to destruction, to the bad” (Latin meaning retained in both English and French). The French pronoun, “vers,” means “toward,” a meaning retained in the word, “version.” The Latin, “pervertere” is “to turn away evilly.” The French, “verser,” is “to shed” or “to remove.” Similarly, “renverser” is “to reverse.” When Lacan utilizes the term *perversion*, the Latin-French origins of the term suggest a *turning back of*, a *turning away from*, a *reversal of*, or a *shedding of* castrati on anxiety and the normative functions of the Oedipus complex. Dylan Evans describes the Lacanian perversion as any psychical structure operating as “an infringement of the normative requirements” for subject formation (138). Kristeva’s term, *pere-version*, is phonetically identical to the Lacanian term, *per-version*. In this context, not only does Kristeva summon the perverse and the father (*pere*), she retains the notion of the turning away. In the Kristevan sense, feminine perversion does not shed or turn away from paternal law (when such a reversal is “appropriate”).

Lacan positions *all* subjects, male and female, as a fissure, the split between an illusory ego produced in the mirror stage and the “knowable” subject of enunciation articulated in the Symbolic and through language. Lacan speaks to this divide when he defines the subject “as that which is represented by a signifier for another signifier,” ultimately rendering the subject “an effect of language” (Evans 196). In one sense, therefore, subjectivity for every human being is an illusion, a fantasy. At the same time, however, the Symbolic order is the mechanism through which “subjectivity” is fashioned. If patriarchal law fabricates and maintains this order, the fantasy through which subjectivity can be achieved is shaped exclusively by patriarchal *versions* of this fantasy.

In Beckett’s *Endgame*, Hamm, a blind and crippled occupant of a nightmarishly apocalyptic world, a world devoid of nature, kinship, and meaning, a world in which the ontological protection provided by the Symbolic has been stripped away, revealing the true nature of the abyss, asks Clov, “have you not had enough? Of this…this…thing” (2461).

**Works Cited**


The Romance of Henry James’s Female Pedophile

Jenn McCollum

The surplus of criticism on Henry James’s The Turn of the Screw is enough to turn even the most creative contemporary critics away. Since the novella’s publication in 1898, the uncanny incidents at Bly have continued to taunt critics, especially those primed to unearth a coherent plot. Despite the raging wars of interpretation among different camps, James's knotty ghost story has refused to ease its death-grip on readers' imaginations. Perhaps today more than ever, readers are bewildered about what the text means, never mind what it suggests. The ambiguities of plot continue to feed the most recent analyses despite William Van Peer’s and Ewout Van der Knapp’s painstakingly scientific study in 1995 that anatomized every claim made about The Turn of the Screw’s plot. Van Peer and Van der Knapp identified two distinct species of argument: those which maintained that the tale is a ghost story, and those which interpreted the ghostly happenings at Bly as the governess’ sexual repression or hallucinations. Each camp had seven possible theories that prompted Van Peer and Van der Knapp to question the “truth” of each. After proving the validity of all fourteen theories, and thus proving that the two opposing arguments were equally legitimate, they concluded that “if the contradiction cannot be resolved by eliminating one of its terms, then presumably this is proof that in the realm of interpretation, contradiction may be tolerated” (706). Thus, the primary debate over the plot of The Turn of the Screw is potentially resolved – opposite interpretations mutually exclude each other, making both arguments valid. James’s novella, then, coheres when the contradictions of plot are embraced. While not every critic is willing to settle for such a thankless contradiction, the emptiness of the plot suggests that the relentless lure of the novella rests elsewhere.

More than a ghost story, The Turn of the Screw is an enthusiastic romance of children and sex. The implication that Miles, the young ward of an impressionable governess, is sexually aware, sexually experienced, and sexually hungry has its draw. Titillating in its inappropriateness, the novel suggests through metaphor and silences what was, and still is, unmentionable. Since Richard von Krafft-Ebbing coined the term “pedophilia erotica” in his 1866 Psychopathia Sexualis, public attitudes toward child sexuality have become increasingly proscriptive and intimate relationships between adults and children suspect. During the Victorian period, Henry James witnessed several significant changes in the social reception of child-adult chumminess. The society that once embraced Charles Dodgson’s (Lewis Carroll’s) provocative photographs and drawings of nude and scantily clad child-bodies in compromising positions, was not the same set of Victorians that criticized The Turn of the Screw at the fin de siècle. Dodgson’s child art was permissible as Victorians, such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, considered his gaze at the child-body innocent (Leach; Gernsheim). In the tradition of William Blake’s imagining of childhood, in which children were esteemed as god-like in their purity and innocence, mid-Victorians still clung to the fantasy that a man who could appreciate the goodness of children must have an ivory-white soul himself. However, late-Victorians exchanged their Romantic ideal of childhood for a more modern model, as several
reviews of James’s novella expressed his work as “horribly successful” (“Magic”), “distinctively repulsive” (“The Story”), “cruel and untrue” (“Mr. James’s”), “monstrous and incredible” (“Recent”), “hopelessly evil” (“Most Hopelessly”), and unsafe (Barry 173). Like critics today who continue to cling to the text’s impenetrable plot, Victorian critics wrestled uncomfortably with the scandalous implication of child sexuality.

Historically, the sexualization of children has courted conflict. In his *Phaedrus*, Plato uses a playfully sexual scene between Socrates and Phaedrus to posit that *eros* (sexual desire) and divine *mania* (madness) are necessary since the love of beautiful young boy-bodies is the first step toward understanding (remembering) the ideal Form. The *mania* inspired by *kalos paı̂s* (erotic interaction) is a “pure and simple […] gift of the god” (244a: 8-9). Although Socrates believes that sexual relationships between men and boys are essential to enlightenment, he is also careful to note that such relations should be kept from the public eye:

> It’s inevitable that a lover will be found out […] The result is that whenever people see you talking with him they’ll think you are spending time together just before or after giving way to desire. But they won’t even begin to find fault with people for spending time together if they are not lovers; they know one has to talk to someone, either out of friendship or to obtain some other pleasure. (232a-b)

According to Greek tradition, giving way to sexual passion with boys is appropriate in private but must be kept from the public eye which might “find fault” with it. While Greeks may have been more forgiving of sexual adult-child relationships than contemporary American perspectives, Greek pederasty was not an arrangement without critical judgment. Today, pedophilia is a problematic area of sexual politics. As Harris Mirkin observes, discourses about pedophilia resemble the first phase of sexual politicizing, which involves “a battle to prevent the battle, to keep the issue from being seen as political and negotiable” (1). Second phase movements, into which feminism and gay/lesbian politics have recently surfaced, argue over rights and privileges, while the first phase is stagnated, without rights or privileges. As a silenced politic, pedophilia is not a “real discussion” (12). Even though, as Gunter Schmidt argues, “consensual sexual acts between children and adults [are difficult to imagine except in] cases of boys just entering puberty and who have masturbated or had other experiences leading to orgasm with peers” (474), the social excommunication of pedophiles does not allow for a conversation about the differences between consensual and non-consensual child sex. Much of this silencing has to do with social mores, as well as psychological implications.

Moral discourses about pedophilia today increasingly activate social panic. The media explodes with chilling tales of predatory men, instilling fear into parents and caregivers who want to protect their children from immorality and psychologically-debilitating experiences. A widespread moral panic infects many Americans, making them susceptible to manipulation by the media, or what Kathleen Woodward identifies as “statistical panic:” a psychological state in which a person fears for her safety due to media-driven cues (196). Resulting from the fear that “our own individual future is at stake” (196), statistical panic breeds uncertainty. Unsure of other people, and especially of ourselves, panic hinders risk-taking; “what we fear is risk itself” (211). Living in a
world of images deemed “dangerous” by the media, Americans succumb to a fantasy of protection in which they have the responsibility to shelter youth from perceived risk. As the most potentially threatening site of risk to a child, sexual abuse “becomes the virus that nourishes us, that empty point of ignorance about which we are the most knowing” (Kincaid 11). A societal preoccupation with child molestation and sexual abuse allows a well-meaning public to place itself as the lighthouse of protection and surveillance; however, such a fantasy of protection requires an equal fantasy of injury. Popular imaginings of pedophilia enable a discourse of protection even though, as James Kincaid argues, “molestation and the stories protesting the molesting walk the same beat” (12). Both fantasies have the potential to wound children. The fantasy of protection imprisons children in a turret of moral and statistical panic that stagnates healthy risk-taking which has the potential to challenge social constructs; the fantasy of injury, on the other hand, silences a sexual politic through a fuzzy imagining of predatory men in which the culprit is unidentifiable, unknowable, and everywhere.

The attempt to “learn” the pedophile, and hence color the grayish face of injury, is an ongoing challenge. Defined through history as an immoral desire, a psychological disorder, and finally a criminal act, pedophilia has been institutionalized into numerous classifications but certain forms, like female pedophilia, elude recognition or direct confrontation in public discourses. Since the late-Victorians identified intimate child-adult relationships as a sign of immorality instead of purity, the American Psychiatric Association Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) went on in 1968 to establish pedophilia as a paraphilic mental disorder in which a person has recurrent, intense sexually-arousing fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviors that generally involve children. According to the DSM, “an adult who engages in sexual activity with a child is performing a criminal and immoral act and this is never considered normal or socially acceptable behavior.” As an abnormal, counter-social act, pedophilia occupies what Ann Cvetkovich terms a “counterpublic sphere,” which is marked by an “affective experience that falls outside of institutionalized or stable forms of identity or politics [which] can form the basis for public culture” (17). Although Cvetkovich does not consider pedophilia in her book, An Archive of Feelings, as one of the primary kinds of counterpublic spheres that have the potential to reform cultural concepts of normalcy, pedophiles nevertheless occupy this sphere as they are in direct opposition to the sanctioned, appropriated spaces of public discourse in which heterosexual sex among adults indicates normative sexual behavior. Whether or not pedophilia has the possibility to positively change culture is not a point I want to make, or feel invested in. Instead, I wish to show that by continuing to foster a hegemonic discourse about pedophilia, American culture represses a serious consideration of both child and female sexuality by refusing to realize either that they have one or that the one they have is socially unacceptable.

The reality of childhood sexuality is at stake in the socially-silenced discourses of pedophilia. Contemporary ideals of the sexualized child have a history, as Steven Angelides observes. Marking the 1980s as a critical stage in theories about childhood sexuality, Angelides posits that before 1980 society imagined childhood as both “sexual and innocent,” and that after 1980 society has become obsessed with making a “conscious effort to resolve this contradiction” (100). The American obsession with
figuring childhood as innocent hearkens back to the Romantic ideal epitomized by Blake. As such, “the intra-psychic repression of childhood sexuality is redoubled by the cultural, or, dialogic repression of child sexuality” (Angelides 100). As Shoshana Felman argues in her psychoanalytical analysis of *The Turn of the Screw*, sexuality is part of a child’s unconscious epistemology of sex (Felman “Turning the Screw of Interpretation”). The media and commercial society do not create child sexuality, but rather these social indicators respond to a sexuality that already exists.

Just as the move to silence discourses of pedophilia enlarges the social fear of it, the persistent view of children as innocent makes them more erotic; “erotic children are manufactured – in the sense that we produce them in our cultural factories, the ones that make meanings for us” (Kincaid 9). Today’s erotic child, or what James Kincaid terms the “postromantic child,” has been deployed as “a political and philosophical agent, a weapon used to assault substance and substitute in its place a set of negative inversions: innocence, purity, and emptiness” (10). Although Kincaid counters Felman’s observation about unconscious sexual knowledge to suggest that children do have intrinsic innocence and that their sexuality is mass-produced, both theorists arrive at a similar claim: the move to ascribe children with innocence has torn their “innocence” (whether real or imagined) from them. The postromantic child is, indeed, Victorian. Its play at innocence is what makes it a sexual object.

The possibility of innocence in such a complicated world is a comfort that gives humanity a certain degree of hope. That the Victorians squeezed the ideal of childhood innocence to their bosoms like a last scrap of meat seems warranted, and sad, in a world that was increasingly polluted with markers of civilization; scholars such as Judith R. Walkowitz, Ronald Pearsall, and Christopher Herbert have convincingly argued that industry, war, class struggle, and the rise of the individual as an independent, isolated being were driving forces in the changing atmosphere of the Victorian period. Late-Victorians, especially, struggled to identify themselves as both individual and community in the aftermath of radical liberal individualism movements: a tradition led by Adam Smith and Jeremy Bentham and followed by Thomas Carlyle and John Stuart Mill. Lost in the blur between individual and nation, defining the Victorian adult was no longer as clear as it may have been. Perhaps in their fear of losing identity or of losing the ability to understand what that identity meant, Victorians strived to define childhood. As Kevin Ohi observes, “to say that children aren’t queer is a way of asserting that we know what children are and that we therefore know what adults are” (82). Attributing children a definite characteristic, like innocence, allowed Victorians to entertain a fantasy of protection, which was essential in a world of such rapid change. However, by associating children with innocence, adults were simultaneously identifying their children as “others” – beings different than them and hence unknowable, even fearful. Children, in other words, were protected but still at risk. As “others,” children’s innocence made them urchins: little imps, scary in their mysterious embodiment of purity.

Like most children in Victorian literature, the innocence of Miles in *The Turn of the Screw* is suspect from the start. Indeed, his mixture of purity and sexuality angered
Victorian critics as much as it angers critics today. Part of that anger arises because the distinction between adult and child is not as crystalline as readers may want it to be; “In this amusette, this erotic child’s play of a novella, it is difficult to say who is the seducer and who the seduced, or, for that matter, who is the child and who the adult” (Hanson 369). One critical tradition famously accuses Peter Quint, a deceased valet at Bly, of initiating Miles into queer, pedophilic relations, although “he remains guilty without proof, a fiend without a definite crime” (Hanson 367). That Miles is expelled from boarding school “can have but one meaning […] that he’s an injury to others” (James 11). According to Agieszka Soltysik, the “injury” must be Miles’s queer knowledge as he “[says] ‘things’ to boys he liked, who in turn repeated them to boys they liked” (248). Hence, most critics who read Miles as a sexualized child read him as a part of a queer tradition of silence. Quint, who was “much too free” with Miles (James 26), has been cast in the role of homosexual predator. However, his “unmentionable” sex acts do not seem to cause critics the kind of panic found in contemporary social discourses about pedophilia. On the contrary, critics such as Soltysik display an eagerness to address the issue of Quint’s queer pedophilia. Within Quint’s relations with Miles is writ a familiar script: that of homosexuality. In fact, almost every critical register of Quint’s pedophilia is associated with homosexuality. Moreover, as Jonathan Flatley’s recent reading of The Turn of the Screw suggests, most contemporary critics that confront any aspect of sexuality in the text seem anxious to reveal a homosexual subscript as a way to make observations about James’s own sexuality. Although pedophilia and homosexuality are not interchangeable, most critics interchange them when analyzing Quint. Miles’s sexuality, as a result, is identified as homosexual, at least initially. Homosexuality is a familiar societal marker, as part of Mirkin’s second phase of sexual politics. So when Ellis Hanson argues that the reader is supposed to find Quint’s “desire to participate with perverse pleasure rather than paranoid disavowal in the queer erotics of children” inadmissible (368), he neglects that by relating Quint’s pederasty to homosexuality, he, like numerous other critics, appropriates it in some sense. There are two registers for the sexual atmosphere in the text: homosexual and heterosexual (Soltysik 249). However, curiously missing from these analyses is the pedosexual. What is less admissible, more unspeakable, than heterosexual pedophilia? And what, then, is more silenced than female pedophilia?

Seen as a most perverse act against nature, the existence of female pedophilia is still questioned today (Chow and Choy 213). Women’s social roles as nurturing mothers and care-givers have been essentialized since gender difference became a topic of discussion. The women’s movement in general was fueled by early feminist thinkers like Mary Wollstonecraft and Dinah Craik who argued that women have an important role in the nation in raising and educating children, and comforting companions. While most feminists challenge the biological differences between men and women, today many Americans continue to subscribe to a sociology of motherhood that passes the responsibility of child care primarily to the mother’s hands. The immense social discomfort Americans show toward issues of motherhood is apparent in the law system, as well as in literature. In family law, contact stipulations tended to favor the mother for the primary care of children after divorce through 1980 (some states still favor the mother), and have prompted father’s rights movements (American Bar Association).
Similarly, Toni Morrison’s fictional depictions of compromised mother-figures who murder their children to save them, or rip the arms from children’s sockets out of jealousy, continue to meet with scathing criticisms for their “unwomanly” portrayals. Public reaction to Morrison’s mother-figures shows that Americans remain focused on the mother as the primary nurturer of children.

The first psychological study of a female pedophile, conducted by Eva Chow and Alberto Choy in 2002, has met with much debate. Despite the definition of pedophiles as people who desire sexual intimacy with children, many contemporary literary publications and social science studies about pedophilia slant their language at men. For example, in Mirkin’s study of sexual politics he describes pedophiles as “men whose sexual wishes and desires for relationship bonds and love are focused either primarily or exclusively on children who have not reached puberty” (473; italics added). Recent studies in criminology and psychiatry conducted by Kolja Schiltz and Boris Schiffer prove that today the trend is still to consider pedophilia as an entirely male pathology, as each study uses only male test subjects. The newest research that argues for pedophilia as a pathology is the same research that dismisses the space that women occupy as pedophiles in society. Furthermore, through the methods of gross examination, the male body is used as evidence to measure signs of pedophilia (such as erectile, brain, and skin responses), excluding the female body a potential site for disease. In response, researchers like Kelly Christopher and Kim Turner have conducted all-female studies to replicate the male-centered trends because “relatively little research has been conducted on female sex-offenders in comparison to males” (Christopher 872), and “female sex offenders may not fit neatly into the same typologies that criminal justice research has developed for male sex offenders” (Turner 880). Similarly, Dominique Roe-Sepowitz has taken necessary pains to show that “in contrast to portrayals in previous research […] female sex offenders are not a homogeneous group” (405).

Like A.J. Cooper’s clinical study of Miss K in 1990, Chow and Choy’s study of Miss A begins with the admission that “although there is a large body of literature on male sex offenders, there are few studies on female sex offenders” (211). Indeed, the slight amount of attention given to female pedophiles is staggering, considering that, according to David Finkelhor’s numerous studies, women’s sexual abuse of children is much more serious than men’s because women are more likely to have abused more children for a longer period of time (Murray 215), are more intrusive, and more likely to use higher rates of force than men (Moulden 388). Finkelhor found that in cases of daycare molestation, more than 60% of children who were molested, were molested by women (Murray 213). Heather Moulden’s 2007 follow-up to Finkelhor’s research verifies that “despite a social reluctance to acknowledge female sexual abusers, reports suggest that they account for between 3% and 15% of all sexual offences” (387). However, as Richard Tewksbury reports, that number is probably much higher since “female sex offending is […] acknowledged as possibly less likely to be detected or reported” (30). Despite the general reluctance to pursue female suspects and to incarcerate them (Moulden 199), criminal acts by female offenders have reached a ratio of 6:1 compared to male criminal acts (Palmero 30). Moulden’s study of female sex
offenders found that “females offended against younger victims and were more violent as compared with male abusers” (399). Similarly, George Palmero recently observed that “girls, apparently less aggressive than boys in general, are becoming more antisocial and violent, participating in the large cauldron of criminality [which] may undermine the testosterone hypothesis that fuels a belief in the tendency to criminality in males” (494). With these findings, the resistance to consider the female pedophile in social science researching is suspect.

Chow and Choy’s study of Miss A, a 23-year old mother of two sons, found that she met DSM’s criteria for a pedophile. She confessed two incidents of sexual abuse to her priest in which she, while babysitting, bathed young girls and continued to lick or rub their vaginal area and then masturbated herself. Miss A admitted that she believed these girls, aged 4 and 5, were sexually taunting her and were pleased with her initiation of a sex act. She decided to seek help in the fear that she may someday give birth to a daughter (214). Miss A read her desire for child sex as unnatural, according to the social norms. According to Schmidt, “it is quite clear that pedophilia in contemporary Western societies represents a form of sexuality that cannot be lived out, since it is in conflict with a central social covenant based upon sexual self-determination and consensual sexuality.” Schmidt goes on, though, to identify this tension as an entirely male problem: “That is the dilemma of the male pedophile” (376).

The dilemma of the female pedophile is that female desire for child sex does not exist in the body of social consciousness. Femininity has become a kind of genre that society believes it can read. Lauren Berlant asserts that “for femininity to be a genre like an aesthetic one means that it is a structure of conventional expectation that people rely on to provide certain kinds of affective intensities” (4). Although perhaps to a lesser degree than in the past, society still looks to women as representatives of national affect. Arlie Hochschild has argued in her book, The Managed Heart, that “feeling rules,” or scripts of emotion, are appropriated by women and affect women more markedly than men:

As a matter of tradition, emotion management has been better understood and more often used by women as one of the offerings they trade for economic support. Especially among dependent women of the middle and upper classes, women have the job (or think they ought to) of creating the sense of surprise at birthdays, or displaying alarm at the mouse in the kitchen. Gender is not the only determinant of skill in such managed expression and in the emotion work needed to do it well. But men who do this work well have slightly less in common with other men than with other women. When the “womanly” art of living up to private emotional conventions goes public, it attaches itself to a different profit-and-loss statement. (20)

While both men and women tend to privatize their socially-unaccepted sexual feelings toward children, the public reception of those private feelings is certainly different and dependent upon gender. There is still little room in the genre of femininity to allow for alternative readings. While male pedophiles occupy the imagination of Americans obsessed with protecting youth, female pedophiles are not allowed a voice in the national imagination. They are completely swallowed into obscurity by what Berlant terms “mass-mediated identity:”
Addressing femininity from the perspective of the mediated fantasies that magnetize many different kinds of women to the scene of suffering, sacrifice, survival, criticism, and sometimes sublimity that has historically provided the narrative of women’s culture thus shows us something about the operation of mass-mediated identity. (11)

As mass-mediated entities, then, female pedophiles may question, like society, whether they, themselves, actually exist. The female pedophile is the ultimate non-entity.

What is more alluring than *The Turn of the Screw*’s plot is the identity of the governess. She frustrates critics more than any other character in the novella because she eludes classification. Like the female pedophile, she is the ultimate non-entity. And even more like the female pedophile, James’s governess meets all the characteristics for the DSM description of pedophilia. I am not the first critic to observe that the governess desires child sex. Although, with such an abundant amount of work on the governess in the long critical tradition of *The Turn of the Screw*, few scholars have followed in Sami Ludwig’s shoes, despite the fact that most analyses display an obsessive preoccupation with the governess. Ludwig’s essay, “Metaphors, Cognition, and Behavior: The Reality of Sexual Puns in *The Turn of the Screw*,” analyzes James’s text most similarly to my own analysis, and I would like to use his claims to push forward into a more risky arena. Ludwig insists that the puns and the obscure language in the text make the most sense when literal sex is read into the plot; “sex now makes the imagery cohere and [sex] becomes a real issue in the world represented” (40). If, as Hanson has suggested, Peter Quint, with his “rare instances of working-class testosterone” fails as a romantic hero (367), perhaps the governess can be read as a kind of romantic hero, and her love affair with Miles, a true romance.

Reading *The Turn of the Screw* as a romance between the governess and Miles requires an understanding of the history of pedophilia, the role that the female pedophile plays in that history, and the history of child sexuality. Apart from these histories, which I have only briefly delineated, the governess has her own critical history, begun by Edmund Wilson who was the first to theorize that her undeniably sexual obsessions were signs of repression, centered on an insatiable desire for the children’s absent uncle. According to Wilson, the governess projects her lustful feelings for the uncle onto the children in a way that reflects Victorian discourses about sex. Several critics follow in Wilson’s shoes by continuing to view the governess’ “sexual repression” in the classical Victorian context. Antonio Sanna has most recently added to Wilson’s claim by observing that:

> If we think of the governess’s behavior as enforcing the sexual prudery and strictures of the Victorian age on the children (and particularly those of the end of the century, when the tale was published), we could say that she enforces on them the rules to which she herself has submitted. If we think of the children as actually enjoying the continued community of sexual affections with Quint and Miss Jessel through the ghosts’ apparitions, the governess is attempting to enforce the power of nineteenth-century patriarchy over the desires of Miles and Flora by preventing them from a possible (homo)sexual bond with the ghosts. She reenacts over Miles and Flora the power which has been enacted on her, the submission to the masculine element in the family, to patriarchy. (105)
Sanna’s reading of the text is useful since he upholds several conventions of interpretation: 1) the children suffer sexual damage 2) the sexual damage is delivered through Quint or Jessel 3) Quint and Jessel involve Miles and Flora, respectively, in a homosexual bond 4) the governess upholds a repressive, patriarchal view of intercourse, which causes the havoc at Bly. Despite the volumes of criticism on this perplexing tale, very few analyses contradict more than one of the stipulations Sanna presents, and no analyses challenge all of them. My reading of *The Turn of the Screw* attempts to challenge each of these theories by showing that Miles is not wholly sexually damaged, that all the sexual intercourse involving children also involves the governess, that Miles is predominately implicated in a heterosexual bond, and that the governess is not sexually repressed, nor does she uphold a patriarchal, conservative ideal of sex.

Of all my forthcoming arguments, the one that will meet the most resistance is that *The Turn of the Screw* is the first literary romance of the female pedophile of its kind. I do not argue that a romance must be comfortable; in fact, the best ones aren’t. Even those who buy into Ludwig’s assertion that Miles’s “death” at the end of the novella is only figurative, may find the “romantic” aspect of my argument uncomfortable. As Sheila Teahan suggests, the governess uses the terms “literal” and “figurative” in opposite ways: “the governess says ‘literally’ when she means ‘figuratively.’ The categories of literal and figurative have no clear application to the idiom in question, which is neither overtly figurative in character nor contains a dead metaphor that could be activated” (64). Teahan’s analysis shows that the “literal” death of Miles can be dismissed in several ways, and not only according to the method suggested by Ludwig. Ludwig reads Miles’s "death" as a mere symbol of “transition, an act of sexual initiation, which leaves Miles alive. Thus we would have a triple pun on ‘death:’ 1) physical death, 2) orgasm, 3) rite of passage” (50). I need not make the same argument about the erotic interactions between Miles and governess, since Ludwig does an excellent job delineating the textual evidence. But if I am to pick up where he leaves off to argue that James intended for readers to suspect that Miles is still alive, I must show that James opens the possibility of Miles’s perseverance, and hence the emergence of a fascinating, although wayward, love story.

Miles is Douglas from the novella’s frame, and the playful anonymous narrator of the same frame is no other than our unnamed governess. Miles does not die at the end of the action at Bly but rather he lives on, continuing to experience sexual pleasure with his governess and, after marrying her, continues to relish the moments of scandalous equivocation that their romance is dependent upon. The playful, flirtatious conversation between Douglas and the narrator in the frame is the first hint of their true identities. The narrator watches with a kind of sardonic pleasure as Douglas approaches the fire to tell a story that “nobody but [him], till now, has ever heard” (1). The narrator and Douglas play off each other, using the same kind of ambiguous language that Miles and the governess use in the governess’ story; they excite their listeners with the promise of scandal in a similar fashion. Together, they construct the ultimate fairy tale. By using pseudonyms, either in the story or in their encounter with others around the fire, they separate themselves from judgment of their peers. Furthermore, by telling that the governess “has been dead these twenty years” (2), and that Douglas himself did not
participate in the occurrences at Bly, they are able to narrate their peculiar love story to strangers while protecting the governess’ identity. Above all, the governess’ identity must be protected because an association with female pedophilia would wreak havoc on their position among strangers. Moreover, there is no language for it.

Douglas does not censor himself in the same way that he censors the governess. His relationship to the governess is the same as Miles’s: “she was ten years older than I. She was my sister’s governess.” He doesn’t hide the fact that he “liked her extremely and am glad to this day to think she liked me too” (2). Implicating himself in a pedophilic relationship is much different than implicating her. Indeed, Mrs. Griffin enjoys imagining a young boy in love with an older woman; “Well, if I don’t know who she was in love with I know who he was […] it’s rather nice” (3). A young boy loving a grown woman is “nice,” but a woman loving a boy has no affective function in the story. The story is told, firstly, as a love story: “I see. She was in love” (3). Everyone wants to know with whom was the governess in love – in fact, it is the object of everyone’s attention – but no one present can imagine the truth. And Douglas is right – the story will not tell that Miles and the governess were lovers in a “literal, vulgar way” (3). The most vulgar way would be to say the “word” that even Mrs. Grose keeps back when addressing the governess: pedophile. However, the story isn’t really a vulgar one, despite the churlish context.

_The Turn of the Screw_ tells a story of two inexperienced, feverishly-sexed lovers coming together under the horrific circumstances of a socially-condoned act of pedophilia. A story that begins with the callow governess on a “see-saw” of “the right throbs and the wrong” (6) finishes with the ripe ejaculation of a job well done. The sexually-naïve governess transforms, by the end, into a woman who has discovered the right jerks and strokes to make Miles utter “the cry of a creature hurled over an abyss” (88). She hardly upholds the image of a repressed, patriarchal Victorian spinster. As Miles falls into her arms, she begins “to feel what it truly was that [she] held” – not Miles’s corpse, but rather the slack, satisfied body of a boy disposed of the sexual temptation haunting him heretofore. According to Ludwig, there are three “turns” in the development of sexual temptation between Miles and the governess that lead to literal sexual intercourse: “sexuality, which first appeared merely in the symbolic imagery and then openly became a question between the two, must now, in the third rhetorical turn, be metaphorically transferred to a real context” (49). The newly sexually-proficient governess marries Miles, as evidenced by the fact that they are still together, as well as their closing words in the frame:

**Mrs. Griffin to Douglas:** What’s your title?

**Douglas:** Oh I haven’t one.

**Governess:** Oh I have!

In a work full of puns, this pun on the title of the governess’ story and class evidences a claim that many critics have already asserted: that the governess is concerned about moving up into Miles’s class. Even critics, like Christine Butterworth-Dermott, who decline to acknowledge the governess’ sexual longing for Miles, still maintain that even though “her fantasy centers not on sexual consummation, [it does focus on] marriage”
But even the outcome of marriage between Douglas and the governess, which naturalizes an otherwise preternatural act of female pedophilia by returning a counterpublic feeling to the public discourse, may not be enough to persuade some critics. There is a long tradition of reading of the governess as a displaced non-entity, as critics often pillage her authority, her sense of self – even her very existence – by supplanting her identifying characteristics to someone or something else. Like the cultural tradition of pedophilia, and especially female pedophilia, critical confrontation of the governess attempts to argue her away. Although they don’t know what to do with her, and don’t seem to want her there, critics can’t seem to leave the governess alone. By squeezing her into the context of Victorian prudery, most critics argue, like Wilson, that the governess is sexually repressed. A distinction needs to be made between the social and cultural atmosphere of sexual repression in which the governess lives, and the very different nature of her actions and emotions. Butterworth-Dermott is correct to observe that “In the Victorian era, the sexual act was seen as animalistic, and sometimes even ‘monstrous’” (44). Commenting on Victorian sexual repression, Foucault claims that:

by speaking about it so much, by discovering it multiplied, partitioned off, and specified precisely where one had placed, what one was seeking essentially was to conceal sex. Until Freud at least, the discourse of sex – the discourse of scholars and theoreticians – never ceased to hide the thing it was speaking about. (53)

By not having his characters speak directly about sex, then, James attempts to reveal the sexual nature of their interactions. Despite the repressive potential of some aspects of Victorian society, James seems to suggest, like Foucault, that “we must abandon […] the hypothesis that modern industrial societies ushered in an age of increased sexual repression” (49). James’s portrayal of a most unorthodox sexuality, that of the female pedophile, speaks more loudly than any other in the text. The unnamed governess and her unnamable act are hence the most articulated. A discourse of female pedophilia rivals the repressive sexual environment of The Turn of the Screw.

That critics have tried to erase the governess from the text is obvious. Like Alejandro Amenabar’s 2001 film adaptation The Others, critics have attempted to read the governess as a ghost herself. Namwali Serpell questions the existence of the governess by reading James’s use of mirrors and reflections through the text as symbols of her disintegrating identity;

The governess puts herself in the position of the vanished visitor, even imitating[the ghost’s] exact gesture of applying his face to the window pane. This
action alone suggests a kind of stepping through the looking glass. [...] Not only does the governess become what she was looking at, she then also gets to see what she looked like when she was looking. (241)

Serpell suggests that not only is the governess ghost-like, but that she may actually be or become a ghost. Similarly, Kiyoon Jang has proposed “an analogy between the secretarial ghostwriter figure in the nineteenth-century and the governess [as] both figures are situated in a system of delegation. Placed in an intermediary position between a text-property and the author/proprietor, they substitute for their employers, carrying out and textualizing their employers’ ideas” (15). By “substituting” the governess’ position with both the uncle and James himself, Jang attempts to dismiss her reality. John Carlos Rowe has emphasized the medium-like quality of the governess by “insisting that her narrative merely enacts and re-enacts the ‘absent authorities’ of the master and James” (qtd. in Jang 13). These popular imaginings either obliterate the governess’ identity as a human being or replace the governess’ femininity with masculinity so that, even if she is a pedophile, she is seen as acting as a male instead of a woman. With a ghost-like identity like Peter Quint, then, the governess of these readings would involve Miles in a kind of homosexual pedophilic relationship which, although rather uncouth, is not as gauche as the alternative: heterosexual female pedophilia.

If the governess’ authority is not her own, if even her actions belong to a male superior, then what is she left? Perhaps only the governess’ emotions are left to speak for her. As Alison Jaggar argues, emotions are closely related to action and values as “they are ways in which we engage actively and even construct the world” (152-153). If the governess has no tangible existence and if even her sexual actions can be disregarded, then her emotions still have a voice. The politics of emotion, like sexual politics, have a history of exclusion in which “the Western tradition has not seen everyone as equally emotional” (Jaggar 157). While my reading of the governess’ emotion integrates arguments along the line of affect theory, which has as deep a history as sexual politics, I do not wish to make the distinction here between emotion and affect. Although making the distinction would subtly complicate my claims, I must save such complication for a longer piece. The term “emotion” will be used to signify the expression of feeling, as we read it in James’s novella, through the governess’ language, silences, and perceived tone.

Although the New Critics have traditionally read tone as a “de-emotionalized concept,” it can give readers cues about the emotions of characters, as well as involve the reader in emotional response (Ngai 29). In the governess’ rainbow of feelings, her primary emotional register is excitement. Indeed, while reading James’s tale, which is conveyed through the governess’ language, we cannot help but feel her excitement. Her narrative language builds a rollercoaster of emotion, but the governess always seems excited about where it will go next – not anxious or scared. Like an enraptured child, she narrates her tale always on the precipice of extreme jouissance. The hodgepodge of exclamation points, emphasized words in italics, dashes, and thrilling silences throughout the governess’ narration speak for themselves; I need not pull out a specific passage to evidence this, as any passage will suffice. She is not ashamed. Nor is she hysterical. She is only what seems most upsetting; she is egregiously excited. Her
narration of Miles’ actions and language, as well, serve to illustrate the same point: he is enthusiastically agog with anticipation of sex with the governess. After all, the governess has already lived the experience she relays. Her ambition is not to show readers her fear but rather to expose her pleasure – the pleasure of the female pedophile – which has no vehicle except through the metaphorical language of fiction.

The “animatedness” of the governess’ language may cause anxiety for readers (since, as critics always point out, we are not sure what the plot is), but the governess herself does not show overwhelming signs of anxiety. Nevertheless, critics want to see the governess as a nervous woman on the verge of hysteria. Because “symptoms of hysteria are the result of trauma” (Kaplan 26), viewing the governess as a hysterical female allows a normative reading of her pedophilic actions. Hysteria is related to trauma, which has an undeniable history of shame. As Cathy Caruth argues, “for those who undergo trauma, it is not only the moment of the event, but of the passing out of it that is traumatic; the survival itself, in other words, can be a crisis” (9). Survivors of a traumatic event will often feel guilt, which may proceed to shame. Indeed, Choy and Chow observed from their case study of Miss A that “shame and guilt were prominent emotions in female sex offenders” (211). Readers expect the governess to show shame, as a regular sex offender would. Many critics, like David Wagenknecht and Albaraq Mahboobaah, have used evidence from Freudian theory and phenomenology to show that the governess meets the criteria for hysteria. Furthermore, several feminist critics, such as Paula Cohen, have attempted to rescue the governess from injurious theories of hysteria by claiming that her hysteria operates as a protest against oppression (65). Regardless of whether critics mean to appropriate the governess’ hysteria or not, by interpreting the governess’ emotions as a part of the hysteria-trauma-shame continuum, they attempt to criminalize her pedophilia and hence fix the problem of the text without ever acknowledging it. By suggesting that the governess is hysterical or feels shame is to say that she acknowledges the wrongness of her desires. Such an acknowledgment lessens the effect/affect that the possibility of female pedophilia opens.

What is most traumatic about the governess’ narrative is its effect on readers. As the body of criticism about The Turn of the Screw shows, readers tend to avoid the distresses that the idea of female pedophilia presents in the text. The avoidance of the issue of female pedophilia is not restricted to the text alone, but can be used as a way to suggest that the evasion exists on a social level. It is not the governess’ trauma that preoccupies us, but our own. American society has silenced the female pedophile from public discourses, removing her from history, because she threatens to deconstruct the cultural imagining of femininity as a genre. By coming to terms with the current (mis)understandings of female pedophilia and child sexuality, by exhuming the fears that each of these issues present, Americans can continue to re-construct their history, to heal some disavowed, disowned wounds. As Cathy Caruth claims, “through the notion of trauma […] we can understand that a rethinking of reference is aimed not at eliminating history but at resituating it in our understanding, that is, a precisely permitting history to arise where immediate understanding may not” (Unclaimed 11).
Through fiction, James narrated the first romance of the female pedophile. Perhaps pedophilia is safest in the context of fiction. Certainly, I have not been arguing that pedophilia, female or male, should be reconsidered as a safe or beneficial practice. Nevertheless, allowing that females and children each have a substantial sexual history beyond the normative cultural imagination offers a way to change or terminate the “ritually sealed and almost inescapable” feeling rules (Hochschild 19) that threaten to stagnate social progress. Dabbling into alternative readings of counterpublic issues, like pedophilia, advances theories of everyday trauma that help us occupy these spaces rather than evacuating them (Cvetkovich 15). Polarizing monstrosity and innocence, like essentializing femininity and masculinity, has its cost. The overwhelming panic that greets us in almost every facet of everyday life seems to get larger the more we insist on separating purity from possible contamination. By allowing even the most hideous of faces to take shape in public, by interpreting the most unfathomable reading into a classical text, we have the ability to quell the disease that is avoidance.

Works Cited


Great Men, Little Black Dresses, & the Virtues of Keeping One’s Feet on the Ground

By Babette Babich

In Memoriam: Mary Daly

I was born the year that Hazel Barnes’ translation of Sartre’s Being and Nothingness first appeared, which means that I was not quite 12 when the events of ‘68 galvanized the intellectual worlds of Europe and the United States. In fact, as I am fond of saying, the ‘sixties’ as we think and speak of that generation, really took place in the following decade, that is: in the 1970s, years I spent in high school, in college, including a hitchhiking trip cross country, alone and at grievous personal risk, especially because I was so out of step with the sexual freedom of the times that I refused to sleep, just on principle, with any one of the many drivers who stopped to give me a ride. I didn’t consider the danger at the time but mostly fumed, outraged, that in more than 3000 miles (some drivers took one not quite in the direction one wanted to go, and hitchhikers can’t be choosers), there was not one of the men (and they were all men) who stopped to pick me up, who did not proposition me, some more violently, some more off-handedly than others. As one guy, himself nice enough, explained, you just had to assume that if a woman was out hitchhiking she was really interested in finding an erotic adventure.

Not true for me: what I was really interested in was hitching a ride back to New York from San Francisco. I was hitching, as one did in those days, because, in my case, with no family to help out, I had no other recourse. As I said, I did not sleep with any of them, but that option did not go without saying. Hence at the extremes, I got shot at, I jumped from a moving car (my judo roll worked) and otherwise endured, just in order to say ‘no’, the array of insults that were common during the liberated hey-day of the sexual revolution: for whenever a woman turned a man down, the reason never had anything to do with him, but her: she was uptight or frigid, and always, always, after all, was not good looking anyway, sort of the precursor theme to the anti-female sentiment of the current runaway hit, in book and movie form: he’s just not that into you.

So there was a double-standard, i.e., the so-called sexual revolution was different for women. So hitchhiking is stressful and sometimes dangerous. So what?

What has any of this to do with philosophy? A lot, actually: everything.

And in 1979, when I went to my first APA meeting in New York City, I was struck by two things in addition to the presidential address by Richard Rorty whose

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1 This is a radically shortened version of a talk on the status of women in philosophy given at the invitation of the graduate students at the New School, April 8, 2009.
Mirror of Nature\(^2\) had seemed a beacon of hope in the faculty and grad student reading group I had been part of devoted to reading Rorty’s book in the very rigorously continental but not less pluralistically idealistic department at Stony Brook where I took my undergraduate degree. Susan Bordo, who later went on to write a bit on Rorty’s Cartesian vision,\(^3\) but also on body-image as a feminist philosopher,\(^4\) was part of that reading group and had (at the time) a distinct resemblance to Brenda Starr: red hair, looks, and the habit of combining the convenience of battle clothes and army boots with the striking inconvenience of complete make up. I, who have never worn make-up in my life as a time-saving choice (my sisters did, so I have a good sense of the time investment involved), found the combination cognitively jarring but stylistically fitting at the end of a decade of cultural transformation.\(^5\) To talk about Bordo’s appearance is gratuitous but I remember it while and by contrast there was nothing to say about Rorty’s appearance: he looked ordinary, yet as portly, though one could not quite tell that then, as he would come to be. I will later return to the point that not commenting on a man’s appearance (one way or another) seems to go without saying.

Two things have remained with me since that first APA. Both concerned the dissonant role of women in the academy.

Firstly, there was the overwhelming masculinity of the profession. Hotel meeting rooms filled to the gills with almost completely male audiences listening to what seemed universally to be male lecturers (who just happened to be delivering analytic and stunningly boring talks).

Neither aspect of this first detail has changed much in the interim, the one difference being that most of the speakers today tend to be grad students, still male, still talking analytic philosophy, but grad students. Then, in the olden days, older profs came to talk and to debate and students came to listen; now the older profs stay home (because they are not on the program) and the students talk (assuming they are on the program) and listen to themselves (provided they go to anyone else’s talks at all — and at recent conferences there has been an increasing trend towards empty rooms: the speakers speaking amongst, i.e., only to the speakers themselves).

The second experience was more specific. One of my professors from Stony Brook helpfully pointed out various luminaries at the smoker or evening APA

\(^5\) Bordo herself has written on such constellations, albeit in a different context. See her *Twilight Zones: The Hidden Life of Cultural Images from Plato to O.J.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).
reception, filled with masses of academics who were at the time furiously smoking.\(^6\)

There were few women among the luminaries but there, however, was Ruth Barcan Marcus, described – and it was this description I took away with me – by my otherwise amicable and jovial teacher as a “battle-axe.”

The first sight (of mostly men listening to mostly men) did not faze me. How could it? It characterized my experience at Stony Brook both in the department of biological sciences, where I began, as it also characterized the department of philosophy which I turned to in a rage of idealistic impatience with the explicit prohibition against defining “life” in the life sciences.\(^7\) What got to me was the description of a famous Yale professor of logic described not in the way other famous professors might be described but as a “battle-axe,” that is, in sex-specific terms, entailing that one could damn a woman for a character trait that would have been described with other terms had she been male.

To this day I have not ceased to think about it.

Now we all know Bertie Russell’s charming conjugation of what he named (upsetting linguists and grammarians everywhere) “irregular verbs”

I am firm.  
You are obstinate.  
He is a pig-headed fool.

Let’s try it with “battle-axe” and pretend that English has, as it does have, gender differences or linguistic shadings as they might be applied to, say a well-known male philosopher, let’s take Michael Dummett or you can substitute someone else you know:

\(^6\) Today, although the reception is still called a smoker, there is, of course, no smoking but the appellation is not simply an anachronism for the prohibition contra smoking also provides one with the chance to hang out around the hotel entrances and look cool, in both senses of the term, ergo a lot of people smoke ‘opportunistically’ at conferences.

I am spirited.
You are aggressive
He is dominating.

But, for Ruth Barcan Marcus, it would be:

I am spirited.
You are aggressive.
She is a battle-axe.

It is not my claim that it is cool or a good thing to be dominating as “he” is merely that it is word-worlds away from being a “battle-ax” as “she” is.\(^8\) This characterization framed the beginning of my academic career as I went to study at Boston College, ruining my career prospects by neglecting other opportunities (failing to apply, failing to accept acceptances) just because Hans-Georg Gadamer whose *Truth and Method* and *Philosophical Hermeneutics* I was reading at Stony Brook happened to be teaching there in the 80 year old flesh. It did not occur to me to hold his age against him.

I mention Boston College not to tell you the history of my life (and I assure you I am not doing that – I have left out all the good and the bad bits) but because it was there that I also met one of the least appealing, that is one of the most annoying and thus one of the most creative or radical feminist theologians of our time, the late Mary Daly. We did not get along but Mary Daly got along with no one and I did not take it personally. I did make an effort to understand the phenomenon.

Now Daly, who was always introduced numerically, that is by counting her PhD’s (she did this herself, as anyone who has met her in person can attest) and noting the provenance of the same (Fribourg and therefore and by implication that serves to square the PhD achievement by emphasizing that it would be gotten in Swiss German with a fair admixture of Latin and no less Greek and Hebrew/Aramaic), has achieved far more fame or notoriety from her classroom restrictions than her books, *The Church and the Second Sex*, *Beyond God the Father*, *Gyn-Ecology*, etc.\(^9\) And this was as true 30 years ago as it is today. In the

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\(^8\) There is a wide literature on this topic but see the very forthright Julia Penelope, *Speaking Freely: Unlearning the Lies of the Fathers* (London: Pergammon, 1990). For a discussion of the very politically correct but often oppressive cooption of the political impetus of feminist critique of language, Tania Modelski, *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a ‘Post-Feminist’ Age* (New York: Routledge, 1991). One may assume that one is “past” needing Modelski’s critical readings. I would argue that we have hardly caught up to them.

theology and philosophy departments at BC, colleagues disapproved: how dare she, they asked, ban men from her classes? Yet Daly had good pedagogical reasons for such a ban, reasons concerning women in the classroom, and she was not the only one with such concerns. Thus it is relevant that at the same time as Daly instituted her notorious ban, the so-called academic “climate” for women was beginning to attract scholarly attention, research that continues to this day, with still-sobering results. As a grad student representative on a Boston College committee (this was one of my first and unfortunately not the last of my committee experiences) entitled “Gender Differences in Classroom Learning Situations,” the issue of the learning climate for women dominated our discussions, with social scientists arguing with epistemologically impeccable just because numeric or statistical backing that the scholarly climate was then (as it, alas, continues to be) a “chilly” one for women. As in the natural sciences, the prospects for advancement and recognition in philosophy remain so dismal that recently the New York Times bothered to wonder about it in an article entitled “A Dearth of Women Philosophers.”

At the time, in the heyday of Mary Daly’s banning men from her classes, the chilly climate contingent argued that women suffered more from taking academic risks than men did; that when speaking, they were not judged as favorably for the same content as men were. In particular, and this is why it mattered on the university level, women in the classroom found themselves far too aware of and thus needing to take account of supposed or anticipated or recollected responses from the men around them, such that they felt inhibited to say the least, and, so the studies seemed to suppose, this inhibition worked on them whether they spoke out in class or not. The same concern for the possible adverse or positive
reactions from members of the opposite sex did not seem to be a factor in male performance — which did not of course mean that men were unaware of the presence of women in the class rooms, just that that presence did not seem to handicap the kinds of questions asked, especially the kind of questions most essential for learning: the questions that can seem foolish and not less, the other important academic kind of question: the question that shows the depth and reach of one’s own learning. It was her solicitude for this same circumstance that framed Daly’s exclusion of men. This solicitude did not make her the soul of openness or tolerance.

Stony Book, like most philosophy departments, offered only a few courses in medieval philosophy. So, although this was not required for my studies at BC, I took the opportunity to make life hard for myself by filling the gaps in my historical background by taking courses in medieval philosophy which was how I found myself in the theology department in the first place. Thus I also took courses with the Canadian Jesuit and Thomist philosopher, Bernard Lonergan, someone even more formidable in every regard than either Ruth Barcan Marcus or Mary Daly. What struck me were the similarities between Lonergan and Daly. Where Daly refused comparisons — a Hegelian as I was at the time, pre-Nietzsche as I was, I sought to situate her approach to theology with reference to Hegel. But Daly would have none of it. And not just Hegel. Rather than mentioning Augustine or Tillich or Altizer (all of whom and others she cites in her own work) or indeed Kierkegaard or any of her Boston or Cambridge colleagues: Daly insisted that her thought was unique to her. I demurred and smiled at that (Hegelians are always right).

I had the same experience in a course that was in every other respect utterly different. Raising a similar query (as was my Hegelian wont) about Lonergan’s own Hegelian schematism, I got the same insistence in a reply even more indignant than Daly’s on the singularity of Lonergan’s thought. Coming from a man whose method of teaching theology was to read, out loud, and without taking questions, from his book Method in Theology, the pattern was patent.12

Let me explain this just a bit more.

When Daly who, like Lonergan, focused on her own books in her classes, told her class that there were no Hegelian influences whatever in her thought her

12 Bernard Lonergan, Method in Theology (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972). Lonergan was known to me for his masterwork, Insight: A Study of Human Understanding (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1957) as well as for his helpfully clear Verbum. Of course that there is a Hegelian connection also goes without saying and had been the subject of a then-recent monograph: Jon Nilson, Hegel’s Phenomenology and Lonergan’s Insights A Comparison of Two Ways to Christianity (Meisenheim am Glan: Verlag Anton Hain, 1979) and including, for all the good it did me, Lonergan’s own 1980 lecture “A Post-Hegelian Philosophy of Religion,” which he gave at the August 1980 meeting of the International Association for the History of Religions in Winnipeg, Canada.
refusal of comparison echoed Lonergan’s analogous refusal. The class responded to Daly with either awed indulgence (her followers) or else with amused indulgence (like me) and those who would have been non-indulgent were, owing either to self-selection or else to her class restrictions, simply not there. I was hardly the only student to smile at Daly’s reply and when I mentioned this to friends I got all the indignation one might imagine. This did not happen when I reported that Lonergan made a similar claim. Of course, the true believers concurred: Lonergan is *sui generis*, utterly unique.

But when Lonergan made his declaration, it wasn’t just the true believers: the entire class nodded in response, almost including me and I would have gone along as I liked Lonergan personally and admired the sheer scope and systematic achievement of his thought but I was distracted by the sudden insight that Lonergan exemplified the “Great Man Syndrome.” Socrates had already explicated this syndrome to the Boule of Athens assembled to hear his self-justification or *Apology*. Socrates was not speaking of *himself* but rather of the tendency for those reputed to have wisdom to be nonetheless limited in that wisdom when it came to insight into their own accomplishments.

Beyond the limitations of self-knowledge, a limitation that, I think, applies to every one of us, the point to be made is that both Mary Daly and Bernard Lonergan were enthusiastic victims of the same Great Man Syndrome. The issue for me is and has been that where Bernard Lonergan got away with it and was admired for it, Mary Daly did not. But that is to say that what is ordinary and understandable for a great man of thought, whether in philosophy or theology, is not ordinary or understandable or even tolerable for a woman.

Lonergan was a great man, that is to say, he was great with all the strengths and weaknesses that go along with that. Mary Daly’s greatness, by contrast, did not go without saying and continues to be a sore point — one she embraced by calling herself, as she did in a perfect provocation and as a fearless model of reclamation, a “Positively Revolting Hag,” using a model some feminists still

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13 I would later study in Germany myself and would learn from my own experience that her insistence (like Lonergan’s) was more than a little unlikely if I also learned enough to leave Hegel for the sake of a better reading of both Heidegger and Nietzsche: Hegel an intolerant task master, is like an old testament divinity, brooking no competition from others in spite of the seductive language of the dialectic which suggests otherwise.

14 Although Daly was able to resist pressure to admit male students into her classes (and offered to tutor them individually), she was, indeed, ultimately forced to resign from Boston College, a resignation she resisted until negotiating a final settlement in 2001. After her death on January 3, 2010 she drew considerable vitriol — still.

15 I thank Jolie Mandelbaum for kindly reminding me of this terminus as well as the complex theoretical issues concerned. My worries in this regard are only small ones from this broader perspective.

16 See the back cover of Mary Daly with Jane Caputi, *Webster's First New Intergalactic Wickedary of the English Language* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1987). Daly defines a “positively revolting hag” as: “a stunning, beauteous Crone; one who inspires positive revulsion from phallic institutions and morality, inciting Others to Acts of Pure Lust.”
follow and I find worrisome for simple empirical reasons: cheap ontic, details. The theory seems to be that if you yourself call yourself rude and misogynistic names those names will cease to be harmful, becoming “good things” in the end. Thus some feminist comics like Margaret Cho and Kathy Griffin, to name only two names, can name themselves “sluts.” In the same way, some social theorists argue that prostitution is “powerful” and propose to re-write history in this mode from Athens and Rome to Madame Pompadour and the sex-workers of our day. A similar tactic has been used in Buddhist thought to call dishwashing good, or housework a joy, diaper changing great or getting up when the baby cries an exercise in mysticism (and note that I am not arguing that it is not). Rather the ontic or real-life problem will always be that calling a garbage collector a sanitation engineer leaves the job to be done the same as it ever was. I cannot begin to address the complex issues of prostitution here — indeed: there is enough trouble where only the usual exchanges of capital are involved as in dating, marriage, and the like. But on the matter of housework, I vote (as if voting were an option) for dividing the chores, not at all equally but fairly, assuming as I do that for the sake of reparations men might take the greater share of said chores, given the work that has already been done by women on the domestic side, not collectively and not in history, but in their own lives, since their mothers, as Virginia Wolf rightly reminds us, first gave them all the peace and calm in the world, a calm that could not but permit a certain level of inattention to the details of what Michel de Certeau calls “everyday life.”

Thus if Daly insisted upon insisting upon her own greatness, her efforts often backfired — and given the very nature of the great man culture, not so named by oversight, such insistence could not but backfire, or be turned against her. Thus I read the negative comments published on the internet in the wake of her death as signs of the persistence of this same culture. There are exceptions like Simone de Beauvoir (but only in part) and Hannah Arendt and one can arguably

17 See for a popular culture feminist analysis, Jessica Valenti, He’s a Stud, She’s a Slut and 49 Other Double Standards Every Woman Should Know (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008).
say the same for Luce Irigaray or Judy Butler but I also think it worth noting how quickly the personal becomes relevant to laying claim to such exceptionality.\textsuperscript{20}

Thus we complain that de Beauvoir was critical of and even “mean” to women and thus “not nice” and Arendt not enough of this or that, and that Irigaray, like Sarah Kofman, was difficult to get along with (meaning not sufficiently “nice” to her interlocutor) and so on. Nor, which was the point of the above cited \textit{New York Times} article, “A Dearth of Woman Philosophers,” do we have such a heck of a lot of names.

To put it in other words, far more male scholars with a certain level of achievement can be called super-scholars without adverting to personal qualities in the process, plus or minus, as I began above by mentioning not a word about Richard Rorty’s 1979 looks or temperament. Think of Alasdair Maclntyre or else think of Simon Critchley (unless you are Brian Leiter, in which case you can find some other name in a Leiter-ranked university department) or Alexander Nehamas or Stanley Cavell or Daniel Dennett, or, just to be radical and a touch continental, think of Slavoj Žižek, etc. The problem is that a woman’s name is not to be had among the super-scholars of philosophy, no matter whether analytically or continentally defined. Female philosophers tend not to be ranked (or regarded as being) at the top of the profession and it is significant that of those fewer female scholars their achievements tend to be restricted to fields like political philosophy, like ethics or feminism, and that in spite of the achievements of a Ruth Barcan Marcus.\textsuperscript{21} Or, like Martha Nussbaum, pearls and all, they can be very good little girls indeed. Failing that, this we know, they are horrid.

\textbf{Feet on the Ground}

I have sought with the above reflections to argue that the promises of the 1960’s and 1970’s, especially the women’s movement, have yet to bear significant fruit in the academy. A handy-dandy wiki-check on the net yields the claim that “U.S. Department of Education reports indicate that philosophy is one of the least proportionate, and possibly the least proportionate, fields in the humanities with respect to gender,”\textsuperscript{22} with a rather dismal addendum reporting that in “2004, the percentage of Ph.D.s in philosophy going to women reached a record high

\textsuperscript{20} Thus Haslanger reminds us that “Philosophy departments often are socially dysfunctional places. It is a familiar joke that (male) philosophers are poorly socialized.” Her recommendation, be it noted, is that one change the “climate” (ideology, culture) for women in philosophy departments by making men more polite, more socialized, etc. and not by suggesting that women who have the traits men have be thought of as one thinks of men, that is with respect. See for an extended note on this, my comment, “Hey, Can’t You Smile?” \textit{Radical Philosophy}, 160 (March/April 2010): 36-38.

\textsuperscript{21} Of course there are exceptions and I would hardly deny this. My concern here addresses the rarity of the same.

percentage: 33.3%.”23 In 2007, according to the NCES report, 54% of all doctorates went to women.24 What is significant is that, despite this numeric advantage at the starting gate, women have continued to be represented by a much smaller proportion in their respective professions, especially including philosophy, a percentage that diminishes as one goes up the academic ladder. And I am here to tell you that when you get to the top there is no top there, not unless you are deferential and polite, have good social skills, and bat your eyes.

Until you age of course. Then you will be either a battle-axe or a mindless biddy (even niceness will not help you here) and nothing in-between.

If the women’s liberation movement sought equality in general, that is: not to be judged on the basis of sex (which includes gender-bias and among other things lookism, ageism, freedom of sexual orientation, and this includes but is not only a right to same-sex- or trans-orientation), and I mean this as a lamentable minimum, more than forty years later we are nowhere near such equality.

At best we have might have equal opportunity for jobs, yet we do not have even that, (and it is still more absurd to say, as one has to say, that we do not have equal pay: junior males in my department are paid more than I am) and at best we might have child-care at the work place and yet we do not have even that. I say “at best” with reference to the last just because the example of child-care alone exemplifies how far we have not come: the issue of child-care is meant to facilitate women in the work place, including the university and yet it is a non-issue for men. The idealist in me insists on believing that it should be a non-issue for women, the empiricist in me knows just by taking a look that it is not so.

In my department, in every department I have worked at, as in any department I know of, the majority of my philosophical colleagues are men and when I stop to think about it, I am at the time of this writing and have been for some time now, the only female full professor in philosophy at Fordham, not that I have any credit for this achievement in my department and the rank, although I value it, offers me little, in fact: no power by contrast with my colleagues. And the only point of power is by contrast with one’s colleagues. We are primates and power, to be power, is about respect.

But that could be me. Note that as a woman, I have learned to assume that whatever limitations I confront in the profession are probably personal rather than endemic, rather than political. And to say that I myself am inclined to think in this fashion, although it is objectively incorrect, is fairly remarkable as I began by


underscoring that I grew up at the tail edge of a generation that emphasized that the personal was always the political. Indeed, my own research emphasizes the importance of adverting to political influences where one does not always see them in academic philosophy in the case of analytic versus continental philosophy and my ongoing work examines the role of politics in both science and the philosophy of science.

Here: I am interested in the judgments we make that inform our positive and negative assessments of who is socialized and who does the “socializing,” just to use Sally Haslanger’s terminology. Along the way I raise the question of men’s clothes (and women’s shoes) in order to pose the question of who gets to look at whom. And this is where real life phenomenology comes in.

**Dress and Undress: Guerilla Phenomenology**

Philosophy in the grand (aka: old) tradition of Thales is the tradition of distracted philosophers. If we include the Cynics, we can also lose the clothes and every other kind of social grace. Some literalist scholars argue that Socrates shows symptoms of what today we call Asperger’s syndrome or a mild autism, or worse, if we take Plato’s word for it (and Plato’s ironic style makes this dangerous), Socrates was quite genuinely catatonic from time to time. In the *Symposium*, a social dialogue if there ever was one, Socrates is presented as a poster child for Haslanger’s “poor socialization” — joining the other guests only when the meal is half over, a point stylistically highlighted by earlier sending someone to call him, and when he refuses to respond, by explaining his behavior on his behalf. Alcibiades, who comes in even later than Socrates, offers us the image of Socrates, in the midst of battle, frozen in thought in spite of the cold, throughout the night to the morning. Socrates, true to his nature, was so detached from the goings on that when everyone else fell exhaustedly asleep, departed unfazed to attend to the day.

The first philosopher, Thales, had the right (he claimed it, suffered or enjoyed the perspective it gained for him) to be the one who falls into the well. Women, it seems, then and now, have only the right to be practical, i.e., not philosophical: they have the right not to “want” to be the one in the well. They can play the role

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27 Haslanger,

28 Of course, Diogenes was a male and that made all the difference both in his expression of his defiance of social convention and his success.

29 Plato, *Symposium*, 175 a-b.

30 Ibid., 220c-d.
of the Thracian milkmaid, laughing at Thales (and doubtless they will be told that that will be the “better part” for them to emulate) but they can’t (and shouldn’t want to) trade place with Thales.\footnote{Plato, \textit{Theaetetus}, 174a.}

Thus and to this day, only the men have the socially problematic (\textit{pace} Haslanger) yet, so I would argue and so Daly’s pedagogy also underlined, philosophically \textit{indispensable} right to fall, as it were, into the well. Thus today’s women still, it seems, have the option of being the passing milkmaid and one can imagine women academics of two kinds, the Marthas and the Marys, that is the ones who tease or else those who avert their eyes when Saul Kripke or some other male philosopher has his fly undone or shirt/hair/face unkempt, as indeed this can also apply (although he does indeed favor bowties) to Jean-Luc Marion, thereby and neatly covering the profession \textit{both} analytic and continental by pointing to a range of sartorially insouciant or incompetent professors on \textit{either} side and by naming such names I mean to underscore the point that such incompetence is to their credit. Simon Critchley himself, a t-shirt and jeans guy from way back, takes insouciance so far that both undergraduates and journalists can get carried away by his style.

Why does it seem to be pushing things a bit to talk about Simon Critchley’s clothes or, just to add a positive note, Alexander Nehamas’ rather impeccable shoes, not to mention the distracted fall out of Kripke’s couture? My point is that Kripke’s messiness is part of his reputation and that that is part of his reputation for \textit{genius}. Do we have women philosophers of this kind? Maybe we do, my point will be that we do not think of them in the same way.

Think again of Mary Daly, attacked in life for her style of writing and not less for her style of dress and personal demeanor and audacity for blocking men from her classes (at a university that, be it noted, only became coeducational as Boston College did in 1970). Women who buck the trend suffer.

This dyadic difference is arguably a matter of sex not gender and the detail is not limited to the academy. If you pass a man of ordinary middle age wearing a casual shirt and a casual pair of pants you will not even notice the detail of his attire. What do clothes have to do with it? Put a jacket and tie on the guy and he’s dressed for the finest restaurant, and these days, he can even skip the tie. The phenomenon stands out in contrast with what can be observed of a Friday evening in New York (or because this is NY, any day or evening will do).

Go and do a little ad hoc phenomenology, using your observations and your own variations, and hence with and on yourself and your judgment, as you wander down the street on such evenings (assuming you are not part of the phenomenon yourself, as you might well be). Look for the well-dressed young women out for the night, whether with or without a date, but a comparative observation, if you mean to make one, can only be made when you can check out her companion.
She may be wearing a little black dress or the equivalent, high heels, stockings, have newly polished nails, newly coiffed hair, and underneath taken more care with her undergarments than even her mother would have recommended in the case of an accident. If her companion is her own age, almost invariably he will be dressed as he was the whole day (though the more fashion-conscious young fellow may have switched the day’s t-shirt for a t-shirt for the evening, etc.). If he is an older man, he may well be wearing a suit, an article of “dress clothing,” which even including one of the more complicated of the limited styles of knotting a tie, never takes more than ten minutes to don, shoes and all, or he may have the Euro, I-am-still-young look just described.

What is important is that however casually or formally he is dressed, he will get to have his feet — every last inch of his feet — on the ground.

Men are not objectified on the street, and this is so despite the commercial success of metrosexual products (which I am all for, you will have noted my enthusiasm for men’s haberdashery and in general anything to do with male beauty). I have in the past encouraged women in the courses I rarely, but occasionally, give on feminism to follow up their own readings of Sartre’s discussion of phenomenology, in terms of perception and consciousness (but not less with reference to de Beauvoir) by a similar kind of practice or phenomenological free variation on the street, using one’s own glance or “look” to do so.

Just as Sartre’s account of intentional consciousness — the subject-objectifying consciousness and its reciprocal subjected modality — describes a man on a park bench in order to reductively note the phenomenon of being seen as opposed to having only the transparent sense of himself as the one who has a regard for what he looks at, that is, qua conscious subject rather being reduced to — and it is essential to note that is a reduction to the status of — an object for another consciousness. As Sartre who was a marvelously consequent Hegelian as much as a Husserlian/Heideggerian, “‘Being-seen-by-the-other’ is the truth of ‘seeing the other.’ He is that object in the world which determines an internal flow of the universal, an internal hemorrhage which bleeds in his direction.” 32

Consider what a difference it makes to be a female, not as a subject of desire be it in Hegel’s or in Butler’s genitive subversion/inversion, but as a Sartrean consciousness, as a conscious subject for whom there is a still subjected world of objects that can turn the tables on the observer, in the case of other subjects of consciousness, simply by being there: “I am seen,”33 as Sartre has it.

To see this, it can help to experiment by varying, indeed by inverting the example Sartre suggests. Instead of Sartre’s male subject gazing around the park as he

33 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 347.
does as a sovereign subject, objectifying all he surveys until he is seen by another (man), try varying the phenomenological exercise by varying not the object but the observer.

The experiment is simple, one need only walk down the street and consider the men passing by. Just look directly at them. For most women raised in an Anglo-European culture (and I am not talking about other cultures for simplicity’s sake), this will not be easy, inasmuch as most women are attuned to worry about their looks, and thus are concerned with how they might be seen rather than with looking at others (an exception, de Beauvoir is smashing on this, is made in the case of other women: there one notices every flaw in what one revealingly calls her “looks,” meaning, of course, how she looks to men).

Thus one might have a bit to do to check one’s own consciousness in the process: at issue is not at all a matter of aesthetic judgment, at issue is not whether you like/dislike the men in question as this so often and very quickly can become a desire to look for a look, as Sartre would speak of it, that is, to look for a response to your own appearance or presence or being and the possibilities of the same in the process. Checking one’s own consciousness in this way corresponds to the routine matter of the suspension of judgment or bracketing that Sartre speaks of, this is the epoché as Husserl speaks of it, as Nietzsche too speaks of it, both echoing the ancient Stoics. Thus bracketing your usual assumptions, and exactly without smiling, simply look over the men you pass on the street: look them up and down: check them out without inviting them to do the same. Look at them directly, in other words, as they might look at you (not out of the corner of your eye).

You can practice looking at men straight on after they have passed you (men often look at women this way, since the whole point of the action is appraisal rather than invitation) and then try looking at them head on as they pass.

When students of mine tried this, they reported that the reactions of men were the most striking. Men were confused, discomfited, checked to see if their flies were undone, their jackets misbuttoned or spotted, looked around to see who else might be the possible object of such “inspection.” In some cases, so I was told, men even lost their footing, stumbling on the sidewalk, so off-putting was the experience of being looked at in this way.

Sartre himself describes the equivalent of such stumbling when he seeks to exemplify what is meant by being an object for consciousness by using the

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34 See in general the latter portions of Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex.
35 For primates a direct gaze is a sign of aggression, looking to oneside or obliquely signals subordination.
36 A note for real-world phenomenologists and other stripes of experimental, hands-on, eyes-open philosophers: Be careful! Like the drivers mentioned at the start in speaking of my cross-country misadventures, some men, indeed more than a few, will assume that a look is a sexual invitation, hence one is advised to limit such a phenomenological experiment to wide-open spaces, in broad daylight, say, in midtown, or on open boulevards, etc.
example first of projecting one’s consciousness (the usual directionality of intentionality) by using the example of looking through a key hole. All of one’s consciousness is ecstatic to oneself and in such a circumstance one is pure transcendence. In such attentiveness to what may be going on the other side of the key-hole, Sartre’s point is that one’s consciousness of one’s own bodily being along with its discomfort, volatizes as one’s awareness of one’s own body disappears into a sheerly objective instrumentality for a consciousness that is now and utterly outside oneself: the whole of one’s consciousness is absorbed by the object attended to. In this, nothing about the awkwardness of such a situation has anything self-referential or self-aware about it, one crouches thus and so: the position is wholly instrumental, thus one adjusts one’s face to the side, squashing it without feeling it, squinting into the key hole just so: “But all of a sudden, I hear footsteps in the hall! Some one is looking at me!”  

Being seen, the very possibility that one may have been seen in just this way, just this bodily disposition (the very same position heretofore matter of inattention, one way or the other), all one’s consciousness crashes back instantaneously, not only bringing to instant awareness one’s bodily awkwardness or discomfort but one (body, conscious intentionality) is just as suddenly reduced to being no more than an object for an other, an object for the gaze — judgment, presumptions, conclusions — of the other. Thus Sartre reflects that when I recognize that someone sees me, that someone is looking at me: “What does that mean? It means that I am suddenly affected in my being and that essential modifications appear in my structure…I see myself because somebody sees me…”  

And our only concern, our anxiety in such situations will be all about determining, as well as we can, whether (or not) the other person, was in fact (or only seemingly) looking at us? We have a great many devices to pretend that the rare occasions where we fail to see someone are more common than they are. We affect disconcern, disinterest, inattention. But we only have to do so because of the extraordinary sweep and world-collapsing power of the gaze.

To turn the gaze around a bit, it is precisely relevant that a naked woman represents (conveniently enough for the heterosexual male spectator) the erotic signifier par excellence. When naked men are depicted, the stylizations or signifiers attending that representation make it plain that such represented images are intended not for the appreciation or admiration of heterosexual women but and rather for homosexual men. The subjects of sexual desire are men when it comes to male objects of desire and men and women, heterosexual and homosexual alike, must desire what heterosexual men desire. Thus it makes a difference that heterosexual men seeking pornographic images are offered a wide and seemingly inexhaustible range of beautiful women where supposed pornography for women is not only limited but often represents, as if this were a good thing, images of ordinarily and no more than ordinarily attractive men,

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37 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, p. 284; 349.
38 Ibid., p. 284. This reading can and should be compared to Lacan’s discussion of the gaze and the Imaginary. See further, Debra Bergoffen, “The Look as Bad Faith,” *Philosophy Today* 36, 3 (1992): 221-227.
sometimes accompanied with helpful glosses explaining that women, unlike men, are not interested in male beauty and are disinclined to celebrate male bodies (this is often coupled with the nauseating repetition of the claim that penis size, in whatever direction, is irrelevant to a woman’s pleasure) and are so unmoved by male youth that they find old men attractive. Thus contemporary love stories in film and on television almost always show beautiful women (let us consider the model and the geek shows, and note immediately that one has already assumed the model to be female and the geek to be male) passing over beautiful or even just attractive men for the awkward and, seemingly so universal is this, the obligatorily unattractive male hero, who is described as ‘sensitive’ (a code-word for self-preoccupied). Woody Allen’s films are comic depictions of the indefatigable allure the unattractive and older man is supposed (that’s just the way women are) to hold for smart, beautiful, younger women, and there are many other such films – indeed films following this model have increased in recent years, think of Adam Sadler or Will Ferrell and still others.

There is, of course, much more to say on this but to conclude I turn briefly to Austrian novelist, Elfriede Jelinek’s reflections on power and desire in order to raise the question of how this power dynamic denominates an established tradition of theological and philosophical love affairs.

**Jelinek on Women and Power**

The problem of Eros, as already suggested above, is also the problem of sexual desire and that is in the case of women often less, and this is no indictment but a lament, a matter of desiring than it is a matter of, that is, that it is about being desired. Luce Irigaray has written on the difference it makes to write on the matter of eros and love as on the body and on perception as a woman and thus explicitly in contrast with the perspectives that predominate in the literature.³⁹

But what this means in real life practice, as Elfriede Jelinek, author of the novel *Women as Lovers*, ⁴⁰ has explained, turns upon nothing but the issue of the status of women as such and in society and that means as compared with men. What is at stake as Jelinek explains it reflects the dynamics of “a Hegelian relationship between master and slave.”⁴¹ With respect to desire, that is to say of desiring, and hence and also with respect to desirability — who is desired, who gets to desire — Jelinek makes the inherently provocative observation that “as long as men are able to increase their sexual value through work, fame, or wealth, while women are only powerful through their body, beauty and youth, nothing will change.”⁴² But this is not what one wants to hear, it is not what one wants to believe. For the ordinary woman, sure, one can agree, but for a woman distinguished by her creativity, her fame, even her wealth, surely that must

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⁴² Ibid.
change everything? So it can’t be true that “nothing will change” — surely, things have already begun to change? Surely by the time one gets to be Jelinek’s age or attain her status, that age and status must make a difference? Thus Jelinek’s surprised interviewer corrected her — surely, she asked such a claim could not be said to hold for famous women such as Jelinek herself. Not to be misunderstood, Jelinek again emphasized in reply that a “woman who becomes famous through her work reduces her erotic value. A woman is permitted to chat or to babble but speaking in public is still the greatest transgression.”

This was what her interviewer wanted to hear and, as published, the interview featured the hostile title, “A Gloom of Her Own.” It is probably as impolitic to repeat this in the current context but it remains the case that Jelinek would not be the only celebrated woman literary artist one to have made such observations or suffered from them.

Indeed, one can read Anne Carson’s later poems after her lover/husband rejected her, published after the extraordinary success of Carson’s *Eros the Bittersweet* for an extraordinarily honest and not less painful articulation of the same lived ramifications of the same phenomenon to which Jelinek refers.

About herself, in her own lyric voice, Carson writes:

Loyal to nothing  
my husband. So why did I love him from early girlhood to late middle age  
and the divorce decree came in the mail?  
Beauty. No great secret. Not  
ashamed to say I loved him for his beauty.  
As I would again  
if he came near. Beauty convinces. You know beauty makes sex possible.  
Beauty makes sex sex.  
You if anyone grasp this – hush, let’s pass.

The poem is extraordinary and I am not “reading” it here except to note its ontic content. What Jelinek does not do in her writing, what Carson does not do except between the lines of her poems, Jelinek does clarify clarifies when pressed by Solomon’s lack of sympathy no less than her Solomon’s unquestionably good journalist’s insistence or investigative instinct, Jelinek repeats: “A woman’s artistic output makes her monstrous to men if she does not know how to make herself small at the same time and present herself as a commodity. At best people are afraid of her.”

43 Ibid.
If literary or artistic fame does not, as Jelinek argues, enhance a woman’s erotic value, it makes a difference of a negative and still more dismal kind that women tend not to be highly ranked in the academy to begin or to end with. Thus such valuation turns out to be anything but unconflicted and in this is so even in exceptional cases. And what about those love affairs.

**The Life of the Mind as Love Affair: Héloïse, Hannah (Arendt), and Lou (Salomé)**

Love has been part of the substance of philosophy from the start, just to speak of Empedocles but also of Plato, that is to say, as he attributes such a discourse to Socrates, as he attributes such a discourse to Diotima, the Mantinean hetaira. And love and inclination, as every one of us knows is the same familiarity that absorbs us in our reading of Carson on Eros or in Jelinek’s and de Beauvoir’s reflections on love.

Love as Carson has also underlined it for us, is and can only be an erotic figure as a mark of loss. And we are used to the power of figures of lack or loss. Thus Hannah Arendt focuses her doctoral dissertation on love in St. Augustine and reviewers and commentators muse that the theme was inspired by the erotic by its loss in and her personal life. For Arendt’s problem was that her lover — she had others then and since, and more than one husband, but we only care about the most famous of her lovers — Martin Heidegger, and he was a married man. But if Arendt is condemned for this, how could she love him? is her dissertation any good? Is it anything more than a response to him? Where Arendt is diminished or loses face — How could she love him! — Heidegger too is condemned for the liason. Curiously, the condemnation lends Heidegger a bit more depth.

Thus Giorgio Agamben writes that so far from lacking a reference to love as is typically argued by those who complain that Being and Time focuses solely on death and anxiety, one can argue that Being and Time, simply given their love affair, was framed by or conceived “under the sign of love.”

So too, according to the Fullbrooks, Ed and Kate, was the writing of Sartre’s Being and Nothingness. Indeed, the Fullbrooks argue persuasively that without de Beauvoir’s philosophical influence, on every level that mattered, philosophical, conceptual and writerly compositional, there would be no Sartre as we know him. We could add the importance of Ilsetraut Hadot for Pierre Hadot’s research and for many others here to remain unnamed names. But such parallels lack the enduring fascination of Heidegger and Arendt.

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49 Edward Fullbrook and Kate Fullbrook, Sex and Philosophy: Rethinking De Beauvoir and Sartre (London: Continuum, 2008).
What about Arendt and Heidegger? Politics? Well, the relationship preceded and survived Nazism. Anti-Semitism? Also complicated. Perhaps their age difference? And perhaps and for me arguably, and this is what I take from George Steiner, though to be sure this is not the point Steiner means to make, it is the power differential that surrounds a relationship between student and teacher? It is also just where we write ourselves into the imaginary, vicariously lived constellation. In other words, when we think of Hannah and Arendt we are not thinking of their meetings in restaurants and café’s, as older friends, as indeed, and this is what upset Elfriede: old lovers.

In the context of that love affair at its inception, in the most important place of all, literally so, for memory and time, writing in the very first letter to pass between them, Heidegger tells Arendt that a “good girl,” that is, that Hannah herself, must be careful of the risks of attending to higher things — noting “the forced academic activity of many” of her sex, remembering as must also have been present to Arendt’s own mind that Heidegger’s had met his wife Elfriede likewise as his student — and thus be sure to avoid sullying her pure “girlish” soul. This complex encouragement, preserved in the first letter of their correspondence, may well be among the reasons Arendt always declined to be identified as, to be titled a philosopher.

Steiner who, when speaking of Heidegger and Arendt, refers to neither Agamben nor Irigaray (or anyone else for that matter), installs Heidegger in the place of Peter Abelard in the lover’s square, an installation unmanning Heidegger and writing Hannah Arendt into the nun’s position, with Héloïse. As a set construct, Steiner’s assemblage reminds us of the old claim that philosophy begins in gossip (another way to translate the famous first line of Aristotle’s Metaphysics). And because we are here talking about gossip, or love affairs in Heidegger’s case, Heidegger, it should be underscored, instigates the high erotic move of

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50 This urging constitutes the heart of Heidegger’s first letter to Arendt, where he writes: “‘Be happy’ that is now my wish for you. Only when you are happy will you become a woman who can give happiness, and around whom all is happiness, security, repose, reverence, and gratitude to life. …For it is at the point where individual intellectual work begins that the initial preservation of one’s innermost womanly essence becomes decisive. …I cannot and do not want to separate your loyal eyes and dear figure from your pure trust, the honor and goodness of your girlish essence. … Be happy, good girl!” Hannah Arendt and Martin Heidegger. Letters, 1925–1975, trans. Andrew Shields (New York: Harcourt, 2004), p. 4.

51 In a 1964 television interview with Günter Gaus, published as “Was Bleibt? Es bleibt die Muttersprache” in Gaus, Zur Person (Munich: Piper, 1965), Arendt emphasizes this distinction in the context of her interviewers’ efforts to highlight her status as a women ‘in the circle of philosophers.” Arendt responded by deflecting the focus on the feminine by making a distinction, the traditional philosopher’s gambit: “I am afraid I have to protest. I do not belong to the circle of philosophers. My profession, if one can even speak of it at all, is political theory.” Arendt, “‘What Remains? The Language Remains’: A Conversation with Günter Gaus,” Essays in Understanding: 1930-1954. Formation, Exile Totalitarianism (New York: Shocken Books, 1994), p. 1.

evasion. But perhaps it was Heidegger’s refusal of Arendt precisely as his student — Heidegger would hand Arendt off to his friend Karl Jaspers for her doctoral work — a move that seemingly worked as the master’s move that like Socrates, so Lacan will tell us (here following Nietzsche),53 assured his enduring erotic allure. Deferral works in the way consumption never does.

Steiner presents his own “lessons” beyond the cheap, ontic reality of sexual harassment — Steiner has no patience with the language and imputations of unwanted attentions (how could there be anything but mutuality here, albeit on a clearly unequal level, Steiner seems to ask?), nor does he have any time to consider the possibility of less than spiritual, less than gentle consequences of such mismatched seduction (again, on both sides).

The masters, be it noted, never want to be masters at this level. Here is the chance to return to the Shropshire of their remembered, or unremembered, fulfilled or unfulfilled youth. And to be sure, for such literal minded thinkers of the old school, sexual harassment would be and is in fact a woefully inadequate term for the student’s intellectual betrayal, for the frustrated hope and for the wronged innocence that teachers of a past generation can never imagine.

Never, never ever.

Teaching, to paraphrase Nietzsche, is so erotic. But for whom? Whose eros if not the master’s erotic ideal: for we are not talking about a student playground, youth on youth.

Nietzsche himself was in this regard no outsider but stood full in the company of the masters — professors, teachers.

For his own part Nietzsche himself did not, so he assured Lou Salomé in a disarmingly innocent protestation of his “intentions,” merely or only want someone to act as his secretary and practical assistant in household affairs, he wanted a — she could be his — pupil. She, of course, never wanted to be so lucky.

Why do we persistent in calling Lou Salomé by her first name, “Lou” countless commentators write, just where we do not refer to Nietzsche as Friedrich (forget Fritz or Freddy)?

Why is Arendt almost always emphatically Hannah Arendt even for those who write about her political thought. Heidegger is never called Martin, save in the context of a love story?

It is significant that the paradigmatic love story for academic masters is that of Héloïse and Abelard. Peter Abelard was an unusually gifted troubadour, exceptionally successful with all the women who heard him, as Héloïse would remind him in one of her later letters, was the teacher and by 22 years the senior of Héloïse. Heidegger, the teacher, this is the point of Steiner’s figuring, was 17 years older than Arendt, the student, who would years later, just like Héloïse and despite separation in distance and long silences, would still remember Heidegger as a hidden king. Nor am I saying that she was wrong on any level. I am only talking about the way we speak of Heidegger, the way we speak of Arendt.

The figuration of the names of Héloïse and Abelard, i.e., named by first and last names, exemplifies a pattern we know and use still in daily life. The woman we call by her first name, as if we ourselves were on intimate terms with her, the man only by his last name: Héloïse and Abelard, never called Peter. Did Héloïse even have a last name? Of course she might have had, but it has never been used when speaking of her. She was the niece of one Canon Fulbert, who arranged Abelard as her tutor (the same Fulbert who would ensured Abelard’s castration following his seduction and marriage of his niece).

Perhaps we are all of us vicarious masters, to take over Steiner’s phrase, and perhaps it is thus that we, male or female, assume the right of speaking on a first name basis whenever we speak of women.54

If Nietzsche was correct to upbraid or criticize philosophers for what he diagnosed as their “lack of love,”55 his point was directed less to the philosophers’ innocence or their deficiencies in matters erotic (as sex-manual mad or just gender scholars have assumed)56 than the philosophers’ lack of critical concern with the “question” of love.

Love in the process, this is the legacy of what Heidegger names formal indication, obscures the character of this solicitude. Failing the exigent reticence of love, the castrated lover embraces the life and the values of a monk but the philosopher runs the risk of becoming what Nietzsche called a “grey” scientist, a mere scholar, a joyless aspirant to wisdom. Worse still, and this is the failure of philosophy itself for Heidegger, the philosopher can become no more than a man of science, dedicated to the calculation of practical knowledge, a calculation of security that is for Heidegger as it would also have been for Nietzsche no different from the calculation of the man of faith.

54 We even extend this intimacy to women we are not supposed to like, like Nietzsche’s sister, Elisabeth, like Heidegger’s wife, Elfriede, or Wagner’s wife, Cosima, etc.
And love always leaves us back where we began.
Feminist Porousness: Challenging the Isolationism of Oppositional Consciousness
By Kendall McClellan

“Identity” can seem like a confounding and malleable term within academic discourse: it can be molded to fit variant critical goals and is too often left undefined or entirely unexplained. In the interest of beginning this discussion of contemporary feminist theory with a modicum of clarity, I want to first attempt a description of the aspect(s) of “identity” that interest me: I believe the concept of identity, and the “identity politics” that grow out of groups formed around shared traits or goals, offers a revelatory focus for multiple threads and conflicts that have stimulated, and continue to stimulate, feminist methodologies.

In The Women’s Movement Today: An Encyclopedia of Third-Wave Feminism, contributor Jo Reger’s summary of “identity” contains multiple points salient to my discussion. Before digging into the particular manner in which “identity” functions within third-wave feminism, Reger begins with a general definition: “Identities are ways in which people come to understand who they are in relationship to others and the social world” (Reger 2006, 181). What this brief definition already reveals is the intrinsic relationality of identity: who I am, or how I see subjectivity (and more specifically, my “self”), results from both my situatedness (class, race, gender, sexuality, etc.), and more centrally, from how I conceive of these positionalities based on my social environment. Reger goes on to explain the way in which “identity” functions collectively and the movement visible in feminism over the past thirty or so years away from a singular group identity toward a “diffusion of feminist ideology” that makes space, under the umbrella of feminist theory and activism, for “a multitude of contemporary feminist identities” (Reger 2006, 183). The road to this point--to the diffuse contemporary state of feminism, which I will argue Reger accurately identifies here--has not always been smooth. While a group identity, in the singular, offers up a sense of shared purpose and commitment that can be politically efficacious, the history of feminism has shown that specific methods of group identity formation arrive with problematic and potentially fracturing epistemological baggage. Reger identifies what I see as a central aspect of such inevitably self-implosive approaches: “one essential aspect of creating a feminist identity is the construction of boundaries to distinguish members from non-members. By doing so, movement communities develop what is called "an oppositional consciousness," which helps to define their position and issues” (Reger 2006, 182). Although identity is intrinsically relational, must it take shape through such “oppositional consciousness”? Feminists have increasingly responded to this question with a convincing “no.”

Much early third-wave feminist writing engaged in a protest against the seemingly rigid boundaries that had been drawn, either explicitly or without acknowledgment, by prominent feminists during the second wave. In one of the earliest essay collections to proclaim itself as presenting voices from the third wave, To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism, editor Rebecca Walker initially represents feminism, from the perspective of her (the younger) generation, as a “strictly defined
and all-encompassing feminist identity” that does not allow for “contradictions and messiness” (Walker 1995, xxxi). Previously, Walker declared herself part of a “third wave” in a 1992 article written for Ms. magazine. This article is widely considered to be the moment the term “third-wave feminist” entered cultural consciousness; Walker became one of the figure-heads of this new movement (Dicker and Piepmeier 2003, 10; Heywood and Drake 1997, 7). As such, she and To Be Real also became a jumping-off point for contemporary feminists interested in exploring both the strengths and possible shortfalls of Walker and her contributors’ constructions of the new feminist generation. While one thread of this continuing conversation focused on the need to transform personal conversations into political action, another interrogated the confrontational relationship—captured in the passages I quoted above—that Walker articulates between the second and third wave. As early as 1997, just two years after To Be Real was published, Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake, editors of the academic collection Third Wave Agenda, pointed out that this essentially oppositional consciousness many writers evince when constructing a relationship to the second wave fails to account for the echoes and commonalities that exist between older and younger feminists:

We see the emphasis on contradiction as continuous with aspects of the second wave, whereas many writers in To Be Real seem eager to distance themselves from the second wave by forgetting or dismissing its legacies. The politics, however, that their essays advocate is very much indebted to the work of women of color who are generationally second wave—Walker’s mother among them. (Heywood and Drake 1997, 7)

Within Heywood and Drake’s collection, Deborah L. Siegel delves more fully into the complex historiographic creation of a monolithic and oppositional second wave, or as Siegel terms it, a “metonymic view of the second wave, in which a part of the second wave activity is substituted for the whole” (Siegel 1997, 59). Siegel credits “many third wave narratives” with the construction and use of this metonymic view, but what I believe is slightly muddying up the waters of this critique is Siegel’s own practice of using the title “third wave” without acknowledging the extreme divergence between the work of those her critique focuses on—Rene Denfeld, Naomi Wolf, and Katie Roiphe—and the voices in collections like To Be Real, or Third Wave Agenda itself.

Although I do not want to dig into another analysis of post-feminist texts, what I do want to suggest is that a politics of identity (both group and individual) sometimes credited to the third wave in general is more accurately ascribed to this limited, albeit highly visible, face of feminism in the 1980s and 1990s. Within Walker’s introduction there is a visible tug between acceptance of the commodified version of second wave Feminism reconstituted by post-feminist authors (feminism with a capital “F”) and a more nuanced understanding of the multiple legacies of the second wave. After expressing the anxiety she sees many women of her generation sharing, of not measuring up to the demands of a prudish and regulatory Feminism, Walker in fact credits feminists for having created a model that enables representation of multiplicity, and for offering women an alternative to acceptance of normalizing social standards:

The complex, multi-issue nature of our lives, the instinct not to categorize and shut oneself off from others, and the enormous contradictions we embody are all fodder for making new theories of living and relating. This continuing legacy of
feminism, which demands that we know and accept ourselves, jettisoning societal norms that don’t allow for our experiences, is a politically powerful decision. (Walker 1995, xxxviii-xxxix)

Walker’s replay of the defensive posture that a monolithic image of feminism elicits renders the dangers of identity politics clear: claims to an easily delimitable and cohesive group identity open the door for a commodification of feminism. Once this occurs, and feminism becomes Feminism, possibilities for coalition are lost in contentious debates over who gets to define that capital F: who “owns” the public commodity? Walker’s introduction replays this conflict, honestly showcases the impact of a falsely monolithic image of the second wave on young women’s lives, and begins to encourage an alternative, coalitional view.

Within Third Wave Agenda, Leigh Shoemaker’s discussion of Henry Rollins’s cultural significance during the era of these internal debates regarding feminism’s past and future points in interesting ways to the deeply intertwined roots of oppositional consciousness and isolationism, and suggests the capacity of a more general cultural mood to impact identity formation both for the individual and the group. Recounting her own identification with well-muscled punk figure Rollins, Shoemaker explores what it is he represents: a physically hard, rigidly bounded individual, resistant to the “mass”--a masculine fortress defined against the femininized forces seeking to disempower him through assimilation (Shoemaker 1997, 114). Using bell hooks’ work to analyze the connections between her individual experience and feminist methodology, Shoemaker illuminates the political and group dimension of this personal/cultural feeling:

Hooks responds by addressing the need to redirect some of the energy for differentiation into community building, but not a community built “in reaction to” what threatens us. The reactionary community is a community built on a fascist model of bonding together in the face of the Other in order to control or destroy it. Alternative communities are built through the intentional tearing down of boundaries, through empathizing with the Other and allowing identification with that Other. (Shoemaker 1997, 118)

Initially convinced that she must change herself to fit an isolationist/individualist culture, Shoemaker realizes that instead what she/we (feminists) should seek to change is the culture itself. In this essay, Shoemaker’s revelations mirror the dynamics of Rebecca Walker’s introduction: after she acknowledges the negative impulse to adopt an oppositional consciousness in the service of self-construction, Shoemaker realizes the ultimately destructive impact that acceptance of this boundary enforcing approach to identity-building has both on the “I” and the “we” of identity and works to build a subject position within feminism through connections instead of negation. What seems to be emerging here is a shared narrative of the growth of feminist consciousness.

In her relatively recent book-length study, Not My Mother’s Sister, Astrid Henry makes a move quite similar to Deborah L. Siegel’s, characterizing early third wave work as invested in an “ideology of individualism” that leads the writers in To Be Real and other collections toward political stasis: “unlike the second wave, the third wave does not move beyond these individual assertions of identity to a larger, collective political identity. The Asian bisexual can only speak for herself, not for other Asians or other
bisexuals. For the third wave, identity politics is limited to the expression of individual identity” (Henry 2004, 44). As Henry’s argument develops, the picture that is painted of third wave feminism becomes more complex; and yet, such flattened-out generalizations as the one above regarding The Third Wave (capital “T,” capital “W”) continue to appear. While it may be true that within collections such as Merri Lisa Johnson’s Jane Sexes It Up--one of Henry’s examples--the second wave is portrayed as a prudish and overbearing mother figure, increasing the already oversimplified public image of feminism co-constituted by the media and post-feminist authors, I do not believe that portraying this as the dominant voice in the third wave creates an accurate estimate of the movement as a whole (Johnson 2002). I do, however, agree with Henry’s insistence that third wave feminists need to remain wary of buying into simplistic and villainized representations of second wave feminism. In a collection focused on keeping activism at the center of feminism, Kristina Sheryl Wong’s description of what motivated her to take a humorous and “modern” (technology-based) approach to creating feminist art falls repeatedly into this well-worn oppositional groove. How can we incite other young, fun-loving women to proclaim themselves feminists? Wong enthusiastically proclaims, “Maybe a national billboard campaign needs to be launched. We need giant signs above every campus and freeway that read: ‘Hey, America! Don’t be afraid of the word ‘feminist’! It doesn’t mean man-hating or being humorless! There is a new thing called ‘third wave’ feminism that will open the door so you can embrace politics by being who you are!’” (Wong 2003, 296). Nowhere in the essay does Wong return to the dichotomy she’s established here to acknowledge that perhaps some second wave feminists had a sense of humor and were perfectly friendly toward men--or, more significantly, that many second wave feminists did not establish themselves as feminists only via rhetoric of rejection and negation. Reconstituting the popular media’s consumable image of “the Feminist” in her work, Wong exemplifies the pattern Henry, Siegel, and others identify, in which third wave feminists portray themselves as the fun-loving and playful alternative to a dour and judgmental mother feminism.

One of the central ways in which Astrid Henry challenges the oppositional mother/daughter relationship that some feminists fall back on when describing the shift from a second to third wave is through an exposition of the “intragenerational” diversity of views that actually made up the second wave. In my own desire to understand how “identity” and more specifically “group identity” has functioned within this shift, I would also like to briefly revisit just a small sample of second wave pieces. Even a brief reexamination of a few of the multiple statements of purpose and manifestos produced during the second wave reveals an interesting dynamic at work. Although certain well-known texts undoubtedly fail to acknowledge the positionality that informs their perspectives, they otherwise represent not only divergent interests, but variant approaches to community building. Even the arguably accusatory tone taken toward “all men” in the Redstockings Manifesto (1969), a possible target for third wave feminists such as Wong seeking to distance themselves from man-bashing, includes what many would consider a typically “third-wave” call to see all oppressions as feminist issues: “We repudiate all economic, racial, educational or status privileges that divide us from other women” (Redstockings 1969, 221). Despite the oppositional and dualistic group
identity that the Redstocking Manifesto proclaims more vociferously than most, of women united *against* men based on an unproblematized shared gender (Women versus Patriarchy), the roots of coalition are nonetheless here. And while Betty Friedan’s widely read *The Feminine Mystique* features a “we” that clearly--based on the picture she paints of the dissatisfied American housewife--exists only through the silent exclusion of economically, racially, or sexually subjugated groups, the statement of purpose published by NOW--an organization Friedan co-founded--proclaims, “We realize that women’s problems are linked to many broader questions of social justice; their solution will require concerted action by many groups. Therefore, convinced that human rights for all are indivisible, we expect to give active support to the common cause of equal rights for all those who suffer discrimination and deprivation” (National Organization for Women 1966, 212). While true integration of various groups into such a coalition might have been only a goal at this stage of feminist activism, the language used in NOW’s statement demonstrate that it was central to the political identity feminists sought to create, rather than an invention or intervention of the third wave. When I engage in a discussion of contemporary feminist coalition-building at the end of this essay, remember NOW’s words: the sentiment and phrasing of this passage reverberate in the voices of the third wave.

I have culled these second wave pieces from a feminist theory reader published in 2005, and investigation of the titular patterns in sections devoted to second wave feminist work suggests one explanation for the knee-jerk response of critics who received their feminist history from such texts, who may imagine this period as one of battling identities rather than incipient coalition building. Two sections covering the years 1963-1985 include pieces titled “Statement of Purpose (NOW 1966), “The BITCH Manifesto” (1968), “Redstocking Manifesto” (1969), “The Woman-Identified Woman” (Radicalesbians 1970), “Why OWL (Older Women’s Liberation)?” (1970), “Chicana Feminism” (1976), and “A Black Feminist Statement” (1977) (Kolmar and Bartkowski 2005). While reading the texts of these statements reveals nuanced and diverse views of women’s lives and feminism, both the act of writing a singular subjective position into group names and the starkly identititarian format for titling group statements lends itself to the impression that these political identities were forged through opposition and along stark lines of singular identification. Here is one of the dangers written into the future moments of such political movements: while the majority of these groups were likely motivated by a desire to enter into the conversation, expand the reach of feminism, and have their voices heard without seeking to drown out the voices of their neighbors, within their methodology and rhetoric one now hears the reverberations of competitive individualism. The visual impact of scanning down the page of this reader is instantaneous; before even opening the book, I can’t help but feel that what I will be reading are manifestos in which women argue for ownership of Feminism based on an oppositional consciousness and competing agendas. Although to an extent, from a historiographic perspective, that sentiment is created as much by the design of this reader (which is fairly representative) as by the titles/group monikers themselves, there remains the feeling that identity commodification was unintentionally built into the foundations of second wave feminism. For third wave feminists, finding a way to alter this foundation and, as fully as possible, eliminate the oppositional streak most fervently
realized, as Henry argues convincingly, in the work of contemporary post-feminist authors, is essential to methodological strength: as Leslie Heywood and Jennifer Drake argued over ten years ago, “Competition can appear to be the most readily available survival strategy even as we know it ensures our extinction. This is a contradiction that feminism’s third wave has to face: an often conscious knowledge of the ways in which we are compelled and constructed by the very things that undermine us” (Heywood and Drake 2006, 11).

Returning conceptually to my analysis of Rebecca Walker and Leigh Shoemaker’s texts, what I hope my essay has begun to suggest is the inextricability of ideologies of identity that inform our senses of individual subjectivity and the construction and eventual shape of group identities within a given culture. I believe that feminism has already made significant motion away from oppositional/competitive self-fashionings and I believe one area of feminist theory that has significantly propelled this shift is work invested in critiquing the sex/gender and nature/culture distinctions central to early feminist work. The texts by Judith Butler, Donna Haraway, and Anne Fausto-Sterling that I am going to discuss as significant entries in the deconstruction of sex/gender dualism arose within a larger context I first want to touch on briefly, because it is an aspect of post-second-wave work so central to the shifting tenor of feminism: critiques of the universal subject.

In 1985 Toril Moi published the influential Sexual/Textual Politics, an academic analysis of American liberal humanist feminism and French feminist work. In this book-length study Moi exposes the problematic ground American feminism creates by continuing to function unquestioningly within a phallogocentric system. Liberal humanism within feminism, according to Moi, leads women to adopt the universal and objective stance their work should instead challenge: “this integrated self is in fact a phallic self, constructed on the model of the self-contained, powerful phallus. Gloriously autonomous, it banishes from itself all conflict, contradiction and ambiguity. In the humanist ideology the self is the sole author of history and of the literary text: the humanist creator is potent, phallic and male” (Moi 1985, 8). Moi’s description of the phallocentric subject echoes the oppositional consciousness and isolation experienced by Walker, Shoemaker, and other third wave feminists. Clearly, an ideology of subject formation that deifies autonomy, detachment, and distance poses a challenge to community building. This lack of positionality and permeability also leads feminists to reconstruct an oppressive Us/Them or One/Other dichotomy along various axes of identity, class, sexuality, and race among them. A year after Moi’s text theorized generally the ideological conflict of adopting a universal stance, Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s essay “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse” demonstrated more concretely the result of liberal humanist feminist praxis. Mohanty’s essay exposes the manner in which some First World feminists--those who adopt a privileged and seemingly objective position--have effectively colonized “Third World” women, creating a static image of the third world Woman as the powerless victim of oppressive patriarchal forces, awaiting salvation at the hands of “free” and progressive western women. One thing Mohanty’s work brings to light is the fracturing capacity of oppositional positioning within feminism or amongst women. This move by western feminists relies on the negation of agency or active/emergent subjectivity in others for a construction of their own identity; such a move clearly creates a power-invested
hierarchy. Although certainly there are complex and significant political differences in Mohanty’s concerns and intergenerational conflicts, when post-feminists or third wave women rely on a dehumanized second wave straw-woman to position themselves, they repeat the problematic humanist practice Moi and Mohanty warned against. While western feminists built their One/Other schema along geographic and racial lines, denying third world women agency and reinforcing distance rather than seeking equality in coalition, contemporary feminists must be careful to avoid transforming their historical/temporal distance from second wave women into another grounds for objectification of women in the interest of oppositional identity-building.

If individual and group identity formation are intimately connected, then central to the transformation of feminist communities—and, perhaps, of all political communities—is a revolution in the dominant cultural narrative of individual subjectivity. This is why I believe feminist interventions in the sex/gender debate continue to be an essential part of shifting feminist consciousness: at the heart of these interventions lies a challenge to long-standing notions of the inviolable, discrete body that is so essential to oppositional consciousness. Twenty years ago academic feminists from various disciplines began to aggressively interrogate binaries circulating within feminism tied intimately to an enlightenment ancestry. This occurred coextensively with the incipient work in third wave feminism; body/mind, sex/gender, and nature/culture (aligned hierarchically) are all productively imperiled by Judith Butler's extremely influential 1990 publication Gender Trouble. Like Mohanty, Butler recognizes the feminist investment in a universal subject and sees this as a community-splintering practice. Yes, Butler acknowledges, “universal patriarchy no longer enjoys the kind of credibility it once did”—when Mohanty entered the conversation five years earlier—but the difference-hostile category “women” seems to persist. The result, Butler argues, is a continuing engagement in alienating identity politics:

The premature insistence on a stable subject of feminism, understood as a seamless category of women, inevitably generates multiple refusals to accept the category. These domains of exclusion reveal the coercive and regulatory consequences of that construction, even when the construction has been elaborated for emancipatory purposes. Indeed, the fragmentation within feminism and the paradoxical opposition to feminism from “women” whom feminism claims to represent suggests the necessary limits of identity politics. (Butler 1990, 6)

Butler throws a wrench in the universal category “women” by challenging one of the tenets on which it is built: notions of biology/embodiment as a stable shared “reality” upon which feminists can found a political identity. Butler’s theory of performativity, in demonstrating the ways gender is an active and unstable series of acts rather than a direct offshoot of “natural” sex, does more than just challenge our cultural conception of gender. It also complicates the body itself. Butler seeks to transform feminist discourse that posits the body “as a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed . . . a mere instrument or medium for which a set of cultural meanings are only externally related,” in order to suggest instead that “the body is itself a construction” (Butler 1990, 12). Butler shows how the performance of gender, rather than simply embodying either a “normal” or improper representation of sex, actually brings the body into discursive being. Gender Trouble troubles the teleology of sex/gender, showing the fallacy of this
hierarchical binary, and in so doing, disturbs liberal humanist notions of the body/mind split as well.

While Judith Butler began pushing against the boundaries of the unyielding liberal humanist body through theorization of gender performance, Donna J. Haraway used critical analysis of scientific discourse and field study, alongside an exploration of human-technology relations, to suggest a new way of imagining feminist subjectivity. In *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, Haraway undertakes a complex critique that explores the intersections of capitalist ideologies, the reconstitution of cultural narratives in primatology, and group dynamics in women’s studies. Haraway’s central interests, among them understanding how the cultural narrative of hierarchy and dominance has been written into scientific research, prefigure significant aspects of contemporary feminist theory. Interest in ecology and the environment, technology, and western capitalism all play a part in Haraway’s text: three interlocked issues that inform various branches of contemporary feminism. What Haraway is interested in is identifying an alternative to the narratives of dominance constantly reasserted in scientific discourse (as elsewhere), and she believes that “efforts to come to linguistic terms with the unrepresentability, historical contingency, artifactuality, and yet spontaneity, necessity, fragility, and stunning profusions of ‘nature’ can help us refigure the kind of persons we might be. These persons can no longer be, if they ever were, master subjects, nor alienated subjects, but—just possibly—multiply heterogeneous, inhomogeneous, accountable, and connected human agents” (Haraway 1991, 3). The conceptual alternative Haraway proposes is the “cyborg.” As a “kind of disassembled and reassembled, postmodern collective and personal self,” Haraway envisions the cyborg (a human fused “with animals and machines”) as a counter to the dominant capitalist ideology that makes of the body a consumable possession that must be protected. A cyborg is, by definition, a split, inhomogeneous, heterogeneous body, intertwined with the environment: there are no inviolable boundaries around or within the cyborg (Haraway, 1991). Though popular images of smooth-surfaced, glinting steel robots might suggest a Henry Rollins-esque impenetrability, Haraway’s construction of the cyborg challenges the popular, hyper-masculinized vision of technology to offer an alternative Leigh Shoemaker would appreciate.

Donna Haraway and Judith Butler effectively engaged in discursive deconstructions of the body and the redolent binaries informing western conceptions of the embodied self: body/mind, sex/gender, nature/culture. In 2000, with the publication of *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*, Anne Fausto-Sterling— with a background in both biology and women’s studies—pushed this deconstruction a step further. Fausto-Sterling mirrors Haraway in her contention that the dualistic system that still informs western ontology in science and elsewhere must be replaced by the “developmental systems theory” that recognizes development as “a process of emergence” (Fausto-Sterling 2000, 27). Paying attention to the constant becoming of being will help us understand the co-constitutive relationships of sex/gender, nature/culture, etc. While portions of Fausto-Sterling’s text draw a similar thread through scientific study of sex as that Haraway earlier articulated, showing the investment of cultural narratives in discourse that claims an “objective” and “factual” status, her work
focuses more exclusively on how this manifests in conceptualizing sexuality and the body. Fausto-Stirling propels identity critiques forward through her well-supported contention that “as we grow and develop, we literally, not just ‘discursively’ (that is, through language and cultural practices), construct our bodies, incorporating experience into our very flesh. To understand this claim, we must recode the distinctions between the physical and the social body” (Fausto-Stirling 2000, 20). How does Fausto-Stirling’s proof that the body itself—all of the various biological systems that make up “sex”—is in a constant state of becoming impact our (feminists and the broader political culture) concept of identity? While the dominant strain may still speak to us, as it did to Leigh Shoemaker and Rebecca Walker, of an oppositional response to the threat of dissolving boundaries, it is important that (again like Shoemaker and Walker) feminists see the promise that inheres within this lost faith in immutable corporeality. Taken together, Butler, Haraway, and Fausto-Stirling’s texts encourage their readers to recognize not just the schisms and instability of the self, a seemingly deconstructive experience, but to understand that this self is mutable because of how intimately connected our bodies are to all that surrounds us: nature, culture, technology, and possibly most significantly for feminist praxis, other human beings.

For me, the work that has arisen out of the sex/gender debate creates a positive rupture in theorizing identity central to what I believe is a productive and coalition-building feminist methodology. While attempting to plot out the shifting landscape of feminism and thinking through the methodological approach within contemporary work I wanted to articulate, I found myself drawn toward those feminists who propose a philosophy that privileges flux. For example, Rosie Braidotti’s focus on materiality leads to a particularly rich post-structuralist re-imagining of identity: For Braidotti, “the definition of a person’s identity takes place in between nature-technology, male-female, black-white, in the spaces that flow and connect in between. We live in permanent processes of transition, hybridization and nomadization, and these in-between states and stages defy the established modes of theoretical representation” (Braidotti 2). In this passage from Metamorphoses, as in Braidotti’s later work Transpositions, we hear clear echoes of Haraway. As is the case in many of these reconstructions, the focus is placed on movement, on the borders where identities collide and transform. Rather than re-illustrating the notion of flux, I want to ever-so-slightly shift this construction through the conception of personal/group porousness, making use of a metaphor in which man-made materials and nature collide.

About ten years ago the expansive cement patio surrounding a friend’s pool showed undeniable wear, namely in the form of sizable cracks throughout. Various contractors presented replacement options, including, of course, new cement, despite the obvious failure of this technique to withstand the wear and tear of environmental shifts over time. What was eventually installed was a sand-based brick construction. In this method of paving, the contractors spread a thick, smooth layer of sand on the ground, after which red bricks are laid diagonally in an interlocking design. No chemical hardening substance is added to the sand. Nothing is poured between the bricks. Instead of a flat, perfectly uniform layer of gray cement quadrants, the pool is now surrounded by comparatively mobile bricks, in a system that recognizes the necessity of allowing for
environmental change and impact. The weather-driven expansion and contraction that create fissures in a cement patio over time do no damage, and the nearly constant rain that falls in Portland seeps right through the bricks and into the sand beneath, rather than being directed along flat planes toward plastic gutters. This new patio is porous. Through time, human contact, and environmental changes, the bricks erode ever so slightly, shift in tandem, and the patio changes subtly. And it is this ability of each individual brick’s physical body to undergo change, along with the design that enables the entire compilation of bricks to shift together, that makes the new system stronger than the old. One thing I see drawing together the polyvalent work of contemporary feminists is not just a discussion of flux, but also a recognition of the perviousness or porousness of individual identity. If we acknowledge this state of being, illustrated so convincingly by Butler, Haraway, Fausto-Sterling, and others, then the multiple affecting elements touched on in their work must all be seen as relevant fields of feminist inquiry: science, culture, sexuality, ecology, technology, etc. What can help the thematically divergent work being done by feminists in these fields coalesce is the interest they share in exposing our porousness, our connectivity, and in doing so, replacing the hierarchy/domination-based thought that still informs many world systems. As feminists in multiple disciplines touch one another through intellectual and activist exchanges, individuals and fields (ideally) change shape accordingly, surviving the multiple shifts in academic perspectives toward feminist work and gender studies through the vigilant maintenance of a porous consciousness.

I hope that my brick-by-brick image of feminist community does not suggest a romantic, perfectly coalesced, and dissension-free vision of contemporary feminism. Not only is this not plausible, history has shown us that such a goal leads to a “universalist” stance and silenced voices. As many before me have demonstrated, such a form of group identity relies on a discursively violent oppositional consciousness that frequently leads to villainization of Others (whether those others are “patriarchy” or “Feminists” themselves) and rewrites the dominance hierarchy of liberal humanist ontology into the community. This is why I would rather see a foundation of sand than one of cement, and a series of mobile and constitutionally vulnerable bricks rather than flat planes of seemingly impervious gray matter. Many of the debates I have already touched on, and some I have not here discussed—the generation gap, theoretical versus activist work, the relevance of popular culture critique, in/exclusiveness of the movement, and fear of essentialist paradigms—continue to inform self-reflections on the state of feminism. In fact, each one of these debates constitute the subject of multiple essays in one of the most recent third wave collections, Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration (Gillis, How, and Munford, 2007). But as Imelda Whelehan argues in her foreword, increasing awareness of the fracturing capacity of claims to a singular group identity have brought about a shift in the handling of these conflicts:

For so long we (I and other commentators on the second wave) have pointed out that while no one ‘owns’ feminism, the worst conflicts within feminist politics were effectively about ownership and colonization. Third wave feminists seem content to move forward on the basis that feminism is not owned – itself refreshing – and in so doing have thrown all the certainties up in the air, perhaps to resolve themselves as something new and challenging. (Whelehan 2007, xv)
In the collection’s introduction, the editors seem less optimistic about bids for ownership; they continue to see this issue as a “contentious one,” but simultaneously, their discussion demonstrates the expansion of a third wave interest in coalitions and continuities, rather than negation, as well as pointing toward the “rich and diverse intellectual and cultural terrain” of contemporary feminism (Whelahan 2007, xxiii, xxx). While the adoption of “third wave” as a collective identity may not encompass all of the work being done by feminists either in academia or as activists, it does help create a space for critical conversations about that work.

Is there a way to encompass all feminist work? As Alison Stone argues, expanding on a concept Judith Butler and others have described, it may be more efficacious and descriptively accurate to relinquish a linear or cohesive feminist history (present, and future) for a genealogical understanding. Stone ties feminists together through a “history of overlapping chains of interpretation, within which all women are situated” (Stone 2007, 17). This image seems equally appropriate to contemporary feminism: while feminists today do not all share an “agenda,” they are tied together by overlapping investments in interrogating systems through a lens that has been at least tinted by established feminist discourses. And for those who are engaged in a critical conversation about feminism, the prevalent tone is one of expansion and inclusion through the illumination of various ways in which we might challenge a stolid/stable theorization of identity. Susan Stryker expands our notion of “transgender phenomena” to show how these moments “simultaneously threaten to refigure the basic conceptual and representational framework within which the category ‘woman’ has been conventionally understood, deployed, embraced and resisted” (Stryker 2007, 60). Stryker’s essay is deeply interested in demonstrating one more challenge to a simplistic conception of “identity,” as she convincingly argues that transgender, like woman or man, gay or lesbian, oozes through such identitarian boundaries into multiple cultural significations. And in an essay that seeks to address the often contentious issue frequently raised in debates over ecofeminist theory, Niamh Moore describes ecofeminist grassroots activism to challenge a dualistic vision that pits essentialism against anti-essentialism in a theoretical struggle. Moore shows the ways in which the “Friends of Clayoquot Sound” engaged “in a process of refiguring the project of feminism” as a methodology for “challenging all oppressions” (Moore 2007, 138, 135). And she encourages a vision of feminism as something that is constantly redefined “through processes... rather than through the construction of any identity politics” (Moore 2007, 135). Stryker and Moore’s essays are linked both in the methodology that encourages them to challenge identity politics through recognition of a feminism of emergence/flux, and in their desire to tackle issues that are quite clearly tied to a sense of social justice, impacting both men’s and women’s lives now. These two important shared goals, in my mind, link many of the voices of contemporary feminism, demonstrating that the “personal”—for certainly our ontology of individual identity may be considered a personal concern--and the “communal” are intimately connected.

Struggles for ownership of feminism and oppositional consciousness still inflect some third wave texts, but the majority of work being done now is actively engaged in coalition building and invested with a sense of group-fortified individual purpose(s) that do not
envision internal differences as, by necessity, a source of disempowerment. For every moment when a feminist hyperbolically reasserts identity politics—for example, Merri Lisa Johnson’s admittedly amusing image of the Feminist predecessor who is not just prudish, but actually a sadist bent on making her feel as if she must be “corseted in theory, sitting in a straight-backed chair, facing away from the screen in flawless self-abnegation”—there are a proliferation of texts that demonstrate movement away from acceptance of easily packaged identity commodities, or that simply shift the focus to feminism in action (Johnson 2007, 8). While it is true that imagining a conflict-free, static representative of oppression (poor Laura Mulvey wears black patent leather in Johnson’s fantasy) can be politically efficacious, it is neither a necessary nor a philosophically advisable methodology for creating feminist community. How can third wave feminists, in all of their diversity, continue to avoid the commodification and attendant polarization that occurred post-second-wave? Many feminists are already producing this shift by rendering the two-fold engagement I described above manifest in their work: both the subject matter and the new feminist “identity” are constituted by a series of porous and mutable selves shifting together. The political significance of such coalition-building is made clear not only in intrafeminist conversations such as those that take place in Gillis, Howe, and Munford’s Third Wave Feminism, but in the type of work being undertaken by contemporary feminists who are propelling forward critical analysis of globalization, technology, and corporate hegemony’s impacts on civil rights. Inderpal Grewal in Transnational America, Judith Butler in Undoing Gender, and Rosemary Radford Ruether, in her powerful critique of globalization and domination-focused contemporary enactments of world religions, all ask how normalizing or hierarchy-based political practices materially impact people’s lives (Grewal 2005, Butler 2004, Ruether 2005). Consciously or not, we project our own conceptions of subjectivity onto the groups we are a part of, whether a small local group or a larger community (class, race, gender, nation). As such, in order to maintain a productive coalition contemporary feminists must be conscious of the way a personal politics of identity impacts praxis. If I can truly begin to see myself as porous, shape-shifting, and elementally infected/affected by all the environments I move through on a daily basis, it becomes increasingly difficult to first, deny the importance of seeking equity and justice in daily practice, and second, to hold onto a notion of group coalition structured by hardened borders and oppositional ideologies.

Works Cited


Perceptions of the Veil: (Un)Veiling the Veiled Muslim Woman
By Rahela Nayebzadah

Introduction
The Muslim veil is an abstract concept that cannot easily be contained under one meaning. The veil, which is also referred to as “hijab”, is both material and conceptual. As a material object, the veil is a fabric which comes in different forms, depending on the person’s cultural beliefs and practices. Some of the many different types of veiling (but not limited to) include burqa, niqab, chador, abaya, and headscarf. A burqa is an enveloping outer garment worn by women for the purpose of cloaking the entire body. It is worn over the usual daily clothing, covering the wearer’s entire face except for a small region about the eyes which is covered by a concealing net. Niqab is a type of veil that covers the face but leaves the eyes exposed. Unlike the burqa, the niqab does not have a concealing net for the eye region. A chador is a full-length semicircle of fabric open down the front, which is thrown over the head and held closed in front. It has no hand openings or closures and is held shut by the hands or by wrapping the ends around the waist. A chador leaves the entire face exposed. An abaya is a robe-like dress which covers the whole body except the face, feet, and hands. It can be worn with the niqab. Also, some women choose to wear long black gloves underneath their abaya so their arms are fully covered. And, a headscarf covers the hair and neck, leaving the entire face exposed. On another level, some Muslims do no translate the veil as an object of clothing that covers a woman’s hair and/or body, but rather view the veil as a concept of modesty in regards to dress, behavior, speech, and way of living. According to this interpretation the concept of modesty and the veil is holistic. The headscarf is a signifier as much as words are signifiers; the veil is semiotics. As an internalized act of modesty, the meaning of the veil is in the veil; the internal meaning is what gives meaning to the external, and only when the internalized modesty manifests itself through the external representation, can a Muslim believer truly represent the true meaning of the garment.

On a conceptual level, the veil is an indicator of modesty. In terms of dress, some Muslims\(^1\) argue that they practice veiling by dressing modestly. However, issues such as what consists of “modest dress” and “immodest dress” are raised. And, who determines what is “modest” and what is “immodest” also raises concern. In terms of behavior, speech, and way of living, some Muslims may argue that they practice veiling by acting, speaking, and living according to the practices of Islam, such as praying five times a day, fasting during the month of Ramadan, taking a pilgrimage to Mecca, practicing peace and kindness towards animals and human beings, etc. In addition, others argue that a veil is a combination of both. In this thesis, I will focus on the veil as a material object that covers women’s hair and/or their bodies. My change in identity as a Muslim—from a believer that Islam degrades women to a believer that Islam liberates women allows me to contribute significantly to this field of study. Moreover, the

\(^1\) A Muslim is an individual that practices the Islamic faith and therefore accepts The Koran (the Islamic holy book) and The Hadith (the teachings of Prophet Mohammad) as their divine source. Furthermore, a Muslim believes in the submission of Allah (an Arabic term meaning God), the oneness of Allah, and accepts Prophet Mohammad as the messenger of Allah.
construction of Muslim women’s identity, particularly concepts pertaining to veiling and unveiling, is crucial to Women’s Studies scholarship because it serves a great contribution to feminist studies: The veiled Muslim woman has come to represent a symbol of backwardness and oppression, and furthermore, a visual cue to bolster claims of the rise in Islamic militancy. The veil serves as an obstacle to Muslim women and their freedom, becoming an important area of debate in regard to “the woman question.”

To many Muslims and non-Muslims, including myself, the Muslim veil in the West\(^2\) is a way of dress that represents agency and freedom. I define agency as the state of being in which one is in action or exerting power. Hence, a veiled woman has agency because of her actions and power in redefining herself by not allowing herself to be the silenced, oppressed, and backward Muslim woman. I define freedom as the state of freely practicing veiling rather than in confinement or under physical restraint. Thus to me, the veil is only a demonstration of freedom if worn by choice. However, one might question exactly how free a choice a Muslim woman can make if she exists within a predominantly patriarchal culture, time, situation, and religion. Hence, would Muslim women veil (or veil constantly) if the notion of veiling had not been introduced by religious text or cultural practice? Exactly how free a choice does a Muslim woman have?

The concept of veiling cannot escape extreme interpretations of modesty or oppression; thus, the use of binaries and dichotomies are significant to this thesis. Moreover, one of the most significant binaries that need to be studied in this area is that of the East\(^3\) and the West as two opposing extremes: One does not have a sense of hierarchy until one has a sense of difference—an acknowledgement that the world is dichotomized between the East and the West, the “progressive” and the “backward.” Hence, Muslim women only make sense when juxtaposed with Christian women, the East only makes sense when adjacent with the West, and Oriental women only make sense when put next to Occidental women. As disputed areas of debate, Muslim and non-Muslim scholars are effortlessly “unveiling” (also a sexual act) the veiled woman by revealing further narrow assumptions of certain dominant logic that appears attractive to the West. The West knows what is best for the “oppressed” Muslim; it sends messages that rely heavily on liberal feminist rhetoric. For as long as the veiled identity is always expressed within dichotomous interpretations, the believers and the non-believers\(^4\) of

\(^2\) The term “the West” does not apply to any specific geographical location; instead, it is a concept borrowed by Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1987) to mean a society which is depicted as forward-thinking, liberal, and progressive. Furthermore, class, ethnicity, and gender also come to play in regards to determining what constitutes as “the West.”

\(^3\) The term “the East” does not apply to any specific geographical location; instead, it is a concept borrowed by Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1987) to mean certain societies (especially Islamic) which are represented as barbaric, savage, backward-thinking, and retrogressive. Furthermore, class, ethnicity, and gender also come to play in regards to determining what constitutes as “the East.”

\(^4\) “Believer” means one who is a believer of the veil. One must not necessarily have to wear the veil, but one must believe that the veil is instructed in *The Koran* and a “non-believer” means one who is not a believer of the veil. One must not necessarily have to be unveiled, but one must believe that the veil is not instructed in *The Koran*. 
the veil will always be confronted with a dialogue of struggle, a verbal argument—the believers will demonstrate the veil is an act of freedom and agency while the non-believers will demonstrate the veil is an act of oppression and retrogression.

However, such various acts of uncovering does not allow one to straightforwardly liberate any oppressed individual, nor do they allow one to reach any transparent truth about that person, the veiled, or unveiled Muslim woman. As a result, I wish to “veil”—or in other words, deem her garment as an act of personal, and sometimes communal, form of expression and belonging that cannot be categorized under one category of meaning—the Muslim woman who has been unveiled, and therefore falsely revealed. However, I do not wish to unveil the correct answer behind why the veiled woman chooses to veil, but rather argue that no unveiling of the veiled woman can lead to one answer. Furthermore, I do not wish to position the veiled Muslim woman in the margins of society; instead, I intend to disrupt established notions of what constitutes sociality’s sacred centre. Why is the oppressed and silenced veiled Muslim woman an important image for the West? Does wearing the veil send as a strong message as not wearing the veil? Which veiled and unveiled Muslim women are represented in popular culture, and why? Why the need to dichotomize the veiled Muslim woman? For example: the veiled modest woman versus the unveiled immodest woman; the attractive unveiled woman versus the unattractive veiled woman; and, the veiled woman who is labelled as a believer versus the unveiled woman who is labelled as a non-believer. And finally, why are Muslims who sell certain stereotypes of the veil considered good Muslims whereas those who are critical of the stereotypes considered bad Muslims?

In addition, my theoretical approach will draw on anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and feminist frameworks. In my research, I will use post colonial and feminist critical theory, textual analysis on videos, diaries, newspaper clippings, etc., and rely on qualitative research methods. My research will also delve into other forms of visuals such as artwork, film, photography, and literature. Also, I will focus of life histories on veiled and unveiled Muslim women. Finally, I have interviewed ten women (five veiled and five unveiled Muslim women) living within the Greater Vancouver area.

The Veil before the Rise of Islam and Koranic and Hadith Interpretations on the Veil

Pre-Islamic Veil

The veil, which is mainly recognized as an item of clothing that signals the Islamic faith, had been present before the rise of Islam: “Indeed, prior to the nineteenth century, the veil was never viewed as a symbol of Muslim culture; the practice of the veiling and seclusions of women is in fact pre-Islamic and originates in non-Arab Middle Eastern and Mediterranean societies” (Hoodfar, 2003, p.6). Homa Hoodfar dates the veil back to
Assyrian law. In the thirteenth century BC, veiling was restricted to “respectable” women only; thus, prostitutes and slaves were forbidden to veil (2003, p.6). Hence, the rules on veiling, according to Assyrian law, are arguably clearer than the “rules” on veiling specified in The Koran. In Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate, Leila Ahmed provides a detailed account on Assyrian law. The law specified that wives and daughters of rulers had to veil, concubines accompanying their mistress had to veil, and former prostitutes who were later married (also known as “sacred prostitutes”) had to veil (1992, p.14–5). These rules were strictly enforced so that those who did not abide by them were heavily punished: there were penalties of flogging, having water poured over their heads, and having their ears cut off (Ahmed, 1992, p.14–5). Nonetheless, the main premise of the pre-Islamic veil was to differentiate women into two categories: respectable and unrespectable, as argued by Ahmed:

That is, use of the veil classified women according to their sexual activity and signaled to men which women were under male protection and which were fair game. […] [This division] was fundamental to the patriarchal system and, second, that women took their place in the class hierarchy on the basis of their relationship (or absence of such) to the men who protected them and on the basis of their sexual activity—and not, as with men, on the basis of their occupations and their relation to production. (1992, p.14–5)

Misogynistic practices were also evident in Byzantine and Syrian practices. In the Byzantine, “women were always supposed to be veiled, the veil or its absence marking the distinction between the ‘honest’ woman and the prostitute” (Ahmed, 1992, p.26). The shamefulness of sex was only targeted on the female body: “the Syrian reliefs showing a woman so heavily swathed that no part of her, not even her hands or face, is uncovered date from the early Christian era” (Ahmed, 1992, p. 35). In addition, Jews also practiced veiling to some degree (Ahmed, 1992, p.55). How the veil has turned to an oppressive Islamic uniform is worth examining, especially since the history of the veil predates misogyny.

As an Islamic phenomenon, the veil is usually interpreted as an act of modesty and the practice of seclusion. However, if the veil is a sign of modesty, this dates back to “a wide variety of communities, including most Mediterranean peoples, regardless of religion” (Hoodfar, 2003, p. 6). And, if the veil is an indication of segregation, this was “a sign of status and was practiced by the elite in the ancient Greco-Roman, pre-Islamic Iranian and Byzantine empires” (Hoodfar, 2003, p.6). According to Ahmed, segregation and the veil were even evident in the Christian Middle East and Mediterranean regions at the time of Islam (1992, p.5).

The Islamic Veil

Firstly, in order to investigate the Islamic veil, one must gain a good understanding of the term “hijab.” Fatema Mernissi’s “The Hijab, the Veil” describes the concept of the word as three-dimensional:
The concept of the word *hijab* is three-dimensional, and the three dimensions often blend into one another. The first dimension is a visual one: to hide something from sight. The root of the verb *hajaba* means “to hide.” The second dimension is spatial: to separate, to mark a border, to establish a threshold. And finally, the third dimension is ethical: it belongs to the realm of the forbidden. So we have not just tangible categories that exist in the reality of the senses—the visual, the spatial—but also an abstract reality in the realm of ideas. A space hidden by a *hijab* is a forbidden space. The *Lisan al’-Arab* dictionary (*Language of the Arabs*) does not help us much. It tells us that *hajaba* means “hide with a *sitr*.” And *sitr* in Arabic means literally “curtain.” So we have an act that divides space into two parts and hides one part from view. The dictionary adds that some synonyms of the verb *hide* are formed from the two words *sitr* and *hijab*. *Satara* and *hajaba* both mean “hide.” (1991, p.93-4)

As mentioned by Mernissi, the three dimensions “blend into one another,” making it difficult to arrange thoughts under each category. However, all three dimensions make specific references to the wives of the Prophet, for they are unquestionably segregated, and therefore, hidden; separated from other women in terms of their status; and, belong to the world of the forbidden, meaning only they are appointed to be the wives of the Prophet and no one else’s.

The first dimension of the veil—the visual component—which consists of hiding something from sight is often understood negatively, especially among the Sufis⁵, Mernissi explains. Among Muslim Sufism, the *hijab* (known as *mahjub*) has nothing to do with a curtain; instead, the *hijab* “is an essentially negative phenomenon, a disturbance, a disability” (1991, p.95). A veiled person “does not perceive the divine light in his soul” because their “consciousness is determined by sensual or mental passion” (1991, p.95). Thus, according to Sufism, a veil prevents a Muslim from becoming closer to Allah. In contrast, Mernissi notes that to Muslim Mystics, the opposite is true: the *hijab* (known as *kashf*) is the discovery to discovering Allah (1991, p.95). According to the second dimension—the spatial aspect—the *hijab* is “to separate, to mark a border, to establish a threshold” (1991, p.93-4). In this regard, the *hijab* was used as a curtain behind which the caliphs and the kings sat in order to avoid the gaze of members of their court (1991, p.94). As a divider, “the drawing of cloaks” was intended to separate those who belonged to Prophet Mohammad’s camps and those who did not, distinguishing the believer from the unbeliever (Hajjaji-Jarrah, 2003, p.192). Accordingly, the word “*hidjab*” in *The Koran* means to mark a separation: “It is the veil of the curtain behind which Mary isolated herself from her people” (Mernissi, 1991, p.96). And, on the Day of Judgment, “the saved will be separated from the damned by a *hijab*, which is glossed as a wall (*sur*) by the commentators” (1991, p.96).

In regards to the third dimension—the ethical element—Mernissi describes the veil as a barrier which was sent down by Allah to place a border between what is forbidden, which referred to the wives of the Prophet. This is also reiterated by Sajida S. Alvi in “Muslim Women and Islamic Religious Tradition: A Historical Overview and

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⁵ Sufism is generally understood to not be a distinct sect of Islam, but the inner, mystical dimension of Islam.
Contemporary Issues”: verse 53 of chapter 33 “refers exclusively to the Koranic prescriptive mode of communication between believing men and the wives of the Prophet” (2003, p.184). In this interpretation, the “hijab—literally ‘curtain’—‘descended,’ not to put a barrier between a man and a woman, but between two men. […] [This] is an event dating back to verse 53 of surah 33, which was revealed during year 5 of the Hejira (AD 627)” (Mernissi, 1991, p.85). In addition, Mernissi provides the story leading to this occurrence. The Prophet was celebrating his marriage to Zaynab Bint Jahsh to which he invited the majority of the Muslim community residing in Medina. After the wedding supper, guests departed except for three men, causing the Prophet to become impatient because he wanted to be alone with his wife. However, because of the Prophet’s personality, he did not raise his concern to his guests; instead, he waited for them to leave on their own terms. Upon their departure, Allah revealed the verse on the hijab to the Prophet. As he drew a sitr between himself and Anas Ibn Malik, the Prophet recited verse 53 of surah 33 which reads as the following:

O you who have believed, do not enter the houses of the Prophet except when you are permitted for a meal, without awaiting its readiness. But when you are invited, then enter; and when you have eaten, disperse without seeking to remain for conversation. Indeed, that behaviour was troubling the Prophet, and he is shy of dismissing you. But Allah is not shy of the truth. And when you ask his wives for something, ask them from behind a partition. That is purer for your hearts and their hearts. And it is not conceivable or lawful for you to harm the Messenger of Allah or to marry his wives after him, ever. Indeed, that would be in the sight of Allah an enormity. (Saheeh International, The Koran, 1997, p. 588).

Historical accounts recall Anas hearing the Prophet murmur the following verse when he drew the curtain between them. In this situation, “the message inspired by God in His Prophet in response to a situation in which Mohammad apparently did not know what to do nor how to act” (Mernissi, 1991, p.87). Furthermore, reference to the hijab as a curtain is also mentioned in The Hadith. In “Hijab According to the Hadith: Text and Interpretation” by L. Clarke, he says the following: “The Hadith tale of Mohammad’s wedding with Safiyah tells us more about the Muslim community’s memory of the dividing curtain called hijab (or sitr, a synonym for hijab also sometimes appearing in the Prophetic Reports)” (2003, p.232).

Leila Ahmed also provides another similar occurrence in which either at the marriage to Zaynab or some other meal, “the hands of some of the men guests touched the hands of Mohammad’s wives, and in particular ‘Umar’s hand touched ‘Aisha’s” (1992, p.54). Furthermore, Mernissi argues that verse 59 of surah 33, which reads: “O Prophet, tell your wives and your daughters and the women of the believers to bring down over themselves [part] of their outer garments. That is more suitable that they will be known and not be abused. And ever is Allah Forgiving and Merciful” (Saheeh International, The Koran, 1997, p. 590) was revealed to the Prophet as a solution to protect his wives from being confused as women who were subject to ta’arrud, meaning “taking up a position along a woman’s path to urge her to fornicate” (1991, p.180). Before the rise of Islam, women (particularly slaves) were subject to sexual encounters, so the hijab clearly expressed that the wives of the Prophet should not be confused with
slaves: “This was the reason Allah revealed verse 59 of surah 33, in which He advised the wives of the Prophet to make themselves recognized by pulling their jilbab over themselves” (1991, p.180). This is also argued by Homa Hoodfar: “Another verse recommends that the wives of the Prophet wrap their cloaks tightly around their bodies, so as to be recognized and not be bothered or molested in public (Surah al-Ahzab, verse 59)” (2003, p.7). Here, it can easily be misinterpreted as Allah only viewing the wives of the Prophet as worthy of any protection. However, this argument can easily be defused when *The Koran* is perceived as a story stating the life of the Prophet with solutions presented to him whenever he confronted an obstacle. Nonetheless, the wives of the Prophet needed protection because of the threat Mohammad presented to the Hypocrites. Here, Ahmed provides two accounts: (i) ‘Umar wanted the Prophet to seclude his wives from Hypocrites who were not hesitant to abuse Mohammad’s wives and then claim that they had mistaken them for slaves, and (ii) ‘Umar further insisted that the Prophet seclude his wives because his success and reputation attracted many visitors to the mosques, visitors which could be of danger to the Prophet’s, and his wives’, wellbeing (1992, p.54). Furthermore, in “The Hijab Descends on Medina,” Fatema Mernissi explains that ‘Umar strongly suggested to the Prophet that the hijab be instructed to all women. He said the following to the Prophet: “Messenger of God, you receive all kinds of people at your house, moral as well as evil. Why do you not order the hijab for the Mothers of the Believers?” Despite all the criticism of him, the Prophet persisted in not consenting to the hijab, not being of the same frame of mind as ‘Umar” (1992, p.184-5). Therefore, Ahmed argues that during the Prophet’s lifetime and toward the end of it, his wives were the only women who were required to veil (1992, p.5). Hence, seclusion was introduced, and again, this only applied to the wives of the Prophet (1992, p.53).

**Koranic and Hadith Interpretations on the Veil**

The word hijab is only found in *The Koran* seven times, as presented by Mernissi (1991, p.96). Furthermore, both Homa Hoodfar and Leila Ahmed argue that nowhere in *The Koran* does it specifically refer to hijab as an item of clothing which covers the hair, or the entire body for that matter. Both refer to Surah al-Nur, verses 30-31, the only verses that deal with women’s clothing, instructing women to guard their private parts and throw a scarf over their bosoms” (1991, p.55; 2003, p.6-7). Hence, it is this verse which, Hoodfar argues “has been interpreted by some that women should cover themselves” (2003, p.7). Furthermore, in “Women’s Modesty in Qur’anic Commentaries: The Founding Discourse,” Soraya Hajjaji-Jarrah claims that the references made on hijab “retains the connotations of either a physical or a metaphorical barrier without any reference to women or their clothing. Verse 15 of Chapter 83, for example, reads: ‘Verily, from their God, that Day, they will be veiled.’ Likewise, verse 45 of Chapter 17 states: ‘When you recite the Koran. We have put between you and those who believe not in the Hereafter, an invisible veil’” (2003, p.184). However, it is important to mention that the hijab is addressed to man first, urging the following: “Say to the believing men that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts; that is purer for them;

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6 The Hypocrites were enemies of the Prophet.
surely Allah is Aware of what they do" (Saheeh International, *The Koran*, 1997, p. 482). “[C]ast down their looks” refers to a “man’s veil,” the covering of one’s eyes from lustful and sinful images. Following thereafter, women are addressed: “And say to the believing women that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts” (Saheeh International, *The Koran*, 1997, p. 482). Here, the hijab is addressed to both genders, and therefore is understood in non-binary terms. Moreover, if the hijab is understood as a demand put forth on all women, then one must also question what the consequences are for those who fail to obey such a demand. Sheila McDonough tackles the following concern in “Voices of Muslim Women,” reaching the following conclusion: “Then I focused my attention on the two specific hijab verses, and did not find any hudud [warning of punishment] for not wearing hijab. As a matter of fact, the reason recommending it is ‘so that they will be known and not get hurt’” (2003, p.114).

*The Hadith* is also crucial in understanding Islam’s standpoint on the veil. In “Hijab According to the Hadith: Text and Interpretation,” L. Clarke provides a detailed summary on *The Hadith’s* view on the hijab. In regards to women’s dress, Clarke mentions that the canonical *Hadith* is not at all concerned with necklines; however, there are two references which address hemlines: (i) it is reported that the Prophet made the following remark: “On the Day of Judgment, God shall not look upon those who trail their robes pridefully” (2003, p.220). In response to this, Umm Salamah, one of the wives of the Prophet, asked: “What then should the women do with their hems?” to which the Prophet responded by saying, “They should let them down the measure of their forearm [dhira], but no more” (2003, p.220) and, (ii) The second hemline reference tells the story of how a woman approached Umm Salamah and “asked her what she should do about her train dragging over impure ground and then over the pure ground of the interior of the mosque. The question implied is: May I pull up, or perhaps shorten, my skirt to avoid dragging it through filth? Umm Salamah indicated that neither was necessary, for the Prophet had said that ‘if she [a woman] passes through an impure place, and then through a pure place, that [her garment] is considered pure’” (2003, p.220). Clarke too demonstrates that there is no clear reference to women covering their hair or their hands in *The Hadith*—“there is no warning that stray hairs should not show, that those who expose their hair will be punished, or anything of this kind” (2003, p.222)—; however, there are references made on hair, both men’s and women’s. For example, there are references made on the thickness, length, and colour of the Prophet’s hair; the dislike of “binding back (kaff)” hair while praying; the attention to carefully washing hair during ablutions, especially after having sexual intercourse; the proper length and style of hair for men; the undesirability of braiding hair so tight that it prevents one from partaking in proper ablution; the style of hair that is acceptable for a woman’s corpse; the rules on women adding false hair to their own; and so on (2003, p.222).

With the many references made to hair rather than the covering of the hair, Clarke argues the following: “One would think that, with so much attention paid to hair, if the covering of women’s hair were of great importance, it would certainly be mentioned. Shouldn’t we expect, in that case, not only explicit references to covering hair but even a discrete bundle of hadiths on the subject” (2003, p.222). Furthermore, Clarke
illustrates that in regards to the covering of the hair, *The Hadith* makes a large number of these references to men, as opposed to women. For men, the area from the thighs to the knees (also known as ‘awrah, meaning the private or shameful parts) should be covered (2003, p.218). Furthermore, “despite the reference in the Koran to ‘awrat al-nisa—‘women’s private parts’—and the popular tendency in our day to associate ‘awrah mainly with women […], nearly all occurrences in the hadith of the term where it refers to private or shameful parts relate to men’s ‘awrah and not women’s” (2003, p.218).

However, *The Hadith* is clear in its disagreement to ostentatious dress.

The avoidance of ostentatious dress is addressed to both sexes. Clarke alludes to two references in *The Hadith* which warn against wearing thin clothing: (i) in the first instance, the Prophet asks his companion to tear a robe into two: one to be used as a shirt and the other to dress (takhtamir) his wife because the clothing she was wearing was thin and revealing her form (2003, p.218); and, (ii) in the second instance, Asma, Abu Bakr’s daughter (the daughter of the Prophet’s father-in-law) came before the Prophet in thin clothes, to which he turned away and said, “‘Asma, if a woman reaches the age of menstruation, it is not fit that anything be seen of her except this and this’”—and, according to the hadith, he pointed to his face and hands” (2003, p.220).

The Muslim Veil Today

Representations of Veiled Women in Scholarly Work

The veil is an item of clothing that is perpetually “pregnant with meanings” (Ahmed, 1992, p.166). No other item of clothing compares to the veil. The veil is always being defined, and each time it is defined, it has been distorted. The veil cannot escape egregious interpretations or dichotomous relationships: it is both an area of interest for the West and the East; the Muslim and the non-Muslim; and, the veiled and the unveiled. In “Identity and its Discontents: Women and the Nation,” Deniz Kandiyoti identifies the struggles in grasping the essence of the veil:

In countries where the most prominent form of cultural nationalism is Islamic, for instance, feminist discourses can legitimately proceed only in one of two directions: either denying that Islamic practices are necessarily oppressive or asserting that oppressive practices are not necessarily Islamic. The first strategy usually involves counterposing the dignity of the protected Muslim women against the commodified and sexually exploited Western woman. It is thus dependent on a demonified ‘other.’ (1994, p.380)

Such a chiasmus depends on a duality: the Muslim woman in juxtaposition to the Western woman, and Islamic practices in opposition to cultural rulings. Furthermore, any binaries created because of the veil create further complications. Leila Ahmed notes the following: the “Western narrative [is] that the veil signified oppression, therefore those who called for its abandonment were feminists and those opposing its abandonment were antifeminists” (1992, p.162). Hence, such logic is not as simple as it
The veil, as an entangled and misapprehended headscarf, can never be assigned one meaning or state of being.

Within mainstream interpretations (from both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars) there seems to be two opposing discourses on the veil: one negative and one positive. As the former, the veil serves to cover women’s shameful bodies; hinder women’s sexualities; and, seclude women from the public realm. As the latter, the veil as an act of seclusion is a political (and therefore feminist) act. In a film called Faith Without Fear, Irshad Manji interviews Arwa Othman, a writer who refuses to be veiled, arguing that “women are not genitalia that need to be covered” because “something that is covered is bad and ugly” (2007). Nonetheless, a similar attitude is present in the works of Fatema Mernissi, as she argues the following: “Islam took an unequivocally negative attitude towards body ornamentation, especially for women. It required pious women to be modest in their appearance and hide all ornamentation and eye-catching beauty behind veils” (2003, p.492). Mernissi’s reference to ornamentation (or “adornment”) is a direct reference to The Koran’s reference of ornamentation, which states the following: “And tell the believing women to [...] [also] not expose their ornamentation except that which necessarily appears thereof [...].And let them not stamp their feet to make known what they conceal of their ornamentation” (Shaheeh International, The Koran, 1997, p.482).

Unlike Othman, the covering of a Muslim woman’s body is not for reasons of ugliness, but rather the opposite: a female body is “eye-catching” and therefore it must be hidden. Here, one must pause and investigate terms such as “ornamentation.” Ornamentation consists of two specific meanings: private parts and anything that beautifies a person. In the former, ornamentation applies to both man and woman, and in the latter, ornamentation only applies to a woman. The private parts of both man and woman are to be covered. In The Koran, man is addressed first: “Say to the believing men that they [...] guard their private parts; that is purer for them; surely Allah is Aware of what they do. And say to the believing women that they [...] guard their private parts” (Saheeh International, The Koran, 1997, p. 482). In the latter, ornamentation can mean both the female body and anything which beautifies a woman such as makeup, excessive jewellery, and certain clothing which reveals the woman’s body shape and form. According to my experience as a Muslim, the female body parts that are considered as ornamentations are every body part except for the face, the hands, and the feet. Special attention was paid to the covering of the neck, the arms, and the legs (from the knee down), which is why women who only covered their hair (revealing their ears and neck) and revealed parts of their arm and legs were considered as not practicing the “proper” veil. In response to Islam’s insistence on covering female ornamentation, Homa Hoodfar illustrates that some women choose to veil because it “beautif[ies] the wearer” while others choose to veil because it “hide[s] the wearer’s identity” (2003, p.11), opposite reasons which are equally liberating to the wearer. However, such a view towards women’s bodies lead to another view: If Islam takes a negative view on women’s bodies then Islam must also take negative views on women’s sexuality.7

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7 By sexuality, I am not referring to the condition of being characterized or distinguished by sex; instead, I am referring to sexuality in terms of sexual activity.
Despite contrary belief, Islam does not take a negative view on sexual activity. Unlike some forms of Christianity, sexual intercourse is encouraged and seen as an act of pleasure between a man and a woman rather than just for the purpose of procreation. References to sexual intercourse is made both in The Koran and The Hadith; however, there are restrictions pertaining to sex: pre-marital sex is not permitted and sex is prohibited during menstruation, during daylight hours of Ramadhan (a month dedicated to fasting), and during pilgrimage (surah 2, verse 187 and surah 2, verse 222). A woman who performs pre-marital sexual intercourse with another man is considered a threat to the social order, and thus, she must be stopped. In “The Meaning of Spatial Boundaries,” focusing on gender politics, Mernissi is critical of certain cultural practices that are imposed on women by men such as excluding women from the public realm. She asserts that a female who trespasses male space is considered “both provocative and offensive” because she is “upsetting the male’s order and his peace of mind”; thus, inviting the male to commit fitna (sin) (2003, p.494). According to this interpretation, any occasion when a man is confronted by a woman, fitna is unavoidable: “When a man and a woman are isolated in the presence of each other, Satan is bound to be their third companion” (2003, p.497). In such occurrences, the male is “passive” and the female is “lust-inducing” (2003, p.492-3). However, there are exceptions: elderly women and unattractive women, “who consequently have a greater freedom” (2003, p.492-3), can go unveiled because their presence would not disrupt a man’s intellect. Here, Mernissi is critical of men’s interpretation in terms of which women should be veiled and which women should not be veiled. Islam’s prescription on abstinence, particularly for women, is enforced because of Islam’s emphasis on marital sexual intercourse, as reiterated by Mernissi: “The most potentially dangerous woman is one who has experienced sexual intercourse” (2003, p.497). In “The Seen, the Unseen, and the Imagined: Private and Public Lives,” Sarah Graham-Brown explains that Islam’s distrust of women is difficult to defuse because “the figure of the nun, the celibate woman who dedicates her life to God, is complemented on the ideological level by the image of the Virgin Mary, the mother figure untouched by human sexuality. In Islam, no equivalent roles have been created for women which similarly defuse the notion of sexual danger” (2003, p.504). However, the image of Virgin Mary is equally significant within Islamic belief, having an entire chapter in The Koran dedicated to her. This chapter is the only chapter in The Koran which is dedicated to a woman; thus, the image of Mary as a celibate woman who gives birth to Jesus Christ is presented within Islamic belief, except Mary takes the name “Maryam” and Jesus Christ takes the name “Issah.” (Surah 19: “Surah Maryam”). Nevertheless, the veil as a piece of clothing that protects celibacy further dichotomizes the spheres: the public sphere, that which belongs to the male; and, the private sphere, that which is dedicated to the female.

In “Veils and Sales: Muslims and the Spaces of Postcolonial Fashion Retail,” Reina Lewis attests that seclusion and veiling were introduced by Islam “as a border which distinguishes inside from outside, as a screen or cover, [since] women are associated with the inside, home and territory” (2007, p.62). In Scheherazade Goes West, Mernissi argues that in the Orient, “men use space to dominate women” (2001, p.112) and uses
Imam Khomeini⁸ as a popular example. Through veiling, Mernissi argues that women are granted access to trespass into the public sphere, but they are also accepting that they are “invisible” and have “no right to be in the street” (2003, p.493). Participating in their invisibility, Mernissi argues that veiled women in the Mediterranean practice a political statement: “Veiling is a political statement. When stepping into the street, the veiled woman agrees to be a shadow in the public space. Power manifests itself as theatre, with the powerful dictating to the weak what role they must play. To veil on the Muslim side of the Mediterranean is to dress as the ruling Imam demands” (2001, p.114). Even though these veiled women are forced to “dress as the ruling Imam demands” and perform the “role they must play” as “a shadow in the public space”, they are still active agents and participators in political acts. Under the rule of patriarchal control, these Mediterranean women are active agents; they exercise their power to enter the public realm, that which is forbidden and only reserved for men. By leaving their private domain and trespassing into the public sphere, they are going against patriarchal demands, and therefore making a political statement. The same idea is suggested by Homa Hoodfar, who not only views the veil “as a symbol of patriarchal control”, but also as “a marker of status and as a tool of emancipation, empowerment and, in some cases, a means of exerting power over those generally considered to have ultimate control” (2003, p.33-4).

In “More Than Clothing: Veiling as an Adaptive Strategy,” Homa Hoodfar pays close attention to two veiled women in terms of political action: Tahera and Mona. In an interview with Tahera, Tahera claims the following: “This scarf, that to so many appears such a big deal, at least has made others aware of Islam, and of my identity within the Canadian society” (2003, p.30). Hoodfar translates Tahera’s veiling as “an expression of particular religious currents” and “a declaration of Muslim identity in primarily non-Muslim society” (2003, p.10-11). Mona, on the other hand, responds differently. She says, “I would have never taken up the veil if I lived in Egypt. Not that I disagree with it, but I see it as part of the male imposition of rules” (2003, p.30). According to Hoodfar, Mona’s veiling would be translated as a political act because it is “a symbol of opposition to the state” and “a symbol of patriarchy and misogynist tradition” (2003, p.10-11). In either case, these veiled women demonstrate “a clear statement to parents and the wider Muslim community that [they] are not relinquishing Islamic mores in favour of ‘Canadianness’”; rather, they are publicly asserting their Muslim-Canadian identity” (Hoodfar, 2003, p.39). Both Tahera and Mona are balancing both identities equally. However, some veil for the complete opposite reasons. In My Journey, My Islam, a group of girls reveals that they veil for reasons of segregation. Aside from commenting on the veil as a feminist act, they make the distinction that their veil separates them from the society of miniskirts, especially since it is “a flag that says, ‘I’m Muslim!’”

In opposition, some women veil because of the advantages it provides as a “trade-off” (Hoodfar, 2003, p.29). Under such circumstances, a young woman may veil for involuntary reasons such as to satisfy their parents, especially since veiling to many

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⁸ Imam Khomeini was an Iranian religious leader and politician. He was also the leader of the 1979 Iranian Revolution.
families is a “reassurance to one’s family that one’s respect for Muslim mores remain strong despite unconventional activities and circumstances” (Hoodfar, 2003, p.10-11). Here, the veil “offers a means to mitigate parental and social concerns” (Hoodfar, 2003, p.18). Thus, satisfying their families, and their community as a whole, they are rewarded by having access to greater freedom such as having the freedom to communicate with the opposite sex without being scrutinized. Onwards, in regards to communicating with the opposite sex, many veiled women would agree that “since donning the veil, it has become easier to interact with men, both Muslim and non-Muslim” (Hoodfar, 2003, p.21). Leila Ahmed also argues that veiling makes it easier for women to build relationships with men:

Wearing it signals the wearer’s adherence to an Islamic moral and sexual code that has the paradoxical effect, as some women have attested, of allowing them to strike up friendships with men and be seen with them without the fear that they will be dubbed immoral or their reputations damaged. Women declare that they avoided being seen in conversations with a man before adopting Islamic dress, but now they feel free to study with men in their classes or even walk with them to the station without any cost to their reputation. (2003, p.224).

In contrast, some veil for protection from men, as described by Ahmed: “The dress also protects them from male harassment. In responding to a questionnaire, women stated that wearing Islamic dress resulted in a marked difference in the way they were treated in public places” (2003, p.223). Also, Ahmed adds that the veil (though not the sole purpose for veiling) is economical: “For women Islamic dress also appears to bring a variety of distinct practical advantages. On the simplest, most material level, it is economical. Women adopting Islamic dress are saved the expense of acquiring fashionable clothes and having more than two or three outfits” (2003, p.223). However, there has been a shift—fashion and the veil are congruent. Muslim fashion designers, particularly in Dubai, are targeting veiled women throughout the world with their fashionable and expensive veils.

However, despite contrary belief, many scholars argue that the veiled woman is a symbol of power. Reina Lewis discusses in detail the power of the veiled woman, particularly in the West. Lewis mentions that “for the European subject, there is always more to the veil than the veil” (2007, p.42). The veiled woman offers a threat to unveiled Western women because “the veiled woman can see without being seen” (2007, p.43). For the Western woman, “instead of being looked at, the object now looks at” (2007, p.62-3). This becomes threatening for the following reasons: “It is the veil which enables the Oriental other to look without being seen. This not only disturbs the desire of the Western/colonial subject to fix cultural and sexual difference, but also enables the colonial other to turn itself into a surveillant gaze” (2007, p.63). The power of looking without being looked at, hence their “omnipresence” causes “frustration” (Alloula, 1986, p.13). As a surveillant gaze, the West wishes for nothing but to dismantle this image. Therefore, it is assumed that certain Muslim women who are dressed in veils must be hiding something:

The veil gives rise to a meditation: if they wear a mask, or masquerade or conceal themselves, then there must be a behind-the-mask, a knowledge
that is kept secret from us. The mystery that is assumed to be concealed by the veil is un concealed by giving a figural representation to this mask and to the act of masquerading as an enigmatic figure. However, what is thus concealed, i.e., the ‘masquerade’, the ‘veil’, is the act of concealment itself. The veiled existence is the very truth of Oriental women; they seem to exist always in this deceptive manner. (Lewis, 2007, p.45)

Such “mysteriousness” that the veiled woman displays immediately transforms to deception in the eyes of the viewer. Her deception becomes entertaining: “The Oriental woman/Orient is so deceptive and theatrical” (Lewis, 2007, p.45). According to Nietzsche, Lewis mentions that the veiled woman is “deceptive because she has no essence to conceal” (2007, p.52). Furthermore, in The Colonial Harem, Malek Alloula presents “a sort of ironic paradox: the veiled subject […] becomes the purport of an unveiling” (1986, p.13). According to Alloula, the veil, symbolizing “the closure of private space […] [signifying] an injunction of no trespassing upon this space” (1986, p.13) tempts the “trespassers”—the Western gaze—to trespass upon this space by “unveiling” the veiled woman. Here, the act of unveiling, and arguably an act of violation, becomes a sexual encounter: “she [the veiled woman] is nothing but the name of untruth and deception. If the Oriental is feminine and if the feminine is Oriental, we can claim that the nature of femininity and the nature of the Orient are figured as one and the same thing in these representations. This equivalence positions the Orientalist/Western colonial subject as masculine: the other culture is always like the other sex” (Lewis, 2007, p.56). Nonetheless, after being unveiled, the veiled woman is finally able to be represented.

In “The Muslim Woman: The Power of Images and the Danger of Pity,” Lila Abu-Lughod makes the following argument pertaining to veiled Muslim women: “Our lives are saturated with images, images that are strangely confined to a very limited set of tropes or themes. The oppressed Muslim woman. The veiled Muslim woman. The Muslim woman who does not have the same freedoms we have. The woman ruled by her religion. The woman ruled by her men” (2006, p.1). Such stereotypical images have entered mainstream thought, reinforcing demeaning narratives on a culture.

Representations of Veiled Women in Literature, Film, Photography, and Art

Veiled women are almost always portrayed as flat characters. As characters that reveal only one or two personality traits, they are depicted as two opposite extremes: either they are fundamental and closed-minded individuals, or they are a silenced, oppressed, and submissive group of women. Thus, characters which do not qualify in either category are an exception—they become the tolerant and acceptable Muslim women; thus, they are the heroines of the story. As the former, two credited autobiographical Muslim writers and “experts” are accredited for their expertise in depicting one-dimensional characters: national bestseller Marjane Satrapi and Nawal El-Saadawi. In Marjane Satrapi’s Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood and Persepolis 2: The Story of a Return, Marij, the protagonist, is caught struggling between two different worlds: the rational and forward-thinking world of the West, in juxtaposition to the stubborn and
backward-thinking world of the East. Set during the Iranian Revolution, Marji is placed in situations where she struggles to assert her individuality. One example is when Marji inserts her will to exercise her sexuality in a classroom filled with traditional women. She says, “Can you explain to me what’s indecent about making love with your boyfriend? Shut up yourself! My body is my own! I give it to whomever I want! It’s nobody else’s business!” (2004, p.149). Furthermore, in Nawal El Saadawi’s *Memoirs From the Women’s Prison*, Dr. Saadawi, the main character, is also placed in a similar situation as Marji. As a political prisoner recognized for her prison writing, Saadawi shares insights on other prison mates. The memorable characters, serving as foils to Dr. Saadawi, are Boduur and Fawqiyya. Boduur is described as “a young woman of about 30 who wore a niqaab. She would chant the Qu’ran in tones which reminded [one] of Qu’ran recitation at a funeral” (1986, p.36-7) and Fawqiyya, an unveiled woman is portrayed as a woman that “placed a veil over her mind and could not imagine that there exist people who think in ways different from hers. […] Fawqiyya resembled Boduur in her blind faith in one idea, believing that anyone who did not believe as she did was an infidel” (1987, p.37-8). Nonetheless, Dr. Saadawi recalls being in a conversation with Boduur in which Boduur reminds her of her duties as a Muslim woman:

‘Get up and wash so you can perform the prayer, and don’t say that you’re ill! Prayer cures you of sickness. It is God who heals. Don’t write any complaint to anyone. God is present. If you are innocent, God will make you victorious. Do not say that you didn’t do anything wrong: you must have done something sinful in your life and then forgotten about it. God could not possibly expose you to pain or torture or prison or beating without a sin on your part. […] You absolutely must stay up all night to pray—the five obligatory prayers are not enough. […] It is important, though, that you keep God in your mind and speech, day and night. Staying up at night to pray is better and more enduring than sleep. You went to the correction cell because you were not staying up at night to pray and because you haven’t memorized the Qur’an. I’ve told you more than once that you must learn two chapters of the Qur’an by heart every week. This is a sacred duty. Whoever does not fulfill it must have her feet whipped fifty times. Who knows, maybe it was God’s will that you were beaten by the hands of others so you would atone for your sins. It’s not enough that you cover your face with a niqaab. You must cleanse your heart of Satan’s whisperings. Woman is nearest to Satan than man—through Eve, Satan was able to reach Adam. Woman was created from a crooked rib and she becomes straightened only through blows which hurt. Her duty is to listen and obey without making any objections—even a blink or a scowl.’ (1986, p.131-2)

In this long conversation, Boduur not only reinforces misconceptions pertaining to Muslim women, but she also depicts Allah as misogynistic and vengeful towards women, the root of all evils. Furthermore, Saadawi provides an illustrated account on veiled women as a whole, degrading them to animals: she says women who wrap their heads make themselves appear “like the heads of crows as they stay carefully in single file, with their white handkerchiefs raised above red eyes or waving through the air around their black heads as they utter the harsh, sharp calls which convey the public
expression of grief” (1986, p.36-7). However, to Saadawi, hope for these women is possible upon the lifting of their veils. She says, “Even those faces hidden under the black veils…when the niqabs were lifted I could see faces that were shining, clear, overflowing with love, a cooperative spirit, and humanity” (1986, p.39).

The silenced veiled woman is a common representation. Irshad Manji, a “Muslim Refusenik,” a term which she coined to mean a Muslim who “refuse[s] to join an army of automatons in the name of Allah” (Manji, 2003, p. 3) is known for degrading Muslim women, particularly veiled Muslim women. As a Muslim living in the West, she makes it clear that her significant presence is the reason to why she is still a Muslim. She says, “No need to choose between Islam and the West. On the contrary, the West made it possible for me to choose Islam, however tentatively. It was up to Islam to retain me” (2003, p.21). By referring to Islam and the West as two separate entities, she further separates the two by electing the women of Islam as a subject of difference to the women of the West. In an interview with George Stroumboulopoulos to promote her film Faith Without Fear, Irshad Manji presents veiled women as backward and frozen in time and space. She says the following about the burqa⁹: it “eras[es] independent thinking” (2007). Furthermore, in her film, she elaborates on the veil, saying it effects women negatively because their “personal expression takes a back seat to the pressures of conformity” (2007). Observing veiled Yemeni students in a classroom setting, she makes the following remark: "unity looks a lot like uniformity" (2007). Later, she tries to experience the “veiled experience” by purchasing and roaming around the streets in a burqa, which she is not hesitant to ridicule. She says, “What’s demeaning is that it erases my individuality” (2007). Upon purchasing the burqa, Manji implicitly ridicules a Yemeni man who tries to sell her a burqa in which he describes it as “the modern Yemen” (2007). To this, she repeats twice, questioning, “This is the modern Yemen? This is the modern Yemen?” (2007). She makes fun of him further by saying, “You realize I’ve always wanted someone to dress me” (2007). Here, her sarcasm is used to demonstrate the complete opposite: unlike the women of Yemen, who lack personal and “modern” expression due to their adherence to Islamic dress code, she is free to express her personal expression; thus, not wanting someone to dress her. Furthermore, as he is dressing her, she tries even further to express the confinement of the veil, saying, “Wooh. That’s tight. […]. I’m having a hard time breathing” (2007). Here, not only is she expressing the veil as an attire that suffocates her individuality, but also her breathing, demonstrating the confinement of the Muslim veil.

Furthermore, Ayaan Hirsi Ali is also accused of portraying Muslim women as silenced and submissive women. Her acclaimed, short film, Submission, used the female body as a canvas to portray the oppressed Muslim woman that is subject to rape, violence, injustice, and incest. The film, which caused a great uproar within the Muslim community in the Netherlands—leading to the tragic murder of Danish filmmaker, Theo van Gogh, by a Muslim extremist, Mohammad Biyar; the world-wide circulation of prophetic caricatures; and, the burning of mosques and Muslim schools—is a film that

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⁹ A burqa is an enveloping outer garment worn by women in some Islamic traditions for the purpose of cloaking the entire body. It is worn over the usual daily clothing. The burqa covers the wearer’s entire body and face except for a small region about the eyes which is covered by a concealing net.
cleverly mashes all the stereotypes based on veiled Muslim women. Koranic verses are printed all over the female’s body (a strategy that has possibly been borrowed by Shirin Neshat, a female Iranian visual artist), verses which prove Allah’s “injustice” towards women. An example of a verse that is used from *The Koran* is “men are the protectors and maintainers of women.” This particular verse is used to show the dominance Muslim men have over their women. Here, Ali uses a certain verse of *The Koran* to distort its meaning, transforming it into a negative and misogynistic verse. Another distorted example, as voiced by the protagonist of the film, is the following verse:

Just as you demand of the believing woman, I lower my gaze and guard my modesty. I never display my beauty and ornaments, not even my face or hands. I never strike with my feet in order to draw attention to my hidden ornaments, not even at parties. I never go out of the house unless it is absolutely necessary, and then only with my father’s permission. When I do go out I draw my veil over my bosom, as you wish. Once in a while I sin. I fantasize about feeling the wind through my hair or the sun on my skin, perhaps on the beach. And I daydream about an extended journey through the world, imagining all the places and people out there. Of course I shall never see these places or meet many people because it is so important for me to guard my modesty in order to please you, oh Allah (2004).

Here, the concept of sin within Islamic belief has also been exaggerated by saying that the fantasizing of wind through one’s hair, or the sun on one’s skin is sin. The main character, whose name is not provided, possibly as a result of her invisibility, is a naked Muslim woman who is praying on the prayer mat. Here, Ali is using nakedness to play with notions of modesty which is associated with the veil. Also, nakedness is used as a response to the female body that is supposed to be covered during prayer time. Nonetheless, the protagonist (also the victim) is a woman who is in love with a man named Raman, but she is forced to marry a religious and strict man named Aziz who constantly abuses her, rapes her, and accuses her of fornication. Furthermore, she is later raped by her uncle, Hakim, and is now carrying his child, an act that is not taken seriously by her parents. Throughout the film, the character makes it clear that she has been betrayed by Allah. She says, “we thought your holiness is on our [her’s and Raman’s] side” and “The verdict that has killed my faith and love is in your holy book. Faith in you. Submission to you. Feels like self betrayal. Oh Allah, giver and taker of life. You admonish all who believe to turn toward you in order to attain bliss. I have done nothing my whole life but turn to you. And now, that I pray for salvation under my veil, you remain silent, like the grave I long for” (2004). However, regardless of her mistreatment, she is still submissive to Allah. She says, “but I submit my will to you” and “So, I cheerfully do as you say and cover my body from head to toe, except when I am in the house, with family members only. Generally, I am happy with my life” (2004). Here, Ali is reinforcing the damned Muslim woman image that submits to Allah because of fear. Nevertheless, it is this particular oppressed image of the veiled woman that leads to representing Muslim women as women who need rescuing (read: colonizing). Such unveiling of the veiled women also leads to a sexual fantasy, just as the act of unveiling implies.
The act of unveiling the veiled woman cannot escape the harem fantasy, a place which Reina Lewis in *Gendering Orientalism* has explained to be the place where “veils were removed on arrival since there is no prohibition on women seeing each others’ faces” (1996, p.155). Reina Lewis explains that the veil “is one of those tropes through which Western fantasies of penetration into the mysteries of the Orient and access to the interiority of the other are fantasmatically achieved” (2007, p.39) because for the male viewer, there is the “desire to penetrate, through his surveillant eye, what is behind the veil” (2007, p.62). The veil, as an off-limits sign, is turning into a fabric that must be unravelled because the veiled woman presents the Western male with a mask, a mask that leaves the male “troubled,” “threatened and seduced at the same time” (2007, p.45). The sexual undertone of the veiled women is beautifully portrayed in Malek Alloula’s *The Colonial Harem*, where he has collected and compiled harem postcards of Algerian women (where “[h]istory knows of no other society in which women have been photographed on such a large scale to be delivered to public view” (1986, p.5)) that were taken and distributed by Western tourists. In these postcards, Algerian women are partially naked, reinforcing concepts of Orientalism. Furthermore, the Western female is also involved in the harem fantasy, not just the men, because Western women in harems succeed “in penetrating deep into the heart of the other, its mysteries, its true nature, its essence” (Lewis, 2007, p.90). Furthermore, her look is just as violating as the male’s, leading the women’s gaze to turn “into a masculine gaze. She takes up the masculine, phallic position and employs his frame in enjoyment, wickedly” (Lewis, 2007, p.90-1).

Other forms of modern day art also further reinforce the sexualized image of the veiled women. In “Mask,” the New York solo debut exhibition of Justine Reyes, Justine displayed photographs of herself in different masks, masks which take the shape of a veil. Part Mexican and part Italian, she has often been mistaken for being from an Islamic nation (2006, p.1). As a result of the aftermath of 9/11, Reyes has taken on this assignment to demonstrate the newfound mysteries the veil has projected on her and others. Reyes “observed firsthand the duality of the veil, as something that can protect a woman from unwelcome leers and also eloquently provoke desire” (2006, p.2). In regards to the former, the veil as a protection, she relies on images of violence that veiled women are associated with, saying, “Through gauzy nylons and lace, they peer with unblinking directness wantonly out at any taker. She is your willing victim, perhaps, who owns you; or the one who kills you, slowly, to your infinite pleasure” (2006, p.1). Hence, some of her masks take the form of gas masks and hazmat gear to further represent the fear and aggression that has been associated with the veil post 9/11. On the contrary, the veil is also represented as danger rather than a protection as it leads to their rape: In some of the photographs, one would think of the veiled woman as a “kidnapper’s mewling prisoner, silenced as she is raped, struggling to breathe” (2006, p.2). In addition, fulfilling the latter part of the duality, Reyes notes the following about the veil: “The mystery that the veil or mask creates is one that is highly sexualized. There is a tension created by veiling. Some people are afraid of not knowing what lies beneath the veil. In this work, I use the mask to explore issues of identity, veiling and the gaze in relationship to power and sexuality” (2006, p.3). With the emphasis on sexuality, the hand-sewn pantyhose veils and the nylons make appropriate choices of
fabric for this project. However, according to Lewis, regardless of the attempts in trying to represent the Oriental veiled women, the “more the Orientalist subject has tried to know and conquer the zone of darkness and mystery, the more he has realized his distance from ‘authentic,’ ‘real’ knowledge of the Orient and its women” (2007, p.73). Thus, leaving “the very act of representing the veil is never represented; the desire that represents the veil cannot be represented” (Lewis, 2007, p.47). However, due to such representations one should consider the following question: Why the fear and the reluctance to accept the veil?

Why Such Hatred toward the Veil?

According to Fatema Mernissi, the image of the veiled woman serves of great significance because “[a]ll debates on democracy get tied up in the woman question and that piece of cloth that opponents of human rights today claim to be the very essence of Muslim identity” (1991, p.188). Here, the veil is used as a distraction. The critique of the veil is a way to use these women as a human shield so that one does not have to talk about any other issues such as the Western reaction to it. Focusing mainly on Quebec’s response to the veil, in “Perceptions of the Hijab in Canada,” Sheila McDonough provides readers with a few responses as to why many are unwilling to accept the veil. In general, McDonough claims that Canada’s distrust of the veil is “linked with this memory of a long history of religious leaders opposing changes in the status of women” (2003, p.122). However, concentrating only on Quebec’s intolerance towards the veil (rather than Canada as a whole) since Quebec, according to McDonough, is arguably the main province in Canada that displays such unacceptance for the veil is due to the following account: “The fact that negative reaction to the hijab 10 may be strongest in Quebec may be linked to the fact that female suffrage and the legal guarantees of women’s rights came later in that province than in the rest of the nation” (2003, p.126). Furthermore, the veil is distrusted because it resembles a uniform and “the sight of uniformed young people awaken bad memories in European society of an association of youth in uniforms with fascist groups” (2003, p.127). This uniform, to many Westerners, is a suffocating item of clothing that prevents women from movement, as mentioned by Homa Hoodfar: “Nonetheless, the imaginary veil that comes to the minds of most Westerners is an awkward black cloak that covers the whole body, including the face, and which is designed to prevent women’s mobility” (2003, p.11). The veil as a uniform is also touched on by Alloula, who says the veiled uniform homogenizes women, leaving them indistinguishable from one veiled woman to another (1986, p.7). Also, the veil is frustrating to many because it “instills uniformity,” and “disappointment and deficiency of expression” (Alloula, 1986, p.11). Such distrust towards the veil makes associating the veil with cynicism easy.

One must question why the urge to distinguish the Muslim veil as something iniquitous. Negative portrayals of the veil make it easy, as argued by Lila Abu-Lughod, for the West to think of the Muslim world incongruent to the Muslim women (2006, p.2). I argue that such a label is necessary in order to constantly have the world divided into two: the East

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10 Here, Sheila McDonough is using the word “hijab” to mean the Muslim veil.
and the West; the progressive and the retrogressive; the Orient and the Occident. Meyda Yegenoglu argues that such a divide is “a process in which both the ‘Western subject’ and the ‘Oriental other’ are mutually implicated in each other and thus neither exists as a fully constituted entity” (1998, p.58). The veil, in particular, is the ultimate symbol by which the West can distinguish the Oriental woman from the Occidental (Lewis, 2003, p.536), creating a further divide between the Oriental repressed woman and the Occidental freed woman. Nonetheless, the veil has “[become] the open target of colonial attack and the spearhead of the assault on Muslim societies” (Ahmed, 1992, p.152). Viewing the veil as a forced garment forced on women by men invites hate towards Muslims and Islam. Furthermore, if Islam equates evil, then there must be an alternative, or in other words, another way to show men and women the correct path; hence, another divide is created: Islam equates immorality and Christianity equates morality.

In “Muslim Women and Islamic Religious Tradition: A Historical Overview and Contemporary Issues,” Sajida S. Alvi illustrates the difficulty the West has when trying to understand Islam: “In search of a typology for Islamic ideology, social scientists and humanists have coined various terms and labels such as ‘secularism,’ ‘Islamic modernism,’ ‘fundamentalism,’ ‘radical Islamism,’ ‘Islamic totalism,’ ‘traditionalism,’ ‘neo-traditionalism,’ and more currently using the term ‘Islamism’” (2003, p.170). Also, in “Perceptions of the Hijab in Canada,” Sheila McDonough provides readers with three occurrences which speak Islamophobia: (i) in the first account (on April 21, 1995), an editorialist, Claudette Tougas, for the newspaper La Presse wrote an article indicating that no one was to blame for the Oklahoma bombing. However, a cartoon by another (showing a Muslim on his knees before a donkey, together agreeing that “the thinkers and the intelligentsia are the enemies of God”) placed right next to the editorial clearly demonstrates that even though the editorialist is arguing that no one is to blame for the bombings, Muslims may be to blame for the Oklahoma bombing (2003, p.129-30); (ii) in the second example, McDonough provides a case in 1993 in which a judge expelled a woman from a courtroom because she was wearing a veil (2003, p.123-4); and, finally, (iii) the third example is dated from 1995 when the CEQ (the federation of Quebec teachers) “agreed by majority vote that no ‘signe ostentaire’ should be permitted in Quebec schools” (2003, p.124). The phrase, “signe ostentaire,” McDonough explains, is also used in debates which take place in France for advocating the veil ban (2003, p.124). Furthermore, more recently, Dutch parliamentarian, Geert Wilders, made a movie titled Fitna (2008) which is also Islamophobic. In this short film, he compares Muslims to the Germans during the Nazi period. He uses very selective Koranic verses to “justify” his arguments and he shows Muslim protestors holding signs which say “Freedom Go to Hell,” “Islam Will Dominate the World,” and “God Bless Hitler” (2008). Moreover, he ends his film with the following:

For it is not up to me, but to Muslims themselves to tear out the hateful verses from the Quran. Muslims want you to make way for Islam, but Islam does not make way for you. The government insists that you respect Islam, but Islam has no respect for you. Islam wants to rule, submit, and seeks to destroy our western civilization. In 1945, Nazism was defeated in
Europe. In 1984, communism was defeated in Europe. Now, the Islamic ideology has to be defeated. Stop Islamisation. (2008)

Muslim women suffocated underneath their veils are the particular images that lead many Westerners to pity Muslim women. Lila Abu-Lughod argues the following: “If one constructs some women as being in need of pity or saving, one implies that one not only wants to save them from something but wants to save them for something—a different kind of world and set of arrangements” (2006, p.5). Nonetheless, the image of the pitied Muslim woman must defuse in order to recognize their agency.

Doing Away with the Pitied Muslim Woman Image

I agree with Leila Ahmed’s statement on veiled women: “My argument here is not that Islamic societies did not oppress women. They did and do; that is not in dispute. Rather, I am here pointing to the political uses of the idea that Islam oppressed women and noting that what patriarchal colonialists identified as the sources and main forms of women’s oppression in Islamic societies was based on a vague and inaccurate understanding of Muslim societies” (1992, p.166). Unfortunately, Muslim societies, along with many other societies, have and continue to degrade women. However, Islam is the only religion constantly attacked; Islamic women have become a popular subject of debate and critical interrogation. The veiled woman is always categorized into a very limited category. The veiled woman is always represented for. The veiled woman can never escape extreme interpretations. I agree with the following comment Fatema Mernissi makes on the veil: “Reducing or assimilating this concept to a scrap of cloth that men have imposed on women to veil them when they go into the street is truly to impoverish this term, not to say to drain it of its meaning […]” (1991, p.95). Furthermore, Leila Ahmed questions why many are willing to attach the veil but hesitate to question society:

It would be unreasonable to fault the young women of today for adopting Islamic dress, as if the dress were intrinsically oppressive—which is how the veil, at least, was viewed by the former colonial powers and by members of the indigenous upper and middle classes who assimilated colonial views. It would be even more unreasonable to fault them for adopting Islamic dress as a means of affirming the ethical and social habits they are accustomed to while they pursue their education and professional careers in an alien, anomic, sexually integrated world. (1992, p.230)

Women who don the veil should not be blamed or questioned for wearing the veil because to do so would be a human rights violation. Moreover, as mentioned by Lila Abu-Lughod, the veil “must not be confused with, or made to stand for, lack of agency” (2006, p.3). As a dress granting agency, veiled women are not secluded from society, but rather the opposite, as eloquently explained by Ahmed: “The adoption of the dress does not declare women’s place to be in the home but, on the contrary, legitimizes their presence outside it” (Ahmed, 1992, p. 224). Hence, sometimes the reliance on analogies is needed in order to prove that the veiled woman, and furthermore, Islam as a religion, is not a threatening and dangerous subject.
The act of covering one’s hair as an indication of modesty is not accepted by many Canadians, as discussed by Sheila McDonough (2003). However, whether the veil is a marker of modesty or not is not important; what is important is why is the veil as an indication of modesty troubling for many to accept when “one or two generations ago, hats were commonly worn by women in churches” (2003, p.141). Furthermore, also looking back in history, Ahmed comments on the following: “It was never argued, for instance, even by the most ardent nineteenth-century feminists, that European women could liberate themselves from the oppressiveness of Victorian dress (designed to compel the female figure to the ideal of frailty and helplessness by means of suffocating, rib-cracking stays, it must surely rank among the more constrictive fashions of relatively recent times) only by adopting the dress of some other culture” (1992, p.244). How is it possible that a culture which disapproves of tight and see-through clothing be accused of pressuring their women to wear veils which disrupt mobility when generations ago, women were confined to tight-fitted corsets even through pregnancy and were not labelled with the negative accusations that Islam is so easily accused of? Because of the negative connotations the veil has been associated with, Lila Abu-Lughod asks: “why are we surprised when Afghan women don’t throw off their burqas when we know perfectly well that it wouldn’t be appropriate to wear shorts to the opera?” (2006, p.3). Why must the West expect Muslim women to dismiss their veils? It would be absolutely inappropriate to ask a nun to not be in her uniform, or ask a priest to not be in his. Also, if it is incorrect to say that Muslim women should abandon their cultural ways in order to adapt to those of the West, then why is it incorrect to say that “Arab and Muslim women need to reject (just as Western women have been trying to do) the androcentrism and misogyny of whatever culture and tradition they find themselves in, but that is not at the same as saying they have to adopt Western culture or reject Arab culture and Islam comprehensively” (1992, p.166). To further “send the message home,” “The Guerilla Girls,” a group of women artists dressed in gorilla masks to fight against discrimination, have dressed up two dolls and described them as having the following characteristics to demonstrate the ridiculousness that is attached to Muslim women: Scheherazade, “the harem girl,” is described as the following:

She’s a curvy, bare-naveled Muslim woman who lives in either a lantern or a harem. The model, when rubbed, appears and disappears to grant wishes. The harem model is one of many wives of a rich and mysterious sheik. She spends all day lounging around with the other wives, hoping to be chosen as the sex object for the night! In her free time she does belly dancing and peels grapes. We based Scheherazade on paintings by 19th-century European artists like Delacroix and Ingres, and on the 1970s TV series, I Dream of Jeannie. Scheherazade wears a halter top, harem pants and a sexy veil that reveals more than it hides. Accessories include toe rings, tons of eye makeup, and heavy jewellery that makes noise when you move her. (2003, p.14).

In addition, Nizreen, the “Good Muslim Wife,” is described as the following:

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11 Scheherazade is a legendary Persian queen and the storyteller of One Thousand and One Nights.
Unfortunate Nizreen! Her father couldn’t find a rich man to marry her so he shipped her out to a fundamentalist who keeps her silent, repressed, invisible, and illiterate! Practically all you can see of her under those robes are her sad, sad eyes! She would never dream of demanding an education, a job, or any rights at all. But she does dream of having a son or daughter who will become a suicide bomber! Comes with brightly colored burka or somber chador. Beneath, dress her any way you like! (2003, p.14).

In the cases of Nizreen and Scheherazade, upon the usage of humour, a message is delivered effectively. Nevertheless, in regards to Islam as a religion that mistreats, Lila Abu-Lughod makes the following statement:

Even if we are critical of the treatment of women in our own societies in Europe or the United States, whether we talk about the glass ceiling that keeps women professionals from rising to the top, the system that keeps so many women-headed households below the poverty line, the high incidence of rape and sexual harassment, or even the exploitation of women in advertising, we do not see this as reflective of the oppressiveness of our culture or a reason to condemn Christianity—the dominant religious tradition (2006, p.6).

However, rather than blaming certain dominant religions, or in this case “reduc[ing] the diverse situations and attitudes of millions of Muslim women to a single item of clothing” (Abu-Lughod, 2006, p.4), we should concern ourselves with “the humane and just treatment of women, nothing less, and nothing more—not the intrinsic merits of Islam, Arab culture, or the West” (Ahmed, 1992, p.168).

Veiled and Unveiled Perceptions

Regardless of the different forms and types of veiling such as the burqa, niqab, chador, abaya, and headscarf, the Muslim veil has turned into one of the most visible symbols that represent the Islamic faith. Becoming a widespread phenomenon, the veil has sparked a lot of controversy and debate. Thus, it comes as no surprise that the reasons for veiling and unveiling have entered the minds of many Muslims and non-Muslims, including myself. For my research, I interviewed five veiled and five unveiled (ages 20-60) Muslim women who reside within the Greater Vancouver area.

I took the following factors into consideration to ensure that I was interviewing women from diverse backgrounds: age, marital status, education background, occupation, and cultural background. The interviews were done all within a three month time period. No interview took longer than forty-five minutes and every interview was held in a place suggested by the participant (either in their home or in a public setting such as a coffee shop). The women were asked to share their reasons for choosing to veil or unveil, their perceptions on Islamic women who veil and unveil, and Western conceptions of veiled and unveiled women. The participants were asked to choose an anonymous name, which many did, while some used their actual names (first names only).
The five veiled women interviewed were Mary (21, Afghani descent), Zara (22, Iranian descent), Rabia (29, Iranian descent), Farzana (34, Afghani descent), and Roqia (51, Afghani descent). Mary is a Pharmacy Technician. Currently engaged, she is still living with her parents. She has been veiled for fourteen years and has been living in Canada for nine years. Before that, she lived in Afghanistan and Iran. Zara is an Assistant Manager at a movie theatre. The highest level of education she has completed is high school. She is single and therefore living at home with her parents. She has been veiled for the past five years. Zara has been living in Canada for ten years and before that, she used to live in Iran and Pakistan. Rabia, a mother of two (one daughter, one son) who is living with her husband and children, has completed her undergraduate degree in Biology and Psychology. Currently, she is a homemaker. She has been veiled for the past ten years and has been living in Canada for twenty years. Before that, Rabia was living in Iran and in Pakistan. Farzana, a mother of three (two sons, one daughter), is a married woman living with her husband and children. With a Bachelor of Arts Degree, Farzana is currently a fulltime mother. She started veiling at the age of nine. She has been living in Canada for sixteen years and previous to that, she used to live in Afghanistan and Iran. Roqia lives with her husband, son, and daughter. With an MA in Persian Literature, she is now the owner of a childcare centre located in her very own home. She took the veil two years ago. She has been living in Canada for the past eleven years. She also used to live in Afghanistan, India, and Pakistan. All the five veiled women practice veiling in the form of a headscarf: their hair and neck are completely covered but their faces are exposed. Also, their hands and feet are also exposed.

The five unveiled women interviewed were Fatema (21, Afghani descent), Zora (23, Iranian descent), Anna Belle (24, African descent (Ivory Coast)), Leila (29, Afghani descent), and Amelia (29, Afghani descent). Fatema is a single woman living at home with her parents. Completing only her high school graduation, she currently works for a day care. She has been residing in Canada for ten years. Before that, she used to live in Afghanistan and then in Pakistan. She has been unveiled for ten years; the only time she was veiled was when she was attending school in Pakistan. Zora has completed her third year university degree in Social Work and she now is a homemaker. She has been living in Canada for twenty-one years, and before she arrived to Canada, she used to live in Iran, India, and Pakistan. She is married and has a daughter. Anna Belle, a woman who has openly been dating her interracial boyfriend of six years, resides with her parents. Completing her Bachelor of Science in Nursing, she is currently a Registered Nurse. At the age of fifteen, she moved to Canada. Before that, she was born and raised in Africa (Ivory Coast). Leila, a twenty-nine year old woman living with her husband, is a Senior Accountant. She is studying business and accounting. Her journey consists of being born in Afghanistan and then moving to Iran. From Iran, she moved to Pakistan, then to India, and then to Canada. Amelia, a twenty-nine year old mother living with her husband and son, is studying to become a Certified General Accountant. She has been living in Canada for nine years. Before that, she used to live in Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and India.
I experienced some minor difficulties upon interviewing which were easy to overcome. Though the majority of the veiled and unveiled women were very open about their experiences, there were a few who were reserved and uncommunicative, and therefore needed encouragement to continue a little further, especially in terms of elaboration. Without trying to appear forceful, I would ask participants to elaborate. I made it very clear that they could take their time upon responding to each question. I waited patiently for a response after every question and sometimes during questions. Through the use of body language, a few participants demonstrated their discomfort; however, as the interview progressed, the participants were feeling more comfortable, leading to a more engaged interview. One woman in particular later revealed that she disclosed information that she should have not disclosed, and therefore asked me to omit it from the interview, which I willingly did.

Reasons for Veiling

In regards to veiling, the participants, both veiled and unveiled, provided the following reasons as to why the veil is worn: submitting to Allah’s command; non-conformism to unjust systems of thought such as universalized ideas of femininity and sexuality; indicator of modesty; deviating from the wrong path; and, participating in political acts. One interpretation of the veil is that it is an immediate response to Allah’s commandments. Every veiled women interviewed agreed that the wearing of the veil is stated in *The Koran*. Obeying deity commands, both Rabia and Zara feel a closer connection to Allah, a connection that not only allows them to become better Muslims, but also better human beings. Rabia says, “The reason why I am still wearing my hijab after ten years is the fact that I know I am closer to Allah than I was [unveiled].” However, executing such instructions to wear the mandated attire is not expressed in oppressive terms; quite the contrary. Being veiled for the past two years, Roqia says the following about her veil: “Since I have worn a veil I feel more comfortable and I think I am free and I can do what I want and it gives me a feeling of inner peace like I am doing something to please Allah by not exposing myself to other things like I would be if I were not covering.” Although Roqia is trying to insert her freedom, Roqia leaves room for speculation by saying “I think I am free.” Exactly how “free” are these women for wearing a veil that they have been advised to wear? Would these women choose to veil if the veil was not “advised” in *The Koran*? Nonetheless, when these veiled women were asked to provide scriptural support that supports the veil, a few of their answers were vague: Zara said, “[Veiling] is in *The Koran* but I do not know exactly where in *The Koran* it says this”; Rabia said, “All of what I have said is in *The Koran*”; and, Mary said, “Wearing hijab is something that covers female modesty.” Roqia and Farzana, on the other hand, were the only veiled woman who gave reference to a surrah. One would think that the majority of these women, if not all—especially since they have been veiled.

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12 During interviewing, some of the women used the word “veil” and “hijab” interchangeably. Arguably, though the hijab to many Muslims is considered a concept of modesty, as opposed to the visual covering of the hair, the hijab is also used to indicate the Muslim veil.

13 A chapter from *The Koran*. 
for many years of their life—would be able to provide actual scriptural support rather than just asserting that it is mentioned in *The Koran*.

The veil, to every veiled women interviewed, has meant non-conformism to unjust systems of thought, specifically designing one’s body for a man. Such universalized ideas of femininity and sexuality are what these women take issue with. Thus, the veil becomes their safeguard and body shield, providing them protection, safety, and relaxation. To Farzana, her veil keeps her from becoming an object of sexual gratification. She says the following:

> By wearing hijab, I find a voice to express my being the way I want, the way I think, the way I believe. I feel like wearing hijab is like breaking the silence, the silence that has been imposed on being a woman in the West because the Western social expectation from a woman is for her to put on makeup, to wear specific types and styles of clothing, to be in certain ways in order to be accepted and liked by the society. This expectation, I believe, suffocates a woman’s thinking power; she becomes a machine that tends to just follow the social order. In fact, she is being silenced. Her actual self is being silenced. When I wear hijab, I find a voice. I am not a passive follower of the pre-molded roles anymore. I prove to the society that I control my life. I have freedom to actively practice my power in choosing the way I want to be.

Farzana’s understanding of the veil is similar to Mernissi’s perception of the word “hijab” in which she describes as three-dimensional and all three dimensions overlapping one another. To Farzana, the female body is a body that needs to be hidden from sight (the first dimension); a body that needs to be separated from the body that is a “passive follower of the pre-molded roles” (the second dimension); and, a body that is a forbidden space (the third dimension). Thus, her understanding of freedom is understood in binary terms. She differentiates herself from the “Western woman” that is “silenced”, “suffocate[d]”, and “pre-molded.” She categorizes the women living in the West as one category—those subject “to put on makeup, to wear specific types and styles of clothing, to be in certain ways in order to be accepted and liked by the society.” Depending on this binary, she assumes that veiled women have a voice and unveiled women are silenced. Farzana is disinclined to believe that veiled women can also “become a machine that tends to just follow the social order.” Moreover, this sense of freedom that Farzana described and the “breaking [of] the silence” that Farzana argues a veil guarantees allows a woman to become an autonomous subject; she will be appreciated for her intellectual qualities, and her physical appearances will subordinate to her intelligence and personality, a view expressed numerously by Rabia. She says:

> It means that I am not being listened to because of the short shorts I wear. I know that if I accomplish something whether in the work place, at school, or anywhere else it would be because of my capabilities and intelligence and not for any other reason. I am not saying that any other women not covering their hair will not advance in life because of their revealing outfits, but when a woman gets a promotion in the West, everyone says ‘oh she probably slept with the boss’; However, if a Muslim women who follows the Islamic conduct of hijab were to get a promotion at work, none of her
friends or family or colleagues would say that she got the job because she slept with the boss, but they will say she got the position because of her capabilities. Before wearing the hijab, I used to feel the eyes follow when I walked on the streets, however now I know men do not do this to me any longer, which means I am being treated as a human being and not a piece of meat.

Like Farzana, Rabia also exercises her freedom by seeing herself in opposition to women living in the West. However, whereas Farzana’s perception was that unveiled women were suspected of conforming to roles of femininity, Rabia’s perception is more extreme because she associates sexual promiscuity and lack of “capabilities” with unveiled women. As the interview progresses, Rabia’s guarantee of sexual freedom is again discussed: “Like I said the hijab to me is a form of freedom. I am judged for my actions and not for what I wear. I know when I go to a job interview that I got it based on my abilities and not for how much cleavage I was able to show.” Again, the dichotomy between the veiled and unveiled woman is emphasized, presenting a problem: just as the belief that veiled Muslim women are the ultimate symbols of backwardness and oppression, the image of the Western provocative, promiscuous, and immoral female has also not been destroyed. Also, not having to rely on her sexuality, Rabia feels a greater sense of freedom and protection when walking down the streets, knowing that men’s violating eyes will not follow her. A similar response came from Zara: “You’re more comfortable walking home in the middle of the night knowing that no one will approach you or pass a vulgar comment.” The following response is also presented by Leila Ahmed who argues: “The [veil] also protects them from male harassment. In responding to a questionnaire, women stated that wearing Islamic dress resulted in a marked difference in the way they were treated in public places” (2003, p.223).

The veil, as a protection from universalized ideas of femininity and sexuality, has been left as an indicator of modesty (in terms of dress). Because of the symbol of modesty attached to the veil, Reina Lewis argues that “there is no single garment that equates to the veil: different versions of clothing that are held suitably to preserve modesty in gender-mixed environments have been adopted by different countries” (2003, p.428). In surrah 24, verse 31 of The Koran, the following is said: “And say to the believing women that they cast down their looks and guard their private parts and do not display their ornaments except what appears thereof, […] and let them not strike their feet so that what they hide of their ornaments may be known; and turn to Allah all of you, O believers so that you may be successful” (Shaheeh International, The Koran, 1997, p.482). It is this section that many Muslims use as a defence to argue that the veil is a marker of modesty. According to my Muslim community, which consists of the Afghani community that resides within the Greater Vancouver area, the forbidding of the striking of one’s feet has been translated by some as the covering of one’s feet and/or as the forbidding of women dancing in the presence of a man. And the insistence of hiding one’s “ornaments” has been translated as covering one’s beauty (see chapter three) and therefore going unnoticed.

In opposition, many argue that the veil only provides the illusion of modesty and serves to absolve men of the responsibility for controlling their lustful behaviour. Samira
Ahmed, the narrator of the film, *Women and Islam: Islam Unveiled* (parts I and II), takes her viewers on a journey of struggle as a Muslim woman living in the West. Born in Iran and now living in London, Samira is intrigued as to why many Muslim women “are interpreting their religion this way” (2006). She believes that the veil invites more attention—even sexual attention—rather than prevents attention. Anna Belle and Amelia, both unveiled women, also agree that the reasoning behind the veil is to cover up female beauty; however, they do not agree with this reasoning. Amelia argues that to wear the veil in Western countries is irrational because it defeats the purpose of veiling: rather than diverting the attention elsewhere, Muslim women are attracting attention to themselves, because the veil is something new and foreign to the West. Here, Amelia is assuming that any form of attention is bad; some attention may be sparked because of curiosity rather than the kind of attention Muslim women are trying to prevent, which is lustful, and therefore sinful behaviour from men. Also, Amelia is assuming that the West is completely ignorant of the veil’s existence.

Not attracting sexual attention, the veil is an effective barrier which prevents these women from wrongdoings. The veil, to Zara, is a constant reminder of Judgment Day, allowing her to live her life patrolling her behaviours and actions. Accordingly, to Rabia, her veil helps her to follow the correct path:

> I know wearing the hijab has changed my life, if not drastically, but there are many changes that I myself notice. First of all my physical appearance: I no longer wear revealing clothes; I no longer dance in parties where both of the sexes are present, and I watch how I behave or speak because I do not want people to judge my religion based on my behavior. I don’t want anyone to say so this is how Muslims are in a negative form. I try to be the best to represent the Muslim women not only in my clothing, but also in my speech, behavior, manner, and all the other aspects to the best of my ability.

To her, wearing the veil is a great responsibility because she feels that she has to set positive examples in order for veiled Muslim women to be accepted in a positive light. And, the idea that the veil is a barrier that prevents sin from occurring is also expressed by Zara. She says, “I am able to have conversations with men knowing that I will be guarded. And, my parents trust me having male friends because they know I won’t act on it.” Homa Hoodfar and Leila Ahmed also present this viewpoint. Hoodfar mentions that when communicating with the opposite sex, many veiled women agreed that “since donning the veil, it has become easier to interact with men, both Muslim and non-Muslim” (Hoodfar, 2003, p.21). Zora, an unveiled woman, also reaffirms this belief, arguing that had she been veiled, she would have led a wiser and less rebellious life: “I am quite certain that being veiled would have affected whom I would have associated with and what I would have been doing with these people. I do feel that being veiled would have almost encouraged me not to slide so far off the path.” Nevertheless, just as it is important to consider why Muslim women choose to veil, it is equally important to consider why Muslim women do not choose to veil. Finally, veiling was practiced because it demonstrated political action. To Mary, the veil gives her freedom because there is less attention directed to her. She says, “I am fine wearing my hijab. I feel like I am free because less people pay attention to me because
I am covered.” Her practice of seclusion is a political act. Her seclusion is seen positively. This concept of seclusion due to veiling that is accepted as something positive is also demonstrated by Fatema Mernissi: “The seclusion of women, which to Western eyes is a source of oppression, is seen by many Muslim women as a source of pride. The traditional women interviewed all perceived seclusion as prestigious” (2003, p.493).

Reasons for Unveiling

In regards to choosing to go unveiled, the five unveiled women provided the following reasons: veiling is not mentioned in *The Koran* and they are not ready for the “it” factor. Four out of the five unveiled women claimed that there is no reference of the veil in their holy text. Like the veiled women, they too did not provide actual scriptural support: Leila said, “I have read *The Koran* and did not interpret that women are required to wear a veil. I interpreted that women are required to dress with modesty, but where do you draw the line? I only found evidence in *The Hadith*, which are somewhat interpretations of *The Koran* which could have an element of culture at that time than religion”; Amelia said, “I am more comfortable in not wearing a veil because it gives me a sense of freedom, equality (not only to men, but to successful women of my generation), confidence, and self-fulfillment”; and, Anna Belle said, “None that I can think of. All of my reasoning [for believing the veil is not mentioned in *The Koran*] comes from my head.” Whereas Amelia and Anna Belle do not even answer the question, Leila answers the question without providing full details. Leila says that modesty is a factor without providing a specific verse from *The Koran*, and she says that the veil is evident in *The Hadith* without providing a specific teaching. Zora and Fatema, however, are the only two unveiled women who admit that the veil is a command placed on every Muslim woman. Zora says, “I am not going to say that I have Islamic support on why I am not being veiled. I am just going to say that it is my own personal flaw in not being strong enough to be veiled and to be confident in being veiled.” Though she states that she cannot provide an actual surrah or verse that demonstrates her view, she makes it clear that the veil is mandated: “I know that in *The Koran* it says that women must be veiled as Prophet Mohammad’s wives were veiled.” However, she too is confused since she questions what the “correct” form of veiling is: “I do still wonder what the correct form of veiling is? Which Islamic culture has gotten the correct form of being veiled? Is it a burqa, a scarf, or is it just to be plain conservative with no headpiece? Sometimes I wonder if all forms are right.” Fatema, on the other hand, is able to provide scriptural support on the veil even though she does not veil herself. She alludes to two verses, but claims that she cannot remember the second one: “In *The Koran* it said that women should draw their veils over their heads so they do not display their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, and their sons. This is so that other men do not draw attention to them in a wrong way. And, there is also another verse in *The Koran* in which the veil is mentioned, but I am not sure which one it is.”

Another common reason for not veiling is because some of these women are not ready for the “it” factor. According to Rabia, the veil is a huge responsibility because it affects one’s life in numerous ways (ie. dress, behavior, sexuality, actions, etc…). She claims that one has to be brave with their identity in order to practice the veil, saying, “A Muslim
woman in the West that keeps her hijab shows that she is a strong individual and is confident about herself and her identity, and if she is able to fight with the West in order to keep her identity, then she can fight for all of her other rights as an individual." The brave identity that is demonstrated by veiled women is also expressed by Zora, as she demonstrates her weak character in juxtaposition to veiled women. She says, "I have seen several people I love treated negatively or differently just because they have worn the veil. I do not feel that I am a confident and strong individual to take on these prejudices thrown specifically towards myself if I were to be veiled." Again, Zora alludes to her lack of bravery when asked if she could provide scriptural support for her position in not veiling, she says, "But the point is I am not going to say that I have Islamic support on why I am not being veiled. I am just going to say that it is my own personal flaw in not being strong enough to be veiled and to be confident in being veiled." Zora’s fear in veiling is that the veil would make her feel insecure and uncomfortable because of how her husband and her in-laws may treat her and how the veil may affect her career choices. Even more, she worries that her child’s friends or her child’s friend’s parents may treat her differently. On the contrary, Amelia’s reasons for not veiling have led to her brave character. She says, "Not wearing a veil has contributed to my self-respect, confidence, personal, and career success."

However, it is this great responsibility, which I call the “it factor,” that a few of these unveiled women are not ready to take on. Both Zora and Fatema have claimed that they are not ready for “it.” Fatema reveals: “I don’t wear a veil simply because I am not ready for it.” Later she says, “I don’t mind wearing one at all it’s just that it isn’t so easy carrying it out.” At first, I wondered what this “it” meant, but as they continued to speak, it became clear to me that they were referring to the accountabilities that come with wearing the veil. Thus, the fear in wearing the veil also leads to the fear in “wearing” the other qualities that proceed with the veil, such as the change of dress and the change of one’s actions and behaviours. However, though Fatema does believe the veil is prescribed to every Muslim woman, she also says, “I do not think that not wearing a veil makes a big difference” because to her, she does not believe that by wearing the veil she will become a better person. She says, “There is much more to be done before I would wear a veil.” However, Fatema is not against wearing the veil in the near future. Fatema says she may take the veil after marriage and Zora prays to have the courage of veiling one day in her life. She says, “I do pray and hope that Allah will eventually instill and encourage the blessing of such a practice upon me.” Besides the ongoing debate as to why a Muslim woman should veil or should not veil, another area of investigation worth examining is another ongoing debate: is the veil oppressive or liberating?

The women who are veiled argue that the veil is liberating while the women who are unveiled argue that the veil is oppressive. Zara, in particular, expresses herself through a song titled “Free” by Sammi Yousuf, an Afghani singer and songwriter, to which she claims the song perfectly expresses her feelings towards the veil. She advises me to search for this song, and I discover that her reasons for veiling are quoted directly from the song. She says, “I’m truly free and this piece of scarf on me I wear so proudly to preserve my dignity, my modesty, and my integrity.” Thinking back, I remember the
words coming out of Zara’s mouth like a song. On the contrary, Anna Belle and Leila feel a greater freedom in comparison to veiled women because they have advanced in their careers. Anna Belle says, “Not wearing the veil has probably affected me in a positive way and by that I mean that I probably got jobs that I potentially would not have gotten had I been wearing the scarf.” And, later she shares: “I do feel like I have more freedom over women who wear the veil because I have family members who have been denied jobs because they wear the veil or have had to entirely switch careers because of the veil, so yes I do feel like women who wear the veil are oppressed.” Leila too feels unrestrained; she says that not wearing a veil “opens up more opportunities for girls in terms of career advancement.” Additionally, Anna Belle feels more freedom for the following reasons: “It probably has also spared me problems crossing the border to the US or somewhere else. And, I’d bet my hand that it has spared me thousands of looks and judgments.” Hence, for these three unveiled women, their freedom is understood in opposition to veiled women, thus creating a binary: the veiled woman who does not succeed in terms of career advancement and the unveiled woman who does succeed.

The only exceptions are Zora and Fatema, who feel that being veiled or unveiled does not signify oppression or liberation. Zora says, “Personally, I don’t think I see either freedom or oppression in the action of veiling or unveiling. However, what I do see is that there are situations around women that entail actions of freedom and actions of oppression. However, I see this in all of women (regardless of being veiled or unveiled).” Fatema, on the other hand, says, “Do I feel any freedom from not wearing a veil? No, none whatsoever.” In spite of her claim, Fatema contradicts herself, arguing that it is easier to find a job when one is unveiled. Furthermore, the veil as an expression of liberation or oppression is not the only subject that is disputed amongst these women; the age in which veiling has to be practiced is also stirring controversy. Rabia argues that females are to wear the veil at the age of nine, covering their entire body except for the face, the hands, and the feet. Mary, on the other hand, took on the veil at the age of seven, explaining “that is the time that God has asked girls to be covered.” According to my experience, I recall that age did play a factor in veiling, but not always. The moment a female entered her menstruation cycle, she was required to veil. For some girls, menstruation occurred at a younger age, and for some menstruation occurred at an older age. However, some members of my family veil their daughters at a really young age (at the age of five or six), so that by the time they reach that age where they are supposed to veil (whether it being younger than the age of nine, or older), they have already adjusted to the pressures of the veil. Also, this is done so that when they reach an older age—where they are capable of making their own decisions—they will not rebel and take their veils off because they have been conditioned to wearing the veil at a young age. Furthermore, some women veil upon entering marriage, upon old age, or after they have made a pilgrimage to Mecca.

The Discriminated Women

Discrimination was another serious area that was examined. Veiled women were asked if they were either treated poorly or well for veiling both within their own Islamic
community\textsuperscript{14} and outside of the community.\textsuperscript{15} Similarly, unveiled women were also asked if they were treated poorly or well for unveiling both within the Islamic community and outside of the community. What was interesting to find was that all of the five veiled women faced equal discrimination, both within and outside of their communities. Even though all five were greatly respected for veiling amongst older generations and other women who were also veiled, the only form of discrimination these women received were from Muslim women who were unveiled. Zara comments that her veil is a popular area of discussion, saying, “As a Muslim who veils, there are those Muslims who don’t veil and tell you ‘why do you hide behind that scarf?’ It’s heartbreaking sometimes to see your fellow Muslims trying to talk you into taking off your scarf.” Being persuaded into taking her veil off by individuals who categorize outside of the Muslim community is not mentioned by Zara; only her “fellow Muslims” place such pressures on her. However, with those who are veiled, Zara feels welcome and a sense of belonging, saying, “When I see someone who is veiled as I am, we always say ‘salam alaykum’ [a way of greeting] even though we do not know each other. It’s a really nice feeling. It’s like being amongst people you know.” Meanwhile, Roqia is not pressured by her Muslim community to unveil; instead, she is treated as backward. She says, “A small number of people think that I am a low class or a villager.” Farzana, on the other hand, discusses that her Islamic community views her as overtly religious and fundamental.

Not all of these unveiled women share negative views on veiled women. Anna Belle, Zora, and Fatema have associated veiled women with bravery, admiring their courage for veiling in Western societies. Anna Belle notes on the following: “Don’t get me wrong, despite the fact that I don’t wear [the veil], I have immense respect for women who do because that shows me the amount of commitment they have to their religious beliefs, especially when it’s thirty degrees and they are hanging out at the park wearing their veils. Kudos to them! Of course that is assuming that they made the choice to wear the veil because I’m sure the majority of women who wear the veil did not have a choice.”

Furthermore, Zora says, “I usually view women who are veiled as strong individuals. I think they are able to stand for what they believe, and they show it in their daily practice.” Fatema says, “For the people who do wear them, hats off to them because I am sure it isn’t easy. It’s extremely hard to find a job and it’s also hard fitting in.” This concept of bravery that is associated with the veiled woman is also reaffirmed by both Roqia and Rabia. In terms of prejudices faced outside of their communities, all of these women were victims. Rabia explains her mistreatment for veiling because of people’s lack of education; Mary explains her unjust treatment because the veiled woman is associated with terrorist activities; Roqia explains her ill-treatment due to the fact that the veiled woman is represented as backward; and, Farzana explains her debasement because she is viewed as fundamentalist. Nonetheless, Leila explains why discrimination is present within these women. Pitying veiled women, she explains that

\textsuperscript{14} Here, I am not identifying the Islamic community as one homogenous entity. The “Islamic community”, like any other community, is diverse in ethnicity, class, etc.

\textsuperscript{15} The term “community” is a complex term and is diverse in ethnicity, class, etc. However, I will not be focusing on class; I will be focusing just on the veil.
they are constantly marginalized because “of the never ending struggle to convince people that they are not a stereotype, essentially one of those who are predominated by men and are not allowed to go to school, work, etc., but rather are capable of taking any career challenges.” However, even though Roqia is treated poorly outside of her community, she is also accepted, saying, “Fortunately, Vancouver is so multicultural that people are so used to seeing all different kinds of dress.” Furthermore, just as veiled women are treated poorly for veiling among Muslims who do not veil; unveiled women are also treated poorly for unveiling among Muslims who veil.

All of the unveiled women, except for Anna Belle, have faced discrimination for unveiling within their communities. Leila, Amelia, and Zora are perceived as unreligious in comparison to veiled women: Leila says, “By not wearing a veil, people in my community judge me as one that has deviated from the path of the Islamic religion, and most of the time the judgment comes without understanding”; Amelia says, “Of course the Muslim community is biased in favor of people who wear a veil; and, Zora says, “I feel that the Muslim community sees me as unreligious because I am unveiled.” Zora, however, also admits that she herself discriminates against unveiled woman, saying:

Women who are Muslim and unveiled, I perceive them as not as religious as women who are veiled. Maybe I pass this very ridiculous judgment because that was what I was told growing up (by my family and my Muslim community). Or, maybe because it reflects my own life, because I am unveiled and I am not as religious as other veiled women, so I might assume that is the case for other unveiled women.

And, Fatema, in particular, is constantly asked by Muslims as to why she goes unveiled, especially since the majority of her family members are veiled, leaving her noticeable. She even claims that her suitors keep insisting that she veil. Anna Belle is neither treated poorly nor well for unveiling. She says, “My Muslim community equals my family here and I am treated normally for unveiling, because half of the women in my family do not wear the veil, so I have no problems there.”

Not all of the veiled women interviewed had negative views of unveiled women. Rabia answered in the following when asked how she perceives unveiled women: ‘This is not a proper question to ask of the Muslim community.” And, Mary said the following: “I don’t care [if unveiled women choose not to veil]. Everyone has their own way of living, so I respect everyone’s beliefs.” Meanwhile, none of the five unveiled women are scrutinized for unveiling outside of the community: Amelia claims that she is “supported” and “respected”; Leila states that she is looked upon as a “mentor and role model”; Zora is seen as “more similar to them [people belonging outside of the Muslim community]”; Anna Belle is treated “fine”; and, Fatema is “not bothered.”

Conclusion

Veiled women are represented as retrogressive, fundamental, homebound, silenced, and oppressed in popular culture and certain areas of scholarship whereas unveiled women are represented as progressive and forward-thinking. Thus, veiled and unveiled women are seen as two separate entities: the good Muslim versus the bad Muslim.
Images of the oppressed and silenced veiled Muslim women are an important image for the West because it is a distraction. The critique of the veil is a way to use these women as a human shield so that one does not have to talk about any other issues such as the Western reaction to it.

Interviewing all ten participants, I have come to the conclusion that there is not one specific reason for choosing to veil or unveil. Furthermore, I have also come to the conclusion that the demonstration of agency through veiling or unveiling cannot be represented in one way. Agency, a term I defined as the state of being in which one is in action or exerting power, is evident in Muslim women’s reasoning for veiling. However, each veiled women’s experience of their own agency differs from those of other veiled women’s experience of agency. Whether a women veils for reasons of protecting herself from male sexual behavior, or excluding herself from unjust systems of thought such as universalized ideas of femininity and sexuality, she is claiming her agency by demonstrating that she is in action and exerting her power. However, veiled women’s experience of their own agency differs from those of unveiled women; hence, just as veiled women veil to demonstrate their agency, unveiled women choose not to veil to demonstrate their agency. By choosing to unveil, unveiled women demonstrate their agency over veiled women by arguing that they are in a greater position of power because they are granted more job opportunities than veiled women. Also, they are recreating the stereotypical Muslim woman image that is retrogressive, homebound, and secluded in the confines of her veil, an image that is not suitable for a woman living in the West. Hence, women wearing the veil and women not wearing the veil both send strong messages.

Nevertheless, the goal of this project is not to argue who has more agency—veiled women or unveiled women—rather, the goal of this project is to argue that veiled women’s expression of agency does not differ much from unveiled women’s expression of agency. Both women, veiled and unveiled, claim their agency in different ways. Furthermore, Western women’s sense of agency is also no different from veiled women. Instead, it is the perception of the lack of agency by Western Others that is the real problem for veiled women and not the veil itself. However, one might question exactly how free a choice a Muslim woman can make if she exists within a predominantly patriarchal culture, time, situation, and religion. Regardless of the demonstration of agency veiled women convey through the veiling, I argue that a Muslim woman would not veil if the notion of veiling had not been introduced by religious text or cultural practice. Hence, a Muslim woman does not have that much of a free choice for veiling because she exists within a patriarchal culture, time, situation, and religion.

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