

Stories That Would Make Her Feel Real: Heterosexual Domination and Distorted Subjectivity

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Feminists have used terms such as bad sex, gray sex, and gray rape to describe heterosexual experiences that do not quite feel like rape to those who experience them, but that do not quite feel right, either. In some of these experiences, the ambiguity lies in the women's admitted acquiescence to unwanted sexual overtures. Making sense of such experiences remains a challenge for feminism. It is tempting to resolve the ambiguity by leaning on binaries of guilt and innocence, injustice and justice, crime and "normal" behavior. But some feminist scholars, notably Ann Cahill and Linda Alcoff, have articulated what many women who have experienced gray sex know: many "normal" or normative heterosexual behaviors harm women in ways that binary approaches do not illuminate. A key harm, according to Alcoff, is the potential for unjust but normalized gray sex to harm women's subjectivity or self-making capacities.

This paper is part of a larger project exploring the power dynamics of heterosexual "gray sex": everyday heterosexual interactions that fall somewhere between unambiguous rape and "just sex," to use Nicola Gavey's term. My larger argument is that our thinking about gray sex will be furthered by understanding it (or at least some instances of it) as a form of domination. Domination, however, cannot be assumed to simply reduce the dominated person to a passive object. The experience of acquiescing to unwanted sex shows that one can be simultaneously dominated and agentic. But what does that mean for the ongoing project of self-making? This paper focuses on this question, divided into two parts: how such experiences affect women's subjectivity over time, and what such experiences tell us about the ways in which women's experiences of subjectivity challenge and exceed the ideal of the sovereign subject. In other words, rather than approaching gray sex merely as a puzzle for theory to solve, I see women's experiences of gray sex as offering insights into the functioning of power.

I take as given the idea that power functions in part by producing subjectivity. We are always already interpellated; there is no pure, inner subject. So I mostly concur with the ways Gavey and Lynn Phillips have applied a Foucauldian approach to ambiguous sexual experiences. We can explain much of what looks like girls' and women's complicity with mistreatment when we apply a productive theory of power. In some cases--for example, when women pretend to have more interest in sex than they really do, or fake

orgasm--it is useful to see that power's functioning does not depend on an individual man acting in a "dominating" (much less violent) manner. In such situations the power dynamics in play may even be seen as internal (in some sense) to the woman, and not elicited by the man. Such an approach also potentially sheds much light on men by reminding us that their subjectivities are also produced by power. For Foucault (and others who develop similar theories of power), there is always the potential for resistance to power because its logic must be reproduced in embodied interactions (1997). At any moment, persons might reject the norm operating to shape the interaction.

There are theoretical challenges to this approach to power that I will not rehearse here except to say that when we look at everyday domination, we need a theory of power that acknowledges embodied inequality and conflict. Men and women do not enter into sexual encounters as equal subjects; power produces masculine and feminine subjectivities in ways that reproduce inequality (Cahill 2001). The tension between the lack of overt conflict in these situations and the underlying exploitation is not illuminated much if we only focus on the internalization of discursive forms of power, or the ubiquitous potential for resistance. We see over and over again in the empirical literature as well as popular accounts that women *consciously* understand the importance of consent, *consciously* reject the idea that they should be sexually compliant, but still do not actually resist in the moment. There's a persistent, confusing, maddening gap between belief and action. Embodied, asymmetrical interactions are only partly explained by a Foucauldian theory of power.

Thinkers such as Cahill and Alcoff have persuasively argued that sexual violence and nonviolent sexual experiences themselves also work to shape subjectivity. My core question is, *how* do experiences of sexual domination in which women comply with unwanted sex shape their subjectivity? I have argued previously that such experiences entail practices of agency on the part of women, and suggested that it is *because* such experiences not only allow but depend on women's agentic practices that their effects on women's subjectivity are significant. "Gray sex" might not be traumatic or feel like much of anything at the time, but its production of compliance in the moment potentially produces a certain kind of subject in the longer term. Women strive to shape their own sexual

subjectivity. Many even imagine their sexuality in rebellious terms, crafting themselves as “bad girls,” rejecting slut shaming and purity culture. But their experiences are also powerful shapers of that subjectivity, and we cannot understand the meanings of those experiences if we exclude domination from our frame.

I treat subjectivity as the shape of the self, influenced by forces from within and without, but particularly by the interplay of forces. Subjectivity is an ongoing project with only minimal coherence on this view; it is plastic, elastic, and fundamentally relational. This is not to say, however, that its shape cannot be distorted. Certain embodied interactions initiated by another person provoke responses that cannot be called spontaneous, but that are agentic. It is at this moment that confusion can arise. “Did I do that? Did I agree to that? Did I want that? I acted as if I did, but now I think I didn’t...” At worst, such experiences can generate a kind of self-abnegating subjectivity, even a kind of undead subjectivity, in which part of the self is silenced or killed. But, to maintain our focus on power, it’s important to understand how this occurs as part of a larger process of crafting one’s own subjectivity. We need to attend to the ways in which women work to become subjects, seeking stories that make us feel “real and alive,” how that effort can be distorted, and how those distortions might be repaired.

Dominated agency and self-making

I take as my starting point Alcoff’s idea that sexual violation harms our relationships to ourselves: our self-making capacities or subjectivity itself (2018, 122). It is “the practical activity of caring for the self,” not an inviolable core, “natural sexual self,” or sovereign subject that is violated (145). But the ways in which sexual violation affects subjectivity are not entirely obvious, and may be especially obscure when women exercise some agency under conditions of domination.

As I have argued elsewhere, sexual domination does not function by simply undermining agency; it may recruit our agency (Kogl 2021, Kogl 2022). This is especially clear in cases of “gray sex”; more specifically, in situations in which women acquiesce to sex they really don’t want. What I want to explore here are the effects on one’s subjectivity of such exercises of agency. This is not to take the focus off of men who

dominate women, to blame victims, or to depoliticize their experience. I use the term “domination” rather than “violation” precisely to emphasize a range of normative heterosexual behaviors as forms of unjust power. These everyday forms of domination are also linked to larger, unjust hierarchies in that they are scaffolded by productive power, and also reproduce sexist domination writ large. Moreover, the question of how domination shapes subjectivity is not limited to effects on one’s *sexual* subjectivity, but more generally on one’s self-making capacities, or practical activities of care for the self. Alcoff argues that “the events of violation themselves have effects on our sexual subjectivity, regardless of the intentions of the rapist” (111). I would put this in more general language: the experience of sexual domination has effects on our subjectivity. I would also add that there are specific effects on one’s subjectivity of knowing that one has exercised some agency in the course of one’s own domination, whether that agency has taken the form of saying yes when one wants to say no, normalizing what is happening either in the moment or afterwards, never telling anyone what happened, or demonstrating kindness or compassion to one’s dominator.

To explore these effects further, we need to distinguish agency from subjectivity. At times Alcoff implies such a distinction; at others the relationship between agency and subjectivity is not entirely clear. For instance, she writes about an ambiguous experience of her own:

Events such as the one to which I was subjected are part of a constellation of normative, or commonly accepted, behaviors that too often curtail the development of women’s and girls’ sexual agency: that is, their ability to develop forms of self-regard strong enough to resist the accepted rules of engagement. Hence, such events should be judged not in isolation, but as part of a cultural pattern that stymies the sort of sexual subjectivity that Beauvoir called for as necessary for women to develop their personhood. (7)

She goes on to list agency together with subjectivity: “[w]hat we are concerned with is a violation of sexual agency, of subjectivity, of our will. We should also be concerned with

the ways in which our will has been formed” (12). Pointing out that empirical work about women “consenting” to avoid being raped highlights that nonconsensual and consensual categories overlap, she argues that one’s agency is still violated if one “consents” to avoid being raped (114). However, she also says that

I take persons...to have in most cases *some* agency in the “work of ourselves on ourselves.” Hence I want to follow Nicola Gavey’s advice to resist using “false consciousness” to explain the ways in which women will sometimes avoid using the term “rape” for events that would seem to fall under this rubric, such as giving in to sex to avoid being raped. (115)

Rejecting glib accusations of “denial” as well, Alcoff suggests that we might see women’s interpretations of their own experience as forms of agency, even when those interpretations seem self-defeating or counterintuitive to a feminist advocate or researcher.

My work is not just indebted to Alcoff; it is an attempt to respond to her call to “better understand the on-the-ground formations of sexual subjectivities” (115) and “shift the concern about power and agency to a kind of meta-level, not at the point of an actual choice, but at the practices and discourses by which choices come into existence as intelligible and desirable” (89). My goal is to help demonstrate her claim that “sex deemed harmless by the mainstream may well be eroding women’s lives, subjectivity, agency, and self-regard” (83). So the following questions are aimed at furthering what I see as her project of thinking about how sexual violation has persistent effects on women’s capacities for developing personhood.

Most basically, what is the difference between agency and subjectivity? Is the bar for agency low or high, and how much normative work does agency do? Is “sexual agency” really the “ability to develop forms of self-regard strong enough to resist the accepted rules of engagement”? This seems like a high bar for agency, and assigns agency significant political work. It would then be consistent to say that consenting to avoid “rape” would *not* be an exercise of agency, not even the “agency of self-protection” (7), but instead a

violation of agency. But then how can a woman calling that experience “sex” (not rape) *also* be a form of agency? Does this “resist the rules of engagement”?

We can set the bar high or low for agency, and make it do more or less normative work. I suggest a more minimalist or agnostic approach, in keeping with Lois McNay and Laina Bay-Cheng. For McNay, agency cannot be confused with liberation; for Bay-Cheng, “agency is everywhere, and agency is not enough.” We may see gray sex more clearly if we lift as much normative weight from agency as possible. Of course exercising agency is better than not. But when a woman consents to sex because she feels she’ll be raped if she doesn’t, or chooses to interpret her own experience not as rape but as “just sex” (when she’d call the same experience rape if it happened to someone else), we might pause before attaching too much normative value to her agency. At the same time, we might pause before redefining such exercises as non-agentic. This is not to presume false consciousness. Counterintuitive interpretations of one’s experience need not be literally true to challenge the most fundamental meaning of domination, which is to treat the dominated person as if they were an empty vessel or not even “in the room” (Kogl 2021). This approach calls for caution in ascribing a priori normative meanings to agency.

I am in firm agreement with Gavey’s warning against glib dismissals of women’s own stories about their experiences, and with Alcoff’s call to center the voices of victims/survivors, and to use theory to enable more clear understanding of their words. My aim is to enable our analysis of the ways in which domination allows or even depends upon certain practices of agency, which implies that those practices in no way lighten the normative weight of domination. If we conflate agency with subjectivity or with liberation we risk reinstating the assumption that domination and agency are mutually exclusive (a perspective that derives from the experiences of dominators, not dominated people). Moreover, if we do not think carefully about the ways in which agency and subjectivity differ, we may miss some of the ways in which women’s experiences of subjectivity exceed and challenge the notion of sovereign subjectivity that still shapes discourses around sexual experience.

Not despite but because of the agency exercised within them, gray sexual experiences undermine the process of self-making. The kinds of agency exercised under

conditions of domination need to be problematized or at least clearly distinguished at a conceptual level from self-care and liberation. Alcoff calls the consent standard a “low bar for sexual agency”; I’d suggest agency is a low bar if what we really are concerned with are self-making capacities. My focus here, however, isn’t on the practices of agency that women demonstrate under conditions of domination or violation. My focus is on the question of how agentic practices might effect a deterioration or disruption in our subjectivity. It is increasingly clear that “agency is everywhere, but agency is not enough”; what is less clear is the relationship between agency and subjectivity.

Subjectivity as the shape of the self

I suggest we imagine subjectivity as the shape of the self, crafted from both within and without, at the surface where the inside meets the outside. Subjectivity is a full vessel, but its boundaries are permeable and its shape is in constant flux. That shape is not entirely under any one person’s control, but due to its plasticity it is vulnerable to pressure, erosion, rupture, unraveling. With every agentic act we shape our own subjectivity, whether that act is a response to terrible constraints or an effort to further our own liberatory projects. The ideal of the sovereign subject implies that liberation depends on our ability to shape ourselves solely from the inside, that the unyielding vessel is the most free, and that certain violations shatter us, perhaps permanently. By contrast, the full vessel metaphor implies a constitutive outside, and implies that liberation might depend on a certain kind of relationship between various pressures bearing on the surface from different directions, including conflicting pressures from within. It allows for the vessel to be rhizomal: knitted together with other vessels, akin to plant cells permeated by mycorrhizae. This vessel might be more like a heart than a rigid container. Like a literal heart, its shape might be harmfully distorted by certain traumas. (In “broken heart syndrome,” or takotsubo cardiomyopathy, acute stress causes a temporary distortion of the left ventricle, causing the heart’s shape to resemble a Japanese octopus trap, or takotsubo.) We might, in some situations, accommodate our experiences in ways that distort the shape we had intended for ourselves: both making a space for something where there was none before, as well as making something feel comfortable that

otherwise would not be, and probably should not be. But living vessels can repair themselves. Susan Brison's emphasis on the need for the trauma survivor to revise her story over time conveys the way in which we shape and reshape our subjectivity over time in response to violation. Not only can our subjectivity not remain--perhaps not survive--in the shape that trauma left it; it can't remain in the shape that we made of it in the immediate aftermath.

All metaphors have limits and also a tendency to take on a life of their own. I use this one to highlight the relationship between agency and subjectivity, the vulnerability of subjectivity to both external and internal forces, the reparability of subjectivity, and the element of time. While the effects on subjectivity of rape are relatively well known, non-traumatic forms of domination affect subjectivity as well, distorting its shape in ways that may persist for years unnoticed.

Self-blame and shame are well known reactions to rape, and can take many forms. Feminist advocates have long insisted, rightly, that the victim in no way bears any blame for her own violation. But the subjective realities of women who experience more ambiguous forms of domination are complex in ways that bear consideration. In particular, in situations that cannot be considered rape or assault, or in which there may be ambiguity but the women themselves do not characterize them as rape or assault, women may exercise agency in ways that have lasting effects on their subjectivity. Considering these effects does not substitute a psychological analysis for a political one; on the contrary, it is aimed precisely at understanding the ways in which power produces subjects, including in ways that may *appear* apolitical and are thus treated (if at all) as individual mental health matters. ("I guess I had low self-esteem"; "maybe I'm a masochist.") I focus here on the emotional complexities of such experiences as offering information about the effects on women's subjectivity of domination.

Bad girls

"Being a bad girl...gave Jayanthi a strong sense of identity," according to psychoanalyst Leslie Bell. In her twenties, Jayanthi wanted a history, "stories that would make her feel real and alive" (55), and she liked the excitement and drama of hooking up with lots of men.

“What I was thinking at the time was, ‘I’m liberating myself, this is liberation’” (56). But she also says that

when I was doing everything, I was censoring myself, ‘cause I didn’t know what...I wanted.... I wasn’t able to really say no. I wasn’t able to be honest with myself, [to say,] “Jay, what are you doing to yourself?”...I would just give in.... I was silencing myself. I was putting myself in hard situations, dangerous ones, risky ones. (55-56).

She estimates that about thirty percent of the time “she had sex because she felt obligated to do so” and did not enjoy sex; “I just took whatever was given” (57).

Jayanthi tells a story about going home very late with a man, not wanting to have sex with him but doing so anyway because she knew her mother wouldn’t let her in the house if she came home so late. Then his roommates appeared and expected her to have sex with them, too. Jayanthi describes the experience:

I didn’t know what to do. I was like, “I guess I’ll have to be cool with it, have to pretend like I’m cool with having a shower with his friend.” After the shower with his friend, his friend wanted to have sex with me. And I think I had sex with him too.... I didn’t know what to do. Then his other roommate came in, and he wanted me to have sex with him. I didn’t have sex with him. I just kind of gave him oral sex, which I really didn’t want to do.... It was only recently...that I thought back on it and I was like, “Oh, my God, that actually happened to me. Oh, my God, what was that about?” (Bell, 58)

Bell comments, “She had now come to understand and describe this experience as a disturbing version of sexual exploitation. Earlier it had felt like another in a series of crazy antics--something that was annoying, but not exploitative or devastating” (59).

Jayanthi describes difficulty being honest with herself during that period, and admits the contradictions in her thinking: she was “liberating herself” but she “just took

whatever was given” and “just kind of” gave what was expected. She felt unable to say no and beyond that, she felt the need to “pretend she was cool” with what was happening. In her story of the roommates, we see a kind of fatalism. Initially in therapy she uses the phrase “have sex” (not rape) to describe what happened, perhaps because she did not say no to any of the men. Women often turn to this strategy when they perceive sex/rape as inevitable: implicitly or explicitly consenting to avoid unambiguous rape or physical violence (Gavey 2005, Phillips 2000). Jayanthi even insists she did not have sex with one roommate, but instead (in her words) “just kind of gave him oral sex.” Clearly, we can call this an example of the agency of self-protection (Alcoff 2018, 7). And we could certainly argue that in that moment she feared for her physical safety if she refused, that her subjectivity was already produced as “rapeable,” and that she feared unambiguous rape or physical violence as a “fate worse than death,” to use Sharon Marcus’ phrase (1992). That is, we could view her subjectivity as already constructed by the power dynamics of a rape culture, such that any question of resistance was quashed before it could rise into her consciousness.

But if, with Alcoff, we want to think about the project of subjectivity more broadly, as involving the ongoing “work of ourselves on ourselves as free beings” (Foucault 2005, cited in Alcoff 2018), we need to think about that subjectivity as both produced by power and an ongoing project of which Jayanthi remains the key author, but not an autonomous author. She wanted to “liberate” herself, partly from her parents’ conservative religious sexual morality. She wanted to “feel real.” She liked sexual adventure. Being “bad” gave her a sense of identity. She was and still is crafting her own sexual subjectivity, much as Alcoff describes herself doing as a young woman: “I wanted to experience life in all its joys, physical and otherwise...I developed a ‘reputation.’ But I considered this [judgment]...an assault on my freedom as well as my human dignity” (2018, 7). Jayanthi consciously rejected norms of femininity and sexuality that she had absorbed from her family and the larger culture. It might be reasonable to assume that Jayanthi, and even Alcoff, were operating under the impression that sovereign, liberated subjectivity was a goal within reach, given that this such a pervasive myth in liberal capitalist regimes and liberal feminism.

Jayanthi's experience of sexual subjectivity was, of course, more complex than this. When her ongoing narrative of self as an independent "bad girl" ran headlong into men's interpellations of her as sexually available and compliant, the latter determined her behavior. We don't know the details of all her experiences, but the pattern of not being able to say no, of "taking what was given," fits with my conception of domination. She was responding to the men's expectations, pressure, or demands, and she perceived sharp constraints on how she could respond, regardless of her conscious beliefs about herself. Then she coped with the experiences in ways that also have to be considered agentic but that directly resulted from the experience of domination. Her own exercises of agency, under the specific circumstances of each interaction, not only contradicted her larger effort towards a liberated sexual subjectivity; those exercises of agency interfered with that larger effort. Jayanthi hints at this possibility when she says "I was censoring myself...I was silencing myself." She says she didn't know what she wanted and was unable to be honest with herself. She is not self-blaming in a counterfactual way (as people often do as a coping mechanism); she is simply aware that she was not entirely helpless. But she struggles to make sense of her own responses to domination.

My own experience is similar to Jayanthi's and Alcoff's in that, at a conscious level, I saw my sexual subjectivity as my own. If, as a teenager, I had put my views into words, they would have conveyed an implicit faith in the possibility of liberated sexual subjectivity. I was sex-positive long before I heard the phrase. I took for granted the idea that sex wasn't shameful, and should only result from both partners' enthusiastic interest. I took for granted a fundamentally feminist sense of the equality of both partners. I also likely took for granted the idea that I was sole author of my subjectivity. So, had someone told teenaged me that as an adult I would find myself in a situation in which it was easier to acquiesce than refuse, and that I would get used to acquiescing over the course of a committed relationship, I would have been horrified. I would have wondered what had happened to *me*: the girl who listened to the Dead Kennedys and got detention for smoking at school.

Jayanthi's language of censorship and silencing captures the dynamic whereby one tells oneself a story about one's experience--"I was liberating myself"--that effectively

silences other possible narratives, of events and one's subjectivity. It is also effective at capturing the ways in which motivations can be multiple and contradictory, and subjectivity itself not constituted by a single subject, but many divergent pressures. But this focus on the internal subjectivity of Jayanthi, myself, or any other person who has experienced everyday domination cannot substitute for an analysis of the key issue: the experience of domination, even when it is not frightening or traumatizing, disrupts our "work on ourselves." It distorts our subjectivity, undoing the work we have done to shape ourselves, requiring us to either adjust to the new shape or repair it. Embodied, intersubjective moments of domination interpellate us, demanding that we perform as compliant subjects, not rebellious ones (Kogl 2022). Domination treats us as empty vessels, to use Saidiya Hartman's metaphor (Kogl 2021). In doing so it squeezes us into new shapes, in some instances making us unrecognizable to ourselves. Unlike overt violence, moments of everyday heterosexual domination do not simply over-ride our agency; they demand that we exercise it. And we do, whether because alternatives don't occur to us, to avoid awkwardness or discomfort, because resistance is just too difficult, to protect the man's feelings, to normalize the encounter, and so on. Our own exercises of agency don't mitigate the disruption of our subjectivity; they exacerbate it. Rather than compensating from within for pressures applied from without, we give in, and that giving in changes us. We may be aiming to make a given experience more tolerable, more reasonable, more comfortable, but we participate in the distortion of our subjectivity.

We see self-blame and shame in people who have been raped or assaulted, even when they rationally know that the experience is an injustice for which they bear no responsibility. The response here differs in that it is less counterfactual. Sometimes we really do make life easier for the people who dominate us. Like Jayanthi, we may "pretend to be cool" with them. We may fake orgasm to end it more quickly or protect their egos. We may explicitly consent to sex we don't want so that both partners can be sure that what happened wasn't "rape." Believing that one could have resisted but did not, knowing that one facilitated or normalized an interaction that one didn't want, can cause a specific set of self-abnegating responses: shame, self-disgust, helplessness, hopelessness, numbness. These all orient us toward our projects of subjectivity, and that orientation is

disempowering. Not only do we learn that our subjectivity can't hold the independent shape we crafted for it; we lose faith in our own ability to shape that subjectivity at all.

Everyday heterosexual domination entails multiple layers of self-abnegation, beginning with the act itself. In the moment of domination it might not occur to one to resist. Or it feels impossible to resist, to express even the slightest discomfort with what's happening, or to speak at all. The inner self saying "no" is censored. If we have the opportunity to reflect on the experience after the fact, many women say things like "I guess I just wasn't strong enough to resist" (Fahs 2011, Gavey 2005, Phillips 2000). So a second instance of self-abnegation occurs afterwards, in the attribution of the experience to one's own deficiency, as if one was freely agentic rather than agentic only under sharp constraint.

But many women (including myself) go a very long time without reflecting on their experiences. They may maintain a narrative that what happened (or continues to happen) doesn't matter: that it was just "bad sex." Or the experience may not even rise into consciousness as something to consider. The distortions to one's subjectivity and to one's sense of efficacy in shaping that subjectivity go unnoticed. This may be especially likely if the distortion takes place over time: a slow stretching out of shape rather than an acute trauma. I myself didn't have a conscious belief in my own deficiency or any sense that I was failing myself because I wasn't aware there was anything wrong. To return to Jayanthi's metaphor: I didn't just censor my inner "no"; I suffocated a whole inner self without knowing I did so. Had I reflected on what I was doing I might've said something like, "you make compromises in committed relationships" or "it's not that bad" or even "it's more loving to go along with sex I don't want than to reject him." These ideas certainly have origins in discourses about (hetero)sexuality that pervade the larger culture. But I wasn't simply parroting those discourses, which at a conscious level I rejected. I was living them as a result of cues from another person, in the context of one specific relationship. I was agentic but dominated, and the shape of who I was was distorted by the dynamics of that domination.

Yet another instance of self-abnegation may arise when one is emerging from the circumstances of one's domination, if one begins to believe that one was strong enough to

resist, but didn't. If one believes that one both failed oneself *and* lied to oneself about it, one can emerge into self-disgust. Jayanthi's realization that she had believed she was liberating herself but she was really censoring herself is not an emotionally neutral one. Particularly if we lack a sense of subjectivity as always intersubjective and therefore always vulnerable, particularly if we lack a theory of the way domination and agency can coexist, particularly if we ascribe to a kind of girl-power pop feminism, particularly if we're attached to a sense of ourselves as sovereign--in short, particularly if we lack a theory of power that will help us make some sense of the tangle of responsibility and injustice that has occurred, we may stay stuck in self-blame. We may rescue the self we tried to kill, but now rage against the self that did the killing. This does not necessarily repair the distortion to our subjectivity; it may just distort it in a new way.

Restoring intersubjectivity, repairing subjectivity

Understanding subjectivity as intersubjective rather than sovereign, and understanding agency as emerging in social interactions rather than a static thing, helps us make some sense of all this. Understanding domination not as simply treating persons as objects but as a relation in which the dominated person plays a scripted role also helps. One of the challenges for any theory that aims to explain domination, though, is to also explain resistance, liberation, or even just change: revision of the narrative, in Brison's metaphor, or reshaping one's distorted subjectivity, in mine. How does a person whose work on herself has consisted of suffocating a part of herself, or accommodating domination, shift to the task of repair?

In my own experience I can point to a single conversation with another woman that enabled me to see the way in which I had distorted my subjectivity to accommodate domination. She had had an unambiguously assaultive experience, and I said something to the effect that I hadn't had a similar experience, but hoped to be able to support her. Later the same day I realized that I had had one experience that wasn't *unambiguously* rape, but wasn't not-rape either. (To this day I hesitate to call the experience rape, but it wasn't "just sex" either. I would now call it domination.) I had been telling myself that the experience was unpleasant but he had apologized and it was behind me. I hadn't even seen the

broader pattern of sexual extraction in that relationship. My sense that the dynamic was normal and acceptable suddenly unraveled. The way in which I had distorted my subjectivity to accommodate this relationship suddenly appeared as a terrible betrayal of myself. I felt physically disoriented, as if the room I was standing in had shifted its axis. (The only other time I have experienced a similar feeling was after a serious earthquake. Well after the ground had stopped moving, I felt like the sun was shining from the wrong direction.) My killed self came back to life--not spontaneously but intersubjectively.

To further understand the work of repair it may be useful to think about a seeming paradox that we see in many women who have been assaulted: a tendency to extend kindness or compassion to the men who have harmed them. While my interest remains in understanding the power dynamics of gray sex, not rape and assault, here I focus on the latter because they put the phenomenon in such sharp focus.

Women's extension of kindness or compassion to their dominators tell us something about their experiences of domination and efforts to repair their subjectivity. Jessica Mann testified of Harvey Weinstein, "When I first saw him naked, I was filled with compassion, absolute compassion" (Ransom 2020). Peggy Orenstein tells the story of a college student, "Megan." A man she met at a party raped Megan. She thanked him as she left his fraternity house afterwards, but then almost immediately recognized the experience as rape and reported it. After he was suspended, she admitted she felt bad for him and "wanted to give him a hug" (Orenstein 2016). Trauma, gaslighting, and other abusive dynamics may lead a person to behave in ways that seem "masochistic," or that are motivated by fear and a simple desire to survive. But there may be instances in which kindness or compassion isn't a self-abnegating *reaction*, but an *action* in and of itself, even an effort at repairing mutuality.

If we imagine the harm of domination as its violation of sovereignty, we will assume that any kindness shown by women to the men who dominate them is self-defeating, false consciousness, denial, masochism, and so on. Sometimes it is. But those kindnesses also may reveal an experience of subjectivity as always intersubjective. The other, even the other who has been harmful or cruel, is still a person, not an object to be dominated in return or destroyed. To attempt to treat the other as an object does not restore or repair

one's own subjectivity; it continues to distort it. To continue to recognize the dominator's personhood, then, is not a pathology but a victory over what Nietzsche calls reactive feelings. Especially when combined with clear acknowledgement of the presence of domination, abuse, assault, or rape, extending recognition to the dominator is a tacit rejection of the logic of domination, which attempts to reduce one person to the status of an object, denying intersubjectivity.

One of the difficulties in capturing the harms entailed in domination, especially nontraumatic domination, is that when one insists that subjectivity is intersubjective, one can't also claim that the sovereignty of the subject is what's violated. While my project is not a moral philosophical one, I would suggest, following Jessica Benjamin, that one of the harms of domination is its violation of *intersubjectivity*: its treatment of the dominated person *as if* she were an extension of the dominator. But of course the dominated person is not truly a mere object nor adjunct of the dominator's ego (Cahill 2010); her cooperation or compliance may be required to complete the relation of domination (even though she does not initiate it). Her agency--albeit nonautonomous--is a required part of the process.

One way to describe the harms of this experience is to turn to a language of alienation: to argue that women who have experienced domination turn against our selves, or experience the self as strange. Perhaps we come to see not only our bodies as objects (objects with which we are in perennial conflict, as many feminists have explored), but our subjectivities as well. Rather than seeing our subjectivity as an ongoing, revisable, repairable project, domination may lead us to say, with dull finality, "I guess I wasn't strong enough to resist." The "I" in question becomes a disappointing other who really should've known better and done better. She has failed herself. We then see the distortion of our subjectivity as permanent, with no sense of our own efficacy to repair it. We may not see it as a distortion, believing instead that we've "proven" who we "really" are. Following Nietzsche, we might say that this amounts to a kind of slave morality, in which the worldly experience of the self's denial is internalized, such that we say "no" to ourselves, come to identify our own inaction and passivity with goodness, while harboring profoundly vengeful (possibly unconscious) impulses toward our dominator, whose strength we exaggerate, fear, and hate (1998).

But Nietzsche also describes a way out. Mercy is possible in place of *ressentiment*, reaction, and vengeance: “if the high, clear objectivity--that sees as deeply as it does generously--of the just eye, the *judging eye*, does not cloud even under the assault of personal injury, derision, accusation, well, then that is a piece of perfection and highest mastery on earth” (1998, 48). And he emphasizes change over time, as the subject transforms itself from the burdened, passive camel to the raging lion, roaring no, to the creative child (Zarathustra). Nietzsche is helpful in distinguishing just mercy from pious masochism, but the Buddhist emphasis on the necessary relationship between compassion for others and self-compassion might also apply here. Compassion is not zero-sum, in this way of thinking: only in extending compassion to ourselves do we become capable of real compassion for others. Simply denying one’s rage, suffocating the inner “no,” killing the self that wanted to resist, is war with the self. Reversing the direction of this inner hierarchy is still war. What Nietzsche calls mercy, a Buddhist might call *bodhichitta*: a completely open heart and mind, “the soft spot, a place as vulnerable and tender as an open wound” (Chödrön 2001, 4). For Nietzsche, mercy comes from a position of strength, of perceiving the other as posing no real threat. For the Buddhist it may be that one perceives a fundamental connection between self and other--regardless of the rage one might feel--but also that one feels at home and secure in oneself through self-compassion. One can listen to both the self that was murdered and the murdering self with acceptance. This response is neither self-abnegating nor driven by rage. It also doesn’t just magically happen. It comes, if at all, through practice. It is neither reactive nor passive, but active.

Chanel Miller’s victim impact statement seems an example of both Nietzschean mercy and *bodhichitta*. Directed toward her rapist, Brock Turner, it went viral after BuzzFeed published it in its entirety in 2016. One selection was shared repeatedly:

You should never have done this to me. Secondly, you should never have made me fight so long to tell you, you should never have done this to me. But here we are. The damage is done, no one can undo it. And now we both have a choice. We can let this destroy us, I can remain angry and hurt and you can be in denial, or we can face

it head on, I accept the pain, you accept the punishment, and we move on. Your life is not over, you have decades ahead to rewrite your story. The world is huge, it is so much bigger than Palo Alto and Stanford, and you will make a space for yourself in it where you can be useful and happy. But right now, you do not get to shrug your shoulders and be confused anymore...You have been convicted of violating me...Do not talk about the sad way your life was upturned because alcohol made you do bad things. Figure out how to take responsibility for your own conduct.

Miller is protecting no one, least of all Turner, from the reality of his actions. But she is treating him as a fellow human, interpellating him as someone who is capable of rewriting his story, who has a future. In her short film, "I Am With You," she says, "nobody wants to be defined by the worst thing that's happened to them." Her implicit message to Turner was, "you don't need to be defined by the worst thing you've ever done." This may be merciful but it is not forgiveness; it is power, practiced not as domination but intersubjectively through interpellation. Miller interpellates Turner as someone who remains human, capable of responsibility and change, even growth. She interpellates him as someone who is still inevitably connected to her and to others, still a subject. In doing so she conveys to everyone her transformation from the anonymous "nobody" depicted in the media as "just" a "victim" to somebody whose subjectivity survives not by denying others' personhood, but by affirming it. She does not reduce Turner to an object to be destroyed--she says explicitly that she didn't want him to "rot in prison"--but offers him a future, conditioning that future on him figuring out how to take responsibility, which would require him to recognize her personhood.

The kindness or compassion that survivors of sexual assault sometimes show their assailants perhaps represents an attempt to restore mutual recognition, implying a rejection of the subject/object binary and the fantasy of sovereign subjectivity. Such gestures are not necessarily self-abnegating, nor evidence of the distortion of subjectivity by domination, but may be active efforts at repairing one's own subjectivity. In Miller's case, and perhaps Megan's and Jessica Mann's as well, gestures of recognition or

compassion are far from passive; they are active. They indicate not the absence of a capacity for assertiveness, but the presence of a capacity for generosity.

But such gestures may be misunderstood. Miller told a probation officer that she didn't want Turner to rot in prison for the rest of his life, and that officer interpreted that as Miller not having been significantly affected by the rape. Because we misunderstand subjectivity and domination, imagining both through the ideological frameworks of the liberal modern subject (i.e. from the standpoint of the dominator), we misunderstand responses to domination that don't treat the dominator as an object. Moving beyond carceral feminism requires that we listen carefully to these responses and develop a political challenge to domination.

Nonsovereign subjects

In situations of everyday domination that are ambiguous, that may not be traumatic, and that may come to feel entirely normal, it may be tempting to consider women's acquiescence and sympathy for our dominators as passive, masochistic, or even just ambivalent. If the experiences aren't traumatic, how significant can they be? On the one hand, such experiences have significant effects on our subjectivity. Girls and women experience everyday forms of domination over and over again, beginning in childhood. They do not just take the form of "gray sex" but include seemingly petty reminders of our status in the gender hierarchy, such as catcalling. Being interpellated repeatedly as a specific kind of inferior produces an unequal, distorted subjectivity. Specifically in situations of gray sex, in which one plays a relatively active role, one may emerge with an altered sense of oneself and of one's ability to determine the shape of that self. On the other hand, women sometimes attempt to restore or establish mutuality in the context of such experiences. We may, in effect, interpellate men as capable of a more just relation with us. Those attempts will continue to be misread if we don't develop a more clear understanding of the dynamics of everyday domination.

None of this is to imply that people who have been dominated *should* respond with mercy or compassion to the people who have dominated them, nor that it just happens spontaneously. It is to suggest that subjectivity is not lived as sovereign, that the

subject/object binary muddies our understanding of domination, and that the repair of distorted subjectivity sometimes proceeds not by upending the hierarchy but by restoring intersubjectivity. This in turn does not imply that the domination that occurred was not an injustice, that the dominated person was not harmed, or that the dominator is forgiven. It does imply that we need to think more about the nature of the harms of domination to nonsovereign subjects.

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