

The Promise of Consent: Exploring the Limits of Consent Culture Through Lacanian
Psychoanalysis

Amber Chiacchieri

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Abstract

Consent has become the dominant paradigm for promoting ethical sexual interactions. While feminists and queer theorists have developed critiques of this discourse, it remains undertheorized from a psychoanalytic perspective. By bringing Lacanian psychoanalysis into conversation with consent culture, I argue that by denying the constitutive unconscious, consent culture promotes a narrow framework for self-knowledge, leading to unnecessary psychic pain and social harm. I address significant gaps in consent literature concerning transactional sex and psychological abuse, focusing on the role of consent frameworks in exacerbating conflict between sex workers and anti-sex trafficking advocates, and stigmatizing psychological abuse victims. I propose deviating from consent culture when necessary by engaging with key Lacanian concepts—extimacy, *objet petit a*, the sinthome, Other jouissance, and the sexual and political impasse. I argue that creating knowledge spaces outside of consent culture is crucial for challenging injustice and imagining alternative democratic sexual futures.

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Introduction

We refused most emphatically to turn a patient who puts himself into our hands in search of help into our private property, to decide his fate for him, to force our own ideals before him, and with the pride of a Creator to form him in our own image and see that it is good... we cannot accept... that psychoanalysis should place itself in the service of a particular philosophical outlook on the world, and should urge this upon the patient for the purpose of enobling his mind. In my opinion, this is after all only to use violence, even though it is overlaid with the most honorable of motives.

— Sigmund Freud, *Lines of Advance in Psycho-Analytic Therapy*

Before the feminist movements of the twentieth century, American women faced severe restrictions on bodily autonomy, freedom of speech, and sexual expression. Women's bodies were legally considered property of their fathers or husbands, marital rape was not criminalized, and sexual violations were rarely prosecuted, unless they involved white women and Black men (Freedman, 2013). This situation began to change in the 1960s with the emergence of what we now call sexual consent. Second-wave feminists fought for women's legal rights, protection from sexual violation, and reproductive justice. In the context of 1960s feminism, discussions of consent often focused on how women had been conditioned to internalize male desires as their own, making it difficult to distinguish between authentic agreement and compliance with gender norms. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) exemplified this analysis by arguing that women were socialized to find fulfillment through serving their husbands and families. From this prominent second wave feminist perspective, true consent required women first to recognize and overcome this internalized socialization and develop authentic understanding of themselves separate from patriarchal expectations.

The concept of consent in the second wave feminist context is related to what Miranda Fricker (2007) called "hermeneutic injustice" (p.1). Unlike resisting mere dismissal of testimony, resisting hermeneutic injustice meant women had first to create the linguistic and conceptual tools needed to name their realities before they could think about them and advocate for change.

When explaining the meaning of hermeneutic injustice, Fricker provided the example of a woman who endures sexual harassment before feminists developed a term and explanation for it. In this situation, the subject may be unable to grasp what happened, even to herself, because no cultural concept exists to validate it. Through consciousness-raising and political activism, feminists developed new words, ideas, and narratives to create the concept of consent, in effect, making women's experiences of pleasure and trauma intelligible.

During the sex wars of the 1970s and 1980s, the debate between sex-positive and radical (anti-pornography) feminists expanded the discourse around consent. Polarized positions on sexual agency, trauma, and transgression characterized these debates. While radical feminists reframed sexual violation as a consequence of systemic patriarchal power rather than isolated criminal behavior (Dworkin, 1981; MacKinnon, 2019; Pateman, 1988), sex-positive feminists emphasized the historical contingency of sexual norms, the risks of censorship, and the subversive potential of female agency and pleasure (Duggan & Hunter, 2006; Rubin, 2011)

Both sex-positive and radical feminists promoted an image of non-alienated consciousness. Radical feminists envisioned women freed from patriarchal conditioning who would intuitively reject practices like pornography, prostitution, and sadomasochistic sex acts. In contrast, sex-positive feminists celebrated subjects liberated from restrictive (gender) norms who could pursue pleasure on their terms, even if this expression involved what looked like, from the outside, patriarchal submission. Each group accused the other of perpetuating false consciousness. The radical feminists saw the sex-positive feminists as reinforcing patriarchal values, whereas the sex-positive feminists saw the radical feminists as reinforcing sexual stigma and repression.

Although both groups analyzed how oppression shapes desire, neither fully confronted the complexity of subjectivity. That is, both sides shared a belief in the possibility of an authentic sexual subject waiting to emerge once freed from the false consciousness imposed on them by oppressive structures. Psychoanalysis, though popular in some progressive circles of the time, did not fit within these feminist movements—partly due to its patriarchal history but more fundamentally because it challenged the very possibility of a liberated feminine subject position (Rose, 1986/2020).

The sex wars enriched our understanding of the politics of gender and sexuality by interrogating power dynamics and challenging heteronormative, patriarchal, and racist capitalist structures. However, from a psychoanalytic perspective, these debates contributed to confusion by obscuring the key psychoanalytic insight that the subject is inherently split, that sexuality emerges through an interaction between unconscious and social formations, and that desire operates through structures of lack, involving displacements and contradictions that can never be fully rationalized or brought to light. As Jacqueline Rose (1986/2020) argued, feminist discourses have inadvertently reinforced a fantasy of psychic coherence, thus limiting their capacity to understand the complex nature of sexual subjectivity necessary for comprehensive and enduring feminist political change.

When the #MeToo movement became a global phenomenon in 2017, the concept of sexual consent reemerged at the center of public discourse around sexual desire, pleasure, violation, transgression, and trauma. Consequently, the term sexual consent has proliferated in academia, media, and activism. The notion that consent is the key to transforming our sexual culture has gained popularity, promoted through the phrase “consent culture” (Angel, 2021, p. 7). Framed in language that celebrates agency, autonomy, awareness, empowerment, and dignity,

consent culture idealizes self-knowledge as protection against undesirable and unethical sexual experiences. The main idea is that subjects, usually represented or imagined as women, know who they are and know what they want and therefore, should be able to communicate this information clearly and accurately to their partners. Whether imagined as an achievement or an aspiration, the promise of consent culture lies in its potential to bridge the gap between sex and knowledge. As a conceptual framework, it is promising because it corresponds to the myths and fantasies of capitalist modernity—to what Sara Ahmed (2010) called “the promise of happiness:” the promise of the good life, the American dream, and the sovereign subject.

I argue that consent culture is both prescriptive and descriptive. It is an encouraged set of practices, a philosophy, and a worldview. It has the power to generate social worlds, political movements, institutional spaces, and symbolic attachments. My study starts with the following questions: (1) How does consent function in pursuing justice? (2) What power is being invested in the act of consenting? (3) How is faith in its political potential being established and maintained? (4) How radical and diverse are its aims? (5) What interpretive modes does it invite or exclude? (6) What conversations and debates are staged in its name? (7) How might we hold onto what is offered by consent culture without neglecting the contradictions of hegemony and subjectivity? To address these questions, I turn to Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic theory. Lacan dedicated his life’s work to critiquing ego psychology, which I argue is the theoretical foundation of consent culture.

Jacques Lacan

Lacan was a French psychoanalytic philosopher who challenged the institutionalized neo-Freudian approaches to psychoanalysis popular during the twentieth century.¹ Lacan was a rebel,

¹ Although I will provide some background on ego psychology, Lacan, and the specific Lacanian concepts I focus on, my analysis assumes a basic familiarity with Lacanian psychoanalysis.

first expelled from the International Psychoanalytical Association and then founding and dissolving his own school, the École Freudienne de Paris. He offered a radical view of psychoanalysis based on the ineradicable division of all human subjectivity. He focused on the lack in desire, the social dimension of psychic life, the paradoxical nature of enjoyment (jouissance), and the illusory aspects of autonomy.

His framework emerged from the cultural and intellectual upheaval that reshaped French intellectual thought following the two World Wars. His psychoanalytic approach incorporated many insights from French philosophy, including existentialism, feminism, phenomenology, Marxism, and poststructuralism. As an initial conceptual mapping, we could say that from existentialism he developed a preoccupation with freedom, complicated by the critical attitude he adopted from feminism toward masculine ideals. From phenomenology, he recognized the epistemic significance of embodiment. From Marxism, he gained an appreciation for the role of alienation and ideology at the structural level, and from post-structuralism, he adopted a skeptical attitude toward institutionalism and positivism. This amalgamation led Lacan to deviate from the medicalizing trends that dominated clinical approaches and reconceptualize psychoanalysis as a philosophical practice concerned with fundamental questions of human existence, in effect developing a perspective skeptical of the attitudes and features of ego psychology.

Ego Psychology

Ego psychology was the leading school of psychoanalytic thought in the United States from roughly the 1930s to the 1970s. It played an important role in American psychiatric training, practice, and discourse, influencing not just psychoanalysis but broader approaches to

mental health and theories of the subject (Wallerstein, 2002). It aligned with American individual and national ideals of enlightenment and evolution.

While Freud (1920/1989) portrayed the ego as caught between unresolvable, conflicting forces, ego psychologists like Anna Freud (1936/1992) and Heinz Hartmann (1958) reconceptualized the ego as a powerful mechanism for regulating these forces. This difference hinged on opposing ways of interpreting a passage by Freud (1933/1990), commonly translated as “Where id was, there ego shall be” (p. 80). For ego psychologists, this meant the task of psychoanalytic treatment was to discipline the unconscious by expanding the field of conscious awareness. Lacan, by contrast, understood Freud’s statement this way, “There where it was, or there where one was ... it is my duty that I should come into being” (Evans, 2006, p. 82). This Lacanian interpretation implied a reckoning with the fact that there is no existence outside of the symbolic realm and that one must negotiate the emergence of one’s existence in relation to the contingency of the signifier (Evans, 2006). This means that knowledge, desire, and the drive are always organized in relation to one another. Although the drive prevents the subject from being fully incorporated into the symbolic, there is no unalienated core of being or centralized subject position.

Ego psychologists spoke in terms of general human development. They represented the ego as possessing autonomous functions independent of the drives. They represented the human subject as capable of rational thought, adaptive functioning, and healthy integration into social norms. The ego was generally accepted as the most important structure of the mind for survival. The focus here was on reality testing or the ability to assess accurately and respond to both internal experiences and external circumstances. Whereas Freud focused on unconscious aggressive and libidinal impulses that persist throughout life and come into conflict with the

demands of civilization, ego psychologists focused on the ego's evolution in terms of the reality principle.

Central to ego psychology was Hartmann's (1939/1958) concept of "conflict-free" ego functioning. In this model, memory, perception, critical thought, self-awareness, and communication could operate relatively harmoniously and independently of unconscious complications. This model assumed that individuals with strong egos would be better positioned to respond to and shape, rather than passively accept, their environments. Ego psychologists developed techniques to strengthen ego functions rather than uncover and interpret unconscious material. The therapeutic relationship was educational, with the analyst teaching by modeling healthy ego behavior and encouraging healthy ways of relating, including self-observation, reality testing, impulse control, emotional regulation, conflict resolution, and establishing and maintaining appropriate boundaries.

Ego psychologists viewed the therapist-client relationship as a corrective relational experience where clients could practice a healthy mode of connecting with others, and then internalize these stable patterns of relating, leading to more satisfying and enduring connections with others. The idea was that developing an integrated sense of self could serve as the foundation for authentic relationships because when people understand their needs, desires, boundaries, and capabilities, they can engage with others more honestly and openly, thus forming relationships based on genuine connection rather than pathological transference. However, ego psychology faced significant criticism from psychoanalysts at other schools, such as object relations theorists who argued that it underappreciated the formative role of early relationships in shaping subjectivity (Weinstein, 1978). The most forceful critique was advanced by Lacan, who called ego psychologists "orthopedists of the unconscious" and "guarantors of the

bourgeois dream” (Zupančič, p. 2). As Rose (1986/2020) described it, Lacan saw ego psychology as “the assimilation of the unconscious into a normative or adaptive psychology which took identity at its word and tries to strengthen it” (p. 4–5).

Lacan argued that ego psychology obscured the radical Freudian revelation about the nature of split subjectivity and perpetuated a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of human sexuality. In his view, the unconscious structure of language and desire means that subjects never achieve the kind of metacognition required for mutual understanding in relationships. He saw ego psychology as promoting conformity to social norms rather than performing the properly psychoanalytic task of helping the analysand confront her unconscious. He argued that the emphasis on self-knowledge, clear communication, and emotional maturity was an institutionally validated defense mechanism that would only lead to confusion and repression, for both analyst and analysand.

Ego Psychology and Consent Culture

Ego psychology and consent culture have significant parallels. Both approaches are aligned with the empirical sciences and aim to strengthen individual egos by developing rational, independent, and adaptive capacities. Both suggest that happy and healthy subjectivity and relationality are the rewards of minimizing anxiety, internal conflict, and neurotic tendencies. In other words, both present developmental pathways toward psychic autonomy, stability, and unity. Ego psychology relies on the therapist’s expert knowledge allied with the patient’s strengthened ego. Consent culture relies on frameworks that promote ongoing education, grounded in common-sense communication skills and the cultivation of mature self-awareness. Both approaches assume that intrapsychic conflict can be effectively managed or even mastered.

From a Lacanian perspective, the fundamental limitation of consent culture is its reliance on a model of the subject as capable of full self-awareness. Lacan would insist that the speaking subject who “gives consent” is divided, never fully present to herself. This division challenges the assumption in consent frameworks that we can truly know ourselves and articulate our desires. A Lacanian intervention would shift the discussion toward the complex relationship between social processes and unconscious formations —the connections and disconnections between desire, perception, language, communication, and enjoyment. This would entail a shift from a strict separation of pleasure and pain toward a recognition of their interrelation in the form of what Lacan called *jouissance*. *Jouissance* is an excessive, traumatic form of enjoyment, exemplified at the point where the subject enjoys symptomatically in a way that contradicts what Freud (1989) called “the pleasure principle.”

Jouissance is one way in which the dimension of the Real, or that which resists symbolization and integration into our psychic and social consciousness, can be glimpsed in bodily experience. While consent culture operates primarily within the symbolic order, I draw on Lacan to argue that it struggles to account for this dimension of the Real. Regarding questions and controversies surrounding sexuality and consent, this shift might shed light on why the same debates keep repeating, from the sex wars of the 1980s to contemporary debates surrounding #MeToo. They circle something impossible: what cannot be recognized, accounted for, or integrated into our conscious subjective, sexual, and political frameworks.

Since Lacan’s teaching challenged the presuppositions of ego psychology and sought to think beyond them, Lacanian theory provides an ideal framework for grappling with the limitations of consent culture. In this analysis, I focus on *Encore* (1975/1998) and engage Lacanian scholars who focus on the connections between Lacan’s late work and feminism,

gender, and sexuality, including Joan Copjec (1994/2015, 2004), Colette Soler (2002, 2006, 2015), Mari Ruti (2012), Alenka Zupančič (2017), Amber Jamilla Musser (2018), Sheila L. Cavanagh (2018), Jacqueline Rose (1986/2020), Jamieson Webster (2022), and Clotilde Leguil (2025).

I use this Lacanian approach to analyze texts that describe and promote consent culture, including self-help books, academic publications, and activist manifestos. I explore the disavowed presuppositions and consequences associated with the master signifiers of this discourse, ultimately arguing that consent culture promotes a narrow framework for self-knowledge, leading to unnecessary shame, repression, confusion, conflict, and exclusion. I ground these theoretical insights with two case studies. First, I examine the conflicts between sex workers and anti-sex trafficking advocates and demonstrate how consent frameworks prevent solidarity between these groups and contribute to the enactment of policies that harm vulnerable people in the sex industry. Second, I explore how consent frameworks can obscure or distort the issue of psychological abuse and stigmatize victims. I use the Lacanian concepts of extimacy, *objet petit a*, the sinthome, Other jouissance, and the sexual and political impasse to shed light on the complexities of (sexual) subjectivity and destigmatize the others of consent.

My approach combines critical analyses of existing frameworks and the constructive development of alternatives. It connects abstract theoretical concepts to current political issues, and acknowledges the complexity of subjectivity and sexuality while avoiding essentialist claims, thereby creating space for exploring the excluded dimensions of consent. I aim to make both theoretical and practical contributions. Theoretically, I aim to extend Lacanian theory by applying it to contemporary issues of consent, demonstrating the continued relevance of psychoanalysis in understanding complex social problems. I also hope to expand the theoretical

terrain of consent discourse, creating opportunities for more inclusive and nuanced discussions. This dissertation should contribute to ongoing debates within feminist and queer theory about the interactions between structural inequalities and psychic complexities, counteracting the marginalization of psychoanalysis within critical theory. I hope to demonstrate that psychoanalytic approaches can be integrated with feminist, queer, and critical theories to address contemporary social and political issues, with applications extending beyond the focus on consent culture.

On a practical level, I hope to make a meaningful contribution by encouraging solidarity between and self-reflection within advocacy groups concerned with protecting people in the sex industry and contribute to more effective approaches to harm reduction. By analyzing how consent culture frameworks marginalize and distort experiences of psychological abuse, I hope to raise awareness about the complexity of this issue and contribute to efforts to destigmatize victims. Finally, by exploring alternative conceptual spaces that acknowledge the sexual unconscious, I hope to offer new ideas for challenging sexual injustice and imagining alternative sexual futures.

Given the feminist history that gave rise to consent culture, I do not recommend pursuing a counter-discourse to consent based on an uncritical attack on everything associated with the ego. Even though I focus on the unconscious, the split self, and the value of negation—of refusal, unbecoming, and unknowing—I recognize that this focus is not always contextually appropriate, as claims to identity and processes of veridiction are often provisionally important in the symbolic. Although I highlight experiences that consent paradigms fail to capture, I do not argue that we should simply go beyond consent, as I believe consent is something we are still trying to understand and work through. While some critics imply that consent is a basic and uninteresting

concept (for example in analyses about how consent is essentially legalistic) and that going beyond consent is the only real site of creative elaboration and resistance, I suggest that violations of consent—and the self-knowledge required to resist and heal from them—are a complex affair, as I explore in detail later in my discussions of sexual and psychological abuse. My aim is not to invalidate the discourse of consent, but to create alternative spaces for thought, speech, resistance, and experience.

Given meaning's extimate nature, dominant discourses are essentially exclusionary because they are structured through hierarchies, binaries, and fantasies of integration and wholeness that privilege specific dimensions of psychic and social reality while excluding others. This means that all interpretative frameworks contain unresolvable contradictions and depend on their constitutive outsides and others for coherence. In consent culture, the unconscious functions as the boundary that determines what is considered legitimate thought and speech. Consequently, negativity, ignorance, absence, invisibility, meaninglessness, confusion, silence, and loss become illegitimate domains of knowledge production. Understanding consent requires engaging with these excluded elements. Psychoanalysis is an apt resource for this project because, as Andrew Blauner (2024) wrote in "Sigmund Freud, Private Investigator," it has developed something like a "science of the invisible and the irrational" (p. 73). Lacan advanced this by positing three psychic registers: the imaginary, the symbolic, and the Real. Since this study focuses on Lacan's late work, which emphasizes the register of the Real, I will provide an overview of the three registers and describe the distinct significance of the Real for my conception of the subject.

The Three Registers of Lacanian Psychoanalysis

Lacan developed a sophisticated science of the invisible and the irrational by positing three psychic registers: the imaginary, the symbolic, and the Real. Human subjectivity takes

shape through constant tension between these three registers. The imaginary is primarily concerned with narcissistic fantasies, ego formations, and idealized images. Lacan describes self-identification as an imaginary process rooted in the mirror stage, where the child recognizes himself in a specular image that functions as a screen (Copjec, 1994/2015). Lacan (1977) describes the mirror stage as “a drama whose internal thrust is precipitated from insufficiency to anticipation” (p. 4). The child moves from a feeling of fragmentation and deficiency towards a sense of unity and mastery, seemingly confirmed in the mirror. Recognizing himself in and identifying with the specular image, the child experiences an illusion of coherence, completeness, and self-possession that serves as a model for the ideal self and an escape from a disorienting feeling of fragmentation. Lacan emphasizes that “this jubilant assumption of [the child’s] specular image” is contradicted by the fact that he continues to be plagued by “his motor incapacity and nursing dependence” (p. 2).

Since the “I” as experienced in the mirror stage comes into being at a time when the child cannot truly experience himself as a unified being, it takes on an anticipatory character. The child imagines his future wholeness, forming an attachment to dreams of cohesion. This formative moment, characterized by the reality of insufficiency and the anticipation of wholeness, remains operative throughout psychic life. Through the imaginary, we seek recognition and validation from others who mirror our wholeness back to ourselves. The function of the imaginary is to minimize existential anxiety and defend against recognition of our fundamental ontological lack.

The imaginary facilitates the consciousness necessary to perceive oneself as a distinct subject with individual thoughts and feelings. The imaginary is essential to everyday social functioning, especially in neoliberal capitalist society, because it plays an important protective

function in hostile environments. Lacan viewed the ego as fundamentally an imaginary formation that emerges when young children misrecognize themselves in the mirror and continues to develop throughout life based on idealized identifications. In other words, Lacan saw the ego as a defensive structure that provided a comforting illusion of unity, integration, coherence, completion, stability, and mastery.

The symbolic is primarily concerned with language, law, and the social order. It is the network of signifiers that provides a structure for our social reality and determines our position as subjects. Central to the symbolic order is what Lacan called the “Name-of-the-Father,” a key signifier that establishes the fundamental law of prohibition. This signifier does not refer to the literal demands of biological fathers but to a paternal function of symbolic authority that breaks the symbiotic bond between the maternal figure and child, introducing the child into the larger social order. The paternal function establishes the original prohibition that creates the possibility of desire by introducing lack into the child’s world. By separating the child from the fantasy of fusion with the maternal figure, this prohibition opens the space of symbolic exchange that characterizes human culture. Lacan emphasized that the symbolic order pre-exists any individual subject, is constituted by signifiers that only gain meaning relative to other signifiers (not direct correspondence between signifiers and what they are supposed to signify), and that something always escapes symbolic capture. This means that becoming a speaking subject requires a dimension of submission, alienation, and failure: we must communicate using established systems of meaning; we can never say exactly what we mean; we cannot control how our words will be interpreted and used, and the words cut into any direct unmediated relationship we might have to our own bodies and experiences.

The symbolic supports and disrupts the imaginary formation of the ego. The mirror stage itself has a symbolic dimension as the child often identifies with his image in the mirror after confirmation by a parental figure, who often points to the mirror image and declares, “That’s you!” in an encouraging voice. The child learns not just to see himself in an image, but to see himself as a subject who others can speak about, address, recognize, and validate. This forms a fundamentally precarious foundation for self-identification because it establishes the subject’s sense of self on two unstable grounds: a visual illusion and symbolic validation from the other (Bailly, 2012).

While the symbolic supports the imaginary register by providing words and concepts to support ego identifications, such as the language of consent, the symbolic also cuts into the imaginary by introducing a dimension of absence, difference, and loss. This means that while the imaginary pursues wholeness and completeness through identification with the mirror image, the symbolic introduces the structural impossibility of such wholeness. Language introduces a fundamental conflict into the subject’s relationship with himself. While nonhuman animals arguably have a more direct (less conflicted) relationship to their biological being, humans must negotiate their needs through the detour of language and the Other’s desire, creating circuitous paths, and denaturalizing our most basic instincts.

The Real is the most elusive of the three registers and is associated with jouissance and the drives, especially the death drive. The Real is more akin to an energy or an excess than a hidden meaning, resembling a resistance to symbolization and a traumatic encounter with impossibility. The Real involves whatever disrupts the imaginary and cannot be integrated into the symbolic order; it is what cannot be accessed directly through speech or thought, illuminating the failures of our conceptual systems. This dimension of experience is impossible to capture or

master through language or knowledge, but it can produce psychic effects that manifest in symptoms. It is associated with the drive as what Lacan (1986/1997), called in his seminar on the ethics of psychoanalysis in 1960 a “fundamental ontological notion” connected to “the crisis of consciousness” (p. 127).

The Real is the part of the subject’s being that can never incorporate into social processes of subjectivation. It conveys what is anomalous about subjects, or how they lack coordination with the cultural configurations of meaning that officially define them. The Real is associated with Lacan’s (1973/1998) depiction of libidinal force as what embodies the distance between reality and the Real in the form of lamella. Lacan described this as an indivisible, indestructible, and irrepressible aspect of life. It is what resists destruction and division, as it always re-composes itself, taking multiple shapes and forms (Ruti, 2012).

Following Mari Ruti (2012), I make a strong connection here between the register of the Real and what she called “the singularity of being.” She wrote,

At the risk of oversimplifying, one might say that subjectivity, for Lacan is aligned with the symbolic, personality with the imaginary, and singularity with the real. The “subject” comes into existence through symbolic law and prohibition. “Personality” can never entirely transcend the narcissistic fantasies of wholeness, integration, and extraordinariness that buttress the subject’s imaginary relationship to the world. “Singularity,” in turn, relates to the rebellious energies of the real that elude both symbolic and imaginary closure. (p. 1)

Quoting Eric Santer, Ruti described the Real as “what persists beyond all social predicates, taxonomies, generalizations, and economies of comparison” as it “escapes the logic of parts and wholes, of cultural systems of exchange where elements gain significance from being weighed

against each other within the parameters of a broader structure.” Singularity, according to Santer, is “a non-relational excess which is out-of-joint with respect to... any form of teleological absorption by a larger purpose,” creating a “stain on the horizon of cultural intelligibility” (Ruti, 2012, p. 2). In other words, the subject is more than her imaginary investments and socio-symbolic markers, and this excess points to something important about the subject.

Since consent culture emerged to grapple primarily with the sexual violation of women, it is important to recognize that when unconscious dimensions of what is considered “reality” are obscured, gender and sex tend to be represented as relatively transparent phenomena. In her defense of a political approach that combines Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytic and feminist insights, Jacqueline Rose (1986/2000) observed,

what distinguishes psychoanalysis from sociological accounts of gender... is that whereas for the latter, the internalization of norms is assumed roughly to work, the basic premise and indeed starting point of psychoanalysis is that it does not. The unconscious constantly reveals the ‘failure’ of identity ... [it] becomes one of the few places in our culture where it is recognized as more than a fact of individual pathology that most women do not painlessly slip into their roles as women. (p. 90)

In other words, a psychoanalytic approach that makes space for the Real cuts against the tendency to read surface-level behaviors and speech acts as evidence of the successful internalization of norms. By shifting attention to the dimension of failure, psychoanalysis offers another perspective: the norm is that the norm does not work—not fully, not without excess. The unconscious is where we glimpse this failure and this excess in action: in symptoms, slips, dreams, repetitions, and the persistence of counterintuitive desires. This is a dimension of the subject the sociologist struggles to grapple with but to which the psychoanalyst is attuned.

Drawing primarily on Lacan's *Encore* (1975/1998), I elaborate on the partial nature of being and the singular nature of desire by analyzing his twin propositions that the Woman does not exist and that the sexual relation does not exist. According to Lacan, the fantasies of lost wholeness and future fulfillment that gather around Woman and the sexual relation point to nothing that actually existed or could ever exist. Consequently, there can be no original or authentic subject position to which one might aspire or return. The Lacanian subject is defined by this constitutive division.

Lacan (1975/1998) rejects the foundational Kantian (1781/2008) distinction between noumena (“things in themselves”) and phenomena (what we can know through sense and cognition), and the related idea that the noumenal realm exists as a distinct, separate reality. Instead, he sees the symbolic order as generating the rupture that constitutes the Real. He thus rejects “transcendental categories and [the] assurances they provide us” (Copjec, 2004, p. 5). The Lacanian Real is not like platonic forms because the split is not between the Real and semblance. Lacan does not place anything “behind” representation formed in relation to language and the visual field. As Copjec (1994/2015) recognizes “the veil of representation actually conceals nothing” as “language’s opacity is taken as the very *cause* of the subject’s being, that is, its desire or want-to-be” (p. 35). For Lacan, the subject emerges through the very impossibility of saying it all. A crucial consequence of this orientation is that the subject does not arise from a regulatory structure exemplified by the law, but from what cannot be integrated into it.

Lacan replaces the noumenal with the Real. The crucial difference is that while the noumenal remains intact, a stable, if completely inaccessible, reference point, the Real is constituted by splitting. According to one way of reading Kant, we should not concern ourselves with the noumenal realm since it is, by definition, out of reach. The Lacanian Real, however, is

clinically significant. The Real can be glimpsed and sensed because it is split by the cut of the signifier and the psychic life of the body. This move has a significant consequence: it destabilizes any attempt to invoke the noumenal realm for normative guidance. Lacan uses this philosophical reorientation to dismantle the normative categories structuring social life and our conceptions of subjectivity and sexuality.

It is important to keep in mind that the Real does not exist “beyond” the symbolic. Lacan used the metaphor of a Borromean knot to show that the three registers are knotted together so that if you cut any one string, all three fall apart. Meaning, they do not exist independently but are mutually constitutive of each other. While recognizing the inextricable nature of the knot, I focus in this dissertation on the significance of the dimension of the Real. I argue that consent culture and critical consent discourse primarily operate at the level of the self, as it is experienced and articulated in the symbolic and imaginary realms. What is needed is more attention to the dimension of the Real and the singularity of being. I suggest that the Real can reorient debates about sexuality by exposing what Barnard (2002) refers to as “the obsessive individual and cultural reiterations of the ‘surface’ of sexuality” that “cover over the fundamental dehiscence of the sexual subject” (p. 11). A Lacanian approach makes it possible to examine patterns and differences in representations of sexual experience without reinforcing determinist logics, without lapsing into discursive relativism, and without reinforcing liberal assumptions about benign sexual variation that tend to strip sexuality of its intellectual, contradictory, and traumatic dimensions. Thus, creating openings for alternative forms of understanding and response.

Since the Real cannot be directly accessed, I must address my position as the author of this text. In the Lacanian clinic, the analyst occupies the position of *objet petit a* in the

transference, functioning as the cause of the analysand's desire to speak and discover something about her unconscious. This position is strategic. While the analysand initially projects the "subject supposed to know" onto the analyst, the trajectory of analysis involves the gradual dissolution of this transference. As analysis progresses, the "subject supposed to know" progressively loses authority, revealing that the knowledge in question has always been rooted in the analysand's unconscious—a strange form of knowledge not truly possessed by anyone, yet intimately connected to the analysand.

The analysis advances not primarily through the analyst's interpretive expertise but through the analysands' encounters with their own surprising speech patterns and symptomatic formations, facilitated by the analyst's carefully timed interventions. This process involves bringing to light how the subject has organized their symptomatic enjoyment (*jouissance*), opening possibilities for the emergence of new forms of satisfaction that are less rigid, repetitive, destructive, or painful. The goal is not the total elimination of symptoms, but a symptomatic reorientation in the subject's relationship to *jouissance* and the Real.

Lacan's (1958/2006) distinction between desire and demand is significant here. Demand involves appeals to the other for love, recognition, or satisfaction. Desire, conversely, emerges from the structural impossibility of these demands ever being fully met. Desire is sustained by the gap between what we ask for and what we want. Authoritarian relationships exploit this distinction by manipulating demand, promising to fulfill subjects in exchange for obedience. Lacanian ethics takes the opposite approach: it supports the subject's desire rather than satisfying their demands, helping subjects recognize how their desire operates rather than prescribing what they should want or providing ready-made solutions to existential predicaments.

This is the position I aim to adopt as the author of this text. My goal is to direct attention to the unconscious and put it into play, rather than establishing myself as a master who determines the direction that consent discourse should take. Such an approach involves using Lacanian technique to draw awareness to the transformative possibilities that emerge from working with, rather than against, structural impossibility. The French title of Seminar XX, *Encore* (1975/1998), the text I work with most closely here, conveys the importance of this continual momentum in understanding what drives desire, analysis, and social change.

As an author, I occupy the positions of both analyst and analysand. I write from the tension of being someone who has struggled to find her own voice and articulate her consent; as someone who has felt supported and alienated by consent discourse, especially within the context of a psychologically abusive relationship. I also write from my experience of suffering because of bad, counterproductive therapeutic treatment and benefiting from psychoanalytic intervention.

These experiences have led me to question whether the promises of consent culture, even those taking intersectional power disparities into account, can adequately address the complexities of desire, power, and the unconscious that shape sexual encounters. This dissertation is motivated by the tension between appreciating the potential of consent culture while remaining skeptical of its emancipatory aspirations. Rather than claiming mastery over my subject matter, my approach resonates with Roland Barthes' (2005) aspiration "to be looking for my own style of being present to the struggles of my time" (p. 8). This approach reflects the Lacanian understanding that knowledge is inextricably linked to jouissance. It also reflects how Lacan positioned himself throughout his career: as teacher and student, analyst and analysand, drawing attention to the limitations of his own capacity to know. According to Colette Soler (2002), Lacan always endeavored to distinguish the psychoanalyst from the master and to

remove psychoanalysis from any and every normative exigency, leaving only the sole constraints imposed by structure” (p. 104). Since the majority of his published work was delivered orally in seminars and transcribed by his students, there is no final, authoritative Lacanian text. This absence of a definitive version mirrors the structural impossibility that Lacanian theory consistently revealed: the impossibility of a metalanguage, of a position outside the unconscious from which to speak with authority.

With these structural constraints in mind, I explore the limits of consent from the perspective of the internally divided subject, or what Lacan called the feminine position of the “not-all.” This perspective disrupts the smooth circulation of ideas, returns repeatedly to the epistemic failure of the impasse, and draws attention to the symptomatic nature of subjectivity. To move from a unified to a split conception of subjectivity, it is necessary to put Lacan into conversation with communities outside of psychoanalysis. This returns us to the fundamental difficulty in theorizing the subject. With this aim, I use case studies on transactional sex and psychological abuse to bring Lacan into dialogue with the “low” voices of prostitutes and psychological abuse victims. This dialogue resists the imposition of a single framework onto the particularity of subjects by highlighting the limits of a Lacanian polemic against the ego and the clinical technique of subjective destitution.

Chapter Summaries

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. The first chapter is split into two sections: the first consists of a literature review, and the second provides an overview of my methodology. In the first section, I provide an overview of consent culture and current critical scholarship on consent (Alcoff, 2018; Angel, 2021; Davis & Dean, 2022; Fischel, 2019; Leguil, 2025; Srinivasan, 2021; Saketopoulou, 2023). Most critical consent literature is informed by

intersectional feminist, queer, and critical theories that center the complications of discourse rather than the unconscious. Within the nascent literature of a psychoanalytic critique of consent culture, there is often an emphasis on the inherently dysregulating force of sexuality (Davis & Dean, 2022; Saketopoulou, 2023). I intervene in this discussion using Lacan's distinction between phallic and Other jouissance to draw attention to meaningful differences associated with the sexual impasse. In the next section, "Decentering the Subject: Lacan's 'Return' to Freud," I establish the theoretical foundation of this dissertation by describing an early Freudian theory of the sexual subject. This subject is split, contradictory, and enigmatic, in contrast to the coherent, stable, unified subject at the center of consent culture. I frame this argument through a discussion of Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905/2017).

In Chapter Two, "The Consenting Subject and the Extimate Self," I extend the early Freudian account of sexual subjectivity using Lacan's concept of extimacy. Using this theoretical grounding, I review contemporary literature promoting consent culture, focusing on texts that represent consent as a catalyst for pedagogical innovation and sociopolitical transformation (Baczynski & Scott, 2022; Beres, 2022; Bradshaw, 2020; Freitas, 2020; Lang, 2018; Mackie-Stephenson, 2024; Martin & Dalzen, 2021; McGuire, 2021; Popova, 2019). I identify four master signifiers spanning this discourse: truth, health, awareness, and progress. I use Lacan's theory of extimacy to investigate several interrelated themes associated with these master signifiers: the embrace of scientific/positivist understandings of sexuality as part of a counter-discourse to histories of religious abstinence-only based models, the assumption of functionalist relational modes, the celebration of the autonomous ego, the erasure of the unconscious, and a teleological view of sexual and cultural development. I argue that a problem with describing the concept of consent in detail is that these master signifiers and their associative chains merge in ways that

produce a promising vocabulary built on a distorted representation of social subjectivity, one that risks creating unnecessary repression and shame.

In Chapter Three, “Consent Culture and the Limits of Language: A Lacanian-Foucauldian Analysis of Transactional Sex,” I put Lacan in conversation with Michel Foucault (1976/1985) to challenge the link made in consent culture between confessional speech and freedom. I start by suggesting that the pressure to articulate oneself within the parameters of consent culture is an example of what Foucault (1976/1985) described as a confessional technology. This practice evolved from religious demands into contemporary therapeutic imperatives. In both contexts, subjects are encouraged to verbalize their innermost thoughts and desires on a path from ignorance, confusion, and suffering toward freedom, understanding, and healing. Foucault’s critical insight is that these confessional practices actively construct the very self they purport to uncover. Favoring a late Lacanian psychoanalytic approach focused on the Real, I (1) contest the assumption that the symbolic realm functions primarily as a site of freedom, as presumed in consent culture; (2) challenge institutional psychoanalytic authority by destabilizing the binary between experts and patients; and (3) identify the blind spots in post-structuralist (Foucauldian) theories that overemphasize the oppressive power of psychoanalysis and the signifier.

I ground this theoretical discussion in an analysis of debates between sex workers and anti-sex trafficking advocates, showing how compulsory self-expression, institutional pathologization of non-normative sexual behaviors, and denial of the constitutive role of the unconscious converge to create unnecessary social harm—in this case, preventing solidarity and collaboration while leading to the enactment of laws and policies that harm vulnerable people in the sex industry. While I document what I believe is the decline of the abolitionist anti-sex

trafficking movement as a viable left political project (Agustín, 2007; Bernstein, 2019; Kempadoo & Shih, 2023) and firmly support the decriminalization of sex work, I caution against uncritically embracing a sex worker rights framework, which can obscure complex forms of relational harm made visible by the anti-sex trafficking movement.

This case study demonstrates the need to carefully contextualize the sexual unconscious in debates about consent. Prostitution has been a central topic of controversy since the very emergence of consent in the second-wave feminist context (see my previous discussion on the sex wars). Because these debates have serious consequences for those who sell sex, they must be revisited in light of contemporary social and political developments. Lacan's account of the split subject—articulated through the distinction between the subject of the signifier and the subject of the drive, and between phallic and Other jouissance—highlights how the prostitute's being exceeds the symbolic. This nuanced account of the split subject challenges the reductive tendency to sort those who sell sex into two categories based on their proximity to consent—sex workers as figures of consent and sex trafficking victims as figures of non-consent.

In Chapter Four, “The Other Side of Consent: A Lacanian Analysis of Psychological Abuse,” I demonstrate the limits of both consent culture and attempting to move too quickly beyond it by turning to a discussion of psychological abuse. I put Lacanian psychoanalysis in dialogue with psychological abuse research and victim narratives to develop a deeper and more nuanced understanding of this complex problem. This study is primarily informed by research on narcissistic and psychopathic abuse, with particular attention to psychological abuse within sexual relationships. I argue that consent culture frameworks systemically ignore these issues due to underlying assumptions about the psychic fortitude of the normal, healthy consenting subject.

Using Lacanian theory, I analyze the dynamics of psychological abuse, destigmatize victims, and demonstrate how their experiences problematize overarching theories of subjectivity and communication within consent culture and traditional approaches to psychoanalysis. I contend that a person's ability to transform themselves following the shattering experience of destructive *jouissance* (in this case, psychological abuse) depends not on individual courage, ego strength, or adaptive capacity but on their position within the symbolic realm—specifically, their access to adequate social recognition and support. In a society where there is social recognition of psychological abuse and where abusers are held accountable for their actions, a Lacanian approach could encourage a more compassionate, less othering attitude toward abusers, given that it highlights the deceptive nature of all human interaction.

This case study offers an alternative vantage point for conceptualizing consent beyond what is typically called “sexual violence.” The problem with this term is that it fails to capture the complex psychical dimensions of victimization and trauma. By drawing attention to the Real of psychological abuse, I demonstrate that consent can be violated in ways that do not register in the symbolic. Attending to the voices of psychological abuse victims and cult survivors also illuminates the risks of subordinating our critical faculties in deference to those who occupy the status of master.

In Chapter Five, “Beyond Consent: Other *Jouissance*,” I argue that the symbolic alienation experienced by sex workers and psychological abuse victims points to a universal condition: all subjects are split by the signifier, and this split opens onto a dimension that goes beyond consent. I claim that while consent frameworks can capture the phallic dimensions of desire, they cannot address Other *jouissance*. Here I draw on the sexual *impasse*, the non-existence of Woman, the *sinthome*, and the death drive to argue that, at the level of the Real,

consent does not exist. The truth can only ever be half said as there is always a remainder, which necessarily gets lost in absolutism of the yes or no of consent. The significant point is that consent culture cannot provide a universal solution for the problem of sexual violation. To develop this claim, I put Lacan in conversation with other psychoanalytic thinkers, such as Sheila L. Cavanagh (2016, 2017a, 2017b, 2018), Colette Soler (2006, 2015), and Joan Copjec (1994/2015, 2004).

I then turn to Lacan's reading of Sophocles' *Antigone* (circa 441 BCE) to develop an ethics that makes space for the singular nature of desire. I argue that desire differs fundamentally from consent culture's ideals of pleasure, happiness, satisfaction, and freedom. This discussion focuses on how desire does not translate into a notion of the good, such as consent culture's promise of mental health, a clear conscience, or an integrated psyche. While consent culture grounds agency in a Kantian pursuit of rational interests, *Antigone* reveals how political and psychic agency takes on a radically different form when understood through a psychoanalytic account of desire, the death drive, and sublimation. *Antigone*'s indecipherable desire resists interpretation and integration into symbolic frameworks, gesturing toward the opacity central to feminine sexuality and the not-all.

In the concluding chapter, "The Impossible Relation: Psychoanalysis and (Consent) Politics," I discuss the limitations of this study and propose directions for future research, with a focus on developing alternatives to consent culture that confront urgent political concerns including environmental devastation and the digital revolution. This discussion centers on the impossible relation between psychoanalysis and politics, or the recognition that true psychoanalysis is, by its very nature, marginalized and contentious. Moving forward, I suggest

maintaining psychoanalysis as a force of complicating consent discourses without replacing them.

Chapter One: Methodology and Literature Review

Although consent has emerged as the dominant framework for ethical sexual engagement, debate persists concerning how to define and conceptualize it. The tension between protection and autonomy that characterized the feminist sex wars persists. There continues to be strong disagreement, even among progressives and feminists, about the meaning of consent regarding the decriminalization of sex work, the production and consumption of pornography, approaches to sexual education, and the definition of sexual violation (Alcoff, 2018). I use Lacanian psychoanalytic theory to intervene in two bodies of scholarship at the center of this debate: consent culture and critical approaches to consent.

Consent Culture

Most contemporary work on consent is based on empirical research and motivated by institutional reform. In feminist studies, significant work has been done in demonstrating the scope of consent violations, promoting inclusive consent paradigms, and highlighting the need to prioritize prevention over prosecution (De Heer et al., 2021). In education and policy, the affirmative consent model is gaining popularity, and rules and regulations regarding ethical sexual conduct are being implemented (Kubota & Nakazawa, 2024). Legal scholars have addressed the limitations of verbal consent to guarantee ethical sexual interactions, especially in cases involving significant power differences or intoxicated victims (Hunt et al., 2022). Within these fields of inquiry, there is a strong desire to articulate consent in the most precise terms possible: as clear, direct, inclusive, affirmative, mutual, continuous, and revocable. There is a strong reliance on empirical methods and evidence, such as self-reporting as a predictable measure of experience. Theoretical work advancing consent culture typically builds on this institutional research and advocacy.

Consent culture promotes consent across contexts beyond sexual interactions, including the classroom, the workplace, and platonic relationships. Consent is represented as an attitude, a lifestyle, a process, and a movement, not an isolated act or a one-time event (Baczynski & Scott, 2022; Freitas, 2020; Garcia, 2023; Lang, 2018; McGuire, 2021; Popova, 2019). The literature acknowledges how culture, norms, and context shape consent. Power dynamics, social structures, and psychological conflicts are often represented as problems, but problems that can be managed effectively. There is a strong focus on pedagogical approaches to teaching consent with an emphasis on objective, scientifically valid, and comprehensive education that begins early and continues throughout one's life (McGuire, 2023).

In each case, consent in a specific context, such as the classroom (Baczynski & Scott, 2022), the theater (Mackie-Stephenson, 2024), early sexual experiences (Bradshaw, 2020), and intimate engagements (Martin & Dalzen, 2021), becomes a model for the development of consent as a mode of wider institutional, social, and systemic change. In other words, beyond individual interactions, the goal is to create a society where consent is practiced, valued, taught, respected, and encouraged. This goal involves overturning policies, norms, and structures that enable consent violations. Many texts offer practical tools and strategies for practicing consent, including techniques for effective communication, boundary setting, checking in, and expressing preferences. In this literature, consent is understood as fundamental to healthy self-understanding, human interaction, intimacy, social harmony, and cultural progress.

To convey the scope of consent discourse, I provide a list of definitions for consent. I created this list while reading consent culture literature, which has been shaped in part by critiques of the concept of consent. *Affirmative consent* refers to voluntary, mutual, informed, enthusiastic, ongoing, and explicit agreement to engage in sex acts. This is a type of *positive*

consent because it involves words or actions (such as a smile, nod, or an enthusiastic *yes!*) demonstrating the willing participation of the “receptive” partner. According to affirmative consent literature, it is the responsibility of the person “initiating” a sexual encounter to ask for permission before proceeding with any new sexual act. *Negative consent*, which refers to silence or lack of resistance (in the absence of an explicit *no!*), is not considered adequate to qualify as genuine consent from this perspective.

Feminists and cultural theorists have developed additional terms and concepts to name different types of consent. *Informed consent* occurs when a person has adequate knowledge of the meaning, context, and consequences of their decisions. *Uninformed consent* occurs when a person engages in a sex act without this knowledge, usually under pretenses. For example, in the show *I May Destroy You* (Coel, 2020), we see an example of this when one of the female characters consents to a threesome with two men she meets in a bar. She consents under the impression that the two men had met for the first time that evening. However, after having sex together, she learns that the men were friends and that they intentionally misled her into believing that the three of them had formed a spontaneous connection to get her into bed. Even though she enthusiastically “consented” to every individual sex act, this consent is not considered meaningful because she was manipulated and ignorant about relevant facts (Angel, 2021, p. 10). Another example of uninformed consent involves a child consenting to sex with an adult or someone consenting to sex when they are severely intoxicated. *Oppressive Consent* involves consent under unjust conditions, as, for example, when sex workers consent to sexual transactions because they need emergency funds and do not have access to other income-generating options under neoliberal capitalism. *Meaningful consent* involves all the conditions

necessary for informed consent, as well as the structural conditions required to have viable alternative choices.

As this incomplete list of definitions suggests, the literature on consent is vast and diverse and reflects a range of perspectives. On the more progressive side, the violation of consent is viewed as connected to structural inequalities, such as capitalism, white supremacy, patriarchy, and transphobia. In this literature, the promise of consent lies in structural analysis, open dialogue, community-based action, and transformative justice. On the more conservative side, the emphasis is on legal and contractual discourse, individual responsibility, traditional values, and (corporate) risk management. Often, there is a narrow focus on whether explicit permission was or was not given. Despite these significant differences, each discourse centers on autonomy and agency, albeit in very different ways.

I focus on work representing consent as a catalyst for pedagogical innovation and sociopolitical transformation (Baczynski & Scott, 2022; Beres, 2022; Bradshaw, 2020; Freitas, 2020; Lang, 2018; Mackie-Stephenson, 2024; Martin & Dalzen, 2021; McGuire, 2023; Popova, 2019). I focus on the link between social transformation and consent because I believe this discussion warrants scholarly attention. This focus is related to the complications I explore regarding the specific association made between consent, speech, knowledge, and liberation.

Critical Approaches to Consent

While theoretical work advancing consent culture typically builds on empirical research motivated by institutional reform, theoretical work challenging consent culture is often skeptical of empirical methods and institutional norms due to complications arising from discourse and hegemony. For example, academic feminists primarily examine how historical conditions, power relations, contingent discourses, and the social construction of subjectivity shape consent. The

most significant contributions are by intersectional feminists who challenge the abstract subject at the center of consent culture, emphasizing that violation cannot be understood apart from broader structures of power and oppression, such as economic exploitation, sexism, racism, and colonialism (Alcoff, 2018; Srinivasan, 2021). Another common theme in literature that is critical of consent frameworks comes from queer theory. Queer critics prioritize challenging heteronormativity and binary thinking, often interrogating how consent models reinforce assumptions about the heterosexual nature of desire (Bauer, 2021; Beres, 2022; Fischel, 2019).

A common theme in literature that is critical of consent frameworks is that consent culture relies on a liberal political worldview that overemphasizes the significance of individual choice. Consent discourses often presume autonomous subjects making free choices, neglecting the essential significance of cultural expectations and sociopolitical hierarchies. This individualistic framing aligns neoliberal politics that emphasize personal responsibility over structural critique. Since proponents of consent culture have been receptive to these criticisms, many books and articles now paradoxically promote consent culture and use the terminology of critical theory, intersectional feminism, and queer theory. Given the dearth of psychoanalytic intervention into this discourse, consent culture continues to obscure the unconscious unambivalently. Since only a few texts critique consent culture from a psychoanalytic perspective, I provide a detailed description of these texts below and explain how my project resonates with yet differs from them.

Kathryn Angel's (2021) critique of consent culture in *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again: Women and Desire in the Age of Consent* inspired this dissertation. Angel defined consent culture as the assumption that consent is the key to transforming the problems of our sexual culture (p. 7). She argued that consent culture fails to represent the ambiguity of sexual

desire and unjustly places the burden of ethical sex on women's knowledge and speech. She argued against the study of sex based on crude scientific methods and helpfully pointed out that it is not possible to entirely disentangle sexual pleasure from sexual risk. She offered a sustained critique of confidence feminism, rejected (female) empowerment as a sexual ideal, and celebrated porousness (openness and receptivity as opposed to autonomy and protection) as an alternative account of sexual subjectivity and phenomenology. Although Angel cited general psychoanalytic concepts, such as the unconscious and the enigmatic nature of desire, she did not elaborate on their meaning.

The most in-depth psychoanalytic critique of consent culture comes from Avgi Saketopoulou's (2023) *Sexuality Beyond Consent: Risk, Race, Traumatophilia*, which powerfully illustrates what we lose by narrowly pursuing consent as the end goal of sexual ethics. What sets their work apart is that, beyond demonstrating the limits of consent, they used psychoanalytic concepts to explore the complications that arise when we recognize the consenting sexual subject as someone with a subjectivity at odds with itself. Putting the theory of Lacan's student, Jean Laplanche, in conversation with queer of color critique and other critical traditions in left philosophy, Saketopoulou argued that consent is not only an interpersonal but also an "internal affair" as sexuality involves confronting the opacity within ourselves (p. 3). By shifting attention to the intrapsychic drama of the split self and the ways the ego's consent can be violated by other parts of the self—especially given the immense labor required to erect the ego's boundaries—Saketopoulou shows that affirmative consent paradigms address the ego while neglecting other aspects of the psyche.

Saketopoulou (2023) criticizes our fixation on consent as part of a widespread societal obsession with preventing and healing trauma rather than harnessing and translating it. Focusing

on the transformative power of trauma, they coined the term “limit consent” to describe what happens when one agrees to surrender to unknown experiences, relinquishing rather than attempting to master or control a sexual encounter (p. 3). Limit consent is attractive for Saketopoulou because it has the potential to connect one with the opacity within themselves. They drew attention to creative sex acts involving limit consent that are alien to conventional forms of intimacy, such as race play.

Referring to their work as a psychoanalyst, Saketopoulou (2023) compares going beyond consent in clinical and sexual encounters. They argued that a traditional consent model does not make sense in the psychoanalytic context, pointing out that in the clinic, psychoanalysts intentionally push analysands’ stated limits, often taking them to places they did not consciously want to go, to places they did not expect to go, along a path that involves pleasure and suffering and ultimately (ideally) transformation. When one goes into analysis, one does not know what one is consenting to. Given the unpredictable nature of transference, the analyst too enters unknown waters with the analysand and may be disturbed or transformed by the encounter. The analyst, of course, has access to psychoanalytic knowledge providing a significant edge over the analysand. Analysts know they will trespass analysands limits and intentionally do not reveal this to them. In ideal situations, this could be considered a benign trespass of consent, designed to help the analysand let go of ego identifications to access new forms of knowledge and jouissance. Therapeutic progress is simultaneously painful, involving the loss and sacrifice of parts of the self, and pleasurable in the opening toward new possibilities. Therapeutic progress is possible precisely because pain can be mobilized alongside pleasure in jouissance.

By introducing terms such “limit consent,” or the willingness to go beyond one’s own stated limits, (p. 3), and “exigent sadism,” or the willingness to transgress the limits of the other

(p. 14), Saketopoulou (2023) helps us think outside of prevailing discourses fixated on consent logics. She wrote:

I propose that the request to have one's limits overrun and the willingness to consider that request are both driven by infantile sexuality's economic tendency to seek escalating excitations toward more stimulation. The move into the 'more and more' of experience can produce states of overwhelm that ... may catalyze significant psychic transformations. (p. 69)

To put this in Freudian-Lacanian terms, Other *jouissance* is more closely related to the sexual aim as formed during the stage of polymorphous perversity, when fantasies associated with the pleasure principle had not yet been disciplined by the reality principle. Since this kind of sexual experience involves undoing work associated with ego consolidation and so-called mature genital sexuality, it is likely to involve sensations associated with humiliation, objectification, or abjection. Insofar as these experiences open us up to the otherness in ourselves, the world, and other people, they can have positive therapeutic and political effects.

One desirable aspect of limit consent involves the possibility of a *jouissance* that activates parts of the self alien to the ego. Saketopoulou (2023) refers to such moments of "overwhelm" as offering "bursts of self-sovereignty" that can disrupt normative social and political logics that attempt to define the self (p. 5). This concept of self-sovereignty is not the sovereignty of consent. It is a way to experience what is foreign to the conscious self, but very much part of the self, similar to what Freud called the uncanny and what Lacan referred to as the *extimate*: what emerges in the self in relation to the other and the Other.

In Saketopoulou's (2023) *Sexuality Beyond Consent*, we see what happens when one puts consent to the test with the psychoanalytic account of the constitutive unconscious. Saketopoulou

demonstrated there is something distinctly valuable about modes of sexual experience that disrupt the logics of the ego, and it would be a mistake to ignore, forget, deny, or negate this potentiality through steadfast adherence to consent frameworks. While this work greatly influenced my project, since I use a Lacanian perspective, I attend to different complications associated with the problem of consent. Saketopoulou focused on explaining, defending, and elaborating a theory of sexuality based on the psychoanalytic work of Jean Laplanche. They used Laplanche's metapsychology to argue that sexuality is inherently dysregulating.

This general representation is complicated by Lacan's theory of *jouissance* as split along lines of phallic *jouissance* and Other *jouissance*. Phallic *jouissance* is associated with the masculine position and with forms of enjoyment linked to egoic mastery. It entails forms of enjoyment most directly structured by *objet petit a*, or the missing object that motivates desire. Alternatively, Other *jouissance* is associated with the feminine position and a mode of enjoyment that emerges in the subject's encounter with the Real. It is characterized by the merging of pleasure with traumatic intensity that resists symbolic mediation. Using this distinction, I argue that the notion of phallic *jouissance* corresponds in a meaningful way to consent logics. The implication is that while Saketopoulou argued that consent culture is fundamentally misguided about the nature of human sexual subjectivity, with a Lacanian perspective I argue that it is limited and flawed but not without value.

I suspect Lacan created the split between phallic and Other *jouissance* to prevent sexuality from being recentered, as this would involve answering the question of what sex is—in some sense resolving the enigma of sex—even if in a counterintuitive or unconventional way, for example by defining sex in terms of disturbance and dysregulation. I use Lacan's concepts of phallic and Other *jouissance* to avoid centering any psychic/phenomenological/ontological

account of sex. My aim is to put pressure on fantasies associated with empowerment models of feminism without universalizing what Lacan called Other *jouissance* as sex itself. This paradoxical approach is intentional, as I hope to emulate the Freudian insight that contradiction is not merely a logical error to correct but an ineradicable feature of psychic, epistemic, and social reality. I argue that the distinction between phallic and Other *jouissance* proves useful when addressing the complications arising from marginalized sexual subject positions, including those of sex workers and psychological abuse victims.

There are significant parallels between Saketopoulou's (2023) *Sexuality Beyond Consent* and one of the other major psychoanalytically informed critiques of consent culture: *Hatred of Sex* by Oliver Davis and Tim Dean (2022), which uses Jean Laplanche's notion of sexual dysregulation and Jacques Rancière's theory of the constitutive disorder of democracy to challenge contemporary sexual norms. This book proposes a theory of sexual aversion as innate and universal. The authors argued that hatred (as opposed to love) is at the center of democracy and sex. Contending that sexual pleasure unbinds psychic structures and creates disturbances in the self, they critiqued the #MeToo movement and consent culture more generally as part of an attempt to purge sex of its disturbing elements. Beyond holding perpetrators accountable, they argued that these movements construct the figure of the "sexual predator" as an object for the convenient projection of complicated forms of sexual aversion.

I consider all three of these texts as offering a counter-discourse to consent. Angel (2021) wrote, "[I]n all sex, we are quintessentially vulnerable: unclothed, incurable, both physically and psychologically" (p. 101, emphasis mine). She argued that our embrace of this vulnerability should define the utopian horizon of sex. Like Angel, Saketopoulou (2023) emphasized the risk inherent to sex. They expressed reluctance about accepting even some of the most basic precepts

of consent culture, claiming that affirmative consent does not exist in the sense that it is not possible to reliably predict or practically manage what impact a sexual event will have on one's psyche. Saketopoulou wrote, "I intervene in ongoing conversations about affirmative consent to argue a point that runs through this book: while violations of consent are real and deserve our attention, affirmative consent does not" (p. 3). Davis and Dean (2022) also focused on the risks and dangers of overemphasizing the negative consequences of trauma and emphasized the risk of recoding sexual variation as abuse.

Angel's (2021) description countered the hegemony of a power-feminist perspective. Saketopoulou (2023) resisted traumatological norms, and Davis and Dean (2022) critiqued the bureaucracies of sexual governance, particularly the hegemonic aspects of certain strands of feminist theory that center on an identitarian victim status. I draw from these sources to account for the role of aversion in shaping sexual desire, illustrating the role of sex in destabilizing identity, and developing my critique of consent culture as a culture of redemption. However, my focus is different. Although I use Lacan's polemic against ego psychology, my attention to the historical feminist contexts that gave rise to consent culture, combined with my attention to forms of sexual victimization and abuse, leads me to be less critical of concepts associated with the ego. Since I spend considerable time examining the complications posed by the confessional discourses of marginalized subjects, and the risks, dangers, and tragedies of porousness, for example, in the context of sexual and psychological abuse, I look at the challenges of consent from a different angle.

This brings me to a discussion of the work that resonates most deeply with my project: Clotilde Leguil's *Lacan and the Question of Consent: Why Yielding is Not Consenting* (2025). Leguil observed that "to yield" has taken on the meaning of "to consent" and aimed to

distinguish the fine line dividing them. By articulating three levels of yielding, or “letting it happen,” she establishes a framework for theorizing the Real of trauma. This nuanced approach works against the formation of a counter-discourse that could arise from a narrow focus on opposing consent culture based on a polemic against ego psychology.

Leguil (2025) implicitly resists idealizing representations of ego-shattering by immediately foregrounding the high stakes of consent. Early in her introduction, she invokes two scenes in connection with #MeToo: femicide and the complex violation of consent involving ongoing manipulation. Regarding the former, she describes the collective resistance to feminicide as “a rebellion against the use of women’s bodies for the sake of jouissance which can go as far as abolishing a woman’s life” (p. 1). Regarding the latter, she references the complex nature of victimization and abuse through Vanessa Springora’s *Consent: A Memoir* (2020).

While Leguil (2025) resists minimizing the value of consent as a concept or its status as a feminist achievement, she also recognizes the risks of unifying knowledge around a collective “We.” She argues that it is important to prevent the “We” of #Metoo from becoming a superegoic and authoritarian “We” by unifying accounts of agency and trauma (p. 3). To prevent this trajectory, Leguil explores the continuing relevance of #MeToo through Lacanian psychoanalysis. This involves exploring how the feminist political achievement of globalizing women’s speech around violation can make possible a Lacanian psychoanalytic exploration of the singular “I” (pp. 2–3).

With Leguil (2025), I hope to chart paths for this singular “I” in ways that support the collective “We” of political action, while remaining attentive to the dangers of authoritarian knowledge production. As Leguil recognizes, the collective declaration “You are victims. We

believe you” of #MeToo can be viewed as a psychologically and politically generative claim when not translated according to an epistemology of institutional Truth. However, since clinical, media, legal, and other institutional and positivist discourses can so easily saturate the field of discourse around sexual violation (Chiacchieri, 2019), the importance of finding a singular language for self-expression is essential. This is the opening where a politically informed psychoanalysis becomes especially relevant to consent culture.

Lacanian psychoanalysis and consent culture both offer multiple points of entry and paths of inquiry. I hope to continue the conversation Leguil (2025) started and take it in new directions by drawing on different aspects of Lacan's work, incorporating different domains of knowledge, and engaging different sociopolitical issues. One significant difference lies in my interest in the queer psychoanalytic potential of the death drive. While Leguil emphasizes the death drive's destructive force, I attend to its potentially sublimatory dimensions, beginning with my discussion of Freud's articulation of the sexual subject in the *Three Essays* (1905/2017) and moving through Lacan's reworking of these ideas in his development of the *sinthome*. On a practical level, while Leguil invokes core theoretical concepts associated with consent, I engage directly with consent culture literature, demonstrating precisely how Lacanian and consent culture ideas diverge in practice. I also present original case studies on marginalized dimensions of consent involving psychological abuse and transactional sex.

The methodology I share with Leguil (2025), which engages the intersection of the Symbolic and the Real, entails certain disadvantages. For example, in some cases, it accommodates existing symbolic frameworks rather than subverting them. In *No Future*, Lacanian scholar Lee Edelman (2004) argues against this use of Lacan. He contends that instead of seeking inclusion within existing structures, a Lacanian reading ought to aim at a fundamental

disturbance of order—a challenge to prevailing logic and a form of resistance linked to the Real of the death drive. Given my concern for developing multiple paths to self-understanding and my interest in bringing psychoanalysis out of the clinic and into popular discourse, however, I have opted to risk the charge of accommodation. My approach pursues a Lacanian critique that intervenes creatively from within the symbolic order.

Sokolofsky (2025) supported this approach, arguing that ignoring the dialectic of the Real and the symbolic “is impossible and leaves the subject without its essential critical potential” (p. 1). Here I follow Ruti (2012) in seeking opportunities for resistance at “the complex interface between the symbolic and the real,” which she argues is “charged with powerful transformative energies” (p. 9). In Seminar XXIII: *Le Sinthome* (1975–1976/2016), Lacan drew on the innovative writing of James Joyce to suggest that such an interface is possible when the sinthome incites a transformation of language. The sinthome is the subject’s singular form of jouissance that functions as a structural support by knotting the Real, Symbolic, and Imaginary threads of the Borromean knot. The sinthome enables a kind of psychic consistency through the binding of jouissance at the point of the hole in the symbolic. Like the symptom, it marks where the subject is out of joint with the social order, but unlike the symptom, it is not open to interpretation and understanding, as it is tied to the subject’s desire and cannot be translated into symbolic terms (Paul Verhaeghe and Frédéric Declercq, 2002). In the case of James Joyce’s writing, the Real penetrates discourse through the sinthome to such a degree that it produces meaningful, transformative psychic and symbolic effects (Ruti, 2012).

Decentering the Subject: Lacan’s “Return” to Freud

In this dissertation, I trace a trajectory of self-understanding that breaks with the logics of consent culture, taking Lacan’s “return” to Freud as my point of departure. Through original

interpretations of core psychoanalytic concepts, Lacan framed his work as a “return” to the radical spirit of Freud’s project, challenging the normalizing orientation of prevailing approaches. This “return” called for a confrontation with the unsettling implications of the truth of the unconscious, and a critical examination of how this truth had been obscured by neo-Freudian developments in psychoanalytic theory and practice, which too often recast psychoanalysis as an explanatory model grounded in clear and distinct ideas, leading to a conformist therapeutic technique. As Lacan (2006) recognized,

Freud’s discovery was that of the field of the effects, in man’s nature, of his relations to the symbolic order and the fact that their meaning goes all the way back to the most radical instances of symbolization in being. To ignore the symbolic order is to condemn Freud’s discovery to forgetting and analytic experience to ruin. (p. 227)

For Lacan, taking seriously the fact that both analyst and analysand operate within a symbolic structure necessitates an epistemic reorientation away from traditional philosophical principles that sharply distinguish truth from error. This reorientation involves recognizing the epistemic value of the symptom and the illusory character of conceptions of truth that deny the unconscious. Lacan observed that “things have come to such a pass that to call for a return to Freud is seen as a reversal” (Lacan, 2006, p. 335). It is seen as a reversal because it reorients attention toward the complications and contradictions that give psychoanalysis its revolutionary potential, rather than toward a scientific framework that imagines epistemic truth and progress in terms of conscious mastery. Thus, the corrective was not meant to imply a directive to “go back, do your homework, get Freud right,” but rather an exhortation to return to Freud through “a reimmersion in Freud’s ideas, Freud’s language, and perhaps even Freud’s unconscious” (Kornbluh, 2018, p. 41). Concerning sexual truth, a Lacanian return to Freud entails reopening

the question of sex from the standpoint of the unconscious, and the first step involves questioning what we think we know about it.

Lacan argued that the most radical aspect of Freud's theory of sexuality was its revelation that sexuality is a deeply intellectual matter (Zupančič, 2017). In line with this insight, Alenka Zupančič (2017) offered a Lacanian-Freudian interpretation in which "sex is above all a *concept* that formulates a persisting contradiction of reality," one that "cannot be circumscribed or reduced to a secondary level (as a contradiction between already well-established entities/beings), but is—as a *contradiction*—involved in the very structuring of these entities, in their very being" (p. 3). On this view, sexuality is neither a biological instinct nor a social construct, but a structural contradiction that belies something Real. In this dissertation, I contrast the Lacanian sexual subject, constituted by just such a contradiction, with the coherent sexual subject at the center of consent culture. To introduce the theoretical framework informing the Lacanian position, based on a return to Freud, I begin by providing background on the first edition of Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905/2017).

According to Philippe Van Haute and Herman Westerink (2020), the first edition of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905/2017) is a marginal text in a literal and metaphorical sense. Since the final 1924 edition is longer, includes more detailed explanations, and provides a more coherent and comprehensive interpretation of the Freudian canon, it is considered the "officially approved" version in standard collections of Freud's writings (Van Haute & Westerink, 2020, p. 1). The original German text of the first edition has been difficult to access, and the first English translation was only published in 2016. According to Bret Kahr, a psychoanalyst and historian of psychoanalytic ideas, the first edition is worth reading because it

“sheds tremendous light on the truly radical, revolutionary nature of [Freud’s] contributions” (Van Haute and Westerink, 2020 p. xi).

The first edition is structured around open questions and unelaborated thoughts, capturing the curiosity and open-mindedness of a young thinker and clinician and arguably the spirit of the psychoanalytic method itself. At this early stage of his career, Freud allowed his mind to wander, unconcerned with formulating psychoanalysis in exact terms or defending it as a legitimate science. A close study of the first edition poses interesting questions about the origins of psychoanalysis, as ideas in this early text resonate with contemporary insights of critical gender and queer thinkers, such as Judith Butler (Van Haute & Herman Westerink, 2020). Since Foucault has played an important role in the development of academic feminist and queer theories and wrote on institutionalized confessional discourses relevant to contemporary discussions concerning sexual violation and consent (Chiacchieri, 2019), it is notable for our purposes that the authors claim that this first edition was “overlooked in [Foucault’s] evaluation of psychoanalysis and its place in the history of sexuality” (Van Haute & Westerink, 2020, p. 5). (See detailed discussion of Foucault’s work on confessional discourse in relation to consent, Freud, and Lacan in Chapter Four.)

The first edition advances a theory of sexuality that deviates significantly from intuitive and normative ways of thinking. Since this work is vast, I focus on six interrelated innovations that are crucial for the development of my project. This list is not a summary of the first edition of the *Three Essays* as it excludes many (heteronormative) ideas also included in the text. These ideas would complicate any straightforward reading of the first edition (not to mention the first edition as only one part of a larger project, including the later editions) as a necessarily radical departure from how we typically think about sexuality. However, following Sheila L. Cavanagh

(2020) I argue that “a critically queer reading of Freud offers a solid groundwork for a radical gender and sexual politic responsive to the unconscious life of the subject” (p. 50). I delve into the radical insights of Freud’s early text here to lay the groundwork for my introduction to key Lacanian concepts regarding sexuality and to complicate the argument that psychoanalysis is inherently patriarchal and heteronormative, thereby defending my use of Lacan’s psychoanalytic approach, which is based on a “return to Freud.”

Freud’s (1905/2017) innovations are as follows:

1. *The polymorphous perversity of infantile sexuality structures adult sexuality.* Infants possess an inherent capacity for multiple forms of (sexual) pleasure from bodily zones and activities not immediately associated with sexual satisfaction. In the beginning, the sexual drive is not directed toward any specific external object and has no aim. Unlike hunger, which requires food for satisfaction, early sexual satisfaction is auto-erotic. Freud refers to an infant sucking its thumb, which provides pleasure through the stimulation of the oral zone. He uses this example to show that sexual pleasure may be initially associated with biological functions, such as feeding. However, when the pleasure is detached from the function, a closed loop of desire and excitation is created. To emphasize this narcissistic (not-other-directed) and non-functional nature of infantile sexuality, Freud (1905/2017) used the metaphor of “the lips kissing themselves” (p. 43).

While Freud acknowledged that these forms of pleasure later become organized, restricted, and repressed by civilization’s demands, he emphasized that this process is always imperfect and incomplete. He claimed there is no genital drive in the unconscious and that sexual “development” is not teleological, but proceeds in nonlinear movements, where early formations endure and interact with newly formed impressions and ideas. Thus, he suggests taking the excitable body or the erogenous zones (as opposed to the procreative body with an emphasis on

the genital drive) as the starting point for theorizing adult sexuality. This starting point paves the way for a theory of sexuality based on partial and composite drives, rather than instincts with predetermined principles and aims. With this move, Freud creates an opening for the radical idea that perhaps sex is not essentially relational, complicating uncritical ideals about mutual, reciprocal, altruistic sexuality as a default mode of human sexual interaction. This orientation can be contrasted with a later Freudian approach focused on the Oedipus complex, object relations, and sexual instincts.

2. The sexual aim is more significant than the sexual object. First, we need to differentiate between the sexual object and the sexual aim. According to Freud (1905/2017), the sexual object is “the person from whom attraction on the other sex emanates,” and the sexual aim is “the action impelled by the drive” (p. 1). Freud observes that for a surprisingly wide range of individuals and under many different circumstances, the sexual aim, or underlying psychic motive that drives the subject’s behavior, is more significant than the sexual object. Freud suggests that sexual aims can take an almost infinite number of forms as they develop through the complex interplay of social and psychic formations, rather than by biological programming. Since the sexual aim cannot be directly observed, and is counterintuitive from an evolutionary perspective, its significance is often overlooked, and emphasis is incorrectly placed on the sexual object, which the sexual drive only attaches to opportunistically.

The radical idea associated with this claim is that empirical research methods and categories that seek to make sense of sexual desire, experience, and behavior risk fundamentally misrepresenting the phenomena they are studying. Unlike sexual objects, which can at least be observed and identified, sexual aims are shaped by a complex interplay of psychic motivations that cannot be easily discerned. This implies that the standard tools of empirical science can only

represent the surface manifestations of sexuality, not the deeper, more significant, unconscious aims.

3. *The sexual exception reveals the sexual norm.* Freud suggested that the categories of normal and abnormal create more confusion than clarification when discussing sexuality. He wrote of the general human “need for [sexual] variation” (1905/2017, p. 14), which does not mean multiple partners (objects) but multiple ways of pursuing one’s sexual aim. He wrote, “There is indeed something innate lying at the basis of the perversions, but ... it is *something innate in all human beings*, though as a disposition it may vary in its intensity and may lie dormant, waiting to be brought to the fore by life experiences” (1905/2017, p. 32). The implication is that what we consider normal or pathological depends on contingent sociohistorical factors, not the nature of psychosexuality. This means there is no direct link between perversions and aggressive, destructive, or antisocial tendencies, a claim that runs against trends in orthodox psychoanalysis, religion, and evolutionary discourses about the relation between perversion and pathology, evil, and maladaptation.

With this move, Freud inverts the relationship between the norm and the exception: what appears exceptional reveals what is hidden within the norm. At the same time, what presents itself as normal becomes the exception that requires explanation. The particularity of the exception is the closest thing we find to a standard informing the universal. The radical implication is that organizing sexuality around concepts of normality and nature, whether through psychoanalytic intervention, legal regulation, or generalizing tendencies associated with consent culture, might be symptomatic of society’s inability to tolerate the unknowable dimensions of human desire. What distinguishes this claim from popular contemporary queer descriptions is the implication that *sex itself* is perverse, including monogamous, cisgender,

heterosexual, and other forms of “normative” sexual expression. Thus, normative sexual behaviors should not be taken at face value, and to understand the complex nature of sexuality, we do not need to focus our attention only on “deviant” forms.

4. *The sexual drive is not a survival instinct.* Against popular Darwinian interpretations, sexuality lacks any predetermined organizing principle and is not geared toward self-preservation or the reproduction of the species. To the first point, people often pursue forms of sexual satisfaction that threaten their physical and psychological well-being (I elaborate on this in my discussion of the death drive in chapter five). To the second point, humans engage in a range of non-procreative sexual behaviors. As an obvious example, Freud (1905/2017) points out that kissing (what he humorously describes as “the contract between the mucous membranes of the lips that constitute the entrance to the digestive tract,”) is widespread, and is considered a normal sexual activity, despite serving no reproductive function (p. 5). Freud posits that instead of a straightforward life drive that would validate the standard procreative interpretation, human sexuality involves a life drive and a death drive that become implicated in each other in various ways throughout one’s life. In other words, sexuality is unmoored from evolutionary imperatives and resists rational organization.

This view is radical because it challenges the widespread assumption that procreative sexuality is a reliable metaphor for understanding human behavior, intimate relationships, communicative ideals, and social organization. It also challenges the fundamental claims of evolutionary psychology regarding arguments about sexual difference, selection, investment, fitness, and adaptation. This challenge is significant because these ideas are associated with Western civilizational narratives of progress and enlightenment, especially as they have been represented as forming the basis of a scientific (non-religious) perspective. Thus, they have had a

significant impact on institutional research design and funding and popular discourses of sexuality and desire. For example, the idea that sex hormones like testosterone and estrogen evolved to coordinate sexual behavior toward reproduction underlies much empirical thinking about gender and sexuality, such as the prevalent idea that sex is essentially male, and that testosterone drives sexual desire. This attitude is described in *Why Women Have Sex* (2009) by clinical psychologist Cindy Meston and evolutionary psychologist David Buss. The title implies that the answer on the male side is self-explanatory. Against this attitude, this early Freudian idea implies that every subject is faced with the challenge of negotiating their complex sexuality without recourse to any default guiding principle. Freud (1905/2017) recognized the radicality of this position, dismissing the prevailing procreative and functionalist approach to sexuality as “poetic fable” (p. 1).

5. *Hysteria is the best model for the sexual unconscious.* The hysteric’s struggle with gender identification and sexual orientation reveals the anxiety and instability that characterizes all human sexuality. Freud represented hysteria not as a feminine pathological deviation but as a key to understanding the human sexual unconscious. Assuming a universal theory of bisexuality, he emphasized that all humans possess masculine and feminine sexual dispositions. He therefore represented the hysteric’s central questions of “Am I a man or a woman?” and “What is sexuality?” as basic human dilemmas. While he originally singled out hysterical sexuality as involving four individuals—the male and female subject orientation and the male and female object—he later generalized this four-person structure of hysterical sexuality. What might appear as the hysteric’s confused gender identification is now a mark of the universal human struggle to integrate one’s innate bisexuality with social positions designated as male and female. As Cavanagh (2019) recognizes, “There is something about the societal requirement to become

‘feminine’ or ‘masculine’ (not both) that causes enormous psychic suffering. Freud’s *Three Essays* can be read as a parable of how difficult it is for the ‘boy’ or ‘girl’ to transition into ‘manhood’ or ‘womanhood’ (p. 228).

The radical implication is that even straightforward heterosexual desire involves underlying dynamics that do not correspond to a simple gender binary. We might conclude that anxiety is not an obstacle to overcome but a feature of human sexuality that points to deeper psychic conflicts over unconscious desire and conscious identity. Perhaps most fundamentally, anxiety reflects our confrontation with the otherness of desire itself, the recognition that our sexuality exceeds our conscious understanding and control, making every sexual encounter a *potentially* destabilizing and transformative experience. In addition, what might appear as hysterical symptoms may represent forms of resistance against social norms, making the body a site of political struggle.

6. *There is no sharp dividing line between the material/empirical and the psychical realms of sexuality.* Freud’s work on conversion hysteria fundamentally challenged the separation between mind and body. In conversion hysteria, patients develop physical symptoms without any medically detectable organic cause. Freud discovered that these symptoms were not simply “imaginary” because they expressed the body’s unconscious conflicts. Physical symptoms become a form of unconscious communication, a way the psyche speaks through the body when direct expression is impossible. The psychic conflict becomes a physical symptom, collapsing the distinction between mental and bodily experience.

This conflict suggests that unconscious processes have direct physical reality, and we can think of the body as a text to interpret rather than an object to observe. Freud (1905/2017) further argued that emotions like shame, disgust, and guilt around sexuality do not simply result from

social stigma and prohibitions. Instead, they emerge from internal psychic conflicts inherent to sexual subjectivity, implying that even a subject raised in a society without sexual prohibitions and norms could experience negative feelings associated with sexual desire because these feelings arise from the structural contradictions of the psyche, such as the struggle to integrate contradictory sexual desires or to translate desires into language. One radical implication is that clear, direct, or rational speech is not an ideal medium for communicating sexual desire or identifying sexual trauma. Another radical implication is that no amount of understanding, leading to, for example, more progressive education, open speech, legal intervention, or cultural acceptance, would eliminate sexual conflict and suffering.

Freud (1905/2017) controversially suggested that unconscious sexual fantasies can be traumatizing, irrespective of their correspondence to empirically observable events. For example, he claimed that a child's unconscious fantasy of seducing or being seduced by a parent can itself be traumatizing, sometimes leading to physical symptoms in the body. While this insight was a crucial theoretical breakthrough for Freud, it feeds into disturbing patterns associated with the widespread denial of (childhood) sexual abuse. Suppose we are to take seriously the power of fantasy to shape psychic reality. In that case, we must also insist on recognizing the prevalence of (childhood) sexual violation and its devastating consequences, along with the *extraordinary* challenge people, especially young people, face in attempting to speak about their experiences, find validation, and hold perpetrators accountable. At the same time, I think grappling with the complexity of sexual violation involves acknowledging the unstable dividing line between material/empirical and psychical realms of sexuality. Attending to the connection between the empirical and the psychical is important because sexual abuse often involves a dimension of psychological abuse that cannot be easily observed or represented, and abusers often rely on

widespread societal (or clinical) ignorance about the link between the mind and the body to abuse, manipulate, and shame victims and silence or invalidate them. (I discuss these points in detail in my chapter on psychological abuse.)

To sum up this discussion, the theory of sexuality articulated in Freud's *Three Essays* (1905/2017) has radical implications that fundamentally challenge psychoanalytic orthodoxy. As Sheila L. Cavanagh (2019) writes, if Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* "teaches us anything, it is that there is nothing normal about sexuality (regardless of object choice, sexual practice, or gender), masculinity, or femininity (or combinations thereof)" (p. 228). She explains that, when we shift our attention, as Freud prompts us to do, from the sexual object to the "the psychic life of the aim," we confront the inherently queer nature of sexuality: "There are, from this perspective, no queer people per se. Sexuality is, in itself, queer by Freudian definition...Nobody grows up straight, let alone normal, from the perspective of unconscious sexuality" (p. 228). Rather than supporting a functional, normalizing, and teleological framework, Freud (1905/2017) rejected the notion of a predetermined trajectory toward "mature" heterosexual object choice, assumptions about masculine and feminine characteristics as fixed essences, and evolutionary schemas that pathologize deviations from procreative behaviors. He presented a primarily unconscious, polymorphous, hysterical, symptomatic, pathological, political, and maladapted theory of sexuality. This framework aligns with his admission at the conclusion of the *Three Essays* that he feels no closer to identifying the essence of sexuality than when he began his study.

In *Encore* (1975/1998), Lacan develops a theory of sexuality that echoes these early Freudian ideas, crystallizing his insights into two well-known formulations: "Woman does not exist" and "the sexual relation does not exist." For the purposes of this essay, the former can be

read as a claim that the unified core self presupposed by the consenting subject does not exist. The speaking subject who “gives consent” is divided and never fully present to herself. The latter can be understood as the assertion that there is no natural, normal, or default mode of human sexuality—for example, one grounded in authenticity, recognition, connection, or mutual understanding. These two claims converge in their insistence that two cannot become one: Woman does not exist because the subject is split and does not coincide with herself, and the sexual relation does not exist because two subjects cannot form a whole, given that each is internally divided and structurally divided from the other. When I refer in this essay to the sexual impasse, I am referring to these constitutive non-relations. In the following chapter, I build on and apply this Lacanian–Freudian approach to sexual subjectivity and truth in order to demonstrate the limits of consent culture.

Chapter Two: The Consenting Subject and the Eximate Self

I begin this chapter by using Lacan's theory of extimacy to extend the early Freudian symptomatic account of sexual truth described in chapter one. I then contrast this Freudian-Lacanian perspective with the conception of sexual truth offered by consent culture, highlighting the radically different assumptions about desire, enjoyment, power, and agency that inform each framework. I conclude by arguing that a psychoanalytic intervention into consent culture is necessary in order to prevent unnecessary repression, shame, and exclusion.

In Lacanian psychoanalysis, extimacy refers to a theory of the subject as structurally decentered. Traditional psychological approaches like ego psychology imagine the subject geometrically, as possessing an inside (mind, ego, intentions) and an outside (the other, symbolic structures, external influences). Lacan turns instead to a topological model that emphasizes the constitutive significance of relations, limits, and gaps. This shift allows him to theorize the subject as constituted by a cut introduced by language. In other words, entry into the symbolic order produces a permanent division, generating an "inside" that is always already "outside." From this view, the unconscious, desire, and *jouissance* cannot be located in a psychic interior but circulate along a cut. The subject is thus organized around a void rather than a center. In the domain of sexuality, extimacy illuminates why what feels most personal and intimate, such as sexual desire and enjoyment, may be experienced as intrusive or alien. Extimacy is central to my critique of consent culture because it reframes subjectivity as structurally divided rather than unified or self-possessed, calling into question ethical models that presume transparency, intentionality, or mastery over knowledge and desire. In this chapter, I develop this concept of extimacy through Lacan's critique of spherical metaphysics.

To begin, we can turn to Alenka Zupančič's aptly titled book *What is Sex?* (2017), where she drew ontological conclusions from Freudian and Lacanian theories of sexual subjectivity. Zupančič argues that life itself is a form of perversion, one that involves humans and animals but finds its fullest expression in humans, what Lacan referred to as speaking beings, where the cut of the signifier gives rise to a form of lack that generates something radically new. What is important for our discussion is to recognize that from this perspective "culture is not something that mediates, splits, denatures natural sexuality (as supposedly present in animals, for instance); it is being generated at the very locus where something in nature (as sexual nature) is lacking" (Zupančič, 2017, p. 15). The best way to understand human sexuality, then, is not as a biological program culture corrupts or liberates. Instead, we should start from the recognition that culture emerges in response to a lack in nature, producing symbolic structures that inevitably fail to correct it. Drawing on this orientation, I complicate the guiding principles of consent culture by reframing sex as a question rather than an answer, directing attention toward sexuality in terms of dissonance and enigma. We can start by engaging Lacan's work on the history of scientific ideas.

Freud described his invention of psychoanalysis as the third Copernican revolution in the progressive decentering of man. Copernicus displaced Earth from the center of the universe, Darwin displaced man from the center of creation, and Freud displaced consciousness from the center of the self, claiming that "the ego is not master in its own house" (Freud, 1917, p. 285). Lacan modified this story of progressive decentering by pointing out that Copernican heliocentrism only repositioned the Earth and the Sun without disrupting the spherical logic of circular movement and the notion of center and periphery. According to Lacan (1973/1998) the true paradigm shift occurred when Kepler demonstrated that planetary orbits are ellipses, with

the Sun at one of the two foci, implying a cosmic split. This discovery paved the way for Newton's theory of universal gravitation, which further disrupted spherical metaphysics. Whereas we once believed celestial bodies "turn," we now understand they "fall" perpetually toward each other in gravitational pull, lacking any discernible center (Fink, 2002, p. 29).

Lacan (1975/1998) traced the idealization of the sphere to Aristotelian philosophy, where the cosmos was conceptualized as one great circle encompassing all existence. For the ancient Greeks, the sphere represented geometric perfection because every point is equidistant from the center, making it symmetrical in all directions. Unlike other shapes with edges, corners, or other "imperfections," the sphere has no beginning or end. This geometrical elegance informed ideas about divinity, the universe, and infinity, influencing ancient astronomy for centuries. Lacan linked this fantasy of spherical perfection to the fantasy of the sexual relation, exemplified in Plato's *Symposium* (circa 370 BCE) through Aristophanes' myth of spherical beings who were cut in two and divided into male and female. In this story, each divided part spends its life seeking reunion through fusion with its other half. Sexual love promises to restore primordial unity to the subject by healing the original split.

Lacan (1975/1998) suggested that it is our continued commitment to these fantasies of unification and the logic of center and periphery that have prevented us from embracing the more radical implications of the modern scientific revolution. Rather, we keep slipping back into old Aristotelian ways of thinking (Fink, 2002). Lacan recognized this persistent centering in ego psychology, where the unconscious is repeatedly neutralized by appeals to the ego and the sexual relation. As the central organizing principle of the psyche, the ego is imagined as mediating between different mental states and integrating and adapting to external reality. Just as a sphere

is complete and self-contained, the goal of ego psychology is “to be myself, to be master of myself, to belong to myself” (Lacan, 1973/2007, p. 178).

According to Lacan (1975/1998), faith in the autonomous ego fosters the illusion of the sexual relation. These beliefs are connected through the logic of wholeness and completion. If we can imagine a unified, self-contained subject who has achieved mastery over his internal conflicts, we can then imagine two autonomous subjects uniting to form an even greater unity based on mutual recognition. Ego psychology presents sexuality in a way that echoes Aristophanes’ myth of spherical sexual love. In psychoanalytic terms, the child matures from polymorphous perversity to mature object love based on the genital drive in a circular trajectory, suggesting a return to an original unity. For Lacan, this pre-scientific perspective reduces sexual love to an imaginary ego function, structured according to the phallic “One” of being.

To work against this regression to pre-scientific spherical thinking, Lacan (1966/2006) pursued a psychoanalytic technique he called “subversion of the subject” (p. 1). He argued that the goal of analysis is not restoring unity but achieving “subjective destitution” by helping the analysand detach from rigid fantasy structures (Lacan, 1966/2006, p. 671). This process begins with free association. As Chloë Brushwood Rose (2009) observes, in an article on the value of digital multimedia storytelling, free association requires faith in the generative power of language and “reveals the trouble with language and indeed all attempts to represent or narrate experience” (p. 217). Free association, she writes, indicates how “our attempts to narrate experience are simultaneously the path to self-knowledge and a resistance to it—and it is precisely this conflict that makes free association useful as a therapeutic technique” (Brushwood Rose, p. 217). For Colette Soler (2015), free association is a useful therapeutic technique because it disrupts the fantasy of a subjective center:

The revelations that are produced by free association are never conclusive, lacking any term that could serve as a last word. In Freudian terms, repression is only partially lifted because primal repression remains. We decipher bits of the unconscious, of course, but deciphering does not have any particular endpoint either. We learn to grasp the meaning of our symptoms – of our fantasy, let us say – but meaning is elusive, and does not put a stop to the deciphering process. In the end, there is some knowledge that is acquired, one knows “a bit” about it, but only a bit. There is no absolute knowledge. (p. 123)

The goal in the Lacanian clinic is to “traverse the fundamental fantasy” to develop a viable relation to the Real (Lacan, 1973/1998 p. 273). This may involve Other jouissance, the *sinthome*, embracing the enigma of the other’s desire, and accepting that there is no Other of the Other. Soler (2015) wrote that successful analysis involves consenting to structural negatives: “[W]hat is at stake is to accept to have or be deprived of the phallus, to consent to the gift of one’s castration, to destitution related to the object, to impossibilities, and finally to the symptom *qua* real that lies outside of meaning” (p. 129). At the end of analysis, the analysand becomes a subject who knows the impossible in its various forms and consequently what constitutes a dead end (Soler, 2015). In Soler’s (2015) words,

We can see the pathway that is traced out here for the analysand: without knowing it, the subject initially suffered from the unconscious as knowledge, and he hoped to eliminate it; by the end, he has sized it up and knows that it cannot be eliminated; this is the unexpected revelation that is provided by an analysis – in the course of which one always finds partial therapeutic effects – and that satisfies. But in what respect? (p. 130)

We could say that the satisfaction comes from uncovering one’s singular way of being in the world without existential or epistemic guarantees. Being deprived of such guarantees may prove

satisfying insofar as they relieve the subject from being tethered to painful fantasy structures based on false promises. Instead of relocating centers of knowledge and authority, Lacanian intervention introduces a fundamental break within spherical logic itself, an ontological dualism that structurally resists reconciliation in the clinic and at the level of knowledge itself.

Decentering the Consenting Subject

In the following pages of this chapter, I critique texts that promote consent-based models, including self-help books, teaching guides, academic publications, and manifestos for transformative justice. I argue that consent culture relies on a center-periphery logic that reproduces the spherical assumptions of ego psychology, creating a path for self-knowledge that proceeds only away from the unconscious. These critiques aim less to fault individual authors than to identify symptomatic patterns arising from the marginalization of psychoanalysis.

I identify four master signifiers spanning consent culture discourse: truth, health, autonomy, and progress. I use Lacan's theory of extimacy to investigate interrelated themes associated with these master signifiers: the embrace of a scientistic understanding of sexuality as part of a counter-discourse to histories of religious abstinence-only models, the assumption of functionalist relational modes, the erasure of the unconscious through the celebration of the autonomous ego, and a teleological view of sexual and cultural development.

I organize this discussion under the following section headings: Truth/Positivism, Health/Functionalism, Autonomy/Erasure, and Progress/Teleology. I argue that when the concept of consent is elaborated in great detail, these master signifiers and their associative chains merge in ways that produce a vocabulary built on a distorted representation of subjectivity—one that risks creating unnecessary repression and shame. My aim is twofold: to acknowledge the role consent discourse has played in combating the harmful effects of more

pernicious discourses and to propose alternative avenues for pursuing self-knowledge that deviate from the norms of consent culture. In each section, I provide background information on the emergence of the master signifier I critique, demonstrating its value in counteracting the negative effects of patriarchal and heteronormative knowledge structures.

This context allows me to develop a nuanced position on consent, demonstrating how it functions in multiple ways: as a corrective framework, as a tool for regulating sexuality, and as an object of erotic investment that opens space for transgression and jouissance. I also provide historical context to emphasize that my intent is not to invalidate consent culture through a psychoanalytic counter-discourse. I have opted to use Lacan because of his extensive critique of the fantasy of institutional psychoanalytic mastery to avoid implying that psychoanalysis ought to be the new dominant framework for understanding sex and sexuality. Using a Lacanian approach, we can pursue a psychoanalytic critique of consent culture while recognizing that if psychoanalysis were to replace consent discourse as the new master framework, it may call for a more traditional consent-based intervention. With this said, it is important to remember that some frameworks for producing and organizing knowledge are preferable to others. A consent-based pedagogy is significantly better than an abstinence-only one, and a consent culture is clearly superior to rape cultures that silence victims. Here, I am making a case for the value of a consent framework that actively creates openings for psychoanalytic engagement to avoid reinforcing rigid, defensive, and exclusionary fantasy structures.

Truth/Positivism

In patriarchal discourse, the male subject serves as the standard for credible testimony, embodying what Genevieve Lloyd (2002) described as the historically masculinized conception of reason that devalues modes of knowledge associated with femininity. Scientific and religious

discourses have historically constructed women, youth, and victims in binary opposition to masculine ideals of objective rational thought (Alcoff, 2018). Rape cultures make it easy for perpetrators to commit sexual violations and hard for victims to think and speak about their experiences. Rape cultures systematically invalidate forms of knowledge that could expose gender inequality and sexual violation while maintaining the illusion of equality and fairness. In this environment, victims and advocates have had to work very hard to “break the silence” around sexual violation, asserting uncomfortable truths about its severity and prevalence against widespread skepticism, trivialization, or outright denial. Counteracting the silence and invisibility surrounding widespread sexual violation required developing new interpretive resources to make experiences of gender inequality and sexual harm legible and meaningful (Alcoff, 2018). Making sexual consent matter in terms of a recognizable truth led to the expansion of legal vocabulary that resulted in the enactment of laws and policies—such as marital rape laws, rape shield laws, and workplace anti-harassment policies—that serve essential functions in protecting vulnerable people from harm and challenging the normalization of male dominance.

Consent culture’s often necessary emphasis on truth evolved from its opposition to patriarchal structures of knowledge that made discussion and debate about sexual injustice difficult. For example, consent-based education emerged partly as a response to abstinence-only programs that have dominated U.S. sexual education for decades. Abstinence-only programs, rooted in a Judeo-Christian framework supporting sex only after marriage, promoted racist, sexist, and heterosexist ideas about purity while depriving young people of essential knowledge. Where abstinence-only education relies on biblical interpretation and religious authority, consent-based education commits to individual decision-making, empirical research, and other

egalitarian liberal ideals like free expression and inclusion. *In this context*, consent education helpfully conveys that sex is “normal” and “healthy,” using empirical research to dispel myths associated with reactionary attitudes. However, the way consent culture approaches the question of truth presents new complications worth exploring.

In 2018, when Bill Cosby’s jury asked the judge to define consent, he responded, “That’s a question that cannot be answered.” He then told the jurors to use their common sense (Short, 2019, p. vii). This judicial deflection reveals a telling problem: by invoking “common sense,” the judge treats consent as self-evident while suggesting that he does not really know what it is. Recognizing the impossibility of defining such an intimate concept with such universal scope, he defers to popular understanding to avoid interpretive responsibility. This evasion reflects a broader problem regarding the relation between consent culture and the notion of truth.

Seeking to establish a definitive understanding of consent in *Your Consent: The Key to Conquering Sexual Assault*, Short (2019) offers a precise definition by invoking the authority of the Nuremberg Code:

The person involved should have legal capacity to give consent; should be so situated as to be able to exercise free power of choice without the intervention of any element of force, fraud, deceit, duress, over-reaching, or other ulterior form of constraint or coercion; and should have sufficient knowledge (of the subject matter involved) as to enable him (or her) to make an understanding, and enlightened decision. (p. 21)

This emphasis on free thought, informed knowledge, and narrative completion is characteristic of consent culture advocacy, where the primary goal of consent pedagogy is to promote widespread sexual literacy and comprehensive education through universally applicable principles.

Toward this end, consent culture often emphasizes the power of science to deliver unbiased facts about sex. This promise of science is juxtaposed with religion, myth, ideology, and sometimes even culture itself, establishing a false dichotomy where knowledge is either scientific—and therefore rational and legitimate—or outside the realm of science and therefore illegitimate, unnecessary, deceptive, or otherwise unworthy of discussion. In the spherical terms outlined in chapter two, observable reality remains centered while the unknown is relegated to the periphery. In psychoanalytic terms, one might describe this as centering manifest content at the expense of latent content (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1974).

When the protocols of consent teach us to ignore knowledge that does not fit neatly into scientific methodology (such as knowledge associated with the unspeakable and the unconscious), what is obscured is the link between knowledge and *jouissance*, the dialectical relation between meaning and lack, and the lack inherent to the structure of social subjectivity. According to Lacanian psychoanalyst Colette Soler (2006), we are eager to fill lack with incarnations of God, which can manifest in the word of the master—like the father, leader, priest, or sovereign subject—revealing the religious nature of speech, even in secular discourses of scientific modernity. If in a religious, abstinence-only discursive environment, silence was the rule, in consent culture, speech takes its place. To prevent what Soler (2006) refers to as the development of new incarnations of God, it is important to interrogate this speech, rather than take it at face value. For inspiration, we can look to critical and creative approaches to narrative pedagogy.

In “Unexpected Self-Expression and the Limits of Narrative Inquiry: Exploring Unconscious Dynamics in a Community-Based Digital Storytelling Workshop,” Chloë Brushwood Rose and Colette A. Granger (2013) offer approaches to self-reflection and self-

expression that make space for interrogating the contradictions of split subjectivity on the side of both “teacher “and “student.” They argue that multimedia technologies are apt resources for attending to unconscious dimensions of self narration because these stories often express meanings that exceed the author’s conscious intentions, revealing something other than what was intended.

Brushwood Rose and Granger (2013) observe that “from an early age, children are instructed in the art of telling tidy and coherent narratives. We are admonished to ‘get our stories straight’, and we learn early on that changing a story is the sure sign of a lie, an untrue story, a false self” (p. 216). Drawing on Deborah Britzman's (2003) work on psychoanalytically-informed pedagogy and Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981) theory of “heteroglossia,” they argue that the traditional pedagogical approach to self narration is fundamentally misguided. How we define and describe ourselves, they recognize, depends on ever-changing relationships between our conscious and unconscious investments, the words we use, the practices we enact, and the communities in which we speak.

Referring to their own experiences creating and facilitating digital multimedia narratives, Brushwood Rose and Granger (2013) observe that narration typically involves multiple, shifting, contradictory, and “strange” stories (p. 217). Instead of encouraging and celebrating coherent narrative accounts, the authors attend to what seems to be offered “in excess” of stated objectives. They write that “the ambivalences of the contradictory story, the shifting story and the strange story undermine the belief in a coherent autobiographical narrative and suggest an important tension, at the heart of all narration, between self-expression and self-knowledge.” They then pose a crucial question: “Is it possible to tell a story we do not already know?” (p.

217). Drawing on the problems of hegemony and the complications of the unconscious, they suggest that our stories of ourselves are always incomplete and in formation.

In “The (Im)possibilities of Self Representation: Exploring the Limits of Storytelling in the Digital Stories of Women and Girls,” Brushwood Rose (2009), referring to the work of D.W Winnicott wrote:

It is precisely the undermining of narrative coherence, both intentional and accidental, that while troubling our desires for an authentic, true or complete story offers us a method for working through these complex experiences of ambivalence, power and loss, and for negotiating the relation between the self and the world.” (p. 212)

This passage suggests that when our stories fall apart, contradict themselves, or resist coherence, we gain access to dissociated aspects of ourselves and new opportunities for awareness and experience arise. Brushwood Rose’s approach avoids reinforcing normative scripts about “true” speech typically framed in terms of coherence and consistency. We can contrast this psychoanalytically-informed multimedia approach to prevailing methods in consent-based pedagogy.

In “Contesting Consent in Sex Education,” Jen Gilbert (2018) addresses the problems inherent in demanding coherent autobiographical narratives specifically within sex education, arguing that “the concept of consent brings with it, into education, a procedural logic that misrecognizes sexuality as a transparent, communicative, and rational experience and mistakes compliance for learning” (p. 1). We see this in books promoting consent culture pedagogy, where consent is often described as straightforward and obvious in common-sense liberal/legal/scientific terms, followed by elaborate discussions of sexual desire and subjectivity in the same tone. Crucially, where abstinence-only education taught young people only to say no

to sex, consent education offers them the option to say yes. Yet this very necessary possibility of a yes invites extended discussions of bodies, subjectivities, and desires (framed in terms of Truth) that may replicate some of the oppressive aspects of religious and patriarchal fantasy by providing ready-made interpretive pathways for understanding. This problem emerges, in part, due to a certain faith in *established* scientific knowledge and the rise of experts as new figures of the subject-supposed-to-know about sex.

Bronwen Low, Chloë Brushwood Rose, and Paula M. Salvio (2016) argue that despite widespread critique of Freire's (1970) "banking model" of education, many schools continue to present knowledge as fixed, neutral facts rather than constructed meaning, maintaining a dynamic in which teachers speak and students listen. They argue that "the listening imperative" is one of the ways the teacher is established as the subject supposed to know. They point out that like Freire, Lacan challenged traditional modes of teaching, rejecting the masterful status of the teacher, ultimately arguing that "the ideal of the teacher as all-knowing, while seductive, is based on an illusion" (2016, p. vii). In consent culture, students are typically called upon to participate in consent-based activities, but in a way that reinforces their subordinate status as thinkers and knowers.

In consent culture pedagogy, educators and parents, equipped with theories and facts, are often assumed to possess an objective understanding of sex, whereas children and students, deprived of this information, are directed to receive and internalize it. For example, books for young people on consent culture often contain true/false questionnaires, myth/fact quizzes, and self-reflection prompts composed of leading questions followed by sections implying what the right and wrong answers are. While using language of neutrality and freedom, these formats subtly discourage inquiry and critical thinking by encouraging agreement over questioning.

The assumption is that there is a correct interpretive path and that educators must direct young people toward it, with an emphasis on speaking openly and directly about gender and sex. For example, in a book about how to teach sex and consent to young boys, Wegner (2021) claimed that when children ask questions such as: “What is rape? What is a pimp?” and “Why do people sell their bodies for sex?” Parents should “stay calm, answer simply, concretely and unemotionally” (p. 98). The assumption is that adults have answers to these questions and that adult knowledge is superior to whatever young people might conjure up in their imagination. However, there remains intense disagreement about how to answer these questions or even what these words mean. This is not surprising, due to what Lacan emphasized as the ineradicable connection between knowledge and *jouissance*. While recognition of this connection occasionally surfaces in consent culture, it is quickly deflected through discussions about power dynamics and appeals to autonomy and rationality. In *The Big Book of Sex and Consent*, for example, Freitas (2020) argued that

The biggest mistake I think our culture and society and religions have made over the century with respect to sex is this: trying to offer, really *to enforce*, a single vision of what it means to be a sexual being. As in one framework, one unique method or path for being sexual, for expressing sexuality, even for how and why to have sex. The One-Size-Fits-All model for sexuality. (p. 141)

In her description and defense of consent culture, she incorporated discussions of social construction, gender policing, feminist intersectionality, and inclusive language associated with LGBTQI+ identities, marking a significant advance from apolitical abstinence-only and biologically essentialist rhetoric. However, her analysis of power remained fixated on external factors. When critiquing cultural constraints, Freitas (2020) told readers they have “an internal

voice (a compass built right in!)” and urged readers to “listen to that voice, to trust it,” asserting that “so much of what we need to be healthy people around the issues of sex and consent we already have within us. We possess it” (p. 153). In examining the harms of performance culture, she argued that consent should ground and shape our relational and sexual ethics. She emphasized that since consent requires knowledge and understanding of our partners, it is incompatible with pornography and casual sex. This claim created a fundamental tension: while rejecting prescriptive sexuality in the name of consent, she simultaneously prescribed specific sexual attitudes and practices as properly aligned with it.

Within consent culture, there emerges an incitement to speak one’s unique truth—the deep truth of desire—through the discourse of consent. Freitas (2020) wrote, “When we have healthy confidence, we are not alone and silent” (p. 140), and “The examined sex life is the healthiest kind of sex life” (p. 138). In *Consent: The New Rules of Sex Education*, Lang (2018) articulated the idea this way

In truth, the sexiest person is someone who is comfortable in their own skin, genuinely knows what they want, and is not afraid to ask for what feels good. The best way to relax and enjoy a sexual encounter is to own your unique beauty and to trust that the right partner will appreciate and desire you for yourself” (p. 14).

This emphasis on knowledge, understanding, authenticity, and comfort is often represented as essential for ethical engagement and personal safety. Opening her “Consent, Capacity, and Communication,” Lang (2018) wrote that, “When it’s good, sex can be wonderful and pleasurable, and it can increase your sense of joy and connection with others. When sex is bad though, it can be really bad. Bad sexual experiences can have serious fallout, leading to trauma or even lifelong problems” (p. 39). She wrote that “there’s only one thing that’s a must-have in

every single sexual scenario, and that's consent... Consent begins with recognizing your own desires and communicating them to your partner to see if they feel the same" (p. 40). The underlying assumption is that sexuality coincides with subjective truth and that culture/ideology obstructs this natural alignment, and disunity is something to overcome. In Freudian terms, we could say that this construct overvalues aspects of the libido associated with the drive for mastery, what Freud identified as part of the sadistic component of the sexual drive (Van Haute & Westerink, 2020).

In secular liberal contexts, the ideological dimension of abstinence-only education is relatively visible—one need only challenge the notion of God using relatively accessible cultural resources to see this illusion of mastery and perfection. Consent culture operates through different mechanisms, encouraging subjects to internalize messages delivered in neutral, common-sense ethical language as their own. This internalization makes the ideological dimensions of it harder to discern and resist, especially given the prominence of phallic fantasies about the “One” of science in our culture, along with the marginalization of psychoanalytic thought.

By embracing truth through this new science of sex—the fusion of the logic of consent with the logic of sex itself—we risk narrowing our attention to one dimension of sexual reality while representing it as a complete picture. This conceptual over-correction threatens to create a self-replicating framework that validates itself through reference to what is already known, binding us to the surface of the visible and the already formed. Thus, it invites us only to talk about, think about, and describe things as we already know them.

Lacan (1978/1991) warned, “All sorts of things in this world behave like mirrors” (p. 49). The ego, formed through misrecognition in the mirror stage, continues seeking confirmation of

its imagined wholeness by projecting this fantasy of coherence and harmony onto the world. We unconsciously use objects, relationships, and ideas as reflective surfaces that seem to validate our completeness, particularly when we assume our ideas correspond perfectly with “external” reality. This is why Lacan remained skeptical of philosophical systems that promised complete understanding or direct correspondence.

For Lacan, genuine science begins by confronting the limits of knowledge, making curiosity about the unknown essential. Indeed, most groundbreaking scientific discoveries emerge from ideas that challenge common-sense assumptions and initially seem to contradict obvious, established truths. An approach to knowledge formation that fails to make space for the unknown risks thwarting scientific progress, creating a closed loop where we only discover what we expect to find. What we need to remember is that, in the words of Lacanian psychoanalyst Colette Soler (2015),

We love the truth because it is promising, it keeps us on the edge of our seats, and grants us small discoveries. But the truth is also the ‘sister of impotence’; it is never whole, never more than half-spoken. And in fact, one can tell some *truths*, but disappointment is in the offing in the absence of *the* truth that would like to be whole, but which is merely a mirage that is never attained. Worse still, the truth lies. (p. 138)

In other words, we suffer when we invest too much in myths of harmony and completion and truth, which is a form of optimism that informs and disappoints our search for knowledge.

Health/Functionalism

During the mid-twentieth century, the functionalist movement emerged as a prominent sociological school in the United States. Talcott Parsons (1951/2012) and Robert K. Merton (1968) attempted to synthesize sociological and psychoanalytic theories into a grand

functionalist structure to conceptualize social institutions as interconnected organs that ensured the proper functioning of the social body. It was assumed that gender difference ensured an efficient division of labor: Men logically take on instrumental roles as breadwinners and leaders, while women adopt expressive roles as nurturers and emotional caregivers. This arrangement was presented as a rational response to societal needs, creating a balanced and mutually beneficial social order. In Lacanian terms, we could say this theory was based on the fantasy of the sexual relation characterized by male and female differences as functional prerequisites for optimal social organization.

Second-wave feminists challenged this narrative by demonstrating that what functionalists presented as harmonious arrangements were actually contingent modes of organizing gender relations that systematically disadvantaged women. They emphasized that, whereas emotional intelligence and caregiving may be publicly praised, they were devalued through unpaid or underpaid labor and ultimately rendered socially insignificant compared to men's public achievements. Most ironically, patriarchal structures that positioned men as natural leaders depended on women's invisible labor. Men's supposed autonomy in the public sphere required women's dedication to maintaining their domestic and emotional well-being.

The second wave feminist challenge to functionalist myths of gender harmony was connected to widespread social changes, including the establishment of equal pay legislation, property rights reform, reproductive rights, and family leave policies. Challenging romanticized narratives about harmonious family relations also led to the recognition of domestic violence and childhood sexual abuse as widespread problems, leading to the development of new laws and institutions to protect women and children from abuse. Due to these significant shifts, the functionalist movement lost its prominent place in American sociology; however, it continues to

impact American thought, with its emphasis on stability and order especially influencing conservative arguments about “proper” family structures and “normal” gender roles. While consent culture rejects patriarchal functionalism in favor of a more egalitarian approach emphasizing mutual recognition, reciprocal support, and shared decision-making without explicit reference to gender, it nevertheless adopts its own problematic functionalist logic.

We can see the functionalist logic in the etymology of the term consent. Consent derives from the Latin verb *consentire*, which means to unite in a sensation or feeling, to be in agreement or harmony. Regarding the embrace of consent culture pedagogy, there is a complication related to this definition, well articulated by Emily Setty in “Sex and Consent in Contemporary Youth Sexual Culture”: “despite consent becoming central to sex and relationship education, there remains no consensus on how to define consent nor the connection between consent and sexual harm” (2021, p. 1). Despite this lack of consensus, consent is used as the central organizing principle in contemporary relationships and sexuality education (RSE), which has replaced abstinence-only models in many schools (Setty, 2021).

The new functionalism associated with consent culture centers on transparent communication and mutual understanding between sexual partners, presupposing individuals with stable self-knowledge about their desires and boundaries who can articulate them clearly to reach mutually satisfying agreements. Drawing on ideas from utilitarianism, positive psychology, attachment theory, and evolutionary biology, this framework emphasizes the physical and psychological benefits of sex, particularly its capacity to foster strong, intimate bonds. Healthy, happy sex appears as the reward of mutual, knowable relations. There is an emphasis on the value of connection, cooperation, communication, compatibility, reciprocity,

and recognition, which is assumed to lead to self-confidence, psychic unity, and secure attachment.

This emphasis on harmonious relations implies a hierarchy of relational forms. For example, in her book advocating consent culture, Freitas (2020) argued that hookup culture is the opposite of consent culture. She argued that hookup culture is “a kind of pretend,” because “the scripts and roles for sexual intimacy and attitudes for one’s partners that hookup culture sets are the kind that discourage care, vulnerability, connection, and communication—and because of this, consent” (pp. 207–209). In *Sex Education for Teenagers*, Rhodes (2023) described what is often considered the essential link between self-awareness, direct communication, and mutual gratification, writing that consent is “the golden rule in relationships ... a game that everyone wins when all the rules are followed” (p. 89). A related idea prevalent in consent culture is that people in secure and healthy relationships are naturally wiser and less likely to be influenced by cultural ideology. As one group of authors promoting consent culture put it, “People who have fulfilling relationships are harder to manipulate into ‘filling the void’ by buying things, joining hate groups, and so on” (Taub et al., 2019, p. 32). What is obscured in these representations is how consent can serve as a mode of filling in a void associated with the sexual impasse.

In consent culture, the ideal of harmonious sexual relations often serve as a prerequisite to a functional society. In *The Consent Primer* (Surmick et al., 2019), a group of therapists and advocates for consent culture conveyed the message in this way: “Consensual interaction between people creates safety. Safety creates connection. Connection creates authentic interaction and trust. Authenticity creates more opportunity for consent. It’s a positive feedback loop that leads to a better world for everyone” (p. 12). This sentiment reflects a common trend in consent culture where self-awareness, intuition, trust, shared values, common language,

compatibility, agreement, and social harmony are fundamentally linked. Authors often discuss the ripple effects of consent: how it starts within the self, moves to the interpersonal level, and then extends to the social and political sphere.

To explore the complications with this approach in more detail, we can look at *The Wheel of Consent*, where Betty Martin and Dalzen (2021), a consent educator, advocated for the importance of consent culture through a discussion of the mechanics of consent. Martin provides information and techniques related to pursuing gratifying sexual experiences and avoiding harm. For example, she provides extensive advice on how to access moment-to-moment mind-body awareness in sexual encounters, a timely intervention given how disconnected we have become from our bodily experiences due to technological overstimulation. Her consent model is especially useful in situations involving transactional sex. However, Martin emphasized a centralizing logic that makes it difficult to think about (sexual) subjectivity and relationality outside of a consent framework.

Martin and Dalzen (2021) argued that the key to good sex is authentic self-understanding, clear self-expression, and recognition of the other's desire. She developed a wheel of consent with four quadrants—giving (doing something for someone else), receiving (allowing someone to do something for you), taking (doing something for yourself), and allowing (letting someone do something for herself). The circle represents consent and connection. She invited readers to use the wheel to conceptualize what falls inside and outside of consent. Using the metaphor of “a big box of complex gears” for sexual being, she wrote, “If sex is less than easy, you might think the whole machine is broken. It's not—it's this little, tiny gear that is rusty. It just happens to be the gear right in the middle, so it affects everything.” She claimed that “in order to get anything happening, you have to make complicated adjustments and work arounds [to the central gear].

One could specialize in those work arounds, many people do” (p. 52). She recommended the wheel of consent as the tool to fix this central gear.

Martin and Dalzen (2021) discussed sex as a form of nourishment and joy. They wrote, “Like all animals we are built for pleasure. Pleasure is a biological guide for what is good for us: fresh air, clean water, food, rest, movement, touch, play” (p. 41). Yet in a telling passage, she acknowledged, “It would seem odd that such creatures would have to remind ourselves that it is okay to experience [pleasure] and would have to, as adults, learn it again. But so it is, and here we are” (p. 41). *The Wheel of Consent* (2021) describes a lot about the pragmatic benefits of a consent model; however, if we accept the broad theoretical claims implied by these benefits, we are led to adopt a functionalist view where sex appears as an evolutionary survival instinct based on a default drive toward pleasure and connection. Sex is represented as a form of sustenance like clean air and rest. From a Freudian-Lacanian viewpoint, this representation obscures crucial dimensions of the sexual: the unruly nature of sexual aims, the disorganized nature of constitutive polymorphous perversity, and split subjectivity, which is formed partly through contradictions between life and death drives.

The problem with the depiction of sexuality according to the wheel of consent is that the anxiety and contradiction associated with the hysterical nature of the sexual unconscious can only be viewed as a malfunction, a rusty gear that understanding and actualizing consent can repair. By treating sexuality as a functional, rational process rather than acknowledging its unconscious, symptomatic, and disorganizing aspects, sex is presented as a question with an answer and a problem with a solution. This is misleading from a Lacanian perspective because it is the absence of the object of desire that drives psychic activity and creates opportunities for jouissance.

In *Raising Feminist Boys: How to Talk with Your Child about Gender, Consent, and Empathy*, clinical psychologist and Harvard Graduate School of Education professor Bobbi Wegner (2021) offered guidance to parents who want to raise boys with progressive feminist attitudes about sex and consent. She provides useful advice, encouraging parents to adopt an open-minded, non-judgmental, and curious tone about sex that fosters acceptance, reflection, and compassion. However, she recommends numerous exercises based on restrictive consent logics designed to help boys tune into their inner experience, including self-reflection, mindfulness, and journaling activities. I will provide two examples.

In the first example, Wegner (2021) describes a boy who is mean to a girl at his school. This girl has darker skin than the boy and is not following the teacher's rules. The author assumes the boy is mean to her because she is different, and he does not yet understand the principles of feminist intersectionality. In this case, the author encourages the parents to advise the boy to reflect on his attitudes related to feelings of entitlement and power, assuming he will discover his own emerging racist motivations, imposed on him from toxic cultural influences.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, however, there are many possible explanations for this behavior. To give only one example, we could consider the possibility of reaction formation—a defense mechanism involving expressing the opposite of what one unconsciously feels. The mean behavior might be an expression of interest, such as feeling attracted to the child's dark skin or fascinated by her rebellious behavior while experiencing anxiety about this attraction. Instead of interpreting the outward behavior, a Lacanian perspective might shift attention to the connection between aggression and libido, suggesting that the behavior could be both satisfying and frustrating, enabling the boy to interact with this girl of interest through the

intimacy of provocation and conflict without satisfying his desire for anything that could be recognized as a genuine connection.

The second example involves a boy who participates in locker room talk about sexual activity with a girl. Wegner (2021) interprets this behavior in terms of sexism and toxic masculinity, helpfully expanding our understanding of consent by implying that even if a girl consents to sexual activity, she may not consent to information about it being shared, especially in the tone often associated with locker rooms, where girls may be represented in objectifying terms. However, thinking psychoanalytically, we might not take the words at face value and focus instead on other aspects of this event, such as the fact that this exchange is taking place in a space without girls, where boys are naked together. We might wonder whether having explicit conversations about sex in this context feels enticing but threatening, perhaps more secure when couched in terms of heterosexual desire. In light of Freud's (1905/2017) claim that subjects are inherently bisexual, occupying multiple sexual positions, and needing to find creative ways to navigate these contradictions, we might be inclined to think more about the sexual aim, the counterintuitive ways of feeling sexually gratified, and so forth. This perspective allows us to consider, for example, that locker room talk might be a way for boys to experience male sexual intimacy in a society where boys are expected to name and own their sexual position, usually as gay or straight.

My point is not that these psychoanalytic explanations are correct, but that they offer possible paths for interpretation and insight, and that by centering a consent model, these kinds of investigations into one's desires and motivations are closed off. In effect, the self-reflection prompts offered to respond to these kinds of events could shut down rather than foster certain forms of self-knowledge, including forms of self-knowledge that could illuminate complex

operations of power. For example, in response to the locker room event, Wegner (2021) provided self-reflection techniques geared toward recognizing psychological patterns based on the logics of consent: the importance of genuine self-understanding and respect for the other. She wrote, “A self-aware boy notices the pull he feels in social groups and questions it. For example, ‘I feel myself wanting to join in the locker room talk. I wonder why? What do I truly need here? What will I achieve by participating or not participating, or speaking up on behalf of the person they are talking about?’” (Wegner, 2021, p. 89).

These are interesting questions; however, the author argued that with practice, these reflective exercises would lead to profound self-awareness. Wegner (2021) wrote, “Over time, boys will start to notice their feelings and thoughts in the moment, almost as if they are watching live theater inside their head. When we get to this point, real change happens because things that were unconscious have moved into the conscious mind” (p. 89). This description of self reflection implies that the unconscious consists merely of pre-conscious material waiting to be discovered through standardized reflection techniques, rather than operating through the elusive operations of displacement, condensation, and repetition in ways that resist direct access.

My point is that the egalitarian functionalist approach, which focuses on cultural influences and power relations, though progressive, may inadvertently create new counterproductive pressures around psychological transparency and communicative competence that could lead to confusion, repression, and shame. The optimistic perception of mutual sexual satisfaction could be considered one example of what Lauren Berlant (2020) called in her book of the same title “cruel optimism,” a diversion from an encounter with lack, or a false promise that functions as consolation for the various forms of alienation we experience through social alienation and oppression, and our fundamental inability to know or possess ourselves or the

other. In consent culture, negative dimensions of sexual experience, such as aversion, antagonism, confusion, and trauma, appear pathological according to binary divisions like constructive/destructive, healthy/unhealthy, authentic/inauthentic, and unifying/fragmenting. By defining sex in terms of consent norms, these binaries obscure the intrapsychic and interpsychic complications inherent in many sexual experiences, as well as the psychoanalytic insight into the uncanny dimensions of sexual desire.

In Lacan's view, communication always involves fundamental misunderstanding because each subject brings their own unconscious associations to every exchange. The goal of making interactions mutually agreeable denies the ways that (sexual) desire often involves transgression, conflict, and encounters with otherness that cannot be rationalized or integrated. The Real of sexuality—its traumatic, excessive dimensions—gets foreclosed in favor of imaginary harmony. In other words, consent culture forecloses much of what makes sexuality compelling for the self and in relationships: its capacity to disrupt our established ideas and form new modes of relating, by confronting us with what we cannot fully comprehend or control. This insight was captured by the psychoanalyst Colette Soler (2006), when she asserted that Lacan's formulas of sexuation "explain what we [psychoanalysts] observe every day: the reign of the Other's norms stops, it could be said, at the foot of the bed" (p. 177).

To sum up this section, I have argued that consent culture's emphasis on functional awareness and communication as a worldview and a way of life may inadvertently foreclose recognition of sexuality's more troubling and unconscious dimensions. By representing clear communication and mutual understanding as the solution to sexual conflict, consent culture risks creating new forms of exclusion, especially in cases where sexuality seems to serve no function or to be counterproductive to the goals of consent culture—in other words, when it is marked by

ambivalence, contradiction, or traumatic repetition, precisely those aspects of sexuality that psychoanalysis recognizes as universal rather than pathological.

The functionalist tone of consent culture—as influenced by intersectional feminist and queer critiques—often highlights the special considerations associated with marginalized sexual subjects, such as LGBTQIA+ identities, representing these identities as outside the norm. In doing so, it risks juxtaposing the complications of these subject positions and their associated experiences with the seemingly universal and straightforward applications of consent to the default sexual subject. In other words, this framing conveys the idea that while consent culture is generally applicable, it requires modification only for marginalized subjects. While this emphasis on inclusion using the terms of LGBTQIA+ makes consent culture appear contextually sensitive and inclusive of different relationship forms, focusing on object choice while neglecting sexual aim excludes significant dimensions of sexuality itself.

Autonomy/Erasure

Patriarchal structures systematically deny women the right to autonomous subjectivity through what the existentialist feminist philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (1949/2015) identified as making women the “Other” to the “Subject” of man. In Lacanian terms, this othering occurs when the existence of woman emerges as symptom to support the fantasy of the phallic “One” of being. This is to say, historically, women have not been defined on their own terms, but relationally, as that which man is not. This othering process denies women the right to shape their existence actively through free choice and self-determination. While men have been imagined in terms of transcendence, women have been imagined in terms of imminence, confined to the biological functions and domestic duties that position them as objects rather than subjects of their own lives.

Virginia Woolf (1929) described the psychological consequences of women's denial of autonomous subjectivity through her analysis of their systematic exclusion from intellectual life in *A Room of One's Own*. She described how women were deprived of the fundamental prerequisites for independent thought: economic independence and private physical space. Her famous assertion that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" extends beyond literary creation to encompass the essential conditions necessary for the psychic separation that enables the critical and creative thinking required for genuine autonomy (Woolf, 1929, p. 4). Central to Woolf's analysis is her examination of the internalized obstacles that hinder women's intellectual development. In discussing the barriers facing women writers, she introduced the metaphor of the "Angel in the House," a phantom that haunted her own attempts at serious work. This idealized feminine figure embodies the self-sacrificing, masochistic woman that society demands:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily ... [s]he was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all—I need not say it—she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty—her blushes, her great grace ... I did my best to kill her. My excuse, if I were to be had up in a court of law, would be that I acted in self-defense. Had I not killed her, she would have killed me. (Woolf, 1942, p. 2)

The significance of Woolf's analysis lies not only in her identification of this psychological barrier but in her strategic response to it. Through her creative practice as a fiction writer, Woolf achieved sufficient psychic distance to transform this idealized feminine figure from an internal oppressor into an object of critical contemplation. This act of creative separation enabled her to

resist the debilitating force of the Angel, thereby countering the self-negation that patriarchal ideology had imposed upon her.

Marion Iris Young (1980) drew attention to the phenomenological dimensions of this idealized feminine figure by looking at gendered ways of occupying and moving through space. She observed that girls and women are more likely to adopt a concave sitting posture, whereas boys and men are more likely to sprawl outward when they sit. She sees this tendency reflected in the phenomenon known as the “girlie throw,” which falls short because girls do not put their whole body into action when they pitch. They use only the immediate body part associated with the task. Young argued that feminine comportment styles, such as sitting and throwing, are products of socialization rather than morphology. The feminine mode of sitting and throwing connotes a disinclination to take up space. This posturing reflects the social demand that girls and women restrict the movement of their bodies due to the threat of sexual violation, histories of domestic confinement, and patriarchal ideas about (white) female fragility. The emphasis on autonomy in consent culture emerged partly as a corrective to this history.

The recognition that all individuals possess sexual agency represents a radical departure from traditional frameworks that have historically positioned women as passive recipients rather than active agents of their own sexuality. In media representation, we see this shift in portrayals of female sexual pleasure, with women now regularly depicted as asserting themselves and actively pursuing their desires beyond conventional social norms. Affirming women’s capacity for self-determination has also contributed to broader social changes, enabling women to assume leadership roles, establish businesses, direct organizations, and access academic programs.

I want to suggest, however, that consent culture promotes an account of the self that overemphasizes the significance of autonomy in freedom. For example, in *The Big Book of Sex*

and Consent, Freitas (2020) defined consent culture as “anti-performance culture,” arguing that genuine sexual liberation” is what happens when we become fully sexually self-possessed subjects. In *The Consent Primer: Foundations for Everyday Life*, Surmick et al. (2019) defined consent culture as based on a collective understanding and respect for individual autonomy, defining autonomy as “the ability to say what happens with and to your body, mind, and spirit” (p. 59). The authors posited that the practice of consent starts with self-awareness and that fostering autonomy is a means of creating a better world. To develop a framework for consent culture, they provided an in-depth description of three types of autonomy: physical autonomy, mental autonomy, and emotional autonomy. Although they mentioned the unconscious, they granted it almost no significance and represented it as a form of confusion or indecision.

The centering, elaboration, and celebration of autonomy without attention to the unconscious exemplifies a trend in consent literature. Consequently, the logics of consent come to stand in for desire itself. For example, in *Creating Cultures of Consent: A Guide for Parents and Educators*, McGuire (2023) offered progressive, inclusive, and sophisticated advice about sex education to parents but created a zone of exclusion around desires that cannot be reconciled with consent logics. On one hand, she challenged slut-shaming and gender-based assumptions about human nature, urged readers “not to hush imperfect victims, like sex workers, felons, [and] non-conforming folks” (p. 29), critiqued childism, and the banking model of education, and acknowledged the complexities of colonization and epistemic inequality. On the other hand, she argued that “personal autonomy is the marrow of consent; without it, we have no power” (p. 41) without addressing the complications posed by split subjectivity. Consequently, while advocating for an approach to consent that promoted individual expression, McGuire conflated autonomy with authenticity.

This problem appears in McGuire's (2023) discussion of *Twilight*, the vampire romance series that captivated teenage girls through five bestselling books and a successful film franchise. The story follows Bella Swan, a 17-year-old girl who falls in love with Edward, a centuries-old vampire appearing as a teenage boy. Central to the plot is Edward's dual desire: He loves Bella but also wants to drink her blood, which would end her human life and transform her into a vampire. While this would condemn her soul, it would also grant her immortality, allowing her to remain with Edward forever. From a conventional feminist perspective, this plot is problematic. The relationship involves profound power imbalances: immortal versus mortal, superhuman strength versus human fragility, centuries of experience versus teenage innocence. Bella is relatively passive, consumed by her love for Edward, who can be possessive and controlling. She is willing to sacrifice everything—her identity, family, and humanity—for their relationship.

Focusing on these problematic issues, McGuire (2023) critiqued the *Twilight* series as promoting toxic ideology, addressing Bella directly, "If only your parents were discussing consent and healthy boundaries with you instead of turning a blind eye to the clear signs that you are scared and imprisoned in your relationships" (p. 33). The underlying assumption is that girls who understand consent would not develop desires resembling Bella's. However, this interpretation fails to explain why so many young girls found the series particularly compelling, despite having access to more traditional romantic novels. With McGuire (2023), we might attribute *Twilight*'s success to our culture's devaluation of consent. A psychoanalytic perspective, however, allows us to consider the opposite possibility: A culture that prioritizes consent above all else creates an erotic opening for whatever eludes it.

One problem with not recognizing the elusive nature of the sexual aim is that consent discourses risk creating a hierarchy of desires, creating new sexual norms that may not depart so much from old attitudes toward sexual abnormality and deviance. For example, when young girls display counterintuitive sexual desires and interests (such as Bella's desire for Edward in *Twilight*), they may be uncritically diagnosed as forms of confusion, insecurity, or lack of self-respect due to their incompatibility with consent norms. However, when boys display interests that do not align with the logics of consent, it is often characterized as unsurprising evidence of their indiscriminate sexual desire and high sex drive. In analyzing *Twilight* through a consent model, adaptation to consent culture takes precedence over understanding the enigma of Bella's desire, raising questions about how autonomy is conceptualized and pursued in this discourse. The attempt to distinguish between "healthy" autonomous desires and "unhealthy" heteronomous ones reinstates a therapeutic discourse that pathologizes certain forms of enjoyment as symptoms requiring correction. The expectation that young women should desire only what consent-based models deem authentic reproduces longstanding anxieties about the dangers of feminine desires that resist observation, articulation, and explanation.

A different version of this problem emerges in *Respect: Everything a Guy Needs to Know about Sex, Love, and Consent*. In this book, Inti Chavez Perez (2019) provides an accessible resource for helping young men manage sex, relationships, consent, sexual identity, and sexual health. In a section on pornography consumption, however, he framed desire in a way that obscured the significance of ambivalence associated with the unconscious. He claimed that there is no reason to feel shame when watching pornography: "Porn is a fantasy, and in fantasy, anything can happen and everything is allowed. The only thing you need to be able to defend is what you do in real life" (p. 31). He addressed the shame one might feel after watching a gang rape scene

on screen, emphasizing, “what happens on screen isn’t real.” The actors, he wrote “are only pretending to engage in rape” (p. 30). A psychoanalytic perspective invites us to consider how the boundaries between performance, fantasy, and reality can blur and to examine the role of shame in animating sexual desire, pointing to the paradoxical nature of *jouissance*.

This psychoanalytic attitude can be contrasted to the path of reflection encouraged by the author. In the concluding chapter, Perez (2019) wrote, “Sex can make you feel good or bad. If you ever find that sex or your sexuality is making you feel bad, you should sit down and think about what feels wrong.” When sex does not feel right or good, he recommends “having sex in other ways or thinking differently about your sexuality. Find a path that leads you to feel good” (p. 185). He continued, “If you ever feel ashamed of the sex you have or want to have, it is important to understand that although the feeling of shame is inside you, the shame actually comes from the world around you” (p. 186). He concluded, “If you feel ashamed, you should take a stand and admit that you like what you like. You have to be courageous about standing up for the person you are” (p. 187).

This emphasis on conscious self-reflection without psychoanalytic insight risks producing subjects who are simultaneously hyperaware of their performed selves yet increasingly disconnected from unconscious sources of desire, shame, and anxiety. Rather than promoting genuine self-knowledge, this approach risks deepening repression by facilitating a painful self-awareness rooted in the distance between what is recognized as authentic and what lies beneath presumed authenticity. Subjects may develop fluency in consent discourse while dissociating from the unsettling, ambiguous, or socially unacceptable dimensions of their inner lives. One consequence is that internal ambiguity and negativity may be projected onto sexual

others since there exists scant sanctioned space for expressing this negativity and conflict within oneself.

In consent culture, anxiety is often conflated with confusion, and autonomous subjectivity is represented as unmarred by anxiety. Here it is useful to distinguish between ontical anxiety and ontological anxiety. The distinction is explained in detail by Shannon Bell and Aidin Keikhaee (2016) in their analysis of the key role of ontological anxiety in Heideggerian philosophy. They define ontical anxiety as “a mental state, or an emotion, characterized by its empirical features and symptoms” (p. 3). This is the type of anxiety identified and problematized in consent discourse. Referring to Hans W. Cohn, they define ontological anxiety as what “belongs to ‘Being’ as such and does not refer to any specific sensually perceivable phenomenon” (p. 3). I argue that consent culture addresses ontical anxiety but fails to acknowledge and grapple with the significance of ontological anxiety.

Bell and Keikhaee (2016) describe ontological anxiety as not feeling at home in one’s body and in the world, and being able to imagine the destruction of the self. This type of anxiety, they argue, is characteristic of being human, and therefore not a symptom that can be cured. In their engagement with the psychoanalytic concept of anxiety, they turn to Freud’s work on the uncanny, and argue that while Freud’s analysis of anxiety through the concept of the uncanny appears to go beyond the limitations of the ontical approach, it does not go far enough. Specifically, they claim that Freud identifies the source of uncanniness in the unhomely yet unconsciously elusive return of the repressed, thereby approaching the ontological by disrupting the correspondence between thought and object. However, his “methodological commitment to a scientific demand for truth in the form of causal explanation and prediction,” ultimately constrains his analysis within the ontical realm (p. 3).

Lacan's theory of extimacy is an apt resource for analyzing ontological anxiety. In "The One or the Other? Anxiety from Heidegger to Lacan," Richard Boothby (2025) explained that for Lacan, anxiety is triggered by the subject's primary alienation in the Other, or "the fact that the path by which the subject comes to itself necessarily begins outside itself" (p. 92). While the Heideggerian subject can aim at something like authenticity, there is no authentic subject in Lacan, just like there is no normal or pathological subject, as this would imply a misleading sense of unity and ownership, which is associated with the consenting subject. However, Boothby points out that both Heidegger and Lacan reject Sartre's existential voluntarism, and that the Heideggerian concept of "Dasein is in some essential way outside and/or beyond itself." This is why Lacan embraces Heidegger's spelling—ek-sistence— "as it captures precisely the elementally inside-out structure of subjectivity" (p. 93). Boothby argues that "Heidegger's own conceptual architecture seems less well-equipped than that of Lacan in making sense of Heidegger's own fundamental point" that the subject is not at home in himself or the world (p. 93).

In *What is Sex?* Zupančič (2017) develops this idea of the human as fundamentally estranged in her exploration of the link between the failure of meaning associated with ontological anxiety and the sexual impasse. She puts pressure on the basic distinction between norm and deviation by exploring the enigmatic nature of even "normative" (procreative) sexuality. She suggests that the sight of the naked genitals and ideas associated with intercourse and copulation may be experienced as shameful in so many cultures and time periods because it directly relates to the question, "Where do adults come from?" (p. 8). That is, it draws attention to the enigma at the origin of human existence: a place where every explanation, no matter how creative, ingenious, or masterful, is revealed as lacking. The implication is that what is shameful

about sex concerns the emptiness associated with what Nietzsche (1882/1974) deemed the death of God. This suggests that anxiety and shame around sex stem from something Real, and that there is something inherently symptomatic about both sex and our knowledge of it.

This basic anxiety and epistemic failure, for Lacan, reflects the indecipherable and inaccessible nature of the sexual aim and the inherent impossibility of desire. Since desire cannot be reduced to a conscious wish or a rational need, one cannot desire what one possesses. The object of desire is necessarily deferred, revealing a metonymic nature. Psychoanalysis reveals that desire is incompatible with utilitarian philosophy, as desire does not operate according to externally defined goals and objectives. Desire is tied to a “network of wishes” that aims at something impossible connected to *jouissance*. For Lacan, “the more impossible the desire, the stronger it is” (Webster, 2022, p. 7). Because desire is impossible, it is not about possession, the linear pursuit of pleasure, nor victory over anxiety or shame. Instead, it subverts the logic of possession and pleasure by involving a confrontation with lack and the dimension of the Real that helps constitute it. In this sense, as Lacanian analyst Jamieson Webster (20022) argued, “Sexuality is the open site, *par excellence*” (p. 7), which means that a concept like consent cannot capture or suture it. Rather than restoring our autonomy, Lacanian psychoanalysis can “give us back our desire,” that is, our unconscious desire, which is shaped by ontological anxiety, and is inherently destabilizing (Webster, 2022, p. 6).

While the ideal in consent culture is to strive for experience unmarred by symptoms such as anxiety, fear, confusion, sadness, or anger, Lacanian psychoanalysis focuses on the fundamentally symptomatic nature of subjectivity itself. In the Lacanian clinic, there are only three diagnostic categories—neurotic, perverse, and psychotic—and everyone falls into one of them (Lacan, 1977). These symptomatic structures involve different strategies subjects use to

manage ontological anxiety. The closest thing to a “cure” in the Lacanian clinic involves the analysand identifying with the Real of their symptom, or what Lacan calls the *sinthome* (Lacan, 2005/2016). In this process, the analysand identifies with their own particular idiosyncratic *jouissance*. This marks how radically different the Lacanian end of analysis is from symptom removal or adaptation to reality. The shift from symptom to *sinthome* marks that moment when what was experienced as foreign, threatening and confusing for the ego becomes recognized as one’s own invention. It involves confronting and enjoying the lack of the Other. It’s the difference between “This is not me. I must eliminate this from myself” and “This is how I enjoy. This is my particular way of creating something out of the lack in myself and the lack in the Other.”

When Žižek (2013) famously declared, “Enjoy your symptom!” he was referring to this *sinthomatic* enjoyment, or the *jouissance* of embracing the singularity (idiosyncrasy) of one’s symptom, which may reflect an aspect of the subject that cannot be assimilated into the symbolic order. To clarify, I am not suggesting that all symptoms are beneficial or transgressive, only that conceptualizing empowered subjectivity as symptom-free is both reductive and constraining. Uncritically attempting to eliminate all symptoms risks sacrificing certain desires, forms of enjoyment (*jouissance*), and therapeutic possibilities.

I will expand on the *sinthome* in relation to *jouissance*, the non-existence of Woman, and the sexual impasse in chapter five, “Beyond Consent: Other *Jouissance*.” For now, what is important to keep in mind is that from a Lacanian-Freudian viewpoint, erotic life is intrinsically bound up with symptoms associated with anxiety, shame, conflict, and loss—not as pathological deviation from healthy sexuality, but as structural features of how desire operates. Sexual encounters activate unconscious fantasies, childhood conflicts, and confrontations with

the limitations of knowledge and being that cannot be readily integrated into conscious awareness or rational discourse. It cannot, therefore, be adapted to our consciously articulated desires and aims. Psychoanalysis reveals the elusive aspects of autonomy: how we are divided between our conscious intentions and our unconscious drives, between what we think we want and what we actually seem to strive for, between our rational self-understanding and the traumatic core of the Real that exceeds our comprehension, between the social selves we present to the world and the interior selves we cannot make intelligible. Crucially, the split is not between but within, meaning we cannot seek refuge in our unconscious, in our genuine desire, in a self beyond the social world of signification, or even in the traumatic Real.

This splitting means that individuals cannot simply “know themselves” in the transparent way that consent culture often assumes, which would be true even with a psychoanalytic intervention. By elevating autonomy while obscuring the unconscious, we reify the performative self—the socially visible and viable version of the self associated with the subject of the signifier—rather than engaging with the less accessible subject of the drive,² which encompasses the impossible nature of desire, contradiction, and jouissance. In other words, it involves praising autonomy at the expense of singularity.

Progress/Teleology

Patriarchal forms of knowledge are organized to prevent political transformation. Two salient examples are religious doctrine and biological determinism. Religious doctrine promotes anxiety and shame by representing the experimental and imaginative thought required for genuine change as sinful. Biological essentialism similarly discourages critical thought by

² I am referring here to Alan Miller and Bruce Fink’s recommendation to understand Lacan’s subject as operating across two dimensions: “the subject of the signifier,” shaped by historic, symbolic, and institutional systems, and the “subject of the drive,” encompassing affect, libido, and jouissance (Fink, 2002, p. 21).

representing gender differences as rooted in unchangeable natural laws, making contingent norms seem inevitable. These frameworks create a particular form of despair where meaningful change seems impossible because it would require overcoming fundamental truths about human nature, the cosmic order, or divine will. By representing inequalities as expressions of immutable realities rather than constructed systems of power, they encourage learned helplessness by making resistance appear delusional and pathological while making submission seem rational and sane.

Against this fatalistic backdrop, consent culture emerges as a fundamentally liberatory project. Rather than understanding sexuality within predetermined moral categories, consent culture promotes the radical idea that we can collectively develop sexual knowledge through experience, education, communication, and political action, creating networks of validation that counter the shame and silence of abstinence-based regimes. Thinking and talking about sexuality is no longer sinful or pathological, but is instead a catalyst for change and a pathway to a better world and a better future. Consent culture recognizes that when young people understand their problems as systemic rather than personal, they develop a stronger sense of agency and are more likely to collaborate and build networks, leading to proactive political behavior. However, it is possible that the teleological aspects of consent culture could lead to problems associated with a different kind of despair, one associated with shame, confusion, and disappointment.

Consent culture is often represented as offering unlimited opportunities for learning and growth, relying on a myth of linear development based on ideals associated with the accumulation of knowledge about the self. A common idea is that consent education needs to be infused into every area of life: how we communicate with each other, how we experience ourselves, how we form relationships, and how we develop ideas about the world. In *Creating*

Cultures of Consent: A Guide for Parents and Educators, McGuire (2023) argued. “Consent education has to be lifelong and cross curricular,” incorporated into English, health, physical education, social studies, science, and math, including psychology and biology (pp. 84–85).

This emphasis on a holistic approach to consent is also emphasized in the illustrated book for young people, *Can We Talk About Consent? A Book About Freedom, Choices, and Agreement* by sex and relationship educator Justin Hancock (2021). In this book, we find quotes by Audre Lorde, Simone De Beauvoir, and Toni Morrison about the need for individual and social change, and detailed explanations of topics including racism, classism, homo/bi/phobia, and ableism. The author helpfully pointed out that “Consent is about the world and the structures we live in” and “[we can] use collective agency to make the world a better place” (p. 144). However, he emphasized, “consent should be happening all day, every day” and “consent is about choosing something to eat, what TV show or movie we want to watch, what game we’re going to play, how we greet each other, and also about sex.” (p. 8). He continued “By the end of this book you’ll be able to take more consent into the world, for yourself, and the people around you” (p. 8). What we see is an initial conflation of consent with decisiveness, which is then extended to the social and political realm.

The emphasis on decisiveness, agreement, and positive political change is also expressed in *Creating Consent Culture: A Handbook for Educators*, where Baczynski and Scott (2022) maintained that consent culture strives for “a culture in which interactions are collaborative, and as mutually agreeable as possible” (p. 13). The goal is to find “agreement about how to interact and create space together” (p. 29). They wrote, “It is not about permission but about agreement, not about getting consent. It’s about creating consent. But it’s not as complicated as you might think” (2020, p. 30). In this book, and in consent culture in general, the unconscious is

recognized but ultimately rendered insignificant in the face of shared intentions and goals. The assumption is that knowing what we want brings out the best in us, enabling us to make the world a better place.

A related assumption is that confronting the complexity of power leads to psychic integration and social harmony. For example, in *The Joy of Consent: A Philosophy of Good Sex*, Garcia (2023) presented her analysis of unjust power and provided a compelling vision for emancipatory sexual politics, including a complex understanding of how social norms generate inequalities. However, she ultimately endorsed the value of consent as the essential component of good sex and the key tool for resistance. She wrote,

In this book, we have developed a concept of consent that allows us to think about erotic relationships in their complexity and to effectively identify and hopefully combat sexual violence, but also to seek a future that is at once egalitarian, liberated, and joyous.

Consent needs to happen through the progressive acquisition of a new language of sex, a language in which we will, over time, feel at home and not embarrassed, and in which we will be able to express our own sexual projects and shape our own sexual scripts. (p. 219)

From a Lacanian perspective, the goal of feeling “at home” in our sexual selves represents a phallic fantasy of mastery, and there is an essential link between feeling at home in one’s body and in the world and the ideals associated with the fantasies of rational mastery and political projects of domination. There is danger in replicating the logics that have historically bolstered masculine symbolic authority in the name of feminist sexual liberation.

Recognizing the complexities associated with power and the promises of authenticity, Garcia (2023) highlighted the problem of co-optation. However, she associated it only with oppressive structures, thus replicating the idea of an internal/external power relation based on a

firm distinction between the authentic and the ideological, writing, “It is patriarchy that consent has primarily served for centuries, but consent can instead serve freedom and autonomy, within it lies the promise of a sexual revolution that could be a liberation for all” (p. 219).

As we see here, although consent culture does acknowledge links between subjective and political complexity, since it does not acknowledge the constitutive unconscious, this complexity is quickly resolved. For example, in *Sexual Consent*, Milena Popova (2019) argued that a recognition of the complexity of consent gives it its radical political potential; however, this complexity is framed only in terms of a power struggle between self and culture, without recognition of the internal complexity and conflict that makes this goal fraught. Popova wrote,

When we move away from looking at consent as something that happens between individuals in a specific situation and start looking at it as something enmeshed in social structures, cultural practices, and complex operations of power, *the radical potential of the idea of consent becomes really clear*. It allows us to start exploring the social and cultural forces that shape the options we have, how we see ourselves, how we are seen by others, *right down to our very desires*. It allows us to ask what the conditions are that we need to create for consent to be *truly free* and truly meaningful. It allows us to start dismantling rape culture in favor of a culture of consent. (2019, pp. 11–12, emphasis mine)

The idea that consent is a radical concept that can lead to social and political transformation is to underestimate the dialectical relation of the self and the social. From a Lacanian view, the unconscious is not a repository of repressed authentic desires but the site of fundamental social contradiction. Thus, even an in-depth analysis of the complexity of power relations without psychoanalytic insight is unlikely to lead to a genuine cultural shift. Instead, we

can predict that new forms of sexual injustice will emerge, associated with the displacement of anxiety and shame to a new site and scene.

In *Real Talk About Sex and Consent: What Every Teen Needs to Know*, by educator and therapist Cheryl M. Bradshaw (2020), we see some of the aforementioned complications play out. In contrast to paternalistic messaging, Bradshaw encouraged readers to examine the cultural messages they receive and to develop their own ideas about sexuality. She wrote about pornography, masturbation, and non-procreative sexual behaviors with an open mind, inviting reflection and curiosity without judgment. She linked individual experience to political action, emphasizing that a generation who genuinely understands sex and consent can change the world, motivating young people to get involved in knowledge projects and political movements toward sexual democracy. However, this promising tone becomes problematic in her attempt to explain the actual links between sex, consent, and progress.

Bradshaw (2020) described the mind as a house with a basement, a middle floor, and a top floor. In this model, she referred to the top floor as the “mammal floor” and the “safe floor,” describing this floor as superior because it is the most logical and rational part of the brain. It is the most recently evolved part and the one that gives us the information we need to consent to sexual activity. When we use the top floor of our brain to guide our actions, we are in control and can speak and think clearly about what we want to do. The middle floor, the “emotional floor,” is the “reptilian” part of the brain, where we act out of instinct and “cannot find our words.” This is the part of the brain that holds our traumatic memories. The basement is “the most primitive part of the self” and is made up of “the lowest parts of the nervous system.” When we are stuck in the basement, we are “non-responsive, robotic, and frozen.” The goal is “to stay on the top floor” when having sex, and the best way to do this is to follow the guidelines of affirmative consent

using “explicit direct verbal communication” and “establishing and enforcing boundaries” (pp. 70–73).

This description is accompanied by diagrams of the body and the brain, arranged in the same three-layered way, but with scientific terms: at the top we find the “neocortex (rational or thinking brain,” in the middle we find the “limbic system (emotional or feeling brain),” and at the bottom we find “the brain stem (instinctual or ancient brain)” (Bradshaw, 2020, p.73). The brain is positioned on top of a human body that is labelled according to the same structure: at the top near the head is the “ventral vagal complex (Social engagement system when safe), in the middle near the torso “sympathetic nervous system (reactive ‘fight or flight’ threat responses) and at the bottom at the genital area “dorsal vagal complex (shut down threat responses)” (Bradshaw, 2020, p. 73).

This scientific diagram corresponds to the illustration of the “survival house” described above (Bradshaw, 2020, p. 71). On the top floor are trophies, books, a sofa, pillows, a light, and windows. By contrast, on the bottom floor is a slide, rocks, bricks, a crack in the wall, no windows, and a ladder. The image presents consciousness as safe, comfortable, impressive, enlightened, and evolved, an achievement, something to strive for and be proud of. In contrast, unconsciousness is depicted in terms of darkness, confinement, and damage, a place where we can only slide down into or climb up out of. We can see that characteristics historically associated with masculine subjectivity and embodiment are located on the top floor, such as rationality and control, whereas characteristics historically associated with femininity, including emotion, are located on lower levels of being. These associations are then mapped onto to myths of cultural progress and evolution, where primitive ways of life are associated with rape cultures, and consent culture is represented as the height of civilized sexuality.

The culmination of consent culture logic results in this kind of teleology: from naïve to mature, from ideological to scientific, from emotional to rational, from feminine to masculine, from unconscious to conscious, and from primitive to civilized. It is commonly assumed that subjects become more aware and mature with age, that self-knowledge is earned through accumulated life experiences, and that time and wisdom offer an enhanced capacity for sexual satisfaction. In this model, the embrace of consent allows a person to enjoy the possibilities of sex, especially later in life. This reinforces the idea that educators understand the true nature of sex, not only due to scientific understanding but also life experience. The implication is that one can develop and grow into consent throughout life and that this maturity corresponds to political potential, as cultures that prioritize consent are represented as the most advanced. While all sexual subjects are represented as capable of pursuing new relational forms, the path is set out in exacting terms, leading to messages that suggest it is irresponsible or irrational to pursue alternative forms of (self) knowledge and pleasure, sometimes leading to explicit claims about the dangers of not centering consent in frameworks for change (see for example, Surmick et al., 2019).

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Jack Halberstam (2011) offer's a critique of the epistemic authority of adults, challenging teleological assumptions about the progression from childhood ignorance to adult wisdom. In opposition to the idea that adults are better equipped to resist ideology, Halberstam suggested that adult authority may derive primarily from successful submission to social norms rather than from superior wisdom. He elaborated on the creativity and wisdom of failure as a queer art form, suggesting that children—relatively powerless, dependent, and unknowing compared to adults—are less invested in hegemonic frameworks of

knowledge. In Lacanian terms, we could posit that young people may be less assimilated into the fantasies of wholeness, completion, and mastery that characterize adult subjectivity.

Halberstam (2011) pointed to movies targeting young audiences that often contain themes of radical revolt and alternative ways of being, suggesting that young people may possess a receptivity to queer forms of knowledge and relationality that adults have lost or suppressed. Having not yet fully internalized social norms, they may retain a capacity to see contradictions and injustices that adults have learned to accept or ignore. Halberstam demonstrated that the assumption that adults necessarily know better can advance aggressive normalization tactics, for example, by using age-based authority to dismiss young people's progressive insights as mere youthful idealism. As transnational feminists have documented, we have also seen this logic play out in depictions of women from the global South, who have been constructed in Western discourses as children who need to be saved, educated, and supervised by culturally mature citizens of wealthy nations as a way to legitimize neocolonial projects on exclusionary feminist grounds (Abu-Lughod, 2013; Spivak, 1988).

Halberstam (2011) advocated for queer time or temporalities that resist the logics of progression. This prescription relates to Freud's psychoanalytic temporality, where polymorphous perversion persists throughout life, disrupting normalizing sexual projects and aims. Although consent culture claims commitment to learning from young people, emphasizing consent as *the key* to understanding sex provides a predetermined developmental path that may undermine this intention. From a Lacanian perspective, we could say that the teleological framework of consent culture involves placing faith in the existence of the sexual relation at every step, from personal enlightenment to social harmony to political evolution. The emphasis on psychic integration, common language, and shared values overlooks how language can

alienate us from direct experience with ourselves and others, and how signifiers carry unconscious meanings that exceed conscious intention.

In sum, the ultimate promise of consent culture is that sexual liberation can serve as a foundation for broad social transformation. In other words, by actualizing the promise of consent, communities can develop capacities for democratic participation that extend far beyond the bedroom into all aspects of social and political life. As consent moves across popular and theoretical discourse, it is often perceived as both self-evident and complex. In its most ambitious form, it grounds the entire discussion of ethical sexual engagement. Presented as an expansive, pluralistic vision for the future, however, it too often provides only a narrow path.

At the same time, it would be a mistake to dismiss consent culture as merely ideology. Here we find genuine interest in sexuality, subjectivity, power, resistance, and complexity. Thus, as Franklin et al. (2023), in *Consent: Legacies, Representations, and Frameworks for the Future* recognized, we ought to make use of the “capacious possibilities of consent” (p. 3). At its best, consent culture represents the question of sex as inherently political. This is what makes it so promising and so precarious. It matters how we respond. And we might start by asking: Who is sanctioned as a political agent capable of possessing the agency, autonomy, and integrity necessary to access this authentic subject position and push society toward a better future—a sexually enlightened and liberatory one? To engage this question, I examine the relationship between the unconscious and unequal power relations, focusing on debates around transactional sex and the framing of sex workers and those identified as trafficking victims as the others of consent.

Chapter Three: Consent Culture and the Limits of Language: A Lacanian-Foucauldian Analysis of Transactional Sex

Since Michel Foucault has profoundly influenced feminist theory and queer theory and has direct relevance to institutionalized confessional discourses regarding consent (Chiacchieri, 2019), I detail the similarities and differences between Lacanian psychoanalytic and Foucauldian post-structuralist methods. I argue that the pressure to articulate oneself within the parameters of consent culture is an example of what Foucault (1976/1985) described as a confessional technology. This practice evolved out of religious demands into therapeutic imperatives. In both religious and therapeutic contexts, subjects are encouraged to verbalize their innermost thoughts and desires on the path from ignorance, confusion, and suffering toward freedom, understanding, and healing. Foucault's critical insight was that these confessional practices actively construct the very self they purport to uncover.

Using Foucault but ultimately favoring a shift to a Lacanian psychoanalytic approach, my aims are to (1) contest the assumption that the symbolic realm functions primarily as a site of freedom, as presumed in consent culture; (2) challenge institutional psychoanalytic authority by destabilizing the binary between experts and patients; and (3) criticize Foucauldian post-structuralist theories that overemphasize the oppressive power of psychoanalysis and the signifier.

I ground this theoretical discussion in a study of the role of consent in debates between sex workers and anti-sex trafficking advocates. I examine how compulsory self-expression, institutional pathologization of non-normative sexual behaviors, and denial of the constitutive role of the unconscious converge to create unnecessary social harm, in this case, exacerbating conflict between sex workers and anti-sex trafficking advocates and leading to the enactment of

policies that harm vulnerable people in the sex industry. While I discuss what I believe is the decline of the abolitionist anti-sex trafficking movement as a viable left political project (Agustín, 2007; Bernstein, 2019; Kempadoo & Shih, 2023) and firmly support the decriminalization of sex work, I caution against uncritically embracing prevailing sex worker rights discourses, which can obscure complex forms of relational harm made visible by the anti-sex trafficking movement.

Lacan and Foucault

Like Lacan, Foucault rejected political projects promising enlightenment and emancipation, challenged the authority and benevolence of social institutions, rejected adaptationist philosophies, and demonstrated a commitment to a radical rethinking of popular and intellectual accounts of the subject, communication, and intimacy. Both scholars were interested in alternative forms of embodiment, pleasure, attachment, and intensity. However, while Lacan pursued his project by devoting himself to realizing the radical potential of psychoanalysis, Foucault pursued a path focused on the history of ideas and discourse analysis.

Foucault

In *the History of Sexuality Volume I* (1985), Foucault criticized psychoanalysis for relying on an anachronistic model of power based on the logics of law and repression, endorsing an ahistorical account of sexuality as subjective truth and reproducing confessional structures. This critique is part of Foucault's study into how mechanisms of social control promise freedom while indiscernibly reinforcing subjugation. Foucault argued that we tend to think of power as a subtraction mechanism: something that prohibits, obscures, silences, excludes, distorts, represses, or deprives, according to an "economy of scarcity and the principles of rarefaction" (p. 12). Instead, he argued that modern power is "polymorphous": inventive, resourceful, relational,

fluid, and constructive (p. 11). He coined the term “power-knowledge” to convey the idea that power finds its limit in violence, aggression, and repression and realizes its potential in the production of knowledge. Most directly, Foucault (1985) defined power-knowledge this way:

It seems to me that power must be understood in the first instance as the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens, or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of the law, in the various social hegemonies. (pp. 92–93)

As an overview, we could describe it like this: First, we have an episteme, an overarching historically contingent knowledge system (such as religion or science) that grounds our basic understanding of the world. This episteme gives rise to specific domains of knowledge that organize information by branching off into distinct interpretive modes. We could think of this as a mosaic with pieces superficially separated by thin cracks but essentially made of the same material provided by the episteme. These distinct domains provide a comforting illusion of conflict and difference, while ultimately cohering into a set of normative imperatives that regulate social life in unequal, and often unjust ways.

Foucault (1985) focused on sexuality because he considered it a particularly prolific source of power-knowledge in modern societies that play a key role in social governance. I will offer a few examples. In Victorian society, women could be diagnosed with hysteria for

behaviors deemed sexually deviant, including excessive sexual desire or lack of sexual interest in marriage. Treatments were often invasive, sometimes including institutionalization, reflecting the medical establishment's belief that they needed to discipline women who deviated from the path of proper femininity (Baloh, 2021). To Freud's credit, he recognized the need to talk to patients diagnosed as hysterical, rather than treating them as simply passive objects to be studied (Rose, 1986/2020).

Psychiatric discourses have historically classified non-heterosexual desires and behaviors as pathological and dangerous. Sodomy laws were not fully struck down in the United States until 2003 (Drescher, 2008). Homosexuality was listed in the DSM-I (1952) under "sociopathic personality disturbances," then redefined as "sexual deviation" in the DSM-II (1968). Although it was removed as a standalone disorder in the DSM-III (1973), it soon reappeared as "Ego-Dystonic Homosexuality" (1980). This category named individuals who experienced distress over their same-sex desires and wished to change them. Although framed as addressing suffering, the Ego-Dystonic Homosexuality diagnosis located dysfunction within the individual rather than in cultural attitudes (Drescher, 2020).

This pattern persists in contemporary psychiatric discourses surrounding trans people. In the current DSM, the DSM-5-TR, Gender Dysphoria (GD) describes the distress individuals experience when their gender identity conflicts with their assigned sex. Despite being preferable to the previous Gender Identity Disorder (GID) diagnosis and practically necessary for securing insurance coverage for transition-related care, the Gender Dysphoria label continues to pathologize transgender people, and preserves psychiatric authority over transgender lives (Drescher, 2020).

Eugenic discourses have weaponized fears of racial contamination to justify eliminating Black people through forced sterilization and lynching, framed as protecting white racial purity from “degeneration” through miscegenation (Freedman, 2013). Colonial administrations have invoked claims about “savage” sexual practices as evidence of civilizational inferiority, justifying imperial violence and cultural destruction in the name of moral improvement (McClintock, 1995). The current Trump administration uses sexual norms to define good citizenship while deploying fears of sexual deviance and impurity to justify authoritarian control. In this case, appeals to traditional values and national security are being used to justify restrictions on LGBTQIA+ rights and indiscriminate immigration enforcement policies.

Foucault (1985) was interested in how these kinds of institutional discourses, which we might consciously reject, nevertheless come to inform how we experience a common-sense understanding of sexuality. For example, the term “hysterical” is still used to characterize forms of “irrationality” associated with femininity, functioning to deny the inherently symptomatic nature of subjectivity by reference to the irrational feminine subject as pathologized Other. Ideas about the inferior sexuality of historically colonized peoples persist in contemporary notions of the sexually repressed or brainwashed third-world woman in need of rescue from enlightened and empowered people in the global North (see Abu-Lughod, 2013; Spivak, 1988). The demonization of so-called perverse sexualities has become linked to state-designated narratives justifying military violence, such as the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq (Puar, 2018).

Foucault (1985) thought psychoanalysis risked reifying assumptions associated with hierarchical discourses concerning sexuality by linking subjectivity and truth in an essential way. Foucault began his critique by describing psychoanalysis as fundamentally flawed due to its adherence to the repressive hypothesis. He suggested that claims about the constitutive nature of

the sexual unconscious promoted an ahistorical account of subjectivity in deference to Freud's supposed genius. Through its basic distinction between normal and pathological subjectivity, psychoanalysis links speech and knowledge not with struggle and power, but with revelation and truth. By positioning itself as an objective science of the psyche, psychoanalysis obscures the positive dimension of its power. Foucault focused on the role of psychoanalysis in elaborating methods for developing relationships with the self—self-examination, deciphering the self, problematizing the self, understanding the self, and transforming the self—according to the authoritarian logic of the clinic. Foucault (1985) wrote,

The confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement, and it is also a ritual of power manifested by the presence of another. The other becomes the authority who requires the confession in order to arbitrate upon it...The dominant agency does not reside within the constraint of the person who speaks but rather within the one who listens and says nothing; neither does it reside within the one who knows and answers but within the one who questions and is not supposed to know. The discourse of truth finally takes effect, however, from the one from whom it was wrested and not from the one who receives it. (p. 62)

In the clinic, patients reveal intimate details about their thoughts, feelings, desires, fears, and traumas, and therapists assess the significance and meaning of what patients share, offering interpretations based on psychoanalytic doctrine. Foucault referred to this as a modern secularized version of the religious confessional. Where the godly wisdom of the priest once mediated subjects' self-relations, it is now mediated by the objective scientific knowledge of the analyst. This arrangement serves a dual function of social control: using the patient's speech as raw material for expanding psychoanalytic power-knowledge while regulating the patient's self-

understanding. The apparent privacy and intimacy of the analytic relationship masks its role in the social production of knowledge about human nature and human potentiality.

For Foucault, psychoanalysis does not uncover sexuality; rather, it joins with other normalizing institutions to domesticate the subject by making sexuality—as something that can be interpreted and known—the key to understanding the self. Since patients rely on the analyst to provide the interpretive framework necessary for unlocking these supposed secret truths, they become prone to developing passive habits of self-relation. Thus, what appears as resolution or cure is assimilation. In sum, for Foucault, psychoanalysis plays a key role in the modern reorganization of power relations around expertise, normalization, discipline, and control.

It is not surprising that Foucault was critical of psychoanalysis. As a “gay” man living in France during a time when homosexuality was a criminal offence, Foucault felt the weight of an invasive pathologizing gaze, informed partly by psychoanalytic language. To counteract the pathologizing tendencies of psychoanalytic discourse, Foucault attempted to formulate representations of sex without participating in the confessional imperative or the “new pastoral” (p. 22). One consequence of this cautious attitude was that he conceived power as a force that could only penetrate sexuality from the outside. By reducing sex to a surface network and subordinating nonconscious elements of sex to discourse, he obscured the psychic-political significance of sex itself, at times reducing it to an experience of pleasure without psychic complexity. In other words, Foucault emphasized that sex is politically dangerous. However, he failed to consider the possibility that sex is *in itself* dangerous to the subject, thus cleansing sex of its potentially enigmatic and threatening aspects.³

³ In an interview, Foucault said “sex is boring” (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983, p. 229), perhaps meaning that the “physical” acts associated with sex are relatively boring when compared to the great language game played in its name. Lacan conveys a related but different message in the phrase “I’m not fucking, I’m talking to you,” which implies that talking is not simply a “substitute satisfaction” for sex (as it is normally assumed to be in standard

Foucault's (1985) project can be recognized as an attempt to de-dramatize sex in the face of homophobic moral panics, pathologizing discourses about perversion, and carceral imperatives. This project remains relevant (Halperin & Hoppe, 2017). However, this project sometimes involved speaking about sex in the same neutral and detached tone Foucault associated with oppressive positivist projects. I provide three examples.

The first example involves a comment Foucault made in 1977 during a roundtable discussion at the Collège de France:

One can always produce the theoretical discourse that amounts to saying: in any case, sexuality can in no circumstances be the object of punishment. And when one punishes rape one should be punishing physical violence and nothing but that. And to say that it is nothing more than an act of aggression: that there is no difference, in principle, between sticking one's fist into someone's face or one's penis into their sex [T]here are problems [if we are to say that rape is more serious than a punch in the face], because what we're saying amounts to this: sexuality as such, in the body, has a preponderant place, the sexual organ isn't like a hand, hair, or a nose. It therefore has to be protected, surrounded, invested in any case with legislation that isn't that pertaining to the rest of the body It isn't a matter of sexuality, it's the physical violence that would be punished, without bringing in the fact that sexuality was involved. (Henderson, 2007, p. 225)

In this passage, Foucault suggested that rape is not fundamentally different from a punch in the face, implying that rape should be desexualized within law. For Foucault, the genitals

accounts of psychoanalytic sublimation) but is itself a source of *jouissance* (Zupančič, 2017, p. 1,3). We could say that this distinction between Foucault's and Lacan's representation of the link between speech and sex suggests that Foucault saw the power of the symbolic as primary, whereas Lacan approached the symbolic and the Real as more dialectical.

should be treated like any other body part, not granted special significance according to heteronormative ideas about the sexual body. In Freudian-Lacanian terms, we could say that Foucault attempted to draw attention to the polymorphous perversity of sexuality and to reject the reification of the genital drive in law. However, Foucault's move could also be seen as desexualizing the body itself—or at least desexualizing the historically informed body to create space for new bodies and pleasures. This move would involve separating the existing body from the potential body, or the historically determined embodied subject from the potential future embodied subject who might emerge through critical consciousness.

The second example concerns comments Foucault (2004) made during his *Abnormal Lectures* at the Collège de France from 1974–1975. During these lectures, Foucault analyzed a medicolegal report from 1868 assessing Charles Jouy, a man diagnosed with a cognitive disorder, who committed sexual offenses against young girls. The first incident involved Jouy asking two young girls to stimulate him with their hands. Only one of them, an 11-year-old girl named Sophie Adam, complied. The second incident involved Jouy paying Adam four pennies to follow him on a road where, according to the report, he “with her consent, attempted a sexual approach which does not seem to have been successful” (Taylor, 2018, p. 246). When asked about the incident, Adam could not confirm whether she was penetrated, but she described pain and liquid running down her legs. Her clothes showed blood and stains. When asked about his sexual preferences for young girls, Jouy only said older girls rejected and laughed at him. The doctors concluded that due to his cognitive impairments, he was not morally responsible for his actions. However, they recommended that he remain permanently institutionalized because he would likely reoffend (Taylor, 2018).

Foucault expressed appropriate empathy for Jouy but unnecessarily trivialized this incident for Adam. He referred to the events as involving “bucolic pleasures” and a “familiar game” for villagers, referring to the young girls involved as “alert children” (Foucault, 1976, p. 44). Referring to the second incident with Adam, he said, reiterating the doctors’ language, “The young girl more or less lets it happen; she seems to receive a few sous quite naturally and runs to the fair to buy some roasted almonds” (Foucault, 2004, p. 292). Since Jouy paid Adam, and she spent the money, Foucault implied there was no reason to imagine Jouy harmed her. For Foucault, the political importance of this event lies not in what happened to Adam, but in demonstrating the emergence of new forms of regulating sexuality and their consequences for “abnormal” subjects like Jouy. His lack of curiosity about the power dynamics between adults and children, including Jouy and Adam, as well as the doctors and Adam, is notable (Alcoff, 1996). We might say that the complexity of Adam’s experience was of no interest to Foucault, given her “normative” sexual position as a girl in a binary gender system, and as a child “protected” by a legal and carceral regime.

The third example involves comments Foucault made on a 1978 broadcast published as “Sexual Morality and the Law” (1988), where Foucault, Guy Hocquenghem, and Jean Danet argued for abolishing statutory rape laws. They condemn coercive sex but oppose any legal restrictions based on age (Taylor, 2018). Foucault claimed it is “intolerable” and “quite unacceptable” to deny children’s capacity to consent, suggesting that sexual manipulation can occur between adults, while adult-minor sexual relations can be more straightforward (Taylor, 2018, p. 285). While Foucault was uniquely aware that narratives of children’s sexual innocence can be deployed to demonize sexual others in carceral-psychiatric regimes (see Edelman, 2004),

he seemed relatively uninterested in and unconcerned with children's particular developmental vulnerabilities and how adults can sexually exploit them.⁴

Lacan Contra Foucault

I shift now to a discussion of Lacan and the value of a Lacanian intervention. As I hope has become clear at this point, Foucault's (1985) critique of psychoanalysis targeted what Lacan would consider Neo-Freudian institutional revisionism, exemplified by ego psychology. Lacan and Foucault were allied in their opposition to this attitude. The difference is that Lacan engaged in deep and careful study of psychoanalysis. In contrast, Foucault seemed interested only in the superficial understanding necessary to critique certain functions of psychoanalysis popular at the time. Given Lacan's unique approach to psychoanalysis, which deviated from the institutional and popular opinion, we can use Lacan to identify several flaws in Foucault's critique of psychoanalysis. A Lacanian view can also help explain Foucault's troubling lack of curiosity and insight concerning certain aspects of subjectivity, sexuality, and power. I focus here on two key differences between a Foucauldian and Lacanian approach concerning the possibilities of resistance and the potential of psychoanalysis.

The Possibilities of Resistance. Where Freud placed the unconscious, Foucault placed history. For Foucault (1972) what we experience as reality emerges from "the historical a priori" or historically contingent power-knowledge formations (p. 127). Foucault's (1977) political

⁴ There are, however, complications with asserting that youth cannot, under any circumstances, consent to sex with adults. In their study of youth in the sex trade in the U.S., Showden and Majic (2018) reject the idea that youth only sell sex because they have been trafficked (deceived, manipulated, or coerced). This assumption is based on the idea that young people would never voluntarily sell sex because they have access to the resources and support systems they need to survive, which suggests an idealized view of the home, family, and society. To account for the complex dynamics of agency and oppression that shape their lives, Showden and Majic recommend adopting an intersectional model that centers the standpoint of transgender youth of color who sell sex. They urge service providers to respect the evolving capacities of youth to make decisions about their own lives and prioritize the development of youth-led policies. This seems consistent with a Foucauldian approach. I would, however, emphasize the need for a psychoanalytic intervention so that youth are not subjected to a confessional regime wherein their words are uncritically taken as truth.

project favored “histories of the present” that expose the contingency of contemporary modes of being by revealing alternative ways we could have been constituted under different historical epistemes (p. 31). This approach denaturalizes self-evident beliefs and practices to promote critical consciousness. Foucault (1985) expressed optimism about the political potential of knowledges that cannot be assimilated into dominant discourses. He used the term “subjugated knowledges” to refer to “unintelligible,” “low-ranking,” “unqualified,” or “directly disqualified” knowledges. He wrote that this “differential knowledge,” which is “incapable of unanimity and owes its force solely to the harshness with which it is opposed by everything surrounding it—that criticism performs its work” (1985, p. 82).

While Foucault imagined resistance in terms of subjugated knowledge, Lacan imagined resistance in terms of the Real, in the sense that both subjugated knowledge and the Real represent limits to the stable reproduction of normative subjectivity and meaning. One important difference is that the Lacanian Real is a structural feature of being itself, whereas Foucauldian subjugated knowledge is specifically associated with pathologized, marginalized, and criminalized populations. Foucault’s contribution of recognizing the critical significance of forms of thought and experience that are marginalized in dominant discourses represents a crucial innovation to social analysis. However, while scholars of continental philosophy and the critical social sciences now widely recognize the importance of including the voices of marginalized populations, they often overlook the essential Lacanian point about how the fundamental structure of subjectivity itself is split and cannot be reconciled with the totalizing discourses of normativity. The difference can be put this way: Foucault presented signification as a mechanism of normalization that produced mostly docile subjects, with some exceptions. By contrast, Lacan emphasized the instability of normalizing signification by representing the

signifying self or the self on display as ultimately only a surface inscription that constantly fails to conceal the subject's symptoms and jouissance, or what cannot be assimilated into the symbolic and, thus, betrays a relation to the Real.

Foucault's fascination with social outsiders—criminals, madmen, sexual deviants—contrasted sharply with his disengagement from the complex experiences of those occupying seemingly normative positions, such as heterosexual women and children. His tendency to focus on the critical potential of marginalized subjects reduced “normative” subjects to their discursive positions, neglecting the significance of the psychoanalytic insight that apparent obedience to norms may mask unconscious conflict or counterintuitive forms of resistance. Consequently, Foucault's framework produced a paternalistic reduction of childhood subjectivity and obscured the critical agency of heterosexual women and young people who engage legal institutions to contest the problem of widespread sexual violation.

By focusing on discourse at the expense of the unconscious, Foucault seemed to imagine that bodies and subjectivities could simply be rewritten with the advent of a new discourse. For example, he suggested that the experience of rape could be transformed by desexualizing the penis within law (Henderson, 2007). From a Lacanian perspective, things are more complicated because subjects are not passively constituted by discourse. From a Lacanian view, every subject, regardless of social position, is constituted by a fundamental lack that cannot be adequately sutured by identificatory processes or resolved through assimilation to discursive norms. This generative gap creates an opening for singular forms of being, and the possibility of a more inclusive and expansive queer politics.

The Potential of Psychoanalysis. In his critique of the repressive hypothesis, Foucault (1985) essentialized psychoanalysis. His critiques stemmed from an interpretation associated

with an idea expressed in *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930), in which Freud proposed a universal model of human development from polymorphous perversity to heterosexual genital supremacy. As discussed in Chapter One, there are many contradictions in Freud's work. While this teleological perspective has been taken up as the official account, Freud (1905) contradicted it many times, as when he emphasized the incomplete and imperfect nature of this civilizing project, implying a kind of generalized perversion (Van Haute & Westerink, 2020). This is the Freudian position elaborated by Lacan.

Foucault (1985) seemed particularly interested in attacking two forms of psychoanalysis. The first was a form of psychoanalysis associated with medicalizing interpretative modes, which Lacan firmly rejected in his critique of ego psychology. The second was a specific idea associated with psychoanalytic Marxism that conjugal, monogamous, reproductive, genital-centered sexuality was shaped and universalized according to the demands of industrial capitalism. Foucault referred specifically to *Eros and Civilization* (1955/1974), where Marcuse, drawing on Freud and Marx, argued that sexual liberation (or the release of repressed libidinal energy) could only occur through socialist revolution. Although Foucault acknowledged the significance of economic relations in shaping sexual desire, he rejected the notion that sex is determined by one great mechanism of power, like capitalism, which means that the problem of sexual injustice could not be solved by one great form of resistance, like socialism. Foucault's point was not that we should not pursue socialist politics, but that tackling the problem of sexual injustice would require pursuing multiple resistance strategies. Consistent with this claim, I have argued that consent (as forming the basis of consent culture) cannot create the conditions of possibility for sexual freedom and that the creation of alternative paths for thought and action is necessary.

Like Foucault, Lacan rejected the idea of sexual liberation. However, he went deeper than Foucault in his critique by offering an account of the subject of the unconscious in terms of the tension between the symbolic and the Real. To convey the crucial difference between the Lacanian and Foucauldian frameworks, we can follow Alan Miller and Bruce Fink's recommendation to understand Lacan's subject as operating across two dimensions: "the subject of the signifier," shaped by historic, symbolic, and institutional systems, and "the subject of the drive," encompassing affect, libido, and jouissance (Fink, 2002, p. 22). Although these dimensions are interdependent, Lacan emphasized that there are important differences between them, and he warned of the temptation to fixate on the subject of the signifier while neglecting the subject of the drive. Lacan worked against this tendency in *Encore* (1975/1998) by taking as his subject the disjunction between knowledge and being (Fink, 2002). Emphasizing the importance of this point, Lacanian analyst Bruce Fink (2002) wrote, "Lacan translates Freud's fundamental distinction between representation and affect as the distinction between language and libido, between signifier and jouissance, and his whole discussion of the subject—of who or what the subject is in psychoanalysis—has to do with this fundamental distinction or disjunction" (p. 22).

In *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists*, Joan Copjec (1994/2015) elaborated on the differences between the subject of the signifier and the subject of the drive by drawing distinctions between the symbolic and the structural, the signifier and desire, and surface and being. She argued that the "historicist approach," which she defines as a method based on an integration of Foucauldian discourse analysis and critical gender theory, risks conflating these distinct realms, erring in the direction of reductive conclusions with nominalist implications. She warned that "the relation between speech and desire, or social surface and desire, may be a

negative one,” implying that a fixation on discourse without psychoanalytic insight may be counterproductive (Copjec, 1994/2015, p. 14). She claimed that “language speaks voluminously in positive statements, but it also copiously speaks of its own lack of self-sufficiency” and that “this negation is no less an inscription for its not being formulated in a statement, and the being it poses presents no less a claim for our consideration” (Copjec, 1994/2015, p. 10). She urged cultural critics to “become literate in desire” by learning “how to read what is inarticulable in cultural statements” and recommended using Lacanian psychoanalysis for this task (Copjec, 1994/2015, p. 14).

The problems Copjec (1994/2015) identified are exemplified in the conversation that has emerged out of the dialectic between consent culture and critical consent discourse. Lacan could be introduced as a third in this discussion to motivate a new critical direction, one that takes care to avoid what we might call, reading Foucault against himself, a kind of panopticism based on a reification of the subject of the signifier, where social relations of power appear visible and mappable through critical discourse analysis—an approach Copjec (1994/2015) described as leading to the representation of society as “a dead structure, mappable on some flat surface” (p. 9).

Lacanian theory makes space for contemplating the significance of those dimensions of thought, desire, and experience that can never be fully illuminated or integrated, drawing attention to the unknown aspects of being that often motivate the anxious knowledge projects of hegemonic discourse. A Lacanian approach also contributes to critical knowledge projects associated with unjust power relations by pointing to symptoms that repeat across historical and social contexts. The sexual non-rapport, the paradoxical nature of *jouissance*, and the enduring problem of the unconscious for speaking beings represent *structural* deadlocks rather than

contingent *symbolic* formations. Whereas critical theorists like Foucault rejected the very idea of origin, Lacan imagined these structural deadlocks as a kind of original generative abyss. That is, structural impossibilities and contradictions that create openings for desire, and possibilities for creation, movement, and change. One benefit of a Lacanian approach is that its transhistorical framework allows for comparative analysis across contexts without reducing meaning to pure historical or discursive contingency (Copjec, 2004).

Due to Lacan's theory of structural negativities and their generative possibilities, Lacanian theory ultimately resists reconciliation with Foucault's absolute rejection of origin and transcendence, his interpretative method based on a strong commitment to historically contextualized discourse, and his deconstructive aims. By emphasizing the *psychic* significance of the bar separating signifier from signified, Lacan introduced a dimension of experience that both incorporates and resists the discursive power that characterizes much poststructuralist-influenced critical theory. Lacanian analysis offers a theory of subjective transformation through traversing the fundamental fantasy and approaching the Real, which offers opportunities for resistance that go deeper than merely adopting a critical attitude—which, I would argue, is the goal of the Foucauldian project. With a Lacanian perspective, we can de-naturalize the body (“there is nothing missing in the real”), gender (“the woman does not exist”), and sexuality (“the sexual relation does not exist”), while holding on to the enduring contradictions associated with the complex psychic realities that cannot be easily resolved. With these differences in mind, I want to remain attentive to the points where these two thinkers meet.

Lacan Avec Foucault

For Lacan, the signifier is no trivial thing: The split subject emerges through entry into the symbolic order, which separates conscious intention from unconscious desire. Since the

drives are formed in a sociohistorical context, attending to the specificity of the discursive situation remains essential. On this point, there is a silver lining to Foucault's preoccupation with the subject of the signifier. Although Lacan developed a sophisticated account of the symbolic realm, Foucault developed uniquely valuable resources for interpreting discursive situations, which are necessary to access the subject of the drive.

I stage a rapprochement between Lacan and Foucault here, recognizing Foucault's current dominant position in critical theory and ultimately defending a shift to a Lacanian perspective. I acknowledge the important contributions of Foucauldian post-structuralism while demonstrating the need to move critical consent discourse away from what can become an unproductive fixation on the operations of discourse toward attention to *jouissance* and the drive. My claim here is that critical theories of discourse are instrumental to (but not sufficient for) analyzing social and political problems emerging from structural deadlocks. Thus, despite significant differences between Lacan and Foucault, they can be used productively together. Following scholars like Mari Ruti (2012), I argue here for the incorporation of the Lacanian Real into critical theory approaches like Foucauldian discourse analysis. This move can help us account for what is often called "agency" without reproducing fantasies of sovereign subjectivity. Using Lacan, we can recognize agency—what Ruti called "singularity"—not as a metaphysical "outside" to language, but its "extimate" and unconscious dimension: that which is simultaneously most intimate and most foreign to the subject.

Foucault (1980) described the aim of his critical project not as providing an overarching philosophy or ahistorical theory of the subject but providing *tools and strategies* to help those subjugated by hegemonic knowledge structures develop an oppositional attitude. Foucault often emphasized that putting a theory to use inevitably means changing it. In an essay describing

Nietzsche's important influence on his own work, Foucault (1980) writes, "For myself, I prefer to utilize the writers I like. The only valid tribute to thought, such as Nietzsche's, is precisely to use it, to deform it, and to make it groan and protest. Moreover, if commentators say that I am being faithful or unfaithful to Nietzsche, that is of absolutely no interest" (pp. 53–54). With statements like this, Foucault emphasizes the need to adapt theory to historical circumstance. While I have outlined the contrast between Foucault's and Lacan's approaches to psychoanalysis above, it is worth noting that despite Foucault's extended critique of psychoanalysis, it is not clear that a psychoanalytic shift in relation to consent would even make him "groan and protest" given that we are living in a different historical moment, one in which psychoanalysis is not a promising discourse tied to psychiatry or a Marxist liberation. By contrast, psychoanalysis is marginalized by psychiatry and clinical psychology. Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) is now widely considered the gold standard of therapy in the United States, with psychoanalysis widely considered outdated, in practice and in theory, often criticized as lacking scientific legitimacy. This supposed lack of scientific legitimacy is also why it is marginalized in academia, taught primarily in literature and creative arts departments, consigned largely to the realm of the imaginary.

I will now provide an example of how Foucauldian analysis of the subject of the signifier can complement a Lacanian analysis of the subject of the drive through a case study of the role of consent in debates concerning transactional sex. Since I argue that sex worker rights discourses have been largely influenced, if not by Foucault directly, then by critical approaches (such as critical gender theory) which he has influenced, I ultimately focus on the need for a Lacanian intervention that draws awareness to the significance of the subject of the drive. I start by using a Foucauldian method to provide an overview of the discursive situation concerning

transactional sex and then move on to argue for the importance of shifting attention to the subject of the drive. Here, I am interested in representing a sex worker rights perspective.

A Lacanian-Foucauldian Analysis of Transactional Sex

Prostitutes are the subject of invasive cultural curiosity, yet they are often represented with severe simplicity. As paradigmatic victims of patriarchy, they are routinely viewed through the narrow lens of ideology, domination, and violence. This perspective has been institutionalized by anti-sex trafficking organizations representing *all* prostitution as a form of gender-based violence that should be criminalized out of existence.⁵ Against criminalizing discourses that conflate consensual and non-consensual prostitution, sex workers have framed their movement through an identification with the image of the consenting subject, based on a counter-identification with the sex trafficking victim.⁶

The sex worker rights narrative is fundamentally rooted in affirming sex worker consent: agency, autonomy, rationality, dignity, and bodily integrity. While this approach destigmatizes favored forms of sex work, it simultaneously traps sex workers within a subject position defined by consent logics and displaces the negative associations of victimization onto a subaltern group. Consequently, sex trafficking victims appear as the appropriate targets of the institutionalized

⁵ See, for example, The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, Polaris Project, United Abolitionists, and Global Center for Women and Justice.

⁶ I focus here on debates in the global North because of the power of these discourses under conditions of geopolitical inequality. In “Mapping Trends: Power Imbalances and the Circulation of Information on Sex Work,” (Murray et al., 2018) find that research on prostitution is overwhelmingly funded, directed, distributed, and validated by subjects and institutions based in the global North, even for studies conducted on subjects and societies in the global South. My representation of the debate between sex workers and anti-sex trafficking advocates is based on generalizations intended to make a comparative analysis possible. My intention is not to simplify this debate or to obscure marginalized expressions, but to examine prevailing trends in relation to the norms of consent. Postcolonial critics have contributed to this task by foregrounding sex worker rights movements outside of the global North, which often deviate from a liberal consent model (See Koné, 2016, Blanchette & da Silva, 2018). However, there is a lack of direct critical engagement with the leading sex worker rights movement in the global North from a perspective that supports sex workers’ political demands, as critical analyses of this movement tend to stem from an anti-sex work position.

violence that sex workers reject. This dynamic has the troubling effect of implicating the sex worker rights movement in hegemonic discourses.

Developing a sex worker rights framework that subverts consent logics would therefore seem imperative. However, this would present significant challenges, given that prostitution remains criminalized in many countries around the world, and sex workers continue to experience violence through this criminalization—violence perpetuated by laws premised on the assumption that sex workers cannot meaningfully consent to prostitution. Before proceeding with this discussion, I suggest we consider more background on the historical and discursive context.

In her genealogy of the anti-sex trafficking movement, Bernstein (2018) argued that although terms such as “abolitionism” and “modern slavery” convey apolitical neutrality, the specific conceptual frameworks for understanding violence associated with the anti-sex trafficking movement emerged from the radical (anti-pornography) camp of the U.S.-based feminist sex wars and have subsequently taken on global dimensions through their integration into transnational institutions.⁷ Following radical feminist notions about the central role of sexuality in the domination of women, sex trade abolitionists argue that in a sexual transaction, the prostitute sells her “self” and her “body” rather than a service. Although abolitionists use an “intersectional” approach based on race, gender, and class, special attention is paid to the patriarchal dimension of power.

Abolitionists come together in their support of what they call the “equality model” of “partial criminalization,” which decriminalizes the act of selling sex but criminalizes the

⁷ According to Bernstein (2018) sex trade abolitionism has not only shaped anti-sex trafficking discourse but anti-trafficking discourses more generally. Beyond simply identifying a form of harm and demanding reparation in the fraught field of human rights, the anti-sex trafficking movement replicates and expands existing laws and policies—against forced labor, exploitation, violence, and sexual abuse—through an anti-prostitution lens (see also Maynard, 2015).

purchase and facilitation of prostitution.⁸ By implementing this legislation, abolitionists hope to criminalize the sex industry without criminalizing prostitutes. Generally, abolitionists work closely with law enforcement agencies and social welfare providers to rescue people from prostitution, offer them therapeutic reintegration services, and support their transition into the formal labor market, a system Laura María Agustín (2007) called “the rescue industry” (p. 8). This approach centers on supporting what abolitionists consider to be the most vulnerable people in the sex trade: those who desperately want to escape the bondage of forced sexual labor.

Against abolitionism, sex workers and their advocates argue that prostitution is not inherently more exploitative or demoralizing than other forms of “legitimate” labor, that it is possible to consent to prostitution and that law enforcement should focus exclusively on eliminating nonconsensual prostitution. They oppose the “partial criminalization” model favored by abolitionists because this legal approach does not distinguish between coercive and supportive forms of “facilitation,” meaning that under abolitionist laws, landlords, security guards, drivers, web hosts, and financial institutions can be charged with pimping if they offer services to prostitutes.⁹ These laws push sex workers underground and into dangerous situations where they are vulnerable to exploitation and violence (Vanwesenbeeck, 2019). In this precarious environment, sex workers mobilize sex-positive feminist and queer discourses associated with consent to destigmatize themselves and differentiate themselves from sex trafficking victims.

⁸ Although some abolitionists believe that consensual prostitution does exist, they consider it rare and ultimately inconsequential. Following this logic, abolitionists support the idea that the prostitution industry must be eliminated because it is powered by sex trafficking.

⁹ For example, on April 11, 2018, U.S. President Donald Trump signed two anti-sex trafficking bills into law that criminalized sex work: the House bill FOSTA, the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act, and the Senate bill, SESTA, the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act. FOSTA-SESTA removed several safe harbor provisions of Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act. Before FOSTA-SESTA, Section 230 protected website operators from being held responsible for user-generated content posted on their platforms. As a result of FOSTA-SESTA, website publishers are now liable for the content third parties post on their websites if this content “facilitates or promotes prostitution” (Tichenor, 2020).

In *Reading, Writing, and Rewriting the Prostitute Body*, Shannon Bell (1994) argued that “modernity, through a process of othering, has produced ‘the prostitute’ as the other of the other: the other within the categorical other ‘woman’” (p. 2). She describes the modern historical trajectory from the nineteenth-century construction of the prostitute as a pathological object, to the twentieth-century psychoanalytic invention of the virtuous woman based on a contrast with the prostitute woman, to a feminist reinterpretation of the prostitute in the image of male sexual power. She offered a “positive construction of the prostitute body” through a reading of performance art and ancient Greek texts to counteract these overwhelmingly negative representations (p. 4). In *White Supremacy, Racism and the Coloniality of Anti-Trafficking*, Kamala Kempadoo and Elena Shih (2023) argue that sex workers have developed a resistance movement from the defensive position of trying to secure basic rights against the “dehumanizing logic” of anti-sex trafficking discourse (p. 416).

In *Revolting Prostitutes* (2018), sex workers Molly Smith and Juno Mac criticized abolitionists for promoting anti-sex trafficking policies by describing sex workers in dehumanizing ways: as “garbage cans, flesh holes, sperm receptacles, orifices [and] blow-up dolls” for men (p. 4). In these representations, prostitutes become the other of the consenting subject: emblems of degraded, receptive, masochistic feminine sexuality, which is symbolized in negating terms. These depictions of prostitutes have led some researchers to claim that “the discourse of ‘sex trafficking’ is itself a form of epistemic violence that silences sex workers and leaves them vulnerable to abuse” (Chapman-Schmidt, 2019, p. 1).

This epistemic violence comes from diverse fields. Clinical psychologist and abolitionist activist Melissa Farley et al. (2018) claimed that most “prostituted women” have sustained traumatic brain injuries from being hit in the head with physical objects by pimps (Farley et al.,

2018). In a more theoretical vein, Elon University professor of philosophy Ann Cahill (2010) argued that “almost all” prostitutes have “derivatized minds” because their subjectivity has been “negated” through sexual transactions (pp. 117–118). University of Chicago professor of law Catharine MacKinnon (2021) asserted that prostitution is tantamount to “sustaining the trauma of a torture chamber,” (p. 313) and prostitutes “require dissociation from [themselves] and the world to survive” (170). Abolitionist author and activist Julie Bindel (2017) argued that the sex workers’ rights movement is funded by the “multi-billion-dollar sex industry” and run by the “pimp lobby” (p. 13). In abolitionist discourse, it is often considered imperative to spread awareness about the pervasive (but deeply hidden and widely ignored) reality of sex trafficking, despite or perhaps because of insufficient evidence to support these claims (Vanwesenbeeck, 2019, p. 1961).

Critical race and decolonial scholars have argued that to construct the figure of the prostitute as the ultimate victim of patriarchy, sex trafficking discourses have portrayed pimps and traffickers in terms of racialized sexual monstrosity. These representations have been used to promote harsh immigration policies and the passage of draconian laws aimed at punishing people in the informal labor market (Mahdavi, 2013). Under some abolitionist laws, for example, individuals who “facilitate” the prostitution of other people, including non-violent facilitators who help sex workers cross borders, can be charged with trafficking (Vuolajärvi, 2019). In *From Trafficking to Terror: Constructing a Global Social Problem*, Mahdavi (2013) argues that “public anxieties pertaining to immoral behavior about sexuality, Islam, and immigration” formed an integral part of the “the trafficking and terror paradigm” or the co-construction of the war on terror and the war on sex trafficking (p. 11).

When sex workers assert their consent in a discursive context shaped by anti-sex trafficking hegemony, it can disrupt two processes: (1) the process whereby audiences are granted an outlet to explore the abject elements of sex from a safe distance by projecting sexual anxiety onto Othered prostitute bodies and subjectivities and (2) the projection of sexual aversion onto figures of sexual monstrosity (i.e., johns, pimps, and traffickers). In this context, it would be a mistake to rush to the conclusion that when sex workers assert their consent (using the terms of ego psychology), it is an expression of hegemonic subjectivity, evidence of the successful commodification of sexuality, or a defensive fantasy of subjective wholeness and mastery. However, this is precisely what happens when some cultural critics and feminists suggest that the sex worker rights narrative is naïve (Cahill, 2010), neoliberal (Oksala, 2016), or a trauma response (Alcoff, 2018).

I argue that sex work sheds light on significant differences in experience represented under the sign of “sex” and thus has the potential for disrupting totalizing representations, which are common in both consent culture discourse and critical consent discourse. I will provide a few examples from critical consent discourse. In *Rape and Resistance: Understanding the Complexities of Sexual Violation*, Alcoff (2018) suggested that transactional sex is distinctly traumatic. While she used Foucault to propose that we adopt an attitude of “discursive relativism” toward firsthand accounts of sexual violation, she implied that prostitution may be an exception to this rule. She cited only one person who has worked in the sex industry, Rachel Moran, who equates sex worker agency with psychic pain, writing that “the survival strategies of defiance and denial [associated with the assertion of consent by sex workers] are most commonly practiced by those who are so injured by prostitution as to have to block out their reality with alcohol and other mind-altering drugs” (p. 127).

In *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again: Women and Desire in the Age of Consent*, Angel (2021) defines sex in terms of vulnerability, writing, “*In all sex*, we are quintessentially vulnerable: unclothed, injurable both physically and psychologically” (p. 101, emphasis mine). Angel further argued that our embrace of this vulnerability should define the “utopian horizon” of sex. Like Angel, Saketopoulou (2023) emphasized the risk inherent to sex. In *Sexuality Beyond Consent: Risk, Race, Traumatophilia*, they wrote, “I intervene in ongoing conversations about affirmative consent to argue a point that runs through this book: while violations of consent are real and deserve our attention, affirmative consent does not” (2023, p. 3). In *Hatred of Sex*, Davis and Dean (2022) also highlighted the inherent negativity of sexual experience, defining sex in terms of hate.

Introducing Lacan into this conversation is insightful because he insisted that the sexual relation does not exist. Against the psychoanalytic idea that sex is necessarily dysregulating, against the idea in consent culture that sex can be represented in terms of ego psychology, and against post-structuralist approaches that reduce sex to historical norms, I use Lacan here to emphasize the magnitude of epistemic failure associated with the sexual impasse. I do so to caution against centering any one phenomenological, ontological, psychoanalytic, or discursive account of sex. Lacan’s split between phallic and Other jouissance is relevant to the topic of sex work in that it allows us to speak on the phallic side, thereby avoiding the dramatization of all representations of sex in anti-sex trafficking discourse. Put another way, anti-sex trafficking discourse frames all transactional sex as a specifically destructive and dangerous form of Other jouissance. In response, sex workers must emphasize the phallic dimension to counter this marginalizing, stigmatizing, and criminalizing characterization.

Although they do not focus on consent or mention Lacan, sex workers Molly Smith and Juno Mac (2018) demonstrated awareness of the reductive nature of the emphasis on consent in sex worker rights discourses. They proposed a paradigm shift in sex worker rights from a liberal and sex-positive orientation to an economic materialist one that withdraws from abstract cultural debates regarding gender and sexuality. Against the abolitionist tendency to ignore the material conditions of prostitution through sensationalist sexual discourses, the authors claimed that sex workers should disengage from theoretical debates regarding sexuality to focus on labor-centered politics. As an oppositional strategy to abolitionism and liberalism, this is a valuable contribution.

There are, however, significant limitations to this approach. For example, it corresponds to the popular argument that sex workers should be listened to and taken seriously *only* when it comes to asserting the need for decriminalization, but that they do not have anything to contribute to our understanding of sex and sexuality. In *A Right to Sex*, for example, which includes an extended critique of consent frameworks, Srinivasan (2021) supported sex workers' rights on the pragmatic grounds that capitalism is oppressive and the carceral system is racist. Srinivasan thus emphasized that a racist legal system should not punish sex workers for doing work that may be necessary for survival. However, when theorizing about sexuality, she turned to the totalizing abolitionist ideas of Catherine McKinnon. Such discourses leave no space for the development of a political project that includes the participation of sex workers in accounting for the psychic and political significance of their *sexual* experiences, which might shed light on the symptomatic nature of anti-prostitution attitudes.

Another limitation to the economic materialist approach advanced by Mac and Smith is that even if sex workers do not speak about their sexual experiences, their silence will be

interpreted anyway. Consider Johanna Oksala's (2016) discussion of sex worker politics and neoliberalism in *Feminist Experiences: Foucauldian and Phenomenological Investigations*. In this book, Oksala insightfully argued that "neoliberal governmentality effectively undermines the relational autonomy of us all" (pp. 141–142) and that feminist theory and politics must take a firm stand on the acceptable limits of the market. However, she represented sex worker rights discourse as an example of the "expansion of market rationality to all areas of life," arguing that the prevailing sex worker rights movement "operates according to the same economic logic as neoliberalism" (Oksala, 2016, p. 143).

In her critique of a materialist approach to securing sex worker rights, Oksala (2016) claimed that it is "important to consider how such a purely economic approach to sex work, may contribute to the increasing difficulty of raising critical questions about the moral limits of the market —the fundamental question of what we as a society should believe should be for sale" (p. 143). Urging feminists to continue to interrogate sex work, she wrote,

"As feminist research has demonstrated, sex workers' subjectivities are complex and do not easily fit into the binaries between forced/voluntary, victim, free agent, active/passive. From a Foucauldian perspective, their subjectivities too have to be examined in relation to the governmental rationalities, power relations, discursive regimes, and juridical norms that *constitute them*. (Oksala, 2016, p. 143, emphasis mine)

Since many feminists and cultural critics have accused sex workers of promoting simplistic and naïve accounts of sexuality (naïve and simplistic because based on the logics of consent), one response by sex workers, as exemplified by Smith and Mac (2018), has been to frame their movement in terms of materialist politics based on harm reduction principles, avoiding unnecessary references to sex and sexuality. In Oksala's Feminist/Foucauldian

approach, however, it is the economic discourse that is represented as simplistic because it colludes with the neoliberalization of subjectivity and social life. Although Oksana recognized that neoliberalism shapes all subjectivity, she implied that sex work is the site where market rationality commodifies the self in an especially deep and intimate way. However, as Martha Nussbaum (1998) has argued, it is not clear why we should imagine the sex worker and not, for example, the philosophy professor, as being representative of the commodification of the self. Nussbaum's suggestion to question the ability of the professor to diagnose the sex workers' subjectivity as commodified makes sense given that to be successful in academia, one must, to some extent, conform to the rules and norms of the neoliberal academic institution.

Although Oksala (2016) discouraged binary logics, she claimed that sex workers are *constituted by* neoliberal regimes, including juridical norms, even though (compared, for example, to philosophy professors) sex workers are criminals: subjects who disobey the law. Considering the problem with confessional discourse, I would point out here that no one needs to be reminded that philosophy professors are neither purely victims nor agents, constituted by neither an active nor passive subjectivity. If we say that philosophy professors are constituted by neoliberal discourse, it does not convey the same objectifying message because of the relatively respectable social position of philosophers compared to sex workers. This reflects a problem with Foucauldian/feminist approaches that ignore the subject of the drive. Certain subjects and groups become marked as representatives of normativity, defined by the terms of discursive regimes. This pathologizing enables a kind of panopticism, where certain subjects are imagined to exist as they are seen. We might say that the "sex worker does not exist" in the sense that descriptions of her seem to be more about the preoccupations of those commenting on her

subjectivity and less about her own symptoms. To be clear, I am not saying that sex workers do not have symptoms, only that there is no space for their articulation.

It is common in feminist and queer theory to refer to the “erotic” instead of “sex” to problematize the simple definition of sex as intercourse.¹⁰ However, even within more open-ended concepts such as the erotic, we find at least this minimal definition: the presence of arousal or any sensation that crosses a certain threshold of intensity. However, the experience of sex in sex work might complicate the universalization of even this most basic assumption. When translating the complex social and subjective phenomenon of prostitution into a sensational story about sexual violence and commodification, there is a tendency to conflate transactional sex with non-transactional sex and what is sometimes non-benign sex (or sex without desire, intimacy, or pleasure) with sexual violation. This conflation is one manifestation of a broader assumption that sex workers enter transactional sexual engagements with the same desires and expectations as in more conventional erotic or romantic ones.

At the Sex Workers’ Festival of Resistance in New York City in 2018, a sex worker told me that it is possible to engage in non-traumatic sexual transactions without any expectations or feelings of pleasure, intimacy, or disappointment. She described a typical transaction to me as uneventful and boring, centering on vaginal intercourse. Since she is not particularly turned on by vaginal intercourse, she explained, she does not even recognize it as “sex” because in her “civic” life she prefers to engage in other erotic activities. Her anecdote is, of course, only one possible experience of sex work, and it is associated with certain privileges. I mention it here to

¹⁰ The classic feminist example of this comes from Audre Lorde’s foundational intersectional feminist text, “Uses of the Erotic” (1978/2012), where Lorde juxtaposed “the pornographic” with “the erotic”: the anti-normative creative forces associated with historically devalued feminine qualities. Although this text is used to expand the definition of sexuality, it is worth noting that it was used in the sex wars debate (with Lorde’s support) as evidence for the criminalization of pornography (Bracewell, 2021).

suggest, in line with sex worker rights discourse, that people can engage in what is typically considered “sex” without experiencing the phenomenological or psychical effects typically associated with it. Her point was that transactional sex does not necessarily entail the set of symptoms commonly associated with fulfilling sex, traumatic sex or even ambivalent sex.

From a psychoanalytic point of view, of course, we might wonder whether this is an accurate description of her experience or whether it is a strategy for dealing with anxiety or shame, or simply a story made up to convey something politically important, but too subjectively complex to be communicated in a short period of time to a stranger. From a Foucauldian viewpoint, we might wonder whether this story is strategically designed to counteract an abolitionist deployment of sexuality. It seems reasonable to assume that sex workers would avoid addressing the negative and contradictory dimensions of sex, including considerations associated with loss, trauma, and shame, and instead reiterate sterile depictions of sex using consent logics due to the prominence of these negative themes in a rigid and redemptive form aimed at sex workers within anti-sex trafficking discourses. With this in mind, we would be inclined to interrogate the confessional nature of the interaction to emphasize the impossible position she is in. She must speak to disrupt the stories other people tell about her and because of the way her silence will be interpreted if she does not speak. And yet, she must speak in a particular way to avoid being further pathologized and criminalized. My sexuality is not on display or on trial in this interaction. I do not need to defend myself. I am like the analyst who listens and then interprets and assesses. Since my sexuality is recognized as “normal” in the context of this exchange, she does not have the authority to interrogate my subjectivity.

Shifting attention to the Lacanian subject of the drive is useful here to break up the confessional structure of the interaction by bringing into play my unconscious (or my extimate

subjectivity), the social realm as Other, and the sex worker's split subjectivity as well as the dynamic constellation of unconscious symptoms at play at every level. To adopt a tone that has become associated with a sex worker rights paradigm, one could argue that not taking the sex worker at her word is a form of epistemic violence considering the extent of oppressive discourses that attempt to silence her and disqualify her speech. Indeed, to diagnose her and not all people everywhere with unconscious conflicts and sexual symptoms would be unjust. However, what a Lacanian view makes clear is that there is also harm in not acknowledging her split subjectivity (and by this I do not mean the common idea in critical theory that she is neither passive nor active, guilty nor innocent, etc., which entails situating her in terms of a compromise between opposing signifiers). Rather, I mean acknowledging her in terms of what is not visible and what cannot be mapped by discourse analysis: her *jouissance*, her singular symptom, her sexual aim, her relation to the Real, etc.

Some would argue that the complications posed by a consideration of transactional sex are peripheral to general discussions about the nature of sex and consent, a special case that could be consigned to a footnote. However, I would point to the scope and relevance of transactional sex in contemporary society, on both sex workers and the public. There are currently over 100 million daily visitors to Pornhub alone (Saunders, 2025), and these visits only represent the most visible dimension of sex work. Many forms of sex work, such as prostitution, cannot be studied directly due to stigma and criminalization. It is also possible that with the advent of new technologies, new forms of sex work will evolve. It is reasonable to assume that the sexual impasse may become more difficult to cover. We can expect this to give rise to new symptoms that consent culture and critical discourses of consent may not be equipped to deal with.

I support the decriminalization of sex work and the shift away from a sex trafficking paradigm to a sex worker rights paradigm because the anti-sex trafficking and sex worker rights movements have formed in opposition to one another but not on equal terms. Although the concept of “sex work” emerged to name the experiences and political organizing of a criminalized group, the anti-trafficking movement emerged as an institutional project based on sexual reform (Bernstein, 2019). Through research and organizing, sex workers have tried to demonstrate the harms of the anti-sex trafficking approach. Yet, prostitution laws and policies around the world continue to be shaped primarily by an unreconstructed anti-trafficking framework. This circumstance coincides with evidence that the abolitionist anti-trafficking movement has not been receptive to criticism by sex workers and that the supposed theoretical potential for joint action has not materialized on the ground (Kempadoo & Durisin, 2020). Although I support this shift, I do so with considerable apprehension, and I caution against uncritically embracing a sex worker rights framework. The current emphasis on consent in sex worker rights discourses can obscure complex forms of interpersonal exploitation and relational harm made visible by the anti-sex trafficking movement.

There is some evidence that, despite abolitionist juridical hegemony, the abolitionist anti-sex trafficking movement is starting to lose its hegemonic hold on both popular and institutional discourses on prostitution. In “The Mainstreaming of Sex Workers’ Rights as Human Rights” Mgbako (2020) observed that prominent transnational, intergovernmental, and human rights institutions have recently embraced key features of the sex workers’ rights movement.¹¹

¹¹ UNAIDS, the World Health Organization, Human Rights’ Watch, and Amnesty International have all declared their support for the decriminalization of sex work (Mgbako, 2020). In the United States, sex workers’ rights became a topic of mainstream discussion after President Donald Trump signed the abolitionist bill SESA/FOSTA into law. These laws received widespread negative press coverage and brought the abolitionist movement under unprecedented scrutiny. Several progressive politicians, including Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, declared their support for the decriminalization of sex work (Helmores, 2019). During the 2020 presidential primaries, democratic

Although sex workers remain widely marginalized, stigmatized, and criminalized around the world, these events suggest that sex worker activism is paying off. If sex workers continue to gain inclusion and support from mainstream institutions and audiences, questions about the shape and direction of their movement will become increasingly relevant to resistance against cooptation.

Since sex workers have been the target of evangelical savior campaigns (see Bernstein, 2019) and criminalization regimes, they have unsurprisingly positioned themselves as victims of (sexual) repression. The depiction that sex workers are subjected to sexual repression often slips into the depiction that a sexually repressive society victimizes sex workers. By focusing on repressive mechanisms of power (exclusion, denial, invalidation, prohibition, silencing), sex workers often fail to interrogate productive dimensions of power, including the power relations that constitute liberal humanist discourses and regimes of truth, such as consent culture. Thus, sex workers' rights advocates often embrace a political approach that relies on what Foucault (1978) called "the speaker's benefit" (p. 6) by rooting liberatory politics in the amplification, validation, and celebration of sex workers' voices. Posing sex workers' voices as true and liberatory makes a certain amount of sense in a discursive context shaped by anti-sex trafficking hegemony. However, discourses dissolve, mutate, multiply, resurface, and even reverse course, sometimes in unexpected ways (Puar, 2018). Therefore, it is important to engage in anticipatory projects that can imagine and plan for these shifts.

candidates were asked, perhaps for the first time, to state their position on the criminalization of the sex trade (Cohen, 2019).

Chapter Four: The Other Side of Consent: A Lacanian Analysis of Psychological Abuse

Psychological abuse is widely ignored in consent culture and in discourses critical of consent frameworks. Consent culture ignores psychological abuse because it presupposes a consenting subject with sufficient ego strength to make autonomous rational decisions. Critical feminist analyses of consent culture, including intersectional feminist analyses that emphasize history, discourse, and power relations, do not address psychological abuse because these frameworks focus on structural rather than interpersonal issues. Queer critiques of consent do not address the issue of psychological abuse because such abuse is not obviously related to questions of deviant sexuality. Psychoanalytic critiques of consent culture overlook psychological abuse because acknowledging it would complicate idealized representations of dysregulating psychosexual experiences.

I put Lacan in conversation with psychological abuse research and victim narratives to complicate generalizing representations of sexual subjectivity in these discourses. Referring primarily to research on narcissistic and psychopathic abuse in sexual relationships, I use Lacanian theory to analyze the mechanisms of psychological abuse and destigmatize victims. A Lacanian analysis offers new words, concepts, and metaphors for understanding the seriousness of this issue. A Lacanian approach also reveals how idealized assumptions about harmonious intersubjectivity in consent discourse and traditional clinical frameworks obscure the complexities of psychological abuse.

Regarding psychological abuse victims, my argument begins with the observation that consent culture frameworks systematically ignore the experiences of psychological abuse victims due to underlying assumptions about the psychic fortitude of the normal, healthy consenting subject. Building on this, I argue that the experiences of psychological abuse victims offer

important insights into the sexual impasse. I suggest that individuals associated with the “not all” of the feminine position may be more susceptible to psychological abuse, yet this susceptibility is not a pathological deficiency. I assert that a victim’s capacity to reconstitute themselves following the shattering experience of destructive *jouissance*—in this case, psychological abuse—depends not on individual courage, ego strength, or adaptive capacity, but rather on their position within the symbolic order, specifically their access to adequate social recognition and support. I maintain that Lacanian psychoanalysis offers uniquely valuable resources for victims in recovery.

Regarding psychological abusers, my argument can be summarized as follows. First, given the non-existence of the sexual relation, the non-correspondence between signifier and signified, and the constitutive unconscious, psychological abuse can be conceptualized as a highly creative and idiosyncratic endeavor. Thus, we cannot expect clinical methods or the intuitive assumptions of consent culture to reliably identify, diagnose, or cure psychological abusers. The current trend toward denouncing physical and emotional abuse¹² while excusing or trivializing psychological abuse is misguided, given that psychological abusers may be less vulnerable than physical and emotional abusers, due to their capacity for strategic covert harm. In a society where psychological abuse receives social recognition and where abusers face accountability for their actions, a Lacanian approach could encourage a more compassionate, less othering and punitive stance toward abusers, given that the Lacanian perspective foregrounds the fundamentally deceptive nature of all human interaction.

I draw on the complications of psychological abuse as a way to emphasize the interrelated nature of the threads of the Borromean knot. Attending to the complications of

¹² See my discussion below concerning the difference between psychological (covert) and emotional (overt) abuse

psychological abuse helps me avoid overemphasizing or romanticizing the Real by neglecting the significance of the symbolic and imaginary registers, which is where Lacan places the ego. My aim is to show that consent is not merely a legal concept simply relevant in the courtroom or in hegemonic liberal discourses, as sometimes implied in critical consent discourse. Rather, I hope to show that consent can be conceptualized, in some contexts, as a creative endeavor, one that involves courage and imagination. Cult survivor and psychoanalyst Daniel Shaw (2022) referred to the complex task of recovering from a psychologically abusive relationship with the help of a psychoanalyst this way: “Liberation from the prison of shame and fear is a central theme of this therapeutic quest, and it is often a labyrinthine journey” (p. 5). Healing from psychological abuse, Shaw argued, involves the long, slow, careful, creative, and collaborative work of repairing and strengthening the self.

Defining Psychological Abuse

Discussing psychological abuse presents a dual challenge. On one hand, it is often ignored or trivialized as not “real” abuse. On the other hand, when the term is used, it is applied to such a wide range of behaviors that the specific and uniquely devastating effects of severe psychological abuse are often obscured by conflation with common forms of interpersonal mistreatment or overshadowed by more accessible arguments about specific manipulation tactics. For example, in *The Gaslight Effect*, Stern (2018) explained that the term gaslight is named after a movie where a man tries to make his wife believe she is going insane so he can distract her while he schemes to steal her inheritance. In contrast to this depiction, Stern argued, gaslighting is primarily unconscious and involves the participation of both parties, describing it as a dance involving two partners. This emphasis on unconsciousness and mutuality makes it

hard to conceptualize cases where gaslighting is part of a traumatizing relational system involving a victim and an abuser.

In this chapter, I use the term psychological abuse to refer to a system where one person subjects another to a pervasive pattern of covert manipulation that induces symptoms of cognitive dissonance and dissociation. It represents a calculated, invasive, and ongoing form of abuse intended to undermine the victim's sense of reality, self-worth, and autonomy. This definition does not refer to isolated instances of deception but rather to elaborate strategies of manipulation, perpetrated by individuals with traits such as callousness, sadism, and Machiavellianism (Lyons, 2019).

Psychological abuse presents unique challenges to consent culture. Unlike physical violence and verbal abuse, it is difficult to identify, define, describe, and measure (Follingstad, 2007). This inherent difficulty may help explain why psychological abuse remains widely overlooked in popular, clinical, and academic discourse, leaving victims vulnerable to re-traumatization through widespread ignorance and invalidation (Arabi, 2017). According to psychoanalyst Daniel Shaw (2022), awareness and understanding in the clinical community and larger public of psychological abuse is “about where rape, domestic violence, and incest were prior to the 1980s” (p. 12).

The effects of psychological abuse have primarily been studied on children apprehended by social welfare services¹³ and by victims who have also experienced physical or sexual abuse. Consequently, the unique effects of psychological abuse as an isolated and hidden strategy deployed against adults are understudied. However, survivor-led recovery communities provide valuable insights. As psychoanalyst Hila Yahalom (2024), explained in her book on narcissistic

¹³ Research priorities may imply the misguided assumption that psychological abuse primarily affects children, not adults. This reflects a common tendency to underestimate the unconscious vulnerabilities that persist into adulthood.

parenting, an entire recovery community and discourse has emerged around the term “narcissistic abuse” to make sense of the experiences of psychological abuse victims and to fill the “void” in therapeutic literature on this topic (p. 4). My approach to theorizing psychological abuse draws primarily on the small number of work by survivors of psychological abuse who are also therapists specializing in treating psychological abuse victims (Arabi, 2017; Morningstar, 2017; Shaw, 2021; Thomas, 2016).

Following Sharon Thomas (2016), I draw a crucial distinction between emotional abuse and psychological abuse. In this framework, emotional abuse refers to overtly cruel behavior: threats, insults, brutal “honesty,” or the use of sarcasm or belittling language to demean someone. Psychological abuse, in contrast, is covert, and often disguised as love and affection. While this distinction has limitations, particularly in obscuring situations where emotional and psychological abuse occur together in indistinguishable ways, it helps isolate and illuminate a systemically ignored problem. I use “psychological abuse” here as an umbrella term encompassing phenomena that clinical, legal, psychiatric, and sociological disciplines variously label as narcissistic abuse, psychopathic abuse, and sociopathic abuse. These terms share a defining characteristic: the use of severe manipulation tactics to systematically undermine victims’ psychological functioning.

Regarding the distinction between emotional (overt) abuse and psychological (covert) abuse, Thomas (2016) claimed that emotional abusers have empathy for others but struggle with issues that impair their ability to express this empathy. As an example, she described someone struggling with a drug addiction who harms others in an attempt to manage their pain. If this person recovered from their addiction, the abusive behavior would diminish. Psychological abuse, by contrast, is not enacted out of impaired judgment or any straightforward reaction to

suffering; instead, it is characterized by enjoyment or exploitation. In other words, for Thomas (2016), emotional abuse is reactive and unconscious, an expression of pain or loss, whereas psychological abuse is intentional and organized around pleasure or profit.

Although I do not want to attribute specific intentions to abusers, neatly separate conscious from unconscious motivations or clearly distinguish pleasure from pain, I follow Thomas (2016) in framing psychological abuse as a form of calculated and hidden abuse. What I appreciate about her distinction is that it disrupts the tendency to conflate visible and invisible forms of non-physical abuse and shifts attention to the premeditated and organized aspects of severe forms of manipulation. This distinction is essential to understanding why psychological abuse is categorically different from isolated instances of manipulation and deception, and why it is so difficult to identify and understand.

The Art of Psychological Abuse

Like powerful art, effective psychological abuse resists articulation: the more profound its impact, the harder it is to describe. Thomas (2016) elaborates on the dual challenge victims face: first identifying that abuse is occurring, and then finding ways to explain it to others. In non-psychologically abusive relationships, instances of manipulation and deception exist in isolation, whereas in psychologically abusive relationships, they are comprehensive. As Thomas explains, psychological abuse is like a picture comprised of hundreds of dots: you cannot see the whole picture by focusing only on one small dot. Many victims find that they can only articulate their experiences by describing isolated incidents, but these fragments fail to convey the systematic nature of coordinated manipulation. As a result, when victims attempt to share their experiences, they often report feeling and appearing petty, paranoid, and hypersensitive, complaining about things all people experience in love relations.

Thomas (2016) describes the experience of psychological abuse as trying to navigate an impossible situation or an “ever-changing maze,” reflecting the creative and adaptive nature of sophisticated manipulation tactics. She wrote, “Psychological abuse is perhaps one of the most hidden injustices of our times because it leaves the targets unable to trust even themselves. It is as if their lives are being violently shaken, like one would shake a snow globe, and everything is swirling in chaos” (pp. xvi-xvii). After living in a state of hypervigilance, perpetually confused, exhausted, and ashamed, it becomes difficult for the victim to critically evaluate the situation.

Another problem that makes psychological abuse difficult to talk about is that it is often perpetrated by those who would never be suspected of being abusive. For Thomas (2016), this is not a coincidence. Psychologically abusive people often adopt an altruistic social persona to deflect any accusations made against them by their victims, sometimes seeking out professions associated with trust and care. Clinical psychologist Martha Stout (2020) disputes the common assumption that abusers are violent criminals, arguing that most sociopathic abusers are invisible to authorities. As opposed to using overt aggression and violence, they are more likely to “lead [their] lover into financial ruin, quietly damag[e] [their] colleague’s career, or carv[e] permanent psychological scars into a vulnerable person’s psyche” in ways that evade social recognition and legal accountability (p. 9). She claimed that psychological abusers strategically perform kindness, empathy, vulnerability, warmth, sensitivity, and trauma as strategies to enact harm, taking advantage of tendencies to interpret subjectivity based on outward performance (Stout, 2020). She wrote,

I have asked countless former victims whether they had any early suspicions that they were being deceived, and nearly all have given the same answer. In the beginning, they saw someone who had a great deal of charm and an intense interest in what other people

had to say, someone who was very complimentary. They saw no red flags. They were without a clue until they began to be victimized, and many remained so long after that.

(Stout, 2020, p. 25)

Forensic psychologist Robert Hare (1999) also emphasized the difficulty of recognizing psychological abuse tactics, writing that, “Everyone, including the experts, can be taken in, manipulated, conned, and left bewildered by them. A good psychopath can play a concerto on anyone’s heartstrings” (p. 207).

Since consent culture tends to reinforce the idea that people are who they say they are, that they want what they say they want, and that their outward behavior is relatively easy to interpret, it significantly contributes to the invisibility of psychological abuse. The way consent culture represents mental health compounds this problem by framing symptoms as individual pathologies rather than relational dynamics. People in psychologically abusive relationships commonly come to believe they have clinical disorders such as bipolar disorder and narcissistic personality disorder. They are often misdiagnosed by professionals or incorrectly self-diagnose because they lack a framework for understanding the link between psychological abuse and their symptoms (Arabi, 2017). According to Thomas (2016) when a victim of psychological abuse realizes in recovery she is not “crazy” it is a profound and shocking revelation (p. xxiv).

Yahalom (2024) also emphasizes the distinct harm associated with concealed forms of abuse. Referring to victim narratives, she wrote, “an almost universal, recurring pattern [in narcissistic abuse survival literature] was that their understanding of having been abused came as a late epiphany, after enduring years of mental suffering they could not explain, and that the recovery process could commence only after they could acknowledge that” (p. 4). The idea prevalent in consent culture that people inherently know their own desires breaks down in

psychologically abusive relationships, where manipulation shapes what victims believe they want. For example, someone who has been isolated may sincerely believe they do not want social contact, when this is actually a intuition shaped by ongoing gaslighting.

We can explore the intricate and insidious nature of psychological abuse by turning to an argument Foucault develops in *Discipline and Punish* (1975/1995) and *The History of Sexuality Volume One* (1978). According to Foucault (1975/1995) those who use direct aggression or detectable methods of control are relatively disempowered compared to those who can control others more discretely by working at the intersections of knowledge and pleasure. We can refer to the former as direct force and to the latter as discursive power. Foucault (1978) argued that when power operates through knowledge and pleasure, rather than direct force, it is more effective at reshaping subjectivity. Unlike direct aggression, which maintains a relatively clear distinction between perpetrator and victim, and between subjugation and freedom, discursive power works by operating at the level of truth (Foucault, 1980). We can apply the Foucauldian distinction between direct force and discursive power to Thomas's (2016) distinction between emotional and psychological abuse, respectively. When emotional abusers use threats, insults, and other forms of verbal aggression, they reveal the limitations of their power. Their abuse maintains a certain clarity that potentially allows for recognition, accountability, and intervention. Psychological abusers, by contrast, demonstrate greater control over themselves and their victims, proceeding with actions designed to minimize detection. They understand that the most effective forms of power are those that quietly persuade victims that their suffering is natural, deserved, inevitable, self-inflicted, or actually desirable.

In the context of effective psychological abuse, victims become unwitting collaborators in their own subjugation. This situation makes resistance particularly difficult because victims

cannot identify the source of their suffering or seek validation from others. To be clear, I do not mean to imply that psychological abuse is more damaging than physical or emotional abuse. My intention is only to isolate and illuminate a form of harm particular to psychological (hidden) abuse.

Let me provide an example of how an emotionally abusive tactic differs from a psychologically abusive one. In an emotionally abusive relationship, an abuser isolates his partner by using overtly controlling tactics: threatening repercussions if she leaves the house, prohibiting her from spending time with others, or using insults and put-downs to erode her self-esteem and make her feel too ashamed to socialize. In a psychologically abusive relationship, by contrast, the abuser might encourage their partner to spend time with others while engaging in covert behaviors designed to alienate her from friends and family. For example, he might spread misinformation about her in strategically ambiguous ways (referred to in the recovery community as a “smear campaign”), repeatedly orchestrate crises before important social events to make others perceive her as unpleasant or unstable, or gaslight her into doubting her own sanity, leading her to “voluntarily” withdraw from social contact out of distress or shame. The psychological abuser may even express concern and worry about the victim’s antisocial behavior, especially if they are in couples therapy together and he is using the therapeutic space to gaslight her, which is a common psychological abuse tactic (Arabi, 2017). From this example, we see that emotional abuse is *comparatively* easy to identify and understand.

Psychological abuse usually only becomes visible when it involves high-profile cases featuring people who have also committed other forms of abuse. Examples include Harvey Weinstein (Farmer, 2019), Sean Combs or “Puff Daddy” (Andrews et al., 2024), Robert Sylvester Kelly or “R. Kelly” (DeRogatis, 2019), Jeffrey Epstein (McCreesh, 2025), Bill Cosby

(Myers, 2023), and Claudine (Dee Dee) Blanchard, mother of Gypsy Rose Blanchard (Salam, 2024). In such cases, the public is often shocked that the abuse went on for so long undetected by so many, that the abuse was so sophisticated and that the abusers were able to draw so many people into their schemes. When the truth is revealed, it is usually because of extraordinary events, such as the coordinated efforts of victims with institutional support, or lucky accidents that exposed the perpetrator. Examples include when video footage from a hotel hallway surfaced showing Sean Combs physically attacking his then-girlfriend Cassie Ventura (Andrews et al., 2024), or when Gypsy-Rose Blanchard found a man online to murder her mother, who had been psychologically abusing and poisoning her throughout her life (Salam, 2024). While I could elaborate on any one of these stories, much has already been written about them. Instead, I will provide three examples focused on more everyday forms of abuse, the kind that possibly occur much more often but are hidden to the public eye.

The first two examples are taken from *Nobody's Victim: Fighting Harassment Online and Off* by victims' rights attorney Carrie Goldberg (2019), who developed an interest in protecting the rights of victims after her own experience with psychological and sexual abuse. She uses cases from her legal experience to illustrate how technology has created new avenues for complex forms of psychological and sexual victimization. Goldberg represents clients who "have endured unimaginable offenses" (p. 1). She noted that clients usually seek her help after police and other legal and social service providers have failed to assist them. These clients are dismissed due to the hidden and complicated nature of the crimes they have endured. She wrote, "I meet people when they are desperate, traumatized, and even suicidal, which is exactly what [their] offenders want" (p. 2). Goldberg emphasized that anyone can become a victim of crimes

involving covert abuse, regardless of their education, emotional health, privilege, or wealth.¹⁴ I examine two cases from her book to demonstrate the concealed and organized nature of psychological abuse.

Francesca

Francesca sought legal services from Goldberg after receiving a series of disturbing communications from her ex-partners. The letters were sexually explicit and shaming in nature, with implications that she was being monitored. Throughout this experience, Francesca's partner provided consistent comfort and support. They spent considerable time analyzing the situation. The persistent and bizarre nature of the harassment began to take its toll. Francesca started feeling paranoid and went to therapy to understand what she had done in the past to attract so many unstable people into her life.

After the law firm traced the origin of a Word document of one of the harassing letters Francesca received, they discovered her current partner had orchestrated the events. Goldberg (2019) recounted how Francesca was shocked. She claimed that she never thought to implicate him because he was such a good partner. When Francesca and her partner first met, they bonded over their shared passion for social justice. He treated her well and was always sensitive and caring, writing her beautiful love letters. However, in retrospect, she recalled that he used the manipulation tactic of "strategic oversharing" (p. 16). He told her stories about his traumatic childhood and urged her to share as well. She revealed her secrets, insecurities, and fears. Although he was loving and accepting at the time, this information was later used against her when drafting the letters from her ex-partners.

¹⁴ However, Goldberg's services are expensive. Access to this kind of specialized legal support is inaccessible to many people. This makes it difficult to determine which demographics are most affected by these crimes. The significant point is that privilege, wealth, and social support do not guarantee protection.

Gathering sensitive information about victims and then using this information to gaslight them is a common psychological abuse tactic (Arabi, 2017). Shaw (2022) described how this process works in cults, explaining that abusers gather sensitive information by encouraging members to “shamefully confess [their] sins again and again” as part of a therapeutic process of supposed enlightenment, purification, redemption, or liberation (p. 27). Thomas argued that psychological abusers are constantly “collecting information” on victims, specifically about their sexual desires, shame, traumas, and inner conflicts (p. 43). This information can be used to pathologize victims when they become distressed in a psychologically abusive relationship. Abusers often urge victims to take responsibility for their symptoms, framing these symptoms in terms of the victim’s underlying or pre-existing pathology, deflecting attention from the psychological abuse (Arabi, 2017; Mackenzie, 2015; Thomas, 2016).

When Francesca met her partner, he claimed he had been fired from his job as a reporter at *The Intercept* because of racism, and she was angry on his behalf, as he was one of the only people of color working at the journal at the time. However, she later learned his termination was due to a deceptive pattern of behavior, similar to what she experienced with him. According to Francesca, her partner must have hacked into her devices, read her digital diary, and her history of social media messages to gather information, given that some of the content included in the letters was not information she directly relayed to him.

According to Goldberg (2019), Francesca’s experience conveys a “classic pattern of manipulation” featuring an outward performance of kindness, care, and sensitivity, while the information gleaned from their interactions was later weaponized to destabilize her sense of reality. After Francesca left him, the abuse escalated—he tried to frame her for various crimes, get her fired from her job, and alienate her from friends and family. Eventually, he was caught

and prosecuted, but only because he attempted to frame Francesca for calling in a bomb threat, which attracted FBI attention, and the FBI had sufficient resources to track him down. Goldberg wrote that Francesca was fortunate to have a strong support system, adequate resources to hire a legal team, and the luck of FBI involvement—only this combination of circumstances led to her perpetrator being caught and held accountable. When the FBI searched his apartment, they found twenty-five digital devices he had been using in his deceptions.

This case illustrates the hidden and often bizarre nature of psychological abuse as well as the harms of what Fabry (2024) called the “harmony bias” in relational accounts of self-understanding (p. 1). According to Fabry (2024), although relational theories of self-narration are superior to internalist ones, research in relational theories of the self have been shaped by a “harmony bias,” or “the tacit assumption that interlocutors contribute to self-narration in ways that are beneficial and supportive, rather than malicious and harmful” (p. 1). Fabry (2024) used gaslighting as an example to counter the harmony bias, showing how it undermines “the self-narrator’s mnemonic, interpretational, and conceptual abilities” (p. 1).

Rather than being helped by discussing her situation with her partner, these conversations made Francesca feel paranoid, which led her to go to therapy. In therapy, she focused on identifying dysfunctional patterns in past relationships, which contributed to her confusion. Since her partner’s behavior defied rational explanation and served no obvious function, it is possible that no amount of analysis, interpretation, and discussion in therapy would have led to understanding. This case reveals a limitation of consent culture, which suffers from a similar harmony bias in its emphasis on clear communication and intersubjective understanding (see my discussion of the functionalist bias of consent culture in chapter two).

Using Francesca's case, we can elaborate on the effectiveness of psychological abuse by drawing attention to similarities in the methods of psychoanalytic treatment and psychological abuse. In psychoanalysis, the analyst applies their understanding of unconscious processes to facilitate the analysand's psychic transformation. This process involves collecting intimate details about the analysand's past and inner life, then strategically using this knowledge to incite change. The analyst and analysand occupy different positions: while the analyst is relatively detached (their subjectivity is not the focus of examination and intervention), the analysand is deeply involved, putting themselves at risk. This is not to deny that countertransference can be disturbing for the analyst, but rather to acknowledge an important power difference inherent in the confessional structure of the clinic.¹⁵ However, in psychoanalysis, we can assume (or hope) that clinicians use these techniques to facilitate psychic transformations aimed at helping the analysand develop inspiring self-knowledge, resilience, and courage. Psychological abusers, by contrast, deploy similar techniques with the opposite intent: to dysregulate, debilitate, and devastate their victims.

Ana

The second case involves an 18-year-old woman named Ana who responded to an online advertisement seeking models. When she arrived, a man told her they were filming an erotic movie for a wealthy client in Asia. He assured her the movie would never become available online. She was offered alcohol to help her relax and asked to sign a consent form—a complicated legal document she did not understand. After filming, the video was distributed to multiple online websites with identifying information about her and her family, which led to her family relocating; however, their identifying information was again posted online (a practice

¹⁵ I would point out here that there is widespread agreement that analysts should not sleep with their analysands due to this significant power difference.

called doxxing). By the time Ana was in her twenties, the video had been viewed millions of times. Eventually, her family paid the film's producers six figures for copyright ownership so the video could be taken down.

According to Goldberg (2019), what happened to Ana is part of a prevalent strategy of psychological and sexual abuse used in the pornography industry. Referring to the website GirlsDoPorn, she claimed the pattern is predictable. The women respond to ambiguous advertisements about modelling, and when they arrive, they are told they are filming a pornographic movie for a private client overseas that will never be shown online. The producers connect potential victims with other women who supposedly filmed for the company in the past to put them at ease and reassure them that the films they shoot do not go online.

Before filming, the young women are offered drugs and alcohol to help them "relax" and presented with legal forms filled with "indecipherable legalese" that they are rushed into signing (p. 178). When one of Goldberg's clients tried to leave after signing the forms, the producer threatened to sue her. Goldberg reported that she commonly hears that sex scenes involve acts not agreed upon in advance, and victims are rarely paid the amount they are promised. Goldberg recounted that it is common for women's payments to be deducted based on age or "bruises, cellulite, visible scars" the producers claim make the videos less profitable (p. 178).

After being filmed, the videos are posted online with sample clips distributed across multiple websites, making efforts to take the videos down difficult since separate takedown notices must be issued to every individual web host—an expensive, time-consuming, and sometimes futile process. Another challenge is that the producers of these films often have money and resources—the reward of their exploitative endeavors—enabling them to hire expensive lawyers specializing in "intellectual property," which makes the videos difficult to

remove. Goldberg (2019) wrote that one lawyer associated with the website XXXLaw writes on his homepage, “The battle we will wage—and win—is not a narrow struggle merely about what is permissible in adult entertainment but rather about the range of the human soul to dream, express, and receive” (p. 185). When Goldberg tried to purchase a pornography video from him that involved a “brutally violent” scene filmed of her teenage client under duress, he referred to it as the “crown jewel” of his client’s collection in an attempt to raise the purchase price (p. 185).

The case of Ana combines what Thomas (2016) described as psychological abuse (manipulation, covert abuse) and emotional abuse (overtly cruel behavior). It also involves sexual violation and criminal offenses, albeit criminal offenses that are difficult to prosecute. However, I include Ana’s case here because it emphasizes the limitations of the legal notion of consent, the organized nature of hidden abuse, and the role of technology in facilitating covert consent violations. It also demonstrates the difficulty of separating online abuse from “real life” abuse, especially when dealing with tech-savvy and well-resourced perpetrators. Goldberg (2019) notes that many people mistakenly assume you can simply block abusive people, or decide not to engage with them. However, in reality, there are numerous ways predatory individuals can systemically abuse their victims using evolving online technologies. As Goldberg argues, there are entire business models built on psychological and sexual abuse schemes. As these technologies and business practices continue to evolve, we will need to have discourses of victimization and violation that can accommodate these complexities. In its current form, I argue that consent culture is not equipped for this task.

Donny

My last example is taken from the Netflix series *Baby Reindeer* (2024) written, produced, and starring Scottish comedian Richard Gadd based on his life. In the show, Gadd is portrayed as

“Donny.” The show depicts complex portrayals of emotional, psychological, and sexual abuse. The show centers on Donny’s encounters with Martha, who exhibits what Thomas (2016) would classify as emotional (overt) abuse. Martha harassed Donny, sending him over 40,000 emails, sabotaging his standup comedy shows, and interfering with his personal relationships, at one point physically attacking one of his partners, and threatening to hurt his family. Although Martha traumatizes Donny, the series presents her as a vulnerable individual grappling with trauma, paranoia, and delusional thinking. Gadd said of her

I can’t emphasize enough how much of a victim she is in all this. When we think of stalkers, we always think of films like *Misery* and *Fatal Attraction*, where the stalker is a monstrous figure in the night down an alleyway. But usually, it’s a prior relationship or someone you know or a work colleague. Stalking and harassment is a form of mental illness. It would have been wrong to paint her as a monster, because she’s unwell, and the system’s failed her. (Pollard, 2019, n.p)

Gadd’s compassionate representation of Martha contrasts sharply with his portrayal of Darrien (Episode 4), a person who embodies the traits of a psychological abuser. Darrien is a manipulative screenwriter who feigns interest in Donny’s creative work. While he offers Donny critical feedback—sometimes harshly critiquing his writing—he strategically intersperses this criticism with admiration. Leveraging his fame and industry success, Darrien claims to see potential in Donny’s writing and claims to want to help advance his career.

What follows is difficult to watch. Donny, a 25-year-old man, experiences ongoing psychological and sexual abuse from his “mentor,” Darrien, a 55-year-old industry professional. Their encounters, which occur regularly at Darrien’s home, follow a pattern designed to exploit Donny’s vulnerability. Darrien systematically pressures Donny into consuming various

substances under the pretense of shared experimentation and spiritual exploration. While Donny often appears reluctant to participate, his desire for Darrien's approval and validation overrides his instinctive resistance. This internal conflict sometimes manifests as a performance of Donny enthusiastically embracing whatever Darrien offers. Although Darrien claims to participate in the substance use with Donny, the show suggests a deliberate deception. Darrien appears to consume far less or none of the more potent substances, particularly during their most extreme sessions, allowing him to maintain control while Donny becomes increasingly incapacitated. This dynamic is visually reinforced through contrasting depictions: Donny appears severely intoxicated while Darrien remains notably more lucid and aware. One revealing scene occurs immediately after Darrien claims they will both be taking equal doses of LSD (28:00–28:50). The subsequent scene suggests this claim was false, as evidenced by the stark difference in their respective states of consciousness and behavior.

In the first scene involving sexual abuse, Darrien gives Donny MDMA and implies that he is going to help him become a famous writer. You have a “big future ahead” Darrien assured him. Donny's narration reveals his psychological state: “With every sentence he said and every drug I took, I started to believe it, smell it, taste it even, that my dreams were quantifiable, that I could almost reach out and grasp them.” After reaching euphoria, Donny becomes violently ill, and Darrien sexually abuses him as he vomits. Despite being clearly distressed during the assault and crying afterward, Donny apologizes to Darrien for vomiting (20:40–23:50).

Darrien uses sophisticated manipulation tactics to maintain control and ensure Donny's return. He fabricates stories about Donny's script, claiming he has shown it to prominent screenwriters who loved it and that, with his help, they could develop it into a show. While conveying this information, Darrien uses confusing industry terminology that Donny does not

understand—a tactic designed to make Donny feel ignorant and discourage him from asking questions that would reveal Darrien’s dishonesty. Darrien’s false promises are devastatingly effective. Donny recalled, “By the time that he cracked out the drugs, I said yes without hesitation.” As Donny described it, “I fully drank the kool aid of his promises, believing success was right around the corner” (26:00). The abuse escalated as Darrien introduced increasingly dangerous substances over various engagements, including crack, methamphetamine, and heroin. Donny’s narration captures his psychological state during these encounters: “When you take enough drugs to reach that plane where all thought stops and euphoria begins, talk of the future and fame and happiness feel almost as real as the chemicals that flow through your body” (26:25–26:45).

Darrien lays a psychological trap. The more Donny sacrifices—his physical safety, his autonomy, his body, his critical thought—the more invested he becomes in the narrative that his suffering has meaning and will lead to something good. This manipulation technique exploits the bias commonly known as the sunk cost fallacy. People fall into this trap when irrecoverable past costs unduly influence present decisions. In Donny’s case, each sacrifice makes it harder to recognize the exploitation objectively. As Donny becomes more emotionally and financially dependent on Darrien’s promises, his ability to perceive the abuse diminishes, demonstrating how psychological manipulation can gradually erode a victim’s capacity for self-protection. On numerous occasions, while Donny is severely intoxicated, he is sexually abused, something he senses upon sobering but can never fully piece together due to the drug-induced haze that inhibits his ability to assert himself and clouds his memory of the events. Instead of feeling anger toward Darrien, these experiences make Donny feel ashamed of himself.

During an intense drug session involving LSD, Donny experiences a psychological breakthrough. He recounted, “suddenly, seemingly from nowhere, this clear, strong thought entered my head. He’s trying to control your mind. This man is bad. This situation is bad. Get out now.” While Darrien weaponizes LSD precisely because it dissolves ego defenses, rendering Donny vulnerable to psychological and sexual abuse, the drug-induced dissociation also grants Donny the objectivity to detach from the myths and fantasies he had constructed around his relationship with his abuser. Momentarily stripped of illusions about Darrien’s interest and affection (and the future of success these fantasies made possible), Donny sees Darrien in a clear light: as a cruel person trying to manipulate and hurt him, a shift that signals the temporary dissolution of his trauma bond.

However, Donny finds himself too incapacitated by the drugs to act on this realization. When Donny attempts to leave, Darrien stops him. When Donny communicates his distress, telling Darrien, “This is bad. I’m being told this is bad,” Darrien gaslights him. He dismisses Donny’s legitimate concerns as “just paranoia” and instructs him to “fight against it,” while offering false comfort by describing the experience as “rebirth” and assuring him “this is part of it” and “you’re safe with me” (29:30–30:00). An insidious example of gaslighting occurs when Donny, distressed by loud music, asks Darrien to turn it off. Despite the music still playing audibly, Darrien responds, “it is off,” causing Donny to have a psychological breakdown (29:30–30:50). This lie serves multiple purposes: it prevents Donny from finding relief from the disorientating overstimulation while reinforcing the narrative that Donny is paranoid and should not trust his instincts. It also encourages Donny to accept another substance from Darrien, GHB, a muscle relaxant. Darrien promises it will “take the edge off.” Instead, it incapacitates Donny so

Darrien can rape him. While Donny attempts to say “no,” he is unable to speak due to the effects of the muscle relaxant (31:00–33:00).

Perhaps most disturbing is Darrien’s continued display of affectionate behavior during and after the assault, creating profound cognitive dissonance for Donny. This deliberate mixing of overt kindness with hidden abuse encourages trauma bonding. After regaining consciousness after being raped while on LSD, Donny remains at Darrien’s home for several days. Darrien is shown hugging and comforting Donny. This scene illustrates how the trauma bonding of psychological manipulation can create a false image of consent.

Psychological abusers like Darrien exploit the transformative effects associated with ego shattering, what Lacan called Other *jouissance*. Although Donny’s narrative is framed around the promise of future success as a comedian and writer, it is notable that Donny was a fan of Darrien, was starstruck when meeting him, genuinely wanted his approval and friendship, and was excited and inspired by the prospect of their creative collaboration. According to Shaw (2022), many victims invest everything they have in relationships with traumatizing narcissists, particularly when the abuse is framed in terms of intimacy, growth or spiritual development. This pattern explains why narratives associated with ego shattering can become powerful tools for abusers. Concepts like letting go of ego, possessions, attachments, or one’s sense of self can be weaponized as strategies for isolation, deprivation, and disorientation, effectively working to “make the world of the victim very small,” preventing them from feeling that there is anywhere to escape to (Shaw, 2022, p. 25).

We see this in *Baby Reindeer* when Darrien reframes the drug-induced abuse as rebirth and transcendence to imprison Donny in his home. Donny struggles to recognize this deception, in part, because the sexual abuse—a form of destructive *jouissance* that shatters the ego—does in

fact destabilize Donny's sense of self, triggering an existential crisis about his sexuality.

Eventually Donny would use this traumatic event to reinvent himself, but not without enduring considerable trauma, and luckily receiving recognition and support from people in his social circle.

This is how the story proceeds. After Donny finally escapes from Darrien and begins to process the abuse, the trauma continues to manifest in debilitating ways. He finds himself unable to maintain intimate relationships, as sexual encounters with his girlfriend become dominated by intrusive thoughts about Darrien and persistent questions about what occurred during his blackouts. Donny torments himself with the question: "Was that the turn on? To ruin my life?" (35:45).

Donny develops compulsive sexual desires related to his abuse experience and becomes addicted to sadomasochistic pornography. He deliberately places himself in dangerous sexual situations where he risks being assaulted again, attempting to gain understanding or control over his previous trauma. His internal rationalization reveals how the abuse has alienated him from his body: "If I am passed around like a whore, then I might at least shed this idea that my body is part of me somehow. Like who cares if it happened before? It's happened a ton of times now, so what does it matter?" (38:40). This attempt to minimize the significance of the original trauma and therefore reduce the power Darrien has over him is fraught. After one particularly aggressive encounter, Donny's defenses collapse. Weeping, he says, "but, it mattered ... It mattered because this is what he wanted. This is what he saw in me all along" (38:60–39:15).¹⁶

¹⁶ In the anthology *Queering Sexual Violence: Radical Voices from Within the Anti-Violence Movement* (Patterson, 2016), several narratives describe individuals who deliberately engage in sexual acts that mirror their previous experiences of sexual violation and harm, like Donny, using these encounters to process or transform their relationship to traumatic meaning.

The trauma extended beyond Donny's sexual relationships, affecting his capacity for emotional stability across all areas of life. However, in one particularly moving scene from the final episode, Donny, while in a particularly dark place, tells his parents about being raped and feeling confused afterward about his sexual identity. He confesses to feeling suicidal and explains his deep desire to share his experiences. This prompts his father to share his own experience of sexual abuse growing up in the Catholic Church. This scene demonstrates how Donny's relationship with his family grew deeper and stronger as a result of the trauma.

The series ends on an ambiguous note. After a clip of Donny on stage discussing his abuse (without implicating Darrien directly) goes viral, Donny returns to Darrien's home and they have a short discussion, with their interactions appearing friendly and professional. Darrien calls Donny's viral confession "brave" and offers him work, promising him that "it will be different this time," and "you will be paid" (22:49–23:52). Donny agrees to take the job, leaves and collapses on the street, appearing both elated and scared.

It is possible that Darrien does not actually intend to give Donny work, only to carefully lure him back in. Or it is possible that Darrien is worried about being exposed, given that Donny has opened up about the abuse, and wants to hire him to make it seem like they have a friendly professional relationship. If Donny ever implicates him in the abuse, Darrien could say, "If that really happened, why would he come work for me?" It is also unclear why Donny returned. He could have gone there to confront Darrien but then lost his courage when back in the space where he was violated. Or it could reflect an enduring trauma bond, or convey the reality that abusive people often wield real power that it doesn't always make practical sense to resist. If Darrien had given Donny the job, it might have set him on the path to telling his story in *Baby Reindeer*.

Baby Reindeer raises complex questions related to issues of consent, expression, self-knowledge, language, power, and representation, including how individuals and societies identify, process, and respond to abuse. In my opinion, Darrien is the primary perpetrator of the most serious forms of abuse in the show, yet public discourse has disproportionately focused on Martha—the emotional abuser—as the primary villain. Internet commentators have invested considerable energy in attempting to identify and villify the real woman behind Martha’s character, while showing comparatively less interest in pursuing or condemning Darrien’s far more sadistic behavior (Simpson, 2024). What makes this especially concerning is that the show ends with Martha in prison while Darrien remains protected, his reputation and prestigious position intact. This disparity in public response raises important questions about how different types of abuse are perceived. The focus on Martha suggests that emotional and physical abuse, as opposed to psychological abuse, elicits more moral condemnation because it is easier to recognize as a consent violation and therefore easier to conceptualize as a crime.

The sequence revealing Darrien’s abuse of Donny is structured as an extended flashback triggered during Donny’s attempt to report Martha to the police. The investigating officer’s question—“Why didn’t you come to us sooner?”—is the catalyst for Donny’s internal reckoning with his unaddressed trauma with Darrien. Donny’s internal response reveals the psychological complexity underlying his delayed reporting, “I couldn’t stand the irony of reporting her and not him ... There was always a sense that she was ill, that she couldn’t help it, whereas he was a pernicious, manipulative groomer” (41:50–42:15). The fact that Donny felt he could not report Darrien, in part because it would not be clear that Darrien had broken any laws, conveys the inadequacy of legal discourse and the challenge of making invisible abuse (or covert consent violations) intelligible. Gadd’s (Donny’s) story is inspiring. Not only did he survive the abuse,

but he used his experience to recreate himself, express himself artistically, and educate people on the nature of complex trauma and victimization. It is my wish that more victims had such opportunities.

While viewers might assume they would be immune to the kind of manipulation Donny experienced at the hands of Darrien, Shaw (2022) recognized that “recruitment efforts” by traumatizing narcissists are typically “aimed at preying on doubts, fears, and insecurities” that “some people feel all their lives, and most people feel at one time or another” (p. 35). The idea that many people are susceptible to psychological abuse associated with trauma bonding is supported by research on Stockholm Syndrome, where kidnapping victims develop feelings of affection for their captors despite having no prior relationship with them.

The term Stockholm Syndrome originates from a 1973 bank robbery in Stockholm, Sweden, where two armed perpetrators held four employees hostage for 131 hours. Following their rescue, the hostages exhibited unexpected affection for their captors, despite being strapped with explosives and threatened by them. After being released, one hostage became romantically involved with her captor, while another established a legal defense fund to support the perpetrators’ cases (Logan, 2018). The hostages who developed these attachments were middle-class professionals without preexisting diagnosed medical health issues. This case suggests that such vulnerability represents a general aspect of human psychology rather than a personal failing or pre-existing weakness.

Under conditions of extreme stress, even minimal acts of care can be experienced as intensely pleasurable, or as indications of intimacy, closeness, or love. This is the logic behind the famous good cop-bad cop routine. When a “criminal” is overwhelmed and being treated with cruelty by one person, the presence of someone who is simply kind, can be quickly established as

a trusted figure. In the case of successful psychological abuse, the abuser may covertly traumatize the victim, and then offer kindness to them, to establish a loving bond that can be hard to break. The concept of a divided self is useful for victims. To break the loving trauma bond, the victim must detach the feeling of love from the fantasy of unified being, or the “true self” as it is articulated in consent culture.

The Real of Psychological Abuse

A Lacanian Perspective on Victims

A Lacanian approach highlighting the significance of the Real deepens our understanding of the elusive nature of psychological abuse, taking pressure off victims to clearly articulate their experiences. A Lacanian viewpoint emphasizes the limits of the Symbolic, including the possibility of genuine understanding in the clinic. Lacan’s psychoanalytic emphasis on the bar separating the signifier from the signified is instructive. In books written for victims, it is common to find contradictory advice. Victims are encouraged to share their experiences, seek advice from others, and avoid isolation, but they are warned that since many people do not understand psychological abuse, speaking openly about it can result in stigma, invalidation, and confusion (Arabi, 2017; Morningstar, 2017; Shaw 2021; Thomas, 2016).

In *Out of the Fog*, Dana Morningstar (2017) observed in her clinical practice that victims often stay in psychologically abusive relationships for so long due to “well-intentioned bad advice,” from friends, family, and therapists (p. 4). Common misguided advice involves different ways of asserting the sexual relationship. As Morningstar observes, without evidence of overt abuse, patients are routinely encouraged to communicate openly with their (abusive) partners, to have empathy for them (assuming it is possible to understand another’s subjective experience),

and to repair the relationship or look inward for the “true” source of their distress (exemplified by the oft-quoted phrase, “you must love yourself before you can love another”).

A Lacanian perspective suggests that consent culture provides victims of physical and emotional abuse with limited resources but has a negative impact on psychological abuse victims. This negative impact stems from consent culture’s matter of fact, empirical focus, and related assumptions about the link between self-knowledge, communication, understanding, and personal responsibility, which is not equipped to handle the underlying psychic complications and the overwhelming social ignorance associated with psychological abuse. In other words, consent culture harms psychological abuse victims by overemphasizing both the rational capacities of the consenting subject and the rational interpretive capacities of a culture that values consent. For Lacan, the sexual relation does not exist. This means there is no possibility for genuine understanding within the self, between sexual partners, or between analyst and analysand. In the clinic, there must be a respect for the singularity of experience and *jouissance*. This anti-authoritarian and open-ended approach could be beneficial for victims who need space to explore their elusive experiences in an open way.

I now turn to a discussion of clinical treatments for victims of psychological abuse and proceed to make a case for a Lacanian contribution. Although I have argued that consent frameworks negatively impact victims through their emphasis on harmony and transparency in the symbolic realm, given the negative impact on the ego in psychologically abusive relationships, an emphasis on rebuilding the ego is necessary at certain points in clinical treatment. However, I use Lacan to resist an extended emphasis on strengthening the ego of ego psychology in recovery literature, particularly when it leads to uncritical assertions of the sexual relation, and the stigmatization of feminine sexuality and Other *jouissance*.

This discussion serves my larger argument in two ways. First, by demonstrating the importance of strengthening the ego in the case of psychological abuse recovery, I draw attention to the interrelated nature of the threads of the Borromean knot, and the risks of a Lacanian approach that overemphasizes or romanticizes the register of the Real. This supports my claim that we should not pursue a counter-discourse to consent culture. At the same time, I demonstrate the problems associated with neglecting the register of the Real by highlighting the limits of a clinical approach that relies on the logics of consent frameworks and ego psychology without psychoanalytic insight attending to the drives. Ultimately, I argue against treating psychological abuse victims in a way that provides only one path to understanding and recovering (based on the principles of ego psychology and consent culture) and offer a Lacanian method as providing an additional perspective and approach.

In this discussion, I rely heavily on the work of psychoanalyst and cult survivor Daniel Shaw (2022) due to the scarcity of psychoanalytic literature on psychological (covert) abuse of adult victims (Yahalom, 2024), and the exceptional nature of his work. Shaw's psychoanalytic method resonates with non-psychoanalytic clinical methods for treating psychological abuse victims, insofar as it focuses on paths of recovery centering on theories informed by concepts associated with ego psychology and consent culture.

Clinical Applications of Lacan for Psychological Abuse victims

In *Traumatic Narcissism and Recovery: Leaving the Prison of Shame and Fear*, psychoanalyst Daniel Shaw (2022) advanced a general theory of the experience of psychological victimization based on his experience of being in a cult and working with survivors of severe manipulation. He described the “relational system of traumatizing narcissism” as involving “a system of subjugation” (p. 7), in which what the victim experiences a core feeling of negation. In

a relationship with a traumatizing narcissist, Shaw argued, the “victim is groomed to lose contact with his own subjectivity” and sacrifice “his own validity, his own ability to think critically” (p. 50).

When working with subjects who leave cults, Shaw (2022) wrote, “It is often a long road to helping these patients find ways to notice and become curious about their internal world” (p. 77). This is because in a psychologically abusive relationship, critical thinking and self-reflection become painful, associated with confusion and failure. Neuroscientific research sheds light on why recovering from psychological abuse is so challenging: ongoing trauma rewires the brain and disrupts nervous system functioning, causing long-term cognitive and health complications (Bremner, 2006; Dossi et al., 2020; Van der Kolk, 2015; Zhu et al., 2022). Shaw (2022) argued that recovering from the shattering experience of psychological abuse requires developing the ego strength necessary to recognize that one has been abused, permanently detach from the abuser, regain the capacity to self-regulate, and restore faith in one’s capacity to think and to know.

Drawing on the work of psychoanalyst Emmanuel Ghent, Shaw (2022) drew a crucial distinction between *surrender* and *submission*, a distinction that has helped his patients feel less shame in forming bonds with psychologically abusive people. Surrender involves “letting go of defenses, opening to the possibility of something more real, authentic, and alive, internally and interpersonally” (p. 6). However, Shaw warned, longing for surrender can all too easily lead to submission. Referring to cult recruitment, he wrote,

If the abuser is charismatic and skillful at manipulation, he can convince others that masochistic admission to him is not what it seems at all, but actually it’s opposite—an esoteric form of self-empowerment ... exploiting followers by persuading them,

seductively at first, and then with greater and greater pressure, to allow their critical thinking to be aborted and their boundaries to be violated (Shaw, 2021, p. 6).

Shaw's (2021) experience with a cult included involvement in Shakti Yoga (a pseudonym). He joined the "community" believing that he would spread awareness about a way of life that could help reduce suffering. The stated mission was to "raise awareness for love and respect for all people" (p. 123). One technique the cult leader used involved denigrating the ego. The goal was to deprive cult members of all attachments, identifications, possessions, and pleasures. Shaw used his experience in Shakti Yoga to illustrate how attacking the ego can be a strategy for subjugation: for making you "believe that you need and want to be violated" (p. 33).¹⁷

According to Shaw (2022), you can become vulnerable to psychological abuse out of an admirable desire to surrender, or to open yourself "to something bigger than yourself, [let] down your defenses and inhabitations, [and] leave the prison of your small self for a wider, deeper experience" (p. 32). However, when dealing with a traumatizing narcissist, doing so leads to the opposite experience of self-negation at the hands of a manipulative and sadistic person. In contrast to the dream of connecting to something larger than the self, the intent of the abuser is to make the target feel like they are diminishing into nonexistence.

In her discussion of Vanessa Springora's *Consent* (2020), Leguil (2025) similarly addresses how yielding can lead to submission. She claims that experiences involving surrender thrust us into the opaque world of consent. In Springora's case, Leguil argues that it was her

¹⁷ The difference between the traumatizing narcissist's exploitative erasure of the ego and the Lacanian critique of the ego of ego psychology concerns questions of mastery, purification, redemption, and liberation. As Shaw (2022) recognized, a common narcissistic tactic involves manipulating someone to become "morally pure, without ego" (p. 49). Lacan, however, promoted nothing like this. Instead, he conceptualized the ego as one strand within the Borromean knot—a structure that, if unraveled, would lead to psychosis. Lacan forcefully rejected any possibility of moral purity, epistemic mastery, or psychic redemption for either analyst or analysand. Lacan's theory resists the cult-like nature of rigid psychoanalytic theories.

“Yes” that put her on a path to experience of sexual abuse. Describing the rupture of the encounter between Springora, then a teenage girl, and a predatory fifty-year-old writer, Leguil writes, “Some encounters partake of the awakening of dreams. Circumstances are sometimes met for the subject to surrender its own self so well that they are totally unable to make a U-turn. Dreams have been awakened, the body has been involved, and nothing will ever be the same” (p. 4).

Building on Shaw’s (2021) claim that individuals who seek surrender may be more vulnerable to submission under manipulative abusers, I argue that vulnerability to psychological abuse may be associated with the feminine position of the “not all.” Subjects who remain open to uncertainty about what is right and true, and who are willing to explore alternative ways of relating may be more susceptible to psychological abuse—especially if they have a high tolerance for enduring states associated with ego dissolution and overwhelm, including affects associated with sacrifice, humiliation, abjection, disorientation, and suffering. The fact that these qualities might make someone more susceptible to abuse does not diminish the value of the qualities themselves.

Unfortunately, such qualities are easily pathologized, even in recovery communities, sometimes leading to labels with pathologizing connotations such as “codependent personality” or “love addict.” Although these labels are part of therapeutic communities that benefit many people,¹⁸ they can be used to pathologize behaviors that are not inherently problematic, such as

¹⁸ I want to acknowledge my support and gratitude here for the participants of Co-Dependents Anonymous (CoDA) who have taught me so much about myself and the world. CoDA meetings are special because they are donation-based and run entirely by participants. Although these meetings regularly convene in churches and the program is organized around twelve steps based on religious ideas, there is no centralized therapeutic authority structure, and people of all backgrounds and faiths are invited to attend. In one CoDA meeting I attended at a church in NYC, a homeless man expressed his atheism by claiming that God had “left him behind.” Although there were religious people in the room, no one interrupted or disputed his view. I would contrast CoDA with more traditional forms of therapy that aim to cure co-dependency.

an identification with the other, or with the symptom of the other, rather than an identification with the ego of ego psychology. In the case of psychological abuse, terms such as “codependent personality” can be applied to victims too quickly, especially when victims (not abusers) are incorrectly assumed to be the problem (Arabi, 2017). Consider that in Melody Beattie’s classic self-help book *Codependent No More* (1986/2022), she suggested that historically people with codependent personalities have been at the forefront of social justice movements due to their tendency to become involved in other peoples’ problems. While acknowledging this positive contribution, her book nonetheless serves as a guide to curing and healing codependent symptoms. Her book serves an important purpose by helping people with codependent personality traits prioritize their own well-being, yet it also stigmatizes traits that fall outside the norms of consent culture. This is a common theme. Self-help, therapeutic, and recovery literature addressing survivors tend to emphasize the value of experiences and orientations associated with consent culture and the sexual relation: the importance of feeling empowered and having a stable sense of self, developing skills for rational decision-making, cultivating mutual recognition and shared power in relationships, maintaining honest communication, establishing and asserting strong boundaries, and so forth.

While all of this is important—especially for people who have endured psychological abuse—a Lacanian intervention can open new ways of representing victims that avoid pathologizing and shaming implications. By shifting attention to myths and fantasies associated with the ego and the sexual relation—those supposedly rational, functional, and healthy ways of living and loving—we can see how those who are vulnerable to psychological abuse are not naïve or deficient. This shift highlights the epistemic and relational value of victims’ characteristics, symptoms, and experiences. From a Lacanian viewpoint, we also can say,

crucially, that a person's ability to transform themselves following the experience of destructive jouissance, in this case psychological abuse, depends not on individual courage, ego strength, rational awareness, or adaptive capacity, but on their position within the symbolic realm—specifically, their access to adequate social recognition and support. A Lacanian perspective can challenge reductive interpretations of victim subjectivities and discourage narrow and normalizing paths for their recovery.

The main symptoms of psychological abuse include feeling out of touch with reality and alienated from the self, believing that one does not have access to the truth or seeing oneself as incapable of rational thought. This constellation of symptoms could be referred to as epistemic collapse and loss of self. Experts are quick to assume that only certain individuals are susceptible to these experiences and are quick to diagnose them as suffering from low self-esteem and low self-worth. Lacan, on the other hand, would see such subjects as in a privileged position to do the most important kind of psychoanalytic work.

Thomas (2016) wrote that her first task when dealing with psychological abuse survivors is making sure they do not hurt or kill themselves, given that many become suicidal in the early stages of leaving a psychologically abusive relationship. During recovery, many experience panic attacks from a process that involves psychic splitting, with one part of the self condemning another part (p. 35). Specifically, the part of the self that can now identify with their empowered and informed position (the one who uncovered the hidden abuse and left the abuser) expresses rage and hatred toward the part of the self that surrendered to the experience of loving them. In other words, the empowered self attacks the submissive self, and this hatred may go as far as “self-annihilation” (Shaw, 2022, p. 36). In this case, the self that can be recognized in terms of

consent (the dignified, empowered, enlightened self) condemns the Other of the consenting self (the dependent, confused, receptive, surrendering/submitting self).

Shaw (2022) implies that healing involves the triumph of what I have described as the subject at the heart of consent culture. He writes that survival involves the restoration of dignity and a coherent sense of self. He argued that this liberation is not only the journey for the survivor of psychological abuse but also for the human subject as well. The goal of subjectivity is defined by Shaw largely in terms of the sexual relation: finding relational safety and relational freedom in the form of trust, mutuality, reciprocity, balance, connection, clarity, and confidence, where interdependence is juxtaposed with the dynamics of dominance and submission. Shaw (2022) wrote, “Loving reciprocity and mutuality is in our DNA” (p. 53). In this discussion, the goal defined is to “feel like a more whole person” (p. 47).

Consistent with trends in psychological abuse literature, fragmentation here is seen as undesirable, and a teleology of enlightenment and healing entails a move from objectification and fragmentation to subjectification and unification. In his description of working with a man who had a trauma bond with a narcissistic mother, Shaw describes his patient as stuck in a mode of relating based on self-negation and accommodation. Shaw (2022) wrote that what emerged after treatment was “a stronger, more reality-based sense of his strengths and successes that allowed for a self-defined identity, not one imposed on him externally” (p. 65). While Shaw explained that it is important for subjects to recognize that there is not one real self but multiple versions of the self (so victims do not reify themselves based on identification with the part that submitted to the abuser), he favors unification and transparency around ego strength: celebrating the core authentic self, speaking favorably of gaining access to a Me as a sense of self that is “innate, ready to unfold and develop.” (67). In this discourse, the characteristics associated with

victims, what I have suggested might indicate the “not all” of the feminine position, including an openness to non-normative relational forms are subtly discouraged.

I argue that a clinical Lacanian approach could provide something valuable to psychological abuse survivors. While Shaw (2022) offered a viable path for healing, a Lacanian approach could offer an alternative path, one that may support the part of the victimized self that sought the experience of *jouissance* associated with intensity and change, and the part of the self that has developed epistemic resources from the shattering experience of psychological abuse.

Insofar as Lacanian psychoanalysis favors “subjective destitution,” it may appear inappropriate for treating psychological abuse. Indeed, Lacanian psychoanalysis is often experienced as psychically destabilizing, which could be counterproductive during and in the aftermath of psychological abuse, insofar as the victim has already been put on a path of dysregulation. Perhaps for this reason, Shaw’s approach, which favors the resources of ego psychology and consent culture, is necessary, especially in the early stages of recovery. However, the benefit of a Lacanian approach, offered at the right time, perhaps once the victim has developed enough ego strength to confidently leave the abusive relationship, could help the analysand work through the effects of their painful *jouissance* in a way that does not assume a straightforward path to rehabilitation, thus accommodating the singularity of the analysand and the possibility of identifying with their *sinthome*.

Jackson MacKenzie’s *Psychopath Free: Recovering from Emotionally Abusive Relationships With Narcissists, Sociopaths, and Other Toxic People* (2015) is a canonical text in the narcissistic abuse recovery community, with many people claiming that reading it saved their lives. This book begins with a something of an ode or a love letter to victims, written for those who are in relationships or who have just left relationships with psychologically abusive people

and are trying to escape the miasma of confusion and shame. In this introductory letter to his readers he writes that psychological abuse “will open your eyes to human nature, our broken society, and perhaps, most important of all, your own spirit.” He writes, “In the end you will be glad it [the abuse] happened.” He continues, “no one ever believes me about that...part. At least, not at first. But I promise you, it’s an adventure worth taking. One that will change your life forever” (p. xi). In this beautiful passage, Mackenzie lends strength to his readers, urging them forward with the hope and promise of something better.

Tragically, MacKenzie, who wrote so powerfully about victimization in *Psychopath Free* (2015) and about healing in *Whole Again* (2019), committed suicide in 2023, at the age of 34. Given that MacKenzie helped so many people and played a major role in bringing psychological abuse into mainstream discourse but decided to take his own life speaks to the fragility of recovery and the importance of not romanticizing the struggles victims face.

A Lacanian Perspective on Abusers

Clinical, legal, psychiatric, and sociological disciplines use terms such as narcissistic abuse, psychopathic abuse, and sociopathic abuse to describe psychological abuse: the use of manipulation to systematically undermine victims’ psychological functioning. Clinical psychologists and psychoanalysts tend to frame this primarily as narcissistic abuse rather than psychopathic or sociopathic abuse, and often characterize psychological abuse as a trauma response and the expression of a deep need to be loved and accepted (see Shaw, 2021; Yahalom, 2024). In contrast, forensic psychologists and victims tend to emphasize the overlap between narcissistic and psychopathic or sociopathic abuse tactics, emphasizing calculated planning, sadistic enjoyment, and exploitation (Arabi, 2017; Hare, 1999; Mackenzie, 2015; Stout, 2020). The term psychopathic abuse generally refers to a diagnostic category associated with anti-

social personality disorder in the DSM, whereas sociopathic abuse generally refers to a sociological category and refers to the representation of socially constructed forms of antisocial behavior.

In the therapeutic narrative, psychological abusers and victims are folded into the fantasy of the sexual relation, as it is often assumed that greater self-awareness and therapeutic care would naturally lead to both partners adopting healthier relational patterns. From this view, under ideal conditions, the abuser would conform to the norms of loving attachment, while the victim would learn the importance of having strong boundaries and self-respect. In contrast to this clinical depiction, in the victim narrative, and the narratives associated with forensic and legal research, it is common to find descriptions of psychological abusers as completely outside the dynamics of normal and healthy human desire and functioning. This assumption participates in the fantasy of the sexual relation by treating psychological abuse as a radical exception to a supposedly natural mode of relating characterized by authenticity, connection, understanding, and care.

While the clinical group argue that acknowledging the vulnerability of abusers is necessary to demystify their power, and that empathy is the key to the ethical treatment and transformation of abusive people (Shaw, 2022; Yahalom, 2024), victims and their advocates tend to represent this attitude as idealistic and naïve, arguing that uncritical appeals to trauma and calls for empathy feed into abusive strategies. Abusers often target empathetic people with histories of trauma and use appeals to vulnerability to avoid accountability, manipulate victims, and lure them back in when they try to protect themselves by detaching from the abuser (Arabi, 2017; Hare, 1999; Mackenzie, 2015; Thomas, 2016). While those in the clinical community claim that psychological abusers need therapy, forensic psychologists and victims are more

likely to caution that therapy can enable abusers to become more sophisticated in their manipulation techniques (Arabi, 2017; Hare, 1999; Stout, 2020).

While clinicians tend to adopt an empathetic attitude necessary for therapeutic inclusion, victims and those working in the criminal justice system tend to promote narratives that help victims permanently detach from abusive people and protect themselves from revictimization. The diagnostic categories enable abusive characteristics to be grouped together and differentiated to make research into this elusive problem intelligible. However, we should be skeptical of sweeping claims about the experiences, desires, and motivations of abusers. The research on narcissistic and psychopathic abuse states that abusers tend to be private, manipulative, rarely seek therapy, and do not speak openly about their strategies (Hare, 1999; Shaw, 2021). Consequently, what we know about them derives primarily from interpretations of victims' accounts, criminal motives gleaned from legal confessions, and clinical studies based on institutionalized and criminalized populations or self-reports from those who appear narcissistic and antisocial. What we know constitutes an obviously limited sample and a fundamentally flawed one if we are concerned with hidden abuse.

Using Lacan's model, which divides all human subjectivity into three registers, we can describe the strategic use of psychological abuse as a manipulation tactic without assuming that psychological abusers are fully self-aware, that they understand why they do what they do, that they can be predictably identified using standardized diagnostic criteria, or that optimal therapeutic intervention would necessarily correct their behavior. Toward this end, I use a description offered by clinical psychologist Martha Stout (2020), who described sociopathy in terms similar to the Lacanian sexual impasse. In a chapter titled "A Hole in the

Psyche: Understanding Sociopathy,” Stout (2020) argued that evil does not exist in the sense that it does not refer to a positive attribute but to a negative one. She wrote,

I ask you to understand that there is no such thing as evil because, psychologically speaking, there is not. Wickedness is not an invasive spirit or thing, nor is it some shadowy part of the primal human brain. It is the opposite: rather than an entity that we could observe or at least feel, evil is an absence. Instead of something, it is a hollowness where *something should have been*. True evil is an empty hole, nothing more—and nothing less. (pp. 13–14)

Stout suggests that this “unfathomed empty space” involves neurological underdevelopment. She describes the absence of empathy as a spectrum and insists that on the most extreme end, there are human beings who are completely devoid of empathy and therefore capable of incredible cruelty. I want to hold onto this idea to suggest that psychological abuse is the expression of a creative elaboration stemming from an absence, and to suggest that this is why psychological abuse can so easily go undetected, why it is not reasonable to expect victims to recognize the nature of this kind of harm, or to expect external observers like clinicians to easily decipher what is going on. Psychological abuse is an expression of the singularity of the abuser, deployed and experienced according to the singularity of the victim. This is why psychological abuse is difficult for victims to think about, put into narrative form, or communicate to other people.

While Stout goes on to contrast normal and whole empathetic neurological structures that naturally link people together with the hole of sociopathic forms of relating, I want to suggest that we can learn something about the Lacanian sexual impasse from the sociopathic hole. While Stout said things like “conscience is ever-present in the lives of people who are emotionally

whole” and “goodness springs from our psychological completeness, our capacity to love and to feel conscience” (p. 255), her political recommendations open an alternative door of interpretation. She wrote that sociopathy “is neither an entity outside of us nor a part of our normal human makeup” and suggests the best way to understand sociopathy is not to see the sociopath as completely Other but to look for evidence of it within ourselves (p. 250). She suggested the starting point for understanding sociopathy is not thinking about the sociopath as someone who is your opposite but rather recognizing a moment in your life when you were cruel or indifferent to the suffering of another and building your understanding from there. This perspective implies the neurodevelopmental defects of sociopathy can be conceptualized as a distinct reality and a nothing that touches everyone.

Stout recognized that groups, institutions, corporations, and governments can act sociopathically. She wrote,

We continue to conceive of evil as a being or a force, one that is external to ourselves. Evil may try to possess or occupy us, but it never originates in us, and the notion that the devil is somewhere out there, possessing the other guy or occupying the other group, has served to reinforce bigotry and hatred throughout the centuries. In virtually every ethnic, racial, and political armed conflict that humans have fought, the in-group is on God’s side and the enemy is on the devil’s—the glitch in this system being, of course, that both sides cherish the identical belief. (2020, p. 251)

To prevent ourselves from becoming implicated in abusive projects, at the interpersonal or institutional level, we must be self-reflexive and accountable; we cannot assume our knowledge is innocent or that good intentions will guarantee good results. Psychoanalysis is essential to this

task because as it prompts us to engage with moral complexity, darkness, and contradictions within ourselves.

The widespread assumption that default, normal, whole, empathetic psychic structures can be juxtaposed with the sociopathic hole implies that kindness is adaptive, and cruelty is maladaptive, or that empathy and kindness are somehow more real and true than manipulation, deception, and sadism—more accurately characteristic of human relations. These assumptions are challenged by work on noncriminal, adaptive, and successful forms of psychopathy where researchers claim that mainstream and capitalist culture rewards and encourages psychopathic personality traits. This research suggests that individuals in some of our most praised positions, such as politicians, military heroes, and CEOs of large corporations have psychopathic characteristics, such as callousness, sadism, and machivellianism (Dutton, 2012; Falkenbach et al., 2017; Stout, 2020).

Faced with the complications of psychological abuse, the challenge is to acknowledge psychic complexity and the harms of binary thinking around guilt and innocence, while holding onto the real distinction that sometimes exists between abusers and victims, even absent visible aggression or violence. Given the fundamentally unjust nature of our carceral system, the political challenge also involves bringing psychological abuse into public awareness in a way that prioritizes the validation and protection of victims but not the demonization of abusers. In a society where there is social recognition of this problem and where abusers are held accountable for their actions, a Lacanian approach could encourage a more compassionate attitude toward psychological abusers, given that it highlights the deceptive nature of all human interaction. In other words, instead of encouraging punitive, othering, or carceral logics, attention to the Lacanian Real supports my claim that many abusive crimes are hidden from view (including

from victims) and thus cannot be prosecuted. Highlighting psychological abuse challenges accepted views of criminality by questioning the widespread assumption that cruelty manifests as overt criminal behavior, that legal discourses are equipped to provide an adequate vocabulary for describing consent violations, or that carceral structures are targeting the right populations.

Psychological Abuse Politicized

In light of the demise of the anti-sex trafficking movement as part of a left political project (Agustín, 2007, Bernstein, 2019; Kempadoo, 2023), it is more important than ever to pay attention to psychological abuse. The anti-trafficking movement, particularly the anti-sex trafficking movement, represents perhaps the closest approximation to a political mobilization against psychological abuse that currently exists. Unlike social movements that take consent at face value, the anti-sex trafficking movement has developed a sophisticated understanding of the hidden dynamics of complex forms of interpersonal exploitation and relational harm. However, as I explore in detail in Chapter Three, the anti-sex trafficking movement has been widely criticized for disregarding the consent and agency of sex workers and advancing carceral feminism (Bernstein, 2019).

The anti-sex trafficking movement's understanding of complex forms of relational harm has always been compromised by its dependence on the figure of the prostitute as the degraded, sexualized female body as its primary condition of intelligibility. In Lacanian terms, we can identify the false premises underlying the anti-sex trafficking framework as the assumption that "Woman" exists, that the sexual relation exists, and that the prostitute's symptom can be identified, interpreted, and cured. My argument is that psychological abuse could only gain political recognition when refracted through the symbolically loaded image of the prostitute, limiting the scope and legitimacy of its analysis, and making it easily co-opted.

While the anti-sex trafficking movement offers crucial insights into the myriad ways consent can be compromised or violated, it simultaneously demonstrates the dangers of ignoring or denying the complex realities of consent itself. A current challenge lies in extracting the valuable insights of anti-sex trafficking discourse while disentangling them from this restrictive essentialist imaginary. As I have argued, embracing the ideals and principles of consent culture (or the intersection of consent culture and sex worker rights) presents no panacea to this problem, given its own attachment to exclusionary fantasies associated with the sexual impasse. A Lacanian approach to psychological abuse has the potential of bringing hidden abuse (covert consent violations) to light without relying on myths and fantasies associated with the existence of Woman or the sexual relation.

Chapter Five: Beyond Consent: Other Jouissance

Lacan's framework offers a unique approach to addressing complexities and contradictions in sexual experience by dividing human subjectivity into three registers and representing sex as split along lines of phallic and Other jouissance, with jouissance itself entailing a split between pleasure and pain. In previous chapters, I discussed the provisional importance of discourses and experiences that affirm the ego in the context of transactional sex and psychological abuse. In the case of transactional sex, I argued that sex worker rights operate according to the phallic logic of the masculine position but that it would be a mistake to uncritically diagnose such phallic assertions as mere fantasies of mastery, as doing so would ignore how anti-trafficking abolitionist campaigns have saturated the field of discourse. Anti-sex trafficking discourses tend to represent all sex within prostitution in terms of a particularly destructive form of Other jouissance. In effect, stigmatizing sex workers and depriving them of basic rights. When sex workers assert their consent, they disrupt this exclusive representation of sex in terms of Other jouissance by invoking the phallic dimension. I have cautioned against centering consent logics in sex worker rights to avoid reifying this phallic dimension.

In addressing psychological abuse, I explored the dangers of ego shattering (Other jouissance) and the importance of rebuilding the ego in recovery. At the same time, I cautioned against techniques that privilege phallic development at the expense of feminine sexuality and Other jouissance. This chapter turns to feminine sexuality and Other jouissance to argue that experiences eluding consent frameworks are integral to desire and ethical action. Drawing on Lacan's theory of sexuation, I argue that while consent culture accurately represents certain aspects of phallic jouissance, it actively obscures Other jouissance.

Current Trends

Consent culture is informed by a binary view of sex. Consensual sex is depicted as pleasurable and life-affirming, while non-consensual sex is portrayed as traumatic and destructive to the self. Critical consent discourses offer alternative representations. Feminist critics often emphasize the complexity and trauma of women's sexual experiences, sometimes unintentionally reinforcing the idea that men experience less psychosexual conflict and greater sexual satisfaction. Queer critics tend to suggest that marginalized sexualities are more subversive than "normative" ones, sometimes implying that "perverse" sexual subjects have access to a superior *jouissance*. Psychoanalytic commentators who critique consent norms tend to stress that sexuality is inherently dysregulating for *all* subjects. These approaches contrast sharply with the post-structuralist tendency to avoid making any gender-specific, universalizing, or decontextualized claims about sex at all, to avoid reifying discursively contingent manifestations of sex.

I draw on Lacan's theory of sexualization, with particular attention to Other *jouissance*, to shift our attention from the visible manifestations of sex and the cultural discourses that organize them toward the enigmatic nature of the sexual aim, which remains undertheorized in consent culture and critical consent discourse. This Lacanian approach allows me to navigate several challenging tasks: examining patterns and differences in representations of sexual experience, resisting determinist logics on the one hand and discursive relativism on the other, and refusing assumptions about benign sexual variation that tend to obscure the intellectual, contradictory, and traumatic aspects of sexuality. Working within a Lacanian frame also allows me to confront patriarchal injustice without reinforcing the idea that masculine *jouissance* is superior. By

demystifying phallic power and revealing its costs, a Lacanian approach avoids unintentionally eroticizing oppressive structures.

Splitting the Signifier: Phallic and Other Jouissance

Throughout much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, our sexual episteme was primarily organized around assumptions about “natural” and “unnatural” sexual desires and behaviors (see Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s encyclopedia of sexual deviance, *Psychopathia Sexualis: A Clinical-Forensic Study*, 1886).¹⁹ Today, it is less clear how to differentiate “natural” and “unnatural” sexualities. While reproduction could once be imagined as the ultimate evolutionary goal of human life, it is now clear that overpopulation risks environmental degradation and resource scarcity.²⁰ We are witnessing declining marriage rates and rising divorce rates, the increase of pornography and other practices of sex work, the emergence of new family forms (often in response to neoliberal capitalist economic pressures), an increase in new sexual arrangements, such as polyamory and romantic “partnerships” involving more than two people, and growing recognition of LGBTQIA+ identities and expressions, albeit against aggressive conservative backlash.

Contemporary liberal frameworks for understanding sexualities have shifted away from categorizing sexualities as “natural” or “unnatural” toward organizing sexualities around identity

¹⁹ For many years, this text was the gold standard in the science of sexuality and served as the main reference point for doctors, lawyers, and social reformers seeking to understand sexual crimes and aberrations. Although Krafft-Ebing expanded our understanding of sexuality by directing attention to its “hidden” manifestations, he categorized and ordered sexual desires and behaviors in limiting empirical terms. In his catalogue of sexual orientations, subjects were differentiated based on superficial criteria. This approach made sense for Krafft-Ebing, who believed sexuality could be defined in terms of its natural function in service of reproduction. Formulated this way, Darwinian principles of individual and species preservation were closely linked, allowing normative and non-normative sexualities to be neatly divided and defined.

²⁰ Racist overpopulation rhetoric and mainstream climate discourse often ignore the essential fact that wealthy individuals and nations are creating an environmental crisis that will disproportionately harm the poor. The term “Capitalocene” has emerged to challenge the idea of the “Anthropocene.” This involves critiquing the representation of humanity as One category, redirecting focus toward the inequalities that divide us (Moore, 2016).

and object choice. For example, by distinguishing between cisgender and transgender, heterosexual and non-heterosexual, and monogamous and polyamorous orientations. In this context, it might sometimes be insightful to scramble the frame: to generalize our understanding of sexual subjectivity and divide our understanding of sexual experience, drawing attention to the precarity of identification and the contradictions within sex itself. To introduce this idea, consider the following examples.

In Gabriel García Márquez's (1985/2008) magical realist romance novel *Love in the Time of Cholera*, Florentino Ariza tells Fermina Daza after "consummating" their love, "I've remained a virgin for you," despite having had intercourse with over six hundred women throughout his life (p. 339). Chantal Akerman's film *Jeanne Dielman* (1975) presented a very different scene: the titular character, a widowed housewife and prostitute, experienced a psychological breakdown and lethally stabbed one of her clients in the throat after she inadvertently had an orgasm with him during intercourse. Both stories draw attention to the enigma of sex, showing that physical acts represented under the sign of "sex" can generate radically different psychic effects for different people under different circumstances.

We might say that sex reached a level of intensity making it worthy of the name for Florentino when he experienced the pleasure of love, and for Jeanne when she experienced the trauma of hate. What links both sexual experiences is their status as psychic events, which took place against the backdrop of relatively unexceptional sexual encounters. The event for Florentino involved finding his own creative solution to cover over the sexual impasse—it is because the sexual relation does not exist that he could experience losing his virginity to Fermina despite engaging in the same physical act with her as with the other women. Jeanne, by contrast, confronted the sexual impasse more directly through violence.

Florentino described the many sexual encounters he had with women before Fermina as palliatives, implying that the corporeal pleasures of sex functioned as a distraction from the psychic pain of Fermina's absence. Throughout much of *Jeanne Dielman* (1975), Jeanne performed sex with her clients with the same routine detachment as she did household chores; it is not until she experienced the jouissance of orgasm with a client that she erupted into murderous rage. These narratives point to a definitional trouble with sex. Although the term "sex" is ordinarily used to signify all four types of encounters depicted in these stories—the palliative, the performative, the romantic, and the traumatic—this would involve conflating forms of experience with very little psychic continuity. Yet while it would be a mistake to conflate these experiences, it would also be misguided to assume they have nothing to do with each other. The palliative experiences informed the romantic, just as the performative experiences prefigured the violent. In these examples, we see that radically different experiences of sex can emerge from the same subject position and same physical act—in this case, cisgender heterosexual intercourse. To elaborate on the notion of sex as psychic event, we can turn to Lacan's theory of sexualization and Other jouissance.

Although Lacan's critique of the rational subject at the center of analytic philosophy is clearly compatible with a feminist perspective, his theory of sexualization remains controversial. From a radical feminist view, his assertion that "Woman does not exist" risks erasing the significance of women's lived experiences. From a queer feminist perspective, his use of masculine and feminine subject positions and of phallic and feminine jouissance risks reinforcing the gender binary, reifying the very idea of "women's experience." I argue that Lacan insightfully incorporated these contradictions into his theory but first let me defend my use of

Lacan's model of sexuation²¹ by providing background on the relation between Lacan and the development of feminism in the United States.

Lacan and Feminism

Suzanne Barnard (2002) argued that Lacanian theory has been widely misrepresented and misunderstood in Anglo-American feminist circles, due primarily to a relative neglect of the register of the Real. According to Barnard, several factors contributed to this problem. First, the major engagement between Lacan and feminism occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, when Lacan's work on the Symbolic was more prominent. Second, compared to the more accessible operations of the symbolic (language and law) and the imaginary (ego formation, fantasy, and identification), the Real is elusive and paradoxical, making it harder to grasp conceptually and apply to concrete political issues. By the time Lacan's late seminars gained wide circulation in the United States, Anglo-American feminist theory had, for the most part, already established interpretive frameworks that rejected psychoanalysis as patriarchal. Many of those feminists who did engage with Lacan had developed sophisticated analyses of the Symbolic and Imaginary while neglecting the crucial dimension of the Real.

A more general problem concerned Lacan's unconventional use of language in his oral seminars, designed for training psychoanalysts. Many feminists turned away from Lacan due to understandable confusion over his core concepts, especially the differences between his counterintuitive definitions and dominant understandings of key terms (Rose, 1986/2020). For example, distinctions between the Real and reality, the phallus and the penis, feminine and

²¹ Since it is not possible to do justice to the complexity of Lacan's theory of sexuation here, I will provide only a brief overview of Other jouissance and explain its relevance to my project. For a proper introduction, I would refer readers to the anthology of essays exploring Lacan's *Seminar XX: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge, 1972–1973*, edited by Suzanne Barnard and Bruce Fink (2002).

female, symptom and sickness, and perversion and pathology are essential but difficult to grasp without familiarity with Lacan's broader psychoanalytic framework.

To emphasize the incompatibility between Lacanian concepts associated with the Real and the terminology used in both popular and academic discourses on sexual subjectivity, Barnard (2002) argued that terms associated with the sex-gender distinction should not be used in reference to Lacanian theory because they create "more confusion than clarity" (p. 6). As Cavanagh (2017a) recognizes, these terms are "ill equipped to manage what Lacan calls the aporia of sexual difference" (p. 328). If these terms were to be used, "sex" might refer to how one is categorized institutionally, while gender might refer to identification with norms associated with this categorization. However, what mattered most to Lacan was something else: how subjects negotiate the impossibility of the sexual relationship and access different forms of jouissance.

According to Barnard (2002) the Lacanian Real defeats any effort to explain sexual difference through biology, phenomenology, or social construction. Lacanian psychoanalysis thus offers powerful tools for bringing aspects of internal struggles regarding the impossibility of gender and the sexual impasse to light. As Barnard (2002) recognized, "[W]hen closely read in its entirety, Seminar XX represents a serious and profoundly original attempt to go beyond both the patriarchal dimensions of Freud's corpus, and the banalities concerning feminine sexuality characteristic of Neo-Freudian revisionism" (p. 3).

From a Lacanian perspective, sexual difference emerges from the tension between symbolic inscription and the drive energies of the Real. The body only becomes "sexed" through its subjection to signifiers, which impacts the psyche but does not determine psychic formations. For Lacan, "there is nothing missing in the real" (1982, p. 113). This means that phenomena such

as penis envy and feminine lack are only symbolic constructions that cover over something more significant. As Lacan (1978) states, “in the psyche, there is nothing by which the subject may situate himself as a male or female being ... the human always has to learn from scratch from the Other what he has to do, as man or woman” (p. 204). The phallus is not the penis but an empty signifier that creates difference by standing in for the impossibility of signifying sex.

In my use of Lacan’s theory of Other *jouissance*, I use terminology associated with the gender binary: masculine and feminine subject positions, and phallic and feminine (Other) *jouissance*. Crucially, these structural positions are not determined by biological or anatomical sex and are not limited to heterosexual relationships. Anyone can occupy either position.²² Therefore, when I use the terms “man” and “woman,” I am referring only to these positions. I do so with apprehension in light of Judith Butler’s (1993) work on citation, which shows how the repeated use of gendered terminology reproduces heteronormative ideas at the level of so-called common-sense reality. Yet the benefits outweigh the risks in this case, given that we need to represent gendered experiences and deal with the complications of moving through the signifier toward the Real.

While some Lacanians reinforce essentialist ideas through the implicit or explicit notion that male and female desires coincide with biologically or socially defined sex/gender categories,²³ I emphasize that nothing about biological sex or cultural inscription determines masculine or feminine structure in Lacan. Masculine and feminine positions refer to strategies

²² This is consistent with Lacan’s approach. Consider that in comparing the psychoanalytic method to the Socratic one, Lacan claims that Socrates is not a man, since he identifies not with the phallus but with its absence (Soler, 2006).

²³ For example, in his chapter “The Real of Sexual Difference,” Slavoj Žižek (2002) claims that there is a “long-observed difference in how the two sexes relate to cybersex...Men are much more prone to use cybersex as a masturbatory device for their lone playing, immersed in stupid repetitive pleasure, while women are more prone to participate in chat rooms, using cyberspace for seductive exchanges of speech” (p. 59) Žižek does not cite an empirical source for this claim, seeming to rely only on what he considers to be a common sense application of Lacan’s theory of sexualization to the realm of cybersex.

subjects use to manage anxiety surrounding the sexual impasse—an anxiety rooted in the failure of meaning. This provides opportunities for a more inclusive and expansive approach to exploring the significance of gender. As Cavanagh (2017a) wrote “Although trans studies often ignore feminist psychoanalytic theories understood (often with just cause) to be essentialist and transphobic, multiple more- progressive readings are possible when the feminine is approached as a sexual position, as opposed to a natal female corporeal ‘truth’ fixed by gender or biology” (p. 327). Cavanagh (2016) explained that from a Lacanian view, personal gender identity is an ego-based “defensive reaction to a primal loss” that occurs primarily in the Imaginary (p. 31).

In “Lacan’s Answer to the Classical Mind/Body Deadlock: Retracing Freud’s Beyond,” Paul Verhaeghe (2002) emphasized this dimension of defense and failure in his discussion of Lacan’s formulas of sexuation, arguing that Lacan’s ultimate goal is to subvert binary logics from within. He wrote, “every interpretation of [Lacan’s theory of sexuation] that leads to yet another binary misses the point and is merely another form of the return of the repressed” (2002, p. 136). This interpretation is shared by Soler (2006), who writes that while Freud “did not hesitate to repeat Napoleon’s saying anatomy is destiny, Lacan challenges this idea and advances a formula that seems to mark the end of any norm coming from nature: as far as being a man or a woman goes ‘they’—subjects—‘have a choice’” (p. 175). What Lacan clearly demonstrates, “is that while “anatomy decides one’s legal status...it commands neither desire nor the drive” (Soler, 2006, p. 176). While the difference does not come down to conscious identification as it concerns sexual aim rather than sexual object, there is some dimension of choice involved. The structural constraints Lacan describes concern the complex operations of the Other and the limited possibilities for jouissance.

Lacan's Theory of Sexuation

In her classic feminist text “The Egg and the Sperm: How Science Has Constructed a Romance Based on Stereotypical Male-Female Roles,” Emily Martin (1991/2025) argued that popular and scientific accounts of fertilization are shot through with romantic fantasies about the fusion of egg and sperm. She recounts a familiar tale often portrayed in textbooks about the heroic journey of a sperm to penetrate an egg that passively waits to be imbued with life. This description is inaccurate, in part because it overlooks the egg's active role in fertilization, including its selective binding mechanisms and biochemical contributions. Despite this inaccuracy and ongoing criticism, these narratives persist, and these themes even appear in descriptions of artificial technological fertilizations like in vitro fertilization (Liston et al., 2025).

Since these romanticized images influence the direction of scientific inquiry—in this case, inquiry into the origin of life—Martin (1991/2025) emphasized the need to “wake up sleeping metaphors” within the biological sciences to make new knowledges possible (p. 501). This is what Lacan (1972/1998) does in his discussion of meiosis, where he emphasizes the dimension of loss in sexual reproduction. Elaborating on the Freudian idea that the death drive is part of the libidinal body, Lacan (1972/1998) claimed,

It is obviously a metaphor that Freud is able to use thanks to the fortunate discovery of the two units of the germ, the ovum and the spermatozoon, about which one could roughly say that it is on the basis of their fusion that is engendered what? A new being. Except that that doesn't happen without meiosis, a thoroughly obvious subtraction, at least for one of the two, just before the very moment at which the conjunction occurs, a subtraction of certain elements that are not superfluous in the final operation (p. 66).

In this passage, Lacan drew attention to the connection between sexed existence and death in reproduction by focusing on cell division rather than fusion. The connection is explicitly sexual because organisms that reproduce asexually, without meiosis, such as amoebas, could theoretically live forever and can therefore be considered biologically immortal. Lacan (1973/1998) wrote that “[t]he living being, by being subject to sex, has fallen under the blow of individual death” (p. 205). By pointing out that biological reproduction could serve as a metaphor for division, loss, absence, or death, Lacan drew attention to the particularity of our prevailing origin myths, which typically emphasize fusion, unity, and the miraculous emergence of life, while obscuring the essential subtractions that make such emergence possible.

For Lacan, the meiotic metaphor illuminates something important about the death drive: it operates not as simple destruction but as the energy that animates the lack inherent to desire, subjectivity, and jouissance. In other words, just as sexual reproduction requires the deduction of genetic material before combination, psychic life requires a hole in the whole, a lack that resists closure, a desire that resists satisfaction—ultimately, a split structure that resists unification into the One. Lacan argues that what appears as destructive is also generative in the sense of ensuring the incompleteness that drives and animates psychic life. This logic of generative loss underlies Lacan’s theory of sexualization.

To introduce key differences between Lacan’s and Freud’s approaches to sexual subjectivity, Soler (2006) provided a distinction between identification (Freud) and sexualization (Lacan). Admitting that the distinction sacrifices certain nuances and simplifies the complexity and diversity of Freud’s thought, she argued that it also points to a significant difference between these two thinkers. Referring to unification and the genital drive, she wrote, “identification is the name that [Freud] gives to the process by which the symbolic ensures its grasp over the real”

(Soler, 2006, p 176). She continued, “with the Oedipus complex and the different identifications it generates, Freud gives consistency to an Other of discourse: an Other who knots the norms, the models, the obligations and the interdictions of discourse to anatomical identity” (Soler, 2006, p. 177). For Freud, the symbolic provides the template for one’s sexual being and orders the relations between the sexes. Sexuality mainly concerns assimilation to social norms. On this account “Sex and “gender.... stand in the same path” (Soler, 2006, p. 177).

According to Soler (2006), “this is precisely the path Lacan left behind when he passed beyond the Oedipus complex, after years devoted to reformulating and rationalizing Freud’s oedipal problematic in terms of language” (p. 177). Lacan recognized that civilizing mechanisms cannot repair the denaturing of the speaking being as there is something about the sexed body and the castrating effects of language that puts a limit on the power of norms and rules. This “is the path from which [Encore] proceeds, from the intersection between the failure of the norm and Other jouissance” (Soler, 2006, p. 183).

For Lacan, sexual desire is rooted in “symbolic castration,” the foundational loss that occurs when subjects enter the symbolic order, fundamentally alienating them from direct or unmediated access to themselves, others, and the world. This loss creates the fundamental lack that becomes the driving force of desire. This process entails the loss of what Lacan calls *The Thing*, which can be traced back to the fantasized oceanic oneness with the maternal figure characteristic of infantile sexuality’s polymorphous perversity. While perfect union between mother and child is impossible, Lacan suggests that this imagined potentiality shapes subjectivity through the retrospective framework of mourning its loss. As subjects constituted through the cut of language—always tethered to the fantasy of *The Thing*—our sexuality emerges from dynamic interactions among ideology, anxiety, repetition, resistance, accommodation, trauma, pleasure,

and narcissism. The ideals of satisfaction that emerge from these largely unconscious formations are not based on complete pictures or realizable states but rather on fragments of pleasure, embodied memories of past traumas, and fantasies of future fulfillment.

In Lacan's theory of the sexual subject, we find partial objects, component drives, unstable fantasies, and counterintuitive aims rather than unified goals, secure orientations, linear trajectories, and complete objects. Lacan used the term *objet petit a* to refer to these elusive elements and to challenge the notion of a "sexual relationship," which he viewed as premised on the illusion of two self-aware subjects with comprehensible and compatible sexual aims. For Lacan, "there is no sexual relationship" because we relate to others through our own unconscious constructions of what they represent and who they are—constructions formed by our necessarily incomplete and distorted ideas about what they see in us and what they want from us.

Unlike traditional psychoanalytic theories that focus on complete objects as the aim of instincts, *objet petit a* operates as the cause of desire or the enigmatic object that represents the absence setting desire in motion. This object-cause can be traced to what was lost or sacrificed during the transition from infantile polymorphous perversity to "mature" symbolic organization. Lacan posited that these losses do not simply disappear; they return as *objet petit a*, organizing the subject's fundamental fantasy structure. *Objet petit a* can manifest in seemingly trivial objects rooted in one's developmental past, such as a tone of voice, mode of glance, or article of clothing, which can carry an inexplicable sexual charge. These objects derive their power from their status as representatives of the impossible object that would, in fantasy, complete the subject and restore the lost wholeness of pre-symbolic existence.

Lacan emphasized that to keep desire alive, the sexual aim can never be realized—it must remain forever out of reach to sustain both the experience of lack and the fantasy of wholeness

that motivates it. By revealing the fundamental gap between what is consciously sought and what provides satisfaction, *objet petit a* sheds light on the paradoxical relationship between obstacles to fulfillment and sources of excitement. Every subject develops a particular relationship to loss, involving their own way of deriving satisfaction partly by keeping their sexual aim inaccessible. Lacan used the concepts of masculine and feminine subject positions to describe different strategies subjects use to navigate these predicaments and access jouissance.

Lacan (1975/1998) reconceptualized the differences between the sexes as two fundamentally different ways of relating to the cut of the signifier. He did so by opposing two kinds of logic, the phallic whole for those in the masculine position, and the not-whole for those in the feminine position. Lacan distinguished the sexes by “having or being the symptom,” which is a “positive function of jouissance” (Soler, 2006, p. 63). As representatives of the dominant sex, those occupying the masculine position are vulnerable to feeling inadequate in their symbolic role, driving them to establish their existence through proximity to the “One” of phallic exception. Lacan argued that while all men are subject to castration and the phallic function, this universality is possible only through the grounding fantasy of an exception. For the statement “all men are castrated” to have meaning, one must be able to imagine a man who is not. Put another way, it would not make sense (in the imaginary and the symbolic) to say “all women are castrated” due to the assumption that there is nothing to castrate. The very idea that men can be castrated presupposes the existence of the organ.

Lacan draws on the mythical primal father from Freud’s *Totem and Taboo* (1913/1990) to represent this fantasy of the uncastrated man. This primal father represents a prehistoric myth that endures through fantasies of mastery and completion, directing desire toward the pursuit of knowledge and selfhood. The primal father can take the form of any superhuman figure with

omniscience and omnipotence as the ultimate ideal. Since men never fully identify with castration (as they remain transfixed on the fantasy of a subject not constrained by symbolic law), men are locked into a relation with the “One” of phallic exception and are thus restricted to pursuing jouissance through identification with it (Barnard, 2002). This anxiety motivates the masculine fantasy of “The Woman” as a complete, knowable object who could theoretically provide the satisfaction that would resolve the predicament of his desire and existence. In other words, Woman becomes the repository for everything man cannot accept about the contradictions of lack in the Other, embodying his fantasy solution to the structural problems of his impossible relation to the Real. In this formula, woman is the symptom of man. The “all” in the masculine position is defined by a dialectical relation between the fantasy of plenitude and the Real of lack. This logic is associated with phallic pleasure, which is inextricably tied to the signifier and associated with a loss of jouissance. When man clings to the fantasy he has elaborated around the phallic stance, it protects him from coming into contact with the void associated with the Real of lack.

Lacan splits jouissance into two categories: phallic jouissance and Other jouissance. Phallic jouissance is associated with the masculine position, forms of phallic enjoyment connected to the ego of ego psychology, and most directly linked to *objet petit a*. Soler (2006) articulated this well,

Phallic Jouissance, as the jouissance of the One, is located, limited, and outside the body. It is a jouissance that is syntonetic to the signifier, as discrete and parceled out as it is; it therefore lends itself to thinking in terms of pluses and minuses, and becomes thereby the partner to the subject as such. (p. 39)

This means phallic jouissance is circumscribed. It is tied to specific erogenous zones and is channeled through specific points. It operates within a phallic economy of having and not having. Just as signifiers are discrete units that can be combined, separated, and contrasted, phallic jouissance can be spoken about and judged. This is the default jouissance for subjects in the symbolic realm. It is an erotic form exemplified by “the masturbatory jouissance of the organ” and it “underlies the whole of the subjects accomplishments in the field of reality and makes up the substance of all the satisfactions that can be capitalized” (Soler, 2006, p. 39). Phallic jouissance is defined by what it fails to deliver, and thus always carries within it a sense of insufficiency or disappointment.

Other Jouissance

To direct attention to what lies outside phallic Jouissance, Lacan (1975/1998) developed the concept of “Other jouissance.” Other jouissance is a form of enjoyment involving the subject’s encounter with the shadow of the Real. This is an excessive, painful, traumatic enjoyment. In its most extreme form, it can barely be distinguished from suffering. Other jouissance is associated with the feminine position. This means it can be accessed by those sexuated on the feminine side, or by those who have been sexuated on the phallic side but traverse the fundmantantal fantasy and identify with the sinthome to access Other jouissance. Before saying more about Other jouissance, let me briefly describe the feminine position.

Lacan (1975/1998) claimed that for those sexuated on the feminine side, there is no exception to ground being or orient desire. Since woman is already “castrated” in the symbolic, she does not need to exert the same energy to form her ego in relation to a fantasy associated with a non-castrated figure. In the symbolic, woman is forced to confront the lack (hole, void)

within herself, whereas man is encouraged to deny it, prompting him to exert his energy to try to cover over it with phallic fantasies, pleasures, and identifications.

Here is one way to describe the difference between the masculine and feminine position in relation to the symbolic: man is One, and woman is Other. What is said of woman is said in relation to man, not of her own being (Soler, 2006). In the words of Verhaeghe and Declercq (2002) “Woman does not exist in the Symbolic” and “Man exists far too much there” (p. 16). Soler (2006) provided an insightful example of this related to the fantasy of the sexual relation:

The “sexual” relation places the erect organ of masculine desire in the master position, and as a result, a woman can be inscribed in this relation only in the place of a correlate of desire. It is thus not astonishing that everything that is said of women is stated from the point of view of the Other and concerns more semblance than her own being; the latter remains what is “foreclosed” from discourse.” (p. 29)

Feminine sexuality in the symbolic registers in relation to the male organ according to the scene of penetration. To clarify this point, consider the difficulty of imagining a woman having sex with another woman. What makes such a scene difficult to conceptualize is the absence of the phallic object (of course, it can be made intelligible by introducing an “artificial” phallic object). This is only one example of how feminine sexuality does not signify. The hidden plus of this failure to signify is that the feminine subject is not obliged to follow the law of phallic exception. Thus, it becomes possible for her to pursue a different relation to the Real via Other *jouissance*.

Unlike phallic *jouissance*, which gets off in relation to the One, Other *jouissance*, “gets off—in a way and on the basis of what we do not comprehend” (Soler, 2006, p. 41). That is, while phallic *jouissance* relies on objects and signifiers, Other *jouissance* derives enjoyment from the defect in the Symbolic. Here, the hole in the psyche resonates with the symbolic hole,

becoming a potential site of enjoyment. Other jouissance inverts the logic of phallic jouissance. It runs in the opposite direction. In the words of Verhaeghe (2002), in contrast to the closed symbolic universe of the “One” of phallic exception, feminine structure exists, within an “open-ended, endless universe” where “exceptions do not refer to the order of the one but to the order of the not-whole” (p. 127). Soler (2006) emphasized this point in her assertion that Other jouissance, in contrast to phallic jouissance, goes beyond: it is a “structure that is necessarily beyond...beyond the phallus, beyond the object, beyond the consistency of the saying (*dire*), and which negatives everything that does not also go beyond” (p. 41).

This “beyond” is not simply an addition to the phallic economy of enjoyment. It is a jouissance untethered from the phallic economy. Soler (2006) claimed that the feminine position is closer to “the vertigo for the absolute... for which love and death are only the most common names (p. 18). And that “this quasi-sacrificial trait of annihilation is the specific mark that designates the threshold, the border, of the position that is not at all phallic, of the not-all it is the absolute Other” (p. 18). The threshold she describes marks the point where divided subjectivity is felt, and dissolution becomes a source of enjoyment—where the not-all opens onto an encounter with extimate otherness.

Other jouissance has important clinical implications as it is essentially opaque, not merely unknown but unknowable. The subject who experiences it cannot name it, describe it, or grasp what is happening. Even psychoanalysts, who may claim to be experts of the unconscious, cannot deciphered it. As Soler (2006) put it, “The unconscious knows a lot, but by definition, it knows nothing of other jouissance” (p. 41). Thus, there is no clinic of the woman that is not “imaginary and projective” (Soler, 2006, p. 46). In other words, the symbolic realm is phallic, analysis proceeds by way of language, and desire is a deviation. In this sense, there is a “path

leading from feminine sexuality to desire itself” (Soler, 2006, p. 38). Here, a connection is drawn between woman, Other jouissance, clinical transformation, and the ultimate impotence of the analyst. Clarifying this connection requires a closer look at the relation between jouissance and the death drive.

Lacan (1970/2007) linked the death drive with jouissance when he wrote that the pleasure principle operates as “a principle of the least tension, of the minimum tension that needs to be maintained for life to subsist,” and that “jouissance overruns it” (pp. 45–46). This is especially true of Other jouissance, which is unique in that it mobilizes one’s complex history of loss and pain alongside pleasure, altering the boundaries of the self. Like in meiosis, self-creation and deduction are part of the same process. In the clinic, the subject can be transformed by Other jouissance, but this transformation does not lend itself to understanding in the rationalist sense informing consent culture and traditional approaches to psychoanalysis. The analyst cannot know Other jouissance because unlike forms of pleasure that serve homeostatic functions, Other jouissance goes against what can be identified as our biological and social interests. It exemplifies the point of intersection between Freud’s life drive (Eros) and death drive (Thanatos).²⁴

Other jouissance sheds light on why transgression can carry such powerful erotic force and why forbidden thoughts and desires can become sexualized. Since boundaries can be eroticized as markers of the impossible object representing *The Thing*, violating law, morality, convention, or apparent personal limits and preferences becomes a strategy for approaching Other jouissance. Although Other jouissance is overwhelming to the subject because it trespasses consciously articulated intention and desire, there are good reasons for pursuing it, given the

²⁴ Lacan (1975/1998) claimed that death, as it relates to the Real, cannot be symbolized, and it is this dimension of death in the death drive that creates a disturbance in the symbolic.

understanding one can derive from approaching the Real of their own divided subjectivity.

Other jouissance brings something new to the fore, inviting a kind of resistance or distance from a performative and signifying self, one that points to the incoherence of embodied subjectivity, which can enable the subject to approach the signifier differently, or at the very least, provide resources for sensing what exceeds intelligibility.

Although she does not refer directly to Other jouissance, Lacanian psychoanalyst Jamieson Webster (2022) gestures toward its significance here:

We encounter an everyday demand to put our bodies and our ideas in some kind of order ... psychoanalysis says, point blank, that nothing could be more impossible, and nothing is more counterproductive to the sexuality unique to human beings; one that Freud points out, goes beyond instinct, beyond pleasure, and is thus radically open. Open, but for carrying the burden of history. (p. xiii)

Put another way, the subject is limited by structure and by history (in the collective sense and in the context of one's own personal life) yet one can negotiate with the determinations of one's past and social context via Other jouissance.

Consent culture, along with traditional psychoanalytic approaches and ego psychology operate according to phallic logics associated with the masculine position. Lacan (1975/1998) however, was interested in the therapeutic possibilities of the feminine “not-all” associated with Other jouissance. He suggested that Other jouissance can establish pathways to the Real by undermining the pleasure principle's regulatory function. This is conducive to analysis, in the Lacanian form, which is more about un-knowing oneself than knowing oneself, more about disruption than consolidation. Rather than pressuring subjects to adapt to “reality” or conform to “healthy” social norms, Lacan used psychoanalysis to create opportunities for new kinds of self-

experience—ones that gesture toward something impossible and illegible, connected to the part of us that cannot conform, that wants to go beyond, and that does not want to be limited.

When Lacan says that the “Woman does not exist” he is saying that “woman is one of the names of this—real—jouissance” (Soler, 2006, p. 27). This claim about the non-existence of woman highlights what the feminine position makes visible: the partial and split nature of all being and the universal potential to experience Other jouissance. Lacan uses the figure of woman—her situation within the symbolic and her escape from symbolic capture via feminine desire and jouissance—to advance a broader psychoanalytic claim about the incomplete nature of being as such (Copjec, 2004).

Recognizing the limit of the norm, in relation to split (as opposed to unified) subjectivity, reveals something important about what is called “agency” in debates about consent. On the narrative of social construction prevalent in many feminist theories, Copjec (1994/2015) writes,

The subject is assumed to be already virtually there in the social and to come into being by actually wanting what social laws want it to want. The construction of the subject depends then on the subject’s taking social representations as images of its own ideal being, on the subject’s deriving a ‘narcissistic pleasure’ from these representations. This notion of pleasure, however vaguely invoked, is what makes the argument for construction stick; it ‘cements’ or ‘glues’ the realm of the psychic to that of the social...The point of insertion of the subject into society thus becomes a point of resemblance, convergence, attachment. (pp. 41–42)

Other jouissance marks a moment where the subject cannot be understood according to such a logic of “resemblance, convergence, [and] attachment.” Other jouissance is what unglues the

subject from the social. It marks the place where the very concept of consent and the concept of social construction (a central concept of critical consent discourse) fails (Soler, 2006).

Other jouissance has the potential to disrupt the smooth operations of the Symbolic. Phallic jouissance corresponds to how institutions operate—seeking to categorize, organize, totalize, and control through systematic knowledge and regulatory frameworks. The satisfaction derived from wielding institutional power or achieving measurable success in a capitalist society reflects its bounded, quantifiable nature. Conversely, Other jouissance relates to the *sinthome* and to forms of resistance, creativity, and social transformation as they cannot be easily mapped and managed by existing structures.²⁵

The Sinthome

Lacan (1976/2016) found evidence for the incomplete nature of being in the symptom, and everything in Lacanian analysis comes down to what one does with their symptom. On this point, he helpfully distinguished between identifying with one's symptom—creating a *sinthome*—and believing in one's symptom—imbuing it with significance vis-à-vis the Other, particularly the fantasy of Woman and the sexual relation. Identifying with the *sinthome* in the Lacanian clinic contrasts with the ideal of identifying with the analyst in ego psychology. As Soler (2006) explained,

²⁵ From a feminist perspective, it is tempting to denounce phallic jouissance in celebration of Other jouissance, however, I think this would be a mistake. Lacan (1975/1998) explored Other jouissance through a series of negative statements about what it is not, implying an opposition that does not obey binary logic. Although Lacan made some “positive” statements about Other jouissance—for instance, by associating it with the enjoyment of the “substance of the body” (p. 26)—he emphasized that this substance ex-sists within phallic jouissance, meaning it is implicated in it and cannot be conceptualized in terms of a romanticized separation. Indeed, it can be difficult to distinguish phallic and Other jouissance in Lacan's work because he often refers to them both using the term *jouissance*, probably to show that they are knotted together. Phallic jouissance is “on the side of the subject,” whereas Other jouissance is “beyond the subject.” The former is filtered through the signifier whereas the latter represents what cannot be directly articulated (Soler, 2015). This points to a dialectical nature: to go beyond the subject, there must be a subject to go beyond. For the Real to transgress the signifier, there must be a signifier to transgress.

Ending analysis by identifying with the analyst and identifying with the symptom are opposites; the first accentuates the defense against the real; the second, on the contrary, supposes that this singular real is confronted. What is prior to this is the fall of identifications with the signifiers of the Other; this fall has a separation-effect that uncovers the void that constitutes the subject. (p. 256)

In other words, throughout the subject's life, they have been supported by signifiers borrowed from the Other in the form of identifications, ideals, and norms. In the Lacanian clinic, psychoanalytic transformation requires that these identifications fall away and the subject find something else to identify with—something unique to themselves. This is the *sinthome*.

The *sinthome* is the symptom that cannot be eradicated in the clinic because it is ontological (not ontic or psychological). It is intimately connected to the subject's desire as it involves their unique mode of accessing *jouissance* and managing their impossible relation to the Real. The *sinthome* is therapeutic because it knots the Real to the other two registers of the imaginary and the symbolic.

Lacan (1976/2016) referred to this knotting as a "relationship." He wrote that the *sinthome* is "what permits the Symbolic, the Real and the Imaginary to be kept together...On the level of the *sinthome*, there is a relationship...There is only a relationship where there is a *sinthome*" (Lacan, 1976/2016, p. 20). By claiming "there is a relationship," Lacan implied that the *sinthome* can compensate for the sexual nonrelation by creating a *jouissance* that stands in for what cannot register in the symbolic. This relationship relies not on the fantasized wholeness of the phallic stance but on a knotting that holds the subject together and, potentially, links the subject to an other through shared precarity and intensity.

The sinthome adds something significant to the canonical feminist claim that “the personal is political.” As an invention that works at the level of a hole in the whole, it names what is simultaneously singular to the subject and lacking in the Other. Lacan (1976/2016) signaled this political potential by referring to the motivating power of the symptom in the creation of art and poetry. He said, “It is by this [lack] that I try to meet the function of art, what is implied by what is left blank as fourth term, when I say that art can even reach the symptom” (p. 18). The fourth term here is the sinthome, exemplified for Lacan by the inventive writing of James Joyce. In Lacan’s words, “I have said of Joyce that he is the symptom. His entire work testifies to it” (p. 15).

In the example of Joyce, the sinthome substitutes for the Name of the Father. Crucially, instead of resulting in psychosis, the fall of the Name of the Father enables a creative self-transformation, producing something new in the lack of the Other. Lacan found this example inspiring. As Paul Verhaeghe and Frédéric Declercq (2002) wrote, “Lacan invites everyone to follow Joyce’s example and to create their own sinthome at the place of the lack of the Other; the aim of this creative act is to be able to function without the signifier of the Name of the Father, i.e., the Other” (p. 16). Lacan envisioned psychoanalysis enabling analysands to live lives rooted in creativity rather than conformity, while retaining the capacity to function socially.

Other Jouissance: Contemporary Perspectives

I turn now to contemporary perspectives that develop concepts associated with Other jouissance in politically insightful ways. These examples concern political questions associated with the gaze (“ugliness” and the sublime), racism and resistance (symbolic death and brown jouissance), embodiment and identity (transpsychoanalytics), and love (impersonal intimacy). After describing these innovations associated with Other jouissance, and explaining how they

disrupt the logics of consent, I introduce an alternative ethics to consent culture based on a psychoanalytic account of desire. This final discussion focuses on Lacan's (1986/1997) ethics seminar and his reading of Antigone.

The Gaze: "Ugliness" and the Sublime

In "The Ugly Gaze," Shannon Bell (2018), integrates a discussion of Lacan's *objet petit a* with the Freudian uncanny and the Kantian sublime to describe a type of experience that resembles Other jouissance. She argues that the power of experiences associated with each of these concepts lies in the "dissensus" between attraction and repulsion (p. 415). Drawing on Žižek, Bell describes the dual character of *objet petit a* as both the cause of desire (the "lure" that draws us forward) and an absence or lack (the "void" that can never be filled) (p. 415). This duality creates an inherent tension: we are attracted to something impossible. In the case of the Freudian uncanny, we encounter something both familiar and strange, intimate yet foreign, revealing how we are fascinated by what disturbs us and compelled by what we wish to avoid. Similarly, in the Kantian sublime, we experience both attraction—in the draw toward the unknown—and a kind of trauma, due in part to our failure to grasp it. The sublime is enjoyable precisely through this unsettling discord. Bell notes that Kant distinguishes aesthetic response into the beautiful and the sublime. The beautiful "derives from a pleasure in order, harmony, delicacy, and the like" whereas the sublime is "a response of awe before the infinite or the overwhelming" (p. 415). We could say that the beautiful corresponds to phallic jouissance and the sublime corresponds to Other jouissance.

The pleasure of the Kantian sublime, Bell wrote, "derives from our awareness that there is something in us that connects with the infinity outside the human" (p. 415). Bell offers this quote from Kant, "The beautiful in nature relates to the form of the object, and this consists in

limitation... the sublime is to be found in an object devoid of form, so far as it immediately involves or else by its present provokes an image of limitlessness” (Bell, p. 415). Bell refers to the sublime as a “slash in the harmony of the symbolic” (p. 416). She claims that such encounters “cut open into the Real” and create “momentary” opportunities for sublime experience (p. 416). By framing the sublime in terms of “dissensus” rather than mere ambivalence, Bell suggests that such experiences constitute a traumatic encounter with the Lacanian Real—a form of jouissance that disrupts our very sense of self and reality. Bell’s chapter contributes to the goal of the anthology in which it appears, *On the Politics of Ugliness* (2018), which marks ugliness as a political category that reinforces established notions of value and significance. The anthology casts ugliness not as an aesthetic property but as a site of visual politics, calling for new ways of seeing that challenge the forms of exclusion and injustice the category of “ugliness” legitimates.

Although Bell (2018) does not discuss consent directly, her analysis challenges the fundamental framework of consent culture, which sorts experiences into good (comfortable, wanted, progressive) versus bad (uncomfortable, unwanted, damaging). The political gaze involves recognizing and opening oneself to a certain tension in the visual field. Like desire, which involves pursuing what we cannot have, the gaze is constituted by what is missing. Phallic jouissance corresponds to the beautiful: bounded, harmonious, graspable. Other jouissance corresponds to the sublime: formless, limitless, overwhelming. Consent culture can only think sexuality in terms of the beautiful, missing entirely the dimension of the sublime.

Racism and Resistance: Symbolic Death and Brown Jouissance

In Amber Jamilla Musser’s *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance* (2018). Musser reconceptualizes Lacanian jouissance using critical race theory, combining

Hortense Spillers's theory of the pornotrope—the process of objectification that reduces the racialized body to pure flesh—with Afro-pessimist theories of Blackness as symbolic death. Musser showed how blackness comes to represent the negated space of otherness that makes fantasies of transcendence possible but also points to forms of excess that emerge from this symbolic exclusion and exceed symbolic containment. With Lacan, she proposes an epistemic approach that privileges opacity and sensuality over transparency and recognition, shifting attention to embodied experiences associated with the Real, and disrupting binaries between objectification and agency, pain and pleasure. Yet while Lacan's Other *jouissance* was framed primarily around sexual difference, Musser (2018) introduces “brown *jouissance*,” to name an approach that confronts the epistemic whiteness embedded in abstract notions of sexuality (p. 3). Where Lacan sometimes casts Other *jouissance* in terms of mystical transcendence, Musser grounds brown *jouissance* in survival and resistance to racist structures.

I appreciate Musser's (2018) unique ability to consistently theorize violence and pleasure together. With Musser, I believe that, “Clearly, we need new frameworks for imagining intimacies and sensualities under duress” (p. 21). Toward this end, Musser proposed meditating on the value of opacity. Although Musser did not focus on consent frameworks specifically in her discussion of brown *jouissance*, she demonstrated that sensual and intimate experiences that do not conform to consent logics have value for knowledge production of marginalized subjects.

Building on the work of Alex Weheliye, Musser (2018) called “hunger” a form of desire that contrasts sharply with the forms of phallic and egoic desire commonly centered in consent culture (p. 5). She explains that for Weheliye hunger “is not about the possibility of fulfillment or nurturance; there are no objects, just cravings, and this act of craving is part of survival” (p. 5). It is a craving that “prioritizes an openness, vulnerability, and a willingness to ingest without

necessarily choosing what one is taking in” (p. 15). It is an “embodied hunger that takes joy and pain in a gesture of radical openness toward otherness” (p. 5). We can find examples of such hunger in certain trauma repetitions that offer paradoxical satisfactions (Freud, 1920/1989).

Trauma survivors may find themselves drawn to relationships, situations, or activities that appear to repeat traumatic events because these repetitions have become structurally necessary for accessing *jouissance*. When involving feminine sexuality, these behaviors are often pathologized and labelled as self-destructive, but repetition compulsions are never simple repetitions. They always involve something new.

While the Anglo-American tradition often views suffering as strengthening agency, echoing Nietzsche’s oft-quoted phrase “whatever doesn’t kill you makes you stronger,” this conception has been bound to masculinity, heteronormativity, able-bodiedness, and whiteness. Those experiencing sexual violation, disability, racism, or colonization are rarely seen as epistemologically privileged through their suffering. This difference may be because the former are assumed to use suffering to cultivate autonomy, while the latter are imagined as insufficiently equipped for this task. Like femininity, Musser (2018) argued that “blackness is the foreclosed other to the concept of the sovereign” (p. 6). Her method involved highlighting the epistemic privileges associated with racialized femininity in resistance without romanticizing this resistance by reducing it to the terms of mastery associated with white, neoliberal empowerment feminisms. Through her exploration of Black queer performance art, Musser argued that objectification can simultaneously suppress and activate, producing an insatiable embodied hunger or a drive toward receptivity and creativity. While consent culture often frames sexual objectification as a destructive form of experience in a one-dimensional way, Musser suggested it can also serve as a source of self-creation that pushes against dominant structures of meaning.

Identity and Embodiment: Transpsychoanalytics

To appreciate the value of Other jouissance in exposing the precarity and elusiveness of gender, we can turn to the emerging field of Transpsychoanalytics, a field of study advancing a transgender turn in psychoanalysis, led by Lacanian psychoanalytic theorists and clinicians such as Sheila L. Cavanagh (2020), Oren Gozlan (2008, 2011), and Patricia Gherovici (2010). While some assume that trans individuals are overly invested in normative gender categories, these theorists argue that transsexuality reveals the inherent instability of all identity and embodiment. From this perspective, transexuality and psychoanalysis share a common insight: being at home in one's body and in the symbolic is impossible (Cavanagh, 2020).

In "Transsexuality as Sinthome: Bracha L. Ettinger and the Other (Feminine) Sexual Difference," Cavanagh (2016) wrote that gender identity, is a "compromise formation" or symptom that leads to "anxiety and crisis" because gender identity is not an adequate solution to the sexual impasse (p. 31). Gender identities function simultaneously as defenses that manage the threat of difference and as symbolic frameworks through which we develop and pursue our impossible desires (Cavanagh, 2017a). Unlike some post-structuralist and queer theorists who argue that gender is merely a cultural construct, Cavanagh and other scholars working at the intersection of psychoanalysis and trans studies make a case for the significance of gender, not by reference to phenomenology or biology, but by reference to the symptom. For example, Cavanagh (2016), Gozlan (2008, 2011), and Gherovici (2010) have used Lacan's theory of sexuation to frame transsexuality as sinthome.

Cavanagh (2016) uses Lacan's theory of sexuation and his idea of the sinthome to argue that the "transsexual trajectory" can be recognized as a "viable way of negotiating the sexual impasse" and "creatively animat[ing] the impossibility of gender wholeness in the domain of

biology and identity” (p. 36). In her discussion of transsexuality as *sinthome*, Cavanagh (2016) wrote that the *sinthome* “can be an active and creative reworking of a symptom that involves what Lacan (1963) in Seminar X calls a ‘passage to the act’” (p. 34). The passage to the act enables the analysand to detach from rigid fantasy structures tied to the desire of the Other and identify instead with their symptom, acting in a way that breaches the symbolic. Just as Joyce’s poetic inventions intervened into the symbolic order—not by correcting or completing it but by exposing and working with its gaps—transsexuality intervenes into the edifice constructed on gender truth.

Consent culture pathologizes feelings of alienation from oneself and society as symptoms to be cured, upholding an ideal of autonomous subjectivity and addressing sexual injustice through appeals to full speech and authentic identification. Transpsychoanalytics, by contrast, conveys a politics that does not depend on wholeness, coherence, or the Other’s validation—reminding us that certain symptoms are not only impossible to cure but are both precious to the subject and politically significant.

Love: Ego Shattering and Impersonal Intimacy

In *Intimacies*, psychoanalyst Adam Phillips and psychoanalytic theorist Leo Bersani (2008) made a case for the psychic, relational, and political value of destabilizing experiences resembling Other *jouissance*. Phillips and Bersani suggested that the popular notion that we can know ourselves and know each other is to believe that we can be cured of the unconscious. Since they argued, from a psychoanalytic point of view, that this knowledge is impossible, they warn that it risks leading to repression, shame, and violent projection.²⁶

²⁶ In *Hatred of Sex*, Davis and Dean (2022) elaborated on problems associated with projecting the negativity of the sexual unconscious. For example, they argued that popular movements against sexual violation often attempt to sanitize sex by eliminating its inherently negative qualities, for instance, by constructing figures of sexual

Since confrontation with difference often motivates aggression, Bersani and Phillips (2008) argued that we should be curious about forms of relationality not based on knowledge. Like Lacan, Phillips and Bersani are interested in how the Freudian death drive could support, rather than harm, intimacy. They suggest that promises of satisfaction related to knowledge, of the self and of the other, create a misleading sense of closure that discourages us from exploring certain experiences and aspects of ourselves and embracing and learning from the differences of others. Bersani's chapters build on his theory of ego-shattering, which he first articulated in *The Freudian Body* (1986), to describe and encourage forms of intimacy based on pleasures associated with excitation, shock, and intensity rather than the pleasures associated with the satisfactions of knowledge and the comforts of repair. In Lacanian terms, they highlight the possibilities associated with Other jouissance and the limitations of phallic jouissance.

For Bersani and Phillips (2008) pursuing relational forms not based on knowledge is desirable because such forms would involve maintaining mutual awareness of the potential of the self and the other. Their work can be used to argue against two central assumptions that underpin orthodox psychoanalysis and consent culture: that intimacy is best realized through knowledge of oneself and knowledge of the other, and that self-knowledge puts one on the path toward greater satisfaction and personal growth.

Antigone's Desire: An Ethics of the Real

Having explored the political significance of the feminine position, Other jouissance, and the sinthome, I now propose a psychoanalytic ethics that incorporates these insights as an alternative to consent culture. To develop this, I turn to *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (1986/1997), where Lacan devoted three lectures to Sophocles' *Antigone* (circa 441 BCE),

monstrosity—such as the sexual predator or the sex trafficker—that operate through simplistic binaries of guilt and innocence, serving as convenient sites for projecting complex sexual aversions.

presenting the titular heroine as an ethical figure par excellence. Against consent culture's vision of agency as the pursuit of rational interests—defined in terms of the alignment of desire with the true and the good—Antigone embodies a form of agency rooted in a rupture of the symbolic. At stake is a tension between two opposing representations of desire. Where psychoanalysis frames desire as impossible and indecipherable, consent culture frames it as intelligible and realizable.

In Sophocles' play (441 BCE/1999), Antigone is the daughter of Oedipus, born from his incestuous union with his mother Jocasta. After Antigone's two brothers kill each other in a civil war over Thebes, the new king, Creon, decrees that one brother, Eteocles, will be marked a hero and receive a proper burial, while the other, Polynices, who fought against Thebes, will be marked a traitor and left unburied. Antigone defies Creon's edict and buries Polynices. For this act of defiance, Creon sentences her to death, but she hangs herself before the sentence is carried out.

Lacan (1986/1997) develops his reading of Antigone against Hegel's interpretation of the play in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807). Hegel reads the play as dramatizing the ethical conflict inherent to ancient Greek political life. From a Lacanian perspective, this interpretation rests on the presupposition of the existence of Woman and the sexual relation. Hegel figures women as guardians of divine law, the family, and the particular, and men as guardians of human law, the state, and the universal. For Hegel, Antigone and Creon each embody a one-sided truth. Tragedy arises because ancient Greek society could not accommodate both sides. Action required choosing one side of the ethical totality, necessarily violating the other. The resolution, for Hegel, implies a synthesis reconciling family and state, human and divine, particular and universal. Although Hegel praised Antigone, Lacan suggested that this dialectical approach

negated her desire and neutralized her ethical act. He broke with the Hegelian reading and insisted that Antigone's act is the only ethical one in the play.

Lacan (1986/1997) places Antigone in the interval between symbolic and biological death. Emerging from Oedipus' incestuous transgression, Antigone embodies a symbolic confusion of kinship origins, creating what Judith Butler (2010) called "kinship trouble" (p. 137). To Oedipus she is both daughter and sister, to Polynices both sister and aunt, to Jocasta both daughter and granddaughter. Since incest represents the collapse of symbolic differentiation, Antigone is marked by a violation of foundational laws. Bound to history and structure, Antigone nevertheless acts according to the Real of her desire rather than the rule of the Father—a rule epitomized by Creon but manifested in historical norms, legal structures, social expectations, practical reason, and the survival instinct. Antigone bypasses the reality principal, the pleasure principle, and the phallic logic of calculations. She is not moved by the question "What does the Other want from me?" The urgency of her ethical act takes precedence over finding justification in the symbolic.

In *Encore* (1975/1998), Lacan stresses that love is motivated by an ethics of creation. That is, love is made rather than found, fabricated out of nothing rather than uncovered or consummated. To determine love symbolically, in relation to a function or ideal, would be to reduce it to mere instinct. As Copjec (2004) explained, the instinct is not conducive to love because it finishes up quickly with its object. The drive, by contrast, takes its time with the object, approaches it with fascination, repeatedly turns it around, and continues to find new ways to derive satisfaction from it. This is because, where instinct has a goal, the drive has only an aim. For the drive, the object is "not a means to something other than itself, but is itself other than itself" (Copjec, 2002, p. 39).

To illustrate drive sublimation, Copjec (2004) compared Antigone's love for Polynices with Jasper Johns's artistic use of what appear as generic coat hangers. In an interview with the critic Leo Steinberg, Johns is asked why he repeatedly uses simple, everyday coat hangers in his artworks. Steinberg recognizes that they are not the intricate wooden ones that might convey, approvingly or disapprovingly, elegance or respectability, nor are they the colorful ones one might expect to find in a young girl's room. They are instead the plain wire hangers one is given at the dry cleaners. Pressing Johns on his choice of objects, Steinberg asks him if he uses such objects because he likes them or because they come that way. Johns answered simply that he likes that they come that way. (Copjec, 2004). Copjec (2004) writes: "There could not be a better description of drive/sublimation: it so wills what occurs that the object finds it indistinguishable from the one it chooses" (p. 40).

Copjec found in Johns' response a resonance with Antigone's love for her brother, as exemplified by her strange declaration that "From my point of view, my brother is my brother" (Copjec, 2004, p. 42). In contrast to consent culture's emphasis on desire as intention, in both cases, there is an appreciation for the object's raw, unmediated existence, a lack of interest in translating its value into terms of the good. According to Copjec (2004), Johns uses the same coat hangers repeatedly in his art because their capacity to inspire his curiosity is endless, "not because they stand for or represent something more than themselves, but because for him they are always more than themselves" (Copjec, 2004, p. 40). Here, Copjec (2004) emphasizes that sublimation does not involve replacing the sexual object with a culturally acceptable one but rather changing the object itself.

Copjec's (2004) Lacanian account of love in terms of drive sublimation can be contrasted with the romanticized notion of the object of love in the familiar terms of the One. Lacan

(1975/1988) wrote “The One everyone talks about all the time is, first of all a mirage of the One you believe yourself to be. Not to say that that is the whole horizon. There are as many Ones as you like—they are characterized by the fact that none of them resemble any of the others in any way” (p. 47). Love, then, is not a merging but a splitting, grounded not in harmony but in difference. It is precisely this splitting and difference that consent misses when conceptualized in terms of instinct. In other words, when desire is imagined in terms of the pleasure principle and reality principle without the complicating factor of the death drive, something crucial is missed. Through splitting and difference a seemingly ordinary coat hanger becomes the object of multiple artworks. It is also how Antigone comes to sacrifice everything for her brother, even after he is “gone,” and how his dead body, ready to be devoured by dogs and birds—becomes the catalyst for what ruptures the symbolic edifice of the Theban polis.

Antigone’s love for her brother is sublime because it is neither conditional nor based on qualities or virtues defined by norms of symbolic exchange and social utility. Her love represents a rupture, and inspires, what Lacan (1963/2014) referred to in Seminar X as “a passage to the act” (p. 102). Creon offers her multiple paths out of her predicament through appeals to legitimacy, rationality, and civility, yet Antigone refuses them all, even knowing that these alternatives would mean less conflict and less suffering. Moved by a love that breaks with the model offered by the Other, Antigone embraces death, the most forcefully repressed truth of ordinary human life. This is one way she breaks with the mold of the human.

Lacan opposes Creon’s superegoic transgression of the law with Antigone’s ethics of pure desire. While the superego suppresses desire in pursuit of an impossible ideal, psychoanalytic ethics takes a different path through impossibility by pursuing desire. In her Lacanian critique of consent, Leguil (2025) argued that Lacan urges the subject not to

underestimate or neglect desire, but to listen to its “whisper, its murmur, its fragmented message” (p. 42). She wrote, “Desire does not give orders; it doesn’t vituperate, nor does it ever yell. It expresses itself implicitly, its presence is quiet and discreet” (p. 42). It is quiet and discreet in the sense that it does not belong in the symbolic, it cannot find a home there. On this point, Lacan distinguishes between action, addressed to the Other, and a passage to the act, which ruptures the symbolic: the former is exemplified by Creon’s “fixation,” the latter by Antigone’s “perseverance” (Copjec, 2004, p. 40). Although Antigone appeals to divine law, her relation to this divine power is religious in a Kierkegaardian existentialist sense. Her conviction seems based less on any concrete law than on her ineffable love for her brother. In this way, she imbues her desire with religious import.

Antigone is compelling for Lacan because she has not sublimated her drives in compliance to the dictates of civilization. She is “essentially uncivilized” (Owens, xxii). Lacan sees in Antigone a compulsion to act beyond the voices of the Other that fill one’s head. In declaring her resolution to bury Polynices, Antigone says, “If my husband had died, I could have had another, and a child by another man, if I had lost the first, but with my mother and father in Hades below, I could never have another brother” (Copjec, 2004, p. 41–42). As Lacan recognized, this passage has so confounded commentators that some have suggested it might have been an error in transcription. Lacan, however, takes its resistance to meaning as evidence of Antigone’s singular desire.

For Lacan, to ignore desire is to betray oneself—to submit to the Other within. As Leguil (2025) wrote, “I desire, therefore I am” could be “the principle of the Lacanian cogito” (p. 40). Yet the Lacanian understanding of desire differs significantly from more common uses of the term. As Leguil (2025) clarified, Lacan’s praise of desire “is not an invitation to enjoy without

constraints nor is it an invitation to ask for the impossible” (p. 41). Lacan’s praise of Antigone does not advance a hedonistic ethic of unlimited enjoyment, an idealism that ignores structural constraints, or a libertarian logic premised on the coincidence of desire and the good. Desire is not possessed by the subject in the traditional sense because it involves an irreducible painful dimension. The fundamental fantasy exists to create distance from this pain, and traversing it requires sacrificing familiar pleasures, fantasies, and attachments—repetitive and conformist modes of *jouissance*—to make space for desires’ realization. Desire is therefore not equivalent to enjoyment, pleasure, happiness, gratification, or freedom, and acting on it cannot, by definition, appear glorious in the symbolic.

Antigone’s story is instructive because it “addresses universal and timeless contradictions ... [and is] simultaneously the story of a singular individual” (Söderbäck, 2010, p. 2). It teaches us something about the relation between history, structure, *jouissance*, the death drive, and sublimation. Antigone’s inheritance, curse, desire, and destiny form a knot: she inherits an excess that shapes her desire and offers a passage to the act. By calling Antigone a “guardian of the criminal as such,” Lacan shows that her desire exists in the lack of the Other, and that her act exposes what the symbolic order must exclude to function: that dimension of being that insists beyond what can be known (Copjec, 2004, p. 19). In other words, although Antigone’s desire remains indecipherable, oriented toward no intelligible good, the act she performs in its name “makes what is absent – Polynices, the Feminine dimension, her unique familial web – signify something of importance” (Cavanagh, 2017b, p. 29). In doing so, she “challenges the very logic of a polity whose necessary condition for representation is exclusion” (Söderbäck, 2010, p. 6). For Kristeva (2010), “she inhabits the place of the mother” by giving “birth to an imaginary universe ... a world in which life is possible at the limit” (p. 222). In this sense, as Kristeva

(2010), Ettinger (2010) and Cavanagh (2017b), have discussed, despite Antigone's manifest love for her brother, she is also moved by love for her mother, Jocasta, who likewise took her own life. Through this connection with her mother, Antigone can be recognized as not simply wedded to death but deeply invested in life—in what will emerge from her act, even if she will not be alive to witness it.

Lacan (1986/1997) distinguishes Antigone's ethics from traditional moral frameworks, including Kant's categorical imperative, which is oriented toward the good. Where Kant promoted a universal theory of moral action based on the dictates of reason, Lacan develops a psychoanalytic ethics of desire. To emphasize the deceptive nature of superegoic demands that present themselves in the guise of desire or duty or love, Lacan draws a parallel between Kant and Sade, arguing that they both converge in "the suppression of all sentimental elements" (Leguil, 2025, p. 43). Against this orientation, Lacan sets out to bring ethics down from the stars above and into the body, rejoining drive and sublimation, *jouissance* and act.

From the Answer of Consent to the Question of Desire

The title for this dissertation is inspired by Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness* (2010). Ahmed observed that happiness is often represented as a universal human good everyone should strive for; however, she is skeptical of the idea that happiness is simply a positive state of being or an obvious "goal of human existence" (p. 15). By politicizing happy objects, happy affects, and happy associations, Ahmed (2010) argued that happiness promotes "a narrow model of the good" linked to the idealization of whiteness, nationalism, capitalism, and heteronormativity (p. 70). She pointed out that critical social projects like feminism, socialism, and anticolonialism emerge from the unhappy experiences of people who do not feel at home in

the world. These critical projects involve “learning to see the violence and power concealed under the language of civility and love” (p. 86).

Lamenting that political discussions often conclude with appeals to happiness, Ahmed (2010) claimed that happiness is how we end difficult conversations: by assuming happiness is what we all really want. Happiness functions as a way of turning a question into an answer, which is a problem for Ahmed because it “requires you to accord with the world as it already exists” (2010, p. 106). In her discussion of the connection between alienation and revolutionary acts, she supports a “revolution of unhappiness” as a delegitimizing politics (2010, p. 106). If we think about sex as a question rather than an answer, we can think about the promise of consent operating in a similar way as the promise of happiness. Embracing consent culture as the goal of sexual politics assumes a shared desire and prioritizes accommodation.

Ahmed’s (2010) critique of the promise of happiness resonates with Lacan’s critique of the good. Insofar as Antigone is not a happy figure, and she does not strive for the good, she presents us with existential questions that strike at the heart of consent. Consent frameworks tend to ground ethical relations in transparency, consistency, and recognition, relying on an abstract depiction of the human and an ethic of noncontradiction. As a figure of the death drive and criminal drive, Antigone foregrounds a different sexual ethic entirely, one premised on the fracture within being and a lack in the Other. While consent culture presupposes subjects who know what they want and can articulate it clearly, Antigone’s desire aims at something she cannot name, and it is this failure to fit within the symbolic that reveals it as uniquely her own.

A Lacanian ethic focuses on desire rather than the assertion of rational will or the dictates of universal law. The Lacanian clinic develops sensitivity to desire by constantly breaking down the law, unsettling the subject, and disrupting common sense. It illuminates contradictions in

speech not as evidence of failure but as openings onto desire. Following Lacan, Copjec (2004), wrote that “a paradox [is] not the confused relation of thought to itself, but the power of thought, of the concept, to capture being, to effect existence” (p. 4). Paradox points to the power of thought because it exposes that “multiple being is anterior to the statements that affect it” (Copjec, 2004, p. 4). This is why Lacanian analysis does not ultimately aim to “interpret” as much as to activate desire.²⁷

For Lacan, the problem with ego psychology is that the ego cannot easily accommodate desire. The ego is conservative, strategic, and calculating: the place where we compare and contrast ourselves with others to develop a distinct self-identity and maintain the fantasy of self-possession, purity, and control. Since the ego’s role is to minimize risk and protect the self, it expends energy resisting disruptive forces associated with the unknown. The ego’s function is to transform the foreign into the familiar, a process that mirrors the autocratic nature of the law. This makes the ego inherently suspicious of conflict, difference, and change, and opposed to the courage essential to the act, in the Lacanian sense. Rose (1986/2020) articulated this point well. She wrote “The critique of autocracy and the critique of the ego should be taken together, since an ego in place which has held off the challenge from the unconscious or transformed it into something which can simply be known and controlled, will be autocratic above all else” (p. 5). The ego’s essential function is to make us feel at home in the world and in our bodies. Yet it constantly fails at this task, generating the kinds of anxiety that can motivate hegemonic knowledge projects. This is why perfecting consent through egoic self-knowledge and rational speech risks reproducing psychic and social harm rather than preventing it.

²⁷ This Lacanian position should not be confused with the nominalist claim that only particular things exist. Lacan holds that “universals are Real” (Copjec, 2004, p. 4). The impossibility of the All of being is a universal predicament that everyone must confront and respond to, generating symptoms that recur across cultures in varying forms and call for critical and clinical engagement.

We might think of Creon as the ego psychologist, attempting to save Antigone by finding a place for her in the symbolic, while Antigone exemplifies the subject who cannot accommodate herself to the available terms. Although Sophocles wrote *Antigone* in Athens around 441 BCE, her story is relevant today. Indeed, it would not be possible to tell Antigone's story using the terms of consent, as she resembles the feminine position of the "not-all." Lacan's vision of psychoanalytic duty sides with Antigone: the analyst must not impose their idea of the good onto the analysand. This is a general duty grounded in a structural condition, akin to Kant's categorical imperative. But where Kant imagines ethics in terms consistent with the sexual relation (one family, one community, one species acting in harmony with reason), Lacan makes space for singular desire. In Copjec's (2004) words, Antigone's act "traces the path of the criminal drive, away from the possibilities the community prescribes and toward the impossible real" (p. 41). While Creon acts from belief in the plenitude of the Other; Antigone acts from its lack, the place from which a sinthomantic response can emerge.

Conclusion: The Impossible Relation: Psychoanalysis and (Consent) Politics

In the remaining pages, I reflect on the theoretical and practical contributions and limitations of my study and propose directions for future research. This discussion concerns the impossible relation between psychoanalysis and politics, or the recognition that true psychoanalysis is, by its nature, marginalized and contentious. To attend to the unconscious dimensions of disavowed reality, psychoanalysis must resist full integration into political institutions and discourses. This impossible relationship means that while psychoanalytic insights can be brought to bear on consent culture, they cannot be fully absorbed into consent politics. This impossible relationship is not a problem to solve, but a tension to embrace. In this dissertation, I have modeled a practice of bringing psychoanalysis and consent into conversation

while preserving the inherent resistance. The approach I propose involves maintaining psychoanalysis as a force of complicating consent discourses without replacing them.

Before proceeding, let me say more about the impossible relation between psychoanalysis and (consent) politics. In *Sexuality in the Field of Vision*, Rose (1986/2006) argued that psychoanalysis is indispensable to radical political critique, however, she cautioned against reductive applications of psychoanalytic ideas, calling instead for a sophisticated account of how political and unconscious processes interact. She described how efforts to combine psychoanalysis and politics tend to create an inside/outside opposition that erases the significance of the unconscious and the difficult work of substantial political change. For example, she wrote that when unconscious conflicts are cited as evidence of oppressive structures, the underlying assumption is often that “the social produces the misery of the psychic in a one-way process, which utterly divests the psychic of its own mechanisms and drives” (p. 9). When internal conflict becomes the primary focus, however, progressive political discourse frequently leads to fantasies of a future resolution via the “vision of an ideal unity to come” (p. 9). The point is that when psychoanalysis and politics merge, there is a tendency to separate two things that should remain connected: our psychic divisions and our oppressive social structures. To emphasize their interrelated nature, Rose advocated for feminist applications of Freud and Lacan.

The inside/outside distinction that obscures the dialectical relation between the unconscious and the political appears in both consent culture and critical consent discourse. Consent culture often frames the subject through liberal individual autonomy, portraying consent as vulnerable to undesirable cultural influences that the subject can reject. This framework supports the idea that self-knowledge leads to personal sexual satisfaction, and that a world of

consenting subjects produces a more just world. Such assumptions obscure the role of the drives, rendering consenting subjectivity as politically neutral and innocent. Critical consent discourse emphasizes that unjust political structures shape subjectivity, making structural change a prerequisite for individual freedom. Here the subject is imagined as relationally determined—understood through discourse, history, and culture—which makes it difficult to envision meaningful resistance outside of structural transformation.

By neglecting split subjectivity, both consent culture and critical consent discourse fail to recognize the significance of resistance at the interstice between the political and the psychic—what Julia Kristeva (2002) called “intimate revolt” and what Lacan might describe as an encounter with the Real, exemplified by Other *jouissance* and the *sinthome*. Consent culture obscures this potential by praising unified subjectivity, whereas critical consent discourses obscure it through a focus on the power of the norm to shape desire. Lacan’s concept of *extimacy* helps disrupt the inside/outside binary that leads to either the internalization or externalization of harm. It creates a bridge between inside and outside, enabling engagement with both the internalization of norms and those parts of the self that resist assimilation. Using Lacan, we can identify the limits of three interrelated assumptions: that one can consent, that one can determine the conditions necessary for consent, and that one has the authority to diagnose others as capable or incapable of consenting. Skepticism toward the ego renders all these ambitions fraught. By highlighting the link between knowledge and *jouissance*, it challenges both the promise of a psychoanalytic master discourse and a truly democratic and inclusive politics, or a politics that would no longer require psychoanalytic intervention.

Contributions

By advancing a Freudian-Lacanian theory of the sexual subject, I have challenged the reification of the unified ego as the whole of being in consent culture. I argued that consent culture without psychoanalytic insight promotes a narrow vision of sexual subjectivity. Since the ego minimizes what conflicts with fantasies of self-possession, cohesion, purity, and control, an approach to self-understanding prioritizing the egoic self, or the consenting self, works against forms of self-knowledge conducive to therapeutic and political transformation. I have demonstrated that consent culture risks reinforcing shame and repression by minimizing the significance of the unconscious, perpetuating false images of harmonious sexuality, promising mutual understanding in relationships, and representing self-knowledge in adaptive terms. I have offered a Lacanian intervention into consent culture to introduce complications associated with the Real: the impasses between desire, perception, language, and *jouissance*; and the limits of knowledge, intersubjectivity, and solidarity. This focus on the Real resists consolidation around consent by attending to what cannot be recognized or integrated within conscious, subjective, sexual, and political frameworks.

This project extends psychoanalytic theory by insisting on its relevance to contemporary social and political issues. Where traditional psychoanalytic approaches have often remained detached from feminist, queer, anti-racist, anti-colonial, and anti-capitalist critique, this dissertation demonstrates how we can engage psychoanalytic insights about subjective division and unconscious enjoyment while responding to unjust power structures and relations. I have pushed back against the marginalization of psychoanalysis in contemporary critical theories of social justice, showing that many legitimate reservations critical scholars have about psychoanalysis do not apply to a Lacanian approach.

I have contributed to existing psychoanalytic critiques of consent culture by introducing Lacan's distinction between phallic and Other *jouissance* to draw attention to meaningful differences regarding the sexual impasse. While much of the psychoanalytic critique of consent emphasizes the inherently dysregulating force of sex, I use the concept of phallic *jouissance* to avoid reifying sex itself as Other *jouissance*. By refusing to center one ontological, phenomenological, social, or clinical account of sex, I create space for forms of experience that resist easy integration into consent and psychoanalytic frameworks. This reinforces my broader claim that no master discourse can capture the whole of experience.

Regarding movements for sexual justice, I have advanced a psychoanalytically informed feminist approach to consent culture. I show how attending to unconscious dimensions can help us understand the complications of marginalized experiences, such as sex work and psychological abuse. I have used Lacanian psychoanalysis to examine the complexities of sex work politics, attending to how consent discourses reinforce histories of exclusion and enable cooptation. I have also used Lacanian psychoanalysis to destigmatize psychological abuse victims and propose alternatives to normalizing paths of recovery.

Limitations

My aim has been to use Lacanian psychoanalysis to reframe sex—the concept at the center of consent culture—as a question rather than an answer, and in doing so, to provide new paths for self-reflection and self-understanding. This approach has significant limitations and risks. The most salient involve the interrelated problems of accommodation, exclusion, intellectualization, and cooptation. Regarding accommodation, while I examine the risks of rejecting consent culture in favor of a psychoanalytic counter-discourse, I give less attention to the risks of neutralizing psychoanalysis by integrating it with consent norms. By advocating for

psychoanalysis in popular discourses associated with consent, my project at times works within existing symbolic frameworks instead of subverting them. Bringing psychoanalytic ideas into consent culture from the clinic and academia invites simplification, misunderstanding, and misuse. These are the conditions that enable cooptation.

In *Rape and Resistance*, Linda Martín Alcoff (2018) wrote extensively on speech about consent violations and the problem of cooptation. She documented how the speech of victims of sexual violation is absorbed into dominant frameworks, particularly within therapeutic and legal contexts. To prevent cooptation, she advocates for centering victims' lived experiences—understood within intersecting forms of oppression and unequal social structures—in discussions about sexual violation. Alcoff highlighted two limitations of my project that warrant caution in drawing conclusions from my analysis. First, by not centering first-hand accounts of consent violations, my analysis risks prioritizing theoretical commitments over the messiness of lived experience. Second, by focusing on psychoanalysis rather than intersecting social inequalities, my analysis risks psychologizing political problems.

Centering Lacan, with his elusive style, dense jargon, and abstract theories, risks reinforcing hierarchies of expertise and limiting accessibility in conversations about consent. Moreover, questioning what consent culture takes as self-evident could devalue the conceptual resources victims use to make sense of their experiences. For example, encouraging multiple paths to self-understanding may at times prove more confusing than clarifying. There is also the risk that psychoanalytic concepts like unconscious enjoyment, impossible desire, or split subjectivity could reinforce victim-blaming by dismissing avoidable harm as an inevitable aspect of unconscious life. Psychoanalytic approaches that lack empirical grounding also make claims

about the unconscious difficult to challenge: for example, when resistance is taken as proof of the interpretation.

There are also implications for political motivation to consider. A Lacanian approach would be unhelpfully obscure in some situations, particularly when clear policy guidance is needed. And Lacan's emphasis on impossibility, lack, and limits could be read as politically nihilistic, potentially discouraging engagement with activist efforts to eradicate sexual violence and structural injustice. There is also the question of timing. Challenging consent frameworks grounded in autonomy may be particularly fraught when abortion rights, trans healthcare, and other issues of basic bodily autonomy are under attack by the Trump administration.

As the above discussion demonstrates, an uncritical application of Lacanian psychoanalysis could risk compromising the shared symbolic resources that are essential to the pedagogy and politics of consent. I have tried to mitigate these risks by emphasizing the interrelated nature of the Borromean knot, by framing the evolution of consent as a feminist achievement, and by promoting multiple paths of self-understanding as opposed to, for example, a path centered on a Lacanian polemic against the ego.

We have seen how a consent culture that ignores the unconscious can be appropriated into neoliberal empowerment feminisms and used to stigmatize so-called abnormal, unnatural, and primitive sexualities. Given that cooptation is an ever-present risk (Douzinas, 2000), I argue that our best approach is to pursue multiple resistance strategies. I therefore advocate for an interdisciplinary and socio-politically engaged psychoanalytic approach rather than psychoanalysis in isolation. Lacan's attention to the extimate unconscious and the big Other makes his work well-suited to this task, as long as an emphasis on contradiction does not come at

the expense of political action. With this in mind, I support integrating Lacanian insights into consent culture.

To counter Lacan's high position as master, I put him into conversation with "low" theories emerging from the voices of sex workers and psychological abuse victims. These discussions draw attention to the limits of a polemic against the ego and the clinical technique of subjective destitution. Regarding sex work, I used Lacan to critique the reification of consent logics in sex worker rights discourse, while cautioning against dismissing sex workers' ego-based assertions as fantasies of mastery, given the influence of abolitionist anti-trafficking campaigns. In the case of psychological abuse, I argued that Lacan offers resources for resisting the normalizing tendencies in existing recovery paradigms. Yet I complicated a straightforward Lacanian approach by putting Lacan in dialogue with Daniel Shaw (2022), a cult survivor and clinician whose work is closer to ego psychology, suggesting that both offer valuable resources for recovery.

A crucial intervention of this project involved resisting the conflation of the unconscious with confusion, indecision, or indignity. My aim was to explore the unconscious dimensions of consent, violation, and recovery to develop narrative paths that acknowledge psychic complexity without pathologizing ambivalence. Where consent discourses seek validation through clear and distinct ideas, a Lacanian approach emphasizes processes of meaning-making within contradiction. With this shift comes an emphasis on producing rather than disseminating consent principles, with attention to how consent is imagined and put to use. My hope is that this shift will reduce the risks of exclusion and cooptation. However, since my approach remains largely theoretical, clinical case material and autobiographical accounts are needed to support, complicate, and/or challenge my claims.

Since my focus has been on sexual politics in the United States, there is also the limitation of cultural specificity. While a focus on consent discourse in the United States has the advantage of challenging dominant frameworks within conditions of geopolitical influence and inequality, it risks simplifying the diversity of voices by attending to the most visible expressions at the expense of marginalized ones. Lacanian theory may not translate well across cultural contexts with different understandings of selfhood, desire, and sexuality. Although Lacan sought to critique the exclusionary structures at the heart of Western individualism, there is nevertheless a risk of universalizing Western psychoanalytic clinical and theoretical assumptions. This poses the question—beyond the scope of this study—about the link between global socio-economic inequality and the Real (the hole in the whole of our symbolic) and the role of this inequality in limiting our unified narratives and our abilities to critique them.

Essentialism poses another risk. For some, Lacan's anti-essentialist potential is undermined by problematic assumptions about sexual difference in his work. Concepts like "masculine position" and "feminine position" may alienate readers attentive to problems associated with the reification of gender difference through discourse. My intention in using these terms, as discussed in detail in chapter five, is to work within the internal contradictions of these signifiers and to resist the tendency in consent discourse to idealize forms of enjoyment associated with masculinity.

To prevent essentialist conclusions, I have used phallic jouissance and feminine (Other) jouissance to explore non-gender-specific experiences associated with the sexual impasse, such as psychological abuse. I have also used gender-specific signifiers in counterintuitive ways—for example, by describing sex work and sex worker rights discourse in terms of the masculine position and phallic jouissance. Finally, I have drawn attention to work in transpsychoanalytics

(Cavanagh, 2017), where Lacan's theory of sexualization is used to denaturalize sexed embodiment and mark the impossibility of gender. Nevertheless, considering Butler's (1993) warning about femininity as "a forcible citation of the norm" (p. 232), there is also value in approaches that omit this terminology. Mari Ruti's *The Singularity of Being* (2012) offers a notable example, engaging Lacan's work on the Real to develop an ethics of the singular subject without his theory of sexualization.

The work of Saketopoulou (2023) and Davis and Dean (2022) also offer a rich psychoanalytic critique of ideas associated with consent while avoiding references to binary gender. These texts use psychoanalytic concepts to fundamentally destabilize consent frameworks through methods sometimes referred to as anti-repair or radical negativity. While this perspective is valuable, there is also value, as I discuss in detail below, in working within rather than against established frameworks, given the need to expand collective awareness of the unconscious.

Future Research Directions

Most research on consent divides into pragmatic-institutional and constructivist-critical approaches. This dissertation contributes to an emerging third direction: the psychoanalytic critique of consent (Angel, 2021; Davis & Dean, 2022; Leguil, 2025; Saketopoulou, 2023). Future research should continue to develop this psychoanalytic perspective in dialogue with critical frameworks that address contemporary political concerns. Such work grows more important as the climate crisis and digital transformation of social life reshape the very conditions under which consent is given. The rationalist optimism of consent culture cannot meet these challenges because it neglects our unconscious attachments to destructive practices and the reshaping of desire by digital capitalism.

Regarding environmental destruction, psychoanalysis can intervene in consent narratives that fail to account for our unconscious investments in compulsive consumption, climate denial, and the business-as-usual attitude driving ecological degradation. Consent discourses urge us to trust our instincts and center our desires, while the intersection of psychoanalysis and climate science brings into focus the importance of thinking beyond the self and interrogating our most basic assumptions about who we are, what we want, and how we should live together.

Psychoanalysis pays unique attention to moments when we deny unpleasant realities and reveals that trauma can galvanize or immobilize us depending on how it is processed, a distinction relevant to the climate crisis. Psychoanalysis can also help us consider alternative ways of living by examining the psychic costs of our commitments to consumption, competition, and success, which require disregarding and demeaning alternative sources of enjoyment and pleasure. In *Climate Crisis, Psychoanalysis, and Radical Ethics*, Orange (2017) approaches the climate crisis by examining the role of trauma, mourning, and psychic and social meaning in challenging the identifications that prevent us from acting. She urges us to “address the defenses that keep us avoidant and name the forms of traumatic shock that keep us too paralyzed to respond appropriately” (p. xiii). With Orange, I argue that psychoanalytic thinkers have an important role in combating the unconscious forces that sustain our complicity.

Regarding the increasing use of artificial intelligence in our daily lives, there is a need for research into consent to account for the unconscious in the face of evolving technology. While the digital revolution has great potential for social good, the current trajectory is concerning. Manipulative marketing strategies are now emboldened by corporations amassing large amounts of personal data to inform intelligent algorithms. Information extracted from digital technologies

is used not only to sell products but also to influence our understanding of ourselves: to shape our knowledge, direct our attention, and motivate our desire.

Design tactics operate on unconscious wishes and fears, and sensitive personal information can be used to induce dissociative symptoms like loneliness and isolation as well as promote products and services that deceptively promise relief. The unsettling reality is that agentic artificial intelligence systems are evolving faster than we can study them, and our laws and policies cannot keep up. Due to a lack of corporate transparency and accountability, we must take stock of these technologies as a society and become more aware of the value of our symptoms, both in understanding and resisting them.

Questions concerning the transgression of bodily boundaries take on new urgency with emerging neurotechnologies and biotechnologies that can alter cognitive activity and embodied experience. These technologies blur the line between the physical and virtual, posing new risks and demanding complex considerations of human awareness and agency. A Lacanian psychoanalytic approach is well suited to grapple with these developments, given its attention to the fragile boundaries between inside and outside, the natural and the technological, the empirical and the psychical.

One trend in contemporary critical theoretical approaches to consent emphasizes the complexities of social structure and embodiment, reworking consent away from the logic of contracts toward a focus on inter-corporeality. This field of research emphasizes the phenomenological role of consent in mutuality and feeling-with as descriptions of just sexual encounters (see Alcoff, 2018; Anderson, 2022). While this trend challenges legal and contractual consent frameworks and neoliberal individuality, it leaves unaddressed the complications posed by impersonal technologies.

We need alternative theories that can account for how technological innovation is intersecting with unconscious drives to reshape sexuality. Such developments demand interrogation of how algorithmic mediation affects the formation and expression of desire. One research area involves studying digitally mediated parasocial relationships, such as human-AI intimacy, as major investors such as Elon Musk are funding sexually explicit chatbots and AI companions (Conger, 2025). Research opportunities exist concerning psychoanalytic inquiry into digitally mediated sex work, dating apps, virtual reality pornography, and other forms of digital intimacy. Of particular concern is how such technologies can facilitate complex consent violations involving deceptive sex and romance scams.

A politically informed psychoanalysis can draw attention to how easily one's perception of reality can be subtly altered and how one can be convinced to engage in behaviors that undermine their own or collective interests. A psychoanalysis attentive to the extimate unconscious can question the foundations of shared knowledge and remind us to remain critical of what may come to appear individually and collectively "intuitively" true. More work can be done to highlight the role of the unconscious in motivating consent discourses, particularly at a time when our consent is undermined from so many directions.

Environmental destruction and the digital revolution pose twin threats to existing consent models, especially as major corporations lead the development of agentic artificial intelligence technologies while promoting myths of corporate environmentalism, citizenship, leadership, and responsibility. As corporations invent new ways of exploiting nature for profit, they reinforce fantasies of endless economic growth and technological salvation as solutions to environmental degradation. Confronting this formidable challenge will entail a shift in focus from how to best teach the existing model of consent to how consent is imagined, communicated,

instrumentalized, felt, and politicized, with an emphasis on democratic forms of thinking and political intervention.

There are also research opportunities at the intersections of decolonial and transnational feminist and queer theories (Agathangelou & Ling, 2009; Grewal, 2005; Haraway, 2016; Schields & Herzog, 2021; Zhou et al., 2021) and psychoanalysis. In our capitalist reality, desirable and productive sexuality has become associated with subjects and populations who can be imagined in terms of autonomous, contained, rational selfhood. This framework of subjectivity and embodiment accords with neoliberal sexuality as it reifies boundaries and borders specific to the good as defined by neoliberal governance regimes, including land division, property rights, compulsory competition, and liberal individualism. These structures play a significant role in shaping our erotic investments and attachments, our paths of desire, and our categories of belonging, including our notions of self, sex, family, and community.

Confronting sexual injustice in this context entails grappling with what Mark Fisher (2009) called “capitalist realism:” the pervasive belief that no alternatives to current socioeconomic arrangements exist. It will also involve the act of “breaching” what McKittrick (2021) described as the “recursive” and “self-replicating” logics of our “present order of knowledge,” which she claims is informed by a “biocentric worldview” legitimating our “ecocidal and genocidal mode of existence” (p. 2, 21, 23, 44, 163). A consent framework open to psychoanalytic engagement would resist a “capitalist realism” of the sexual. By insisting on the unconscious, symbolic lack, and the void at the center of desire, Lacanian psychoanalysis attends to what does not work in the world, engaging questions of political existence and animating the persistence of desire.

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