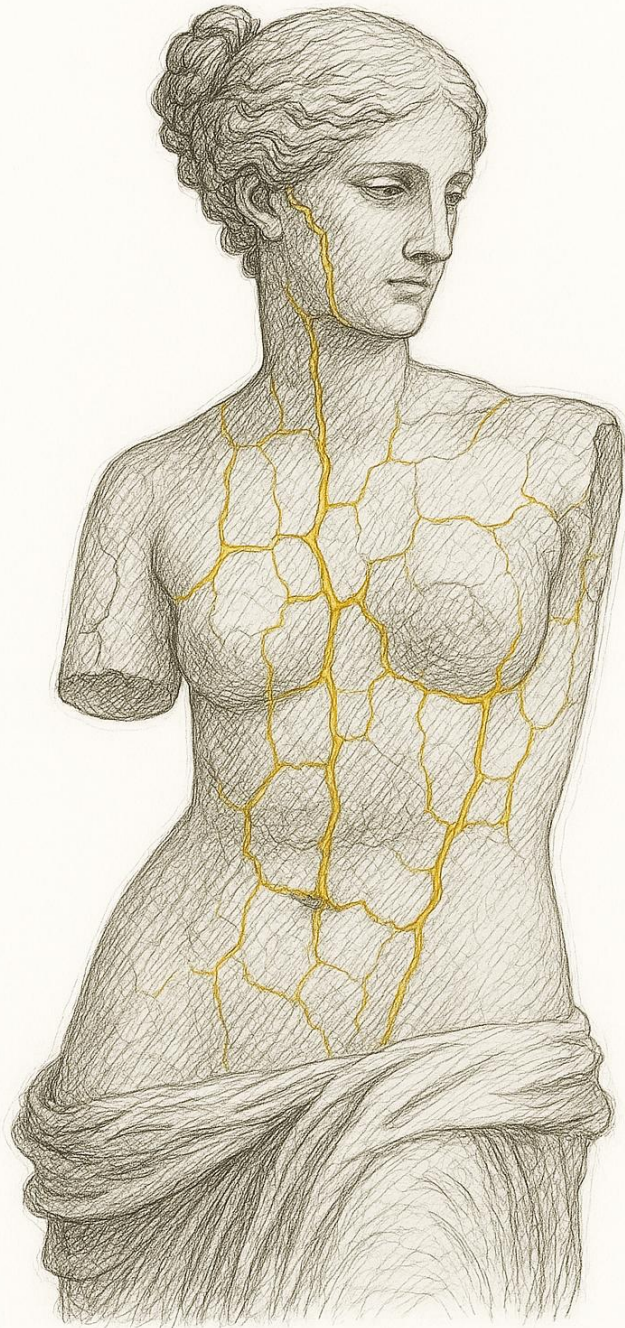


Desire, Discipline and Punish: A Post-Structuralist Analysis of Female Desire for Sexual Submission

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ABSTRACT (NL)

Deze masterproef onderzoekt hoe de feministische theorie ruimte kan maken voor vrouwelijke seksuele verlangens naar onderwerping zonder te vervallen in moreel wantrouwen of liberaal idealisme. Historisch gezien werden dergelijke verlangens vaak als problematisch beschouwd via het concept van vals bewustzijn. Vertrekkend vanuit poststructuralistische denkers zoals Foucault, Berlant, Butler en Kamra, wordt verlangen benaderd als een relationele en affectieve structuur die door macht wordt gevormd, eerder dan als een zuivere uitdrukking van autonomie of onderdrukking. Audre Lorde's begrip van het erotische vult dit theoretisch kader aan door diep gevoeld verlangen te beschouwen als een bron van feministische kennis en creatieve kracht. Deze masterproef pleit voor het loslaten van morele controle over seksualiteit en voor het erkennen van verlangen als een complex en vaak tegenstrijdig onderdeel van het geleefde bestaan. Ze besluit met een oproep tot een materialistisch feminisme waarin erotisch verlangen inspiratie biedt voor verzet, solidariteit en collectieve bevrijding.

ABSTRACT (EN)

This thesis examines how feminist theory can make space for the female sexual desire for submission without reverting to moral suspicion or liberal idealism. Historically viewed through the lens of false consciousness, such desires have often been treated as politically problematic. Drawing on post-structuralist thinkers including Foucault, Berlant, Butler, and Kamra, the thesis explores desire as a relational, affective structure shaped by power, rather than as a site of pure autonomy or oppression. Audre Lorde's concept of the erotic complements this analysis by positioning deeply felt desire as a source of feminist knowledge and creative energy. The thesis argues that feminism must reject moral policing of sexuality and instead engage desire as a complex, contradictory part of lived experience. It concludes by calling for a shift toward materialist feminist politics, where erotic energy—when embraced consciously and unapologetically—can inspire solidarity, resistance, and new imaginaries for collective freedom.

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Introduction: Reconsidering Feminist Suspicion Toward Sexual Submission

Sexual desire, particularly in its gendered expressions, continues to be a philosophical and political site of unease. Among the most persistently controversial of these desires is the wish—expressed by some heterosexual women—to submit sexually to their male partners. This desire has long been met with suspicion from within feminist circles, perceived as symptomatic of internalized patriarchy, false consciousness, or, at best, a politically inconvenient exception to an otherwise empowering sexual politics. Even among women who experience this desire, ambivalence, guilt, and self-questioning often accompany its expression. The question persists, sometimes silently and sometimes urgently: *Can I want this and still be a feminist?*

This thesis centers around a philosophical inquiry into precisely this problem: how to think through the female sexual desire for submission in a way that neither romanticizes power asymmetry nor pathologizes desire itself. The tension at the heart of this inquiry is not simply about what is permissible within feminist frameworks but about the very structure of desire, agency, and political identity. Feminist theory has made substantial progress over the past decades, particularly through its affective turns, which have deepened the understanding of subjectivity, embodiment, and sexuality.¹ However, public discourse, especially as mediated by mainstream feminism, has not caught up. As Serene Khader argues in *Faux Feminism*, a persistent thread in contemporary culture is a kind of feminist self-policing, wherein women anxiously interrogate their compliance with gender norms and consumerist femininity:

“There is literally an entire genre of feminist writing devoted to the question, ‘Can I be a feminist and . . .?’ Perhaps the most common fill-in to the blank is ‘Can I be a feminist and wear high heels?’ If you ever comply with social expectations around femininity, there’s a well-worn internet search out there waiting for you. Can I be a feminist and wear makeup? Can I be a feminist and be a stay-at-home mom? Get cosmetic surgery?”²

Khader’s insight points to a deeper dissonance between the theoretical sophistication of feminist thought and the cultural narratives through which feminism is popularly understood and lived. While sex-positive feminism has sought to validate a wide range of sexual expressions, it has

¹ The affective turn in feminist theory has foregrounded the role of emotion and affect in shaping subjectivity, embodiment, and political life, moving beyond purely discursive or structural accounts of power. A prominent example of this shift is Sara Ahmed’s *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), which explores how emotions circulate within social and political spheres, binding bodies together and constituting collective identities.

² Serene Khader, *Faux Feminism: Why We Fall for White Feminism and How We Can Stop* (Beacon Press, 2024), 107–108.

also contributed to new forms of normative pressure, leading to the suspicion and marginalization of desires that fall outside the celebratory or agentic models of sexuality. In this context, some desires remain more politically suspect than others—particularly those that reenact or mirror traditional power dynamics, such as heterosexual submission. This thesis identifies this discrepancy as a key problem for feminist philosophy: why is it that certain expressions of desire, especially those involving asymmetrical power, provoke more scrutiny than others? And what does this tell us about the implicit moralism still embedded in feminist discourse?

While the term “patriarchy” has long served as a central concept in feminist theory, this thesis deliberately avoids using it as a stand-alone framework. The choice is not rooted in a denial of male dominance, but in a recognition of the analytical limitations of treating patriarchy as a singular or unified system. Following critiques by thinkers such as Sally Haslanger, this thesis aligns with the view that gendered power cannot be fully understood in isolation from other intersecting structures, including capitalism, white supremacy, and heteronormativity.³ Framing social domination solely in terms of patriarchy risks obscuring the multifaceted and co-constitutive nature of these systems, and may narrow the scope of feminist critique to a binary model of male-over-female dominance. By decentering “patriarchy” as the sole explanatory framework, this thesis aims to open space for a more nuanced analysis of how desires—particularly those that seem politically or morally suspect—are shaped within a broader and more entangled social order.

The feminist suspicion of sexual submission has its roots in a long-standing concern with false consciousness. This is the idea that women may unwittingly desire their own subordination due to the internalization of patriarchal norms. While early radical feminists such as Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin saw heterosexual intercourse itself as a site of male dominance, later feminists have sought more nuanced ways of interpreting sexual agency. Nevertheless, the legacy of this suspicion persists. The contemporary landscape continues to demand moral and political coherence from sexual subjectivity: we are expected to desire “correctly,” to embody liberation not only in our politics but in our pleasures.

This thesis argues that feminism must move beyond this regulatory impulse. Rather than treating erotic longing as either a symptom of oppression or a badge of liberation, it must be

³ Sally Haslanger, “Why I Don’t Believe in Patriarchy: Comments on Kate Manne’s *Down Girl*,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 101, no. 1 (2020): 220–229. <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.12697>.

understood as an ambivalent and often paradoxical part of lived experience—one that resists tidy categorization. If feminism is to take women's experiences seriously, it must make room for the full range of desires, including those that appear to contradict feminist ideals on the surface. Crucially, this does not mean abandoning critical engagement with power, but rather, reframing that engagement in ways that do not preemptively disqualify certain desires from feminist legitimacy.

To do this, this thesis develops a dual methodological approach, combining historical and post-structuralist modes of inquiry. Historically, it traces the evolution of feminist thought on sexual agency, power, and submission, paying close attention to the ways in which notions of false consciousness have shaped attitudes toward female desire. In particular, the first chapter examines the legacy of the radical feminist critique of heterosexuality, and how it contributed to a general skepticism about women's sexual submission—even as later waves of feminism sought to complicate or refute those critiques.

The second chapter turns to post-structuralist accounts of subjectivity and desire, drawing on theorists such as Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick to examine how desires are produced, lived, and interpreted. This chapter is especially concerned with moving beyond moralizing frameworks, emphasizing instead the constructed, contingent, and relational nature of desire. In doing so, it provides a philosophical account of sexual submission not as a straightforward enactment of domination or subordination, but as an affectively and historically mediated phenomenon that resists reduction to ideology.

The third and final chapter draws on Audre Lorde's conception of the erotic as a source of power to argue that sex, in itself, should not be positioned as the primary site of feminist resistance. Instead, feminist resistance must be materially grounded: in labor, in healthcare, in bodily autonomy, in legal and economic structures. Desire, far from being a threat to this resistance, can serve as a vital source of energy, creativity, and political imagination. By de-centering the moral scrutiny of personal sexual choices, feminism can better focus on the structures that constrain those choices in the first place.

This thesis thus makes several deliberate delimitations in its scope. First, it focuses specifically on heterosexual, cis-gendered relationships in which a woman desires to submit sexually to a male partner. While the analysis developed here may have resonances beyond this frame, the particular dynamics of heterosexual power relations necessitate focused inquiry. The experiences of trans, non-binary, and queer individuals with regard to sexual submission are

equally valid, but require distinct frameworks that fall outside the scope of this study. This is also the case for bisexual women, whose experience might largely overlap with that of heterosexual women, but who are excluded from this analysis because their queerness—often an important if not central part to their sexual identity—is not part of the analysis of this thesis.

In approaching this subject, it is important to clarify that this is not an attempt to celebrate or promote sexual submission as inherently liberatory or politically resistant. Rather, it is a call to attend seriously to the complexities of desire—without defaulting to immediate judgment. It asks what is at stake when certain desires are treated as less legitimate, and whether feminist theory can accommodate the ambiguities, contradictions, and pleasures of desire without compromising its political commitments.

Ultimately, the aim is to reframe the discussion around female sexual submission in a way that restores dignity to desire. Not by removing it from the domain of critique, but by refusing to moralize it in advance. The argument is not that all desires are equally emancipatory, but that desire itself cannot be a reliable index of feminist virtue or betrayal. Desire must be understood as an unstable and affectively rich terrain in which power, pleasure, vulnerability, and agency co-exist in tension.

Central to this thesis is a concern with the prevalence of moralistic frameworks in feminist responses to desire. Moralism, in this context, refers not to moral analysis per se, but to the tendency to impose normative judgments that preemptively classify certain desires as politically acceptable or unacceptable. Unlike moral analysis—which involves carefully considering the ethical implications of actions or social arrangements—moralizing often entails applying rigid evaluative standards to intimate life in ways that foreclose complexity and ambiguity. As Amy Allen notes, moralizing discourse tends to operate through “binary constructions of good versus bad desire,” which undermines the possibility of engaging desire as a field of contested meaning and lived contradiction.⁴ Such frameworks can lead to a regulatory dynamic in which women feel compelled to justify their erotic lives in terms of political virtue, rather than being invited to explore them with critical openness. In this sense, moralism risks replicating the very disciplinary structures that feminism seeks to dismantle, reinforcing a culture of self-surveillance and judgment rather than fostering liberation.

⁴ Amy Allen, *The Politics of Our Selves: Power, Autonomy, and Gender in Contemporary Critical Theory* (Columbia University Press, 2008), 156.

To that end, this thesis asks *How has feminist theory responded to sexual desires—specifically, the desire of heterosexual women to submit sexually to male partners—that appear to contradict or challenge the feminist project? And can feminist critique accommodate such desires without reproducing moralistic frameworks?* In seeking to answer these questions, it hopes to offer a framework for thinking about desire not as a problem to be solved, but as a phenomenon to be understood—ethically, politically, and philosophically. By challenging the impulse to sanitize or discipline desire, feminism can better align itself with the complexity of lived experience and reclaim the erotic as a legitimate ground for both pleasure and resistance.

The Historical Debate on Feminism, Sex, and False Consciousness

The intersection of desire, power, and autonomy has long been central to the discussions held in shaping feminist theory. Originally developed within Marxist theory to describe how oppressed classes misrecognize their own interests due to ideological domination, the concept of ‘false consciousness’ was adapted and increasingly used by radical second-wave feminists in their analysis of male dominance as the root of oppression.⁵ In relation to female sexual desire, false consciousness is often used to indicate how women may genuinely feel a desire for submission, but that it reflects internalized patriarchal values rather than true autonomy. Radical feminists have used this term in confronting the tension between women’s desires and their systemic oppression.⁶ These critiques, however, have also become the grounds of further debate on sexuality, autonomy, and the politics of submission. While the feminist “waves” were never internally unified and encompassed a wide range of sometimes conflicting perspectives, they nonetheless offer a useful framework for tracing shifts in feminist thinking over time. As feminist discourse evolved, with the emergence of cultural feminism that later developed into the more individualist third-wave feminism⁷, the conversation about heterosexual desire, particularly in relation to submission, remained a point of tension. Even within fourth-wave feminism, which brings a more nuanced approach to sexual desire and places consent and agency as central to sexual empowerment, the question of false consciousness remains.

Although the thinkers within these feminist strands were by no means homogenous, they shared a tendency toward a moralizing approach to sexual desire. Instead of exploring sexual desire as a complex human phenomenon, much of feminist thought has approached it as a site of judgment about power, politics, and identity. This is not uniquely feminists’ doing, but rather a continuation of existing stigmatizing and moralizing dynamics which have also made their way in feminist theory and practice. In other words, historically, feminist critiques have used a moral framing in their exploration of sexual desire, using their insights as a grounds for prescription and critique, and neglecting the ambiguity, fluidity, and personal meaning of desire

⁵ An example of this increasing use of the term ‘false consciousness’ in second-wave feminism is Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex*, which exemplifies how second-wave radical feminism incorporated the Marxist concept of false consciousness to theorize the internalization of patriarchal norms as a primary mechanism of women’s oppression. Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

⁶ This can be seen, for example, in Catherine MacKinnon, who contends that women’s sexual preferences are shaped by male dominance and that what is experienced as desire may, in fact, reflect social subordination. See Catharine MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Harvard University Press, 1989), 141–162.

⁷ R. Claire Snyder-Hall, “Third-Wave Feminism and the Defense of “Choice”,” *Perspectives on Politics* 8 no. 1 (2010): 255–261, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592709992842>.

itself. This chapter delves into the complexities of feminist perspectives on desires have evolved, how they have grappled with women's sexual choices, and argues for a feminist analysis of desire that uses an exploratory rather than moralising point of departure.

Second-Wave and Radical Feminism

Radical feminism emerged in the late 1960s as a political force within the broader women's liberation movement, with the aim to not simply reform but to break down all structures of male domination across all aspects of life. For radical feminists, the structure of male control was the primary oppression for women.⁸ Unlike liberal feminism, which sought equal rights within existing systems, radical feminism attempted to expose how deeply power was embedded in everyday experience, emphasizing collective struggle and conscious-raising as essential tools for change.⁹ Radical feminists essentially brought sexual politics into public consciousness through their insistence that liberation must extend to the intimate sphere of relationships, desire, and domestic labor, because the oppressive structure of male domination also reaches to this extent.

The writings of radical feminists such as Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin offer a central perspective on female autonomy, arguing that sexual desire can impossibly be seen as separate from structures of male dominance. MacKinnon critiques the liberal feminist notion of "free choice" in sexuality, arguing that women's desires are so deeply shaped by systemic inequality that what appears to be autonomous desire often reflects the internalization of male power.¹⁰ Although the term false consciousness only later gained popularity, MacKinnon's point directly reflects the feminist grappling with autonomy in the experience of sexual desire that is still prevalent today. Similarly, Dworkin sees heterosexual intercourse itself as inherently tied to male supremacy, arguing that women's eroticization of submission is not a reflection of agency but a survival mechanism within an oppressive system.¹¹ She argues that in a structure of male oppression, women may internalize the idea that their submission is what men want and thus learn to derive erotic pleasure from that submission. This sexual desire is then the result of societal conditioning instead of free choice.

⁸ Robyn Rowland and Renate D. Klein, "Radical Feminism: Critique And Construct," in *Feminist Knowledge*, ed. Sneja Gunew (Routledge, 2013), 273.

⁹ Ellen Willis, "Radical Feminism and Feminist Radicalism," *Social Text*, no. 9/10 (1984): 91–92, <https://doi.org/10.2307/466537>.

¹⁰ Katherine MacKinnon, "Pornography, Civil Rights and Speech," in *Radical Feminism*, (Quadrangle Books City, 2022), 298.; Katerine MacKinnon, "Liberalism and the Death of Feminism," in *Sexual Liberals and the Attack on Feminism*, ed. Dorchen Leidholdt and Janice G. Raymond (Teachers College Press, 1990), 13.

¹¹ Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (Basic Books, 2006), 84.

From this perspective, the very concept of female sexual autonomy is fraught, as it is formed within and often serves to reinforce the same structures of male domination that feminists seek to dismantle. In the words of Dworkin: “getting fucked and being owned are inseparably the same; together, being one and the same, they are sex for women under male dominance as a social system.”¹² Here it becomes clear that for Dworkin, intercourse is an act of possession, with men treating women’s bodies as their domain. This possession manifests in two ways: private ownership, where a man claims an individual woman as his, which in turn reflects a collective ownership, where sex reinforces men’s general dominance over women.¹³ Women, socialized within this system, then start to associate being sexually possessed with love and validation, turning submission into a fundamentally erotic experience.

MacKinnon and Dworkin reflect a strand of feminist thought that sought to uncover the ways power permeates even the most personal, private acts, arguing that under a system of male domination, even sex cannot be assumed to be free from ideological distortion or violence.¹⁴ This radical position became foundational for the concept of false consciousness in feminist debates, as it questioned whether women could truly desire or enjoy sex in a context where their very subjectivity is formed under oppressive conditions. The implication was clear: desire itself was politically suspect, particularly when it aligned with patriarchal norms of dominance and submission.

What also becomes abundantly clear is the implicitly moralizing nature of the work of MacKinnon and Dworkin. They do not just analyze desire, they evaluate it, assigning a political and normative meaning to a desire for submission. Even when women enjoy this submissive sexual role, for MacKinnon and Dworkin this does not override what they see as the larger moral wrong of male domination. Importantly, they do not argue that women who experience such desires are themselves morally blameworthy—rather, their work frames these desires as shaped by a patriarchal system in which women are socialized into reproducing their own subordination. In fact, this enjoyment is not even real but rather a symptom of structural oppression. Ultimately, radical feminists treat certain sexual behaviors, such as women’s pleasure in fulfilling submissive sexual roles, as symptoms of societal sickness, not individual choice. Sexuality then becomes a moral battlefield, not just a personal or relational space.

¹² Ibid., 83.

¹³ Andrea Dworkin, “Women-Hating Right and Left,” in *Sexual Liberals and the Attack on Feminism*, ed. Dorchen Leidholdt and Janice G. Raymond (Teachers College Press, 1990), 32–33.

¹⁴ Véronique Mottier, “The invention of sexuality,” *Chic, cheque, choc: Transactions autour des corps et stratégies amoureuses contemporaines* (2012): 34. <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.iheid.6336>.

Other feminists at the time also noticed this moralizing tendency of radical feminists. Gayle Rubin's contribution to feminist thought in the 1970s and 1980s offered a significant challenge to the increasingly moralizing tone within radical feminism. She laid the foundation for a structuralist critique of gender and sexuality by shifting the conversation away from biology and individual behavior toward kinship systems, economic exchange, and symbolic meaning.¹⁵ Rubin theorized that women's oppression is not simply the result of individual male dominance, but is rooted in the socio-symbolic systems that structure society, particularly those systems that treat women as objects of exchange instead of autonomous beings.

This structuralist lens also allowed Rubin to approach sexual desire and sexual politics with greater complexity than her radical feminist contemporaries. Rubin warned that feminist movements risk reproducing the same sexual hierarchies they seek to dismantle when they begin to judge sexual behavior according to ideological purity rather than the principles of consent and harm reduction.¹⁶ She identifies what she calls the "hierarchical system of sexual value," a value system that privileges certain forms of sex (for example, vanilla sex¹⁷) as "good" and stigmatizes others — including consensual practices that involve asymmetrical power roles, such as BDSM or other dominant/submissive dynamics — as "bad."¹⁸ This framework, Rubin argues, "has more in common with ideologies of racism than with true ethics."¹⁹ In other words, the convictions of radical feminism transform feminism from a movement of liberation into a regime of sexual legitimacy.

However, Rubin's goal is not to do away with the moral nature of sexual politics, but rather she seeks to develop a "democratic morality," which assesses sexual acts based on how respectfully partners treat each other, how much mutual care is involved, whether there is any coercion, and the extent and depth of the pleasure shared.²⁰ Therefore, instead of eliminating sexual ethics, her aim is to restructure how moral judgments are made, by depathologizing difference and building a sexual ethics based on justice. This restructured morality, though more inclusive and harm-based, can still obscure the ambiguity, fluidity, and personal meaning of

¹⁵ Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (Monthly Review Press, 1975), 157–210.

¹⁶ Deirdre English, Amber Hollibaugh, and Gayle Rubin, "Talking Sex: A Conversation on Sexuality and Feminism," *Feminist Review*, no. 11 (1982): 41, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1394826>.

¹⁷ "Vanilla sex" refers to sexual activity that adheres to conventional norms, typically characterized by a focus on genital intercourse without the inclusion of kink, BDSM, or other non-normative practices.

¹⁸ Gayle S. Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Ablove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin (Routledge, 1993), 12–14.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

sexual desire itself. In focusing on structural forces and systems of exchange, Rubin's method tends to abstract desire into its political and symbolic functions, sometimes at the expense of understanding it as a deeply subjective and exploratory human experience. In this sense, even Rubin's expansive framework risks reinforcing a regulatory mode of thinking about sex.

Third-Wave and Sex-Positive Feminism

The complex legacy of second-wave feminism, particularly its entanglement with questions of desire, power, and autonomy, would carry over into the third wave, though often in a more liberalized form. Rubin's theory of sexual hierarchies paved the way for this shift, by showing how sexuality is socially organized and challenging universalizing narratives of female sexual victimhood and male oppression. This critical perspective on sexuality would resonate with third-wave feminists, who, emerging in the 1990s, adopted a more individualistic ethos that strongly emphasized choice, empowerment, and sexual agency.²¹

However, this wave of feminism also operated within a neoliberal framework that commodified feminist ideals, emphasizing empowerment but offering it through consumption, self-expression, and lifestyle choices rather than collective political struggle.²² Instead of resolving the complexities of desire and power raised by radical feminists, this discussion was subsumed into a discourse where sexual choice was framed as inherently liberating, regardless of its political context. Angela McRobbie identifies this as a "disarticulated feminism," where feminism has been separated from its original political force and is instead absorbed into mainstream culture in a way that neutralizes its radical potential.²³ In this landscape, the feminist interrogation of heterosexual desire became increasingly fragmented, as the emphasis moved from systemic critique to individual freedom, thereby distracting from more fundamental questions about how desire itself is shaped by and embedded within structures of domination.

Yet even as third-wave feminism celebrated sexual agency and diversity, it continued to rely on a moralizing framework that judged desires according to their perceived alignment with empowerment. This can be seen, for example, in Rebecca Walker's writings, whose essay "Becoming the Third Wave" clearly shows the individualization of political outrage. Her call to feminist action is not based on building a mass political movement in the traditional sense,

²¹ R. Claire Snyder, "What Is Third-Wave Feminism? A New Directions Essay," *Signs* 34 no. 1 (2008): 184, <https://doi.org/10.1086/588436>

²² Angela McRobbie, *The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change* (SAGE, 2009), 29.

²³ *Ibid.*, 25–26.

but rather encourages individual women to see feminism as integral to their personal lives and choices. Walker says:

“Turn that outrage into political power. Do not vote for them [non-feminists] unless they work for us. Do not have sex with them, do not break bread with them, do not nurture them if they don’t prioritize our freedom to control our bodies and our lives. I am not a postfeminism feminist. I am the Third Wave.”²⁴

Third-wave feminists moved away from framing sexual desire as false consciousness and reframed a sexual desire for submission as a matter of erotic agency, but this reframing still operates in a moral framework that values certain expressions of sexuality, for example those aligned with self-assertion, over others. Female submission thus remains suspect, either as evidence of internalized misogyny or, conversely, as something to be validated only if it can be justified as an “empowering” kink. In both cases, the complexity and ambiguity of desire are flattened.

The deep moral tensions at the heart of feminist sexual politics came most vividly to the surface during the feminist sex wars of the 1980s, which exposed stark ideological divisions between radical feminists and sex-positive feminists, but also revealed the limits of framing sexual desire through competing moralities. Ultimately, the sex wars show us how centering feminist debates on the moral legitimacy of certain sexual acts—rather than on the complexity, ambiguity, and personal meaning of desire itself—locks us into a cycle of judgment and opposition, offering little progress toward a deeper, more open-ended understanding of sexuality as a lived, shifting, and often contradictory human experience.

The sex wars were a set of ideological battles within feminism about the politics of sexuality, particularly focusing on issues such as pornography, BDSM, and the eroticization of submission. At the heart of the debate was the tension between radical feminists, who critiqued heterosexual sex and submission as inherently tied to patriarchal power, and sex-positive feminists, who argued for sexual autonomy and fought for freedom of sexual expression, including a sexual desire for submission as long as it was an expression of empowerment.²⁵ The sex wars did not reach a clear resolution, but instead ended in an uneasy stalemate, splintering feminist thought into different camps that left lasting divisions that still echo today.²⁶ These

²⁴ Rebecca Walker, “Becoming the Third Wave,” *Ms. Magazine* 11 no. 2 (1992): 41.

²⁵ Thekla Morgenroth et al., “Sex Wars and TERF Wars: The Divisiveness of Who Is Included in Feminism,” *Sex Roles* 90, no. 6 (May 27, 2024): 678, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-024-01473-2>.

²⁶ Lynn Comella, “Revisiting the Feminist Sex Wars,” *Feminist Studies* 41, no 2 (2015): 440.

debates, while crucial for questioning the relationship between sexuality and power, got lost in deciding who had the moral upper hand, categorizing certain sexual practices as inherently empowering or inherently oppressive. The sex wars' failure to reach any clear conclusion demonstrates that starting with moral judgments about sexual practices ultimately limits the possibility of understanding desire. Instead of offering valuable insights into how desire functions and evolves in our lives, this moral framework polarizes and simplifies complex human experiences.

Fourth-Wave Feminism and the Unfinished Exploration of Desire

Still, the question of whether women's sexual choices are "real choices" or the result of conditioning is at the heart of feminist debates about the legitimacy of certain desires, particularly those that seem to reinforce traditional gender hierarchies. The contemporary feminist understanding of desire ultimately states that while desire is undeniably shaped by structures of power, women also have the right to experience pleasure and autonomy in their sexual choices. Ellen Willis argues that feminism must uphold the principle that consenting individuals have the right to their sexual preferences, free from authoritarian moralism. However, as feminist thinkers interrogate the origins of desire, they often risk reproducing the very moralism they seek to reject. Even well-intentioned critiques can rely on normative frameworks that implicitly judge certain desires less authentic or politically problematic. Willis simultaneously insists that a "truly radical" feminism must interrogate why we desire what we desire. As Willis asks, "What would we choose if we had a real choice?"²⁷

While some scholars question whether a true "fourth wave" of feminism exists, given the movement's fluid boundaries and lack of a distinct theoretical break from earlier waves, this thesis departs from the assumption that a fourth wave can meaningfully be acknowledged. The emergence of widespread internet activism, particularly through social media platforms, has marked a significant transformation in the way feminist issues are discussed, organized, and politicized.²⁸ This digital shift not only amplifies feminist voices but also reshapes the frameworks through which sexual politics and desire are understood. Here, the unresolved tensions around female sexual desire, including the sexual desire for submission, persist, but are now filtered through the immediacy and public nature of digital discourse. Therefore, while

²⁷ Ellen Willis, "Lust Horizons: Is the Women's Movement Pro-Sex?," in *No More Nice Girls: Countercultural Essays* (Minnesota University Press, 2012), 14.

²⁸ Ealasaid Munro, "Feminism: A Fourth Wave?" *Political Insight* 4, no. 2 (2013): 22–25, <https://doi-org.kuleuven.e-bronnen.be/10.1111/2041-9066.12021>.

the existence of a fourth wave remains a debated issue, the profound influence of internet activism on feminist engagements with sexuality warrants treating it as a distinct phase in feminist history for the purposes of this study.

In an attempt to grapple with the persisting unease surrounding sexual desire, fourth-wave feminists have expanded the feminist discussion around consent, agency, and structural violence with a focus on intersectionality.²⁹ However, as with third-wave feminism, desires involving sexual submission are still viewed with suspicion unless they are explicitly framed through the lens of empowerment. This is highlighted by Banet-Weiser's analysis of contemporary feminism, who identifies a "brand culture of empowerment," where only those sexual practices that align with neoliberal ideals of personal liberation are affirmed.³⁰ At the same time, the increasing attention to intersectionality has broadened feminist discussions by emphasizing the importance of recognizing varied experiences of power.³¹

In this sense, the thinkers of the fourth wave build a good foundation to include a richer, more complex understanding of how sexual desire intersects with systems of race, class, and gender. However, they still lack a truly non-moralizing framework that allows for the ambiguity, fluidity, and personal meaning of desire itself. The persistent inclination to judge sexual practices according to political ideals, rather than to explore them as deeply subjective and often contradictory human experiences, risks reproducing internalized shame. The danger, then, is that this internalized shame recreates the very exclusion and surveillance that feminism sought to overcome.

Current Landscape: Persistent Unease with Submission

The fourth-wave feminism's lack of tools and insights to deal with sexual desires that seem inconsistent with the broader feminist project transcends the purely theoretical domain. The questions surrounding this paradox have strong implications for the lived experience of women. Many of these women who find themselves drawn to sexual desire for submission in their heterosexual relationships continue to struggle with the unsettling question of whether their pleasure is *truly* their own or whether it has been shaped by social conditioning in ways they cannot fully perceive. They may experience an internal conflict, where the satisfaction they

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Sarah Banet-Weiser, *Empowered: Popular Feminism and Popular Misogyny* (Duke University Press, 2018), 78.

³¹ Kimberlé Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 139–167.

derive from these sexual experiences is accompanied by an undercurrent of guilt or self-doubt. Does enjoying submission mean they are complicit in their own oppression? Can they still call themselves feminists if their most intimate desires seem to contradict the principles of gender equality they actively support? Here, the question of real choice that feminists pose themselves becomes the ground of a kind of self-regulation in regards to sexual desire.

Serene Khader also identifies this recurring anxiety among women about whether their personal choices, and especially those that align with traditional femininity, disqualify them from being “real” feminists.³² The common question “Can I be a feminist and...?” reflects a fear of judgment, particularly from within the feminist community, over choices like wearing makeup, loving fashion, or being a stay-at-home mom. It points to the tension between feminist ideals and the realities of navigating a society that still rewards women for conforming to patriarchal norms. In line with this, Khader identifies the “judgement myth,” which is the belief that feminism’s main purpose is to respect women’s individual choices, and that critiquing those choices is unfeminist.³³

In this context, it becomes crucial to differentiate a fourth-wave feminism that is profoundly shaped by the dynamics of social media activism. Digital platforms have become spaces where women publicly grapple with the complexities of their sexual desires, often voicing a deep unease about how internalized patriarchy might influence their preferences. For example, Reddit forums like *r/AskFeminists* frequently feature posts from women questioning whether their enjoyment of submission in sexual relationships undermines their feminist identity. In an illustrative thread, a user asked, “Am I a bad feminist for being submissive in the bedroom?”, receiving dozens of detailed, conflicted responses expressing solidarity but also confusion over whether their desires were truly autonomous.³⁴

These online discussions vividly illustrate how the immediacy and public nature of digital spaces magnify feelings of self-surveillance, as women not only question themselves but also anticipate judgment from broader feminist audiences.³⁵ This aspect of online feminism, where expressions of desire are subject to rapid public scrutiny, further embed the moralizing tendencies that fourth-wave feminism struggles to overcome. As such, the digital realm both amplifies feminist discourse around sexuality and simultaneously intensifies internalized forms

³² Khader, *Faux Feminism*, 107.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Dolly_Mama, “Am I a bad feminist for being submissive in the bedroom?” *Reddit*, 2019, https://www.reddit.com/r/AskFeminists/comments/bqgulj/am_i_a_bad_feminist_for_being_submissive_in_the/.

³⁵ Khader, *Faux Feminism*, 107.

of moral policing, making it an essential factor in understanding the contemporary feminist landscape surrounding sexual desire.

Khader's judgement myth shows up frequently, especially in these online conversations, where a woman's behavior—whether she stays home or works, has sex or does not have sex, eats a cupcake or avoids one—is met with commentary or critique. This discussion is then quickly shut down with the argument that feminism is about allowing women to choose freely, and that judging those choices goes against feminist values. By treating all critique as judgment, feminism is reduced to a “you do you” philosophy that avoids examining the influence of capitalism, or cultural norms. This creates a silencing effect, where meaningful discussion about systemic inequality is seen as off-limits.³⁶ As seen on platforms like Reddit, women often express anxiety about whether their sexual desires, particularly those involving submission, are truly their own or products of internalized oppression. This anxiety can indeed be understood as a form of critical self-reflection—a recognition that desire is never formed in a vacuum but shaped by structural forces. However, the way these conversations unfold often reveals an underlying expectation that women must resolve this ambiguity by morally justifying their desires. In that sense, the discourse tends to reproduce the idea that certain desires must either be defended as autonomous or exposed as ideologically contaminated. This suggests that contemporary feminism still struggles to fully move beyond framing individual desires through a moral lens, even when those desires are being interrogated in the name of structural critique. A more generative approach would be to accept such desires as complex, layered responses to both structural forces and intimate personal experience, without demanding moral resolution. The persistent need for women to justify or defend their sexual preferences against perceived accusations of false consciousness reflects not only the difficulty of separating desire from ideology, but also a broader discomfort with the ambiguity and multiplicity of human desire.

This tension between personal pleasure and feminist expectation is not confined to the online realm. It manifests just as vividly in contemporary cultural works that attempt to give voice to women's desires. *Want*, a collection of anonymous sexual confessions curated by Gillian Anderson, offers a revealing glimpse into this persistent self-policing. The book's format, using anonymous, unfiltered confessions, is significant as it highlights how many women still feel the need to protect themselves from social scrutiny when articulating their most intimate fantasies. Although the book spans a broad array of sexual scenarios, ranging from

³⁶ Khader, *Faux Feminism*, 108.

group sex to fantastical kinks, fantasies involving sexual submission appear especially burdened by an undercurrent of internalized shame. Often, women's admissions of desiring domination, control, or pain are accompanied by explicit reassurances that they still consider themselves feminist, or by rhetorical distancing from their own desires. To exemplify, the following anonymous submissions were published in *Want*:

An ardent feminist. Outspoken, in control. Someone who demands equality in a relationship but whose drive to lessen suffering means a tendency to take on emotional labour to make life easier for others. Making choices, being the driving force. My God, sometimes I just want to surrender. My whole body, all of me—hand it over and let it be completely possessed by someone. No choices to be made. Just hands on the back of my neck and a solid body crushed against mine. [...] To be grabbed, pushed—filth whispered in my ear along with the sounds that tell me I'm wanted.³⁷

I am a feminist woman working in the legal field, who believes women should be as powerful as they want to be. In many ways, I have a great amount of control over who I am and what I do: how I spend my money, how I treat my body and the way that I dress. But I want to lose that control. And every one of my fantasies involves my boyfriend dominating me.³⁸

This suggests that while such fantasies may be deeply pleasurable, they remain fraught with the weight of cultural expectations and the fear of being perceived as betraying feminist principles. The unresolved tension between personal fulfillment and political identity exemplifies how moralistic tendencies continue to shape women's experiences of sexuality, even in spaces ostensibly meant to be free from judgment.

Politicizing Desire

Within the historical feminist debate on sexuality and false consciousness, a key tension has emerged between liberal and radical approaches to desire. While liberal feminism has often centered personal autonomy and the inviolability of individual choice—particularly in the realm of sex—radical feminism has questioned the very conditions under which such choices are made. This divide is sharply articulated by Sandra Lee Bartky, who warns that to assume politics has no place in the domain of sexuality is to offer “essentially a liberal response to a radical critique of sexuality and, as such, it fails entirely to engage in this critique.”³⁹ Here, Bartky

³⁷ Gillian Anderson, *Want* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2024), 49.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 198.

³⁹ Sandra Lee Bartky, *Femininity and Domination: Studies in the Phenomenology of Oppression* (Routledge, 1990), 50.

underscores the risk of retreating into a framework that treats desire as apolitical, thereby ignoring how deeply social norms and structures of power shape what women come to want. In the context of the false consciousness debate, this critique becomes especially salient: liberal feminism's reluctance to interrogate desires seen as freely chosen can inadvertently reproduce the very dynamics of domination radical feminism seeks to challenge. Rather than asking whether a desire is authentic or free in a purely individual sense, the radical position insists on asking how such desires are formed, maintained, and regulated within systems of power—a move that continues to provoke unease and division within feminist thought.

Yet, as Srinivasan notes in engaging with Bartky, the challenge is not simply to politicize desire, but to do so without falling into a new form of disciplinary judgment. She writes:

“Here, then, is the real question: how do we engage in a political critique of sex without slipping into the misogynistic logic of sexual entitlement (‘the right to sex’) or into a moral authoritarianism that disciplines rather than emancipates? How we do address our desires without fear, as Lorde puts it, of the distortions we may find within ourselves? And how do we do so without turning inwards, without replacing a political project with a personal one? The answer to the question, I take it, is a practical one – a matter, as philosophers like to say, not of knowing-*that*, but of knowing-*how*. Know-how is to be found not through theoretical investigation but through experiments of living.”⁴⁰

This thesis is positioned precisely within that space of lived experimentation. It insists that to theorize desire is not to police it, but to explore how it is formed, what it promises, and how it may be reworked through feminist praxis. The post-structuralist framework adopted here, drawing primarily from Michel Foucault and Lauren Berlant, views desire not as something “pure” or corrupted, but as constituted through discourses and power relations that shape subjectivity from within. This creates space to resist a reductive moral logic that casts certain desires, like those for sexual submission, as either false consciousness or emancipatory truths. Instead, we can understand these desires as historically and affectively contingent attachments, rich with meaning and contradiction.

Conclusion

Situating the contemporary feminist struggle of women who experience sexual desire for submission within the broader historical arc of feminist thought exposes a persistent and troubling trend: the reliance on moral judgment as the primary lens for evaluating sexual

⁴⁰ Amia Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022), 102.

politics. From the radical feminist critique that viewed all female submission as capitulation to patriarchal domination, to liberal feminism's celebration of individual choice framed within narrow conditions of empowerment, the feminist tradition has consistently struggled to move beyond normative frameworks that measure desire against ideological standards. At every stage, sexuality has been positioned as something that must be politically purified, policed, or defended, rather than engaged with in its messy, ambivalent reality. This moralistic legacy helps explain why submission continues to provoke unease—it is less about the desires themselves than about feminism's ongoing difficulty in accepting the contradictions inherent in intimate life.

Throughout this chapter, it has become clear that moralism, however framed, remains inadequate for grappling with the complexity of sexual desire. The insistence on evaluating desires based on their perceived ideological conformity forces women into a kind of self-surveillance that mirrors the very structures of judgment feminism seeks to dismantle. Instead of offering liberation, this dynamic often reproduces new forms of guilt, anxiety, and internalized shame. Women are not only tasked with managing their sexual experiences but also with ensuring that these experiences align with an often rigid and moralized conception of feminist politics. In doing so, feminism risks collapsing into a new ideology, one that demands performances of empowerment rather than fostering a deeper, more compassionate understanding of lived sexual realities.

Recognizing these limitations, the need for a new conceptual approach becomes urgent. The next chapter will propose a post-structuralist rethinking of sexual desire, moving away from frameworks that ask whether desires are authentic or corrupted, emancipatory or oppressive. This post-structuralist approach offers a crucial corrective to feminism's historical tendencies toward moral policing. This shift does not aim to depoliticize sexuality; on the contrary, it invites a more nuanced and fulfilling engagement with the political dimensions of desire. By understanding desire as a site of negotiation rather than moral judgment, feminism can better attend to the realities of women's lived experiences—their contradictions, their uncertainties, their pleasures, and their pains. Such an approach opens up space for women to encounter their sexualities with less internalized shame and more critical compassion, recognizing that empowerment does not require the purification of desire, but a deepened, more courageous engagement with its complexities. The next chapter, therefore, will develop a framework that neither absolves nor condemns desire but seeks to understand it as a profound, embodied, and often ambivalent relation to self and other, power and pleasure.

What is Desire? A Post-Structuralist Perspective

Desire is not a simple, isolated drive; it is a complex relational structure, a mode of connecting with both ourselves and the world around us.⁴¹ Internally, we understand ourselves through what we long for, and our desires provide valuable information about our emotional and psychological needs. At the same time, desire also projects outward, by positioning us in relation to something external that we do not yet possess, but that we do feel drawn towards. Lauren Berlant further develops this understanding of desire, which they describe as follows:

Desire describes a state of attachment to something or someone, and the cloud of possibility that is generated by the gap between an object's specificity and the needs and promises projected onto it.⁴²

Here, Berlant states that desire is a complex emotional attachment shaped by both reality and imagination. When we desire, we become attached not only to the object itself, but to the “cloud of possibility” it represents. Desire, then, is shaped by the world of hopes, dreams, and promises we project onto it. This means that desire is not only shaped by what already exists in the world, but also by our inner psychic life through our emotions and imaginations.

In contrast to the moralistic tone of feminist writers highlighted in the previous chapter, Berlant's take on desire, alongside a broader post-structuralist perspective, offers a much richer and exploratory approach. Berlant's perspective avoids prescribing how women should desire and instead invites an exploration of how desire emerges, shaped by projections, fantasies, and emotional needs. This shift allows for a deeper understanding of desire as complex and fluid, rather than something to be “fixed” or normalized. By not immediately imposing judgments or moral imperatives, Berlant and post-structuralism in general provide a more open space to investigate desire in all its nuanced forms, encouraging a nuanced inquiry rather than a prescriptive stance.

Ultimately, this chapter argues that feminism, in order to adequately deal with concerns regarding internalized oppression, false consciousness and cognitive dissonance, needs an understanding of sexual desire that has an investigative instead of prescriptive point of departure. It is precisely in dealing with the internal contradictions of desire in relation to power and exploring these contradictions to their full extent that sexual politics can ultimately be a force of liberation. By first focusing on an adequate understanding of desire, we can understand

⁴¹ Lauren Berlant, *Desire/Love* (Punctum Books, 2012), 6.

⁴² Ibid.

its political significance and use it to shape the broader feminist project in a way that works *for* instead of *against* women.⁴³

The Object of Desire

Desire is never simply about possessing an object; it is shaped by the act of longing itself. It involves cycles of hope, loss, fantasy, and reattachment.⁴⁴ The object of desire itself then remains elusive, not only because it may be unattainable, but because it is about the symbolic meaning and fantasy surrounding the object, not the material thing. In other words, we do not long for the object of desire as it is, but we long for the fulfilment we imagine it might bring. Desire, in this way, functions as a promise: it entices us with the possibility of satisfaction, even if this satisfaction might never be reached in reality.

To exemplify the object of desire and the relation we have to it, the kind of longing people experience for an ideal romantic partner can help illustrate this relationship. Consider an individual who idealizes the notion of encountering “the one” — an imagined perfect partner who promises emotional completeness, unconditional love, and deep understanding. In this case, the object of desire is not the person themselves, but the symbolic meanings and fantasies projected onto that person. The individual does not long for the partner as they are, but rather for the emotional fulfilment and relational satisfaction they believe the partner might offer. This object of desire, therefore, remains elusive not because it is inherently unattainable, but because it exists primarily within the realm of fantasy. The object is bound to the promise of fulfilment rather than its material or concrete reality.

Berlant’s concept of “cruel optimism” helps illuminate this dynamic by framing desire as an attachment not just to an object, but to the promises embedded within it. As Berlant argues, “When we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us.”⁴⁵ This framing helps explain why desire persists even when the object repeatedly fails to deliver on its promises: it

⁴³ The call for a feminist project “that works for instead of against women” should be read as an appeal to move beyond prescriptive and moralizing approaches to sexual desire. These approaches often fail to engage the internal contradictions and complexities of desire in relation to power. This move is necessary for developing a genuinely emancipatory sexual politics. However, such a reorientation must also reckon with the historical tendency of mainstream feminism to center the experiences and moral concerns of a relatively narrow group—primarily white, middle-class, cisgender, heterosexual women—while marginalizing or excluding others. See bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (South End Press, 1984); and Kimberlé Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex”, *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 139–167.

⁴⁴ Berlant, *Desire/Love*, 13.

⁴⁵ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Duke University Press, 2011), 23.

is the fantasy of fulfilment, rather than its realization, that sustains attachment. For Berlant, desire operates at the level of the promise, and the affective force of desire depends precisely on the gap between what is hoped for and what reality delivers.

This understanding of desire and cruel optimism proves particularly useful when thinking about female sexual desire for submission. Here, the longing is not simply a wish for domination in material life. Rather, it is mediated by the symbolic meanings attached to the act of submission. These symbolic meanings can include those of safety, trust, surrender, the temporary suspension of responsibility, and an intense affirmation of value and belonging. Within Berlant's framework, such attachments could be seen as a form of cruel optimism: they offer promises that cannot be fully realized and yet continue to structure desire.

However, applying cruel optimism to sexual desire specifically also exposes the limits of Berlant's theory. Berlant frames attachments through blockage, frustration, and the ultimate unattainability of the object of desire. Yet in the domain of sexual desire, particularly in the desire for submission, tension, instability, and even unattainability are not experienced merely as failures or obstacles. Rather, they are constitutive of the pleasure itself. In sexual contexts, the pleasure often resides not in the resolution of desire, but in the play with vulnerability and power dynamics. Sexual longing may deliberately seek volatility and ambiguity—such as the uncertainty of control or the unpredictability of response—finding affective intensity not despite the absence of stable fulfilment, but because of it. Thus, while Berlant's framework is invaluable for diagnosing broader social attachments, it inadequately captures how, in sexual desire, the impossibility of full satisfaction can itself be erotically sustaining. In this sense, sexual desire complicates the logic of cruel optimism: it shows that failure and instability are not always experienced as cruel or diminishing, but can instead be the very conditions that make desire pleasurable and affectively rich.

Together with Lee Edelman, Berlant further complicates the narrative of submission always signaling internalized oppression, or false consciousness. They argue that people sometimes desire “to be nonsovereign and sometimes not-autonomous,”⁴⁶ not because they are trapped by oppressive structures, but because surrendering autonomy can itself constitute a different kind of freedom.⁴⁷ For many, the experience of being desired, protected, or even controlled carries a big emotional value, even when such experiences seemingly echo

⁴⁶ Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman, *Sex, or the Unbearable* (Duke University Press: 2014), 117.

⁴⁷ Maggie Nelson, *On Freedom* (Vintage: 2021), 95–96.

traditional gender scripts. This means not only that the relation to the object of desire is not reducible to lack or deprivation, but also that the object of desire can indeed be attained, albeit only temporarily. In sexual contexts, the fulfilment of a desire to be dominated often occurs in momentary experiences of connection, after which the cycle of longing, tension, and reattachment can be reignited.

Consequently, feminist critique must be careful not to dismiss such desires as politically false or psychologically illegitimate. To do so risks misunderstanding the complex ways in which desire operates not merely as a symptom of oppression, but as a site where forms of non-sovereign agency emerge. A desire's entanglement with cultural norms does not automatically erase its emotional authenticity or its capacity to generate meaning and pleasure. Instead, it reveals that agency itself need not be imagined solely in terms of autonomy or resistance. Within the experience of sexual submission, agency can take the form of a conscious relinquishing of control, or a negotiated vulnerability. Recognizing the possibility of non-sovereign agency demands a more nuanced theoretical approach that is attentive to the ways in which power, pleasure, and subjectivity are co-constituted.

Non-Sovereign Agency and Bio-Power

To fully understand how agency can function within structures of submission and contradiction, it is crucial to rethink what power really means in this situation. A Foucauldian framework offers a powerful starting point. For Foucault, power is not simply a repressive force but rather a productive one. It circulates through institutions, discourses and everyday practices. In this view, subjects are not merely constrained by power but also take form through this power.⁴⁸ This insight allows for the recognition of agency even in situations where autonomy seems to be compromised, such as in situations of sexual submission.

A central aspect of Foucault's later work is his formulation of bio-power, a mode of power that targets populations and bodies as objects of management.⁴⁹ Bio-power aims to regulate life itself through mechanisms of health, sexuality, reproduction, and normality. This power is scattered, often internalized by subjects themselves, leading them to govern their own behaviors in alignment with social norms. In this way, bio-power is not something merely imposed on a passive subject, but it is constitutive of the subject, shaping how they understand themselves and their desires.

⁴⁸ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge* (Penguin Classics, 2020), 94–95.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 140.

In the context of female sexual desire for submission, Foucault's concept of bio-power is of importance in two important respects. First, it helps us understand how feminist discourses can themselves become regulatory frameworks. Within these frameworks, women may internalize expectations about what liberated desire should look like and, as a result, censor or question their own submissive fantasies when these seem politically incompatible with feminist ideals. This form of self-policing is not merely imposed from outside but arises from bio-power's internalization, as subjects come to govern their own desires in accordance with dominant discourses of sexual normativity—even feminist ones.⁵⁰

Second, bio-power clarifies how power is not just limiting but productive; it constitutes the very subject who desires. Desire, then, is not something pure that power distorts, but something that takes shape through the very power relations that organize sexuality, gender, and identity. This means that desires for submission can be understood as deeply embedded in the discursive and embodied experiences through which subjects come to know themselves. Rather than seeing submission and pleasure as mutually exclusive or politically incompatible, a Foucauldian lens invites us to consider how pleasure might emerge precisely through one's navigation of power.

This insight allows for the recognition of agency even in situations where autonomy seems compromised, such as in experiences of sexual submission. Pleasure, in such contexts, does not necessarily stand outside of power but is entangled with it. Here, agency can be found in the subject's ability to navigate, appropriate, and even embrace the very structures that define and constrain them. As Foucault observes, "pleasure and power do not cancel or turn back against one another; they seek out, overlap, and reinforce one another. They are linked together by complex mechanisms and devices of excitation and incitement."⁵¹

Building on this, Lipika Kamra offers the term non-sovereign agency to describe agentive practices that occur within, rather than despite, dominant power structures. Kamra's work is particularly useful for analyzing agency in contexts where traditional notions of autonomy do not apply. Writing about women's memoirs from the Naxalite movement in India⁵², Kamra argues that "the subjectivities of women as agents need to be understood in

⁵⁰ Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*, 80–100.

⁵¹ Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, 48.

⁵² The Naxalite movement is a Maoist-inspired insurgency in India that began in the late 1960s, advocating for the rights of marginalized rural populations. While rooted in class struggle, the movement also drew in many women who saw it as a space for resisting both state violence and patriarchal oppression. However, the role of women within the movement has been ambivalent—offering possibilities for agency and political voice, while often reproducing gendered hierarchies within its own structures.

terms of everyday negotiations with their existential situations.”⁵³ These women, she notes, are often engaged in acts of resistance even as their identities and actions are deeply shaped by patriarchy, class, and militarized politics. Kamra defines non-sovereign agency as distinct from the liberal model of the rational, self-determining individual: it captures agentive acts that are not always consciously autonomous but are nevertheless meaningful responses to structural constraints. It challenges rigid binaries such as ‘resistance/ domination’ or ‘agency/victimhood’ by acknowledging how power and subjectivity are intertwined.⁵⁴

For Kamra, the key to understanding non-sovereign agency is that it arises within existing power relations. This conception allows us to see resistance not as a purely autonomous stance, but as something that takes many forms, including those shaped by the very structures one seeks to resist. In her analysis of women in the Naxalite movement, Kamra illustrates how resistance does not always mean rejecting authority or asserting autonomy; instead, it can involve acts of strategic submission or alignment with broader collective goals, even when those alignments are constrained by gendered, classed, and political expectations. In this way, Kamra moves away from the liberal notion that agency is only real when it is performed outside of oppression and toward an understanding of resistance that incorporates the complexities of embodied and situated lived experiences.

However, while Kamra's model of non-sovereign agency and Foucault's concept of bio-power are powerful tools for understanding agency within structures of domination, they do not fully account for how the subject can truly *enjoy* submission, especially in the context of sexual submission. Kamra's analysis emphasizes the negotiation of power, particularly in political and militant contexts, but sexual submission raises a unique set of questions. It is not simply about negotiating within oppressive structures; it involves a paradox where the subject may derive pleasure from what is traditionally considered a subjugated position. Similarly, Foucault maps how power shapes desire but remains largely silent on how submission can be not only meaningful but erotically fulfilling. His framework offers tools for understanding how desires are produced but less for grappling with why submission in itself can feel good.⁵⁵ In this sense,

⁵³ Lipika Kamra, “Self-Making Through Self-Writing: Non-Sovereign Agency in Women's Memoirs From the Naxalite Movement,” *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal*, no. 7 (October 14, 2013): 3, <https://doi.org/10.4000/samaj.3608>.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Carolyn J. Dean, *The Self and Its Pleasures: Bataille, Lacan, and the History of the Decentered Subject* (Cornell University Press, 1992), 6.

Foucault gives us a compelling theory of how submission is possible, but less of a theory for why it might be desirable.

Subjection and the Pleasure of Submission

Judith Butler's understanding of subjection offers an indispensable lens for making sense of the enjoyment of sexual submission. Butler radically complicates the way thinkers such as Foucault have understood agency and desire. If one's very sense of self is shaped by power, then so too are their pleasures, including those that emerge in sexual submission. Butler draws particular attention to the affective and psychic dimensions of this process, focusing on how power becomes internalized not simply as constraint, but as a felt necessity and even a condition for desire.

Subjection, in Butler's view, is not only a political or discursive condition but a psychic one, involving attachment and dependency.⁵⁶ The subject is not merely dominated but emotionally bound to the norms that govern them, and this binding often takes the form of affective investments that are central to how one comes to inhabit a sense of self. In this framework, the desire to submit sexually is not merely a consequence of structural male domination but can be seen as an affective attachment to the very conditions of subordination that structure subjectivity. This is not a case of desire needing to be questioned or "corrected"; rather, it is an example of desire's intelligibility and coherence within a matrix of power that shapes the very conditions of feeling and longing.

Butler's work thus fills a critical gap left by both Berlant's theory of cruel optimism and Foucault's bio-political analysis. Where Berlant focuses on the frustrating deferral of satisfaction, and Foucault emphasizes the productive force of power on the subject, Butler offers a more intimate account of how desire becomes affectively and psychically bound to the very norms that define it. In doing so, they provide a more adequate explanation for why submission might not only occur but feel right and even pleasurable. As such, there is no imperative to treat women's submissive desires as false or suspect. Rather, they must be recognized as affectively real, psychically coherent, and politically significant forms of relationality and self-experience.

Drawing on Hegel's depiction of the master-slave dialectic and the slave's internalization of the master, they show how conscience and agency are shaped by the internalization of authoritative voices.⁵⁷ This internalization becomes central to someone's psychological structure—something felt, longed for, and sometimes even enjoyed. In this light,

⁵⁶ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford University Press, 1997), 2.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 3.

a woman's enjoyment of sexual submission is not merely a failure of feminist reason or a capitulation to patriarchal norms. It is an embodied psychic truth that reflects her specific history of normativity, affect, and desire, and one that should be approached with interpretive generosity rather than suspicion. To feel pleasure in submission, then, is not to step outside of agency, but to occupy a complex affective terrain in which agency, dependency, and desire converge. Such pleasure is not automatically regressive or disempowering; it is historically, psychically, and emotionally mediated. Power then, operates through the deeply felt experience of living a norm.

Butler's account of subjection makes clear that agency is not constituted in the absence of power but rather through its intimate operations. To experience pleasure in submission does not mean a woman has failed to achieve feminist consciousness; rather, it may reflect a form of agency embedded within the very structures that shape and sustain her. As Berlant reminds us, desire is not simply rational or ideological—it is affective, embodied, and deeply personal.

Sexual desires, particularly those formed at the intersection of affect, normativity, and psychic life, are often elusive and resistant to stable interpretation. Their meanings shift across contexts and are deeply entwined with the emotional texture of the self. In this light, it is neither necessary nor productive to question whether a specific desire is “authentic” or “false.” Doing so risks flattening the psychic complexity of desire and reintroducing prescriptive judgments that post-structuralist theory has helped us move beyond. Instead, by focusing on how the social field constitute the very conditions under which certain desires become possible, we can politicize desire at the level of its formation, without imposing normative judgments on the intimate configurations it takes.

Experiments of Living

Following Amia Srinivasan's call to apply our understanding of desire to “experiments in living,” it is vital to explore how theoretical insights into desire, agency, and power play out in concrete, lived experience.⁵⁸ To do so, we will revisit one of the anonymized submissions published in *Want* that was put forward in the previous chapter. The submission is as follows:

An ardent feminist. Outspoken, in control. Someone who demands equality in a relationship but whose drive to lessen suffering means a tendency to take on emotional labour to make life easier for others. Making choices, being the driving force. My God, sometimes I just want to surrender.

⁵⁸ Srinivasan, *The Right to Sex*, 102.

My whole body, all of me—hand it over and let it be completely possessed by someone. No choices to be made. Just hands on the back of my neck and a solid body crushed against mine. [...] To be grabbed, pushed—filth whispered in my ear along with the sounds that tell me I’m wanted.⁵⁹

This submission presents a sexual fantasy submitted by an anonymous woman that at first glance may appear to reflect a contradiction: a woman who identifies as an ardent feminist expresses a longing to be dominated, to surrender control, and to feel wanted through the forceful affirmation of a man’s desire. Yet to frame this contradiction as a problem in need of correction would be to misunderstand the layered complexity of desire and its relation to subjectivity. Rather than dismissing such fantasies as false consciousness or internalized oppression, it is more generative to ask what these longings reveal about the emotional and political terrain that feminism must navigate.

Berlant’s notion of cruel optimism offers a starting point. The writer’s longing is not simply for domination, but she longs for what that domination promises: release from responsibility, affirmation of worth, the comfort of relinquished decision-making. These are not trivial comforts; they are deeply affective attachments that offer temporary respite from the emotional labour and constant self-regulation expected of women under neoliberal feminism. In Berlant’s terms, the object of desire here—submission—is less about the act itself and more about the “cluster of promises”⁶⁰ it conjures: the fantasy of freedom-through-surrender. Yet this is precisely where the cruelty lies. The fantasy sustains itself on promises that are, at best, fleeting and, at worst, illusory. The desire for submission becomes a form of cruel optimism insofar as it attaches the subject to an object that cannot resolve the structural conditions that produced the desire in the first place. In this case, domination cannot permanently alleviate the burdens of gendered emotional labour; it merely offers an eroticized suspension of it.

However, as Berlant and Edelman caution, sexual desire cannot be fully reduced to unfulfilled longing. It often operates precisely *through* failure, instability, and tension. The impossibility of full satisfaction is not experienced as tragic, but as erotically sustaining. In this way, submission escapes the diagnostic pessimism of cruel optimism, and instead becomes a site where affective intensity is not only maintained but amplified by the very unresolvability of the longing.

⁵⁹ Anderson, *Want*, 49.

⁶⁰ Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 23.

Here, Foucault's theory of *bio-power* provides further insight. Power, for Foucault, does not merely repress but instead takes a productive form. Sexuality, desire, and even resistance are not pure forces of individual will, but are shaped through discourses, norms, and institutions. The fantasy of submission in the anonymous confession is not a spontaneous eruption of authentic desire but one structured by the very apparatuses that govern women's lives—norms of femininity, emotional availability, selflessness, and sexual desirability. The fantasy of being "completely possessed" can be read, then, as the internalization of a power that has taught the subject to understand value as something conferred through desirability and devotion.

Yet to claim this desire is wholly determined by power would risk denying the subject any agency. It is here that Kamra's concept of *non-sovereign agency* becomes crucial. Non-sovereign agency describes forms of action that occur not in defiance of power, but within its folds. The fantasy of submission is not a simple capitulation to patriarchy, but a strategic, even pleasurable, navigation of it. The subject may find meaning and relief in her surrender, not because she lost in a system of male domination, but because this surrender functions as a response to her lived experience of over-responsibility and emotional depletion. Her agency lies not in rejecting the structures that shape her, but in appropriating them for a moment of psychic rebalancing. And yet, such appropriations do not dislodge the structures themselves. They offer temporary, affectively real experiences of relief without challenging the system that made such relief necessary.

Judith Butler's account of *subjection* deepens this reading by focusing on how norms are not only internalized intellectually but felt psychically. We are not simply shaped by power; we are bound to it emotionally. The woman's longing to be overtaken is not an aberration but a reflection of how deeply the norms of care, submission, and desirability have become constitutive of her subjectivity. Subjection, in Butler's sense, describes the paradox of a self formed through power, which then turns back to the very norms that subordinate her for recognition, stability, and pleasure. To enjoy submission is thus not to step outside of feminism, but to experience the intimate, often inescapable entanglement of power and pleasure. There is no outside of power from which one can desire "freely"—only different modes of attachment to it.

Taken together, these theoretical insights reveal that the fantasy in question cannot be disentangled from the structures of power, gendered labor, and emotional depletion that shape it. Rather than functioning as a pure site of freedom or resistance, the fantasy embodies a complex negotiation with the conditions that structure feminine subjectivity. The subject's

longing for domination does not contradict her feminism but arises within the tensions that feminism seeks to confront: the burden of care, the expectation of emotional endurance, and the need for recognition under neoliberal norms. As such, this desire—though meaningful, affectively rich, and experientially real—ultimately exposes the limits of locating political resistance in sexuality itself. This realization sets the stage for a deeper interrogation: if sexual desire is always already shaped by the very systems feminism aims to challenge, can sex truly serve as a reliable site of feminist resistance? It is to this question that we now turn.

Sex as a Site of Resistance?

Sex does not automatically align with ethical or political ideals.⁶¹ As Maggie Nelson reminds us, we must be wary of framing sexuality in binary terms—between a “once-and-for-all happy and liberated sexuality vs. *The Handmaid’s Tale*.”⁶² Feminism cannot assume that sexual desire will align neatly with political resistance. The slogan “the personal is political” still holds, but not in the simplified sense that personal desire always mirrors political ideals.

As explored in the previous chapter, it is common for women to experience the pressure of self-regulation or to feel the need to defend their sexual desires, particularly when these desires appear to conflict with feminist ideals. In a society dominated by male domination, women bear the burden of both justifying these desires and proving their feminist credentials. When these desires happen to entail a preference for sexual submission to a male partner, this proves the stalemate of the feminist project: either women need to admit that they suffer from “internalized patriarchy” which diminishes their agency or they need to distance themselves from the sexual desire which would otherwise bring them fulfilment.

This tension exposes the limits of framing sexual acts or expressions as inherently resistant. As Foucault argues, power does not merely repress desire—it produces and organizes it. If sexuality is already enmeshed in systems of control, then expressions of sexuality, even those that appear transgressive, are not necessarily outside those systems. Rather than offering freedom, sexual acts risk being recaptured by the very logics of power they are supposed to subvert. The fantasy of resistance through sex may thus be more comforting than effective.

So where does this leave the feminist project? If sexuality is too entangled with structures of power to serve as a reliable site of resistance, then feminist energy must be directed elsewhere—not toward redeeming or disciplining desire, but toward transforming the

⁶¹ Nelson, *On Freedom*, 76.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 77.

conditions that render certain desires fraught in the first place. This means resisting the impulse to locate feminist freedom in individual acts of sexual agency or transgression and instead focusing on the broader systems—economic, social, and institutional—that shape how sex is lived and understood.

Silvia Federici's work is helpful here. She says:

““Liberation from sex” means liberation from the conditions in which we are forced to live our sexuality, which transform this activity into an arduous work, full of incognita and accidents, not least the danger of remaining pregnant, given that even the latest contraceptives are taken at a considerable health risk. [...] [S]exuality continues to be for us a source of anxiety, for “sexual liberation” has been turned into a duty that we must accept if we do not want to be accused of being backward.”⁶³

Her call for “liberation from sex” does not imply prudishness or abstention, but rather a liberation from the social and material conditions that render sexuality anxious, burdensome, and exploitative. For Federici, the problem is not sex itself but the way sex is embedded in histories of labor, violence, and reproductive risk. Even contemporary notions of sexual liberation can impose new forms of obligation: the duty to be sexually active, sexually confident, or sexually enlightened. These imperatives may only deepen the sense of alienation for their desires that many women feel, turning liberation into yet another form of work.

By framing the issue in this way, Federici helps shift the focus away from sex as a political end in itself and toward the conditions under which sex becomes meaningful—or meaningless. Ethical or fulfilling sex cannot be reduced to a fantasy of freedom; it is shaped by power, by context, and by structures that extend far beyond the bedroom. As Katherine Angel puts it, if we want sex to be joyful, we must pay attention to its contexts.⁶⁴ Sexuality is not a stable terrain on which liberation can be built—it is a shifting, historically contingent experience, often laden with contradiction and shaped by forces far beyond the individual.

The implication is clear: the feminist project should not hinge on the liberation of desire but on interrogating and transforming the shifting networks of power that shape how desire is experienced and governed. If sexuality is not a stable site but a terrain continually produced through discourse, practice, and regulation, then feminist resistance must be equally fluid—

⁶³ Silvia Federici, *Beyond the Periphery of the Skin: Rethinking, Remaking, and Reclaiming the Body in Contemporary Capitalism* (PM Press, 2020), 104.

⁶⁴ Katherine Angel, *Tomorrow Sex Will be Good Again: Women and Desire in the Age of Consent* (Verso, 2021), 68.

attuned not to universal formulas for freedom but to the uneven, situated conditions that constrain and enable women's lives. Rather than seeking to liberate sex itself, feminism must engage the broader, evolving contexts in which sex becomes meaningful, contested, and regulated. Liberation, then, is not a destination within the sexual realm—it is a continuous, critical practice aimed at unsettling the forces that render certain desires legible, others deviant, and all subject to scrutiny.

Conclusion

The preceding analysis brings together the insights of Berlant, Foucault, Kamra, and Butler to trace the affective and discursive production of desire, particularly in relation to the fantasy of sexual submission. What emerges is a vision of desire as a deeply relational and structurally mediated phenomenon—formed not in isolation, but within and through the power relations that shape subjectivity itself. Rather than treating submission as a contradiction to feminist consciousness or as a false consciousness to be corrected, we have seen how it can be understood as an affectively coherent response to gendered expectations, emotional labor, and psychic subjection.

However, this convergence also reveals a critical limit. While the intimate realm of sexual desire can provide momentary reprieve and affective richness, it does not constitute a stable or sufficient site of feminist resistance. As long as desire remains shaped by the very structures it appears to resist, sexuality risks becoming a scene where contradiction is managed rather than transformed. To continue locating feminist resistance within the realm of sex is to risk confusing genuine, deeply felt longing for a false consciousness.

This recognition validates the pleasures or meanings of submission, but it also shows the need for a shift in feminist imagination: away from a focus on sex as the privileged site of freedom, and toward a broader, more collective horizon of resistance. The next chapter will take up this task by turning to forms of feminist praxis rooted not in the individual negotiation of desire, but in collective action, solidarity, and the reimagining of relational life. If desire reveals the conditions of our attachments, then collective resistance must ask how we might change those conditions altogether.

Rethinking Feminist Resistance: Reclaiming Desire for Collective Power

Where the last chapter explored desire as a reflection of the conditions shaping our attachments, this chapter begins from the premise that those conditions can and must be transformed. Desires that fall outside dominant feminist scripts are often treated with suspicion, as if they reflect false consciousness rather than complex truths. But the political power of sex may lie not in correcting or purifying what we want, but in claiming those wants fully and without shame.

Audre Lorde offers a vital reorientation here. She argues for approaching desire not as a liability, but as a profound source of knowledge and energy—a force that, when felt deeply and consciously, becomes a ground for resistance.⁶⁵ For Lorde, the erotic is not limited to sexuality but encompasses the full range of emotional intensity that connects us to aliveness, possibility, and integrity. What gives desire its political charge is not its alignment with any ideal, but the depth of self-awareness and intention with which it is lived. This turn inward is not a retreat from collective struggle, but a step toward building it on more honest ground.

To underline this point, Lorde redefines what the “erotic” means, moving it far beyond its narrow and sexualized interpretations. Lorde defines the erotic as a profound source of emotional, creative, and spiritual vitality that connects us to our deepest truths. It is, in her words, “a well of replenishing and provocative force” that, when accessed with full awareness, becomes a foundation for personal power and radical honesty.⁶⁶ Although Lorde writes from a Black lesbian feminist standpoint, her theory of the erotic challenges hegemonic structures of power in ways that can be productively extended to heterosexual contexts. When this framework is applied to heterosexual desire for submission, Lorde’s theory shows us that what matters is not the form the desire takes, but the depth of intentionality with which it is embraced. Rather than reading heterosexual submission as inherently complicit with patriarchal domination, Lorde’s queer theoretical lens invites us to consider how agency, self-knowledge, and chosen vulnerability might constitute a resistant erotic. A woman’s pleasure in submission is not necessarily capitulation to patriarchy—it can be, when claimed with consciousness and without shame, an expression of erotic power rather than its negation.

Lorde warns us that many systems fear the erotic, because it is uncontrollable and demands truth. She writes: “Our erotic knowledge empowers us... forcing us to evaluate those

⁶⁵ Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” in *Sister Outsider* (Crossing Press, 1984), 87–91.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 88.

aspects [of our lives] honestly in terms of their relative meaning.”⁶⁷ Trying to fit our sexuality into a pre-approved feminist mold can lead to self-denial, and ultimately, a kind of ideological chastity. But Lorde insists: nothing is more politically potent than a woman who truly feels and honors her desires. Even if those desires are messy, contradictory, or don't look “empowered” from the outside.

Still, while Lorde offers a powerful invitation to reclaim the erotic as a site of truth and resistance, her work must not be misread as an endorsement of individualism untethered from structural analysis. If Lorde calls us to turn inward not to purify desire but to encounter it honestly, Serene Khader reminds us that this encounter must be situated within—and accountable to—the social and material conditions that shape the very possibilities of desire. Khader critiques the turn within liberal and development feminisms toward equating empowerment with personal choice, arguing that such frameworks obscure the systems that constrain agency and distribute vulnerability. Her analysis warns that without a structural horizon, the erotic risks being co-opted by neoliberal logics that treat self-expression as liberation, regardless of the political economy in which it unfolds.⁶⁸ But read together, Lorde and Khader do not cancel one another out; rather, they offer a dialectical feminist praxis. Lorde provides the language to access inner life as a site of resistance, while Khader grounds that resistance in collective struggle and material critique. The erotic, then, becomes politically potent not simply because it is deeply felt, but because it becomes a resource for imagining and building a world in which such depth is possible for all.

This is where Serene Khader's critique of the individualist tendencies within certain feminist and development frameworks, where empowerment is measured by personal choice rather than collective liberation, becomes essential. If Lorde encourages us to turn inward not to purify desire, but to encounter it honestly, Khader reminds us that this inward work must remain accountable to the structural conditions that shape and constrain desire itself. Owning one's longing is not inherently liberatory if it happens in isolation from solidarity or material critique.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 90.

⁶⁸ Serene J. Khader, “Should Feminists Be Individualists? A Puzzle from Gender and Development Practice” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 48, no. 2 (2023): 294. <https://doi.org/10.1086/722508>.

Reorienting Feminist Focus

In response to the impasses of feminist debates centered on sexual morality and identity, a reorientation of feminist politics is both necessary and urgent. Rather than asking whether particular desires or practices are sufficiently feminist, a more transformative question emerges: what kind of world enables freedom and dignity for all genders? This shift—from evaluating the feminist legitimacy of individual sexual practices to challenging the structural conditions that constrain human flourishing—resonates deeply with the overlapping insights of Black feminist thought, socialist feminism, and intersectional analysis. These traditions, though diverse in emphasis, converge in their call for a materialist re-grounding of feminist theory: one centered not on adjudicating sexual purity, but on dismantling the institutions and systems that sustain gendered, racialized, and economic oppression.

Angela Davis, the Combahee River Collective, and Kimberlé Crenshaw each emphasize that feminist liberation must account for the ways race, class, and gender intersect to produce compounded forms of marginalization. Davis critiques the limitations of white middle-class feminism and instead foregrounds the material struggles of working-class women and women of color, pointing to the prison system, labor exploitation, and the healthcare industry as critical sites of feminist intervention.⁶⁹ The Combahee River Collective similarly situates feminism within a matrix of interlocking oppressions, arguing that true liberation must be collective, antiracist, and structurally grounded.⁷⁰ Crenshaw, by theorizing intersectionality, builds on these insights by offering a legal and conceptual framework for understanding how Black women's experiences are erased by single-axis analyses of power.⁷¹ Where Davis and the Collective provide historical and activist perspectives, Crenshaw translates these into a critical methodology that has profoundly reshaped feminist praxis across disciplines.

Silvia Federici and Nancy Fraser further deepen this structural critique by analyzing the economic foundations of gendered oppression. Federici's account of primitive accumulation reveals how capitalism has historically depended on the unpaid reproductive labor of women, forcibly disciplining them into roles of domestic servitude and care work.⁷² Fraser complements this critique by examining how neoliberal capitalism has absorbed feminist rhetoric into market

⁶⁹ Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race, & Class* (Penguin Classics, 2019).

⁷⁰ Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement" *Women's Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 3/4 (2014): 271–280. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24365010>.

⁷¹ Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex" 139–167.

⁷² Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Penguin Books, 2021).

logics, offering corporate empowerment in place of redistributive justice.⁷³ Both theorists argue that feminist resistance must contend with the economic systems that exploit reproductive labor and promote structural inequality. While Federici is grounded in a historical materialist analysis, Fraser bridges economic critique with political theory, showing how feminism's co-optation by neoliberalism has undermined its emancipatory potential.

Bell hooks unites many of these threads by calling for a feminism that moves beyond bourgeois identity politics and centers the needs of poor and working-class women.⁷⁴ Like Davis and the Combahee River Collective, hooks rejects a feminism fixated on lifestyle or sexual preferences, arguing instead for a politics committed to ending systems of domination—whether racial, economic, or colonial. Her emphasis on education, community building, and anti-violence work offers a vision of feminism rooted in care and solidarity, closely aligned with Federici's and Fraser's calls for systemic transformation.

Despite their differing emphases—legal, economic, historical, or pedagogical—these thinkers converge in critiquing the turn within feminism toward sexual moralism and identity policing. This moralism often results in the shaming of feminists who express desires deemed politically inconvenient, such as a preference for sexual submission. Such dynamics echo what Serene J. Khader critiques in her analysis of neoliberal feminism's reduction of liberation to individual choice and moral correctness. Khader cites Kristen Ghodsee's work, which demonstrates that women in socialist countries reported greater sexual satisfaction not because of authoritarianism, but because of comprehensive public policies: maternity leave, subsidized childcare, reproductive healthcare, and even state-supported efforts to redistribute housework.⁷⁵ These structural investments made possible a more equitable and pleasurable life, revealing, as Khader writes, that 'the lesson of better sex under socialism is partly a lesson about what feminists can gain from thinking in terms of changing distributions instead of removing restrictions.'⁷⁶

By shifting feminist attention from questions like “what kind of sex is feminist?” to “what kind of world enables gendered and sexual freedom and justice?” this coalition of thought reclaims the political radicalism of feminism. It opens space for coalition-building across difference, grounding feminist struggle not in the management of desire but in the pursuit of

⁷³ Nancy Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism: From State-Managed Capitalism to Neoliberal Crisis* (Verso, 2013).

⁷⁴ bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (South End Press, 1984).

⁷⁵ Kristen Ghodsee, *Why Women Have Better Sex Under Socialism And Other Arguments for Economic Independence* (Vintage, 2019).

⁷⁶ Khader, *Faux Feminism*, 49.

healthcare, housing, reproductive autonomy, labor rights, and protection from violence. In doing so, these scholars and activists together illuminate a path forward—one where feminism reclaims its transformative horizon by addressing the material realities that shape, constrain, and potentially liberate our lives.

This materialist reorientation demands that we reimagine feminist resistance not as a mode of personal expression or moral purification, but as a collective project grounded in structural transformation. Central to this vision is a renewed focus on economic justice, labor rights, healthcare access, reproductive autonomy, and anti-violence efforts. These are not merely policy preferences—they are the concrete arenas through which feminist theory becomes praxis. Rather than debating the political correctness of desire, feminists must ask: who has the resources, support, and power to live freely? And how might those conditions be collectively built?

One of the most formative contributions to this project comes from Silvia Federici's Wages for Housework campaign, launched in the 1970s. This movement radically reframed unpaid domestic labor as foundational to capitalist accumulation, arguing that housework is not a natural extension of womanhood but an imposed economic function.⁷⁷ The demand for wages was not simply a call for monetary compensation—it was a strategy to politicize reproductive labor, to unveil its centrality to capitalism, and to assert that liberation requires redistribution, not assimilation. As Federici writes, "To say that we want wages for housework is the first step toward refusing to do it."⁷⁸ This campaign exemplifies how feminist gains have historically been made not through moral reform or sexual legibility, but through militant engagement with the material conditions of women's lives.

This radical tradition is echoed in anarcha-feminist organizing across time and geography—from the Mujeres Libres in 1930s Spain⁷⁹ to contemporary queer feminist mutual aid networks. These movements have prioritized direct action, collective care, and resistance to both capitalist exploitation and state violence.⁸⁰ Rejecting hierarchical structures, anarcha-

⁷⁷ Silvia Federici, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (PM Press, 2012), 15–24.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁷⁹ Mujeres Libres was a feminist anarchist organization active during the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s. Formed by working-class women, it aimed to empower women through education, political mobilization, and direct action, while also participating in the broader anarchist and anti-fascist struggle. The group sought to combat both state oppression and the patriarchal attitudes within the leftist movements themselves.

⁸⁰ Martha Ackelsberg, *Free Women of Spain: Anarchism and the Struggle for the Emancipation of Women* (AK Press, 1991).

feminists have created autonomous infrastructures like free clinics, abortion support networks, and housing cooperatives. Their activism blurs the boundaries between survival and resistance, locating feminism not in institutional visibility but in the radical reorganization of everyday life.

These efforts illuminate how feminist resistance becomes transformative when it is anchored in material demands and collective struggle. As Nancy Fraser has argued, feminism must articulate a politics that bridges the need for recognition with the imperative of redistribution—challenging both symbolic injustice and the economic structures that reproduce inequality.⁸¹ When feminists organize not around identity, but around shared conditions of dispossession and care, they forge solidarities capable of confronting the root causes of oppression. It is through such coalitions—across race, class, and geography—that feminism can reclaim its revolutionary potential.

The Erotic as Ground for Feminist Solidarity

Returning to Lorde's redefinition of the erotic, we can see how reclaiming desire—even desire that unsettles dominant feminist narratives—can actually strengthen feminist solidarity and challenge the structural foundations of male domination. Lorde insists that the erotic is not frivolous or solely sexual, but a profound source of emotional and spiritual power rooted in the capacity to feel deeply and to know oneself honestly. It is, she writes, “a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings” that enables us to live from a place of integrity and resistance, rather than compliance or fear.⁸² When women suppress or disown their desires in order to appear ideologically coherent, they are cut off from this wellspring of power. This is especially true in the case of sexual submission, a desire often read as politically suspect. But for Lorde, the crucial question is not *what* one desires, but *how* one comes to know and claim that desire. The erotic becomes a force of resistance not by conforming to political norms, but by anchoring women in the fullness of their own inner truths.

Eve Sedgwick's concept of reparative reading offers a valuable complement to Lorde's theory. In contrast to paranoid reading practices, which search for hidden forms of domination and mistake exposure for liberation, reparative reading opens up space for pleasure, contradiction, and survival.⁸³ When feminists approach desires, especially complex or

⁸¹ Fraser, *Fortunes of Feminism*.

⁸² Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic” 88.

⁸³ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2003), 124–151.

“inconvenient” ones, with suspicion, they risk reinforcing the same punitive logics they seek to dismantle. Sedgwick urges us to shift from a politics of suspicion to one of care: to ask not whether a desire is politically pure, but what it offers to the person who holds it. This shift parallels Lorde’s call to honor the erotic not as a site of guilt or correction, but of deep nourishment and potential.

This shift in reading practice has material stakes. Reparative reading models a feminist praxis that moves beyond moral surveillance and toward an ethics of care—one that honors the affective complexity of women’s desires without reducing them to evidence of false consciousness or internalized oppression. Rather than evaluating sexual submission, for instance, through a rigid lens of political acceptability, reparative reading asks what kind of comfort, recognition, or healing such a desire might provide. This does not mean ignoring the structural histories of male dominance embedded in heterosexuality, but it means recognizing that pleasure and survival are often negotiated within, not outside, those structures. Feminist politics must learn to read those negotiations generously rather than punitively.

In this sense, refusing to pathologize or politicize desire in simplistic terms is itself a form of feminist praxis. It redirects our energy from adjudicating women’s choices toward confronting the conditions that constrain those choices in the first place. The political potential of reclaiming desire lies, then, not in rejecting structure, but in better understanding how structure shapes longing—and how, through that awareness, we can begin to change it. Heterosexual submission, for example, cannot be fully disentangled from histories of male dominance. But neither can it be reduced to those histories. When such desires are claimed rather than disavowed, they can become entry points into a deeper interrogation of how power circulates through intimacy, pleasure, and attachment.

Feminist solidarity, in this view, is not built through consensus or moral agreement, but through trust in each other’s capacity for self-knowing, and through a shared commitment to dismantling the conditions that make certain desires feel necessary, shameful, or unnameable. Reclaiming the erotic—as Lorde urges—is a means of grounding that solidarity in honesty, not purity. It asks feminism to make room for difference without surveillance, and to treat women’s inner lives not as liabilities, but as resources for imagining freer ways of living and relating. This resonates with Katherine Angel’s observation that in order to say what they want, women must know what they want—and that is not always easy.⁸⁴ Lorde’s erotic is thus not only a tool

⁸⁴ Angel, *Tomorrow Sex Will be Good Again*, 24.

for collective solidarity, but also a practice of tuning into desire's complexity and ambivalence. Feminism, in this light, must create conditions where self-knowledge is cultivated rather than assumed, and where uncertainty is not a failure but a generative starting point.

Conclusion

Feminist theory must reckon with the fact that desire—often treated with suspicion or moral scrutiny—remains one of the most underutilized sources of political energy. As this chapter has argued, it is not desire itself that requires regulation or purification, but the systems of power that constrain how, when, and to whom it may be expressed. The political task is not to determine which desires are “feminist enough,” but to recognize the revolutionary potential of any desire that is claimed with self-awareness and without shame.

Desire is never formed in a vacuum; it is shaped by material conditions, cultural norms, and historical legacies of power. Yet this does not render it false, untrustworthy, or politically suspect. As Audre Lorde powerfully insists, the erotic is not limited to sexuality, but functions as a well of inner knowledge, emotional vitality, and creative potential. It is through our capacity to feel deeply that we become attuned to what nourishes or diminishes our lives. Reclaiming this erotic knowledge is not an escape from feminist struggle, but a grounding for it.

This framework invites a crucial shift in feminist politics: away from moral evaluation of sexual acts and toward a more reparative, generous, and structurally grounded understanding of pleasure. Eve Sedgwick's theory of reparative reading offers an instructive model here. Rather than viewing sexual desire through a paranoid lens that seeks domination at every turn, reparative reading opens space for contradiction, pleasure, and survival. It recognizes that women may find comfort, affirmation, or agency in desires that do not easily conform to dominant feminist scripts. Such desires should not be dismissed as symptoms of false consciousness but taken seriously as expressions of embodied life negotiated within, and sometimes against, structural constraint.

This means that the political significance of sex does not lie in its conformity to feminist ideals, but in how it is experienced and claimed. Women should not fear that their desires—particularly those seen as “inconvenient,” such as sexual submission—make them complicit in their own oppression. Rather, the question becomes: can this desire, lived consciously and without apology, be a site of power, self-knowledge, or connection? If so, then it holds political value not in spite of its messiness, but because of its truth.

Ultimately, reclaiming desire must be part of a broader feminist project aimed at structural transformation. It is not enough to seek validation for our pleasures; we must also fight for the material conditions—economic security, bodily autonomy, healthcare, safety—that make the free expression of desire possible. But that fight loses force if women remain alienated from their own longing. Feminist resistance cannot be built on the denial of pleasure. Instead, it must be nourished by it. To feel deeply, to want fully, and to claim those wants without fear. These are not private indulgences, but radical acts. In this light, desire becomes not a liability, but a foundation for collective liberation.

Conclusion

This thesis has examined the fraught relationship between feminist politics and the female sexual desire for submission, arguing for a reconfiguration of how desire is approached within feminist theory. Rather than treating desire as either a symptom of patriarchal internalization or a badge of liberated agency, the analysis has shown that desire functions as a complex site of affect, subjectivity, and power. The study has engaged with a variety of theoretical frameworks to suggest that submission can be understood as a meaningful form of agency, and that reclaiming desire as a feminist resource requires abandoning moralizing frameworks in favor of exploratory and situated analyses.

Historically, feminist discomfort with submissive sexual desires has been grounded in the concept of false consciousness. Radical feminist thinkers such as Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin have argued that heterosexual desire is so shaped by male dominance that women who express a desire for submission may be unwittingly complicit in their own subordination. Within this framework, such desires were viewed as political problems requiring critique and correction. Later interventions, such as Gayle Rubin's structuralist approach, challenged the prescriptive moralism of radical feminism but often remained invested in regulating sexual practices through ideological hierarchies.

The emergence of third- and fourth-wave feminisms sought to shift focus toward sexual agency and individual empowerment. However, as Angela Davis observed, this celebration of agency often coincided with the neoliberal co-optation of feminism. In this context, submission was rendered acceptable only if framed as a freely chosen, empowered kink. The persistence of discomfort around submission, even in sex-positive discourse, reveals that the feminist archive has not yet developed a fully non-moralizing framework for interpreting complex sexual desires.

Post-structuralist theory offers a way forward. Lauren Berlant's understanding of desire as a structure of attachment, imbued with fantasy and contradiction, allows for an interpretation of submission that moves beyond both liberal notions of autonomy and radical critiques of ideological distortion. Berlant's concept of "cruel optimism"—attachments to promises that may ultimately obstruct flourishing—resonates with the way submission may serve as a coping mechanism under patriarchal norms. Yet, as this thesis has shown, the erotics of submission are not reducible to disappointment or failure; rather, they often derive affective intensity from ambivalence, play, and the suspension of control.

Michel Foucault's concept of bio-power further complicates simplistic oppositions between autonomy and subjection. Power, for Foucault, is productive as well as repressive. It constitutes subjectivity, shaping not only what one does but what one desires. Within this framework, the desire for submission can be seen not as an escape from power but as a modality within it. Submission becomes a practice through which power is negotiated, internalized, and possibly transformed. Lipika Kamra's notion of non-sovereign agency extends this Foucauldian insight. Kamra argues that agency does not require full autonomy but can emerge through situated, constrained acts that respond to existing structures. Applying this to sexual desire, particularly in the case of submission, underscores the importance of interpreting such desires not as failures of feminist consciousness, but as affectively real and politically intelligible engagements with power.

Judith Butler's work on subjection deepens this line of thought by revealing the psychic investments that bind subjects to normative power. Butler insists that the norms one internalizes are not merely constraints but also the conditions through which subjectivity is constituted. The pleasure found in submission, then, reflects the ways in which individuals are formed through, and not in spite of, the norms they inhabit. This psychic dimension of subjection is critical for understanding why certain desires feel not only authentic but also pleasurable.

Audre Lorde's theory of the erotic provides the most affirmative vision of desire as a resource for feminist praxis. For Lorde, the erotic is not confined to sexuality but is a source of creative and political energy rooted in the capacity to feel deeply and live with integrity. The erotic, when experienced fully and without shame, becomes a wellspring for resistance. This reframing allows for desires that might appear politically suspect—such as submission—to be understood as potential grounds for feminist energy, provided they are lived consciously and without coercion.

Crucially, the reappropriation of desire as feminist energy does not imply that sex, or sexual expression, is inherently liberatory. Desire is deeply shaped by history, culture, and power. To locate the feminist project within desire itself is to risk conflating affective intensity with political resistance. As this thesis has demonstrated, the political charge of desire lies not in its content but in the interpretive and material contexts through which it is lived.

The conclusion therefore echoes the concern voiced by Amia Srinivasan, cited in the thesis's first chapter, who calls for a political critique of sex that avoids both moral authoritarianism and the liberal refusal to critique desire at all. Srinivasan proposes a model

based on “know-how,” a practice of ongoing experimentation and inquiry. The analysis presented here has attempted to embody this ethic of exploratory critique, seeking to understand desire not through binaries of authenticity or distortion, but through layered accounts of lived subjectivity.

This work acknowledges its limitations. Its focus on cisgender heterosexual dynamics of submission has necessarily excluded other experiences and configurations of desire. Future research must turn to the experiences of non-binary, queer, and trans subjects, whose relationships to power, embodiment, and desire may illuminate different forms of non-sovereign agency, pleasure, and resistance. Similarly, desires that fall outside the dominant frameworks of dominance and submission also require sustained feminist analysis, particularly as they challenge existing categories of legibility within sexual discourse.

In sum, the thesis contends that desire must be reclaimed not as an index of feminist virtue or failure but as a site of meaning-making and relational negotiation. Desire, when interpreted with care, offers insights into the affective and psychic dimensions of power, agency, and subjectivity. Rather than seeking to purify sexual desire of its contradictions, feminism would do better to dwell within them, to read them generously, and to use them as resources for imagining other ways of living and relating. In this way, the erotic becomes not an obstacle to feminist thought but one of its most potent sources of strength.

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