Men’s Task in Luce Irigaray’s Ethics of Sexual Difference:
Privilege, Responsibility, and Reparations

by

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ABSTRACT

MEN’S TASK IN LUCE IRIGARAY’S ETHICS OF SEXUAL DIFFERENCE: PRIVILEGE, RESPONSIBILITY, AND REPARATIONS

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In my dissertation I argue that men are responsible for women’s oppression and that men owe reparations to women. Drawing on Luce Irigaray’s analysis of women’s oppression, and in particular the role that pornography and prostitution play in that oppression, I demonstrate that most men contribute unintentionally and indirectly to women’s oppression. Further, I show that the same social structures that subordinate women bestow privileges on men. Specifically, men gain the capacities and opportunities to function as linguistic, sexual, and political subjects in ways that women do not. I then explain the ethical significance of men’s contributions and privileges: On the one hand, men accrue moral residue through their unintentional and indirect contributions to women’s oppression. On the other hand, men incur a debt to women, due to the fact that men’s privilege comes at the expense of women’s capacities and opportunities to functions as subjects. I then argue that men’s moral residue and moral debt are sufficient to justify holding men responsible for women’s oppression. However, the majority of men’s contributions lack intention, a common criterion for moral responsibility. Therefore, I suggest holding men responsible in a qualified sense. Specifically, I argue that we should not blame men for women’s oppression, but that we are warranted in
demanding reparations from men. Finally, I recommend that these reparations come in the form of a commitment to feminist social change and I turn to Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference—which aims at creating non-hierarchal relationships between women and men—to outline men’s task in relation to feminist social change. From this perspective, the preliminary stages of men’s task consist in men entering into dialogue with women, learning about their connection to women’s oppression, creating new modes of masculinity through friendship and fatherhood, and developing new modes of sexuality.
To Kelly and June with the deepest love.
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Introduction

The issue of men’s relationship to women’s oppression and feminism raises an interesting set of questions: Do men benefit from women’s oppression? Does women’s oppression have adverse effects on men? Do men contribute to the maintenance and perpetuation of women’s oppression? If so, which men and in what ways? And if men contribute to women’s oppression, are they morally responsible for these contributions? Similarly, are men morally responsible for the benefits or privileges they receive due to women’s oppression? Does feminism (the project of social change aimed at a happier and more just existence for all women) require or benefit from men’s participation? If so, what can and should men do to aid in feminist social change? These questions motivate my research, and this dissertation responds to these questions.

In responding to these questions, I draw heavily upon the philosophical work of Luce Irigaray. Irigaray anchors her philosophical project in a notion of sexual difference that suggests that men and women have (at least) two different subjectivities. Because of the structures of phallocentric culture, Irigaray suggests women’s existence or subjectivity remains limited and underdeveloped within our current culture. Because of the differences between masculine and feminine subjectivity within contemporary Western culture, sexual difference is a problem. The problem of sexual difference includes the diminished subjectivity that many women live out, a failure of women and men to relate in non-hierarchal ways, and a limitation to men’s subjectivity because of their inability to relate ethically with women.

To begin to articulate Irigaray’s transformative project and men’s task within that project, I turn to Irigaray’s analysis of the structures and processes that perpetuate
women’s social subordination, i.e. constitute women as limited subjects. From this I develop a theory of men’s privilege grounded in an Irigarayan framework. In short, I argue that the same processes that subordinate women also constitute men as benefiting from certain subject privileges (for example, being seen by others as autonomous, rational agents capable of making claims in the public sphere). Further, I show that men not only benefit from, but also contribute to women’s subordination. Through these discussions I highlight the important role that both language and sexuality play in Irigaray’s understanding of the problem of sexual difference.

Two problems arise when thinking about men’s responsibility for contributing to women’s oppression. The first problem comes up in relation to commonplace understandings of responsibility. We generally understand moral responsibility (liability) as hinging on the intention of the perpetrator (*mens rea*) and on a direct causal relationship between the perpetrator’s actions (*actus reus*) and the harms a victim suffers. From this perspective we want to know not only if the perpetrator made something happen, but also whether or not he meant to make it happen. Both our legal frameworks and our lay understandings generally allow for a sliding scale of responsibility. Think, for example, of the differences between manslaughter and murder (with their varying degrees) or the way in which we would bulk at punishing a rambunctious kid for hitting another kid accidentally (although we’d probably want to talk to her about being more careful).

Because of its focus on intent, the liability model of moral responsibility does not work very well to capture the significance of men’s contributions to women’s subordination. Most of men’s contributions to women’s subordination do not include
direct, intentional harm. Rather, men sustain structures and processes of subordination through indirect, unconscious, and non-volitional means. So, we are left wondering in what sense can we hold men responsible for their (indirect, unintentional, and non-volitional) contributions to women’s subordination.

A second problem comes up when trying to understand the reparations men might owe for their role in women’s subordination on a compensatory model of justice. Compensatory justice seeks reparations or redress for damages or harms done. For example, if I borrow my neighbor’s skateboard, and it breaks while in my care, then I should probably buy him a new one. Things become more complicated when considering intangible harms like “undue stress” or “mental anguish”. The compensatory model does have a way of dealing with these kinds of harms: it puts a price tag on them. For example, if I manufacture a beauty product that ends causing severe facial scaring, a court would most likely have me pay those affected for more than just their medical expenses.

This compensatory approach to reparations does not work well in the context of men’s connection to women’s subordination. Men’s contributions to women’s subordination come primarily through indirect and unintentional means. Because this is the case, it becomes more difficult to say how much harm any man in particular has done or what extent any particular man has contributed women’s subordination more generally. Further, men’s privilege comes at the expense of women’s opportunities to develop and express themselves. Because of this “cost” associated with men’s privilege, men should compensate women. But it is hard to determine the amount of, or even the means of, compensation appropriate to this context.
Thinking about men’s responsibility outside of a liability model for responsibility and the compensatory model of justice comes with specific challenges. If we want to hold men responsible, we need to show that their connection to women’s subordination is sufficient to ground their moral responsibility for that connection. We need a different model of responsibility to do this. Likewise, if we want to demand reparations from men, then we need to draw on a model of reparations appropriate to men’s connection to women’s subordination. Because of the indirect and unintentional nature of men’s connection to women’s subordination, we will need to adopt or develop some other criteria: for assessing the moral significance of men’s connection to women’s subordination, for determining whether this connection warrants reparations, and for saying what men owe and how they might “pay” this debt.

In response to these challenges, I argue that men’s connection to women’s subordination is sufficient to ground a demand for reparations and that men owe these reparations to all women. On the one hand, men accrue a moral residue through their contributions to women’s subordination. This moral residue warrants some response. Although, neither blame, nor excuse seem appropriate. On the other hand, the privileges men accumulate through women’s subordination entail limiting women’s opportunities for developing and expressing themselves. Thus, men’s privilege comes at the expense of women’s opportunities, and men’s privilege leaves men indebted to women. Men’s moral residue and moral debt are sufficient to justify demanding reparations from men for their connection to women’s subordination.

In this context, reparations take on the form of an open-ended, restorative process. Because of the immeasurable nature of men’s debt, the reparations men owe to women
are indeterminate. Further, we cannot give indeterminate reparations a price tag. Because they are indeterminate, reparations cannot consist of a discreet act (or series/set of acts)—at least not one that we can set out ahead of time. I draw on a notion of restorative justice to flesh out this notion of an open-ended, restorative process.

Despite the fact that reparations are indeterminate and open-ended, we can let men’s connection to women’s subordination guide us in beginning to give shape and direction to this process. Because men’s moral residue and moral debt stem from their contributions and privileges in relation to women’s subordination, these seem like reasonable places to start in when considering men’s reparations. Men accrue moral residue through their contributions to women’s subordination. So, minimally, men should stop accumulating of moral residue. To do so they would need to end their contributions to women’s subordination. Also, men acquire debt through their privilege, which comes at the expense of women’s opportunities for development and expression. So, additionally, men should pay back this debt they owe women. To do so they would need to help create opportunities for women’s development and expression.

Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference, and in particular her notion of “men’s task”, works as an excellent framework for beginning to articulate men’s restorative process. In response to the problem of sexual difference, Irigaray develops an ethics of sexual difference—a transformative project aimed at the creation of new modes of both feminine and masculine subjectivities and the development of ethical relationships between women and men. In the context of an ethics of sexual difference, “sexual difference” refers both to the current limited subjectivities and to non-hierarchal relationships between women
and men, and to a possible future of new masculine and feminine subjectivities and non-hierarchal relationships. So, sexual difference is both the problem and the solution.

As a solution, sexual difference entails a radical “futural” project. As radical, Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference aims to completely recreate the subjectivities and relationships that currently exist. This project has far reaching implications for all aspects of our culture. As futural, Irigaray’s project aims at creating a future that does not yet exist (rather than more simply repairing existing relationships or institutions).

It is not just the case that we do not yet know what this future will look like. Rather, we can never know completely. Therefore, we can never know exactly what change we will need to bring it about. For this reason, any prescription made from an Irigarayan perspective—including the details of men’s task that I develop in this dissertation—remain provisional. Again, we should not understand “provisional” as placeholder for a certainty that will come about in time or with a little more work or research. Rather, an Irigarayan project remains provisional in such a way that it will never be replaced by some more certain version of social change. Because, of this radical futural nature, Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference remains indeterminate—we can never completely determine the parameters of the social change that is needed.

More specifically, men’s task involves a complicated process of creating ethical relationships with women. Because of the open-ended nature of men’s restorative task, and because of the futural nature of Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference, we cannot specify men’s task in its entirety from the outset. However, we can note that Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference addresses a problem of relationships between women and
men. In particular, her ethics focuses on problems in the relationships of language and sexuality.

It follows that men’s reparations need to focus on these relationships. Because i) men are largely unaware of their contributions to women’s subordination and the debt they owe women, ii) because the open-ended process of reparations requires a dialogue between women and men, and iii) because discourse constitutes a major site of failure in the relationships between women and men—men’s task must begin in a conversation between women and men and an on-going effort to improve relationships that frame that conversation. Finally, because the frame for the conversation between women and men is the relationship between women and men more generally, and because sexual relationships are integral to the more general relationship between women and men, an important part of men’s task will involve discovering new modes of sexuality and new ways of relating to women romantically and sexually.

I use the remainder of this introduction to outline key aspects of the Irigarayan framework in which I am working. First, I offer a brief analysis of women’s oppression from the perspective of sexual difference. I then turn to a description of Irigaray’s positive, transformative project—her ethics of sexual difference.

I. Inequality

Irigaray’s critique of women’s subordination begins by rejecting of any claim to an existing equality between women and men:

And to assert that men and women are now equal or well on the way to becoming so has served almost as an opiate of the people for some time now. Men and
women are not equal, and I think it’s very problematic or misguided to orient
development in this direction. (Irigaray 1993c, 77)

I see the effects of this “opiate” at work on my students. Teaching an introductory course
in Women’s Studies, I ask students whether they are feminists and whether or not they
think they still need feminism. My students, for the most part young (18–24 years old),
Canadian-born women, feel that we have achieved an adequate level of equality in
Western society. If gender-based oppression (this is my term not theirs) remains a
problem, they suggest, then that problem belongs to women of the global south and
especially Muslim women. At home, if gender remains a problem, it affects women and
men equally and the solution amounts to fine-tuning an already-existing state of near
equality. From Irigaray’s perspective, it is clear that the opiate of gender equality has
fairly thoroughly clouded my student’s perception.

These young women seem to honestly believe that we have achieved gender
equality. Yet they are frightened of the repercussions of identifying as a feminist. Their
avowal of equality stands in contrast to their own lived reality in an anti-feminist society.
This contrast stems from the fact that well into the 21st century, within Western culture
women’s social and political position continues to be unequal to that of men’s.¹ If these
young women were right about gender equality, then they would not need to fear the
reprisal that come from identifying as a feminist.

This proves Irigaray’s point: Women have made significant gains. Most
importantly, women have gained recognition under the law as “persons” and many now

¹ Most of the examples I draw upon come from the United States, Canada, Great Britain, and
Australia.
benefit from the institutional privileges associated with this status (i.e. suffrage, access to education, the right to own property). Women’s social conditions have shifted. We find: women in the public sphere, policy targeting sexual harassment, and positive portrayals of women in the media. However, despite these gains, we ought not assume that women and men exist as equals in our society. Women do not receive equal representation in the public sphere, women continue to regularly suffer from sexual harassment and violence, and the media sexualizes and objectifies women far more than it does men. I do not intend this list of be exhaustive, but rather sufficient to illustrate that we cannot move forward on the assumption that women and men are equal. Instead we need to work to better understand the nature of this inequality. To this end I will give thumbnail sketches of these basic three claims and build upon these in the subsequent chapters.

a. Representation in the Public Sphere

Despite gains in women’s representation in the public sphere, inequality persists. Feminists have long criticized the fact that gender maps on to the public/private divide such that men enter the workforce and control law, politics, and media, whereas women “stay at home.” Although “staying at home” suggests passively waiting for her man to return from work, in most cases, “staying at home” entails some combination of cooking, cleaning, caring for children/elders, and taking in work. And “staying at home” usually means contributing more than a partner or spouse who “helps out” around the house.

Beginning in the 1960s, American women began to acknowledge the ill effects of the gendered division of labor that keep women in the domestic sphere. For example, Betty Friedan’s (1963) *The Feminine Mystique* stressed women’s need to get out of the house and into the workplace. However, working outside the home was a feminist aim
with a very narrow scope. It only applies to those women who were not already working—white middle-class women. Angela Davis (1983) points out that working class women, and in particular women of color, were often employed outside the home. Working outside the home did not bring these women equality. Davis insists that instead, social norms restricted women to menial labor, whether as homemakers, factory workers, or “the help”. Therefore, white, middle-class feminists were mistaken in assuming that women’s plight stemmed from being contained to the domestic sphere and therefore that women’s salvation would come from leaving the home to enter the workforce.

Although things have changed since the 1960s, we still see inequalities. Women have entered the workforce en masse and have slowly increased their presence in managerial/administrative roles, as well as creative and high prestige careers. Everyday we see businesswomen, female doctors and female politicians, as well as female artists, musicians and filmmakers. Since 1960, the number of households with women as the sole or primary “breadwinner” has quadrupled to 40% in 2011 (Wang, Parker, and Taylor 2013). Despite these gains, inequalities persist, both between women and men, and among women. There are relatively few female politicians, women are still not represented evenly in the highest paying/most prestigious positions and men continue to dominate creative fields (Zuniga 2012). And about two thirds of female “breadwinners” are single mothers who earn about $20,000 dollars annually (Wang, Parker, and Taylor 2013). And the kinds of inequalities that affect women along lines of race and class that Davis pointed to in the 1980s still exist.

Women’s gains also often have unintended, ill effects. As possibilities open up for women in the public sphere, many women feel trapped between the demands of
traditional femininity (i.e. taking care of homes, husbands, children, and elders), and the pressure to meet traditional masculine standards of success (i.e. maintain a prestigious, engaging, high-paying career). And many women “lean in” and take on the “double burden” of maintaining a career and a family. While this is a current hot topic among white, middle class women, working class white women and women of color have long faced just such a double burden in their struggle to make ends meet and provide for their families in a sexist, classist, and racist society (Davis 1983). Further, as middle-class women increasingly pursue professional careers, they have shifted much of the domestic labor to other women, largely working class white women, women of color, and immigrants (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2012).

Men do not face this double bind. For the most part when women are in the workforce, men are not picking up the slack at home. Women in the United States still spend twice as much time men each week taking care of kids and cleaning the house (Parker and Wang 2013). Although some men help out around the home and provide childcare, the percentage of men who choose to be stay-at-home dads remains small. And for the most part their decision to do so remains one choice among others in a way that it does not for many women, especially working-class women and women of color. And we still tend to view men who cook, clean, and take care of children as going above and beyond the call of duty. Rather than a pressure to “have it all,” men receive praise for choosing to “help out” around the house. The very idea that men are “helping out” suggests that men domestic labor supplements a task that is properly the domain of women.

b. Sexual Harassment and Sexual Violence
Whether in the private or public sphere, women continue to suffer from harassment and violence. In the home, women still fall victim to intimate partner abuse. In the workplace, sexual harassment, as well as more subtle relations of power, plays out between women and men on a daily basis. And approximately 35-50% of women face sexual harassment sometime in their career (Bravo and Meric 2012, 201). Further, harassment takes place in the street and at school and forms a background for many young women’s experience of the world (Kearl 2010).

A recent case in the UK highlights this point. In March of 2011, a thirteen-year-old girl, Chevonea Kendall-Bryan, fell to her death from the window of her South London home. A fifteen-year-old boy, whose name is protected by the moniker “E6,” had threatened to throw a brick through Chevonea’s window if she did not perform oral sex on him. When Chevonea gave into the threat, E6 video taped the sex act and sent it around to his friends. Chevonea later found out about the tape and threatened to jump from her window if E6 did not delete the tape. According to the coroner’s report, delivered in court in January of 2013, Chevonea slipped from the ledge and died of her injuries. Chevonea had been the victim of sexual bullying since the age of 11. But the harassment intensified after Chevonea accused an eighteen-year-old of raping her at a party.

Chevonea’s death is not an isolated incident; her death and circumstances surrounding it are symptomatic of a broader trend in culture. The recent suicides of Rehtaeh Parsons, Carolina Picchio, Audrie Pott, and others all have similar stories: a girl gets drunk at a party; boys or men have sex with her, take photos or videos of the sex acts
and/or her body, and post the media content on the Internet; the girl is subsequently bullied and then kills herself.

Cole Moreton (2013), a journalist and father of two eleven-year-old girls, connects the incidents surrounding Chevonea Kendall-Bryan’s death to two trends in youth culture in the UK. Increasingly, boys send photos of their penises to girls as a means of flirting. Girls, in turn, write boys’ names on their breasts and send photos of these inscriptions to boys, who post the photos on Facebook and share them with friends (Moreton 2013). The fact that pictures of boys’ penises remain relatively private, while photos of girls body parts become publicly available (and the subsequent source of bullying) demonstrates an asymmetry of power in these juvenile relationships. This imbalance becomes even more apparent when, for example, we note the increased prevalence of young girls being caught performing oral sex on whole groups of boys in school washrooms (Moreton 2013).

A youth culture exists in which boys use girls’ bodies for sex and to produce pornography, in which girls and boys shame girls for their overtly sexual behavior (Fagbenie, Stein, and McCune 2012). Sadly, authority figures sometimes ignore victims’ complaints. For example, the RCMP dismissed Rehtaeh Parsons’ claims of sexual assault and bullying as “rumor.” (CBC News 2013) Media attention has increasingly focused on this issue in the last year, and educators are taking the problem seriously (see for example Myers, McCaw, and Hermphill 2011; Phillips and Sianjina 2013; and Shariff 2008). Not all victims of bullying commit suicide, nor does all bullying stem from cases of sexual assault and the distribution of homemade pornography. However, the generic term “cyber
“bullying” can have the effect of covering over the fact that young women are often the victims of sexual harassment, pornographic exploitation, and rape.

Sexual assault is the product of inequalities and part of a larger culture of sexual inequality. While the last two decades have seen an increase in awareness around issues such as acquaintance rape on college campuses, the number of women who experience attempted or completed sexual assault has changed little (Sanday 2012, 535-536). Although the numbers of reported sexual assaults have declined in recent years, the majority of sexual assaults remain unreported (Statistics Canada 2011). All of the talk has not resulted in meaningful change. Of course, women have done and still do more than just talk about these issues. Beginning in the 1970s, Take Back the Night has spread around the world, and more recent organizations, such as France’s Ni Putes Ni Soumises (Neither Whores, Nor Doormats), the Toronto-born Slutwalk phenomenon, or One Billion Rising continue the fight against violence against women. But still the violence continues.

While women endure harassment and assault at work, in their homes, and on the street, these realities do not find reasonable and accurate expression in representations of women. Film and television portray the murder and rape of women (and often eroticize this violence), but they also portray the men who commit these crimes as pathological. The serial rapist who abducts strangers is a mainstay of American film and television. In reality, rapists are not generally considered mentally ill and are usually known to the victim. Bufkin and Eschholz (2000) suggest that these hyperbolic images of sex offenders help cover over the everyday facts and nature of violence against women.
Popular media is not alone in perpetuating this “monster myth”. As Tom Meagher (2014) argues, thinking of rapists as monsters allows us to avoid thinking about the uncomfortable truth, “that men are socialized by the ingrained sexism and entrenched masculinity that permeates everything, from our daily interactions all the way up to our higher institutions.” Thus, we (men) perpetuate the monster myth to protect ourselves from ugly reality of our own complicity in sexism and rape culture. For example, Meagher suggests, when men encounter everyday aspects of rape culture they normalize it by comparing it to the monster archetype. In light of this comparison, everyday aggressions appear as mundane occurrences that can be more readily dismissed as insignificant.

The everyday experience of sexual harassment rarely finds its way into film and television, when it does the context is often humorous and/or anachronistic. Two recent examples come to mind of film and television productions that give significant screen time to sexual harassment. In the first, Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy (2004), the principle comedic trope revolves around the male characters’ harassment of their female colleague who, despite her treatment, falls in love with one of her harassers. The second, Mad Men (2007-present), portrays harassment not as comedy, but as part of the everyday experience of “the time”. In both cases (the 1970s newsroom or the 1960s ad agency), the historical context supports the fiction that harassment is a thing of past. At the same time, these works portray “everyday” harassment as entertainment, which allows the contemporary male viewer to partake in that harassment by identifying with the male characters and “laughing along with the guys.”
The female viewer might be offended, but if she expresses her frustration or anger, the men around will quickly remind her that it is only a joke or only a TV show. Does she lack a sense of humor? Does she not understand the difference between reality and fantasy? Or is she a man-hating lesbian after all? We have all witnessed the ways in which men (although not only men) can shut down feminist analysis of the everyday.

Homosociality also perpetuates attitudes and behavior that contribute to women’s oppression. Homosociality is a social preference for members of one’s own sex, often referred to as “male bonding”. We see detrimental forms of men’s homosociality among the boys who share photos and videos of their sexual conquests and the men who laugh along with sexist films and comedians. In all male groups, men commonly reinforce sexist attitudes and behavior—even if some of the men in those groups feel uncomfortable with those attitudes and behaviors. Men’s homosociality, in the forms I have described here, perpetuates inequalities and contributes to a culture in which women free being labeled as “feminist”. Thus, we see that a culture of sexual inequality persists.

c. Media Representations

Inequality extends to the realm of representations of women. For example, that film and television portray fewer female characters than male characters (despite a relative parity of men and women in the world) is noteworthy (Zuniga 2012). More importantly, the media portrays men and women in different kinds of roles and these qualitative differences really matter. We still see this common scenario throughout popular media: Woman is threatened; man saves woman. Even when women are not explicitly victims, the media often portrays them as passive, sexually available, or animalistic/overly sexual.
Whether it is Katy Perry in a cat suit selling perfume or “employees” in hotel rooms hawking American Apparel garments, advertisements eroticize either women’s “animal nature,” or their passivity. Music videos notoriously use scantily clad, gyrating women (at times the artist herself), as props. Cole and Guy-Sheftall (2010) and others point to the use of women as sexualized props in rap music videos. However, this use of women’s bodies has spread into the mainstream and images of women are increasingly sexualized. What passed as a racy, sexy video in 1990 seems almost laughable in today’s market. The industry does not treat men in the same way. Although we do see topless photos of David Beckham and sexy male dancers in some music videos, such images of men are far from ubiquitous and they are generally representative of sexual agency, not passivity. The oddity and humorous intention of LMFAO’s *Sexy and I know it* (2011) video, in which the male artist dances on a bar in a Speedo, highlights the asymmetry that normally exists in the portrayals of women and men in this genre. If it were a woman dancing on a bar in a speedo, the video would not be odd or funny, it would just be another music video like any other.

The relationship between the male spectator and the sexualized woman is not simply the equal-and-opposite relationship we might find between the female spectator and the sexualized man. When men sexualize women, it occurs against the cultural background just described of limited political clout and economic resources, as well as sexualization, objectification, and sexual violence, which I have been describing. In this context, we can read women’s sexualization of men as a form of resistance to women’s subordinated status. Thus, the music videos that portray men as sexualized are often used as explicit means of asserting female agency. Over the years, Madonna has made good
use of this approach, while Niki Minaj’s (2011) *Super Bass* serves as a contemporary example. We may or may not agree that women’s assertion of (sexual) agency through the sexualization of men is an *appropriate* response to women’s subordinated (sexual) status. But we can to understand it as a response. And as such (because these instances are outliers), these music videos bring to the fore the asymmetry between the sexualization of women and the sexualization of men.

We see this asymmetry most blatantly in mainstream, heterosexual pornography. The content of pornography consists primarily of women’s bodies on display for a male viewer and is often shot from the perspective of a male character. Significantly more men and boys view pornography than women and girls (Flood 2007; Johansson and Hammaré 2007). Of course, neither men’s nor women’s attitudes toward pornography are homogenous—some women like porn and some men do not (Johansson and Hammaré 2007). What we cannot ignore is the fact that the difference in pornography use falls along gender lines—and it almost exclusively involves men looking at women.

Today, more than ever, pornography saturates mainstream culture. Various authors have noted the ways in which pornography affects the broader culture through processes of “pornification” (see for example Dines 2010, McNair 1996, Paul 2005 and Tyler 2011). The line between “pornographic” and “non-pornographic” images has always been a fine one (consider the “pin-up” or the “page three girl”). And as mainstream pornography has become increasingly explicit, so to have mainstream “non-pornographic” portrayals of women. The affects of pornography are more than just increased displays of sexuality, they are also increased displays of women’s bodies as sexualized in ways that leave less and less to the imagination. For example, it is not
uncommon today to see a twelve-year old girl at the mall in hot pants and a crop top emblazoned with “Porn Star” in glitter and sequins. This 12-year old is not a bad person, but there is something wrong with a society that tells girls to celebrate their sexuality (within a very narrowly defined spectrum) and at the same time shames them for doing so. From *Playboy* and *Hustler* to *Maxim*, from X-rated websites to booty shaking YouTube videos, and from provocative fashion advertisements to alluring Instagram photos, the explicit sexualization and objectification of women’s and girls’ bodies forms part of our everyday experience of the world. In contrast, the sexualization of young boys has not taken the same course.

**II. Men and Women**

Today: Men get to “have it all” in a way that is largely still unavailable to women. Although “having it all” also depends upon differences of race, class, disability, sexuality (among others), for the most part gendered disparities cut across these differences. Men have broader career options than women. Men are more free to decide about whether and when they have a family and how much time they dedicate to their family. Women can pursue a career (although the available careers are limited) and they can chose to have a family (although they face incredible social pressure to do so in addition to having a career). Men have more choices available to them and less pressure to succeed on both fronts.

I am not making a universal claim that all women are worse off than all men. Men often suffer from patriarchal culture and the structures of hegemonic masculinity and heterosexism that maintain that culture. Further, I acknowledge that certain aspects of racist and colonialist oppression affect men more than women. For example,
Incarceration rates for African-Canadian and Aboriginal men are higher than African-Canadian and Aboriginal women. To say that in general women suffer from gender-based oppression does not exclude the possibility that other forms of oppression are at work and that these other forms of oppression intersect with gender in complex ways. Even though it does not tell the whole story, the gender analysis I present here remains relevant for understanding the lives of women and girls today and the role men play in perpetuating these problems.

Today: Men harass and rape women, and women are harassed and raped. Men use women’s bodies in sexual ways, and women are often punished for expressing their sexuality. Men play an active role, and women receive treatment. Men get to be sexual subjects in ways that women do not, (and even if men do not want to harass and rape women, we cannot ignore the fact that those options are available to them). Further, if women “complain” about their treatment, they are ignored or further punished. Men get to be linguistic subjects in ways that women do not. For example, in cases of sexual harassment or assault, women’s speech and testimony does not carry the kind of weight that men’s does.

Today: Men get to see others like themselves represented as subjects, (whether rock stars, porn stars, or action movie stars) capable of making decisions. Men get to see women’s bodies and sexuality as available for men’s pleasure. Men get to laugh when another man is “treated like a woman.” Women get to see others like themselves represented as sexually available and as victims, but seldom as subjects.

Today: We live in a culture in which popular culture assumes that men are subjects and women are not, in which women have fewer options to engage as subjects,
and in which media representations, bullies, harassers, and rapists sanction women for acting like subjects and entrench assumptions about men’s and women’s respective relationships to subjectivity. We live in a culture in which at least two different kinds of human beings have tended to exist: men, who get to be subjects, and women, who do not get to be subjects in the same ways or to the same extent.

**III. Subjectivity and Inequality**

Both men and women are possible sites of subjectivity. A site of subjectivity is a body with certain subject capacities, (or the potential to develop such capacities). Subject capacities include, for example, self-consciousness, rational thought, judgment, beliefs, imagination, emotion, desire, language, sense experience, and bodily comportment. A site of subjectivity need not have all of these capacities, nor does this list exhaust all possible subject capacities.

The characterization of subject capacities I offer here risks compartmentalizing capabilities in relation to those that belong to the mind and those that belong to the body. But if subjectivity includes speech, emotion, desire, bodily experience, and bodily action, then we cannot separate subjectivity from the body. We cannot reduce subjectivity to “mind” or “will” or any kind of “interiority” that stands in contrast to the body. In other words, subjectivity is embodied. Although hammering out the precise nature of the relationship between the “the mind” and “the body” lies beyond the scope of this project, I do want to suggest that they are never wholly separable. We never find a disembodied mind and our bodily existence shapes our thought.

Subjectivity involves experiencing and expressing some subset of subject capacities and also and experiencing oneself as capable of expressing these capacities.
For example, I express my subjectivity when I dig a hole, tell a story, or lust after a new car and also when I consciously reflect upon my ability to dig a hole or go about my day as the kind of being that can lust after objects.

Our culture privileges certain capacities over others. We can see this privilege most clearly in the ways in which human beings have tended to distinguish themselves from animals. Although humans are capable of digging holes, tearing flesh from a bone with their teeth, and copulating, we do not tend to see these as specifically human traits. Rather, we cordon off a special set of capacities related to conscious reflection, language, tool use, and rationality and say, “These are the things that make us human.” Thus, we can refer to certain privileged subject capacities that make us more human or more fully human according to this kind of human/non-human distinction. These “human” subject capacities include, for example, rational thought, language use, the ability to be responsible for property, and sexual desire.

In general, our culture assigns capacities along the lines of gender. Privileged “human” characteristics are often seen as specifically masculine or assumed to belong more to men than to women. Thus, men’s and women’s bodies and subjectivities have different meanings and values that determine what they should and should not do and what they should and should not have done to them. As we have seen in some of the examples above, real bodily and psychological violence enforces these normative claims. This violence shapes in very concrete terms what men and women can and cannot do and what can and cannot be done to them. In turn, these realities shape men’s and women’s experience of the world, such that what it is like to be a man and what it is like to be a woman turn out to be two very different things.
Insofar as both men and women are sites of subjectivity, men and women generally have similar sets of capacities. However, men and women differ regarding i) the degree of development of their capacities, ii) the extent to which they experience themselves having these capacities, iii) the opportunities society provides for them to express various capacities, iv) whether or not and to what extent others perceive and/or treat them as having certain capacities, and v) the extent to which their actualized subjectivity affects the social world.

Regardless of the capacities men and women actually develop or see themselves as possessing, society provides different opportunities for men and women to develop and express their capacities. For example, teachers still push boys toward science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM subjects) and girls in the direction of the Humanities and Social Sciences. So due to these social constraints women are less likely to develop certain capacities. Even when women demonstrate aptitude in STEM subjects, teachers and fellow classmates often continue to perceive them and treat them as if they were incapable of the requisite subject capacities to participate fully. (I am thinking her of the anecdotes I have heard of women’s experience in philosophy and math classes.) Thus, a man and a woman with equally developed capacities will have very different effects in the social world in which they express their capacities. Because of the assumptions surrounding them, men can get by on less, while women often need to work much harder for the same gain. Or women work to no avail.

We can understand the differences in the development, expression, and experience of subject capacities in terms of “subject privileges.” A site of subjectivity has subject privileges when it benefits from the opportunity to develop and express subject
capacities, from the general assumption that it has more or more-fully-developed subject capacities, and its sense of itself as having more or more-fully-developed subject capacities. We can understand the development and expression of subject capacities in terms of “flourishing”. In this sense, benefiting from subject privileges means having the opportunity to flourish as a subject (or agent) within our culture, to have others see you as flourishing, and to see yourself as flourishing.

We can also understand inequality in terms of subject capacities and subject privileges. To live as a man is for the most part to benefit from subject privileges—to live as a human subject. Whereas women live as something less than subjects: assumed to be incapable, insufficient, and inferior; given fewer opportunities; and ultimately more likely to see themselves as incapable, insufficient, and inferior. So, we see that, “inequality between the sexes” extends to how they can express and experience themselves, how other perceive and treat them, and what effects their subjectivity will have in the social world, that is, whether or not one is a subject.

Not all men express these subject privilege to the same extent. Factors such as poverty or race can greatly impact a subject’s possibilities. For example, minority students in the United States are much less likely to finish high school (Hekman and LaFontaine 2010). Because high school dropouts are more likely to report chronic illness (Vaughn, Salas-Wright & Maynard 2014), minority group members will more likely suffer from limited lifespan, opportunities, and capacities.

The gendered nature of subject capacities and privilege limits the possibility for social change. First, to live as a subject means to live as masculine subject because privileged subject capacities are already coded as masculine. So if women do act like
subjects, they are really only aping a masculine model of subjectivity (or an inherently masculine set of privileged subject capacities). Second, there is little opportunity for either women or men to value, develop, or express subject capacities other than those recognized as specifically human. However, we can imagine the possibility of valuing, developing, and expressing capacities other than already-established subset of human subject capacities. Although women are subordinated in relation to a masculine model of subjectivity, both men and women could be much more. Valuing, developing, and expressing new and different capacities would challenging our understanding not only of “human” and also potentially “masculine” and “feminine”. So long as we remain within the narrowly defined subset of human (read: masculine) subject capacities, we limit our potential deep and lasting social change.

A debate exists between feminist ethicists who see oppressors as incapable of happiness or flourishing (ex. Tessman 2005), and those who do not (ex. Friedman 2009). I am not claiming that men insofar as they benefit or contribute to women’s oppression are incapable of happiness or flourishing. Rather, along with Irigaray, I suggest that we can imagine some alternative model of happiness or flourishing that depends upon the flourishing of both men and women. My position depends upon the notion of flourishing that is particular to a patriarchal/phallocentric culture, i.e. a model of flourishing that is defined upon traditional (i.e. masculine) notions of humanity and that does not understand unearned privilege as anathema to happiness. In short, men are able to be “happy”. But we can imagine and develop some other model of happiness.

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IV. Luce Irigaray’s Ethics of Sexual Difference

In response to the fundamental kinds of equality I have described here, i.e. an inequality in subjectivity, Luce Irigaray developed her ethics of sexual difference—a transformative project aimed at developing new modes of masculine and feminine subjectivity and of creating new ways of relating between these subjectivities. Beginning from a critical feminist perspective, Irigaray’s ethics targets women’s oppression. Irigaray grounds her understanding of women’s oppression in the fact that we do not find a fully formed feminine subjectivity in our culture. Because her analysis of oppression focuses on problems within culture and subjectivity, Irigaray’s ethics exceeds any common notion of a remedial political project: it involves deep cultural transformation. Further, Irigaray’s ethics also goes beyond the political sphere to call for change in interpersonal relationships and modes of comportment within these relationships.

a. Happiness, Oppression, and Women’s Rights

A notion of “happiness” rests at the core of Irigaray’s practical philosophy. In a talk that she delivered in 1994, Irigaray told her audience that “happiness, whether private or public, personal or collective [was] the goal which [she had] been pursuing for some years.” (Irigaray 2000, 165) In an earlier publication, i love to you: Sketch of a possible felicity in history, Irigaray (1996) claims: “The realization of happiness in us and between us is our primary cultural obligation.” (15) Here, we gain two important insights into Irigaray’s ethical principle of happiness. One, we have a fundamental political duty to seek happiness, and two, happiness (the notion of happiness we are obligated to cultivate) occurs in large part in relationships between subjectivities.
As was apparent from the proceeding discussion, inequalities persist between women and men. The problem of inequality between women and men (which we have come to understand as limitations to the development of women’s subjectivity) thwarts happiness. The project of becoming happy will require cultural change to address these inequalities. “Becoming happy implies liberating human subjectivity from the ignorance, oppression and the lack of culture that weighs so heavily upon this essential dimension of existence: sexual difference.” (Irigaray 1996, 15) Therefore, our collective duty is the political project of alleviating women’s oppression.

Irigaray (1993c) understands her normative project as “a matter of social justice” and as necessitating a political project of women’s rights (80). Irigaray’s rights-based politics also serve the more fundamental duty of achieving happiness. Happiness requires that women develop their subjectivity and rights are integral to this process:

Having rights—human rights in any case—implies having duties. […] My purpose in demanding these rights for women is to make them take responsibility for themselves socially, make them responsible adult citizens. […] It is therefore up to them to become subjects capable of sublimating their sexual drives, cultivating their sexuality, giving it rhythm, temporality, stakes. To do this women need rights. (Irigaray 1994, 81)

Having rights means being a particular kind of subject: a bearer of rights and a member of a political and moral community. Being part of a moral community, for Irigaray, implies not only the protections that come with having rights, but also having duties.

3 In this and similar passages, I do not take Irigaray to be using “lack” in the technical sense of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, as a lack that produces desire.
Women’s duties, as Irigaray outlines them here, refer to an obligation to develop a specifically feminine subjectivity (I will develop this notion further below). That is, women need to take responsibility for their selves to address the inequality in subjectivity that certainly exists between women and men and which blocks our collective happiness. Rights are a step in this process.

On Rawls’ (1971) taxonomy, Irigaray’s ethical theory is teleological: “the good is defined independently of the right.” (24) More specifically, her theory would fall under the category of “perfectionism”, i.e. “the realization of human excellence in the various forms of culture […].” (25) Irigaray does not employ the term “human excellence”. However, her notion of happiness in combination with a notion of perfecting human culture seems to fill this role. For example, Irigaray refers to subjects as having “the duty of preserving the human species and of developing its culture […].” (Irigaray 2000, 129) The theme of developing or creating human culture remains throughout much of Irigaray’s latter work.

The rights and duties that Irigaray envisions require a reciprocal relationship between sites of subjectivity, one in which sexual difference plays an integral role:

The demand for women’s rights is part of a vaster whole where the right to difference has become incontrovertible. It is not only a question of the right to be different-from, since this risks giving rise to further conflicts between entities and blocks, but of the right and the duty to be diverse-between. Thus, not: ‘I’m different from you’, but: ‘we differ amongst ourselves’, which implies a continual give-and-take in the establishing of boundaries and relationships, without the one having greater authority over the other.” (Irigaray 2000, 14)
Difference ought not be a question of defining ourselves in contrast or opposition to others (individuals, groups). Rather, we need to work together to elaborate the positive differences that exist between us. Such a project requires first removing the inequality that exists in men’s and women’s subjectivity.

b. The Problem of Sexual Difference

Irigaray’s employs the term “sexual difference” to refer to both the (absence of) difference between women and men in Western culture and also to refer to the possibility of a real, positive difference between feminine and masculine modes of subjectivity. Later in her career Irigaray began to use the term “sexuate difference” to stress her point that sexual difference (in the positive sense) is part of nature. Some commentators are critical of Irigaray’s rhetoric of “nature” (particularly in relation to sexual difference). However both Fielding (2003) and Stone (2006) give us good reasons (albeit from different theoretical perspectives) to believe that Irigaray understands nature as mutable. So, for Irigaray, we cannot reduce sexual difference to biological sex, nor can we limit our understanding of sexual difference to existing constructions of gender. Rather, for Irigaray, we must bring about sexual difference. Bringing about sexual (or sexuate) difference will require a transformation of our notion of nature, biological sex, and gender. Because a full treatment of these concepts is beyond the scope of this work and because “sexual difference” has currency beyond the narrow scope of Irigaray scholarship, I employ the term “sexual difference” throughout.

Addressing the problem of sexual difference requires a radical transformation of culture. The current state of our culture restricts the possibility for the kind of non-hierarchal relationships grounded in difference that Irigaray sees as necessary for
cultivating human happiness. We described the problem of women’s inequality as a difference in the degree to which women and men are able to express their subjectivity, which in turn produces two different kinds of subjects.

The problem, as Irigaray understands it, lies in a commonplace model of the subject, the meaning of which coincides with men’s subject privileges. “The subject,” as we generally understand it, refers to men. And the dominant conceptual framework excludes women. We can understand this as a problem of the other or alterity, where “the question of who the other is has not been well formulated in the Western tradition, in which the other is always the other of a singular subject and not another subject, irreducible to the masculine subject and of equal dignity.” (Irigaray 2000, 123-124) The dominance of a masculine model of the subject does not allow other subjects to flourish along side the masculine. Thus, our culture does not currently have the capacity to acknowledge the difference between women and men, that is, the kind of positive difference that is necessary for cultivating happiness.

An Irigarayan goal is “to be recognized as really an other [altro(a)], irreducible to the masculine subject.” (Irigaray 2000, 125) That is, she seeks to cultivate a feminine subjectivity that is something other than an (inferior) opposite of the masculine subject.

Let us recall, briefly, what is at stake here: the exploitation and the alienation of women are located in the difference between the sexes and the genders, and have to be resolved in that difference, without trying to abolish it, which would amount to yet another reduction to the singular subject. (Irigaray 2000, 126) The problem of sexual difference is the problem of women’s oppression, understood as women’s inequality based on the absence of feminine subjectivity and well-developed
subject capacities. And the problem of sexual difference is also the problem of
developing a feminine subjectivity that will be truly different from, but exist in relation
with, masculine subjectivity.

Here we come across the most novel feature of Irigaray’s philosophy: her notion
of sexual difference as two. Irigaray introduces the notion of sexual difference as two as a
means of breaking up the monoculture of the masculine subject of phallocentric culture:

Substituting the two for the one in sexual difference corresponds, then, to a
decisive philosophical and political gesture, one which renounces being one or
many in favour of being-two as the necessary foundation of a new ontology, a
new ethics and a new politics in which the other is recognized as other and not as
the same: greater, smaller, at best equal to me.” (Irigaray 2000, 140-141)

Irigaray’s notion of sexual difference allows her to reject a liberal politics of equality,
since “equality” requires comparable or similar subjects. That is, projects of equality
erase or cover over the difference between women and men. Thus Irigaray seeks to
articulate a positive meaning of the feminine that, on the one hand, cannot be reduced to a
universal subject, and on the other hand, does not simply reiterate the oppressive
definitions of “woman” and “the feminine” integral to patriarchal oppression. Insofar as
liberal equality hides or neutralizes difference, it reinforces the dominance of the
(masculine) subject. Any feminist project aiming at liberal equality will thus fail to make
the transformations necessary for truly non-hierarchal relationships between women and
men to happen.

Irigaray refers to this positive difference between women and men—in which
both women and men would be able to develop their subjectivities and exists as
subjects—as “sexual difference”. For Irigaray, the problem of sexual difference lies in its neutralization: the dominance of a generic (masculine) subjectivity neutralizes sexual difference within our culture. Because of its neutralization, sexual difference “represents one of the questions, or the question, of our epoch, which we must think through. […] The thing of our time that, once thought, will bring us salvation.” (Irigaray 1993a, 5; translation modified) Both the problem, i.e. the absence of women’s subjectivity, and humanity’s lack of happiness, involve sexual difference. However, sexual difference will also be our “salvation.” “Women’s exploitation is based upon sexual difference; its solution will come only through sexual difference.” (Irigaray 1993c, 12) If the problem of sexual difference is an absence of subjectivity for women and men grounded in positive differences between the sexes, then the solution to the problem will be the development or cultivation of that very difference.

Part of the problem rests in the fact that “woman” or “the feminine” have very restricted meanings within our culture. Women’s role in reproduction still plays a large role in determining these meanings. Although feminists have made important gains in this area, the problem of women’s subjectivity persists. An important aspect of women’s duty to develop their subjectivity will come by way of defining themselves as other than “wombs” and “mothers”. (Irigaray 1985b, 128)

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Neutralization refers to “a refusal to see women’s specificities and their differences from men.” (Grosz 1993, 37) For the most part this “refusal” comes through the use of language and concepts that rely on an implicit assumption that supposedly generic terms are in fact masculine. We find an excellent example of this in a liberal political position that “doesn’t see gender”. The supposed neutrality of this egalitarian position erases the specificity of gender, but is does so in the context of a culture that values the masculine and in which the “specificity of gender” refers only to women’s differences from men (Zakin 2007).
The need to develop sexual difference extends beyond traditional, restrictive, and exploitative subjectivities to include a remodeling of men’s subjectivity, as well as the relationships between women and men.

If man’s dealings with woman are to be equal, he will have to face a culture of sexual desire and of coexistence in difference of which he, as yet, knows nothing. This requires a reorganization of the relationship between sensibility and intellect, between body or emotions and civil existence. It is also a question of rethinking love and of refounding the family. (Irigaray 2000, 5)

The Irigarayan problem of sexual difference thus requires something other than “women’s liberation.” Women and men must work together to discover and develop sexual difference. This new sexual difference will entail recreating every aspect of our culture to articulate a positive, non-oppositional difference between women and men. Such a transformation will open up the possibility for non-hierarchal (happy, loving) relationships between all women and men that go beyond, but include, romantic or sexual relationships. How women (as mothers, sisters, aunts, friends, lovers, neighbors) relate to men (as fathers, brothers, uncles, friends, lovers, neighbors) will need to change.

We must create sexual difference—bring it into existence. Not only is it the case that we know nothing of these new relationships, but their creation will mark a radical break with what we do know: "Both in theory and in practice, everything resists the discovery and affirmation of such an advent or event." (Irigaray 1993a, 6) Thus, "[a] revolution in thought and ethics is needed if the work of sexual difference is to take place." (Irigaray 1993a, 6) In short, Irigaray's philosophical project aims to overturn and reinvent the very foundations of our culture: thought and ethics.
c. Ethics of Sexual Difference

The problem of sexual difference calls for a radical, transformative project, which we will refer to generally as an “ethics of sexual difference”. This “ethics” incorporates political elements (for example women’s rights), but extends far beyond political or legal reforms.

Deciding what is to be done is no longer simply a question of defining the right salary for a certain job, or of knowing how to help the less industrialized nations to develop, nor even of how to create jobs to absorb unemployment. It is much more a case of reorganizing the way that humanity lives and produces with a view to preserving the planet, and human life and culture. In other words, of awakening consciousness to another state in its becoming, which will allows us to begin building new ways of existing and thinking. (Irigaray 2000, 4)

And later, she summarizes: “An ethic of sexual difference could, if practiced with those closest to us as well as those furthest away, modify the entire culture: our way of thinking as much as our way of behaving politically.” (Irigaray 2000, 13) An ethics of sexual difference seeks to change the structures of culture as a whole. Thus, narrower definitions of “politics” or “ethics” will not capture the breadth of Irigaray’s project, nor direct the kind of change that she seeks. Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference goes further than many other feminist projects.5

Irigaray targets interpersonal relationships (rather than political or institutional change). She claims, “the most demanding human imperative [is] to cultivate the

5 I use the term “feminist social change” throughout to refer to Irigaray’s transformative project, although Irigaray does not refer to herself as a feminist.
development of an energy, that is always and already bound to the other, towards the elaboration of a specifically human transcendence.” (Irigaray 2008a, xiii) Here, “transcendence” refers to the movement beyond present modes of subjectivity and hierarchal relationships between women and men. For Irigaray, “transcendence” captures the transformative and futural (i.e. that it points towards a future that we cannot yet fully define) aspect of her project. That this transcendence is a “human transcendence” points to the fact that human beings and the relationships between human beings rest at the heart of Irigaray’s project.

Although Irigaray does not limit the meaning of sexual difference to erotic relationships between women and men, the erotic plays a central role in Irigaray’s ethics. A sexual or carnal ethics would require […] a] genesis of love between the sexes [that] has yet to come about in all dimensions, from the smallest to the greatest, from the most intimate to the most political. A world that must be created or re-created so that man and woman may once again or at last live together, meet, and sometimes inhabit the same place. (Irigaray 1993a, 17)

Although Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference involves the erotic, she does not limit the work of this project to intimate relationships. The project necessary to realize happiness will require a transformation throughout culture but that this transformation will rely primarily upon the relationships we build with truly different feminine and masculine subjectivities.

Irigaray uses the term “fecundity” to refer to the generative relationship she envisions developing between women and men. Irigaray’s notion of fecundity exceeds generative production or reproduction (Irigaray 1993a, 199). The erotic relationship
between man and woman—before any child—is already fecund (see Irigaray 1993a, 199). Fecundity marks the positive, constructive aspect of a sexual relation. Thus, Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference also seeks to transform the meaning of the erotic relationship:

The dissociation of love and desire would, in this case, have little meaning, nor would the sexual have an amoral, or nonethical, character. On the contrary, the sexual act would turn into the act whereby the other gives new form, birth, incarnation to the self. (Irigaray 1993a, 51)

That is, Irigaray sees the erotic relationship as a privileged site for ethics and for fecundity.

For Irigaray, fecundity names a relationship in which both terms (man and woman) are able to grow (Irigaray 1993a, 14). She suggests we can understand this fecundity or growth in terms of positive freedom. In Sharing the World (2008a), Irigaray makes an explicit connection between “growth” and “human freedom”:

Human freedom […] resembles the sap that comes out of a delicate plant, and that grows or withers depending on whether or not the surroundings in which it appears are favourably disposed towards its existence, its becoming. (Irigaray 2008a, xix-xx)

Irigaray weaves this theme of growth throughout Elemental Passions through the imagery of the flower and specific reference to the ‘vegetal’ (Irigaray 1992). She contrasts the ‘vegetal’ to the ‘mineral’ and the ‘crystal’ (Irigaray 1992, 33). The solidity of the crystal remains the same; it is unmoving. But the vegetal involves fluidity—a movement.
Despite this language of the vegetal, growth is a “specifically human” task that we ought to carry out in our “present existence.” (Irigaray 2008a, xviii) Non-hierarchal relationships between women and men open the possibility for growth or fecundity. We can understand Irigaray’s practical project as aiming toward a positive development of subjectivities beyond current limitations, what Irigaray names our “human becoming” (2000, 13 and 2008a, 59).

We should not confuse Irigaray’s notion of ‘growth’ with a biological understanding. She is not reducing our ‘becoming’ to the developmental stages of human beings. A closer comparison would be to ‘spiritual growth’, a development that occurs quite apart from our physical maturation. However, this too could be misleading because it suggests a strict divide between the body and the spirit, soul, or mind. ‘Growth’ is a development of human beings with and beyond nature. Irigaray stresses that this movement is a movement from nature to culture (Irigaray 1996 and 2008a). Also, it is a movement from ‘animal instinct’ to ‘desire’ (Irigaray 1996 and 2008a). We see that this growth is both ‘transcendental’, insofar as it is an elaboration of human culture, and ‘sensible’, insofar as it is a development of desire between subjects.

Closely related to “growth” is Irigaray’s notion of “fecundity”. Irigaray draws the terms “fecundity” from a reading of Emmanuel Levinas’ (1969) Totality and Infinity. Levinas (1969) defines “fecundity” as “a possibility of myself but also a possibility of the other, of the Beloved […]” (267) Fecundity arises out of the erotic relationship, but represents something other than the two lovers in that relationship. Levinas (1969) tells us that eros is “fed somehow by what is not yet…” (Levinas 1969, 258). The not yet is the object or aim of desire in the erotic relationship—not the body of the other lover—but
fecundity itself, which is also a temporal category. The not yet is the future of the I, but not simply what lays in wait for the I that would come about in the course of its life. “A not yet more remote than a future, a temporal not yet” (Levinas 1969, 264), which is beyond any determinable set of possibilities of my future. With the not yet Levinas points to a potentiality that is not inherent to the I, but at the same time constitutes a future for the I. Levinas differs from Irigaray insofar as he limits the notion of fecundity to procreative relationships between lovers. The “not yet” of the erotic relationship is the “child” (Levinas 1969, 267 and 271). And the child as a continuation of the I constitutes the future of the I found in the not yet.

For Irigaray, fecundity only arises through relationships between subjectivities, and therefore gestures towards a future that is only possible through those relationships. Fecundity also refers to a futural temporality, a “not-yet.” As a “not yet”, fecundity not only does not yet exist, but also cannot be fully captured by the possible futures of the individuals involved in the fecund relationship. Irigaray’s ethics qua transformative project functions according to the futural temporality of the not-yet. Because the achievement of her project depends upon the non-hierarchal relationships between women and men and the fecundity that those relationships can produce, Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference points towards an as-of-yet unimagined future of humanity and subjectivities: a not-yet.

The futural temporality of the not-yet implies that we cannot declare the outcome of Irigaray’s practical project beforehand. As a possibility that can only emerge as a possibility through non-hierarchal relationships between women and men that do not yet exist, the exact or final aim of Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference remains amorphous.
and unstable. On the one hand, the futural temporality of Irigaray’s transformative project qualifies the perfectionism we might otherwise associate with a project that emphasizes positive freedom. That is, we cannot find a blueprint for a utopian culture grounded in non-hierarchal relationships between women and men. On the other hand, Irigaray’s critical projects, i.e. her analysis of women’s subordination and men’s role in women’s subordination, offers us a good starting point insofar as it aims to alleviate oppression and allow for fecundity and growth, i.e. move in the direction of sexual difference.

The futural temporality of the not-yet also provides a context in which to understand Irigaray’s notion of “sexual difference.” Sexual difference refers to the difference between women and men. As we saw above, Irigaray understands women’s oppression as a problem of sexual difference. The problem of sexual difference amounts to a current neutralization of sexual difference, a culture that only acknowledges one and not two. In contrast, Irigaray positive project seeks the creation of difference between women and men. Such a creation would transform what we mean by “woman” and “man.” Therefore, sexual difference refers to the difference between women and men, but not to the difference as it currently exists. It names a not-yet existent possibility of women and men.

Irigaray also uses the term sexual difference to refer to women and men, and to women’s and men’s bodies. Irigaray (1985a and 1993) describes men’s and women’s bodies in terms of “morphology,” which we can understand as material-psychical hybrid. “Morphology” does not simply refer to the biological “shape” of women and men’s bodies, but the ways in which bodies take shape within a social field:
Morphologies are the effects of the psychological meanings of the developing child’s sexual zones and pleasures, meanings communicated through the hierarchical structures of the nuclear family; they are also the effect of a socio-symbolic inscription of the body, producing bodies as discursive effects.” (Grosz 1989, xix)

This hybridity ensures that while sexual difference does not refer to an immutable essence (i.e. we can change the meanings and capacities of morphology), neither does it refer to a cultural construction “on top of” a biological foundation. We can understand morphology in terms of bodily and psychic capacities. Because we live in a culture that does not acknowledge the positive differences between women and men, neither women, nor men, have developed morphologies capable of fecund relationships with one another. To create sexual difference would involve developing new morphologies capable of relating while maintaining the difference between subjectivities.

We should not make the mistake of thinking of sexual difference as functioning within a strict binary. Irigaray’s emphasis on the “two” of sexual difference could be misleading. However, she employs the two of sexual difference as a means of breaking up a binary system of sex, gender, and sexuality. Two is merely the first step in a process of undermining the dominance of the masculine (read: phallocentric) subject. More specifically, we can productively employ Irigaray’s notion of “morphology” in thinking about the complicated ways in which material aspects of bodies (skin, bone, organs, glands, hormones, and chromosomes) intermingle with the cultural regulation of gender and sexuality to produce myriad bodies, genders, and sexualities. This exercise in thought
will be integral to creating a culture in all kinds of sexual difference can be recognized and respected.

The *creation* of a new culture, a culture of sexual difference, lies at the heart of Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference. First and foremost, Irigaray casts this project in terms of the creation and representation of (new modes of) feminine subjectivity. For a new feminine subjectivity to develop, we require non-hierarchal relationships between women and men. This is women’s task in Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference.

Men, too, have a task in Irigaray’s ethics. At present masculine subjectivity is not suited to non-hierarchal, fecund relationships with women. Men too must undergo a transformation—we need to re-create masculine subjectivity. As Britt-Marie Schiller (2011) explains, “[…] the task of the masculine is to step back […] we need gestures toward a masculine subject of sexual difference, an incomplete masculine. The incomplete masculine is able to let the other be, and he is able to let the other come to encounter him […].” (132) Men’s task is to place limitations on themselves, so that the can make a space in which to meet and interact with women—a space in which both women and men can experience and been seen to express subject capacities. This dissertation aims to articulate the theoretical components of men’s task, describe the larger framework in which men’s task takes place (i.e. theories of subordination, privilege, responsibility, and reparations), and make some concrete suggestions as to how men might begin to carry out their task within Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference.

We should not construe Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference as inherently heterosexist. Irigaray’s emphasis on relationships between women and men, and particularly erotic relationships, should make us suspicious. We do not want to endorse a
project of social change that focuses on solely on heterosexual couples. Any change that might come about through such a project would have a very limited scope. Further, a strictly heterocentric model of social change would reiterate the exclusions that currently marginalize non-normative sexualities (i.e. homosexuality, bisexuality, and asexuality). Despite Irigaray’s focus on heterosexual erotic relationships, her ethical project also takes explicit account of non-sexual relationships between women and men and among women. Also, we could extend key features of her ethics to myriad relationships that could include, for example, homosexual, bisexual, or asexual people.

V. Chapter outline

In this dissertation, I focus specifically on men’s relationship to women’s subordination and men’s task in feminist social change. In response to the question of men’s responsibility for women’s oppression, I develop a notion of a “moral residue” that accumulates due to men’s indirect, unintentional, and non-volitional contributions to women’s subordination, and a notion of debt arising from the subject privileges men receive through the processes that subordinate women. Men’s moral residue and debt leave men owing reparations to women and these reparations take the form of a responsibility for men to partake in feminist social change. Through these notions of debt and reparations, I offer a unique contribution to the contemporary philosophical discussion about the moral significance of oppressors’ relation to oppression.

Further, I present a coherent outline of an Irigarayan practical philosophy, both her critique of patriarchal culture and her positive project of social change. In doing so I give unprecedented attention to men’s role within Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference. Finally, through the running example of men’s sexuality and pornography, I present a
specifically Irigarayan critique of pornography: its contribution to women’s oppression, its transformative potential for feminist change, and the limits of this transformative potential. Thus, my dissertation should be of interest to ethicists concerned with the moral dimension of social justice, Irigaray scholars, feminists (philosophers and otherwise) interested in pornography and prostitution, and anyone concerned with men’s relationship to and role in feminist social change.

In the first chapter, I argue that men receive subject privileges through the processes that subordinate women, and that the maintenance of men’s privilege requires women’s subordination. Irigaray’s model of women’s subordination consists of three components: devaluation, constitution as objects, and exploitation. Devaluation, constitution, and exploitation work together to limit women’s subjectivity (or growth). Fundamental features of Western culture (structures of thought, representation, language, desire, and social relations) perpetuate these processes. Therefore, women’s subordination does not consist primarily in a series of discrete events with clear, distinguishable harms, but rather forms a cultural milieu that shapes—and more importantly hindersthe development of women’s subjectivity. Further, the same processes that subordinate women also maintain men as “subjects”. Thus, we can understand men’s constitution as subjects as the most fundamental benefit that men receive from women’s subordination. Not only does subordination harm women by limiting women’s freedom, it also benefits men by allowing them to more fully develop their freedom. In other words, men function as subjects in a phallocentric economy at the expense of women’s freedom.
The second chapter shifts the focus to men’s contributions to women’s subordination. Here, I argue that although men do contribute to women’s oppression indirectly through intentional action, we cannot attribute many of the harms that women endure to men’s intentional action, or even to men’s agency. Drawing on an Irigarayan analysis of prostitution and pornography, I will illustrate how a seemingly mundane aspect of men’s sexuality, pornography use, functions to perpetuate women’s subordination in general. Further, pornography use exemplifies the majority of men’s contributions to women’s subordination, insofar as men’s contributions tend to be indirect, unintentional, and non-volitional.

In the third chapter, I argue that men have a necessary role to play in feminist social change. Again I focus on pornography, suggesting, alongside many other feminist thinkers, that women can use pornography as a tool for feminist social change. However, pornography use plays a much larger role than authorial intention in determining the meaning and effects of pornography. Therefore, men’s pornography use places limitations on the effectiveness of the transformative potential of feminist pornography. Men will need to change their way of relating to pornography for feminist pornography to reach its full potential. By extension, men need to work alongside women for lasting feminist social change to occur.

In the fourth chapter, I argue that men have a fundamental responsibility to partake in feminist social change. I argue that men accrue a moral residue through their indirect, unintentional, and non-volitional contributions to women’s subordination. Men’s privilege adds further weight to this residue because men have the potential to change the situation in which they find themselves and by means of which they contribute to
women’s subordination. Further, I argue that men purchase subject privileges at the expense of women’s freedom. Thus men owe a debt to women. In combination with the weight of men’s moral residue, this debt is sufficient to ground a special moral obligation to partake in feminist social change.

In the fifth chapter, I suggest that we understand men’s obligation in terms of an obligation to pay reparations to women. A compensatory model of justice is inadequate for articulating the nature of the reparations owed, because of the indeterminate nature of men’s contributions and the open-ended character of feminist social change. In the absence of criteria for liability it is inappropriate to blame men for their contributions and privileges. Instead, I turn to a model of restorative justice to suggest that men work to repair their relationships with women in such a way that does not simply return women and men to some earlier state of harmony. Rather, men ought to work alongside women to create a feminist future of sexual difference. I go further to argue that we ought to explicitly reference men’s connection to women’s subordination in both justifying and making this response. Thus, men’s task in Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference is both a special role in feminist social change and the means through which men can begin to “compensate” women for the harms of oppression. I close by looking at how men can begin to carry out their task in the context of linguistic and sexual relationships with women. And I conclude the dissertation with some further suggestions for men’s task in relation to men’s roles as friends and fathers.
Chapter One

Processes of Subordination and Privileging

In this chapter, I draw upon the work of Luce Irigaray to describe some of the key structures and processes that subordinate women. Given this understanding of women’s subordination, I argue that men’s privilege depends upon women’s subordination. The specific kind of privilege from which men benefit allows men to exist as subjects in a phallocentric culture. For men to reap these benefits, women must exist as limited sites of subjectivity. In other words, the structures and processes of phallocentric culture allow for men’s expression of subjectivity only at the expense women’s expression of subjectivity.

By phallocentric culture I understand a culture (in the broadest sense) that values men and masculinity (over women and femininity). This gendered hierarchy of value plays out through the myriad complexities of contemporary Western culture. For example, we tend to refer to men’s sports by the name of the sport (ex. hockey, basketball, and soccer), while women’s sports receive a gendered qualifier (ex. women’s hockey, women’s basketball, women’s soccer). In these examples, the gendered qualifier marks a lesser, derivative value for women’s sports. We see these values play out in social practices (i.e. men’s hockey, basketball, and soccer have more fans and receive much more media attention) and through the material/economic components of culture (i.e. men’s hockey, basketball, and soccer have highly paid professional teams, and men’s hockey, basketball, and soccer Olympic teams receive more funding).

I prefer “phallocentric” to “phalallocratic” because the former allows for a broader understanding of women’s subordination, while the latter refers primarily to the rule or
domination of men (over women). I am not suggesting that this domination does not exist. We can verify instances of men’s rule or domination, through an analysis of specific social or political institutions, for example, women’s legal status or property rights within marriage in the context of a particular state or society. However, a strict focus on phallocratic domination risks overlooking the more subtle aspects of women’s subordination, as in the example of women’s and men’s sports. Phallocentric values support and maintain phallocratic material structures. An Irigarayan analysis highlights the importance of values for maintaining hierarchal relationships of domination and subordination. I employ “phallocentric” to keep the etiological component of subordination at the fore.

I do not intend this as an exhaustive account of women’s oppression. Rather, I offer a sufficient structural account of women’s subordination to demonstrate that men’s subject privilege depends necessarily upon women’s subordination. My goal is to describe various economies and their relation to women’s subordination and men’s privilege as a set of dynamic processes that work reproduce and sustain women’s subordination. Likewise, the account of men’s privilege I offer in the following chapter will not be exhaustive, but rather focus on those features (what I have termed “subject privileges”) that most clearly highlight this relationship of dependence. My argument for understanding the moral significance of men’s connection to women’s subordination in terms of a debt that men owe to women (see Chapter 4) rests upon a notion that in this economic system of subordination men “purchase” their privilege and that women pay the price with their subjectivity.
I. Phallocentric Economies

In *Speculum: Of the other woman* (1985a) and *This Sex Which is Not One* (1985b), Luce Irigaray describes women’s subordination as functioning through various kinds of “economies.” Normally, within a philosophical context “economy” would refer to the political economy: the production and exchange of commodities (i.e. goods and services). But Irigaray means something broader by the term “economy”: any system of value and exchange. Phallocentric culture consists (minimally) of four interrelated economies that contribute to women’s subordination: an economy of representation, economies of discourse and desire, and the political economy (i.e. goods and services).

On Irigaray’s model, the meanings and values within an economy of representation condition concrete relationships in discourse and desire that constitute women as objects and men as subjects. Relatedly, women and men’s positions as subjects and objects condition social relations of the exchange of goods and services i.e. the political economy.

Irigaray prioritizes ideal components of women’s subordination, such as the role meaning and representation play in maintaining social hierarchies. However, we would be incorrect to understand Irigaray as suggesting that ideal structures cause material relations. None of the economies Irigaray discusses are purely ideal or purely material. Each of these economies consists of complex processes with multiple conditions and influences. So, for example, the concrete relationships within the (more material) political economy feed back into and help to shape the (more ideal) economy of representation: We can see this at play in the way in which stereotypes of women as homemakers and caretakers (and related attitudes about women’s “proper place” and “natural abilities”)

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limited the career opportunities for women entering the workforce. In pink-collar jobs, women earned less money than men and continued to be financially dependent upon men and were more likely to give up a career to care for children. In turn, the clearly gendered division of labor in the public sphere reinforced stereotypes and entrenched gender roles.

The economies I describe here are examples of women’s subordinate position within phallocentric culture. Their “position” is one of *use* and *exploitation*, such that subordination is not a passive state, but rather something that has to be actively maintained. Therefore, these economies work to maintain women’s subordinate position, that is, to *subordinate* women. Here, the emphasis is on the transitive verb that is always at work within subordination. We ought to think of these economies as continuous processes through which women are judged and treated as subordinate. Economies continually position, and re-position, women as subordinate to men. Thus, subordination consists not only in a subordinate position vis-à-vis men, but also in the effects of various material and ideal forces on women, such as the treatment and assignation of value that women receive in both institutional and interpersonal settings.

A site of subjectivity’s position remains dynamic. Once positioned, a site of subjectivity does not keep the same set of possibilities for experience, expression, and effect. Rather, the site of subjectivity is continually repositioned and the constellation of possible experience, expression, and effects shifts. We can imagine a promising graduate student who gets involved in a psychologically abusive relationship. Where once she had the potential to attend conferences, publish papers, and pursue a promising career in academia, she is now filled with self-doubt and shies away from public encounters.
The positioning of bodies within economies occurs through the complex interaction of various forces. In broad terms, we can understand these “forces” as interactions between the social and psychic aspects of bodies, which blend together the ideal and the material.

*Representational social forces* consist of, for example, the images in the media and popular culture; myth, religion, and philosophy; attitudes, stereotypes, and prejudices; as well as, conversations, gossip, whispers, accusations, and verdicts. Representations function through the social, which ranges from formal social and political institutions to crowds in the street to intimate interpersonal relationships. These representations influence bodies both psychically and materially. Psychically, representations influence our conscious beliefs and attitudes, but also our unconscious judgments, imagination, and desire. Again, our psychic states influence our behavior, i.e. where we go, what we do, how we carry ourselves, how we interact with other bodies. That is, “ideal” representations have “material” effects.

*Material social forces* range from the physical barriers of the natural and built environment to the actions of other agents (i.e. treatment). Material social forces, for example, those that the built environment exert upon impaired bodies, have both psychic and material effects. For example, a lack of accessible washrooms in downtown restaurants keeps bodies with physical impairments from patronizing these establishments with the same level of ease and comfort that non-impaired bodies might.

Further, the absence of accessible washrooms also sends a “message” to impaired bodies, suggesting that they are unwanted or do not belong in those spaces. People will respond to this “message” with varying degrees of frustration and indignation. But we
can image that any sense of injustice will be accompanied with a feeling or belief that they are unwanted, which will influence their further actions whether this involves going out and putting up with the lack of washrooms, staying home, visiting other restaurants with accessible washrooms, or lobbying for change, or some combination of these. As social, these forces contain an “ideal” component, despite being largely “material” in nature.

The relationship between the ideal and the material features of these economies is not monocausal. We can attribute causal efficacy neither solely to the ideal, nor solely to the material. The ideal does not cause the material, nor vice versa. Rather, we can to think of the human world as consisting of a network of material and ideal components that exert forces upon one another. Both the ideal, and the material, have a degree of causal efficacy. In any particular case, each will exert a certain pressure or force.

Further, they work upon one another. The ideal exerts pressure on the material and material forces influence the ideal. This is the case because the social and the psychic always contain a material component, just as material bodies and our (i.e. human) experience of material bodies always contain an ideal component. When I refer to “the social,” “the psychic,” and “the bodily,” I understand these primarily in terms of “the human,” which is always an intertwining of the material and ideal. The task of parsing out “cause” and “effect” in the context of the human—whether “social,” “psychic,” or “material”—is an ongoing task (in science and social science). We can say little about these equations with certainty beyond noting that there is a complex set of interactions between the ideal and the material, as well as the internal (ex. psychological habits, the
will, the unconscious) and the external (ex. other bodies, institutions, physical environment).

We can say with a higher degree of certainty that economies position sites of subjectivity (which are always bodies) in relation to other bodies and forces. Although these economies consist in dynamic, ongoing processes, the structures integral to these economies ensure that bodies retain relatively stable positions. The forces that position a site of subjectivity determine the possibilities for the expression of its subjectivity. That is, any given position will limit in some way and to some extent the capacities a site of subjectivity will express and experience itself as capable of expressing, as well as limit the effects these expressions might have. For example, many forces (through socialization, economic and educational institutions, stereotypes, city planning and zoning, etc.) work against class mobility. Working-class women will generally hold “pink-collar” jobs in which they rely more on their body, age, physical appearance, and emotional labor than the male dominated fields in which middle-class women work. Thus, economies differently position bodies, limit subject capacities, and bestow subject privileges.

II. Devaluation

Irigaray identifies a phallocentric economy of representation that produces women’s devaluation. Devaluation consists in representing “woman” without the characteristics of subjectivity, and therefore as worth less than those beings that do have characteristics that make them “subjects.” Because devaluation opposes “woman” to “subjects,” and because devaluation takes place through representations, we can refer to this aspect of women’s subordination as an ideational denial of women’s subjectivity.
Women’s devaluation via the ideational denial is significant for two reasons. First, devaluation is a necessary condition for women’s constitution as objects through the economies of discourse and desire (a more concrete aspect of women’s subordination). Second, the denial is itself an aspect of the “purchase” of men’s privilege at the expense of women’s subjectivity.

Irigaray points to a denial of women’s subjectivity that underwrites women’s position and function within phallocentric economies:

Subjectivity denied to woman: indisputably this provides the financial backing for every irreducible constitution as an object: of representation, of discourse, of desire. Once imagine that woman imagines and the object loses its fixed, obsessional character. (Irigaray 1985a, 133)

Irigaray claims that western culture is unable to imagine that woman is a subject. The ways in which western culture represents “woman” are deficient insofar as they represent “woman” not as a subject or site of subjectivity, but as an inferior negation of the positive subject, “man.”

This ideational denial of women’s subjectivity takes place within an economy of imaginary and representation. In a discussion of Freud’s psychoanalytic theory, Irigaray (1985a) claims that Freud “has recourse [to an economy of representation] without criticism, without sufficient questioning: this is an organized system whose meaning is regulated by paradigms and units of value that are in turn determined by male subjects.” (22) Irigaray draws our attention to Freud’s theory of psychosexual development as an example of the way in which the phallocentric economy of representation informs scientific and theoretical discourse. The phallocentric economy of representation
devalues women by ignoring them, negating them, or denying their subjectivity. This economy consists of the values associated with, and the exchanges of, meaning that take place in cultural representations and language in general. The economy of representation functions implicitly within masculinist psychoanalytic theories and philosophy, as well as myth, religious iconography, literature, scientific discourses, and popular media (film, music, television, advertisements).

Irigaray suggests that “woman” figures into these disparate images and discourses in very similar ways. Dominant segments of the economy of representation within Western culture operate according to a male or masculine standard of value, and devalue images of women, as well as imagery and concepts associated with women such as “woman,” “feminine,” or “maternal”. For this reason, we can call the dominant economy of representation within western culture a phallocentric economy of representation.

Within the phallocentric economy of representation, images of women and concepts associated with women are often missing altogether. When these images and concepts do surface, the phallocentric representational economy often defines them in negative terms according to a male or masculine standard. For example, when a woman demonstrates leadership in business or politics, she is derided as a bitch and possibly a lesbian. That is, not only as not a real woman, but also as a failed attempt at being a man. So, definitions of “woman” cast women as inferior versions of men—missing the requisite capacities of any ethical and political subject. Even those theories that have historically attempted to find a place for “woman” fail to do so, because they either refer to a generic “subject” or “humanity,” or define “woman” with recourse to existing
“feminine” attributes. That is, they rely implicitly upon a phallocentric economy of representation that has already negated or devalued “woman.”

a. “Woman” as “Blind Spot”

A central claim, in Irigaray critique of women’s subordination is that “woman” remains “unsymbolized.” Margaret Whitford (1991) suggests understanding this absence of symbolization as “an absence of linguistic, social, semiotic, structural, cultural, iconic, theoretical, mythical, religious or any other representations […]” (76) Whitford’s expansive list implies that “woman” is underrepresented in the cultural imagination. Irigaray claims that it is because the dominant economy of representation functions according to a male model that this economy figures “woman” as between meanings.

[The phallocentric] economy of representation […] is an organized system whose meaning is regulated by paradigms and units of value that are in turn determined by male subjects. Therefore, the feminine must be deciphered as inter-dict: within the signs or between them, between the realized meanings, between the lines…

[…]. (Irigaray 1985a, 22)

“Woman” is interdict—excluded or forbidden—from language, meaning, and representation. For example, I noted in the introduction that there are literally fewer women in television and film and that these media are less likely to portray women as expressing subjectivity. More likely, women figure as love interests for male characters, “damsels in distress” to be saved by male characters, or simply ornaments to adorn male characters or settings. Finding “woman” requires looking between signs and meanings as they exist and circulate within the phallocentric economy of representation. “Woman” is a “blind spot” within the phallocentric economy of representation (Irigaray 2002a, 227).
We might “decipher” the feminine between the existing meanings within the phallocentric economy of representation, but we will not find an explicit positive definition of a feminine subjectivity.

Because male subjects have dominated discourse and representation within our culture, it is male subjects that have determined the meanings and values within this culture.

As animal endowed with language, as rational animal, man has always represented the only possible subject of discourse, the only possible subject. And his language appears to be the universal itself. The mode(s) of predication, the categories of discourse, the forms of judgement, the reign of the concept… have never been questioned with respect to their determination by a sexed being. […] A perpetually unrecognized law regulates all operations carried out in language(s), all production of discourse, and all constitution of language according to the necessities of one perspective, one point of view, and one economy: that of men, who supposedly represent the human race.” (Irigaray 2002a, 227)

The subject of language and representation, although assumed neutral, has always been masculine/male (more on this below). Sexed subjects (men) have created an economy of representation from their own perspective and left out other sexed subjects (women) from those representations. The absence of “woman” is not obvious. The absence of the means of representing half of humanity ought to be a conspicuous absence. But the generic or neutral language of the phallocentric economy of representation covers over this absence
and leaves a blind spot in its place. For example, the impersonal pronoun “one” or the generic “human” stand in for “man” and exclude “woman”.

In her essay, “In science, is the subject sexed?” Irigaray (2002a) suggests that the kinds of questions that researchers ask, the research that is funded, and therefore the knowledges that are produced are i) shaped by the sexed specificity of the researcher, and ii) exclude questions and knowledge specific to women. Irigaray’s claims resonate with other contributions to feminist epistemology and science studies: Scientific discourse on sex, gender, and sexuality comes, for the most part, from men, and therefore represents their perspective. From the perspective of mainstream science, the maleness of the subject of science is either irrelevant, or can be overcome through recourse to objective methods, specifically through “aperspectivity” or by taking a “view from nowhere.” But this claim to neutrality and objectivity at the heart of scientific method and discourse covers over the sexed specificity of the subject of knowledge. Thus, not only does “woman” remain unrepresented within these discourses, but the nature of these discourse cover over this exclusion leaving “woman” as a blind spot.

b. “Woman” as Negation

Despite the interdiction of “woman”, we do find representations of women in western culture. The terms “woman” and “femininity” do have meaning for us. In light of this observation, we can draw two points from Irigaray’s position: First, because male subjects dominate the phallocentric economy of representation, women are not in control of the meanings of “woman” or “femininity.” In fact, Irigaray claims that one way the phallocentric economy of representation defines “woman” is as that which cannot represent itself: “A man minus the possibility of (re)presenting oneself as a man = a
normal woman.” (Irigaray 1985a, 27) From this passage, we can note a further point: Insofar as we can find “woman” within the phallocentric economy of representation, woman’s attributes will appear as the negation of man’s. Thus, “woman” will only have a very limited set of meanings within this economy, i.e. those that men attribute to “woman” through a negation of the ways in which men understand themselves.

Irigaray explains this return as negation, despite the interdiction that leaves “woman” as a blind spot within the phallocentric economy of representation:

The feminine will be allowed and even obliged to return in such oppositions as: be/become, have/not have sex (organ), phallic/non-phallic, penis/clitoris or else penis/vagina, plus/minus, clearly representable/dark continent, logos/silence or idle chatter, desire for the mother/desire to be the mother, etc. (Irigaray 1985a, 22)

These are the “interpretive modalities” through which the phallocentric economy of representation understands “woman” or “the female function.” (Irigaray 1985a, 22) That is, if the phallocentric economy of representation defines “man” in terms of “being,” “having a sex organ/phallus/penis,” as present, as positive, “representable,” as possessing logos, then “woman” must appear as “becoming,” “not having a sex organ/phallus/penis,” as absent, as negative, as “unrepresentable” or “unthematizable,” and as irrational and/or silent. “Woman,” the “feminine,” “maternity,” etc. will have no meaning unless they have received their meaning from these binary ‘sets’. Thus, social forces of representation “oblige” women to take on these deficient copies of men’s meaning.

c. “Woman” in Binary Thought
The phallocentric economy of representation functions according to a logic of binary opposition and exclusion. At the basis of this logic is a binary structure in which two terms are related through a non-inclusive disjunction: either…, or…. The principle of non-contradiction describes this relationship: nothing can be both ‘A’, and not-‘A’. For example, the ink on this page cannot be both black and not black. The ink can be ‘black’, or not-‘black’, but it cannot be both. If negation has meaning, then this principle must hold. This principle is intuitive. And it might seem as if our brains were hard-wired to make these kinds of either/or distinctions. Even if this were the case, binary thought is only way of thinking—despite the inflated sense of importance our culture accords to it.

Hélène Cixous (1981) describes the relation between sexual difference and the binaries of oppositional thought:

By dual, hierarchized oppositions. Superior/Inferior. Myths, legends, books.

Philosophical systems. Wherever an ordering intervenes, a law organizes the thinkable by (dual, irreconcilable; or mitigable, dialectical) oppositions. And all the couples of oppositions are couples. Does this mean something? Is the fact that logocentrism subjects thought—all of the concepts, the codes, the values—to a two-term system, related to “the” couple man/woman? (91)

Cixous’, as well as Irigaray’s, answer to this question is, “Yes.” The meanings of “man” within the phallocentric economy of representation and the binaries of Western thought coincide such that this conceptual economy subordinates the terms associated with women, i.e. “woman,” “femininity,” “maternity,” by figuring them in terms of a negation of the positive terms associated with “man.” So, for example, Western culture tends to define “masculinity” as active, rational, brave, and strong, and therefore defines
“femininity” as the opposite of these values: passive and emotional, timid and fragile.

Woman only appears as an inferior reflection of men’s attributes.

Irigaray draws our attention to a variation on this negative definition of “woman” through the example of Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic theory and specifically his account of psychosexual development (Freud 2000). Here, rather than an inferior copy of man, the little girl is nothing other than a little man:

“Both sexes seem to pass through the early phases of libidinal development in the same manner. […] With entry into the phallic phase the differences between the sexes are completely eclipsed by their agreements. We are now obliged to recognize that the little girl is a little man.” (Irigaray 1985b)

But women will have to overcome this coincidence if they are to develop as “normal women.” As Irigaray (1985b) points out, “[…] in order for “femininity” to arise, a much greater repression […] will be required of the little girl, and, in particular the transformation of her sexual “activity” into its opposite: “passivity.”” (36) That is, a woman becomes a woman through a negation of that attribute most associated with men and male sexuality, a negation of activity. This move from activity to passivity requires a transfer of erogenous investment from the masculine, penis-like clitoris to the feminine vagina (Irigaray 1985b, 41).

Further, the transfer of erogeneity from clitoris to vagina privileges the reproductive function over women’s pleasure. Here’s Irigaray (1985b): “The “sexual function,” for Freud, is above all the reproductive function. […] The woman has to be induced to privilege this “sexual function”; the capstone of her libidinal evolution must be the desire to give birth.” (41) With this final move, we see Freud’s theory defines
“woman” as a diminished version of “man” and defines “maternity” as a passive function always dependent upon the activity of “man.”

In the context, Irigaray does not endorse Freud’s psychoanalytic model, but rather uses it as an artifact of a phallocentric culture. Whether Freud’s theory is currently seen as correct or not is irrelevant in this context. Of course, Freud’s theory does not constitute the entirety of the economy of representation or even of Western thought. But it serves as an example of an influential theory that defines “woman” negatively, and more specifically as a negation of “man” or “the masculine.” Further, Irigaray is not alone in her claim that the history of philosophy places the ‘feminine’ and women in a subordinate position through a series of binary oppositions. Michèle LeDoeuff (1989 and 1991) and Sarah Kofman (1982), as well as Susan Bordo (1987), Genevieve Lloyd (1993), and Naomi Scheman (1993), give similar accounts. (For a comparison of Irigaray with LeDoeuff and Kofman on this point, see Deutscher 1997, and for a comparison of Bordo, Lloyd, Irigaray, and Scheman, see Witt 2007.)

d. “Any theory of the subject…”

To remain with Freud’s theory for a moment, we can see that not only does “woman” figure as a negation of man, but also as a negation of masculine attributes, i.e. active, courageous, desiring. Therefore, following the binary, oppositional logic at work there, Freud’s theory casts “woman” as passive, weak, and submissive. Again, Freud’s theory exemplify what Irigaray identifies as a broader trend in Western culture: theories of “the subject” function according to the phallocentric economy of representation explicitly exclude “woman” or “felinity” from their understanding of “the subject”. Or, in
Irigaray’s (1985a) words, “any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the “masculine”.” (133)

Irigaray demonstrates this “appropriation” through a series of critical vignettes each of which engages the work of an individual philosopher. In Speculum she treats Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Hegel, and Freud, among others (Irigaray 1985a). Both Nietzsche and Heidegger receive book length treatments (Irigaray 1991a and 1999). And in An Ethics of Sexual Difference Irigaray (1993a) dedicates a chapter each to Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Spinoza, Merleau-Ponty, and Levinas. Her approach in each of these texts focuses less on the explicit claims philosophers have made regarding women than on uncovering implicit associations of “woman” or “felicity” (or the ways in which the feminine is missing altogether). Her method resembles that of a therapist analyzing the utterances and dreams of a patient, seeking to make the unconscious conscious.

Irigaray’s method changes over the course of her work. Speculum, more than any other piece of writing, demonstrates the “analyst” approach I describe here. As Irigaray’s work progresses, she begins to build a positive project that both draws on the work of these canonical figures, as well as using them for jumping off points for re-thinking sexual difference and the relationships between women and men. However, up to the end of Ethics, Irigaray (1993a) continues to uncover the unthought and unsaid within these various theories.

So, for example, Irigaray suggests that in Freud’s theory “woman” figures as the unconscious itself that which cannot be understood through logical discourse and scientific theory; in the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus “woman” figures as “matter” that either exists as an unthematizable materiality (Plato/Plotinus), or does not
exist at all (Aristotle); Kant’s critical philosophy subordinates (feminine) nature to (masculine) understanding and (feminine) imagination (i.e. the imaginary, or unconscious) to (masculine) reason (1985a). Heidegger “forgets” the (feminine) element air, subordinating it to (masculine) earth (Irigaray 1999), whereas Nietzsche’s underplays the importance of the (feminine, fluid) element, water (Irigaray 1991a).

In attributing hidden assumptions about the nature of “woman” or “felinity” to these philosophers, the “evidence” Irigaray furnishes would seem circumspect, if it were not for those texts where “woman” or “felinity” figures explicitly. For example, in her reading of *Totality and Infinity*, Irigaray (1993a) claims that Levinas’ emphasis on the father-son relationships implicitly subordinates mother–daughter relationships. On its own this claim seems to lack evidence, but when we also see that Levinas explicitly excludes the “feminine Other” from the ethical relationship, the plausibility of Irigaray’s original claim increases (Levinas 1969, see Irigaray 1993a).

Overall, Irigaray does not explicitly build what we would typically recognize as rigorous arguments, but rather carries out a series of analyses each of which resonate with one another. Taken as a whole the reader gains a sense of the pervasive nature of the implicit biases and exclusions Irigaray attends to. In the end, Irigaray’s position rests upon her opponents’ inability to furnish an adequate set of counter examples that would throw into question the pervasive nature of “woman” as a negation of “man” and the masculine in the conceptual landscape of Western culture.

Feminist theory has developed substantially since Irigaray’s canonical contributions in the mid-1970s. Many theories of the subject, or philosophical positions in general, attempt to take account of “woman” and explicitly seek women’s equality and
status as persons and subjects. However, any such theory runs two risks: On the one hand, reference to a generic “subject” or “humanity” risks positing a theory in which “woman” quite simply cannot yet make an appearance because of the cultural framework. These theories assume that the “subject” or “individual” is a universal concept that would include all of “humanity.” However, these terms (“subject,” “individual,” and “humanity”) have been conceived within a masculine framework that has proceeds from a denial or devaluation of “woman” and “felinity”). Here, I am thinking of liberal feminism that generally speaking seeks to remove sexist prejudices that distort or detract from women’s humanity and value as subjects just like men. On the other hand, other feminist theories risk defining “woman” with recourse to existing “feminine” attributes. For example, feminist theory that values women’s maternal, caring, or emotional characteristics risks figuring “woman” as the negation of masculine attributes. For example, this risk arises in the early work of Gilligan (1982), Ruddick (1989), and Noddings (2003). Therefore, any project of “equality” will risk either conceiving of equality as an equality of all (male) subjects and implicitly exclude women, or acknowledge differences between women and men, but define these differences in terms that exclude women’s existence as anything other than a negation of “man.” For a meaningful third alternative to come about, we would need a radical change to culture and economy of representation and imaginary.

A third option exists. A theory might give positive definition to “woman,” “felinity,” “maternity,” etc. that does not rely solely on traditional notions of femininity (or reduce feminine to traditional notions of masculinity). Any theory that does so is feminist in the sense in which an Irigarayan will endorse. My point is that finding this
kind of third option requires a radical movement in thought beyond the confines of existing culture meanings. In the end, the redefinition of “woman” or feminine subjectivity will be a lengthy, collaborative struggle in which different theorists and artists—as well as “ordinary” women—contribute to the process of creating new meanings and a new model of feminine subjectivity.

**e. Ideational Privileges**

Through our discussion of phallocentric the economy of representation, we can see that men’s privilege includes the fact that men are “symbolized” within the dominant economy of representation. Men get to see others like themselves represented as capable of expressing subjectivity, which means that they can much more easily imagine themselves taking on these kinds of subject roles in their own lives. Also, women see men represented in this way, and are more likely to assume that men can and ought to behave as subjects. Further, phallocentric culture assigns positive values to masculine attributes (as long as they attach to men) and therefore tends to value men more highly than women. Finally, because “the subject” is implicitly masculine at the level of concepts, all of us are more likely to equate “men” with “subject,” that is, implicitly understand men as subjects.

Certainly, these privileges do not extend equally to all men. For example, popular media rarely portrays men of African descent in a positive light. Such that these men also do not often see “others like themselves” benefitting from subject privileges in the same way that men of European descent do. Also, western culture rarely assigns positive masculine attributes of, for example, strength and courage to homosexual men. These meanings and values shape common stereotypes of gay men, who they are (i.e. not real
men) and what they are capable of doing (ex. until recently openly gay men were specifically excluded from military service in the United States). Similarly, phallocentric culture figures “the subject” as a fully autonomous, rational agent such that this definition can implicitly exclude men with certain mental or physical impairments disabled simultaneously from the categories of “subjects” and “men.” In each of these examples different structures of oppression at play within western culture work to weaken the benefits some men receive from the phallocentric economy of representation. However, as a baseline, all men enjoy a relative benefit of subject privileges relative to women within similar social positions, and all men benefit in some way simply insofar as they are men in ways that are impossible for any woman.

Some feminists have raised a similar point in attacking transmen for trying “cash in” on male privilege. These simplistic arguments ignore both the reality of trans lives and costs that often come with “passing,” which can include losing all of one’s family and friends from a pre-transition life. In discussing his own attempts at procuring sex reassignment surgery, Spade (2006) suggests that while male privilege might be a consideration or even a motivating factor, we cannot reduce trans experiences to a power grab for male privilege.

Men benefit from women’s subordination by being valued as subjects. This privilege comes through the absence and negation of “woman” and “femininity.” This negation limits women’s subjectivity insofar as the absence of meaning of women as subjects limits women’s options for expressing their subjectivity. Therefore, men’s subjectivity requires an ideational denial that necessarily limits women’s subjectivity.
IV. Constitution

Taken in isolation it is unclear how the ideational denial of women’s subjectivity constitutes subordination. As we have seen, Irigaray claims that the ideational denial of women’s subjectivity “provides the financial backing for every irreducible constitution as an object: of representation, of discourse, of desire. (Irigaray 1985a, 133) That is, the ideational denial is a condition for a more evident, tangible aspect of women’s subordination, their constitution as objects.

We should not to take the term “object” literally. In our discussion of constitution we see that “object” refers to a site of subjectivity that receives few subject privileges, i.e. is not treated as being capable of, and therefore does not express, a complex range of well-developed subject capacities. However, this figurative “objectification” that takes place through economies of discourse and desire contrasts with a more literal (if not fully literal) meaning of “object” in Irigaray’s (1985b) claims that women function as “commodities” within social economies of use and exchange. The move from the more ideal end of subordination to the more material parallels a move from a more metaphorical (i.e. “woman” and “object”) to a more literal (i.e. commodity).

Irigaray refers to woman’s constitution as a object as “a bench mark that is ultimately more crucial than the subject, for he [i.e. the subject] can sustain himself only by bouncing back off some objectiveness, some objective.” (Irigaray 1985a, 133, my emphasis) The processes through which subjects come to, and maintain themselves, as subjects rely upon woman’s role as that object.  

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We see another version of this dynamic in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory: the subject relies upon an identification with its mirror image to understand itself as a cohesive subject and to
In what follows, we will see that a similar relationship of object-subject dependency exists in all the economies of discourse and desire that Irigaray describes. That is, these economies produce both men-subjects via women-objects. Irigaray’s claim that women-objects are “more crucial” than men-subjects seems true insofar as the former is a condition of possibility for the production of the latter. However, the inverse is also the case: the production of men-subjects is a condition of possibility for the production of women-objects. So, on the one hand, the production of phallocentric subjects depends upon women’s subordination and, on the other hand, the specific features of women’s subordination we describe here only come about through the production of phallocentric subjects. This interdependency of production grounds the “purchase” of men’s privilege.

**a. Phallocentric Economy of Discourse**

Irigaray’s discussion of discourse introduces an interesting example of the way in which women figure into these processes of constitution. The term “discourse” shows up in Irigaray’s writing in two distinct contexts. “Discourse,” in the sense of theoretical or scientific conversation, figures as an example of the economy of representation. Therefore, Irigaray (1985b) reminds us of “the way in which, within discourse, the feminine finds itself defined as lack, deficiency, or as imitation and negative image of the function in a social world (Johnston 2013). An Irigarayan analysis of this scene of identification would draw our attention to the role of woman or the mother. Here, the mother figures as a mirror-like object. According to Johnston (2013), the mother functions as a support for the child holding him to the mirror and encouraging his identification. Homer (2005) adds that the mother’s face can act as a reflective surface in which the child finds an image of itself (24). In either case, from Irigaray’s perspective, Lacan places woman as the mother as necessary to the process of recognition, but her role is that of an object or support for the subject.
subject […]” (78, my emphasis)\(^7\) In the previous section, we saw how the position of “woman” within the economy of representation amounts to a denial of women’s subjectivity. Irigaray was trained as a linguist, in addition to a philosopher and analyst, and some of her earlier writing as well as her social scientific research focuses on language. “Discourse”, in the second sense, refers to a scene of enunciation between two subjects. Here, I focus on this second sense.

\(i.\) Benveniste and Enunciation

Irigaray (2002a) draws explicitly on the linguistic theory of Emile Benveniste, which centers on a rejection of an instrumental understanding of language. In place of a notion of language as a tool used between subjects, Benveniste suggests that the practice of language between speakers produces subjectivity. Subjectivity for Benveniste comes about only through speaking, or what he calls “enunciation”. Irigaray (2002a) distinguishes between utterances and enunciation in language. Utterances refers to language as contentful, for example, a sentence considered in terms of its meaning. Enunciation refers to the expression of a sentence, the act of speaking, or “[…] ‘putting language into operation through individual acts of utilization’ […]” (Irigaray 2002a, 173) Utterances are something language says; enunciation is something language does.

For Benveniste, subjectivity comes about only through enunciation. Benveniste understands subjectivity as a unity of experiences that arises only out of the use of language. In his essay, “Subjectivity in language”, originally published in 1958, Benveniste (1971) explains:

\[\]

\(^7\) Here, “lack” would refer to the notion within psychoanalytic theory that woman is missing or lacking a penis, or that woman is the object which man lacks and which drives his desire.
The “subjectivity” we are discussing here is the capacity of the speaker to posit himself as “subject.” It is defined not by the feeling which everyone experiences of being himself […] but as the psychic unity that transcends the totality of the actual experiences it assembles and that make the permanence of the consciousness. […] “Ego” is he who says “ego.” (522)

Speaking “I” allows us to unify our otherwise disparate experiences. “I” is an identity, but one that only functions through the use of language, that is, by speaking “I”.

Subjectivity, for Benveniste (1971) consists in saying “I”. According to Benveniste, the exercise of language that takes place in the use of personal pronouns is the process through which we come to be subjects. That is, through enunciation one becomes a subject. As John Philips (2006) explains, “[…] the human subject is something only made possible by language. […] So the basis of subjectivity […] would only be discoverable in the exercise of language.” For Benveniste, enunciation is evidence of subjectivity, but subjectivity only arises through the exercise of language, i.e. in enunciation.

As we saw in the introduction, language use is one way in which a site of subjectivity can express its subjectivity. Further, given the centrality of language to human existence and sociality, we ought to understand a capacity for discourse, i.e. speaking to another site of subjectivity, as a necessary condition for subjectivity. However, Benveniste’s theory makes a more specific claim and demands not only that a site of subjectivity have a capacity for discourse, but also that the site of subjectivity in question express itself as an “I”—that is, take up the subject position within language.
Although, saying “I” may not be a sufficient condition for existing as a subject, it is a necessary condition for receiving subject-privileges within culture.

Functioning as a subject within a social, i.e. an ethical and political, world requires speech and specifically speaking as an “I” To participate and to be understood as someone or something capable of participation within the social world—i.e. being seen as a subject—requires making subjective claims, such as, “I am angry,” “I want soup,” or “I have a tummy ache.” We understand these kinds of statements as indicative of an “internal world,” or subjectivity. More specifically, the ethical and political aspects of the social realm demand that a subject express beliefs, provide justification for those beliefs, and justify its actions in terms of those beliefs. To enter into a exchange of praise and blame, of accusation and acquittal, or of guilt and punishment requires that I speak as an “I”: to receive my merits, to stand trial, to enter my plea, to be condemned, to make a claim of injustice done against me, etc.

Those sites of subjectivity we view as subjects have a fundamental privilege insofar as they can participate in political and social institutions and they are also privileged insofar as others see them as able to make (legal, moral, political) claims and as having the rational capacities to engage in these kinds of discourse. Of course, not all sites of subjectivity that utter “I” in these contexts receive subject privileges. For example, legal and judicial institutions often fail to extend subject privileges to disabled and racialized sites of subjectivity despite their ability to say “I.” So, although saying “I” does not guarantee subject privileges, subject privileges do depend upon being given and taking up the subject position within discourse.
ii. The Phallocentric Grammar of Enunciation

The reciprocity of the “I” and the “you” in enunciation becomes the basis for Irigaray’s critique of relationships between women and men within culture—or what she calls the grammar of enunciation. This grammar of enunciation depends upon the relationship of the “I” and the “you” in the scene of enunciation. Benveniste (1971) draws our attention to the reciprocal nature of this scene of subject formation:

Consciousness of self is only possible if it is experienced by contrast. I use I only when I am speaking to someone who will be a you in my address. It is this condition of dialogue that is constitutive of a person, for it implies that reciprocally I becomes you in the address of the one who in his turn designates himself as I. (522-523)

Here we note that enunciation, as a process of subject formation, is always also dialogue, a process in which at least two subjects come into being through this second sense of discourse. The “I” only arises in relation to a corresponding “you” and vice versa.

Irigaray endorses both of Benveniste’s claims, i.e. that the subject comes to be through enunciation and that ideally enunciation, or subject formation, is a reciprocal process in which two subjects emerge. However, Irigaray (2002a) suggests that within phallocentric culture there is a problem with the “grammar of enunciation” such that reciprocity does not exist between women and men within the scene of enunciation (43). The phallocentric economy of discourse produces men-subjects, but not women-subjects. Given Benveniste’s understanding of the reciprocal scene of enunciation, to be an object of enunciation (to be referred to as “you”) would be sufficient for subjectivity—because the “you” of enunciation is also an “I.” However, women, Irigaray will claim, do not
figure as I-objects of this sort within the phallocentric economy of discourse. Women do not say (or are not heard to say) “I”. Irigaray develops this claim through an analogy with the neuroses of hysteria and obsessional behavior

Neurotic utterances. According to Irigaray’s empirical research, the hysteric speaks in some sense, but not in such a way as to assume the subject position within the grammar enunciation; that is, through an “I …” statement.

The typical utterance of the hysteric is: (I) $\leftarrow$ do you love me? $\rightarrow$ (you). The hysteric leaves it to the addressee to assume the utterance, the interrogative form making the message ambiguous, incomplete, in a world, non-assumed. It is the yes or the no of (you) that underlies the message, and constitutes the addressee as the only subject of enunciation. (Irigaray 2002a, 53)

The hysteric’s utterance is always a deferral of subjectivity to another site of subjectivity, to (you). Hence, in the question, “Do you love me?” the interrogated subject remains the grammatical subject of the utterance, and despite the speech act, the hysteric remains at best a grammatical object of the utterance. The hysteric utters the question, but this utterance is not properly an enunciation. The hysteric does not assume subjectivity through this utterance.

If the failure of the hysteric is to leave herself out of the statement and confer subjectivity to her interlocutor, then the failure of the obsessive is to completely abandon—or exclude—his interlocutor.

The typical statement of the obsessive would be: (I) $\leftarrow$ I tell myself that I am loved $\rightarrow$ (you), […]. […] The locutor is not the problem here, but rather the addressee. His or her function as receiver of the message is in fact called into
question by the reflexive character of the enunciation […] In addition, the addressee is also left out of the utterance where she or he functions neither as subject or an active verb, nor as agent of a passive verb, nor as object. (Irigaray 2002a, 53)

The obsessive is caught up in himself. The grammar of enunciation must include both an “I” and a “you.” But this “you” is also an “I.” So, properly speaking enunciation takes place between two “I”s, and therefore does not take place. In contrast, the utterance of the obsessive includes only one “I”. The passive statement, “I tell myself I am loved,” suggests another subject, someone capable of loving. But this phantom “you” does not make an appearance in the obsessive’s utterance. His statement is completely self-referential. The “you”—any other subject—has no place in the obsessive’s speech.

Irigaray’s analysis identifies a problem at the level of the grammar of enunciation, i.e. the relationship (that fails to be) created between the subjects of enunciation (“I” and “you”). She shows us the hysteric and the obsessive in a scene of enunciation in which neither speaks to the other (Irigaray 2004, 37). The obsessive’s speech is insular and self-referential, while the hysterics speech too refers only to the other. In neither case can discourse occur.

*Men and women’s discourse.* Irigaray suggests that the difference between obsessives and hysterics parallels a difference between men’s speech and women’s speech within a phallocentric economy of discourse (Irigaray 2004, 36). Discourse in phallocentric culture takes place between men-obsessives and women-hysterics. In conversation with one another, we can see that not only would they not have a reciprocal back and forth between equal parties, but that both utterances refer back to a single
(male) subject. The obsessive (man) does not relate to the hysterical (woman) as if she were another subject, and the hysterical’s (woman’s) speech is derivative of, or supplemental to, the obsessive's (man’s) speech insofar as her speech refers only to the other subject.

Irigaray diagnoses the entirety of western culture as consisting of hysterics (women) and obsessives (men). Irigaray’s analogy might strike us as tenuous. However, Irigaray (2004) and her colleagues have carried out linguistic analyses of women, men, girls, and boys and have found evidence that the characteristic ways of speaking attributed to hysterics and obsessives in fact track differences in gender across different languages (37). Irigaray does not claim that all women use these “hysteric” utterances all of the time. Rather, women and girls more often speak like hysterics, whereas men more often speak like obsessives.

Irigaray is not the only linguist to acknowledge differences in men’s and women’s language and discourse. Although some authors contest the empirical evidence of such differences, one meta-analysis attempting to correct for methodological variance supports the notion that women and men use language differently, (although these differences vary depending upon the task in which participants are engaged) (Newman et al. 2007). Other scholars have focused more on the ways in which language produces gendered subjects (see, for example, Cameron 1992, Fenstermaker and West 2002, and Speer 2005).

Insofar as Irigaray claims that discourse between women and men is indicative of an inequality in subject capacities and social status, she understands that hierarchal structures are not necessarily the result of intentional action. Tannen (1990) agrees that we cannot reduce an analysis of these differences to intentional acts of domination (18).
Some commentators often see Deborah Tannen as the spokeswoman of “difference approach,” which claims that differences between women’s and men’s conversational styles are merely a difference—unrelated to relations of power (see, for example, Gibbon 1999, Ch. 7). However, Tannen (1994) understands her own work as part of a tradition of linguistic research grounded in critical theory and she is very clear that power plays an important role in her analysis of language. Irigaray also acknowledges the productive power of language—we find parallels to her approach in the work of other feminist linguistics. For example, Robin Lackoff’s (1975) *Language and Women’s Place* provided a radical feminist analysis of gender and language and spurred what has come to be known as the “dominance approach” in feminist linguistics.

The study of politeness is the aspect of discourse analysis that best highlights both the power differential in conversations between women and men, as well as the way in which discourse (re)produces these unequal structures at the level of subjects. Gibbon (1999) suggests that women’s politeness serves men’s “face,” i.e. their “need to be liked and admired and need not to be imposed upon.” (133) That is, politeness is a form of subservience, and women tend to take up this position in relation more often than men. As we noted in relation to men’s unequal privileges, other factors (i.e. race, class, sexuality, disability, etc.) play a role in determining our relative positions within discourse. For example, women might be less likely to be polite to men who otherwise occupy an “inferior” social position. Mills (2003) argues that we cannot make sweeping generalizations about men and women’s politeness, because politeness takes place in specific interactions and is a tool for negotiating gendered environments. However, the gendered environments that we negotiate call on women to be polite to men more often
than the reverse. Gibbon (1999) rightly argues that women’s politeness is an expression of their lack of power relative to men.

However, Gibbon misses the deeper point about what women enact in being polite and the effect of this enactment. Women’s deference shifts the focus from their own subjectivity to men’s subjectivity (i.e. needs, sense of control, independence, etc.). Robin Lackoff (1973), albeit in a different context, sums up the effect of women’s politeness: “The personal identity of women thus is linguistically submerged; the language works against treatment of women, as serious persons with individual views.”

In catering to men’s face, women’s politeness bestows subject privileges upon men. While women acknowledge men’s needs, they also undermine their own subjectivity, i.e. women prioritize men’s needs over their own. That is, women “submerge” their own subjectivity to help men express theirs.

These deferential strategies parallel the grammar of the hysterics utterances. In both cases, subjectivity rests more fully or more firmly not with the speaker but with her interlocutor. Women take up this “hysteric” position within discourse in many (although not all) of their relationships with men. Women’s role in discourse, in part, seems to consist in bestowing subject privileges upon men while simultaneously undermining their own subjectivity, thereby contributing to the production of men-subject and women-objects.

Further, we can see in the particular structures of this economy how the production of men-subjects depends upon and therefore necessitates the production of women-objects. The scene of enunciation between women and men—ideally a reciprocal relation between two subjects—often only includes one subject. Because the obsessive
speaks as a subject, he takes up his subjectivity through language in a way that the hysterical does not. The hysterical (woman) does not enact her subjectivity through the exercise of language and her existence within this scene remains not only impoverished, but also secondary to and reliant upon the other’s existence as a subject.

Further, the kind of subject that arises out of this particular grammar of enunciation is one that is primarily narcissistic/obsessive. This subject relies upon the absence of another subject (and particularly the absence of women as subjects) to sustain itself in its self-referential bubble. This subject has to engage in discourse in such a way that maintains a blind spot where women as subject might otherwise exist. That is, many of the subject privileges men receive through discourse necessitate women’s subordination. A parallel dependency exists in another aspect of women’s constitution—men and women’s erotic relationships.

b. Phallocentric Economy of Desire

Broadly speaking, the economy of desire refers to the “exchange” of desire and pleasure and the “use” of bodies for the production of pleasure and satisfaction of desire. Irigaray draws our attention to dominant features of this economy, which we can characterize as phallocentric sexuality. Phallocentric sexuality involves a teleological notion of desire (in that desire that aims at an object and aims to be relieved of tension); and a binary framework such that active desire attaches to primarily to masculine subjects and women’s bodies play the role of the “objects of desire.” Sexual relationships that function within the parameters of a phallocentric sexuality also constitute men as subjects insofar as its modes of erotic relating confirm men’s sexual agency.
These two modes of relating simultaneously undermine women’s sexual agency. Phallocentric sexuality does require minimal sexual agency on women’s part, (i.e. experience pleasure and pain, express likes and dislikes, and perform sexual techniques). However, to the extent that women do express sexual agency within the confines of phallocentric sexuality, their sexual agency references men’s sexual agency and men’s pleasure. That is, in tandem with the economy of discourse, the phallocentric economy of desire subordinates women by casting them in a subservient role that limits the expression and development of their subject capacities. Insofar as women function as diminished sites of subjectivity and serve male desire and pleasure, women are “objects” within the phallocentric economy of desire.

Because the economy of desire functions according to a binary logic, the structure of the economy of desire only allows only two options for women and men, and precludes any alternative sexuality (including but not limited to modes of heterosexuality, bisexuality, homosexuality, or asexuality). This economy limits sites of subjectivity that would express modes of desire and sexuality other than these two options, as well as those sites of subjectivity that would express and live out as yet unexplored alternatives.

The phallocentric economy of desire limits a woman’s subjectivity by working to bar her access to existing as a subject of libido and by limiting her possibilities for expressing herself as a subject of desire. Only two options exist within this economy for sites of erotic subjectivity: a masculine libido or an atrophied, subordinated feminine sexuality. Neither option permits for the expression of a feminine desire or sexuality.

We find a similar line of reasoning in the radical, American feminism of Catherine MacKinnon. For MacKinnon (1989) women’s existence in a patriarchal culture
amounts to little more than a fetishized commodity—a body-object for the projection of male sexual fantasies (123). Thus, she claims, “A women is identified as a being who identifies and is identified as one whose sexuality exists for someone else, who is socially male. What is termed women's sexuality is the capacity to arouse desire in that someone.” (119) MacKinnon, like Irigaray, raises the question of the very possibility of an authentic feminine sexuality within a masculine economy of desire.

While noting the similarity between their projects, MacKinnon remains critical of Irigaray’s analysis: “Luce Irigaray's critique of Freud in Speculum of the Other Woman acutely shows how Freud constructs sexuality from the male point of view, with woman as deviation from the norm. But she, too, sees female sexuality not as constructed by male dominance but only repressed under it.” (280 n.10) Here MacKinnon lumps Irigaray in with some other “contemporary French feminist theorists […] who do not problematize desire as such, but rather its repression, not seeing either that its determinants are gendered or that its so-called repression is essential to its existence as they know it.” (251 n.1) MacKinnon’s criticism consists of two points: First, Irigaray (and others) fail to understand feminine sexuality as constructed through relations of dominance. Second, this failure amounts to a problematization of the repression of feminine sexuality within a phallocentric culture, rather than a critique of feminine sexuality. For MacKinnon any repressed feminine sexuality can only ever appear as a derivative and subordinate variation on masculine sexuality. Sexuality as such is the problem.

An Irigarayian response would need to reference the temporality of feminine sexuality as a not-yet-existent possibility for women’s bodily pleasure as means of
moving beyond the repression/liberation dichotomy within which MacKinnon’s criticism functions. The pervasiveness of phallocentric sexuality warrants MacKinnon’s caution: Any attempt to redefine or recreate feminine *jouissance* will take place under the threat of being recaptured by and reappropriated to a phallocentric economy. However, as we will see below, Irigaray’s analysis of sexuality within a phallocentric economy remains critical of the way in which women’s sexuality has been constructed as derivative of and subordinate to men’s sexuality. Further, Irigaray characterizes feminine sexuality or *jouissance* as something that does not yet exist. She calls on women not to liberate their sexuality, but to create it anew (I elaborate on this point in Chapter 3).

### i. Psychoanalysis

Irigaray’s critique of the economy of desire relies on psychoanalytic theory. Irigaray (1985b) offers a brief overview of approaches to psychoanalysis (34-67). However, the extensive critique she offers in *Speculum* (1985a) as well as sections of *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985b) focus exclusively on Freud and Lacan. Her criticism parallels her comments on the phallocentric economy of representation: “Up to this point, the main concepts of psychoanalysis, its theory, will have taken no account of woman’s desire [...] . For their ways are too narrowly derived from the history and the historicization of (so-called) male sexuality.” (Irigaray 1985a, 55) Irigaray’s claim is that theories of desire have not even begun to think about women’s desire. These theorists have thought about masculine desire and men’s sexual development. Therefore, on these models, sexual desire, or the libido, is understood as masculine (Irigaray 1996, 134). Because they have taken this andocentric approach, women’s desire does not exist as a
possibility within these theories, i.e. remains a “blind spot.” The very notion of a “female libido” has no meaning within these classic psychoanalytic theories (Irigaray 1985a, 43).

Therapeutic practice grounds psychoanalytic theory—both in the sense that practice informs theory and that theory informs practice. Therefore, these theories are, on the one hand, descriptions of men and women’s sexuality and sexual development, and, on the other hand, techniques for treating patients and, in particular, guiding their sexual development. That is, psychoanalytic theory both describes a certain “truth” about bodies, desire, and relationships, and exerts forces through therapeutic practice that (re)shape the “truth” of bodies, desire, and relationships.

As both a developmental theory and as practices of therapeutic treatment, we can understand psychoanalysis (and by extension the economy of desire that psychoanalytic theory describes and of which it is a part) as a process that constitutes sites of subjectivity as subjects of desire. Therefore, to say that women’s sexuality or desire has received inadequate theoretical elaboration within psychoanalysis suggest that psychoanalysis both describes and contributes to an existent and dynamic economy of desire that excludes women’s desire—not only “in theory”—but also in practice. That is, by putting into practice a theory in which women’s sexuality figures as a “blind spot,” psychoanalytic practice becomes a process for “realizing” that ideational denial.

According to both Freud, there is a direct positive relationship between existing as a desiring (i.e. masculine) subject and having access to the social sphere as a subject. For Freud, identification with the father is a necessary stage in the boy’s development—a step that is necessary for taking on a role in the public sphere. In this way, the processes
formative of subjects of desire are also process of subject formation understood more generally.

Women’s movement to “adult sexuality,” in contrast, requires a loss of autoeroticism and a genuinely feminine pleasure and hence loss of social subject capacities. First, women’s (clitoral) autoeroticism is suppressed and replaced by a “mature” (vaginal) pleasure reliant upon man/the penis (Irigaray 1985b, 63-67). Women’s sexuality is reduced to a (maternal) “function”; the vagina is interpreted as a “sheath” for the penis and the womb as a place for the (male) child. So that, for example, the little girl is said to experience her genitals as a castration, an absence of penis, rather than in positive terms (Irigaray 1985b, 39). This experience leads to “a virtually total repression of [the little girl’s] sexual instincts.” (Irigaray 1985a, 63) Understood as a part of the process of subject formation, women’s role in this process of sexual development also exerts a force on her social role: if her “desire” is to mother a (male) child, then we could understand motherhood (along with marriage) and the related demands and pressures as women’s “natural” course of social development. Further, the little girl’s identification with the mother and her sexual relationship with the masculine perpetuates these social structures.

Continental psychoanalytic theory, as Irigaray conceives it, produces phallocentric subjects, on the one hand, and desire-less women, on the other hand. The absence of female desire suggests a diminished sexual agency. Further, psychoanalysis fails to treat women as sites of subjectivity, both in its theoretical treatment of “female

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8 We could understand this in terms of Miranda Fricker’s (2007) notion of epistemic injustice: because a concept does not exist for women’s desire, women are ill-served by the conceptual framework at play in contemporary Western culture.
desire” and in its therapeutic treatment of female patients. But Irigaray’s critique of psychoanalysis focuses narrowly on the work of Freud and Lacan, and does not extend to other psychological therapeutic practices. To show that phallocentric sexuality pervades our culture requires that we cast a broader net. To this end I want to turn to a discussion of the techniques of phallocentric sexuality as exemplified in popular “how to” guides to sex.

ii. Knowledge and Technique

Here, I will argue that the phallocentric sexual economy subordinates women by using women’s pleasure for the production of men’s pleasure. The production of men’s pleasure requires the application of sexual techniques. These techniques can produce pleasure in women. However, this production of pleasure ultimately serves men’s pleasure. Women’s pleasure plays only an instrumental, or secondary, role. Also, women’s role in this production of pleasure is primarily passive. That is, the techniques of phallocentric sexuality do not engage women as active, imaginative, desiring subjects. Further, by disengaging with women as subjects the techniques of phallocentric sexuality limit women’s possibilities for expressing their subjectivity.

According to Irigaray, phallocentric sexuality employs “techniques of pleasure” to produce pleasure (Irigaray 1985b, 199). We see evidence of this technical approach to sexuality in self-help and relationship guides, popular magazines and television shows. A recent issue of Cosmopolitan (2012) advertises: “The sex moves he’s begging for you to try” and “The naughty orgasm trick couples love.” The Men’s Health (2012) website offers tips on how to “last longer in bed” and perform oral sex on women. We are all familiar with this kind of popular “how to” guide that decorates the checkout lanes of
every grocery store and drug store in Canada and the United States. The proliferation of “how to” guides on sex and sexuality in popular culture are the product of increasingly liberal attitudes towards sex and sexuality. Generally speaking, these liberal attitudes are preferable to the conservatism and sexual repression that characterized past decades. But the tips and tricks of the “how to” guide are also the product of a model of sexuality that does not extend beyond the application of techniques for the production of pleasure—that is, a phallocentric model of sexuality.

Further, the currency of these techniques is male pleasure. There are clearly techniques that specifically target men’s pleasure (ex. “Sex positions he’ll love!”). But there are also techniques that seem most obviously to aim for women’s pleasure—which also work to increase men’s pleasure. Here, men’s pleasure comes from the knowledge and mastery inherent in the application of techniques. The phallocentric model of sexuality allows the practitioner to collect his “premium in sexual pleasure from […] knowledge.” (Irigaray 1985b, 200) Men derive pleasure from the knowledge they gain about women’s bodies and sexuality, which they can use to refine their techniques, as well as the social capital (pride, ego, reputation) that men gain from applying these techniques. The pleasure that comes from both knowledge and prestige stems from the mastery that these sexual techniques allow. Through practicing these techniques men can make women cum—and in doing so men can take control of women’s sexuality. Within the phallocentric sexual economy the control of women (and in particular the control of women’s pleasure) itself becomes a site of men’s pleasure.

I do not mean to suggest that men never have a genuine motivation to provide women with a pleasurable sexual experience. Rather, these “genuine” motivations do not
tend to exclude the kind of pleasure in knowledge and mastery that Irigaray brings to our attention. Further, as we will see in the following chapter, we cannot limit our analysis to men’s explicit and conscious motivations, because women’s subjectivity is already absent from the cultural frame in which men act upon these motivations.

The phallocentric sexuality does not leave women completely without the pleasure of sexual agency. However, “the techniques for pleasure [in phallocentric sexuality] have hardly been suited [...] for women’s pleasure.” (Irigaray 1985b, 199-200) For example, women’s pleasure is not altogether absent from the production of pornography. Irigaray (1985b) acknowledges that women do find pleasure in the phallocentric sexuality of pornography, if only because women are “gifted” (200).

Irigaray explains away the apparent tension in a sexual economy not “suited” to women in which women nevertheless do find pleasure in this way: “Obviously, it is possible for a woman to use the phallic model of sexual pleasure and there’s no lack of men or pornographers to tell women that they can achieve extraordinary sexual pleasure within that phallic economy.” (Irigaray 1993b, 20) However, she adds: “That a woman has one, two, ten or twenty orgasms, to the point of complete exhaustion (lassata sed non satiata?), does not mean that she takes pleasure in her pleasure.” (Irigaray 1985b, 199)

The techniques of phallocentric sexuality produce orgasms in women; that is their goal.

Irigaray is not claiming that women do not enjoy these sexual experiences, but rather that phallocentric sexuality does not engage women as desiring subjects. Women experience jouissance, or sexual pleasure, within the economy of desire. However, Irigaray claims, there is another jouissance "more in keeping with their bodies and their sex [...]" (1991b, 45) In part, the difference between these two kinds of sexual pleasure
depends upon women’s activity, or subjectivity—that is, whether women experience pleasure passively or actively participate in the creation of their pleasure. That is, in a phallocentric sexual economy women do not take an active role in the production of their own pleasure. Rather, masculine techniques produce women’s pleasure, techniques which figure women in a functional role and not as desiring sites of subjectivity. Irigaray’s use of “jouisser” attempts to capture an active aspect of women’s proper jouissance. Irigaray points out that women’s experience lacks the active verb (jouisser). Activity or agency—whether in thought, language, speech, imagination, or desire—is the key feature of subjectivity. The distinction between an active and a passive role names the absence of women’s subjectivity in the phallocentric sexual economy.

Because phallocentric sexuality aims at male pleasure derived from the control of women’s sexuality through the application of techniques, it subordinates women. Women’s role in the relationship is one of an intermediary. Men use women’s bodies and pleasure to produce their own (i.e. male) pleasure. Because phallocentric sexual does not value women’s pleasure for itself, because it subordinates women’s pleasure to man’s pleasure and because it seeks to control women’s sexuality, the fundamental relationship of phallocentric sexuality is a hierarchy that subordinates women. Capacities to experience bodily pleasure and express sexual desire are key characteristics of a site of subjectivity. Thus, phallocentric sexuality undermines and limits women’s subjectivity.

Again, we see that men’s privilege comes through women’s loss of subjectivity. Where sexuality serves men’s desire and agency, as well as their social standing, the economy of desire bestows subject privileges on men. Further, where theories and
practices of sexuality or popular culture subordinate women’s desire and agency to men’s upkeep, the economy of desire purchases privileges for men at the expense of women.

c. The Reciprocity of Subordination and Privilege

Women’s relationship to discourse and desire plays a double role of undermining their subjectivity and building up that of men. Both the phallocentric economy of discourse, and the phallocentric economy of desire, function to subordinate women. Each, in their own way, limits the possibilities for women to express their subjectivity and creates social conditions in which women are not viewed or treated as subjects. Thus women have fewer chances to develop their capacities.

Men’s privileges consist in the relatively unconstrained ability to express themselves as linguistic and sexual subjects. Men can hold forth and ought to be listened to; men’s sexual objectification and subordination of women is not only accepted, but also touted as the exemplary model of sexual behavior. Further, men can be subjects without having any concern for women’s “face” or sexual needs. Men need not subordinate their behavior to another’s needs or make themselves vulnerable to another’s demands in the same way that women must.

To the extent that women’s subjectivity does make an appearance within these economies it serves to support men’s subjectivity and its expression in discourse and desire. Women treat men as subjects and relate to men in ways that confirm their subject privileges within a phallocentric order. Thus, we see that women’s subordinate role in these processes is necessary to the production of men as subjects. That is, we cannot reproduce phallocentric (read: masculine) subjects, unless we also produce women as limited sites of subjectivity.
Finally, in the above examples, we have seen that women’s “constitution as an object” takes place in relationships of language and desire. This constitution takes place within the social and is not some extra-social process that performs sites of subjectivity as “subjects” and “objects” which then enter unto the social scene. These processes (i.e. the social) consist of (competing) forces (images, language, laws, concrete relationships with other subjects, institutional structures, material barriers) that blame or praise, disenfranchise or empower, limit, or open possibilities for sites of subjectivity. Sites of subjectivity express, or fail to express, their subjectivity within the social.

Therefore, we can see that the processes that use women as objects to produce masculine subjects are also the processes through which women come to figure as objects within the social. We can distinguish between an ideational denial that conditions the possibility of women’s constitution as objects and a constitution as an object that conditions women’s position within the social (and the subsequent treatment they receive there). However, we need to take care not to think of these as stages in a movement as a causal story: ideational denial causes women’s constitution as objects which, in turn, causes treatment. Rather, these are all aspects of an ongoing process in which the framework is already in place. Each interaction between a woman and a man contributes to this perpetual “constitution” such that the processes continually reproduce their own structures.

Further these constitutions are reciprocal. Men’s constitution as subject and women’s constitution as objects are two aspects of the same set of processes. These processes bestow subject privileges upon men through structures that necessitate a limitation of women’s subjectivity. Women’s subjectivity is not completely non-existent.
But relationships between women and men function for the most part to limit women’s subjectivity, rather than act as sites for the development of both women’s and men’s subjectivities. While both women and men form only limited subjectivities, men are much more likely to function as subjects. Finally, that functional subjectivity depends upon the limitations of women’s subjectivity. Thus, processes of constitution purchase men’s privilege at the expense of women’s expression and experience of their subjectivity. In the following section, we will see how this constitution fits women and men for specific roles in broader social relations of exchange and use, which further women’s subordination.

IV. Exploitation

The economies of desire and discourse constitute women as objects such that they can be used by and exchanged among subjects within the phallocentric political economy. As limited sites of subjectivity women enter a *political economy* that exploits women. *Exploitation* refers to the *use and exchange* of women’s bodies that limits women’s subjectivity. At the material end of the spectrum, women’s bodies are bought and sold through prostitution, and exploited for reproduction and physical and emotional labor.

I use the term “prostitution” throughout my analysis to refer to any transaction in which sex is exchanged for money. This includes both legitimate forms of sex work as well as exploitative forms of sexual slavery. So in this case, prostitution is a more general term. Also, Irigaray’s analysis (and subsequently my own) focuses on important differences between pornography and prostitution, which the more generic term “sex work” would confuse. Finally, sex work focuses on the work of prostitution and
pornography, while my analysis draws attention to men’s role in using these “services”. Specifically, men’s pornography use has relatively little to do with sex work.

Because women have already been subordinated (through devaluation and subjection) they can be further subordinated through material relations of exploitation. It would seem that the ideal conditions the material aspects of subordination. But Irigaray claims that the role that women’s bodies play within these economies of exploitation is the condition for (phallocentric) culture. So, the material also conditions the ideal. We cannot commit Irigaray to a causal explanation. Rather, she is describing women’s subordination as an already existing, on-going process in which the material and ideal conditions continually reinforce one another.

**a. Functional Roles and Commodities**

Irigaray identifies three functional roles for women in the phallocentric political economy. These functional roles are: virgin, mother, and prostitute. These “functional roles” limit women’s opportunities to develop and express their subjectivity. Given the examples of women’s subordination we saw in the previous chapter, it is not surprising that there are either few positions available to girls and women, or those positions do not necessarily allow for the expression of women’s subjectivity. Furthermore, Irigaray suggests that the three functional roles available to women are inextricably linked. They are linked because they exert competing pressures, or double binds. A double bind consists in contradictory prescriptions for behavior, such that meeting one necessarily entails failing to meet the other. Thus, even seemingly correct behavior can be met with condemnation or punishment. Marilyn Frye (1983) elaborates the importance of double binds for the functioning of women’s oppression. Below, I turn to the ways in which we
can understand double binds from an Irigarayan perspective. Here, I focus specifically on the ways in which the regulatory structures of the phallocentric political economy value and order all women and their relationships.

Women’s functional roles in the phallocentric political economy are more than just an ordinal set of social values used to judge and rank women. The phallocentric political economy is a material-economic system—a literal exchange of women’s bodies (as virgins, wives, and prostitutes).

In our social order, women are “products” used and exchanged by men. Their status is that of merchandise, “commodities.” […] The use, consumption, and circulation of their sexualized bodies underwrite the organization and the reproduction of the social order, in which they have never taken part as “subjects.” Women are thus in a situation of specific exploitation with respect to exchange operations: sexual exchanges, but also economic, social, and cultural exchanges. A woman “enters into” these exchanges only as the object of a transaction […]” (Irigaray 1985b, 84-85)

This is the meaning of “functional role”: Within the phallocentric political economy women fulfill the role of commodity in an exchange among men. Even via a more traditional understanding of economy as an exchange of goods, as production of surplus value, woman is a commodity (Irigaray 1985b). Men partake in the trade of women, as sex slaves and prostitutes, but also as wives.

Women’s value within this economy stems from their role in production (of male status and sexual desire) and reproduction (of feminine bodies to fill functional roles and masculine subjects to use these bodies). The dominance of the anatomical model
understands the masculine and the feminine solely in relation to their role in the economy of sexual intercourse and reproduction:

It must surely be concluded that up to this point the element defined as both specific to each and common to both sexes involves nothing but a process of reproduction and production. And that it is as a function of the way they participate in this economy that one will with certainty label some male and others female. (Irigaray 1985a, 14)

That is, if women even come have a position it is as a womb and as a mother (Irigaray 1985a, 75). The phallocentric political economy understands the “wife” in terms of a reproductive-maternal function, i.e. as the “mother”. The pressure faced by and stigma attached to childless women speaks to this fact (see Ireland 1993). These positions determine women’s value (social, economic, logical, and ethical) within this economy. However, in all these, women’s value is derivative of the value of the men. Women are particular objects and their value as these objects determines the social meaning of their bodies. This economy in which all women participate codes her genitals as reproductive organs, not as a source of pleasure. Women have little meaning beyond these functions. Thus, women’s specific position in this economy dictates their relationship to their own bodies as well as to children and to men. As practice, this has the effect of keeping women within the home (pregnant, lactating, and looking after both children and men). Within the phallocentric political economy, women are primarily ova and wombs, wives and mothers.

Irigaray continues: “As commodities, women are thus two things at once: utilitarian objects and bearers of value.” (Irigaray 1985b, 175, original emphasis) As
bearers of value commodities have an exchange value, and, as utilitarian objects commodities have a use value. Whether an individual woman aligns more with object or value will depend upon whether she fills the function role of virgin, mother, or prostitute. We can understand the virgin is pure exchange value, while the mother is pure use value.

The prostitute combines both exchange and use as a “usage that is exchanged.” (Irigaray 1985b, 186) Men exchange money (and drugs) for the use of women’s bodies and services. Women and girls are literally bought and sold in part of a multi-billion dollar global trade. We can see this clearly in the case of sex workers whose exchange often takes place between men (i.e. johns and pimps), and most acutely in the case of victims of human trafficking. As of 2005, the United Nations estimated “the total market value of illicit human trafficking at 32 billion dollars US.” (UNDOC 2010)

In the following chapter I expand upon Irigaray’s critique of prostitution and her related critique of pornography insofar as they exemplify men’s unintentional and indirect contributions to women’s subordination. For the present discussion, I would like to focus on the less obvious examples of the mother and the virgin. I also suggest that these functional roles interlock in such a way as to create a series of contradictory pressures, or double binds, upon women. This means that a feminist analysis cannot ignore any of these functional roles, and the interrelated nature of women’s functional roles is an important feature of Irigaray’s analysis. I conclude by describing in more detail men’s privilege in relation to women’s functional roles within a phallocentric political economy.

a. Mother
We can readily understand the “mother” as a functional role within a male-dominated social order. “Mothers are essential to [the social order’s] (re)production (particularly inasmuch as they are [re]productive of children and of the labor force: through maternity, child-rearing, and domestic maintenance in general.)” (Irigaray 1985b, 185) Women make babies, raise children, and maintain the home in which this production takes place. That is, women’s bodies maintain a system of reproduction that underlies the political economy. I am not claiming that maternal experience cannot be meaningful for women or that feminine subjectivity must exclude any relation to the maternity. Rather, I am claiming that the phallocentric political economy strips women of their subjectivity when the phallocentric political economy understands maternity only in relation to a male subject and when it understands women only in relation to maternity.

Irigaray points out that the real problem with marriage, and relationships between women and men more generally, is that the erotic has been reduced to reproduction: “Our […] tradition has even taught us that is forbidden or futile to be lovers unless there is procreation […]” (Irigaray 1993a, 30) Elsewhere, she suggests that a family founded on the relationships between a mother, a father, and a child corrupts the more fundamental relationship between a woman and a man:

In this type of family organization, the commitment made between an adult man and woman to live together on a long-term basis, in mutual respect, becomes blurred in the face of the subjection of the man, the woman, and the child to the necessities of natural reproduction, itself subjected to the imperatives of the reproduction of society, of the State. (Irigaray 2002b, 106)
The subordination to procreation limits each of the members of the family. However, it is women’s bodies that figure most centrally in the economy of reproduction and rearing of offspring for the maintenance of the state. Therefore, women’s limitation is most pronounced. The role that women in particular play within Western culture—as womb and caregiver—undermines the possibilities for fruitful, loving relationships between women and men. These are relationships in which women’s desire, and subjectivity more generally, play a more central role. In other words, women’s functional role of wife and mother limits women’s subjectivity.

In order to maintain the social order and their status within that order, men must cover over their reliance upon nature/women. The public circulation of “mothers” would make their fundamental role explicit and threaten men’s dominance. This might explain the negative attitudes towards public breastfeeding and the pressure for women to return to work—and the praise women get for losing their “baby weight” after childbirth. If society were forced to acknowledge its fundamental dependence upon maternal bodies and women’s labor for civil society not just nature, then there would be good reason to challenge women’s subordinated status within that society. It is only by maintaining an illusion of women as inconsequential for the workings of the public sphere that men can continue to hold sway there.

Women’s historical status as chattel and valorization of that status, i.e. as the perfect mother/housewife, is integral to the cover-up. Mothers are private property and as such are kept off the market. Wives are no longer traded, although the concept of “wife swapping” (and the absence of a reciprocal notion of “husband swapping”) hints at

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women’s status as commodities among men. Becoming a wife marks a woman’s status as no longer “on the market,” although she still is subject to the standards of age, beauty, and sexuality. That is, becoming a wife is just one functional role in which women can live out their subordinated status within the phallocentric political economy.

Despite being “off the market” the role of the mother/wife underwrites the entire political economy and phallocentric culture more generally. For example, women contribute to the political economy through the unpaid or underpaid domestic labor that they carry out both in their own homes and in the homes of others. In most cases this labor is 'invisible': the market does not account for its value. Ann Crittenden (2002) points to the way in which the family and the global economy are “free riding” off of women’s “invisible labor” as mothers and “house wives”. We can put a dollar amount on some aspects of ‘women's work’, for example, what it costs to have a shirt cleaned and pressed, or have meals prepared—those activities that sustain men in their role as subjects in the public sphere. For example, the value unpaid housework in Canada in 1994 was estimated at $318 billion. (L'Hirondelle 2004) A staggering figure. Selma James’ International Wages for Housework Campaign was an attempt to not only account for women’s contributions, but to pay women for their work.

When we try to account for the value of women’s contributions to society, a difficulty arises because this labor plays such a fundamental role in the functioning, not only of the political economy, but also of society in general. This kind of accounting becomes increasingly abstract and speculative in the face of particular aspects of women's domestic roles: childbirth and child rearing. Patriarchy uses women's maternal function, i.e. the reproductive capacity of the female body, to create and educate citizens,
workers, and soldiers, who in turn perpetuate the oppressive relations of the society they are born into. This goes beyond an economic value and an economic function.

The mother/wife, in her role as domestic laborer and producer of children, sustains the continuance of not only financial exchange, but also patriarchal society more generally. The production of bodies to take up roles as men and women within society relies upon women’s reproductive capacities. More specifically the production of phallocentric subjects (i.e. men who benefit from subject privileges) relies upon women’s functional role as womb, childcare provider, and domestic servant.

Although seeking compensation for women’s invisible labor is important for countering economic inequalities built into the gendered division of labor, estimating the value of creating citizens, soldiers, and workers, as well as the next generation of women-wombs, becomes untenable. The idea that we could compensate women financially for the ways in which society exploits their bodies borders on nonsense, because most of women’s contributions as mothers and wives exceed a simple accounting. As we will see in Chapter five, we need a model of justice that goes beyond the confines of compensation to begin to adequately address these aspects of women’s subordination.

b. Virgin

Despite the fact that the mother’s role is “off the market” women do have a place on the market (other than as prostitutes). Irigaray (1985b) argues that a trade in virginal women lies at the heart of the male-dominated social order. The virgin, unlike the mother, is not useful. Her value does not lie in her (re)productive function. Rather, her value is purely one of exchange relative to some economic standard. Virginal women are exchanged among men and this exchange determines the virgin’s value. “She is nothing
but the possibility, the place, the sign of relations among men.” (Irigaray 1985b, 186)
The value of virgin remains abstract and removed from the messy reality of the
reproductive function that ultimately underlies this value. “In this sense, her natural body
disappears into its representative function.” (Irigaray 1985b, 186) In fact, her status as
virgin depends upon the absence of her body and a prohibition against any use of her
body that would affect that status. On the one hand, sex “ruins” a virgin by referring back
to her body and its uses. On the other hand, the virgin is most sexually desirable and has a
value in relation to men’s sexuality.

According to this line of analysis, through marriage, and the consummation of
marriage, the “virgin” transitions directly to “mother.” Blood marks this transition from
exchange value to use value. “Red blood remains on the mother’s side, but it has not
price, as such, in the social order […]. Once deflowered, woman is relegated to the status
of use value, to her entrapment in private property; she is removed from exchange among
men.” (1985b, 186) The ceremony of wedding or consummation changes both the
woman’s status, and also the meaning of her body. This return of the woman’s body in
place of the virgin takes the virgin off the market. Thus, qua virgin women’s sole
function and value is in relation to an exchange between men abstracted from any use.

c. Double Binds

It is not the case that every woman is only a virgin, a mother, or a prostitute.
Sexual liberation furnishes an example. In many contemporary Western societies, women
openly have sexual relationships outside of marriage. There is some room for women’s
sexuality beyond the confines of the virgin-mother dichotomy. For example, another
position of the “sexually liberated woman” has been emerging over the last 50 years. I do
not intend to suggest that women’s sexual liberty first came into existence beginning in the 1960’s. A history of women’s sexuality and sexual freedom would prove much more complicated. In place of a story of traditions of repression and a newfound freedom, we would probably find a complex network of repressions and freedoms at work in any particular time, which would take shape in relation to structures of racism and classism, as well as changes in religious and scientific thinking. Accordingly the “sexually liberated woman” is a position available to white, middle-class women—just as the “teen mom” generally only includes working-class women and in particular women of color.

Yet despite the fact that women’s social situation is changing, the dominant functional roles of virgin, mother, and prostitute continue to place widespread, competing, and often contradictory, demands on most women. For example, women’s worker status is still often tied to their status as mothers or potential mothers. Prospective employers, friends, and even strangers will ask women who work whether they will give up their job for their children or how they will balance their maternal duties with the demands of their job. Husbands and other family members will often (either explicitly, or implicitly) expect their working wives to also bear, nurse, and raise children—and even abandon or neglect their career to do so. So, insofar as women’s “worker” status challenges the dominant position of mother, it is also largely determined in relation to this position, such that many women face a mother-worker double bind.

Despite women’s increased freedoms, they still face pressure to conform to the functional roles of virgin and mother or to be invisible insofar as they refuse to. Even when women achieve seemingly high social status, for example, as politicians, the public discourse judges these women in terms of their age, physical beauty, sexiness, and
reproductive-maternal role. We have seen this in the media coverage of, for example, Princess Diana, Hillary Clinton, Sarah Palin, Belinda Stronach, and others. Broadly speaking women’s sexual freedom has increased and attitudes towards women’s sexuality have relaxed. Yet, as we saw in the empirical examples of sexual harassment and assault, and women’s images in the media in the introduction, women continue to face a sexual double bind: Men continue to demand sexual access to women and at the same time condemn women for being promiscuous.

As with all aspects of women’s subordination, we can find exceptions. The phallocentric political economy, and the meanings that it attributes to women as “virgin”, “mother”, or “whore”, do not exhaust women’s meanings in society. But there are dominant, connected forces that work to apply these meanings to women. For example, there are women who try to be mothers and also have a career or men who try to share the burden of domestic chores and childcare duties. But these alternative arrangements are not the norm. And such arrangements meet with resistance from the practices, values, and concepts that shape pressures and expectations all women face regarding if, when, and how they will have and raise children. For example, Ireland (1993) illustrates the pressure women face vis-à-vis motherhood in her discussion of the pressures childless women face. These forces both coerce women to conform to functional roles, and at the same time punish women for not meeting competing demands to fulfill other contradictory roles.

d. Purchasing Subject Privileges

The structures of use and exchange that rely upon women’s functional roles maintain men’s subject privilege. Men act as subjects within this economy, rather than
merely fulfilling a role. Rather than being used, exchanged, and trapped between contradictory demands, men use, exchange, and determine the meanings and demands associated with, women’s bodies, and in ways that coordinate to confirm their subjectivity. Men of all ages (including many boys) have access to women’s bodies for sexual pleasure and reproductive functions. Men exchange women as prostitutes and virgins, and reap the financial benefits of women’s labor. And men are the arbiters of the double binds that affect women. That is, men decide when a woman will pass as a sexually liberated woman or a career woman and when she will be chastised for being too promiscuous or for neglecting her motherly/wifely duties.

Women fulfill functional roles, which by definition are subordinate to the role of subjects, and men fulfill subject roles in relation to women’s functional roles. In addition to providing a backing for the continuation of phallocentric society in general (i.e. by producing and caring for children), women’s functional role also helps maintain men’s subject privileges. On the one hand, insofar as women remain within functional roles they will not threaten men’s dominance of those aspects of life reserved for subjects, for example, roles in the public sphere. On the other hand, women’s functional roles are a condition of possibility for men’s role as subjects. Maintaining the structures of exploitation also maintains men’s role. In other words, men’s role as subjects within a phallocentric political economy, and society more generally, requires women’s exploitation. In the aspects of women’s subordination we have referred to as exploitation, women’s bodies and labor quite literally purchase men’s subject privileges. And the functional roles through which women make this purchase limit women’s subjectivity. That is, the purchase costs women their subjectivity just as it gains men theirs.
V. Men’s Privilege

Through an explication of devaluation, constitution, and exploitation, we see that the same structures and processes that subordinate women work to maintain men’s privilege. At the same time, we see that each of these aspects of women’s subordination function together, i.e. the ideational denial of devaluation conditions the processes of constitution through discourse and desire, which in turn conditions women’s entry into the “market” as commodities. Thus, the structures and processes of women’s subordination function to produce men as subjects and to maintain men’s subject privileges, while at the same time undermine women’s subjectivity. Finally, the interdependency of men’s and women’s roles require that we cannot have the specific feature of subordination we have described and without also producing phallocentric subjects and vice-versa. That is, men’s privilege requires women’s subordination.

The phallocentric economy of representation includes structures of meanings and values within phallocentric representations that devalue women and condition the economies of discourse and desire that constitute women and men as subordinated and privileged sites of subjectivity, respectively. Further, men’s and women’s constitution conditions a political economy in which men can use and exchange women as objects or commodities. In turn, the various patterns of forces at work in the political economy reiterate and reinforce men’s and women’s dominant and subordinate positions, as well as the meanings and values associated with those positions. In the next chapter, I turn to a discussion of men’s unintentional and indirect contributions to women’s subordination. I draw on Irigaray’s analysis of phallocentric sexuality, particularly in relation to
prostitution and pornography, to show how sexuality can expand our understanding of men’s contributions to women’s subordination.
Chapter Two

Men’s Contributions

In the previous chapter, we looked at Irigaray’s notion of phallocentric economies and the ways in which these structures perpetuate both women’s subordination and men’s privilege. In this chapter, I continue a discussion of phallocentric economies. My purpose there is two-fold. Generally, I want to broaden our understanding of the cultural aspects of women’s subordination. More specifically, I want to elaborate upon i) the role phallocentric sexuality and ii) the functional role of prostitution and pornography to expand our understanding of men’s contributions to women’s subordination. My purpose is not to exhaustively detail men’s contributions to women’s oppression, but rather to highlight important structural aspects of those contributions. I will begin by looking at contemporary analyses of men’s contributions through a brief analysis of microaggressions and what I call “passive oppression”. I then turn to an Irigarayan analysis of prostitution and pornography to further elaborate men’s contributions to women’s subordination. I argue that much of men’s contributions to women’s subordination are unintentional and indirect.

I. Passive Oppression: Unintentional and Indirect Contributions

Various theories of inequality and oppression acknowledge the existence of ways in which oppressive structures perpetuate themselves separate from any conscious decision to oppress or even do harm on the part of individuals. For example, Rawls (2001) suggests structural injustices (i.e. unequal access to opportunity) can develop over time through the apparently “free and fair” transactions between individuals (53). Over an extended period of time, “very considerable wealth and property may accumulate in a
few hands, and these concentrations are likely to undermine fair equality of opportunity, the fair value of the political liberties, and so on.” (Rawls 2001, 53) That is, macro-level inequalities can accrue through micro-level interactions despite the lack of any intention to create such inequalities.

Rawls’ example of inheritance shows how this might occur: a father makes a fortune in oil and passes it on to his son who can now pay for an Ivy League education, meet other students from rich families, secure an influential position in business or government, and simply by pursuing his own best interest shape legislation (ex. tax law) that further advantages wealthy families and similarly disadvantages working-class and working-poor families. Thus, with each generation the economic and educational gap (as well as associated disparities in health and well-being) widens between classes. Neither the oil barren, nor his son, nor their friends and colleagues need harbor any ill will toward working-class and working-poor families to contribute to the developing structural inequalities.

Whereas Rawls’ examples focuses on the acquisition and transfer of property, I wish to look more closely at the ways in which interpersonal interactions and everyday social experience—in the absence of ill will and intentional acts of oppression—can work to maintain subordination. To this end, I turn to social-psychological models of oppression to argue that contributions to oppression can take both unintentional and indirect forms. Further, I suggest that much of women’s subordination functions through these unintentional and indirect means (although these do operate in combination with overt/intentional forms of oppression).
For good reason, many accounts of oppression focus on experiences of the members of oppressed groups. Derald Wing Sue’s (2010b) analysis of microaggressions, subtle everyday aspects of oppression, focuses on the psychological processes of the victim of these aggressions. Rightly, Sue wants to make these experiences known. For example, by spreading such knowledge, his work lends legitimacy to members of oppressed groups who also experience microaggression (but who perhaps have not yet seen them as aspects of their oppression). Similarly, Ann Cudd’s (2006) analysis of oppression attends to the psychology of the oppressed in maintaining their own oppression. Again, a comprehensive understanding of the mechanisms of oppression requires an account of the collusion of members of oppressed groups in their own oppression. However, my discussion will focus on the ways in which members of oppressor groups (such as men or white North Americans) contribute to microaggressions.

**a. Prejudice-Only Definition of Oppression**

Many lay understandings of oppression, such as racism or sexism, rely upon a prejudice-only definition of oppression. Prejudice consists in negative attitudes towards and negative beliefs about (often taking the form of generalizations about groups, i.e. “stereotypes”) individuals because of their group membership or perceived identity. Prejudice often forms the basis of discrimination, hatemongering, or oppressive violence (ex. lynching, genocide). A prejudice-only model of oppression focuses on the overt contributions of individuals or groups.

Prejudice-only definitions of oppression miss much of the everyday aspects of oppression that members of oppressed groups experience. Prejudiced individuals by
definition “report and approve” of their negative attitudes and stereotypes (Project Implicit). Therefore, a prejudice-only definition of oppression must by definition focus on conscious prejudices and deliberate acts of oppression. For this reason, a model of oppression that looks solely at prejudice and the actions informed by prejudice the notion of prejudice will not capture the unintentional behavior and actions that contribute to many aspects of oppression.

b. Everyday Oppression

We could find many accounts of everyday aspects of various forms of oppression in both academic and non-academic writing, as well as film, television, music, and poetry. To capture this variety of experiences theorists have employed the term “microaggression” to refer to “brief, everyday exchanges that send [negative] messages to certain individuals because of their group membership (people of color, women, or LGBTs)” (Sue 2010, 24). Sue’s definition of microaggressions focuses on interpersonal interactions between members of oppressed groups and members of oppressor groups—citing examples from scenes from restaurants, elevators, and commercial flights, which highlights the “everyday” quality of microaggressions.

These “micro” components of oppression may seem insignificant in contrast to the “macro” incidents of discrimination, hatemongering, and oppressive violence. In fact, they may seem like nothing more than the daily hassles and annoyances that stress each of us out from day to day. However, Sue (2010) convincingly argues that microaggressions are distinct from other everyday stressors because of the continuing nature of and cumulative effect of microaggressions, as well as the social and historical context in which they take place (91-96). That is, microaggressions are “daily hassles”
that form part of a system of oppression for members of oppressed groups, which differ from the daily hassles of members of oppressor groups (96).

For example, recall Marilyn Frye’s (1983) well-known example of the “male door-opening ritual” in which a woman approaches a door and a man (even one carrying a heavy load) goes out of his way to hold the door for the woman (5). Frye suggests that we can understand this daily occurrence as an aspect of women’s oppression, because the “help” this man renders is false (5). Further, she suggests that we need to look to the symbolic message this act sends to women to really understand it. Because men will perform this “helpful” act even if women are unburdened and even if men are burdened, it sends the message that women are incapable (6). Further, the “help” of opening the door belies the fact that men do not provide meaningful help to women. “The detachment of the acts from the concrete realities of what women need and do not need is a vehicle for the message that women’s actual needs are unimportant or irrelevant.” (6) Because women social context is one in which they, for example, perform significantly more unpaid domestic labor, there are places where men could truly help out—but holding the door is not one of the, nor is it the most important one for women.

Frye’s (1983) point is that focusing on a single instance will not easily tell us about the system of which this instance is only a part. She illustrates with an imagery of a birdcage: if we look at each bar individually, we cannot understand how the cage could entrap a bird, but if take a step back and see how the individual bars works together to create a structure, we understand how the cage works.

As the cageness of the birdcage is a macroscopic phenomenon, the oppressiveness of the situations in which women live our various and different lives is a
macroscopic phenomenon. Neither can be seen from a microscopic perspective.
But when you look macroscopically you can see it—a network of forces and barriers which are systematically related and which conspire to the
immobilization, reduction and molding of women and the lives they live. (7)
The first few times I read Frye’s essay I focused on the systematic, structural aspects of her definition of oppression. Frye (1983) allows us to see everyday aspects of women’s experience and social interaction as part of women’s oppression.

Jean Harvey’s (1999) Civilized Oppression describes the subtle ways in which interpersonal relationships and interactions contribute to oppression. Harvey argues that much of the abuse in nonviolent oppression “involves no malicious intention, and contributing agents are often unaware of anything amiss.” (16) Despite the difference in terminology, Harvey’s work appears to be one of the first sustained analyses of ethical implications and significance of microaggressions.

Harvey (1999) like Frye shows us how daily interactions—when viewed from the perspective of disadvantaged groups—can appear as part of a larger system of advantage and disadvantage. “When things are morally amiss, there may be no flashing red lights, no twitching antenna, nothings but the familiar and apparently innocuous incidents of daily life.” (15) Harvey makes a further point explicit: perpetuate the structures of inequality within which they function. As an example Harvey gives us an excellent analysis of the ways in which jokes and prevalent attitudes about the nature and importance of a sense of humor can work to attack the disadvantaged. She shows how jokes function along asymmetries in power with more advantaged people “poking fun” at less advantaged people (5). The subject of the joke, because of her less advantaged
position, is left with little or no recourse to respond to what amounts to an insult or “put-down”—she has to grin and bear it (10).

c. Microaggressions

Sue’s analysis of microaggression highlights for me the micro/macro distinction Frye relies on. The “door opening ritual” appears as one of myriad everyday slights that take their significance from the facts that they accumulate over the courses of women lives and that they take place in a social and historical context in which institutions and policies, as well as cultural representations, have sustained women’s subordination.

This analysis of everyday, “micro” aspects of oppression allows us to better understand the ways in which members of oppressor groups can contribute to oppression. Sue’s model for understanding microaggression focuses on the process that the member of the oppressed group undergoes in experiencing these everyday aspects of oppression. Sue (2010) describes three types of microaggression: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. He characterizes microassaults as explicitly racist or sexist violent attacks purposefully discriminatory acts (Sue 2010, 29 fig. 2.1). And while these are generally intentional acts of oppression, i.e. directed as a member of an oppressed groups because of their memberships (or perceived membership) in that group, they are not necessarily so. Consider the example of the man who calls a woman a “bitch”. We can imagine that his use of this derogatory term does not stem from a conscious set of beliefs about women inferiority—but is rather just a gender appropriate insult in the same way that “bastard” refers only to men. Microinsults are subtle comments or other forms of communication “that demean a person’s racial, gender, or sexual orientation, heritage, or
identity.” (Sue 2010, 31) Here, the demeaning message is implicit and the perpetrator is often unaware of the effects of their comment or gesture.

Finally, microinvalidations are “communications that exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color.” (Sue 2010, 29 fig. 2.1) Sue (2010) includes the examples of colorblindness and the myth of meritocracy. The interesting thing about colorblindness is an attempt to address racial (or other) differences with the explicit aim of undermining discrimination and injustice. However, as other authors have explained, the effect of a colorblind approach is to ignore “both the negative experiences of stereotyping and marginalization and the positive experiences of community, culture and resistance.” (Geiser 2012, 489) While the myth of meritocracy lacks the beneficent justification that accompanies colorblindness, this myth has the effect of denying the systemic disadvantages that limit members of oppressed groups. In both cases, perpetrators tend not to connect their outlook to any explicit group-based bias, i.e. racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, etc.

d. Passive Oppression

In explaining the ways in which Whites sustain a system of advantage and disadvantage based on racial difference, Beverley Daniel Tatum (2007) distinguishes between “active” and “passive” racism. Active racism refers to “blatant, intentional acts of racial bigotry and discrimination.” (128) Passive racism, in contrast, “[…] is more subtle and can be seen in the collusion of laughing when a racist joke is told, of letting exclusionary hiring practices go unchallenged, of accepting as appropriate the omissions of people of color from the curriculum, and of avoiding difficult race-related issues.” (Tatum 2007, 128) Tatum’s notion of passive racism might refer to both those
microaggressions that stem from explicit prejudice, and those that do not. However, her
distinction gets us closer to understanding the ways in which members of oppressor
groups contribute *unintentionally* to oppression.

Tatum’s notion of “cultural racism” helps us understand these unintentional
contributions to oppression. Tatum explains, “Because racism is so ingrained in the fabric
of American institutions, it is easily self-perpetuating. All that is required to maintain it is
business as usual.” (128) If the status quo (regarding either institutions or interpersonal
interactions) maintains racist structures, then simply “going with the flow” will contribute
to racist oppression. As Sue (2010) explains, “It is clear from our analysis that Whites are
unwitting victims in a social conditioning process that imbues within them biased racial
attitudes; many biases exist outside the level of awareness because they are deeply
embedded in the psyche and made invisible.” (121) The passive racist is a “victim”
insofar as he did not purposefully cultivate his racism, but rather supports racism simply
through the otherwise lucky chance that he was born white. The passive racist is
unwitting insofar as he need not be aware that his actions harm anyone let alone
contribute to group-based oppression, or even that he holds the racist beliefs that he does.
We gain a fuller understanding of passive oppression by considering implicit bias and
indirect contributions to oppression.

i. *Implicit Bias and Ignorance*

Over the last 20 years psychologists have given increasing intention to implicit
biases (see, for example, Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz 1998 and Greenwald et al.
2002). Implicit biases include both attitudes and stereotypes. Tests for implicit
associations look at the connections participants make between concepts (ex. “African
American”, “woman”) and evaluations (ex. good, bad) and stereotypes (ex. athletic, superficial) (Project Implicit). Sue (2010) suggests that Whites continue to harbor these implicit biases because they fear appearing racist, acknowledging their own racism and privilege, and taking personal responsibility to end racism (122-128).

Racist or sexist beliefs can motivate actions that discriminate against members of oppressed group or contribute to microaggressions—even if the perpetrator is not conscious of these beliefs. Philosopher’s working in social psychology and race have suggested that implicit biases and stereotype threat are important for understanding how racism functions and the implications for addressing racism (Anderson 2010; Blum 2004; Kelly, Machery, and Mallon 2010; Machery 2010; Machery, Faucher, and Kelly 2010; Steele 2010; Wilson 2012). Similarly, feminist scholars have described the impact of implicit/covert/benevolent/subtle forms of oppression (see Crouch and Schwartzman 2012). Recently, we have seen a focus specifically on implicit bias (Fine 2010; DesAutels 2012; Valian 1998). Studies have shown that implicit bias affects the decisions we make regarding people with dark skin. For example, doctors are less likely to recommend dark-skinned patients to specialists, judges are more likely to give longer sentences to dark-skinned defendants, and managers are less likely to invite dark-skinned candidates for an interview (Roberts 2011). Further, “white people with high levels of implicit racial bias show less warmth and welcoming behavior toward black people. They will sit further away, and their facial expression will be cold and withdrawn.” (Roberts 2011) These examples describe the same kinds of interactions that we have characterized as microaggressions.
Stereotypes whether explicit or implicit often stem from ignorance. A lack of knowledge about the experience and identities of the members of oppressed groups can impact our behavior and its effects on members of marginalized groups. Members of oppressor groups often remain ignorant of marginalized groups because mainstream media does not represent their perspective. A member of an oppressor group has to go out of his or her way to learn about these marginalized perspectives. And members of oppressor groups have little reason to do so. Whereas members of oppressed groups must understand mainstream culture in order to exist within it. Because members of oppressor groups have such limited perspectives, they tend to develop a kind of tunnel vision that allows them to feel as if their experience described human experience in general. I take the term “tunnel vision” from Spelman (1989), who defines white solipsism as “tunnel vision” that ignores the experience of racialized people and leads to a tendency “to think, imagine, and speak as if whiteness described the world.” (266) Here, I suggest that we can apply this epistemological limitation to members of any oppressor group. Further, a lack of critical insight into one’s own social position and the effects it has on others can keep members of oppressor groups from reflecting upon their behavior and trying to check the influence of implicit bias.

Returning to the examples of colorblindness and the myth of meritocracy, we can see that these attitudes work to cultivate ignorance of the experience and identities of members of oppressed groups. In part the negative impact of these doctrines must come from the confrontation between members of oppressed groups and those who espouse these views. Sue (2010) refers to this as tension as the “clash of racial realities.” Because whites and people of color have such different experiences of racism, they hold very
different opinions about, for example, levels of equality, racial tension, and
discrimination (Sue 2010, 44-45). Many members of oppressed groups must respond to
attitudes that deny or attempt to circumvent cultural racism, such as colorblindness and
the myth of meritocracy, with disbelief, disgust, and anger, if only because these views
contrast so starkly with their own experience. Members of oppressed groups can have
these strong negative reactions without needing to attribute malicious motivation on the
part of the perpetrator.

Fricker (2007) describes another way in which ignorance leads to injustice. She sees “hermeneutical injustice” occurring “when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences.” (Fricker 2007, 1) That is members of oppressed groups lack the cognitive framework for clearly articulating their own experience of oppression as an example of oppression. Fricker draws on the example of a woman who suffers from sexual harassment before the concept of “sexual harassment” existed in legal discourse. We can imagine that she feels uncomfortable and threatened and may even feel strongly that things are not right, but also that she lacks the concept to clearly articulate her situation to herself or others. Fricker (2007) suggests that his lack of an appropriate concept to understand her situation marginalizes this woman (6).

Although both parties are ignorant of the concept, this ignorance does not affect
both parties equally. The “gap” in knowledge adversely affects those who could use such
a concept to better understand their own social existence (i.e. women who suffer from
sexual harassment). Despite the fact that no particular individual perpetrates epistemic
violence of hermeneutical injustice (because it is a feature of shared interpretive
resources), “it will normally make itself apparent in the discursive exchanges between
individuals.” (Fricker 2007, 7) That is, those unaffected by sexual harassment will
mistrust or dismiss the testimony of victims of sexual harassment, because both parties
lack the resources to clearly understand the situation. Fricker’s notion of hermeneutical
injustice offers us another example of an unintentional contribution to oppression that
does not stem from attitudes or stereotypes.

ii. Indirect Contributions

We see further examples of unintentional contributions through what Sue (2010)
refers to as environmental microaggressions. Providing a description from the perspective
of members of oppressed groups, Sue (2010) defines “environmental microaggressions”
as “the numerous demeaning and threatening social, educational, political, or economic
cues that are communicated individually, institutionally, or societally to marginalized
groups.” (25) Sue (2010) evokes this notion to acknowledge a structural (rather than
interpersonal) aspect of microaggressions—but for our purposes it says something more
important about the role of contributors/perpetrators. The pornification of culture and its
cumulative affect one girl’s self-conception and self-esteem offers an excellent example
of environmental microaggressions.

We find a similar concept in Larry May’s (1998) *Masculinity and Morality*. In a
chapter devoted to pornography, May argues that pornography, like pollution, has a
negative, cumulative effect. Although any particular instance of pornography (this letter
to Playboy or this video on You Tube) does not produce a non-trivial harm, the
cumulative effect of all of the instances of pornography constitutes a non-trivial harm.
Further, in the same way that industrial pollution threatens the individuals of a
community, insofar as they are members of that community, pornography harms women insofar as they are women. That is, the cumulative effect of pornography constitutes a non-trivial group-harm.

Environmental microaggressions represent indirect contributions to oppression. In some cases, these indirect contributions will stem from intentional contributions. For example, the South African policy of Apartheid resulted from the racial prejudice of lawmakers. And Apartheid negatively impacted many more Black South Africans than those lawmakers ever interacted with personally. That is, the lawmakers’ decision had far-reaching indirect contributions to the oppression of Black South Africans.

In many cases, indirect contributions will come from the same unintentional sources—implicit bias and ignorance. For example, when graphic designers create advertisements, they are probably not trying to harm women. But many advertisements represent and position women’s bodies in ways that devalue women’s subjectivity and that chip away at women’s self-esteem and sense of self-worth. That is, the graphic designers can unintentionally and indirectly contribute to women’s oppression.

iii. Passive Oppressors

The notion of unintentional oppression I described here has interesting implications for how we understand the term “oppressor”. Cudd (2006) defines oppressors as those who “act in order to continue or intensify the oppression of a social group.” (Cudd 2006, 195) Cudd’s phrase “in order to” seems to imply an intentional or conscious effort to oppress. However, she adds an important qualification: “An oppressor may be unaware that the injustice that is being committed counts as oppression, or that the harm falls on a social group, but must be aware that he or she is acting unjustly and
harming someone thereby” (Cudd 2006, 195) The first component of Cudd’s qualification suggests that an oppressor’s action must not intentionally contribute to oppression, while the second component suggests that the oppressor’s action must be intentionally malicious.

The second component of Cudd’s qualification excludes those who perpetrate unintentional contributions from her definition of “oppressor”. We need not see this as a shortcoming of Cudd’s definition. Rather we add to her definition by introducing a distinction between active oppressors and “passive oppressors”, the latter being members of oppressor groups who contribute unintentionally to oppression, either directly or indirectly.

Like Tatum’s notion of “passive racism”, “passive oppressor” captures the absence of conscious agency on the part of oppressor in question. Of course, the passive oppressor’s passivity does not go “all the way down”. The passive oppressor contributions lack intention to contribute to oppression, as well as the malice central to Cudd’s definition of oppressor. But the passive oppressor does act. And the passive oppressor’s actions may very well be intentional actions. But these acts are neither malicious acts (i.e. did not intend harm), nor intentional contributions (i.e. made with an awareness of group-based harm). The oppressor’s passivity refers instead to unintended consequences of his or her actions. That is, the passive oppressor makes unintentional contributions, such as those brought about through implicit bias and ignorance.

Tatum’s (2007) notion of cultural racism is useful here. But it does focus too narrowly on the “the cultural images and messages that affirm the assumed superiority of Whites and the assumed inferiority of people of color […].” (125) Although images and
messages impact our psychological development, affective components of our experiences (emotions, bodily interactions) must also play a role. A notion of cultural racism or cultural oppression must also include our attitudes, beliefs, behavior, and habits that are informed by and reinforce the oppressive structures of a broad notion of culture.

II. Unintentional Contributions: Prostitution Use and Pornographic Production

In this section, I argue that through embodied practices of phallocentric sexuality men contribute unintentionally to women’s subordination through prostitution and pornography, as well as though everyday sexual encounters. In the final section, I show how phallocentric sexuality plays a structural role in the maintenance of phallocentric economies more generally and thereby how men contribute unintentionally and indirectly to women’s subordination. That is, simply by embodying mainstream forms of sexuality, men contribute to women’s oppression. I focus on sexuality because of the centrality of relationships, and particularly erotic relationships between women and men, both for Irigaray’s analysis of women’s oppression and for her proposal for meaningful social change.

Irigaray’s critique of prostitution depends upon the broader analysis of phallocentric economies, which we discussed in the previous chapter. The functional role of the prostitute consists in men’s exchange and use of women’s bodies. The production of pornography clearly exhibits an exchange and use of women’s bodies. This use and exchange limits women’s subjectivity and contributes to the subordination of many of the women who work directly as prostitutes and actors in pornography. The men who work as traffickers and pimps, and some of those who work as producers and actors in the pornography industry, contribute directly to women’s subordination and are aware of the
damage and limitations they are inflicting on women or are complicit in. In contrast, the
clients and customers—the johns and pornography users—contribute to women’s
subordination only insofar as they support the industries in which these contributions take
place. Thus, most men’s use of prostitution and pornography involves only indirect and
unintentional contributions to women’s subordination.

Further, the role of prostitution and pornography in the phallocentric economy is
necessary for the functioning of the exchange of women as virgins and mothers (what I
will refer to as the virgin-mother economy). Therefore, prostitution and pornography
contribute directly to the subordination of the women involved in these industries, as well
as indirectly to all women affected by the virgin-mother economy. Thus, insofar as men
support the exchange and use of women in prostitution and pornography, i.e. by paying
for sex with women and paying for pornography, they also contribute—indirectly and
unintentionally—to the broader subordination of women taking place in the virgin-
mother economy.

a. The Functional Role of the Prostitute

For Irigaray, the functional role of the prostitute is a usage that is exchanged. That
is, men both use and exchange women as prostitutes:

In [the prostitute’s] case, the qualities of woman’s body are “useful.” However,
these qualities have “value” only because they have already been appropriated by
a man, and because they serve as the locus of relations—hidden ones—between
men. Prostitution amounts to usage that is exchanged. Usage that is not merely
potential: it has already been realized. The woman’s body is valuable because it
has already been used. In the extreme case, the more it has served, the more it is
worth. Not because its natural assets have been put to use this way, but, on the contrary, because its nature has been “used up,” and has become once again no more than a vehicle for relations among men. (Irigaray 1985b, 186)

Unlike the virgin, who circulates on the market with her potential use in abeyance, and the mother, who is taken off of the market to be used, the prostitute is both used and exchanged. In contrast to the virgin, who loses her value in use—in her transition to mother, the value of the prostitute comes from the fact that her body has been used. In contrast to the mother, whose value comes through the activity of her use, i.e. reproduction, the prostitute’s use is not productive. Rather, the prostitute has been “used up.” This is not a use of her natural function; the prostitute is not like a mother who has borne all of the babies her body can bear. Rather, the prostitute’s use strips her both of her potential (virgin) and actual (mother) use for the production of legitimate children.

The prostitute can circulate on the market. Whereas the mother’s use presents a risk to the public sphere, the prostitute, as “used up,” does not draw the same explicit connection to nature and the fundamental role of women’s bodies in sustaining the social order. Thus, the market not only tolerates the prostitute: the market is her proper place.

I want to be very clear that I do not intended the term “used up” as a value judgment of people working as prostitutes. I do not want to disparage sex workers, but rather direct our criticism to the social structures that determine the negative economy of value commonly attributed to this work and these workers. That is, within a phallocentric political economy, female prostitutes insofar as they fulfill the function of the prostitute

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10 As we have seen in the previous chapter, phallocentric sexuality too functions according to a general economy (i.e. discharge and “return to zero”). As we will see below, this sexual economy allows men to use prostitutes and pornography as a form of “release”.

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are used up or useless vis-à-vis the other functional roles (which are also exploitative). Any particular prostitute might function both as prostitute and virgin or prostitute and mother. If so her value within the phallocentric political economy will depend upon the functional role she takes up at any particular point in time. Of course, there is a good chance that making her role as prostitute known to her family and the broader public would—in their eyes—disqualify her from the roles of virgin and mother.

Also, there are factors that can influence this use and exchange. For example, if johns develop intimate relationship with prostitutes such that men treat women like subjects, then this use is no longer harmful. That is, intimacy can mitigate the subordination of phallocentric sex. We see an example of this in Chester Brown’s (2011) *Paying for It*. Brown (2011) recounts his experience with prostitutes including a seven-year long monogamous financial exchange with one woman. Brown claims "paying for sex isn’t an empty experience if you’re paying the right person for sex […]" (227). Also, Susannah Breslin’s (2009) *Letters From Johns* project offers some interesting examples of the various relationships men can have with prostitutes and prostitution. (For a discussion of the various ways in which clients eroticize prostitutes and their use of prostitutes, see O’Connell Davidson 1998, 138-162.) Despite the fact that some men have positive relationships with prostitutes and the fact that an increasing number of prostitutes are taking control of their own business, this does not change the fact that prostitutes are used and exchanged. Rather it changes the conditions under which these take place and therefore opens the possibility for limited or removing the subordination associated with the use and exchange Irigaray describes. As we will in the following
section, changing the means of production and consumption are two important ways to eliminate the subordination of pornography.

Irigaray’s characterization of prostitution as a usage that is exchanged captures some of the important features of prostitution and its contributions to women’s subordination. We can now extend this notion of usage that is exchanged to include an analysis of the pornography industry.

i. Exchange: Prostitution

Prostitution is an exchange. Johns pay for sex. Prostitution exchanges the body qua usage. Prostitution rents out bodies to be used for sex in the same way that a video store rents out DVDs to be watched. Whether in an exchange between john and pimp, or among pimps, prostitution reduces the prostitute to a body that is used and exchanged for use. Here, “reduction” means to treat a person as if she did not exhibit unique subjective characteristics, but rather was nothing more than a commodity. In prostitution women’s bodies function as commodities, whether prostitution exchanges women’s bodies (trafficking) or the use of women’s bodies (pimping). As commodities, women fulfill a functional role vis-à-vis phallocentric subjects, who do the buying, selling, and renting.

As with any full reduction of a person to a function, the exchange of prostitution denies the subjective-capacities of prostitutes, both in thought and action. Relating to someone as a commodity or functional role limits that person’s ability experience and express themselves as sites of subjectivity, as well as limiting their ability to further develop subject capacities through those relationships. Insofar as the phallocentric political economy reduces women to a strictly functional role of prostitute, as exchanged between men, this economy subordinates women.
Independent-women, or women-controlled, prostitution offers one way to avoid some of these forms of subordination, at least for those women who work as prostitutes. If women “sell themselves” rather than working through a pimp, then they break partially from the structures of use found in the political economy and they take up a different role, i.e. they exercise their otherwise-unexpressed subject capacities. This describes some but not all cases of prostitution—and even women-controlled prostitution still tends to function according to an economy of desire that prioritizes men’s pleasure and ignores women’s sexual agency.

In this case prostitution no longer consists of an exchange of women between men. This mitigates the commodification and subordination of prostitution because women are taking on an agential role. Hence most governments do not officially sanction prostitution (despite the substantial economic influence it exerts). But also this allows us to note that the increasing recognition and legitimization of prostitution and the increasing protections for prostitutes is a sign of the prostitute taking on meaning as other than a functional role, as a subject deserving of protection. For example, the Canadian Supreme Court’s recent decision in Canada (Attorney General) v. Bedford (2013 SCC 72) was an important move in an effort to allow prostitutes to operate safely. These kinds of decisions legitimize prostitutes as sites of subjectivity.

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11 Sociologist Ronald Weitzer (2012) distinguishes between six different types of prostitution that occur globally based on distinctions in the venue in which sex work takes place. However, the general distinction between women-controlled and pimp-controlled prostitution remains relevant and avoids covering over the fact that not all brothels or all massage parlors or all casinos will function in the same way.
Women-controlled prostitution opens up the possibility for limiting or removing the subordination associated with the use and exchange Irigaray describes. The kind of defense of prostitution that we see in the Bedford decision suggests the possibility of feminist prostitution, a female-controlled industry that lessens the subordination of women.

Pimp-controlled prostitution and trafficking, however, remain an important part of the institution of prostitution. Since the 1980’s researchers have focused increasingly on independent-women prostitution, however some research suggests “pimp-controlled prostitution is still an integral part of street level prostitution for some women and girls.” (Williamson and Cluse-Tolar 2002, 1088) Determining just how many women remains difficult. However between 40 and 80 percent of prostitutes work for or have worked for a pimp, with some women moving back and forth between pimp-controlled and independent-women prostitution (Williamson and Cluse-Tolar 2002). The numbers for trafficking are probably more significant. Globally, “43% of [human trafficking] victims are used for forced commercial sexual exploitation, of whom 98 per cent are women and girls.” (Global Initiative to Fight Human Trafficking) Clearly, we cannot see all prostitution as just another form of work.

Pimp-controlled prostitution treats prostitutes as if they were little more than a body that is exchanged. Prostitution often depends on an economics of slavery. Prostitution relies upon a global trade of women’s bodies, and pimps at the level of the street also exchange prostitutes for cash. This kind of sale takes place between traffickers and pimps, and among pimps. For example, a law student who escaped prostitution recounts being sold between several pimps for $10,000 each time (Kristof 2012). Many
trafficked women are initially offered work other than sex and then later forced into sex
work, with little-to-no freedom of movement and often with no choice over clients,
sexual services, or the use of condoms (Della Giusta, Di Tommaso, and Strom 2008, 67-
68). Further, global trafficking in women (for sex or other labor) generates an estimated
$12 billion a year (Della Giusta, Di Tommaso, and Strom 2008, 67). It is clear that as
commodities in this illegal trade, women’s subject capacities matter little in their
treatment.

Even in cases where women are not held against their will, pimps often rely on
violence and manipulation to bring women into, and keep women involved in,
prostitution. Pimp-prostitute relationships often parallel abuser-survivor relationships
(Giobbe 1993; Williamson and Cluse-Tolar 2002). However, pimp-prostitute
relationships generally involve less emotional commitment on the part of the pimp and
more unpredictable violent behavior (Williamson and Cluse-Tolar 2002).

Hodgson (1997) characterizes two methods through which pimps procure
prostitutes. “Seduction,” as the name suggests, involves men showing “various levels of
affection, attraction and concern” for women (45). “Stratagem” involves pimps talking
about “the large amounts of money that can be earned, the glamour of travel, adventure
and other grandiose images resembling the lifestyles of the rich and famous.” (57)
Further, Hodgson’s research suggests that pimps are more likely to employ a seduction
 technique on girls and younger women, and switch to a stratagem technique with older
women who “appear to be in more control of their environment […]” (43–44 and table
9)
Thus, a pimp’s success depends, on the one hand, upon his ability to understand and, in part, meet women’s emotional and financial needs. Typically, pimps offer women a better life (clothing, jewelry, cars) and builds up women’s trust by treating a perspective prostitute as a girlfriend, before explaining what she will have to do to in return (Williamson and Cluse-Tolar 2002). On the other hand, he must prioritize business, and only offer affection in return the money a prostitute brings in (Williamson and Cluse-Tolar 2002, 1085). Doing so requires “ice”—the ability to “turn off” one’s emotions and use violence to enforce the rules of “the game”, or simply to maintain a level of hostility and threat in the relationship (Williamson and Cluse-Tolar 2002).

Further, pimps prey on women’s subjectivity in manipulating women. Many girls and women who enter street-level prostitution have suffered from poverty, abuse, and addiction. Pimps will specifically target these vulnerable girls (Williamson and Cluse-Tolar 2002). Pimps offer “a sense of belonging that women longed for, a sense of exciting hope for the future, an adventure that would take them from their meager existence into a life with a man who told them they had special skills, intelligence, and beauty.” (Williamson and Cluse-Tolar 2002, 1081) The pimp’s offer amounts to an opportunity for a woman to express and experience her subject capacities in ways currently unavailable. However, the situation of manipulation for the purpose of turning a profit through the use of women’s bodies clearly treats women as missing the very subject capacities the offer appeals to.

In the end, pimp-controlled prostitution and sex-related human trafficking exchanges women’s bodies to make money. And women function as commodities within these exchanges, the majority of which take place between men. Trafficking and pimp-
controlled prostitution exemplify the limitations to women’s subjectivity of commodification. And the role of traffickers and pimps highlights some of the ways in which men directly and intentionally exploit women and contribute to women’s subordination.

ii. Exchange: Pornography

Irigaray suggests that pornography also involves women as a commodity in a relation between men. Because pornography involves men showing women’s bodies to other men, Irigaray claims, “In a relationship established between (at least) two men, the ignorant young woman is the mediation prescribed by society. The woman is all the more in the foreground because the scene is played out between men.” (Irigaray 1985b, 199) Pornography consists of a relationship between men; women are only present to cover over this otherwise taboo relationship. Here, we find a resonance with Irigaray’s broader critique of the phallocentric economy in which “wives, daughters, and sisters have value only in that they serve as the possibility of, and potential benefit in relations among men.” (Irigaray 1985b, 172) Like virgins, mothers, and prostitutes—the women of pornography function as commodities in relations between men. Thus, an Irigarayan analysis suggests that pornography fulfills the same functional role as prostitution. Insofar as pornography fulfills the same functional role as prostitution, pornography enacts the same subordination as prostitution.

The most obvious exchange between men in relation to pornography takes place between producers, distributors, and retailers and the men who use pornography. Irigaray’s analysis suggests that insofar as pornographic production subordinates women’s bodies and pleasures to this exchange, pornography contributes to women’s
subordination. However, it seems clear that women’s express treatment in the production of pornography will have a much greater impact on whether and to what extent women express and experience themselves as sites of subjectivity. Here, the functional role of the pornographic actor seems much less important than the concrete material relationships in the production of pornography.

Like prostitution, the production of pornographic material can sometimes rely on trafficked and otherwise captive and coerced women. It remains unclear the extent to which this is the case, especially in mainstream Hollywood pornography. For the most part the economic exchange between men and economic exploitation of women’s bodies and labor is akin to other less stigmatized jobs women often perform in which women’s bodies and sex appeal play a major role: modeling, serving/bar tending, sales, etc. In turn, these jobs differ little from the alienation of labor that persists throughout both women’s and men’s work in general—including men’s work as performers in the production of pornography. Although the producers and directors of pornography contribute to women’s subordination, these contributions have much less to do with pornography’s functional role, than with more general forms of exploitation. However, these are not the only limitations that pornography places on women's subjectivity, as we will see below.

Pornography is big business and many men support this industry through pornography use. To the extent to which the pornography industry exploits women or in any other way contributes to women's subordination, the men who use pornography (either by purchasing it or creating a demand through the use of free websites) implicate themselves in that exploitation and subordination. The pornography user’s contributions to women's subordination are indirect. These contributions are also most likely
unintentional: We can imagine that, like most consumers, pornography users do not meticulously research the working conditions of the workers who produce the products they consume. Although the contribution of any particular pornography user may appear as insignificant, the sheer number of men and boys who use pornography suggests that these indirect and unintentional contributions to women's subordination are significant when we consider them as a whole.

b. Phallocentric sexuality

Here, I apply Irigaray’s analysis of phallocentric sexuality to prostitution and pornography as a supplement to her critique of functional roles. The sex of pornographic production constitutes an important part of concrete, material relationships in the production of pornography, and is therefore integral to understanding the way in which pornography contributes to women’s subordination. As we have seen in the previous chapter, phallocentric sexuality contributes to women's subordination. Insofar as actors embody and deploy phallocentric sexuality within the pornographic scene, pornographic production also contributes to women's subordination via that mode of sexuality. Further, we can apply this analysis of sexuality to prostitution as well to better understand the ways in which subordination functions there.

We saw in the previous chapter that phallocentric sexuality contributes to women’s subordination. There we characterized phallocentric sexuality in terms of a heterosexual binary that prioritizes men's sexuality over women's sexuality. Further, phallocentric sexuality involves a teleological notion of desire (in that desire aims at an object and aims to be satisfied/relieved). This teleology operates within a binary framework such that active desire or libido attaches to primarily to masculine subjects.
Therefore, “desire” will always already be a masculine desire and women’s bodies play the role of the “objects of desire.”

Phallocentric sexuality does require some minimal sexual agency on women’s part, (i.e. experience pleasure and pain, express likes and dislikes, and perform sexual techniques). However, to the extent to which women do express sexual agency within the confines of phallocentric sexuality women’s sexual agency references men’s sexual agency and men’s pleasure. Therefore, we should not mistake women’s agency within the confines of a phallocentric economy as genuine feminine sexuality. Here it will suffice to point out that the phallocentric sexual economy privileges men’s desire and pleasure over that of women.

Here, we can see some two further characteristics of phallocentric sexuality. First, phallocentric sexuality emphasizes genital erogeneity. Irigaray points to “[...] a fragmentation [...] which in sexual language seems to be translated into partial drives and the regrouping of those drives into genitality [...].” (Irigaray 1993a, 61) Again, the reference is to Freud’s model of psychosexual development, children go through stages loosely organized around “partial drives” (the oral, the anal, and the phallic). The genital stage marks the pinnacle of development, when all of the partial drives are organized into a whole around the task of procreation. Here, the genitals become the chief site of erogeneity.

We should note two outcomes of genital erogeneity. First, this model of sexuality fragments bodies into various “erogenous zones.” It does not view the body as a contiguous whole, but rather as a collection of parts, and prioritizes certain parts over others in terms of their “erogenous” value. This model limits erogeneity to the genitals.
Desire does not circulate through the entire body, but rather within certain predetermined sites (i.e. penis, vagina, anus, breasts, nipples, mouth, etc.). Further, because of the priority of masculine desire, the penis receives the most value within the phallocentric sexual economy. However, the counterpart of the penis, the vagina, also has a significant role to play both in relation to procreation and the production of men’s pleasure. Even though the economy exchanges women as commodities, these economies receive their value from their relationship to men’s desire and sexual use of women’s bodies. That is, the value of commodities (women) within the phallocentric sexual economy is always relative to a phallocentric standard. So, for example, the virgin does not have an intrinsic value, but rather is valuable insofar as her virginity stands a guarantor of paternity (or a fetishized object).

Second, phallocentric sexuality is teleological; it focuses on men “getting off.” Irigaray claims, “Male sexuality—there is not other, according to Freud—is constructed upon a model of energy involving tension, release and return to homeostasis.” (Irigaray 1994, 20) On this model, sexual energy builds within the individual and purpose of the sexual encounter is to release this energy. In the context of the privilege of male desire and genital ergogeneity, we can understand this release primarily in terms of orgasm and ejaculation. Within the phallocentric sexual economy, sex has a goal: to get men off. And women’s bodies figure a means to this end. Thus, phallocentric sexuality is teleological in a second sense: It aims at women’s bodies. Women’s bodies figure as “objects,” or more specifically targets, of desire.

We ought to note that this model of sexuality does not describe all men. For example, asexual men, some homosexual men, and men who participate in BDSM
culture or who incorporate yogic, Taoist, or some other form of sexual practice into their lives will have other modes of sexual and intimate comportment. They will use their bodies in ways atypical of the dominant model of sexuality. However, these modes of comportment are not the norm. Phallocentric sexuality pervades Western culture to such an extent that it functions as a largely unquestioned background to many boys and men’s ideas about bodies and sexuality and much of their sexual comportment, either by themselves or in relationships with others. Two recent films, Steve McQueen’s *Shame* (2011) and Joseph Gordon-Levitt’s *Don Jon* (2013), both chronicle the negative effects of habitual pornography use on men’s intimacy and ability to relate to women.

**c. Phallocentric sexuality in prostitution and pornography**

In addition to the blatant exploitation of trafficking and pimp-controlled prostitution, men’s use of women’s bodies in prostitution can also contribute to women’s subordination in general. Whether men’s use of prostitution contributes to women’s subordination depends upon the extent to which this use conforms to phallocentric sexuality, that is, the extent to which the woman’s body and sex serves the man’s pleasure.

Irigaray’s notion of prostitution as a functional role subordinates the intricacies of specific relationships to a structural analysis. Specifically, Irigaray's analysis suggests that all prostitutes fulfill a functional role of usage that is exchanged, that this functional role limits women's subjectivity, and therefore that prostitution limits all prostitutes' subjectivity. Her claim that prostitution serves a functional role suggests that each individual exchange of prostitution necessarily subordinates the prostitute involved. Irigaray's position depends upon the structure of this exchange functioning undistributed
by the specifics of the relationships between prostitutes and johns. In effect, Irigaray’s position suggests that all men use prostitutes in the same way and that all women's experiences of prostitution is equally limiting. But this does not tell the whole story. Works such as Whores and other Feminists (Nagle 1997) and Susannah Breslin’s (2009) “Letters from Johns” highlight the heterogeneity of experiences of prostitution, both on the part of women and men.

The extent to which any instance of prostitution use contributes to the subordination of a particular prostitute will depend on the specific relationship between that prostitute and that john. The prostitute’s subjectivity will be a key factor in determining the impacts a particular exchange on a prostitute. That is, the extent to which a woman expresses her subjectivity and experiences herself as a site of subjectivity, and the extent to which the man involved treats her as a site of subjectivity with subject capacities. Most women who prostitute themselves would, all things being equal, choose another line of work. For example, in their survey Farley and Barken (1998) found that eighty-eight percent of the prostitutes they interviewed wanted to leave prostitution. However, some women do choose to work in the sex industry and these women express their subjectivity to a greater degree.

Men’s contribution to the subordination of particular prostitutes depends in large part upon the relationship men foster with prostitutes. Outside of cases of explicit violence (assault and rape) these relationships consist of sex. Therefore, men’s sexuality will play an important role. Most men who use prostitutes just want to get off. This clear expression of phallocentric sexuality leaves little room for women’s subjectivity, or her
pleasure. As in relationships with wives and lovers, phallocentric sexuality contributes to women’s subordination in prostitution.

However, johns have different reasons for using prostitutes and different relationships develop. Interactions between johns and prostitutes can closely resemble any other exchange of services for money in which the parties involved treat one another as sites of subjectivity. In these cases, the exploitation of the prostitute differs little form that of any other worker in a capitalist society. Here, women and men’s roles as workers and consumers overshadow their specific roles as women and men. And men’s contribution to women’s subordination parallels that of other female-dominated industries, such as domestic work and childcare, which is not insignificant, but neither is it specific to the functional role of prostitution.

To be clear, the functional role of prostitution as a usage that is exchanged does—on a purely structural level—contribute to women’s subordination in general, but this contribution does not depend upon the harm to individual prostitutes that may or may not come about through specific exchanges. I will return to this point below.

Pornography takes on the functional role of a usage that is exchanged. However, the relationships that take place between women are different in pornography than they are in prostitution, as well as effects on women's subjectivity. The relation between men that Irigaray identifies in the scene of pornography does not refer solely to an economic exchange. Within the confines of phallocentric sexuality, pornography consists in relationships between (groups of) men, with pornographers, on the one side, and users on the other side. These relationships are sexual relationships: Men create representations of their sexual fantasies so that other men can share in these fantasies. Thus, pornography is
fundamentally a homosexual relationship. Here, women function as a "mediation prescribed by society" because within phallocentric culture explicitly homosexual relationship between men are taboo. Irigaray's analysis argues that much of pornography is a means of carrying out sexual relationship between men, although mediated through women's bodies.

Here the limitation to women's subjectivity comes in taking up the functional role of mediation in a relationship between men. According this Irigarayan line of thinking, phallocentric pornography reduces women to their intermediary role. Here, women's subjectivity—and especially women's pleasure and sexuality—play only functional roles. Women are not valued and treated as sites of subjectivity.

When we turn to pornography we see that the functional role plays an even bigger part in men's contributions, whereas the part of phallocentric sexuality becomes less significant. That is, in prostitution most men who use prostitution directly limit the subjectivity of individual women, whereas most men who use pornography contribute indirectly by support the limitations taking place in pornographic production. That is, men's pornography use supports an industry that relies upon and perpetuates phallocentric sexuality.

More specifically, the sex of pornographic production consists in large part in phallocentric modes of sexuality. The sex that takes place in the production of pornography subjects the women involved to a phallocentric sexual economy (Irigaray 1985b, 199). The phallocentric sexual economy that mainstream pornography demonstrates indeed reduces sex to a linear stimulus-response mechanism: apply friction/pressure immediately to a penis/clitoris/vagina/anus until orgasm, repeat. This
mechanistic, teleological unilateral approach ignores and eventually dulls our receptivity to any pleasure that might come from other areas of the body, any other kinds of pleasure other than strictly genital pleasure, or any other ways of relating between bodies sensually than the act of doing-to and being-done-to, in alternation. Here, we can see a parallel to the phallocentric grammar of enunciation. In both cases, the masculine subject relates to the other in a purely self-referential, self-serving manner without any meaningful reciprocity.

It seems as though women’s experience in the production of pornography supports Irigaray’s claim. For example, Candida Royalle (2000), a veteran of the mainstream industry, as well as an established producer and director of feminist pornography, describes her experience:

What I did find […] was that people think that, having been in porn, you have to be a super lover. But that’s not true at all. All it teaches you is technique and the mechanics, and I realized that I had to learn all over again what sensuality was about, and I had to get back in touch with my sensual beginnings.” (543)

Royalle certainly acquired sexual techniques as an actor in mainstream pornographic films. However, she could not transfer her skills to her life beyond the film set. For Royalle, the “mechanics” of pornography blocked sensuality. According to Royalle, the focus on technique casts the body as a collection of parts, rather than viewing the body as a collective “erogenous zone.” (Royalle 2000, 549)

As Royalle explains, the techniques or “mechanics” of phallocentric sexuality ignore the body as a whole, both hers and that of the person with whom she is having sex. The sex of pornography lacks sensuality and fails to realize the body as a single
“erogenous zone” (Royalle 2000, 543 and 549). It is not that Royalle did not find pleasure in the production of pornography. But, it did not satisfy her as a sensual being.

Again, the extent to which pornographic production limits women's subjectivity will rely upon the specific relationships that take place between the women and men involved in that production. To the extent to which phallocentric sexuality plays a part in pornographic production, the men involved contribute to the limitations to women's subjectivity that results. So, the porn actor can have a direct limiting effect on women's subjectivity.

As we saw earlier, men control the pornography industry, both its supply and its demand. This male control helps to perpetuate the phallocentric sexuality pornography expresses. Men influenced by phallocentric sexuality will make use of phallocentric pornography (i.e. purchase it and get off on it) even if they are conflicted about, or explicitly express dissatisfaction with, the content of that pornography. Loftus (2002) describes a lack of coherence between what is available and what men want to see: “People presume [that] whatever is selling must be what men want. But that doesn’t mean that men are satisfied with what they can get.” (29) This dissatisfaction is a positive sign. It suggests that phallocentric sexuality does not fully describe men’s sexuality and perhaps that phallocentric sexuality is losing some of its influence over men. However, as long as men consume phallocentric pornography, they create a demand for it. Further, men’s dissatisfaction has yet to translate into significant changes in the mainstream pornography industry—because men’s dissatisfaction has yet to seriously impact their consumption of phallocentric pornography.
Men’s control of the industry (both supply and demand) does not necessarily mean that men force women to have sex against their will, that women do not organize to protect themselves, or that there are not genuinely caring men working in this industry (see Royalle 2000, 542). But so far, women have proven much more likely than men to challenge commonplace sexual scripts in the porn they produce and more likely to seek out alternatives to mainstream phallocentric porn. Also, women’s ethically made feminist and queer porn exists primarily outside of the mainstream industry, although this is changing (Vasquez 2012). Thus male control of the industry perpetuates the phallocentric imagery we find in contemporary, mainstream pornography.

Through Irigaray’s analysis of prostitution and pornography, we see ways in which men contribute unintentionally to women’s subordination simply by embodying phallocentric modes of sexuality. That is, through sexual relationships men can perpetrate microaggressions against women. Thus, sexuality is another area in which men function as passive oppressors, without intending to do so and while remaining unaware that they are doing so. However, most men are not Johns or porn actors. And the majority of men's contributions to the limitation of women's subjectivity will be indirect.

III. Men’s Indirect Contributions: Prostitution and Pornography Use

Extrapolating from my earlier analysis of Irigaray’s notion of functional roles within a phallocentric political economy, I argue that as a release for male sexual energy, pornography fulfills a supportive role in the phallocentric political economy that uses and exchanges women and ultimately perpetuates a larger system of the use and exchange of women. These structures appear in pornography, but not only in pornography. Because the use and exchange of women in the phallocentric political economy subordinates
women, and because pornography is both a part of this economy, and a support for it, pornography qua supportive role subordinates women-in-general. Further, because pornography’s supportive role depends upon men using pornography as a release of sexual energy, we can trace the subordination that results form pornography’s supportive role back to men’s pornography use.

“Getting off” to pornography supports the structures underlying the phallocentric economies in which women do not count fully as subjects. Pornography as structural support for the phallocentric economy contributes to the subordination of all women insofar as pornography constitutes the other functional roles of the phallocentric political economy. For two reasons, my primary concern is this third form of subordination. First, the constitutive relationship between prostitution/pornography and the overall phallocentric political economy creates the most fundamental of pornography’s subordination. Second, phallocentric masculine sexuality helps sustain constitutive role of prostitution/pornography, and therefore constitutes a significant aspect of men’s contribution to women’s subordination.

**a. Support for the Virgin-Mother Economy: Prostitution**

Any reduction to a functional role (i.e. virgin, mother, or prostitute) subordinates the site of subjectivity in question. And therefore the functional role of the prostitute subordinates all members of the group “woman” insofar as this functional role is constitutive of the other functional roles (i.e. virgin and mother). This is a key contribution that an Irigarayan perspective adds to the conversation about pornography and prostitution, because it insists that these are not simply issues for sex workers, porn stars, johns, and pornography users. Rather pornography and prostitution are constitutive
of a system that limits women’s subjectivity, men’s sexuality, and social relationships between women and men in general.

The prostitute’s functional role is the production of male sexual pleasure, distinguishing her from both the virgin, and the mother. As such, the prostitute functions outside the virgin-mother economy. Men’s pleasure does not have a proper place in the virgin-mother economy. “Explicitly condemned by the social order, she is implicitly tolerated. No doubt because the break between usage and exchange is, in her case, less clear cut?” (Irigaray 1985b, 186) Because the virgin-mother economy has no room for male sexual pleasure, extramarital sex ruins women for both positions and casts them outside of the virgin-mother economy. It is only as outside this economy, as neither virgin, nor mother, that women can take on the use of producing male sexual pleasure. Further, prostitution is the outlet for men’s sexual pleasure that keeps it from disrupting the virgin-mother (i.e. reproductive) economy. Therefore, prostitution acts as a release valve for men’s sexual pleasure and supports the smooth functioning of the virgin-mother economy.

b. Support for the Virgin-Mother Economy: Pornography

My critique of pornography use depends upon pornography playing the same functional role as the prostitute. Irigaray (1985b) gives us good reasons to believe that this is the case:

In fact, the pornographic scene—tacitly or explicitly encouraged by the powers of the State—works as a space carefully portioned off for “discharge” and “pollution” ad nauseum. A place where human machines can go for periodical cleaning, where they can be emptied of their desires and possible sexual
superfluities. Human bodies, purged of their potential excesses, can return to the rut, to their familiar slot in the circuits of work, society, or family. (201)

Pornography plays a key role in the contemporary state. Porn is a means of controlling the (male) population’s desire, keeping it “in check”. Pornography staves off an excess of desire that would threaten the status of the virgin and the mother—and disrupts the economic and social order. By keeping male sexuality in check, prostitution ensures the smooth functioning of the virgin-mother economy. As an outlet for male sexual desire, prostitution allows the virgin-mother economy to work. Because the sex trade is both excluded from the virgin-mother economy, and serves to maintain it, the sex trade is the permanent, condition (or constitutive outside) of this economy.

We find the notion of prostitution as an outlet elsewhere. For example, some men who use prostitutes express the view that prostitution decreases instances of rape because men have a “safe” outlet for sexual desire (Farley, Bindel and Golding 2009, 13). This specific aspect of Irigaray’s analysis is not particularly unique. However, it does allow us to understand prostitution and pornography as a defilement of the virgin-mother economy, which is unique to Irigaray.

c. Defilement

Irigaray’s discussion of pornography allows us to better understand the use of prostitution as the state of exception in the movement from virgin to whore. Here, we see that the virgin plays an important role: “The pornographic scene can be viewed paradigmatically as the initiation and training of a woman who is and continues to be virginal with respect to pleasure that some man purports to be teaching her.” (Irigaray 1985b, 199) The woman of pornography plays the role of the virgin. The man’s role is to
introduce her to sexual pleasure (even if this only produces an performance of pleasure intended for his pleasure). In this way, pornography enacts the movement from virgin to prostitute. Through man’s instruction, woman is taken out of the virgin-mother economy and made to serve. Her initiation uses her up—defiles her—and puts her body to another use. Further, the virgin-defilement trope is endlessly repeatable. After each use the whore can become a virgin again through the fictive aspect of pornography.

In pornography, we see clear examples of the defilement of both the virgin and the mother. The woman of pornography is always already defiled, i.e. used up, and always ready to be defiled, i.e. to serve. “The [prostitute’s] body is valuable because it has already been used. In the extreme case, the more it has served, the more it is worth.” (Irigaray 1985b, 186) In “serving,” the prostitutes body is “used up,” fit neither for exchange as a virgin, nor for the reproductive function of the private sphere. The prostitute’s “service” takes her out of the specific economy of the virgin-mother. The value of “service” comes from being used, but this use is the infinitely repeatable movement from virginity to prostitution. “The pornographic scene is indefinitely repetitive. It never stops. It always has to start over. […] Pornography is the reign of the series.” (Irigaray 1985b, 202) What pornography use repeats is the defilement that takes women out of the virgin-mother economy that uses them up.

If the prostitute is “used up” it is her reproductive use that has been negated. She remains useful and maintains a value in relation to that use alone. Part of that use is exacting the movement from virgin to whore by taking her virginity. Or by teaching her new forms of his pleasure, thus, reenacting this movement from virgin to whore. The
pornographic scene takes the form or an initiation of the virgin or a forcing upon of “pleasure” by men. And this movement is endlessly repeatable.

**d. Defilement in Mainstream Pornography**

The structure of defilement that we have identified persists in contemporary mainstream pornography, in which we still see the script of virginity-defilement. The Web is full of sites in which actors are meant to look as young as possible while maintaining the assurance that they are in fact “legal”, i.e. at least eighteen-years-old. The prevalence of these “barely legal” or “teen” sites demonstrates the relevance of Irigaray’s analysis. Also, spam advertising pornographic websites tends to describe women’s genitalia as “tight”. In part, this emphasizes women’s sexual inexperience. The “tight,” “barely legal” virgin is not yet “used up”. But these sites and ads present her as “to-be-used-up”. Her value lies in her availability for defilement. Paasonen (2011) suggests that the rise in images of more mature women, such as those on MILF and cougar sites, is in part “due to consumers’ desire for alternatives to “hot teens” or “barely legal” performers.” (110) But the demand for an alternative to these latter categories also speaks to their ubiquity.

Contemporary pornography is certainly not monolithic. Alongside and often intertwined with the virgin-defilement trope, there are other common themes that allow for a different reading of Irigaray’s central economic claim that “the more [the prostitute’s body] has served, the more it is worth.” (Irigaray 1985b, 186) A common

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12 In her survey, Paasonen (2011) found that “tight” comprised 72% of the adjectives used to describe female genitalia, with “tiny” (11%), “small” (9%) and “little” (8%) making up the remainder (122-123, fig. 4.5).
theme in pornography is the “nasty girl” (Paasonen 2011, 207-210). She performs shocking feats (gang bangs, fisting, double penetration, ass-to-mouth, etc.) that go far beyond the confines of everyday heterosexual relationships (see Jensen 2007, 59-61). A popular example is the “Two Girls One Cup” video in which (apparently) one woman defecates into a cup and a second woman empties the cup into her mouth and regurgitates it back into the mouth of the first woman (Paasonen 2011, 209-210).

We can read “nasty” pornography as acting out the defilement of the virgin in a space (i.e. pornography) that is safely outside of the virgin-mother economy. The nasty acts symbolically defile women, insofar as these women are no longer virginal. However, the porn star cannot be “broken” in the traditional way, so the pornographer must seek out bizarre or disgusting means of enacting the defilement of the porn star. These “nasty women” do not contest Irigaray’s analysis, but rather support it.

We also find pornography featuring “experienced women,” for example, “horny housewives,” “moms I’d like to fuck” (MILFs) and “cougars”, which also appear to be in direct contrast to the virgin-defilement trope. The term “cougar” refers to an older woman who “preys” on younger men. Although cougars can be “hot” and it would be acceptable for men to have “a thing” for cougars, the term always seems to carry a pejorative connotation. With our understanding of the double binds that affect women in mind, it should not surprise us that the negative connotations adhere only to the woman. Although MILF is a recent product of American pop-culture, “the wife” and the suburban home have been common features of pornography since the 1940s (Paasonen 2011, 107). Paasonen (2011) suggests, “Like the wife, the MILF promises alternatives to the glossiness and bodily conformity of regular porn. She connotes realness, accessibility,
and authenticity.” (112) Paasonen (2011) describes these as “scenarios of trespassing (“Fuck somebody’s wife tonight!”) but also [as] fantasy landscapes of female sexual availability and willing serviceability […]” (111) If “barely legal” porn defiles the virgin, then, here, the inverse is the case: porn defiles “the mother”. By turning the mother to prostitute, this pornography allows the male user to invade the home and defile (other) men’s private property. We are making the private public by taking private property and putting it “back on the market.” The MILF is a mother (real or fictional). Horny housewife and MILF porn allows the user to defile his neighbor’s wife by taking her out of her reproductive role and her status as private property, which is of course a status that exist for her in a relation between men.

We could extend this analysis to two other common subcategories of contemporary pornography. The first focuses on racialized women of color specifically Asians and African Americans. These pornography images rely on racist stereotypes to position women within one of two categories: “virgin” or “nasty”. For example, websites dedicated to Asian women often play off of their innocent or adolescent, i.e. virginal, appearance, whereas websites dedicated to Black women borrow from imagery of the animalistic primitive, i.e. nasty.

Also, various “fetishes” offer a false sense of sexual diversity focusing on feet, pantyhose, or unshaven women, etc. We can read these as a defilement of the everyday, i.e. the accepted social status of virgin/mother. The “fetish” of fetish sites is not true fetishism, but rather women posed in shoes, panties, pantyhose, etc. Kaite (1995) argues that the way in which bodies are adorned in pornographic imagery takes precedence over the sheer nakedness or exposure of the body (35). However, even in this context the
“fetish object” is the woman the objects are mere adornments. The connection to the woman—her body and her social status—is still apparent. Like the suburban context of the “wife” or MILF, the fetish item creates a space for sexual desire within the everyday, while simultaneously defiling that space.

**e. Indirect Contributions**

The patterns discernable in mainstream pornography illustrate the fact that pornography takes on the social status of the prostitute and the “outside” relationship to the virgin-mother economy. The absence of sexual pleasure within the virgin-mother economy encourages men to seek pleasure and express their desires outside of this economy. This creates the woman who is “used up”—the prostitute—and therefore ready for a new use, i.e. sexual service. The prohibition on sexual pleasure also shapes the form of this expression takes, i.e. a defilement of the virgin-mother economy through the sexual use of the virgin and the exchange of the mother. In this way, the sexual use to which pornography puts women serves a higher order use: to sustain the virgin-mother economy and its reproductive function.

Pornography use offers another window into men’s “passive” role in oppression. Although men choose to get off with prostitutes or get off to pornography, most—if not all—of these men are unaware of the social, lasting effects of their choices and actions. Only if men are aware of the constitutive role that prostitution and pornography use plays in supporting the virgin-mother economy can we reasonably claim that men are aware of their role in women’s oppression. Men’s contributions to women’s oppression through pornography use are unintentional. They are also indirect. By getting off to pornography men do not directly affect the women in the images of pornography. Rather, they support
an industry that subordinates women and, more broadly, they contribute to an economy that subordinates all women. Thus, in the example of pornography use we see important ways in which men’s embodiment of phallocentric sexuality contributes indirectly to women’s subordination in general.
Chapter Three

The Practical Necessity of Men’s Task

We have seen that phallocentric culture limits the development of women’s subjectivity and women’s opportunities to express their subjectivity through processes of devaluation, constitution, and exploitation. Men contribute to these processes of subordination through myriad indirect, unintentional, and non-volitional means, including but not limited to pornography use. Men also benefit from these processes in the form of subject privileges. Further, men’s privileges come about through the same processes that subordinate women such that we can characterize this relationship as a “purchase” of men’s privilege made at the expense of women’s subjectivity.

In this chapter, I shift my focus from men’s contribution to women’s subordination to look at men’s role vis-à-vis feminist social change and I argue for the practical necessity of men’s participation in feminist social change. I begin by outlining “women’s task” within Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference, which centers on the creation and representation of new modes of feminine subjectivity and sexuality. I then turn to the example of feminist pornography as one possible means of carrying out women’s task. I draw on existing feminist and queer approaches to pornography and illustrate how these alternative pornographies can have positive effects through changes in pornographic production and representations. However, I also argue that there are limits to pornography’s potential for feminist change. Drawing on the above analysis I suggest that pornography use plays a much larger role than authorial intention in determining the meaning and effects of pornography. Therefore, as long as men’s pornography use functions according a phallocentric model of sexuality, alternative
pornographies will have limited effect on men and phallocentric sexuality. The example of feminist pornography illustrates the broader limitations that phallocentric economies, and men’s role within those economies, place upon women’s task. Because of these kinds of limitations, I argue, men’s active participation in feminist social change—what following Irigaray I refer to as “men’s task”—is necessary for the radical cultural change that Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference prescribes.

I. The Necessity of Men’s Task

As we have seen, the problem of sexual difference is a problem of relationships between women and men. We can see this most clearly in the fact that the processes of women’s subordination function in relationships of language and desire, and use and exchange, that take place between women and men. Because the problem lies in the relationship between women and men, addressing the problem of sexual difference will require women and men working together to alter their relationships with one another. But because the problem is one of a failure to relate, both women and men need to carry out change to facilitate their collaborative efforts. Hence Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference includes women’s task and men’s task as parts of what is overall a joint project.

The lack of intentional control we exercise over our actions and projects limits any transformative project, including one of feminist social change. These limits are more acute in a culture where phallocentric economies work to code behavior within its own narrow, hierarchical structures. Because of the limits of effecting intentional action, any particular action aimed at social change might also inadvertently reinforce existing social structures.
Take for example a feminist woman who wears “revealing” or “provocative” clothing (such as a low-cut top or a short skirt). She may be intending to resist social structures that lay claim to her body and her sexuality through the virgin-whore double bind. She is at once challenging a view that women ought not be sexual by being “slutty”, and challenging an assumption that women’s bodies are there for men’s pleasure/use by make a conscious, reflective decision about how she expresses her sexuality). But her behavior could also have the unintended effect of reinforcing structures of phallocentric sexuality, because many men will ogle her and take pleasure form her body with no consideration of her subjectivity (and possibly with a contempt for and violent reaction to any display of subjectivity). Ultimately, she has little control over these reactions and their further effects.

Clearly phallocentric economies work to limit the effects of feminist social change. At present, men’s primary role within those economies rests in contributing to and maintaining those structures and processes. Despite the fact that many men continually resist feminist change (or only come on board in limited, “well-meaning” ways), feminist resistance has had and continues to have a positive impact on women’s lives. To bring about the deep notion of change Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference implies a deep notion of social change. To help bring this about men change their role within society.

13 A similar kind of double-bind affects men’s efforts to take part in feminist resistance. For example, when I teach Introduction to Women’s Studies as a man, I am challenging hegemonic notions of masculinity and providing a positive role model to young pro-feminist men. But I am also reiterating a phallocentric role of male expert disseminating knowledge, as well as keeping a female academic out of work and denying the young women in my class the opportunity of having a positive female feminist role model. My efforts both further and hinder the feminist cause.
II. Women’s Task

Women’s task consists of two intertwined aspects. First, Irigaray sees the need for women to find new ways of representing themselves as subjects and in relationships with other subjects. For example, we need to stop representing women as if their only value were as sexual commodities (as we see, for example, in pornography and advertising) and instead represent women as subjects. Second, Irigaray calls for new ways of expressing and experiencing subjectivity and new ways of relating between subjectivities (both among women and between women and men).

Accordingly, women’s task within Irigaray political project is twofold. Women have to seek new ways of representing feminine subjectivity and also new ways of living and relating to others as women. We find Irigaray’s most systematic development of this project in her *Ethics of Sexual Difference* (1993a). In this text, Irigaray outlines three aspects of “women’s task”: “love of self”, “love of same” and “love of other”. In this chapter, I will focus specifically on “love of self” and “love of same”. “Love of other” as a relationship between sexually different subjectivities can follow upon these two, and so I turn to a discussion of “love of other” in the final chapter, which focuses on the concrete aspects of men’s task in Irigaray’s transformative project.

a. Love of Self

Through “love of self” individual women can contribute to building a more robust subjectivity for women in general. Irigaray (1993a) refers to “love of self” as a “detachment from what is, from the situation in which woman has traditionally been placed […].” (169) “Love of self”—as a means of self-definition—breaks with women’s dependency on men for meaning and value and therefore with women’s strictly defined
roles within the phallocentric economies: the virgin he deflowers, the mother of his child, the whore he gets off with. We can think of women’s “love of self” as female empowerment and self-reliance, as well as the self-respect and self-confidence that these require.

i. Autoeroticism

Irigaray emphasizes the role sexuality can play in creating loving subjectivities. As we saw above, women’s significance does not extend beyond their sexual/reproductive functions within the phallocentric economies. The phallocentric economies define and value these functions solely based upon their relation to men and masculine sexuality. An important aspect of women developing “love of self” is thus creating feminine sexuality that is not defined in relation to/subordinated to masculine sexuality. Irigaray suggests that on an alternate model of sexuality women have to take on a role as active, desiring subjects. “There are at least two modes of sexual pleasure for women. The first is programmed into a male libidinal economy and obeys a certain phallic order. […] But I think it is important […] for us [i.e. women] to know that another relation to sexual pleasure is available apart from the phallic model.” (Irigaray 1993a, 20) Creating a feminine subjectivity outside the bounds of the phallocentric culture requires women to develop feminine sexuality. Irigaray does not suggest that this alternative pleasure is the only option for women. But if the alternative includes a more active role for women, then it will undermine the processes of women’s subordination and begin to challenge the dominance of phallocentric sexuality.

Women’s sexuality, and in particular women’s autoeroticism, seems to be one area where significant changes within the social have taken place. Since the 1990’s and
perhaps as early as the ‘sexual revolution’ of the 1960’s, there has been an increased awareness around women’s sexuality. We see this today in the form of, for example, workshops focused on women’s orgasms, as well as references in popular culture to masturbation, and discussions of women’s dissatisfaction with heterosexual sex. Of course, more sex is not the answer if the phallocentric economies determine the significance of that sex, whatever shape it takes, i.e. to “prepare” her better to be a good lover for men.

There are good reasons to be wary of the transformative potential of “sexual liberation”. The notion “sexual liberation” characterized the early second wave of feminism in North America came under fire from radical feminist who saw “free love” as an extension of a sexual double standard that left women at the whim of men. Both sides of debate were responding the oppressive structures of patriarchy that i) reduce women’s sexuality to a means of reproduction and male pleasure and ii) ignore or limit women’s unique sexual expression. However, the radical feminist position saw the deeper issues of power that were at play in sexual relationships between women and men (MacKinnon 1989). From this perspective, ‘sexual liberation’ amounted to an increase in the amount and kinds of phallocentric sexual relationships that were taking place without changing the underlying structures of domination and subordination that ordered these sexual relationships.

In the context of an Irigarayan analysis, we can see that women’s “liberation” could easily remain within the structures of phallocentric sexuality. However, Irigaray also holds out hope for a transformation of sexuality. As we saw in chapter 1, there is little to no place for feminine desire and pleasure within the phallocentric model of
sexuality; the very notion of a ‘female libido’ appears as an oxymoron. To counter these understandings, Irigaray suggests that if women are to create a sexual desire and pleasure of the their specifically female bodies. That is, women need to ‘get in touch’ with themselves—and joyously. They need to learn to experience pleasure otherwise than in relation to masculine pleasure or imaginaries. This means exploring their bodies and their sexual pleasure on their own and outside of heterosexual relationships or the promise of them. In this way, women’s love of self as auto-eroticism, and the discovery/creation of a feminine sexuality, can challenge that piece of dominance of the masculine system of representations that undergird the subordination of women (Irigaray 1985a, 51).

The strength of Irigaray’s prescription to create a feminine autoeroticism lies in the fact that she does not set out a specific program or define beforehand what an “authentic” feminine sexuality will look like. Rather, Irigaray’s open-ended approach suggests that women explore their sexuality into unfamiliar areas, experiences and sensations: “Do what comes to mind, do what you like [...] your impulses may change: they may or may not coincide with those of some other, man or woman.” (Irigaray 1985b, 203-204) In short, she recommends that women learn to experiment in their own sexuality.

**ii. Self-Respect**

Beyond the specifically overt sexual meaning of ‘auto-eroticism’, Irigaray also seems to understand “love of self” as a kind of self-respect or self-love. This is not a narcissistic self-love, but rather something closer to respect for oneself, self-confidence, or pride in oneself. If women are to create a feminine subjectivity, this kind of respect for themselves as women will be necessary.
Self-respect allows us to ground ourselves within ourselves. For example, children who respect themselves are less vulnerable to peer-pressure and social pressure. We could understand this as a kind of resilience within systems of microaggressions that attempt to appropriate girls into a phallocentric culture: the self-confident child maintains a sense of herself in face of pressure to adopt modes of behavior that she feels to be inappropriate to her. In the context of the phallocentric culture, the system of phallocentric representations appropriate women’s complex, varied subjectivity and give it the limited significance of the three functional roles. “Love of self” as self-respect could act as a mooring against the attempt by the phallocentric economy of representation to usurp women’s significance from themselves (i.e. define women solely in relation to the masculine subject position). Of course, as we have seen above, women will not easily throw off the constraints of the phallocentric culture. Rather women will need to build these new meanings and definitions through gradual, reiterative processes.

Given the constant barrage targeting women’s body image, “love of self” will to focus on learning to love one’s body. In her account of her battle with anorexia, Abra Fortune Chernik (2012) describes the way in which her hatred of her female body and her subsequent attempts to destroy herself limited her subjectivity. Chernik (2012) draws a direct “connection between a nation of starving, self-obsessed women and the continued success of the patriarchy.” (131) For Chernik, the physical space her body occupies parallels her political power. Men tend to take up a lot of space and speak with loud voices (Henley and Freeman 2012). They are able to do this because of their relative position of power as subjects within a patriarchal society. Conversely, Chernik sees patriarchy’s attempt to emaciate women (and have them obsesses over their size) as a
way of limiting women’s power. Thus, she understands weight gain in an anorexic body—and the self-acceptance it represents—as a “political act” (132).

Chernik also calls on women to love themselves: “We must claim our bodies as our own to love and honor in their infinite shapes and sizes. […] By nourishing our bodies, we care for and love ourselves on the most basic level.” (133) In Chernik’s case, “love of self” consisted literally in nourishing herself, i.e. learning to eat again, as well as educating herself in feminist literature and accepting her adult female figure. In the context of Irigaray’s political project, we can read Chernik’s prescription as one way of grounding a women-defined feminine subjectivity in a “love of self”. In the same way that Irigaray suggests turning to female bodily experience as a means of developing a feminine sexuality, Chernik shows us how women’s “love of self” can spring from their acceptance of and love for their own bodies, as bodies with subject capacities, and not merely as male-defined functions.

Beyond the drastic example of Chernik’s near-death experience with anorexia, we should consider the many ways in which women scrutinize, criticize, and police their bodies and their behavior. I am reminded of a scene in Mean Girls (2004) in which the backstabbing clique of teen girls take turns standing in front of the mirror and naming the parts of their bodies they “hate”. Lindsay Lohan’s character risks the collective scorn of the group by not being sufficiently critical of herself. This example highlights, albeit through comedic means, the pervasive culture of self-loathing that exists among young women in contemporary society. Disdain for one’s self does not stop at bodily characteristics. Too many young women hold themselves back from: speaking in class, taking up space, being good at sports, or getting excited about creative projects. All of
these are ways in which girls hold their selves back (according to a rigorous training they have undergone since childhood) from acting like subjects in a male-dominated world.

**b. Love of Same**

The “love of self”—women’s self-respect and the development of a feminine sexuality—requires a “love of same”. “Love of same” means a love among women as women. This refers to female friends and sisters, but for Irigaray most importantly the mother–daughter relationship. Irigaray describes women’s “love of self” as a “love for the child that she once was, that she still is, […]” (Irigaray 1993a, 69) Irigaray encourages women to not only develop a love for self, but also to make a feminine future through a love for self as part of a female genealogy. I see this as including women’s acceptance of their (and their daughters’) sexual identity and sexual difference. To fully love yourself as a woman means to embrace your relationship to your mother as a woman, as born of her and as having come to life through her body.

This suggestion can raise serious problems in some instances. In cases where mothers abuse their daughters, to suggest that they learn to love their mother and their relationship and connection to their mother is inappropriate. Also, in cases of non-normative sex and gender, this kind of identification could cause children to repress these differences. We need to think of a way to talk about ‘genealogy’ in a way that does not necessary privilege the mother–daughter relationship, i.e. by leaving open the possibility of focusing on other relationships with women. Also, broadening our understanding of “woman” to include previously marginalized and excluded bodies and genders will be an important step to forming non-oppressive feminine subjectivities as genealogical projects.
Some existing projects seem to lead in this direction, for example, oral history projects, mentoring programs, and a renewed interest in breastfeeding and attachment parenting.

However, within the phallocentric economies the mother–daughter relationship does not tend to allow for women to develop loving relationships or to develop a “love of self” along this axis. Therefore, if the establishment of a love of self requires a love of same, i.e. a love among women, then it is the structures of the relationships between women within the phallocentric economies that must change.

Innerness, self-intimacy, for a woman, can be established or re-established only through the mother–daughter, daughter-mother relationship which woman re-plays for herself. Herself with herself, in advance of any procreation. This way she becomes capable of respecting herself in her childhood and in her maternal creative function. This is one of the most difficult gestures of our culture.

(Irigaray 1993a, 68)

Women must work to create a new meaning for “maternity” and the mother–daughter relationship if they are to build the self-love necessary for the establishment of a feminine subjectivity. In this way, the women’s “love of self” as the child of her mother is also a “love of same”—a happy, affirmative acknowledgment of belonging to the same sex as her mother.

The reason for this emphasis is that child–parent relationships play such an important role in the formation of identity and the entry into phallocentric economies.

The absence of a feminine subjectivity within the symbolic order could be seen as a result of, in part, the current limitations of the mother–daughter relationship. On Freud’s model, the little girl’s rejection of her mother and attempt to identify with the father is the basis
of “woman” being defined as a “lack” in relation to the penis/phallus (Irigaray 1985b, 39). It is losing the connection to the mother that the little girl is stripped of her properly feminine pleasure and the opportunity to develop a feminine identity. Within the Oedipal structures of psychoanalytic theory, “hatred” characterizes the girl’s relationship to her mother (Irigaray 1985b 37). Hence Irigaray’s (1993a) characterization of the attempt to build a loving mother–daughter relationship as “one of the most difficult gestures of our culture.” (68)

Subverting this developmental structure is essential for the development of a feminine subjectivity. Changing the identification between the mother and the daughter will be fundamental to this development. As Irigaray explains, mother and daughter “want to be able to represent themselves as women’s bodies that are both desired and desiring—though not necessarily “phallic.”” But all this would require the repetition-displacement of the maternal function [...]” (Irigaray 1985a, 36) Through “repetition” women maintain and sustain the mother–daughter relationship and the possibility for a “feminine” identity. Through “displacement” women transform the meaning of this relationship and the “feminine”. Further, developing these relationships over generations is the kind of incremental work Irigaray has in mind when she talks about creating feminine subjectivity. If nothing changes in the fundamental mother–daughter relationship, then any project of change will be limited to the lifespan of a single generation. Lasting change will require continual trans-generational transformation.

Irigaray draws upon the pre-Oedipal mother–daughter relationship, reimagining it as a basis for a feminine identity. For example, Freud points to a desire on the part of the little girl to impregnate her mother, and thus bring forth a male child (Irigaray 1985b, 35).
Irigaray suggests that valuing the little girl “for her femaleness” might in fact bring the little girl to desire a female child from her mother (Irigaray 1985b, 35).

Engendering a girl’s body, bringing a third woman’s body into play, would allow her [i.e. the little girl] to identify both herself and her mother as sexuate women’s bodies. As two women, defining each other as both like and unlike, thanks to a third “body” [i.e. the desired female child] that both by common consent with to be “female.” (Irigaray 1985b, 35)

The pre-Oedipal relationship between mother and daughter can become an origin for a shared positive femaleness. Through the relation between the two and this third, mother and daughter can define themselves and each other, as well as a feminine identity.

A “love of same” is also to be brought about through the symbolization of a feminine imaginary (Irigaray 1993a, 104). Irigaray discusses this in concrete terms calling for female religious representation (for example, St. Anne and the Virgin Mary), and the public display of mother–daughter couples (Irigaray 1993b). I find a contemporary example in the film Antonia’s Line (1995), which represents not only female agency but also the struggles and strength of the bonds between a mother and her daughter. These kinds of images can help women to build positive intergenerational relationships among themselves. If women can create more positive representations of relationships between women, then the personal imaginary of individual women and the social imaginary might begin to change such that women can live out and sustain these kinds of relationships. Positive cultural representations can act as a model for these relationships.

c. Toward a Feminine Imaginary
A question arises: “To what extent have women begun to create a feminine imaginary?” Beginning in the 1970’s, there was a swell in the number of women authors, artists, and filmmakers who have written from a female perspective in an attempt to create a female language, a female mode of representation, or a female gaze—in short, a ‘feminine imaginary’. It is not the case that all of these women have agreed on what that imaginary ought to entail. However, this proliferation of creative work is an important part of the social change Irigaray envisions. In some cases, the artist in question is conscious of creating a feminine imaginary, and in other cases they are simply creating as a woman. Bainbridge (2008) argues that there is an emerging ‘feminine cinematic’ that can be seen in the work of directors such as, for example, Jane Campion, Marleen Gorris, Samira Makhmalbaf, and Sally Potter. There are promising signs that a feminine imaginary is beginning to develop.

Although Irigaray does push for the creation of female imagery, she also claims that visual representation alone is inadequate to the real of sexuate difference (Irigaray 2008b, 116). Creating a feminine imaginary is part of a larger project of building a new culture and hence new ethical relations among women:

The world of women must successfully create an ethical order and establish the conditions necessary for women’s action…. A world for women. Something that at the same time has never existed and which is already present, although repressed, latent, potential. (Irigaray 1993a, 108-109)

If women are not going to remain bound to and defined by a masculine culture in which their jouissance is sacrificed, in which they are commodities, then they need to construct a world of their own. This world is first and foremost a world of language and symbols.
(see Irigaray 1993a, 107 and 114). But it is from these representations that concrete non-oppositional relationships can stem.

d. Love of Other

Finally, women must work together with men to build new modes of relating between the sexes grounded in non-derivative instantiations of women’s subjectivity. Irigaray understands ‘love of other’ primarily as a sexual relationship, and a means of rethinking and revaluing heterosexual sexuality and notions of the family. For example, Irigaray points out that reproduction is not the only possible meaning of sex and marriage for individuals. Individuals want sex and love to mean something other than an implicit or explicit contract to produce offspring.

Many no longer want this authority. First the women who refuse henceforth to be considered as a simple reproductive ground, who demand the right to speech, to desire, to liberty, to the “soul.” This does not mean that they no longer want children, but that they want to be able to say “yes” to engendering in themselves, that they want children born of flesh and speech, and not according to the traditional modality where the mother remains the body impregnated by the spirit of the father. (Irigaray 2002b, 108-109)

Many women and, I would add, many men, want to change this “modality”. However, wanting change is not enough to make change. This kind of deep cultural change does not come over-night. Entrenched cultural forces continue to support the subordination of sex to reproduction despite feminist (and other) struggles to resist these forces. Irigaray recognizes this and hence supports these more radical attempts to redefine the cultural
meanings of love, sex, marriage, maternity, fatherhood, etc. Indeed, this is the bedrock of her ethical and political project.

Some critics have rightly charged Irigaray with heterosexism. For example, Alison Stone says, “this philosophy is heterosexist, assuming that, being naturally different, men and women are naturally attracted to one another.” (Stone 2006, 7) Both Irigaray’s exclusion of erotic relationships between women in her account love of same, and her intense focus on heterosexual relationships in love of other, speak to her heterosexism—or perhaps to be more charitable, heterocentrism.

Focusing on love of other, Elaine Miller (2004) manages to give a much less heterosexual reading to Irigaray:

Far from simply advocating a conservative restriction of a family to a heterosexual couple (a non-philosophical reading), philosophically understood, Irigaray is insisting on a radical reconception of the family that has implications for both men and women and for all types of familial partnerships…. Again, it is less important that the couple would factually consist of a man and a woman, than that there be an even-sided polemical—in order to assure reciprocity—intersubjectivity that involves bodies and desire. (133)

“The couple”, on Miller’s reading, would not necessarily consist of a man and a woman. Rather, man and woman would represent the two halves of the couple, which might consist of any possible combination of individuals.

We have reason to reject Miller’s position, though as an accurate reading of the philosophical position Irigaray articulates in her work. There is an increasing heterosexualism throughout Irigaray’s work. I suggest “increasing” because of Irigaray’s
(1985b) essay, “When our lips speak together,” which seems to evoke a notion of lesbian separatism, even if only as a means for women to prepare themselves for an encounter with men. To my knowledge, no reference to this kind of “strategic lesbianism” appears in Irigaray’s later work. Irigaray’s heterocentrism is particularly evident in her discussion of the couple in *i love to you* (1996), where Irigaray reiterates the importance of sexual difference: “Concrete, irreducible, exteriority comes to me from the other gender, in relation to which my interiority constitutes itself in difference.” (Irigaray 1996, 145)

Further, the privilege of the relation between man and woman is clarified: “The wedding between man and woman realizes the reign of spirit. Without it, there is no spirit.” (Irigaray 1996, 147) Again, it is not the case that Irigaray neglects the relation between women, but she consistently sees this as secondary to the relation between man and woman (See Irigaray 1996, 145-146). By privileging a conception of sexual difference as the difference between men and women, Irigaray does subordinate homosexual desire and relations.

These criticisms of Irigaray’s project suggest that we adjust the scope of Irigaray’s vision of social change: Sexual difference—and in particular relationships between women and men—is not the whole the picture. But despite Irigaray’s heterocentrism, her philosophical position offers the means for an important analysis of women’s subordination and a model of social change. That is, Irigaray gives us a way of understanding the problems that exist between women and men in general (and not only in a couple) and the means of beginning to think of improving upon those relationships. On the one hand, we do not need to limit the implications of Irigaray’s philosophy to heterosexual erotic relationships. Most women and most men come in contact with “the
sexually different other” regularly. Irigaray’s project has a lot to tell us about how to create better relationships with family, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances, as well as lovers.

On the other hand, Irigaray’s “radical heterosexuality” emphasizes the importance of men for creating lasting feminist social change. If women’s relationships with men (especially romantic and sexual relationships) are integral to both our understanding of women’s subordination and to (some features of) feminist social change, then we cannot move forward unless we do so together. Men need to take part in altering phallocentric culture. If they do not, no real transformation will take place. Such a project is not necessarily heterosexist, but rather a politics of sexual difference. Rather than concentrate on the possible short-coming or dangers in Irigaray’s project, I want to elaborate upon her writings to better understand the potential of her thought for better understanding men’s relation to women’s oppression and for motivating men’s participation in feminist social change. Such a project is necessarily always incomplete. But Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference offers a starting point that takes seriously—more than any other radical feminist analysis, the need for men’s participation in bringing about a better world.

II. Feminist Pornography

In this section, I will suggest that pornography—specifically non-phallocentric heterosexual pornography—can be an important piece of an Irigarayan project for social change. However, phallocentric sexuality at work in men’s pornography use limits the effects of feminist pornography as a means of social change. Unless men change the ways in which they relate to pornography, and sexuality and women’s bodies, the effects
of feminist pornography will remain limited. The example of feminist pornography highlights the necessity of men’s role in feminist change, more generally. Unless men work to undermine the ways in which phallocentric economies function through all their relationships with women (and other men), we will never begin realize the cultural revolution Irigaray envisions.

Women ought to be able to live otherwise than the dictates of a phallocentric social order. But meaningful change requires that women themselves actively image and represent alternative modes of femininity and feminine sexuality. Feminist pornography offers a means of creating, representing, and reinforcing non-derivative feminine sexualities and subjectivities. But before we use any pornography to achieve Irigarayan ends, we will need to eliminate or diminish the various forms and modes of subordination that takes place around the production, representation and use of phallocentric pornography. In what follows, I articulate some of the interventions necessary to mitigate the subordination that stems from phallocentric pornography and leaks into feminist pornography. Specifically, I draw on existing alternative pornographies to suggest changes to production and representation. (I use the term “alternative pornography” to refer to queer, feminist and ethical pornography that seeks to create more egalitarian relationships in its production and more authentic representations of sex. The reader should not confuse with “alt porn”, which usually refers to independently produced pornography from within punk and Goth subcultures.) I close by considering two shortcomings of feminist pornography as a means of creating social change.

a. Alternative Production
Many self-proclaimed “feminist”, “queer” and “ethical” pornographers—who I refer to collectively as alternative pornographers—strive to create non-hierarchal relationships in the production of their pornography. “Queer porn is made by the sexual fringe. It’s sex-positive portrayals of fluid sexuality, diverse genders throughout the spectrum, couplings and co-partners you wouldn’t expect and sex acts that represent personal authenticity.” (Courtney Trouble as quoted in Vasquez 2012, 32) Although queer porn focuses on diverse sexualities and genders, feminist and ethical pornography share its focus on sex-positivity and personal authenticity. Alternative pornographers, in general, seek to treat their performers (women, men, genderqueer and trans* folk) more ethically by making changes to the production of pornography, i.e. by i) actively seeking the consent of performers, ii) attending to performers pleasure, and iii) giving performers creative control of production (and thereby moving away from the tired sexual-cinematic scripts of mainstream porn). These interventions in the production of pornography offer a significant alternative to phallocentric structures of production and representation and therefore promise a means of undermining the limitations phallocentric sexuality and pornography place on performers’ subjectivity.

Generally speaking alternative pornographers place performers’ consent at the center of their production (Vasquez 2012). This does not necessarily distinguish them from mainstream pornographers, who are unlikely to physically coerce actors. But, alternative pornographers do distinguish themselves by going beyond consent to also focus on performer’s pleasure. As Tina Vasquez (2012) says of ethical pornography: “the performers’ experiences of making the film are just as important as the final product.” (33) By beginning from the question about what performers find pleasurable, alternative
pornographers ensure that performers are not only consenting, but also consenting to acts that they will enjoy and acts that stem from their own fantasies.

For example, many feminist and queer pornographers create “scenes that come from [the actors’] own fantasy lives with partners of their own choosing.” (Lane 2011)

As queer pornographer Bren Ryder explains:

For *Good Dyke Porn* [Ryder’s queer porn website], the biggest factor that sets it apart from conventional porn is that the models are the creators of the scene. Whatever they want to do—be it a role play, their natural sex, kink, giggles, cuddles, or boot licking—is up to them to communicate with each other and act out their desires. We simply capture it on film. (Ryder quoted in Van Deven 2009)

The actors’ pleasure and fantasies drive the action of the scene. Rather than “must have shots”, the director or cinematographer follows the actors’ lead.

This has a further effect. When performers’ pleasures shape what happens on set and what shots the filmmaker captures, performers are exercising creative control in the production of pornography. This breaks down the distinction between filmmaker and performer and with it the hierarchy that tends to exist between these roles in mainstream pornographic production. If an actor decides on the content, and the filmmaker ensures the consent of all involved, then there is little room for coercion or undue pressure between the filmmaker and actors.

All of these aspects of alternative pornographies (consent, actor’s pleasure and fantasies, and creative control) work together to treat the performers of pornography as sites of subjectivity capable of pleasure and desire. When a filmmaker asks an actor for
her consent, the filmmaker treats the actor as someone who can give consent and whose consent matters, i.e. as a human being with autonomy and dignity. When a filmmaker draws on an actor’s fantasies and allows the actor’s pleasure to guide the action of production, the filmmaker treats the actor as site of pleasure and fantasy, i.e. as having a subjective experience of the world. When a filmmaker places actors in a position of creative control, the filmmaker treats the actor as capable and deserving of making decisions and acting on those decisions, i.e. as an agent. In short, alternative pornographers take an approach to production that treats actors as sites of subjectivity and erodes hierarchal relationships between filmmakers and actors. As such, this mode of production increases the possibility for non-phallocentric alternatives to phallocentric pornographic production. As we will see below, this does not guarantee that the performers’ fantasies do not, and therefore, that the production does not incorporate problematic aspects of phallocentric sexuality outlined above. However, this change in the mode of production is an important condition for the other aspects of change alternative pornographies promise.

b. Alternative Representation

Alternative pornographic production tends to lead to changes in representation. If actors’ consent and pleasure shape the action of the pornographic set, and if alternative pornographers allows this action to guide how they shoot the scene, then the images alternative pornography produces will have been informed by performers’ pleasure and fantasy and not by the fantasy of directors, writers, and cinematographers. In turn this increases the diversity of fantasies and pleasures that alternative pornography captures.
Further, alternative pornographers purposefully seek to represent different body
types and, more importantly, authentic female pleasure or “real sex”. Feminist
pornographer, Shine Louise Houston, demonstrates this when describing her intervention
in relation to the mainstream pornography industry: “The mainstream is all about illusion,
but by […] featuring real bodies having real sex, we’re showing the mechanics of what
the mainstream has always tried to hide.” (Houston quoted in Vasquez 2012, 34)
Therefore, alternative pornographies offer alternative representations of feminine bodies
and pleasure.

As much as these can seem to us to be positive developments along the feminist
agenda, using alternative pornographies to carry out Irigaray’s particular political project
immediately confronts us with a series of challenges: a) distinguishing between the
realness of production and the realness of pleasure, b) distinguishing “real sex” or
“genuine pleasure” from phallocentric sexuality, and d) creating change within the
mainstream industry dominated by phallocentric modes of representation. I will speak to
each of these in turn before turning to the limitations for using alternative pornographies
in service of Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference.

i. The Realness of Pleasure

The strategy of social change some filmmakers attribute to queer pornography
parallels an Irigarayan political project. That is, women can use alternative pornography
to represent feminine subjectivity and sexuality otherwise than through phallocentric
modes of representation. This kind of strategy requires not only access to a “real”
sexuality, as we saw above, but also the means of representing that sexuality within a
phallocentric order.
As Russo (2007) points out, queer and feminist pornographers employ the rhetoric of “real sex” as a means of distinguishing themselves from mainstream pornography (239). For example, as we saw above in Houston’s comment, she attempts to portray “real bodies” and “real sex” (Houston quoted in Vasquez 2012, 34). However, mainstream pornography also uses this terminology (Russo 2007, 239). Genres of professional pornography that ape the aesthetic of amateur pornography, i.e. reality pornography and gonzo pornography, also seek to show “real” sex. Even if the performers are professional actors, the cinema verité style and point of view shots of reality and gonzo pornography (in contrast to the more Hollywood production style of pornographic features) create a sense that the audience is watching people having sex, rather than watching a movie about people having sex. Interestingly, we can note a similar feature in the selfies and booty shaking YouTube videos, and the candid homemade porn, of youth culture. Whether, and to what extent, the authenticity matters for these aspects of pornified youth culture would require an analysis beyond the scope of this work. This emphasis on “real sex” raises the next question: How do we distinguish between the “real sex” of (mainstream) gonzo and reality pornography and the “real sex” of (alternative) feminist and queer pornography?

The “real” of mainstream pornography tends to refer to the representation of “an unsimulated, authentic sexual act,” what Russo (2007) calls the “realness of production.” (239) Here, the focus is on the act and whether or not sex “really happened” or was “just acting”. The realness of production is empirically identifiable. The audience can see for themselves whether the sex is “real” in this sense, and mainstream directors work to
portray “real sex”. For example, remember that Royalle (2000) noted that mainstream producers include a cum shot to prove that the sex really happened (547).

In contrast, alternative pornographers tend to employ the term “real” to refer the pleasures, desires, fantasies or experiences of the performers. We can call this the realness of pleasure. The “real” is true to the individual performer’s subjective experience and not to an empirically identifiable set of criteria that may or may not have been staged for the audience to see or hear.

Here, we can note a parallel to Irigaray’s notion of “jouissance”. Strictly speaking, jouissance refers to erotic pleasure. However, Irigaray is critical of the sexual pleasure women experience within the phallocentric economy of desire. As we have seen, Irigaray’s (1985b) own critique of pornography suggests that it does not employ a sexuality properly fitted to women’s pleasure, or jouissance (199). Further, Irigaray claims, there is another jouissance "more in keeping with [women’s] bodies and their sex […]." (1991b, 45) That is a sexual pleasure proper to women.

Russo seems to capture the latter concept of the ‘realness of pleasure’ (or proper jouissance) in her discussion of what she calls the “realness of social context”:

This is the most significant sense in which “real” queer porn is a valuable and politically vital project: rather than allowing the anti-porn forces to monopolize the interpretation of the real of sexuality and “deviance,” queer porn strategically reclaims the label “real” for images that are connected in their production and consumption to material social networks and collective experiences. (Russo 2007, 246-249)
Russo’s emphasis is on the “real” political effects of pornography. However, we can see that the political project of queer pornography relies upon a realness of (queer) pleasure to counteract the narrative of deviance. In fact, it is the recourse to an authentic queer pleasure, which is marginalized or excluded from mainstream pornography, that gives the realness of social context its political force.

**ii. Distinguishing “Real” Pleasure**

We have run into a second problem, though: If phallocentric sexuality pervades society, how do we ensure that these really “real” pleasures we might manage to tap into have not been tainted by phallocentric structures? At the end of her essay on pornography, Irigaray notes the difficulty in discovering authentic female pleasure:

> You have been taught that you were property, private or public, belonging to one man or all. […] That therein lay your pleasure. […] But, curiously enough, your nature has always been defined by men and men alone. […] You haven’t yet had a word on the subject. (Irigaray 1985b, 203)

Given the dominance of the phallocentric subject and sexual economies, men have subordinated women’s pleasure to their own and thereby wholly defined women’s pleasure in relation to men’s pleasure. Within these economies, “women’s pleasure” has never belonged properly to women, despite the fact that they are the ones experiencing it. From Irigaray’s perspective, and this remains largely true, women have had relatively little to say on what their pleasure and their desire might be apart from the phallocentric sexual economy.

So how can women (queer or otherwise) discover or uncover their “genuine” pleasure if up until now men have defined their pleasure? Irigaray offers a suggestion:
So ask yourselves just what “nature” is speaking along their theoretical or practical lines. And if you find yourselves attracted by something other than what their laws, rules, and rituals prescribe, realize that—perhaps—you have come across your “nature.” (Irigaray 1985b, 203)

The phallocentric sexual economy has narrowly defined women’s pleasure, such that any experience of pleasure that falls outside that definition promises to be properly women’s pleasure. However, simply defining women’s pleasure in opposition to what men have prescribed risks limiting women’s pleasure.

Irigaray notes this problem and alters her suggestion accordingly:

Don’t even go looking for that alibi. Do what comes to mind, do what you like: without “reasons,” without “valid motives,” without “justification.” You don’t have to raise your impulses to the lofty status of categorical imperatives: neither for your own benefit nor for anybody else’s. Your impulses may change: they may or may not coincide with those of some other, man or woman.” (Irigaray 1985b, 203-204)

The “alibi” of, “At least it’s not men’s definition of women’s pleasure,” is insufficient. Women need to break fully from the phallocentric sexual economy if they are to uncover a genuine female pleasure. This break includes avoiding defining women’s pleasure in opposition to men’s definition. As an alternative, Irigaray suggests experimentation. Women ought to do “what comes to mind” and “what they like”. This means women ought to strike out on their own following neither men’s definition of their pleasure, nor any rules other women have set down. Only through this kind of exploration, can each women hope to uncover or create what is true to her. The issue of the diversity of
pleasure is central to much of pro-pornography feminism (see, for example, McElroy 1995 and Williams 1989) as well as many queer pornographers (see, for example, Van Deven 2009). However, diversity alone will be insufficient for creating non-phallocentric sexualities.

Feminist documentarian and pornographer, Maria Engberg’s experience highlights the importance of avoiding an oppositional approach to representing feminine sexuality, as well as the benefits of an experimental approach. Her pornography debut, *Selma and Sofie* (2002), took an “oppositional” approach to content:

We made that film with strict guidelines as to what it shouldn’t contain: no exploitation, no breast implants, no erect penises. But in the end there was nothing left. Fear and caution don’t exactly encourage creativity. Sexuality comes from another source: you have to be allowed to tear down the barriers and taboos. (Wilson 2009, 30-31)

It is true that phallocentric pornography includes exploitation, breast implants, and erect penises. But we cannot define women’s sexuality or feminist pornography by the absence of these things. In her second pornographic project, Engberg took a different approach, asking various filmmakers and artists to make films according to their own desires (Wilson 2009). The result, *Dirty Diaries* (2009), is a collection of twelve short films as varied in their mode of representation as in their content. Despite the lack of “strict guidelines” the products were still significantly different than the mainstream, phallocentric norm for pornography. Although there is no guarantee that any single experiment will produce a fully non-phallocentric product, Engberg’s collection suggests
that experimentation *can* produce pornography that represents otherwise than through phallocentric modes.

There seems to be a tension between the experimentation Irigaray recommends in these passages and the more structured prescriptions for creating fecund relationships between men and women that we discussed in the previous chapter. However, the experimentation Irigaray mentions here is specifically in relation to discovering non-phallocentric modes of sexuality, pleasure, and desire, and not necessarily for building relationships with other subjects. Further, the structures and dispositions that allows for fecund relationships to develop are general principles necessary for any non-hierarchal, loving relationship between two different subjects. How these principles play out in specific relationships between singular, same subjects will differ.

*iii. Influencing the Mainstream Industry*

Mainstream pornography tends to incorporate phallocentric sexuality in its production and in its representations, and phallocentric pornography has the affect it does because of the ubiquity of mainstream pornography. Our ability to mitigate the degradation of phallocentric pornography depends, for the most part, on our ability to affect change within the mainstream industry. The extent to which alternative pornographies can mitigate that degradation depends heavily on alternative pornographies’ capacity to influence the mainstream pornography industry. Carrying out this kind of change requires that alternative pornographies move from the margins to influence dominant representational economies.

Working to create change from the inside in this way requires a mimetic strategy, a political strategy many other feminist projects deploy. As with any mimetic strategy—a
strategy that apes the style of the phallocentric culture while attempting to create change through subtle (although structurally significant) differences—alternative pornographies’ effectiveness will be tied to how closely it can mimic the original, in this case mainstream pornography, without simply repeating its structures (i.e. phallocentric sexuality and representation). But any mimetic strategy risks collapsing into, and becoming, that which it attempts to subvert. Alternative pornographies run this risk by operating within a predominantly phallocentric industry. However, changing that industry and mitigating the degradation of pornography will require just such a risk on the part of alternative pornographers.

In Susanne Kappeler’s (1985) *The Representation of Pornography*, I find a strong objection to the mimetic project of changing phallocentric pornography from within the industry. Although she does not address Irigaray’s work, Kappeler identifies a feminist response to pornography characterized by i) a proliferation of nonsexist images that ii) intervene in the mainstream pornography industry and transforms it from within (42–43). Yet, Kappeler finds this project “misguided” insofar as it attempts to create a feminist alternative to the dominant phallocentric aesthetics and “utopian” insofar as it seeks to use this aesthetic to create political change through the mainstream pornography industry (42–43).

The heart of Kappeler’s objection rests upon a notion of aesthetics as phallocentric.\(^{14}\) Turning to Kant’s aesthetics, she argues, “[…] it is a precondition […] that the aesthetic sense be *divorced from any interest in (cognition or understanding of)*

\(^{14}\) Part of the appeal of Kappeler’s objection to feminist pornography is the seemingly Irigarayan move she makes in uncovering phallocentric structures in the history of ideas.
the object of representation, and that the aesthetic pleasure derived stem entirely from the ‘genius’ of the imagination of the perceiver who is representing the object to himself.” (46, my emphasis) For Kappeler, the value of the art object comes entirely from the disinterested perspective of the spectator. Furthermore, the value of the art object stems from its status as an object for a subjective spectator. The object is ‘soulless’, i.e. does not exhibit subject capacities, and it is precisely as such that it is of value.

In Western societies we can find spectator-object structure prevalent in different art forms. For example, narrative structures often describe the subjective experience of the protagonist, but describe other characters from that subjective perspective (i.e. as objects for the reader/spectator), gallery exhibitions divorce the art object from the artist’s intentions giving the subjective role over to the viewer, and photography creates from the position of the voyeur and then leaves that position open for viewer (see 44 and 47).

The skeptical reader might observe that as such aesthetic value is not necessarily phallocentric, but merely a relation between a viewer (subject) and work (object). Kappeler responds by pointing to Kant’s definition of art in which he counts “woman” among its products. Thus, Kappeler concludes: “[...] the notion of women as objects of aesthetic perception, soulless until animated by the genius of the perceiver, is firmly grounded in the very definition of the aesthetic.” (46, my emphasis) That is, the history of the concept of aesthetics incorporates not only a subject-object relationship in which the object is completely ‘soulless’, but also in which woman takes the status of the object. And, we might add, man assumes the role of the spectator-subject. Thus, the “aesthetic” functions within a phallocentric economy.
Kappeler unearths the history of the notion of the aesthetic to display the phallocentric structures that have shaped it. She then goes a step further: Any artist having developed through a “cultural apprenticeship” creates according to phallocentric modes of representation. “The aesthetic and the beautiful have their own histories, as do the conventions of producing beautiful effects.” (45) The modes of representation that the artist employs to produce and display the art object also have a history, and more importantly this history incorporates the same phallocentric structures we find in the aesthetic more generally. “Looking at the scene framing it, taking a picture ensures this disinterestedness by imposing the structure of representation on it, opening up the positions of the white men and the Instamatic, engendering a disinterested audience.” (46, my emphasis) Because the artist’s notion of art assumes disinterested audience, the artists create for—and in doing so produces—a disinterested spectator. In turn, this disinterested audience presupposes a notion of the soulless art object, which includes women.

Kappeler then turns this historical notion of the aesthetic and the related cultural apprenticeship in phallocentric modes of representation against any would-be feminist pornographer. Women share in the cultural apprenticeship of perceiving the ‘beautiful’ in certain ways, and these ways are indebted to the male perspective of the viewer.” (45) Women, no less than men, have learned to create art in ways that assume a disinterested male spectator and a soulless female object. That is, anyone who attempts to create a work of art, in this case a pornographic story, photo, or film, will—as a outcome of her or his cultural upbringing—will create according to these phallocentric structures.
Feminist porn veteran, Candida Royalle, offers a convincing example of this apprenticeship. Royalle (2000) identifies the way in which mainstream pornography, shaped by phallocentric sexuality, habituates the people who produce it: “[…] camera people from the industry […] are already programmed to shoot things a certain way. The same even applies to female talent, who are used to performing for the male fantasy medium.” (544) Because phallocentric sexuality and phallocentric modes of production and representation are the norm within the mainstream pornography industry, producing alternative pornography from within that same context will conform to those phallocentric structures.

Kappeler’s basic claim is that alternative pornography will still present sexuality through phallocentric modes of representation. Despite alternative pornographers’ best intentions to represent a non-phallocentric sexuality, choices about working conditions or actors’ involvement in the creative process will not break from a phallocentric economy of representation. The representations will remain phallocentric and the finished product will not break from a more fundamental phallocentric economy of representation. The question becomes how to create pornographic literature, photography, and film and video that do not rely upon phallocentric structures of representation.

Kappeler offers a compelling case for the existence of deep-lying phallocentric structures within visual culture. But I think her mistake comes in assuming the futility of feminist interventions attempting to change these structures. Ironically, Kappeler’s own analysis opens the possibility of this kind of reform. If, as Kappeler claims, aesthetics is an historical concept and the phallocentric structures of artistic representation developed, i.e. are historically contingent rather than necessary, then the possibility remains open.
that the meaning of aesthetic value and dominant modes of representation can change. Further, if the artist (director, cinematographer, writer, actor, etc.) receives an ‘apprenticeship’ in these cultural (read: phallocentric) modes of representation, then there remains a possibility of retraining these people in an alternate, i.e. non-phallocentric, modes of representation.

Outside the context of pornography, the last 40 years have seen various attempts by feminist filmmakers to break with phallocentric modes of representation and to create film otherwise. These began as experimental projects, but there are an increasing number of mainstream films that “feature women in lead roles, with female-centered or female-focused narratives, which concern women’s experience and choices […]” (Bolton 2011, 30) Films such as Jane Campion’s *The Piano* (1993), Marleen Gorris’ *Antonia’s Line* (1995), Lynne Ramsay’s *Morvern Callar* (2002), and Lena Dunham’s HBO series *Girls* (2012) all exemplify an alternative to phallocentric structures. In these works, women have subjective experiences (i.e. are not mere objects) and value of the work stands on the portrayal of these experiences. In turn, these representations of women ask the viewer to identify with female characters, rather than taking a disinterested stance vis-à-vis women-objects. In short, the possibility of representing otherwise than the dominant, phallocentric modes of representation exists.

Even if Kappeler were to concede the technical possibility of the reform of phallocentric modes of representation on a practical level, she still rejects the possibility of a feminist intervention in the pornography industry. She also accuses her contemporaries of lacking practical suggestions as to how to infiltrate the industry (Kappeler 1985, 43).
Twenty-five years later, real-world examples do exist of feminist pornographers working within the mainstream pornography industry. A small group of feminist pornographers, such as Tristan Taormino, make films for mainstream companies (Vasquez 2012, 33). Existing alternative pornographies aim “to influence the mainstream industry to incorporate feminist ideas into its films […].” (Vasquez 2012, 35) As Shine Louise Houston puts it, “I basically realized that I can fuck with the industry by being in the industry.” (Houston quoted in Vasquez 2012, 34) Although few in number, these feminist pornographers working within the mainstream industry represent the always-open potential for refiguring the phallocentric modes of representation found there.

**c. The Limits of Alternative Pornographies**

Although alternative pornographies do offer promise for resisting the subordination that takes place through the production and representation of phallocentric pornography, there are two significant limits to this model of social change. The first is intrinsic to queer pornography and limits its usefulness for an Irigarayan project. The second is extrinsic and stems from that fact that the pervasiveness of phallocentric sexuality does limit the effectiveness of alternative pornographies.

From an Irigarayan perspective, alternative pornographies exhibit an important shortcoming. This limit arises in relation to Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference and specifically the project of creating more fecund loving relationships between women and men, that is, in relation to the “radical heterosexuality” of Irigaray’s project. Most existing alternative pornography is either specifically lesbian pornography or queer pornography, which focuses on a diversity of sexualities and genders. In most of these cases, for entirely legitimate reasons, the focus has moved away from heterosexual
pairings between cis-gendered couples, either completely, or to a large extent. This shift is understandable. Alternative pornographies play an important role in representing sexualities, genders, and bodies that differ from the norms of not only pornography, but also of society in general. As Russo (2007) points out, “When the regulation of pornography becomes a means of defining and policing sexual subcultures, the production of pornography becomes an important means of self-defining identity and community.” (246) Alternative pornography maintains a crucial space for lesbian and queer sexuality and thus can strengthen these sub-cultures and communities.

However, Irigaray’s project—and my own project here—focuses on intervening in and transforming heterosexual relationships, rather than offering a total alternative to them. For this reason, much existing alternative pornography, although important in its own right, does not offer the means of realizing these Irigarayan goals. There will be something of use for heterosexual couples in alternative pornographies insofar as these are non-phallocentric representations of human relationships. But if Irigaray demands anything of us, it is to attend to sexual difference. This means we need to avoid generalizing or universalizing human experience, and to avoid ignoring the difference between women and men and the lived specificity of the relationship between women and men. In the end, heterosexual couples will not be able to fully learn how to relate to one another by watching dyke porn or queer porn. Heterosexual couples require a heterosexual alternative to phallocentric pornography.

Heterosexual feminist pornography does exist. Candida Royalle and Tristan Taormino, for example, represent two generations of feminist pornographers catering specifically to a heterosexual market. The extent to which these filmmakers’ work lends
itself to the establishment of fecund relationships between women and men would require an in depth analysis that goes beyond the scope of my project.

Others acknowledge the use of cinema for an Irigarayan project. As Bainbridge (2008) points out, “[Irigay] argues for the need to speak the feminine, to articulate it and to give it room of enunciation. Cinema arguably provides a cultural arena in which to begin to explore these ideas and to put them into practice.” (2) Importantly, Bainbridge (2008) does not address the issue of pornography. Rather she focuses primarily on feature-length narrative film (ex. *The Piano, Orlando, Antonia’s Line, The Apple*, etc.)

The fact that pornography explicitly represents sexuality and desire recommends it as an important part of this very project. This is not to say that pornography is the only means of representing women’s subjectivity, or even women’s sexuality. But pornography can be an important tool and should not be ignored or rejected. Bainbridge (2008) draws on Irigaray’s philosophical work to develop a “feminine cinematic” with particular attention to issues of “representation, spectatorship and authorship.” (1) However, she quickly passes over any discussion of pornography, as do other recent applications of Irigaray’s philosophy to cinema (see Bolton 2011 and Constable 2005). We need to expand these projects to include the creation of non-phallocentric heterosexual pornography that specifically aims at the development of fecund relationships between women and men, in short, Irigarayan pornography.

The pervasive, entrenched nature of phallocentric sexuality will ensure that any alternative pornography, whether specifically Irigarayan or not, will have a limited impact on the negative impacts of pornography. That is, the transformative potential of
feminist pornography finds its limits in the dominant mode of sexuality within western culture and in the habits of average pornography users.

Feminist pornographers can change the modes of production and work to eliminate phallocentric relationships within the pornography industry. However, on the one hand, effecting change within the industry as a whole will require undermining the habituated ways of desiring, thinking, and acting prevalent among the actors and producers who make pornography, and among the users who demand phallocentric pornography via their purchasing power. On the other hand, the harms of pornographic production, although generally more acute and apparent, do not account for the majority of pornography’s contribution to women’s subordination.

As we saw in the previous chapter, the chief harms of pornography (although largely indirect) stem from men’s pornography use. Simply by getting off to pornography men reinforce structures of phallocentric sexuality and the phallocentric political economy. The problem with non-phallocentric, even Irigarayan representations of sex, is that men will still be able to get off to this pornography and possibly only get off to this. Men trained in phallocentric sexuality can use, for example, even the most egalitarian lesbian pornography as masturbation material—thus reappropriating it for use with a phallocentric sexual economy. For example, in a recent conversation a friend mentioned masturbating to *Star Trek: The next generation* as a teenager. *Star Trek* is not pornography, but for young men almost any image will do. This “pornification” of *Star Trek* illustrates the fact that we cannot count solely upon the intention of the author, or in this case director, to dictate the way in which the audience relates to the text or film.
So, men’s pornography use will need to drastically change—or end altogether, if we are going to make a significant impact on the harms of pornography. It is not only a question of content or even representation, but also of use. It is the mode or economy of men’s pornography use, i.e. “getting off”, if we are to end the relationship between pornography and phallocentric sexuality and women’s subordination. In the conclusion, I return to this issue and highlight some of the aspects of men’s sexuality that need to change to create fecund relationships between women and men. I comment specifically on the role pornography might still play, if any, in this process of change.

Despite limiting the effectiveness of feminist pornography as a means of social change, phallocentric sexuality is not an immutable monolith. Despite the exponential growth of and mainstreaming of the pornography industry. Changes in culture over the last 40 years have both weakened the dominance of phallocentric sexuality and created greater diversity within popular notions of masculine sexuality. Social change—including changes to the habits we form in relation to sexuality and pornography use—has taken place and can continue to take place. Acknowledging the limits phallocentric sexuality places on feminist pornography should not lead to despair, but rather allow us to see more clearly what challenges we must work to overcome.

This perspective also emphasizes the importance of men’s role in feminist change. If men do not begin using different pornography and using pornography differently, then we may never break the cyclical processes that sustain the dominance of phallocentric sexuality and the contributions it makes to women’s subordination. Given the centrality of the phallocentric economy of desire in the constitution of women as objects and the constitutive role of pornography and prostitution in sustaining phallocentric economies
more generally—phallocentric sexuality is a very important part of men’s contributions to women’s subordination. Although, men’s contributions do exceed those that come through pornography and prostitution, and phallocentric sexuality more generally, the example of pornography allows us to see the necessity of men’s role, or task, in feminist social change.

In the following chapter, I argue that men’s connection to women’s subordination, (i.e. the contributions men make and the privileges men receive), constitute men as “indebted” to women and that this indebtedness grounds a moral obligation for men to participate in feminist social change. In the final chapter, I suggest that although men cannot ever “repay” this debt, we can develop a model of reparations appropriate to men’s debt, grounded in education and dialogue. In conclusion, I make some concrete suggestions for men’s task, focusing on men’s need to find new non-hierarchal modes of relating to others.
Chapter Four

Responsibility, Moral Residue, and Men’s Debt

We have looked at the ways in which processes of language and desire constitute women as objects and men as subjects, thus subordinating men and placing men in a privileged position (Chapter one). And we saw that men contribute unintentionally and indirectly to women’s subordination through the embodiment of phallocentric sexuality, particularly in the use of prostitutes and pornography (Chapter two). To emphasize the practical need for men to take an active role in countering the forces that contribute to women’s subordination, we outlined some potential limitations men’s phallocentric sexuality imposes upon avenues of resistance to women’s subordination (Chapter three).

In this chapter, I turn to the question of men’s moral obligation to take part in feminist social change. I argue that both men’s contributions to women’s subordination as well as the privileges men receive from women’s subordination, place men under a special moral obligation. By the term “special moral obligation” I mean i) something other than a generic obligation to help others address injustice in general (i.e. not a natural duty of beneficence). Men’s obligation is “special” in the sense that ii) it arises out of the particularities of men’s social situation and, further, that iii) it addresses their connection to women’s subordination (i.e. does not excuse men). And finally that it iv) obligates men to redress the damage related to men’s connection to women’s subordination, i.e. that responds to the injustice specific to women’s subordination.

Drawing on Iris Marion Young’s (2007) social connection model of responsibility, I suggest men’s special moral obligation stems from their “connection” to women’s subordination. Despite Young’s explicit rejection of a liability model of
responsibility, I show that her model relies implicitly on a liability model of responsibility. Bringing Cheshire Calhoun’s (1989) insights on men’s liability for their role in women’s oppression, I offer a revised liability model of responsibility to augment Young’s social connection model.

In order to further elaborate the relationship between men’s connection and men’s obligation, I draw on Margaret Urban Walker’s (2003) work on moral luck to argue that men’s unintentional and indirect contributions create a “moral residue”. Finally, I argue, following Irigaray, that men’s obligation takes the form of a debt men owe to women. Men’s residue (from their contributions) and debt (from their privilege) combine to found men’s special moral obligation to participate in feminist social change.

I. Connection

Iris Marion Young’s (2007) social connection model of responsibility offers the resources for developing a model of obligation that derives directly from men’s privilege as men. Young develops her model as a means of addressing the structural injustices of global poverty and exploitation. Specifically, she seeks to address unintentional and dispersed contributions to structural injustice. Although Young does not focus on women’s subordination, her model remains relevant to men’s unintentional contributions to women’s subordination and the privilege men derive from women’s subordination.

a. Liability vs. Obligation

Young (2007) understands “responsibility” in two ways. To be responsible on a “liability model” of responsibility is “to be guilty or at fault for having caused a harm and without valid excuses.” (175) Young’s notion of “liability responsibility” parallels what we can call the standard model of responsibility. Young contrasts this with a notion of
“role responsibility” in which “people have certain responsibilities by virtue of their social roles or positions, as when we say a teacher has specific responsibilities, or we appeal to our responsibilities as citizens.” (175) To be “role responsible” is to have an obligation to do (or refrain from doing) something, not because we are human beings to whom universal duties apply, rather because of some specific aspect of our social situation. The difference, as Young understands it, is primarily temporal: liability responsibility looks backward toward past events, whereas role responsibility looks forward to future outcomes (175 and 178).

Beyond the temporality of responsibility the forward-looking/backward-looking distinction can refer to the source of responsibility. On the liability model, I am responsible for an action or omission that I have committed (or failed to commit). I have done wrong, i.e. acted in a way that deviated from the morally neutral background (i.e. the status quo) in which I normally operate. And because of this deviation, I am “guilty,” “at fault,” or “to blame.” Liability responsibility is backward looking in the sense that this action occurred in past, but also in the sense that my action is the source of my responsibility.

In contrast, role responsibility stems from our “social roles or positions […].” (Young 2007, 175) It is not because the teacher has deviated from the moral background through some discrete action that he is responsible to grade his students fairly. Rather, he is responsible to his students in this way simply by the fact that he is a teacher (and that certain expectations and obligations attach to that role).

We see another important difference between these two models, that is, their relation to obligation. To be responsible on the liability model is to be responsible for
some past action or omission. If I am responsible in this way, it is because I have failed to meet an obligation or transgressed a law. To say that I am “responsible for” suggests that I have committed some moral failing. But liability responsibility does not yet say anything about what future obligations might stem from this failing, for example, what I ought to do to correct for my transgression.

In contrast, to have a role responsibility is to have a responsibility to carry out some future action or outcome. If I am responsible in this way, it is because I have an obligation that I must meet. To say that I am “responsible to” suggests that I have a commitment to some carry out an action or achieve an outcome. But role responsibility does not yet say anything about whether I have met or have failed to meet this obligation. Thus, a role responsibility is an obligation specific to my social position.

b. A Critique of Young’s Model

Young (2007) suggests that her social connection model is primarily forward-looking and more closely resembles role responsibility, than liability responsibility (175 and 178). However, given their respective relations to obligation, it becomes clear that liability responsibility and role responsibility are not two mutually exclusive notions of responsibility, but rather a model of moral responsibility, on the one hand, and a model of moral obligation, on the other hand. Whereas a standard model of moral responsibility understands responsibility primarily in terms of liability, Young’s model understands responsibility first and foremost as obligation. So, when Young says her own social connection model more strongly resembles a forward-looking model like role responsibility, she means that she is less interested in attributions of blame than in isolating moral obligations that arise out of our social positions.
It is interesting to note that, for the most part, philosophers working more closely to an analytic tradition employ the term “responsibility” to refer to attributions of moral responsibility, whereas those working in the continental tradition generally use the same term to refer to obligation. So, for example, Calhoun (1989), Moody-Adams (1994), or Isaacs (2011) address the issues of men’s responsibility vis-à-vis women’s oppression in terms of justifying and making attributions of responsibility, and understand their work as supplementing a standard model of responsibility. Whereas Young (2003 and 2007) and Applebaum (2010), the latter drawing heavily on the work of Judith Butler (2005), focus on oppressors’ obligations and distance their projects from practices of blame and accountability, trademarks of the standard model (see also Lavin 2008).

Young (2007) distinguishes between the causal role we play in perpetuating structures of injustice, on the one hand, and the volitional control and intention we sometimes have as agents, on the other hand. She explains: “All the persons who participate by their actions in the ongoing schemes of cooperation that constitute these [unjust] structures are responsible for them, in the sense that they are part of the process that causes them. They are not responsible, however, in the sense of having directed the process or intended its outcomes.” (171, my emphasis) According to Young, responsibility stems from a causal relationship to processes of oppression. On Young’s model the oppressed do not necessarily escape responsibility for oppression (180). But what does Young mean when she claims that we responsible for oppression?

The fact is Young’s model does draws a “backward-looking” notion of responsibility. Young (2007) claims, we “bear responsibility for structural injustice because [we] contribute by [our] actions to the processes that produce unjust outcomes.”
(175, my emphasis) Young’s model is “forward looking” insofar as “bearing responsibility” for oppression implies having a role responsibility to partake in collective action to end oppression (179). Young’s model is also “backward-looking” in the sense that we bear this responsibility, or in other words we have this obligation, because of the role we played in systems of oppression. Young identifies the source of our obligations, or “role responsibilities,” as deriving from our “participation in the diverse institutional processes that produce structural injustice.” (176) That is, our role causes our responsibility.

Young does not completely reject liability responsibility, but rather she builds this notion of responsibility into her model. For Young (2007), the role we play in oppression founds a duty or obligation insofar as we are connected to injustices. Our role is a causal role—we help bring oppression about, maintain it, and intensify it. Having taken part in structures of oppression, we are obligated to partake in social change. For Young, our connection to oppression (in this case our indirect causal role in perpetuating systems of oppression) leaves us “at fault.” Our role responsibility stems from or develops out of our fault. So, although Young does not focus on attributions of responsibility, she does rely upon a backward-looking notion of liability responsibility in identifying the source of our obligations vis-à-vis oppression.

Young (2007) identifies an obligation to participate in collective action that stems from unintentional and non-volitional contributions. In doing so offers us a means of capturing some aspects of the moral significance of men connection to women’s subordination, while avoiding both blame, on the one hand, and excuse, on the other hand. She describes a tension between our contradictory reactions to men’s role in
oppression. “While it is usually inappropriate to blame those agents who are connected to but removed from the harm [of oppression], it is also inappropriate, I suggest, to allow them (us) to say that they (we) have nothing to do with it.” (175) Young does not want to blame those contribute to oppression through unintentional, non-volitional, and indirect means. However, she also does not want to let them off the hook completely. Therefore, we need something other than blame in order to acknowledge the moral significance of men’s connection to oppression.

The general position that Calhoun (1989), Young (2007), and I subscribe to is consistent with notions of circumstantial and constitutive moral luck. The wrongs men commit stem in large part from the fact that men are born into a phallocentric society as men and undergo socialization that influences their actions. In these terms, Calhoun (1989) and Young (2007) agree with Margaret Urban Walker (2003): “Moral luck is real and not paradoxical.” (22) That is, an agent’s responsibility really does exceed an agent’s control and therefore it makes sense to say that an agent is responsible in these cases. For us to understand circumstantial and constitutive luck as having this moral weight, we require a model of responsibility that does not limit itself to cases of intentional action.

II. A Revised Model of Liability

A backward-looking component of responsibility requires that we not excuse men for their contributions to women’s subordination. However, we have a strong intuition to excuse men’s contributions to women’s subordination insofar as they are unintentional and stem from conformity to social practices and unconscious behavior. Cheshire Calhoun (1989) notes a tension between our intuitions to both excuse unintentional contributions, and to blame (or otherwise respond to) men for their role in women’s
subordination. Through her notion of “abnormal moral contexts” Calhoun offers a way of revising a liability model of responsibility such that we can respond to men’s unintentional contributions without going so far as to blame men for those contributions. Thus, Calhoun offers the possibility of rejecting excuse as inappropriate in the face of men’s unintentional contributions and a means of maintaining a backward-looking component to a model of men’s obligation.

a. Abnormal Moral Contexts

As we have seen in our discussion of men’s contribution to women’s subordination, these contributions extend beyond intentional actions to include not only unintentional actions, but also non-volitional contributions (i.e. behavior). That is, cultural forces that influence our relation to thought, language, desire, and sexuality work through our unconscious, habitual actions. We cannot entirely attribute the attitudes, beliefs, actions, and relationships that men form to men’s volition.

Our analysis of the everyday, “micro” components of oppression challenges this assumption. The status quo is not acceptable—but implicates many of us in the harms of oppression. “Most of us contribute to a greater or lesser degree to the production and reproduction of structural injustice precisely because we follow the accepted and expected rules and conventions of the communities and institutions in which we act.” (Young 2007, 177, my emphasis) The background in which we operate everyday is the problem. The social structures are wrong, and our participation within these structures, even when unintentional and non-volitional, is not morally neutral.

Cheshire Calhoun (1989) introduces a notion of “abnormal moral contexts” to describe situations in which the majority of society is unaware certain actions are wrong.
Calhoun (1989) gives the example of professional ethicists working in business and healthcare who might make advances in moral knowledge “faster than they can be disseminated to and assimilated by the general public and subgroups at special moral risk (e.g., physicians and corporate executives).” (396) We find another example in the case of scientists and environmentalists who were aware of the harms of leaded gasoline and CFCs before such information was widely available to the general public. The environmentalists had a special moral knowledge, while the average consumer continued to purchase hairspray in aerosol containers unaware of their moral risk.

More importantly, in an abnormal moral context, a subgroup has special moral knowledge that we cannot realistically expect everyone to share. Calhoun (1989) suggests that feminists are one such subgroup (396). For example, when feminists first identified sexual harassment, marital rape, or date rape as moral wrongs, society in general did not. Isaacs (2011) rightly points out that the subgroups with special moral knowledge “do not need moral experts to understand that there is something troubling and unjust about their situation.” (170) Therefore, we ought to expand our notion of the ways in which moral knowledge and expand and who can contribute to it (Isaacs 2011, 170) For example, returning to Fricker’s (2007) notion of “epistemic injustice”, we could suggest that victims of sexual harassment living before the concept existed constituted a group with special moral knowledge akin to Calhoun’s professional ethicists.

As advanced moral knowledge becomes more widespread, the abnormality of moral contexts dissipates. For example, society in general now acknowledges the moral wrong inherent in leaded gasoline and marital rape. Eventually, the information hits a
watershed moment and people who remain ignorant after that point “ought to have known better.”

In an abnormal moral context, not all agents will be “equally capable of self-legislation.” (Calhoun 1989, 396) Importantly, this diminished capacity does not arise from an inability to partake in moral reasoning (for example, through some kind of psychological deficiency) or a general lack of moral ignorance, but rather comes about because of a lack of the moral knowledge relevant to a particular moral context (Calhoun 1989, 398). Therefore, we can imagine otherwise-morally-capable and otherwise-morally-good agents performing acts that are wrong, but the wrongness of which they are unaware. Michele Moody-Adams (1994) argues that men and other in a position of privilege maintain a “willful ignorance” around moral knowledge that would challenge their privileged behavior. Although cases of willful ignorance exist, Calhoun is correct to suggest that not all ignorance on the part of privileged individuals is willfully maintained, even if that ignorance protects or maintains privilege.

An abnormal moral context will persist so long as specialized moral knowledge remains marginalized. In these cases, the background of social norms will not reflect advances in moral knowledge. And for most of us aspects of our seemingly mundane, day-to-day activities will include wrongs of which we are unaware. Thus, the notion of an abnormal moral context allows us to capture the wrongness or moral significance of unintentional contributions to oppression.

As Applebaum (2010) rightly suggests, the general ignorance regarding non-volitional contributions to subordination within society means that we are all perpetually operating within an abnormal moral context (159). The background of our everyday
experience consists in modes of speech and bodily comportment (actions, gestures, and expressions) that are also processes of subordination. Most of us are unaware of all of the ways in which we are implicated in processes of subordination; very few of us are even aware that we are implicated in these processes.

We have established that men’s connection to women’s subordination carries a moral weight. The question remains: Should we blame or excuse men who contribute to women’s oppression in an abnormal moral context?

**b. Competing Intuitions**

Calhoun (1989) acknowledges a tension between two intuitions or “contradictory reactive attitudes” that arise in abnormal moral contexts. On the one hand, it seems inappropriate to blame men for harms that they did not intend or of which they were unaware. On the other hand, we feel a need to acknowledge the moral significance of women’s subordination and respond to those who perpetuate it.

**i. Excuse**

We have a strong intuition to excuse people for harms they did not intend, whether they were the consequence of intentional action or involuntary behavior. Standard models of liability incorporate this intuition, and accept both ignorance, and a lack of voluntary action, as excusing conditions (Applebaum 2010, 158). Ann Cudd (2006) expresses this same intuition in her discussion of the obligations of oppressors: “One cannot be held responsible for failing to act to end an immoral situation that one does not see.” (196) If someone does something without meaning to or even knowing they did it, then how can we reasonably blame? In most cases, we cannot.
Racist, sexist, and classist social structures shape our bodily comportment, and this non-volitional bodily comportment, i.e. the way we behave in our day-to-day lives as sexed, classed, and racialized bodies, contributes to subordination. Applebaum (2010) draws on George Yancy’s (2008) example of elevator ride in which he (a black man wearing a suit) is joined by a white woman:

Her body language signifies, ‘Look, the Black!’ On this score, though short of a performative locution, her body language functions as an insult. Over and above how my body is clothed, she ‘sees’ a criminal, she sees me as a threat. […] It is as if my Black body has always already committed a criminal deed. As a result, my being as being-for-itself, my freedom, is fundamentally called into question. On this score, who I have become as partly constituted through the history of my own actions is nugatory. (Yancy 2008, 846-847)

Although Yancy’s analysis is interesting, I want to turn our attention to the woman in the example—the one who perpetrates this existential violence through nothing more than an unconscious bodily reaction. Of course the woman in question might have been carrying out a subtle form of existential terrorism. But it seems much more likely that she did not intend her actions to have such effects and that she was even aware of those effects.

Applebaum (2010) argues that on a standard model of responsibility this woman would not be considered responsible for her racist microaggressions. Reasoning according to the standard model, we “will find it difficult to explain why this woman bears any responsibility [and further] may provide reasons (more accurately excuses) for believing she is in no way responsible […].” (157) Removed from the context of the processes of racial subordination that function through microaggression, it becomes
unclear how this woman’s everyday activity of riding an elevator could possibly cause harm—even raising the question of whether or not we ought to blame or excuse this woman might appear as laughable. Even if we agreed that her actions were somehow wrong or harmful, surely her complete lack of awareness that she was even doing anything that could have harmed someone must excuse her. Or so we would reason according to the standard model of responsibility.

ii. Reproach and Mitigated Response

Through our analysis of women’s subordination we have shown that ordinary men sustain the structures of subordination through their everyday activities. Cheshire Calhoun (1989) objects to excusing these kinds of contributions. Take for example the white woman on the elevator with Yancy. Let’s assume she clutches her purse. Excusing her would involve saying, “It is wrong to clutch your purse around a man just because he is black, but we don’t blame you because everyone does it.” In a context where this activity is generally thought to be morally acceptable, the “because everyone does it” will count as a justification for having done it, rather than an excuse for having done it. The excuse effaces the white woman’s wrong rather than drawing her attention to it. Let’s suppose we add: “What you did was wrong, but you only acted this way because you have been socialized to do so.” Calhoun suggests, drawing attention to the social forces shaping the agent’s action will make practices seem unalterable and agents seem unable to rise above this social conditioning (402 and 404). However, we can change. Excusing socially accepted wrongdoing has the effect of sanctioning that wrongdoing, obscuring our role in the wrongdoing and our possibility of doing otherwise (401-402).
As we saw in Chapter Two, men contribute to women’s subordination through these kinds of microaggressions. These aggressions are “micro” because they are subtle, and not because they are insignificant. The combined effect of microaggressions is not miniscule. Because the standard model of responsibility functions from set of background assumptions about deliberate actions and harms, it tends to overlook the moral significance of these kinds of interactions. However, a full account of the moral significance of oppression has to address these non-volitional contributions. And excusing these contributions is insufficient.

Calhoun (1989) responds to the tension between these two intuitions by suggesting that we are entitled to respond to men’s unintentional contributions with moral reproach, despite the fact that these men are not blameworthy (400). That is, we should not blame these men, but we ought to respond to them in some way. That is, men’s everyday unintentional contributions to women’s subordination are morally significant, and we should not excuse them.

Calhoun (1989) suggests, “The level and extent of offense seem to call for reactive attitudes predicated on moral responsibility.” (390) That is, we feel that someone should be held responsible. As in my analysis of everyday oppression in Chapter Two, Calhoun suggests the parties responsible for oppression exceed the malignly intentioned oppressor to include ordinary men:

The sheer volume of oppressive, exploitative, sexist, and power-abusing practices documented by feminists seems to call for a suitably large number of culpable agents. Indeed, talk about “oppression,” exploitation,” “sexism,” and “power relation” implicitly points toward oppressors, exploiters, sexists, and abusers of
power, that is, to the responsible villains. Yet the “villains” are mostly ordinary men, with ordinary characters, living out ordinary lives as husbands, scientists, ad men, construction workers, and so forth. Pimps, porn magnates, rapists, and self-proclaimed chauvinists are exceptional figures in women’s oppression. Without the ordinary man’s participation in routine social practices—in marriage, in the workplace, in daily conversation—oppression would not take the universal form it does. (390)

If we focus only on intentional contributions, then we will overlook the majority of those who actually contribute to women’s oppression. This perspective gives rise to another intuition, i.e. that we ought to hold ordinary men responsible for their connection to oppression. Therefore, we have reason to avoid excusing men’s connection to women’s subordination, even if we lack reason to blame men for their contributions to women’s oppression.

Further, from the perspective of those with special moral knowledge, excuse seems inappropriate. Applebaum (2010) suggests that the standard model of liability itself functions within an abnormal moral context (158). That is, as an aspect of dominant culture, the standard model of liability does not have special moral knowledge. Because the standard model of liability functions within an abnormal moral context, this model assumes that the status quo is morally acceptable. As Iris Marion Young (2007) points out the standard model of responsibility understands a harm or wrong as a break or deviation from a “normal background situation that is morally acceptable, if not ideal.” (176) For this reason, on the standard model of responsibility, excusing this behavior would make recourse to the fact that our participation in oppression is something all of us
do and something that occurs without us knowing it is happening or wanting it to happen.

On our common conception, we go about our day caught up in activities that are at worst merely permissible, and only when we “break the law” (whether moral or legal) do we do anything wrong.

A feature of abnormal moral contexts is that we contribute to oppression simply by following the status quo, by doing “what everyone does”. That is, it is our participation in the status quo—what would normally be seen as sufficient to excuse—that contributes to oppression. Acknowledging an abnormal moral context allows us to see precisely that the background situation is problem. So, acknowledging our abnormal moral context gives us some reason to avoid excusing the unintentional contributions that stem from our everyday participation within oppressive structures. In this context, excuse no longer seems appropriate.

I see the compromise inherent in Calhoun’s “mitigated response” as more important than the specific content or means of reproach. Calhoun’s revised liability model tells us something about how we can respond to men’s unintentional and non-volitional contributions. However, she does not tell us anything about how exactly men ought to react to the fact that they deserve this response. In the following section, I want to bring together Young’s insight that men’s social position (i.e. privilege) grounds a forward-looking, positive obligation to partake in feminist social change with Calhoun’s insight that we ought to hold men responsible for their unintentional contributions. I introduce the notion of “moral residue” as a means of providing evidence for the moral significance of men’s unintentional and indirect contributions. And I suggest that men’s
contributions and privilege constitute a moral debt to women. This debt consists in a forward-looking obligation grounded in men’s connection to women’s oppression.

**III. Men’s Moral Residue**

Young’s social connection model gives us a forward-looking responsibility, and specifically a positive obligation to partake in feminist social change. However, we saw that this forward-looking obligation depends upon a backward-looking responsibility, akin to liability. Calhoun’s notion of an abnormal moral context allowed us to understand why excusing men’s unintentional, everyday contributions is inappropriate, and in doing so furnished us with the means of acknowledging the moral significance of these contributions.

To emphasize the moral significance of men’s unintentional and indirect contributions, I suggest that men accrue a moral residue that grows as men continually contribute to women’s oppression through their everyday interactions. As we have seen, men’s privilege comes at the expense of women’s subjectivity. Following Irigaray (1993a), I suggest that men have incurred a “debt” in relation to this “expense”. Further, I argue that men’s debt to women demands reparation. Through this notion of debt I suggest that men have a forward-looking obligation to participate in feminist social change grounded in a backward-looking notion of responsibility for their contributions and the cost of men’s privilege.

*a. Circumstantial and Systemic Luck*

Margaret Urban Walker’s (2003) model of circumstantial and systemic luck helps make even more sense of the moral significance of men’s unintentional contributions. Moral luck refers to aspects of our moral environment that i) are not under an agent’s
control, but ii) do influence an agent’s responsibility or moral standing. Circumstantial moral luck refers specifically to “luck in those circumstances we happen to encounter which provide opportunities for excellence or disgrace.” (21) For example, men were conscripted into the military during the First World War and therefore had opportunities for bravery and cowardice their female compatriots did not. Circumstances were such that men’s moral context was very different from women’s—and neither women nor men had very much control over their moral context.

The luck at play in the conscription example is not natural, but rather the result of cultural institutions. The meaning of gender in early 20th century western culture determined whether or not any particular individual would have the opportunity for bravery (or cowardice) specific to soldiers. Drawing on Claudia Card’s (1996) notion of the “unnatural lottery”, Tessman (2005) refers to this as “systemic luck.” (13) Tessman suggests that systems of privilege and oppression play a strong role in our moral luck, which can be good or bad depending on whether or not it contributes to, or diminishes, our flourishing (13). In the conscription example, we can see that men’s privilege (i.e. being understood as the kinds of subjects capable of bravery and therefore best suited to warfare) could result in either good or bad moral luck, depending on whether or not they “proved brave in the face of the enemy”.

b. Men’s Luck

The structures of women’s subordination result in both good and bad luck for men. In our analysis of subordination and privilege we saw that privilege amounts to a flourishing of subjectivity, while subordination consists in a diminishment of subjectivity. Men’s privilege would seem to result in good moral luck. Simply by being born men,
men have a much better opportunity to develop their subject capacities and live a more fulfilling life. In contrast, women’s luck is bad. They have diminished opportunities, and forces beyond their immediate control limit their possibilities for flourishing and happiness.

However, men’s position also comes with bad moral luck, as well. As we have seen in our analysis of men’s contributions to women’s subordination, men commit microaggressions against women and perpetuate structures of subordination without meaning to or even knowing they are doing so. Simply by virtue of their position, men contribute to women’s oppression. Extrapolating from Sue (2010) comments about white Americans, we can say that men are also “victims” (although in a qualified sense) of their circumstances. Insofar as they contribute to women’s oppression, and insofar as women remain in a subordinate position, men are also unable to realize their own subjectivity beyond the limitations of phallocentric subjectivity. Thus, men’s privilege position ensures men’s everyday contributions, which amounts to bad moral luck.

Tessman (2005) suggests that both the oppressed and oppressors suffer from bad systemic luck. While women suffer “moral damage” as a result of their social position, men’s situation implicates them in “ordinary vices of domination.” According to Tessman, ordinary vices of domination lead men to be insufficiently other-regarding, while moral damage limits women’s ability to be self-regarding (63). Friedman (2009) in contrast argues that we should not believe that male oppressors cannot flourish, and that such a thought is detrimental to feminist projects. However, as I have shown there is good reason to believe that men’s subjectivity will always be limited so long as women
suffer from subordination, and further I would suggest that this limitation on men’s subjectivity gives men good reason to participate in feminist social change.

The notion of moral luck allows us to see that men’s contributions have moral significance. Although a standard model of responsibility would understand men’s unintentional and non-volitional actions as the result of their luck—and see this as reason to reject these actions as moral insignificant. On a model of systemic moral luck, we understand men’s unintentional contributions as influencing men’s responsibility and moral standing and as being morally significant.

c. Moral Residue

To the extent to which my luck contributes to my actions I accrue a moral residue. The notion of moral residue developed out of discussions of moral conflicts and dilemmas. Bernard Williams (1973) argues that in cases where an agent faces two competing obligations, the obligation that the agent does not act upon remains unfulfilled. “Moral conflicts are neither systematically avoidable, nor all soluble without remainder.” (178-179) For example, if I have to pick my daughter up from daycare at the same time that I have to meet a colleague for lunch, when I decide to pick up my daughter (and fulfill that obligation) the obligation to meet my colleague remains. This “remainder” is significant, because I have failed to meet that obligation. That is, the remaining obligation leaves a moral remainder or moral residue behind.

Moral residue can accumulate in other ways, as well. Simon Blackburn (1996) suggests that remainder or residue can accrue “independent of whether the situation is ever a quandary […]” (132) That is, moral residue builds up through minor transgressions, in addition to the moral remainder that arises out of unfulfilled
obligations. This notion of moral residue helps us think about how unintentional and indirect micro-contributions can come to have substantial moral significance.

Men’s moral residue accumulates through the incremental contributions to women’s subordination that occur in the processes of interpersonal interaction. Young (2007) understands our obligations as arising out of the fact of our “belonging together with others in a system of interdependent processes of cooperation and competition through which we seek benefits and aim to realize projects.” (175) Our mutual interdependence means each of our actions has some impact on others. Each of us acts as individuals and in doing so maintains a system that also subordinates some while benefiting others. Neither intention, nor volition, is necessary for the actions to contribute to this system. There may be no clear or direct causal relationship between (unintentional, non-volitional) actions that contribute to these processes, on the one hand, and the outcomes of the processes, on the other hand. But there is a connection between the inputs (contributions) and the outputs (harms) in a system of oppression.

Further, men’s contributions accumulate over the course of their lives. Young (2007) concentrates on our participation in ongoing processes, rather than discrete acts. Although Young raises this point in an attempt to distance herself from a focus on blame and punishment, the distinction is also important in this context. As we saw, Applebaum (2010) employs the term “microaggression” to describe the subtle, and often unintentional and non-volitional, acts of oppression that occur every day, such as Yancy’s experience in the elevator. Men commit multiple microaggression against individual women, both with those with whom they interact with on a daily basis, and those who they come across only once. Over the course of days, months, and years, men carry out
hundreds and thousands of these “microaggressions.” Taken as discrete incidences, men’s unintentional and non-volitional contributions seem insignificant. However, each individual’s microaggressions have a cumulative moral weight. Although each individual wrong is so small as to be nearly imperceptible, over the course of years a hefty moral residue accumulates through men’s ongoing interactions with women.

**d. Obligation from Privilege**

Young’s (2007) attention to our participation in ongoing processes of oppression adds to an account of moral residue grounded in moral luck. Moral luck refers to aspects of our lives that contributed to our actions or omissions but over which we had no control. Men do have some control over their connection to women’s subordination, insofar as they can learn about the ways in which they contribute to subordination and can reflect upon, and change, their behavior. Further, men’s position of privilege gives them a liberty in deciding what they spend their time learning about and how they respond to that learning. If we were only interested in assessing past actions this insight would be irrelevant. However, Young’s model allows us to focus on the way in which men’s responsibility is caught up in ongoing processes of oppression. The fact men can take control of their situation and begin to undermine phallocentric social structures and their own participation within those structures adds to the weight of the moral residue than men accrue.

I am suggesting that we adopt a notion of “subject role responsibility”. This subject role responsibility pertains to cases of circumstantial and constitutive luck in which the subject has some kind of long-term control over those circumstances and their own behavior within those contexts. Although privileged subjects’ control over the
broader social system is always partial and often only indirectly efficacious, privileged subjects have an obligation to seek social change. When privileged subjects fail to act, they are responsible for their omission. We can distinguish this long-term control from the intentional action of subject for which they are clearly responsible, that is, cases in which we can clearly trace a causal line between intentions, actions, and results. In contrast, long-term control stems from our position within a social system, agents may not even know that they have it or are exercising it. Yet their responsibility vis-à-vis their privileged social “role” accrues in the form of a moral residue.

We can distinguish the moral residue of a subject role responsibility from the moral residue that builds up due to other kinds of bad moral luck. Subject role responsibility also arises out of our role in oppressive social systems. The difference between subject role responsibility and the residue of moral luck is that our role responsibility carries with it an obligation to effect the changes that we can potentially change. Our obligation holds even if we are as-of-yet unaware of our role in the system or of the fact that we have long-term control over our situation.

This insight about men’s potential for effecting change allows us to draw together two aspects of Young’s social connection model of responsibility. As we have seen, Young (2007) understands our obligation as stemming from our role in sustaining processes of oppression. However, because we cannot tie our actions directly to the outcomes of these processes, we need some other means of specifying the degree to which we are responsible, as well as the details of our obligations. Here, Young refers to the details of our social position. That is, we are responsible for enacting social change to the extent to which our power, privilege, interest, and collective ability allow us (183).
Young goes so far as suggest that privileged persons “have special moral responsibilities to contribute to organized efforts to correct them, not because they are to blame, but because they are able to adapt to changed circumstances without suffering serious deprivation.” (184) That is, our obligation stems not only from our contribution, but also from our position of privilege.

The notion of moral residue related to ongoing processes and the possible for change ties Young’s two sources for obligation together. Our obligation arises, in part, from our contributions to processes of oppression and, in part, from our ability to effect change within these processes. Therefore our role responsibility differs, on the one hand, insofar as our ability to effect change places a stronger moral claim on us. And our role responsibility differs, on the other hand, from standard notions of role responsibility insofar as subject role responsibility does not require awareness of privilege as a condition for obligation. Rather, men’s good luck of being in a position to create change places them under an obligation to do so.

Our ability to effect change mitigates our obligation to participate in change. We can only do so much and at some point these limitations ought to weaken our obligations. Young’s reliance on social position as a means of determining our obligation serves us well for this purpose. We have seen how our contributions connect us to processes of oppression, that is, to wrongs and harms. That is, men’s good luck in being born in a privileged social position (which allows for social mobility and agency in social change) adds weight to the moral residue that accrues through men’s bad moral luck of being
implicated in women’s subordination. In this way, men’s contributions and men’s privilege work together to accumulate and strengthen a moral residue.

We can still say something more about the moral significance of privilege that goes beyond seeing it as a means of strengthening our role responsibility. In what follows I will argue that the moral significance of privilege stems not only, as Young suggests, from our ability to adapt to change, but also from a moral feature of the processes that constitute us as privileged subjects.

IV. Men’s Debt

In this final section, I introduce a notion of debt as a means of connecting the backward-looking and forward-looking components of men’s responsibility. Debt looks backward insofar as it always refers to an event or process through which we have become indebted. Unlike natural duty, debt does not simply exist, but arises out of a particular context and history. Debt also looks forward. As indebted, I am left owing. The context or history of my indebtedness leaves me obligated to pay my debtor. Thus, debt directly connects my backward-looking responsibility to a forward-looking obligation. In what follows I argue that men’s connection to women’s oppression and the moral residue that arises and increases through men’s subjective contributions and privilege leaves men indebted to women.

a. Irigaray’s “Debt”

Irigaray also uses a notion of men’s “debt” in relation to certain aspects of women’s subordination. Recalling our discussion of the role of representation in women’s subordination, we see that the neutral, generic language of Western thought along with its assumptions about masculine nature of the generic subject serve to exclude
women and felinity from the representation of theory and technical discourses. This exclusion is part of what Irigaray refers to as a “forgetting” of sexual difference or feminine subjectivity.

In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, Irigaray (1993a) suggests that men have incurred a debt insofar as Western thought has ignored or “forgotten” the body and, more specifically, the role the maternal body plays as a necessary condition for our embodied existence (127-128). Whereas women’s task consists in “searching for way to find and speak [their] meaning […],” Irigaray claims, “The meaning that can be found on the male side is perhaps that of a debt contracted toward the one who gave and still gives man life […].” (126-127) Here, Irigaray suggests that men owe a debt to women insofar as i) women’s bodies sustain life and ii) men have forgotten or disavowed women’s bodies and subjectivity.

Importantly, Irigaray does not reduce women’s value to their reproductive function. Women do give birth and rear children. But these activities are the conditions for all human life. Without women’s bodies and women’s labor neither men, nor women, would exist as we do.¹⁵ Further, phallocentric culture has not only forgotten women’s bodies, but also women’s subjectivity. We can understand women’s subordination as processes that depend upon the forgetting of women’s subjectivity. For Irigaray, men’s debt arises in relation to the forgetting of the value of women qua sites of subjectivity integral to the sustenance of human life. That is, men’s subordination of women through

¹⁵ Men’s bodies, too, are integral to the sustenance of human life. Although this value does not influence men’s debt, an important part of men’s task will be to re-imagine the male body as life giving.
processes of subordination (representation, constitution, and exploitation) has left men owing a debt to women.

b. The “Price” of Privilege

As we have agreed, the processes that produce men as privileged are the same processes that limit or diminish women’s subjectivity. Processes of subordination include relations of language and desire that constitute women as objects. For example, operating within phallocentric language, men take up the “I” without reference to the “you” of women. Without the reciprocity of these the “I” and the “you” women cannot fully function as subjects within language. Similarly, the subject of phallocentric desire asserts itself as such through recourse to women’s bodies in such a way as to leave women within an object position.

Processes of subordination also constitute privileged subjects. Picking up on this reciprocal relationship between the constitution of subordination and the constitution of privilege, Applebaum (2010) notes, “In the aforementioned elevator incident, it is not only that the white woman clutching her purse blackens Yancy but also that this somatic habit constitutes her as innocent.” (162) The same event constitutes Yancy as black/criminal/oppressed and the woman as white/innocent/privileged.

Similarly, the processes that constitute women as objects also constitute men as subjects. For example, in saying “I” the phallocentric subject affirms its subjectivity and at the same time does so in a way that leaves out (forgets) the feminine “you.” The same processes of constitution produce both men-subjects and women-objects.

Further, Applebaum (2010) claims, “In the elevator, white innocence is purchased on the back of Black criminality […].” (156, my emphasis) The white woman affirms or
“buys” her whiteness through the bodily comportment that she enacts on the elevator. However, the same actions through which she purchases her innocence constitute Yancy as “criminal.” His constitution as “criminal” costs Yancy his subjectivity to some extent. Although, the white woman enacts the purchase, Yancy pays the price.

The parallel is striking. The phallocentric subject can only come about through these processes. Therefore, women’s constitution as objects is a necessary condition for men’s constitution as phallocentric subjects. Finally, men’s privilege consists first and foremost in fact that they can experience and express their subjectivity in such a way that it has an effect in the world. Therefore, we can say that men purchase this privilege (i.e. their subjectivity) at the expense of women’s subjectivity. Men’s gain is women’s loss, and men owe a debt to those who paid for their privilege. Thus, men’s privilege constitutes them as indebted to women.

Of course, gender and race are not two separate, parallel structures that produce similar but unrelated forms of oppression. Rather, gender and race function together along with other aspects of our identities to produce a complex web of interlacing oppressions. In Yancy’s example, it might seem that race merely supplants gender in the constitution of the subject. However, gender and sexuality play would seem to play an important role in this interaction. Blackness in America is closely tied to the sexualized of black bodies. A racist perspective sees “blacks” as wild and sexually uninhibited. The “criminality” the woman in the elevator feared could not have been far removed from the aggressive, insatiable sexual appetite often associated with African-American men. Although the woman’s meeting with Yancy contributes to the social forces that maintain her whiteness and privileges she receives because of it, the experience also contributes to
the social structures that limit her: casting her as a victim and specifically a victim of sexual violence. And despite the limitations imposed by this woman’s racism, Yancy’s racialized and sexualized body perpetrates a similar limitation on the woman—without Yancy’s intention or knowledge. Thus, both parties suffer from the intersection of race, sexuality, and gender in this example.

We can note two important points in the context of this intersectional analysis. First, we can extend the analyses of oppression and privilege to other forms of oppression. For example, the constitution of racialized bodies produces racially privileged subjects. Or rather we can think of racialization as a process that bestows privileges upon and limits different bodies depending upon their racial identity within a particular social context. Second, we can also extend Irigaray’s ethics to help negotiate relationships across other kinds of difference. Of course, we cannot simply paste an Irigarayan solution on to the unique problems of race or class. But fundamental aspects of Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference could help us better think about how to relate across lines of race or class.

c. Residue and Debt

Men’s residue and men’s debt function in the absence of criteria for liability to connect men to women’s subordination and ground men’s moral obligation. Both aspects of men’s connection to women’s subordination are morally significant. Although the lack of intention and even volition on the part of men suggest that we ought not blame men for their connection to women’s subordination, the moral weight of that connection suggests that men owe women a debt. In other words, the notion of “men’s debt” allows us to capture the moral significance of men’s connection to women’s subordination while
negotiating the tension between, on the one hand, having insufficient grounds to blame men, and on the other hand, feeling that men have some responsibility vis-à-vis women’s subordination. In the following chapter we will outline a notion of reparations appropriate to the nature of men’s debt and women’s subordination, as well as some concrete suggestions for men to begin their task.
Chapter Five

Reparations and Men’s Task

We have seen that despite the fact that men’s connection to women’s subordination lacks the standard criteria for responsibility (i.e. knowledge, intention, and volition), this connection does have moral significance. Men’s unintentional and non-volitional contributions to and the benefits men receive from women’s subordination result in men owing a debt to women. We can understand men’s debt as a special moral obligation to make reparations to women. However, we cannot specify the exact amount men owe because of the indeterminate nature of the loss women’s have suffered through subordination, men’s connection to women’s subordination, and the requirements for “restoring” women’s subjectivity. Further, the nature of the moral context proscribes a return to some previous state of relationships between women and men. Therefore, the situation of indeterminacy and moral disequilibrium call for a transformative project, and the moral significance of men’s connection to women’s subordination amounts to a forward-looking role responsibility to engage in feminist social change.

In this chapter, I move from the relatively abstract discussion of moral responsibility and men’s debt to a practical understanding of men’s task. To do so, I require a model of justice capable of articulating the immeasurable or indeterminate nature of men’s debt in concrete term. Drawing on Margaret Urban Walker’s (2006) model of restorative justice, I argue that men’s reparations to women must take the form of an open-ended process. Further, we need a means of motivating men to take up their task. I argue that we need to name men as having a special moral obligation, and we need
justify this attribution. Drawing on the work of Tracy Isaacs (2011), I suggest that we should base our response to men in “dialogue”.

From this perspective, men’s task appears as an on-going process of reparations that aims at building a relationship between women and men, and responding to men’s contributions and privilege requires engaging in a dialogic relationship with men. Both this process-based dialogic understanding of reparations, and the role language plays in the problem of sexual difference, recommend dialogue between women and men as a starting point for this process of reparations. That is, men’s task begins in talking to women.

Although important, dialogue is only one aspect of relationship between women and men. We have also seen the important role at men’s phallocentric sexuality plays in maintaining women’s oppression and pornography’s potential for changing cultural representations of bodies and sex. Thus, I close the chapter by making some concrete suggestions for men’s task in Irigaray’s sexual difference as it pertains to language and sexuality.

**I. Moral Disequilibrium and Restorative Justice**

Given our characterization of the moral significance of men’s connection to women’s subordination as a “debt” owing, we need to ask next how men might repay this debt. To do so we need a model of justice that will allow us to determine the nature and scope of the reparations men owe women. I will argue that men’s debt and any reparations men owe are real yet indeterminate. A notion of corrective or compensatory justice is inadequate for articulating the nature of men’s debt and the kinds of reparations men owe. Instead we require a model of justice that can meaningfully imagine the
indeterminacy of men’s debt. I will draw on Margaret Urban Walker’s (2006) model of restorative justice in articulating a notion of indeterminate reparations. Finally, I will show that these indeterminate reparations align with the framework of Irigaray’s transformative project. Ultimately we can understand men’s debt as demanding men to pay reparations through participation in feminist social change, where feminist social change focuses on creating new relationships between women and men.

a. Compensatory Justice

I understand a standard model of compensatory justice as consisting of four fundamental features: an imperative of moral equilibrium, a focus on discrete events, a principle of proportionality, and a principle of measurability.

Compensatory justice follows an imperative of moral equilibrium. Like the standard model of responsibility, the compensatory model of justice understands wrongs and harms as deviations from a moral baseline (Walker 2006, 380). I understand this deviation as a disruption to a status quo that takes a morally neutral situation and adds a charge. Compensatory justice seeks to “discharge” the system and have it return to a neutral state of equilibrium. Compensatory justice seeks “to restore the injured person to the position that he or she would have occupied if the unlawful conduct had not occurred.” (Sunstein 1994, 319) So for example, if I break your window, a compensatory model of justice would demand that I pay you for the expense of replacing it. Before I broke the window we existed in a kind of moral equilibrium or neutral state. When I broke the window I created disequilibrium, which requires a response so that we can return to the equilibrium or baseline from which we began. The imperative of moral
equilibrium requires an assumption that we begin from, and a demand that we return to, a
state of moral neutrality.

Because of its concern with maintaining a status quo, this compensatory model
focuses on “discrete and unitary” events (Sunstein 1994, 319). Given the assumption of a
morally neutral baseline, we see that before I broke your window we did not stand in a
special moral relationship to one another. (We might have had some obligations to one
another qua fellow citizens or human beings, but these would have been reciprocal and
equal, sustaining the notion of equilibrium.) We can pinpoint the moment at which I
disrupted the status quo by breaking the window and therefore the point at which a
compensatory model of justice would come into play in attempt to reestablish that order.
Further, we can also isolate the point at which I discharge my debt and return the
situation to a state of moral equilibrium.

A compensatory model of justice also requires a principle of proportionality,
which dictates that compensation should be adequate to the injury or harm (Walker 2006,
379). The fundamental goal of equilibrium requires proportionality. To reestablish
equilibrium the payment must be more or less equal to the debt. I need to pay your for the
window, nothing less and nothing more, otherwise a debt remains and the system is out
of balance. Even if the compensation is not entirely monetary in nature, the compensatory
model functions according to an economy that seeks to “settle accounts” or return to the
null state of neutrality.

Finally, the desire for moral equilibrium with its subsequent demand for
proportionality insists on treating all debts and payments as measurable within some
system (i.e. money). In the case of your broken window there is clear a dollar figure we
can attach to a new window and the fee for installation that will set things right.

However, not all cases are so clear-cut. If your window were an irreplaceable antique, then we would have to work a little harder to find (and perhaps come to a mutual agreement about) an adequate settlement. But the imperative of moral equilibrium demands we find some acceptable payment, even if that means treating priceless objects as having a price. The demand for equilibrium and the principle of proportionality privilege clear measures over messy concepts like “pricelessness” and “non-fungibility.”

The four features of compensatory justice I describe here demonstrate that this model functions within a restrictive, rather than a general, economy. A ‘restrictive economy’, one in which a closed accounting is possible that would balance the books, in which we incur and discharge debt through reciprocal exchange and a system of equivalences, and in which the whole of exchange can be contained within finite limits. In contrast, a ‘general economy’ is an economy of excess, the impossibility of accounting and equivalence, and the inability to be contained with finite limits (Bataille 1991).

Thus, a compensatory model will be insufficient for thinking about what men owe women.

b. A critique of Compensatory Justice

A model of compensatory justice grounded in an imperative of moral equilibrium is inadequate for theorizing men’s debt and the reparations men owe to women. Both the assumption that we begin from equilibrium, and the assumption that we can or ought to return to equilibrium, do not apply.

First, we do not begin from a moral equilibrium. As Margaret Urban Walker (2006) explains,
The framework of corrective justice strains, because it has never been meant to deal with either a massive scale of serious mayhem or a protracted and brutal subjugation and mutually ramifying indignities and atrocities that characterize oppressive and violently repressive systems.” (Walker 2006, 380)

In these kinds of situations, we cannot count on anything like a neutral moral baseline. In the context of women’s subordination, the moral background or status quo is already in a state of disequilibrium. The baseline represents ongoing processes of subordination in which men are constantly accruing debt, rather than a morally neutral relationship in which all parties have an equal claim on one another. In these cases the baseline is illusory and a model of compensatory justice is unable to adequately handle such situations (Walker 2006, 381).

Second, we cannot return to moral equilibrium because both the debt and any possible reparations remain indeterminate. In part this is the case because we cannot measure men’s debt in relation either to men’s contributions, or to the harms women suffer, like we would the cost of a window. Men’s contributions to women’s oppression, especially unintentional and indirect contributions, are indeterminate and escape reckoning within a standard model of responsibility. On the one hand, because men’s contributions occur through so many minute aspects of bodily and linguistic comportment, the task of collecting these, let alone assigning some definitive value to them, seems practically impossible. On the other hand, because men are part of a system of subordination not all of men’s contributions have direct impact on women such that we could trace a clear causal relationship or isolate and rank “culprits”.

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Turning to the other side of the relation of subordination, we see that the harms women suffer are also indeterminate. As we have seen, the main “harms” of women’s subordination are diminished capacities—to express their subjectivity, to experience themselves as sites of subjectivity, and to effect change when they do express their subjectivity. This harm differs from the example of the broken window in three important ways that make it impossible to assign a value to women’s limitations. First, women’s subjectivity cannot be replaced with an identical, mass produced unit. Rather women’s subjectivity is more like the antique stained glass in that it is irreplaceable or non-fungible. Nothing can adequately “replace” women’s limited subjectivity—the closest we could come is the creation of that women’s subjectivity.

Second, unlike the broken window, women’s subjectivity never existed in a perfect, un tarnished state prior to some discrete event of subordination. So it remains indeterminate insofar as it is currently impossible to say what it is, let alone to determine a degree of damage and attach a value to it. Third, subordination affects women’s subjective experiences, and these are not something that women can recuperate. Just as nothing can adequately reimburse the wrongfully accused convict for the time he has spent in jail, nothing can adequately reimburse women for their experience of living as a limited site of subjectivity. We cannot turn back the clock; we cannot give someone back her life.

Conversely, we cannot quantify the gains men receive through these processes of constitution or the subsequent benefits men experience insofar as they can express and experience their subjectivity. Subjectivity is not only non-fungible, but also invaluable. Because we cannot put a precise value of men’s privilege, we cannot accurately measure
the debt that men might owe vis-à-vis these ill-gotten gains. In all these cases, men’s debt remains indeterminate because the nature of subjectivity is such that exceeds any model of equivalence.

Further, we cannot return to a moral equilibrium, because we cannot determine the reparations required. In part this is because, without being able to measure the harm or debt, we cannot employ a principle of proportionality. But more importantly, a model of reparation that seeks to return to a previously existing equilibrium will be inappropriate. As we mentioned above, women’s subjectivity has not yet existed. Therefore we cannot specify what it is we would be “returning” to. And, finally, the notion of “return” ignores the fact that the initial state of “moral equilibrium” was actually a culture that systematically subordinated women.

Given the indeterminacy of men’s debt and the systemic nature of women’s subordination, the idea that we could compensate women and return to a baseline “as if nothing had happened” is not only implausible, but also deeply insulting. Justice cannot be an attempt to “return” to some previous ideal state by settling accounts and reestablishing a moral equilibrium. The only way is forward. The question of debt and reparation becomes, “How do we move forward in such a way as to do justice to the harms women have suffered and the benefits that men have reaped because of these harms?”

c. Margaret Urban Walker’s Model of Restorative Justice

Walker’s (2006) model of restorative justice points to a way forward. Other critics of compensatory justice have made suggestion for reparations in similar contexts. For example, Roy Brooks (2004) develops an “atonement model”; Thompson (2002) also
focuses on building, rather than repairing, relationships; and de Greiff (2006) suggests that “reparations programs should express and create conditions for recognition, civic trust, and social solidarity between victims and others in societies undergoing political transition.” (Walker 2006, 377-378) However, Walker’s (2006) draws on these discussions and offers a more comprehensive account as well as one that is very well suited to an Irigarayan approach to these issues. Importantly, Walker (2006) theorizes from the assumption that we do not share a morally neutral baseline or equilibrium.

“Restorative justice begins from and defines itself in terms of the reality of violation, alienation, and disregard among human beings.” (Walker 2006, 382) Beginning from this position of disequilibrium, Walker’s approach reflects the reality of situations of oppression better than a compensatory model.

“Restoration,” Walker (2006) stresses, does not refer to a return to normal (384). Rather, “restoration refers to repairs that move relationships in the direction of becoming morally adequate, without assuming a morally adequate status quo ante.” (Walker 2006, 384) Walker neither clearly defines “moral adequacy,” nor does she explicitly suggest that such a definition is impossible. She does claim that morally adequate relations require confidence and trust between parties and a shared hope that changes will be made and sustained (Walker 2006, 384). Mutual confidence, trust, and hope seem like necessary tools for a project of establishing moral adequacy, but do not determine moral adequacy. Restoration, on Walker’s model, is a process of seeking moral adequacy where the meaning of moral adequacy is always at stake.

Walker understands restoration as an open-ended process, rather than a series of acts aimed at a definitive, predetermined outcome. This understanding significantly
shapes Walker’s model, because—insofar as it is ongoing and never finally determined—an open-ended process requires communication or dialogue between parties.

The nature and meaning of restitution or compensation in restorative justice should emerge from a practice of communication centered on the needs and understandings of victims as well as wrongdoers’ deepened understanding of the nature and meaning of the victims’ loss and of the nature and extent of their own responsibility. (Walker 2006, 385)

Rather than determining moral adequacy prior to any reparation (for example, through recourse to a predetermined moral equilibrium), the process of reparation includes a conversation that seeks to define “moral adequacy” as it pertains to the particular situation. Restoration can include other means of reparation, even monetary compensation, but it will also always include a “practice of communication.”

The open-ended, communicative nature of Walker’s model means that new responsibilities can come to light throughout the process of restoration.

Restorative practice is […] dynamic with respect to responsibility. It may not be necessary to establish responsibility extensively, exclusively, or certainly in order to engage in restorative justice: restorative justice practice may be the way to discover, induce, deepen, extend, and clarify responsibilities that are unnoticed, resisted, or denied at the outset of a process, or have been reassuringly assigned to some small number of target individuals.” (385-386)

Unlike a compensatory model that requires a determinate measure of harms suffered and the compensation owed before any reparation takes place, Walker’s notion of restorative
practice recommends a process of reparation and most importantly a conversation about harms and wrongs. Through this conversation all parties can gain new understandings of the harm and subsequent responsibilities.

These practices of communication place the quality of relationships between individuals and groups front and center. Walker (2006) understands the notion of disequilibrium from which a model of restorative justice begins as a “disregard or violation of acceptable human relationships […].” (382) Walker’s model attends to violent or oppressive relationships such as the relationships that exist between women and men within a phallocentric culture. Beginning from a disequilibrium of relationships, the restorative model takes the repair or restoration of relationships as its “guiding aim.” (379) “In restorative justice, what demands repair is a state of relationship between the victim and the wrongdoer, and among each and his or her community, that has been distorted, damaged, or destroyed.” (383) Again, “repair” does not mean a return to some previous state, but rather a process that moves toward moral adequacy (384). “The direct concern of restorative justice is the moral quality of future relations between those who have done, allowed, or benefited from wrong and those harmed, deprived, or insulted by it.” (385) Walker’s model of restorative justice is fundamentally oriented toward building relationships, that is, creating a future in which the status quo no longer consists in the “disregard or violation” of relationships.

Drawing on Young’s role responsibility and Walker’s notion of repair, we can understand men’s reparations in terms of a demand for men to participate in feminist social change. Further, we can see these restorative practices as taking the form of an open-ended process or “dialogue”. Although we cannot determine the scope and nature of
men’s reparations from the outset, by returning to Irigaray’s analysis of the phallocentric economies of desire and language, we can pinpoint two starting points (language and desire) for this restorative process to get off the ground. I will return to a concrete discussion of this process and some things men can do to get it started. But the question remains as to how to go about getting men involved in feminist projects. So, I first want to turn to the issue of motivating men to partake in this kind of project.

II. Motivating Social Change

The question of motivating men’s participation breaks down into two further questions. First, given that we have shown that the standard criteria for liability are lacking in the case of men’s connection to women’s subordination, we need to ask how we ought to justify particular attributions of responsibility in this context. This is a problem of justification. Second, given that we have shown both blame and excuse to be inappropriate responses to men’s connection to women’s subordination, we need to ask what kind of response is appropriate. This is a problem of response practices.

Walker’s model of restorative justice is well suited to situations of unintentional and non-volitional contributions, as well as privileges that accrue in virtue of a situation of oppression. As Walker points out, conversation of this kind can be a means of educating responsible parties and allowing them to come to a more full understanding of their responsibilities. Therefore, a notion of justice as a process or practice is particularly helpful for addressing the case of men’s connection to women’s subordination. This notion of educating and motivating men to partake in the process of reparation figures heavily in both Calhoun’s (1989) and Young’s (2007) justifications for responding to men’s connection to women’s subordination, (as well as Calhoun’s (1989) and Isaacs’
(2011) suggestions for appropriate response practices. We need to consider not only the practical point of making a response (i.e. motivating men to partake in social change), but also the reasons we offer men when making this response. Specifically, men’s debt acts as a justification for responding to men (beyond the point of doing so).

We have noted that men are indebted to women and have an obligation to partake in feminist social change. That is, men’s connection to women’s subordination is morally significant. The moral weight that attaches to men’s contribution is sufficient to lend credence to Calhoun’s (1989) intuition that men’s connection to women’s subordination seems “to call for reactive attitudes predicated on moral responsibility.” (390) We need more than a theoretical appraisal of the moral significance of men’s debt; we need to respond in some way to men.

Blame is the standard response to cases where an agent is responsible for some wrong or harm. However, in the case of men’s connection to women’s subordination we lack the standard justifications for blame, i.e. intention and volition. Blame is inappropriate in this case. However, we have also seen that excusing men’s connection to women’s subordination ignores the moral significance of this connection. And saying nothing will have the same effect because men are largely unaware of their contributions and their privilege. In comparison, we can imagine situations in which an agent is aware of the harms he or she has caused and feels an appropriate regret or remorse and makes other attempts at reparation without needing encouragement.

As I noted above, we are left with two questions: The first question refers to justifications for response, i.e. what criteria might justify responding to men in the absence of standard justifications? And the second asks about response practices, i.e.
what kind of response is appropriate in the absence of blame? I want to begin with the question of justification and move on to the question response practices.

a. “Justification” and “Point”

According to Calhoun (1989), we have other good reasons to respond to men’s oppressive behavior, even when the men in question are not blameworthy. Calhoun’s (1989) argument rests on the distinction she draws between the “justification” of response and the “point” of response. “Justifications appeal to things like rationality, ability to take the moral point of view, having moral knowledge and moral reasoning skills, having free will (at least in the sense of not being overwhelmed by causal determinants), and so on.” (405) On the standard model of responsibility, justifications for blame rely upon agent-indexed features. That is, justification is primarily a question about the agent’s abilities, knowledge, and intentions.

Calhoun suggests that there is another kind of question we can ask, a question about the point of making a response. Here, she focuses on the fact that attributions of praise and blame license “reproachful or approving responses […].” (Calhoun 1989, 405) Reproach, she suggests, has certain practical benefits by “publicizing moral standards, (2) conveying the obligatory force of moral commands, and (3) sustaining our sense of ourselves as self-legislators.” (405) When we reproach someone we announce that the thing she did was wrong, remind or inform her that she has an obligation do otherwise, and reinforce the sense that she is capable of doing otherwise. Further, Calhoun (1989) suggests that these three “benefits” of reproach are important for moral progress, not only of the individual, but also of society in general. Reproach can teach me about my obligations or remind me that I am responsible. And reproach can be a useful tool in
transforming an abnormal moral context by publicizing new moral standards and
encouraging agents to conform to them. Based on this distinction, Calhoun (1989) argues
that the point of reproach is sufficient to warrant reproaching men, and that justification
(of the type necessary for blame) is unnecessary for reproach in these cases.

b. Justification Beyond Point

I agree that making a response to men’s connection has an important point, i.e. to
make men aware of their connection to women’s subordination and of their obligation to
engage in feminist social change. Responding in this way should make men less likely to
contribute to women’s subordination and therefore diminish men’s moral risk (Calhoun
1989, 405-406). And response will also make men more likely to actively engage in
feminist social change (Young 2007, 178). However, we need something more than just the
point of response to justify responding to men’s connection to women’s
subordination. In what follows I will argue that relying solely on “point” in justifying our
response to men i) risks responding to parties who do not deserve this response and ii)
limits the ability of our response to achieve its point. But first I want to make some
terminological distinctions.

Calhoun (1989) is correct to distinguish between “justification” and “point.”
Justification refers to the reasons we accept in support of making a response, whereas
point refers to the overall effects of response. However, Calhoun (1989) relies on the
point of response (i.e. the effects of response) as a reason for making a response (i.e. as a
justification). In other words, Calhoun (1989) employs “point-indexed” justifications for
response. We can contrast this with the standard model of responsibility, which relies on
“agent-indexed” justifications such as the agent’s knowledge, intention, or volition. So
rather than reject justification in favor of point, Calhoun (1989) adopts point-indexed justifications in lieu of agent-indexed criteria. This distinction between point-indexed and agent-indexed criteria bears importantly on what resources we may or may not have available to motivate men’s participation in feminist social change.

Additionally, we understand agent-indexed justifications as part of a broader category of “connection-indexed” justifications. Knowledge, intention, and volition can all have a bearing on the moral significance of an action because they connect an agent to that action and to the consequences of that action. Further, we have seen that unintentional and non-volitional action, as well as one’s social position, can “connect” an agent to a morally significant event or situation. To accept any of these criteria as reasons for making a response to men would amount to a “connection-indexed” justification, even if the standard criteria were lacking.

The distinction between point-indexed and connection-indexed justifications is important because even in the absence of agent-indexed criteria (i.e. intention and volition), connection-indexed justifications remain integral to response.

Calhoun (1989) overlooks connection-indexed criteria other than the standard justifications for blame. She introduces the notion of point into her conversation of abnormal moral context as a means of saying why reproach is warranted in these contexts. That is, point comes into play for Calhoun in those contexts where we cannot refer to the agent’s intention. She claims, “In abnormal contexts, decisions about responsibility cannot be both justified and have a point.” (406) However, Calhoun conflates justification with agent-indexed justification. It is not the case that we cannot have justifications for responding to abnormal moral contexts—Calhoun relies upon
point-indexed justifications in these contexts—but rather that we cannot have agent-indexed justifications. Because she creates a strict distinction between justification and point, Calhoun misses the possibility of drawing on connection-indexed justifications for response, and thus relies solely on point-indexed justifications.

The first problem with a solely point-indexed justification for response is that it risks responding to the wrong parties. When we are operating on a standard model of responsibility, we are wary to lay blame where there was no wrong. No one should blame an innocent party. Similarly, in making our response to men’s connection to women’s subordination, we ensure that we are responding to those who do have a connection to women’s subordination. However, point-indexed justifications alone cannot insure that our response will be appropriate in this way. When I elaborate the point of response, nothing in my account specifies to whom I make my response.

Recall that Young (2007) distinguishes between a “backward looking” model of responsibility and her own “forward looking” social connection model. According to Young these two models also take a different approach to response: “The point [on the social connection model] is not to blame, punish, or seek redress from those who did it, but rather to enjoin those who participate by their actions in the process of collective action to change it.” (178) Young does not clearly distinguish between justifications for response and response practices. However, she does adopt a “forward-looking” response practice, i.e. calling on others to participate in social change (181). And, as we see in the passage above, Young justifies this response in terms of its point, i.e. creating social change. However, in rejecting the assignment of blame wholesale, Young also relies solely upon the point of response in justifying response.
Young’s reliance on point has some questionable implications. Young can justify reproaching men for having contributed to women’s subordination simply by saying that doing so will increase the number of people participating in social change. However, no part of the justification says that she can only reproach those men who actually contributed to women’s subordination. By the same reasoning, Young could justify reproaching anyone for having contributed to women’s subordination, if it will serve her pragmatic end of getting more people involved. But that means it could involve holding innocent parties responsible. And that seems counter-intuitive—or just plain wrong. We should try to get people (men) involved, but we should be honest in doing so.

If we rely solely on a point-indexed justification for response, our response will not track the moral feature that actually warrants making that response. In the same way that a murder’s intentional action makes her deserving of blame, men’s debt makes men deserving of a response. When we say that we do not want to blame or respond to anyone that does not deserve it, we mean anyone that does not have the appropriate moral connection to that event or situation. To ensure that our responses track this moral feature, we need to accept this connection (whether in the form of moral responsibility or a moral debt) as justification for that response.

Calhoun’s model of response avoids this problem, but only because she implicitly relies upon a connection-indexed justification for reproach in abnormal moral contexts. Calhoun (1989) suggests that “a commitment to moral improvement seem to require” reproaching men because of the practical effect it will have, i.e. educating men about their role in oppression, motivating them to change, and confirming their identity as
moral agents (405-406). However, Calhoun (1989) also implicitly depends upon a connection-indexed justification for reproaching men, i.e. they did something wrong.

We will remember that Calhoun’s (1989) interest in abnormal moral contexts is not that they mitigate the past wrong, but rather the blameworthiness, of men’s actions. Cashed out in my terminology, Calhoun’s central question is, “How ought we respond to wrongdoers, in cases where we cannot justify blame according to agent-indexed criteria?” Calhoun’s notion of reproach depends upon the “point” of making such a response, but it also implicitly depends upon the wrongs men have committed. In doing so, Calhoun (1989) relies on a connection-indexed justification, i.e. “wrongness.” Further, it is because Calhoun adopts this connection-indexed justification that her response tracks men’s contributions to women’s oppression and ensures that she will not reproach those who do not deserve it. We need to supplement point-indexed justifications with connection-indexed justifications, not only to ensure that we respond to those who deserve it, but also that we do it for the right reasons.

**c. Response Practices**

If we want men to participate in feminist social change, then we should try to increase the likelihood that our response to men’s contributions and privilege will achieve its point. If the point of response is to raise awareness among men about their connection to women’s subordination, or to increase their engagement in feminist social change, then we need to give them good reasons to do so. When we respond to men, we will need to say why we are reproaching them or calling them to action. Pointing out injustices that all of us have an obligation to address, as Cudd’s (2006) model would have us do, does nothing to say why men might have a special moral obligation to participate in feminist
social change. Not only do we need to rely upon connection-indexed justifications in making a response, but we also need to offer connection-indexed justifications as part of our response.

Giving justifications alongside response seems particularly appropriate in the context of men’s debt and the model of restorative justice that we discussed earlier. If men’s reparations should take the form of communication between women and men, and if we expect me to learn more about their own responsibility through this process, then it seems necessary that we offer men justifications for engaging them in this process and for asking them to participate. That is, we need to explain to men their connection to women’s subordination and its moral significance, which means offering connection-indexed, and not only point-indexed, justifications for doing so.

In the context of the restorative practices of communication, we begin to see the shortcomings of both Calhoun’s (1989) and Young’s (2007) models of response. As we have seen, it would be insufficient to simply call men to action without any reference to the moral significance of their connection to women’s subordination. Young’s forward-looking model of response needs a supplement. Calhoun’s notion of reproach does some work here, insofar as she suggests explicitly naming men as “oppressors” in an attempt to make them aware of their connection to women’s subordination.

However, reproach also falls short. Abnormal moral contexts, or states of disequilibrium, are situations in which various parties disagree about who and what is right and wrong. The point of response is a shift from an abnormal moral context to a normal moral context, to educate wrongdoers about their wrongdoing, i.e. to share “special moral knowledge” with those who are unknowingly committing wrongs.
However, Isaacs (2011) points out that we cannot even guarantee a unified “special moral knowledge.” The members of the group will not necessarily be equally informed, and they could very well disagree about what is wrong and why (170–172).

Attuned as she is to the fundamental disagreement that exists within the state of moral disequilibrium, Isaacs (2011) offers an alternative response practice:

Where there is not uniform agreement, those who have some insight into the issues and information about the relevant moral questions and the relevant points of view. The idea is to bring more people into the dialogue, to urge more people to examine what was previously unexamined. [...] The main point is to force attentiveness in agents who are already, for the most part, morally reflective or sensitive. (173–174)

Dialogue, on Isaacs’ model, is a means of navigating the state of disequilibrium by engaging various parties in conversation, rather than simply blaming, reproaching, or placing demands on them. Importantly, Isaacs’ insights ask for an increased reflexivity on the part of those who would lay claim to “special moral knowledge”, while still offering a way forward toward an increased awareness of our responsibilities. Thus, Isaacs’ (2010) notion of “dialogue” supplements the restorative practice of communication.

Further, many men are unaware of their connection to women’s subordination and therefore of their debt and obligation. So, the response we make to men’s connection (in the absence of a justification for blame) means educating men about their connection and obligation. The process of response as a project of education and motivation, as well as the nature of a situation of moral disequilibrium, suggests the need for communication and dialogue between women and men. If justice demands men partake in feminist social
change, and feminist social change first requires a process of education and motivation, then men’s participation in the response practice of dialogue is also a restorative practice and the first step in their process of making reparations.

Dialogue comes with risks. Both the moral significance of men’s connection to women’s subordination, and the pragmatic goal of getting men involved in feminist social change, suggests that explicit reference to men’s contributions and benefits are the topic of the conversation. However, phallocentric discourses demand rational justification and the give and take of reasons. By engaging in this style of conversation, we rely on a model of giving accounts that has traditionally excluded or marginalized women and women’s knowledge and that operates on a phallocentric model of the subject as self-identical, complete, and fully self-aware. Further our analysis has shown that phallocentric language is a key component in the processes of women’s subordination. Engaging in restorative practices of communication and dialogue risks reiterating these structures and undermining the process of justice. We need a way forward that will allow us to navigate the dangers inherent in engaging in a conversation between women and men within the context of a phallocentric culture.

III. Men’s task

The way forward for men remains somewhat unclear. Men’s obligation demands that they should partake in feminist social change. But the futural temporality of feminist social change is such that we cannot determine the parameters of that change (i.e. creating and representing feminist subjectivity and creating a culture of sexual difference). Therefore, men are obligated to partake in an open-ended project of cultural transformation.
a. Discourse

The way forward for men will require building new relationships with women. As we have seen, language plays a central role in the development and expression of subjectivity. For women to create new feminine subjectivities and to represent those subjectivities, we will all require new modes of relating through language. This linguistic transformation is a key component in Irigaray’s model of social change, and therefore an important part of men’s task. From an Irigarayan perspective, we see that the restorative practice of dialogue will also have to include a transformative process. This process will involve women and men work together to create a new foundation upon which this dialogue can take place. However, a transformative project must begin from the concrete situations of the present and build toward a new future. We cannot wait until we meet all of the conditions of a non-hierarchal dialogue between women and men before we begin to speak to one another. Even if this were possible, we will only ever develop the conditions for a non-hierarchal dialogue through a conversation with one another. Therefore, dialogue, including justifications for our response to men, remains an important stage in the transformative process.

By changing the way in which men relate to women through language, men can make changes to a significant number of relationships in which they find themselves. The key intervention will be to break down the solipsistic grammar of enunciation and the self-referential “I” of the masculine/obsessive utterances. Irigaray offers us the example of ‘I love to you’, a way of expressing love that allows for an interval between two subjects (Irigaray 1996). Irigaray also stresses the importance of listening and silence.
Given the grammar of enunciation typical of discourse between women and men in phallocentric culture (which Irigaray bases on her analysis of obsessives and hysterics), men need to learn how to hear women speak. Specifically, men need to hear women say “I” and, more general, speak as subjects of language.

Hearing women’s subjectivity requires a mode of listening appropriate to the ethical relation between the sexes. This is a listening that is aimed neither at content or information, nor at affect or sentiment (Irigaray 1996, 116). Rather, it takes as its target the unknownness or irreducibility of the other (Irigaray 1996, 116). The listening that follows the question, “Who are you?” can be understood in terms of the distinction between the indicative and the interrogative. This listening does not seek as its response an indicative statement that would answer and effectively shut down the question. Rather, listening, in the sense intended here, would work to keep the question open. It would be a continuation of the question, a circulation of the open space of the interrogative. In this way, through listening, we can cultivate the open relationship towards the becoming of the other. Building non-hierarchal relationships through listening will facilitate the development of non-hierarchal relationships in other aspects of women and men’s lives.

An important part of listening is paying attention. I am sure that we have all been in a room full of men and women in which the men carry on a conversation among themselves. In these situations, women often remain silent. If they do speak, it is quite common that men will ignore their contributions, and often interrupt them or talk over them. I have seen this play out in gatherings with friends, classroom discussions, and professional meetings. Quite often men fail to create any space in which women might begin to be heard.
Perhaps one of the most important things men can do is cultivate the silence in which men can listen to women. Cultivating silence can quite simply mean to stop talking. Men tend to dominate conversations, fill classrooms and meeting rooms with their voices, ideas, and plans for action. Women, as subjects capable of participating and sharing ideas, are left out.

Cultivating silence can also take a more active form through questioning. Questioning can be an active means of creating a space in which the other can speak and in which we can pause and listen. The significant feature of the listening that follows the “Who are you?” is that it is marked by silence. In listening, I give silence to the other. Silence is “an openness that nothing or no one occupies or preoccupies.” (Irigaray 1996, 117) Silence is the space of the unknown, the unassimilated. It is the irreducible difference between us, and as such it must be protected and respected.

The origin, if I can say this, of the love between us is silence…. This silence which exists between the subjectivity of man and woman must not be overcome either in words or in representations, but must be protected, cultivated, generated, also historically, so that it becomes more refined and shared. (Irigaray 2000, 62)

This is the role of the question: to come near the other while respecting her silence. For this reason, the question, “Who are you?” must foster and maintain silence.

Irigaray’s notion of the “Who are you?” need not only take the form of this particular question. The “Who are you?” is a particular kind of question that invites the other to speak and that creates a space in which to listen to the other. Of course, some questions are not genuine: “Are you wearing that to the party?” “What do you think you are doing?” “What are you, stupid?” However, genuine questions can function as
invitations. Although questions can take the form of a declaration or imperative, questions are for the most part invitations. Conversation analysis shows us that every part of speech can have different effects depending on the context in which it is deployed. However, questions generally signify a position of ignorance, weakness, and vulnerability. In asking a question I can show my ignorance, my limitations, and my vulnerabilities—each of which makes me open to another subject. A question not only asks the other, but also asks the other for a response. Already the interrogative form includes an invitation to speech and offers a welcome to the interlocutor.

Questioning and listening maintain the difference of the other while creating a space or freedom from which the other might speak. The response, whether hesitant or confident, contradictory or rational, must not be taken as an end of questioning and listening. It is listening, which is neither active nor passive, that allows for this “silent space” in which the other might manifest herself (Irigaray 1996, 118). In this way, it is through questioning and listening that I maintain respect for the irreducible difference of the other. And, therefore, through these practices, men can begin to cultivate a new relationship in language with women.

b. Pornography

Men’s relationships with women consist in more than just language or discourse. As we saw in earlier chapters, desire and sexuality also play important roles in the ways in which men contribute to women’s social subordination. For this reason, I return to discussion of phallocentric sexuality and pornography as a means of beginning to articulate some possible directions for men’s task of making reparations to women.
We saw above that pornography contributes to women’s degradation in two ways: by reinforcing phallocentric sexuality and by working to maintain the phallocentric subject economy. In modeling non-phallocentric sexualities, alternative pornographies can help erode the dominance of phallocentric sexuality among men. However, men can use any pornography to “get off” and this fact limits the influence of non-phallocentric representations on men. In the end, we will need to go to the root of the problem: Men and boys will need to transform their predisposition to “get off” to pornography. This will require going beyond pornography to effect change in men’s and boy’s sexuality more generally. In what follows, I make some suggestions for the changes men and boys might make to their relationship to pornography that align with Irigaray’s overall project of developing fecund relationships between women and men.

i. Modeling Fecund Relationships

As we have seen above, pornography contributes to boys and men’s socialization related to how they view women’s bodies and how they interact with to women. To the extent to which this is true, changing the representations of pornography to present non-phallocentric sexual relationships would go a long way in combating this training and could lead to re-training men and boys in a new mode of sexuality. As alternative pornographic representations begin to infiltrate the mainstream, we might begin to see a change in the training boys and men receive through their pornography use.

Currently, feminist pornographers do make educational videos and give talks on sexuality. For example, Taormino has directed a series of educational pornographic videos that are produced and distributed by a mainstream company (Vasquez 2012, 33). This kind of work is important for helping women explore their sexuality in a positive
environment. However, feminist pornography does not necessarily go far enough in modeling the kind of fecund relationship between women and men that an ethics of sexual difference demands. If this re-training in sexuality is to go beyond non-phallocentric modes of sexuality to build fecund relationships between women and men, mainstream pornography will also need to reflect Irigarayan ideals and educational videos (from a heterosexual perspective) will need to target boys and young men.

ii. The Fecundity of the Couple and Men’s Sexuality

Let us recall the features of the fecund relationship between two that we referred to as the couple. This relationship of mutuality takes place through dialogue, which includes both questioning the other and listening to the other, touching and being touched and cultivating and circulating energy. We have seen that the structures of the phallocentric subject economy and the position and functions of women within this economy, in combination with men’s phallocentric sexuality, hinder the couple from developing. Women do not develop the subject capacities and the relation to the desire necessary to enter into fecund relationships as subjects. At the same time, men’s subjectivity and sexuality does not include a sufficient capacity for receptivity to develop appropriate forms of questioning, listening, touching and being touched. For these reasons, women and men—as a couple—face a series of barriers to the cultivation and circulation of energy that the fecundity requires.

At the end of the previous chapter, we saw the ways in which men need to develop their sexuality, and the ways in which they relate to women, to cultivate fecund relationships between the sexes. To recap: Consent does play an important role, because it respects the autonomy of the other as a site of subjectivity. However, on Irigaray’s
relational model of ethics, respect for autonomy is not sufficient. On this model, consent is crucial because it is the most fundamental way in which dialogue enters into the sexual relationship. Asking about consent requires questioning and listening to the other in a mode of invitation that always holds open the possibility of rejection. The dialogue of consent calls for a limitation to men’s appropriation of the feminine other and an increased vulnerability in relation to the other.

The dialogue of consent can open a space for a further discussion about pleasure and a questioning that moves from “Is this okay?” to “What would you like?” Here, we see a shift from treating the other subject as autonomous to treating the other subject as an agent and as a source of her own pleasure. In these kinds of questions about consent and pleasure and the listening that must properly follow upon these questions, men can already begin to practice receptivity, which in part means seeing and treating the other as capable of taking on an active role in the relationship (i.e. being a subject).

Receptivity must also become fully and generally bodily in nature for men to enter into fecund relationships. Phallocentric masculine sexuality reduces touching to genitals and penetration, as well as the techniques that are necessary for leading up to penetration (i.e. “foreplay”). Physiology aside, the active/passive dichotomy of the phallocentric subject economy leaves this role of penetrating to men. Women do not penetrate/touch; men are not touched. For example, phallocentric sexuality views fellatio more as an act of penetrating women, rather than an acting of touching on the part of an active female subject. Phallocentric masculine sexuality does not leave a conceptual space for men to take on the receptive role of the one being touched. Seeing and treating
women as subjects—as capable of actively touching—must come hand in hand with men taking on a receptive role that allows them to be touched.

Only once men take on the more open, vulnerable position of receptivity in dialogue and in touching can women and men come together in such a way that will cultivate and circulate energy between two different subjectivities. The movement of energy that founds the couple requires two subjects who are both active and receptive. By balancing out the power relationship between subjects through this active-receptive dyad, the couple allows for energy to pass between two in a way that does not fall into hierarchal relations of force and coercion. In the couple, energy can flow between two and build, rather than taking aim at the other and discharging itself through acting on a passive object. The final question is this: What role can pornography play in these processes of transformation?

iii. Pornography use in relationships

I want to suggest some ways in which men can incorporate pornography use into the project of developing a non-phallocentric sexuality and fecund relationships with women. This is not an unqualified endorsement of pornography use. Given our current social situation and the dominance of phallocentric modes of sexuality, pornography use is generally limiting for men and their relationships with women. For this reason, I will mention two specific ways in which pornography use might aid in the development of fecundity, as well as two risks that accompany such a project.

First, women and men might use pornography as a means of initiating a dialogue about sexuality. This strategy requires a conscious effort on the part of women and men to develop non-phallocentric modes of relating, as well pornography that lends itself to
this task. Some men use pornography as a means of encouraging or coercing women into acts with which they may be uncomfortable (ex. anal sex, bondage, fellatio, extra-vaginal ejaculation, etc.). If the pornography in question is non-phallocentric, or better yet Irigarayan, then the representation of sexuality and relationships should be such as to mitigate this kind misuse and to encourage a more positive dialogue.

Second, an important part of developing non-phallocentric sexualities for both men and women will be to explore diverse modes of relating. We noted above Irigaray’s suggestion for experimentation as a means of uncovering non-phallocentric modes of pleasure and desire. By using non-phallocentric pornography, women and men might very well broaden their sexual imaginaries. Alternative and Irigarayan pornographies could help women and men discover new, more egalitarian and fecund ways of relating to one another.

An important aspect of these suggestions is that women and men use pornography together as part of their sexual relationship and not solely as a means of getting off. Here, pornography acts as an inspiration for dialogue and touching and not just as masturbation material. However, there is a risk even in this intermediary role. The couple is fundamentally a relationship between two subjects and two bodies. Using pornography as a guide for relating, or as a way of intervening between subjects, risks distracting from the relationship between subjects. For example, women and men might adopt alternative modes of relating without exploring their own pleasure and desire, or women or men might feel pressured to engage in activities with which they are uncomfortable. In short, the couple risks relating through pornography (and its sexual imaginary) rather than using pornography as a means to foster their own dialogue and touching.
Further, given the number of men who have already embodied phallocentric modes of sexuality and who rely upon pornography for getting off, making an unqualified recommendation to incorporate pornography—even alternative or Irigarayan pornography—into a relationship is dangerous. My chief claim is that before men bring pornography into their sexual relationships with women, they first need to address their own personal relationship with pornography. That is, they need to stop getting off to pornography. Further, they need to take a reflective perspective on their sexuality and their relationships with women. Given how early men develop the physical and psychological habits of phallocentric sexuality, we need to address these issues through education during boys formative years.

iv. Sex Education

Over the last 20 years, various educational projects in relation to gender and sexuality have targeted boys and young men. For example, high schools in Calgary have developed a program for teaching boys about sex and gender in a space where they can comfortably discuss these topics (Bielski 2012). This type of program is incredibly important for working against hegemonic masculinity and phallocentric sexuality. However, from an Irigarayan perspective, this kind of same-sex sex education also has limits vis-à-vis an ethics of sexual difference.

In general, boys can learn about why it is wrong to degrade women and how their own attitudes and actions in relation to women contribute to that degradation. Specifically, these courses would need to address the degradation that stems from getting off to pornography. Given the role that pornography plays in training boys in hegemonic
masculine sexuality, i.e. getting off and the degradation of women, pornography ought to be in sex education.

However, from an Irigarayan perspective, same-sex sex education courses leave out an important part of sex education, that is, communicating and relating across sexual difference. There is no reason we cannot teach boys and girls to talk to one another about sex. Creating a space in our society where boys can speak openly about their sexuality is an impressive and important achievement. However, we need to see this as a step in a process that ends with the successful navigation of sexual difference and relationships across sexual difference.

Through changes in pornographic representations, men’s relationships to pornography (especially in relationships) and the way boys learn to interact with pornography we can make significant changes not only in the degradation of associated with pornography and pornography use, but also with phallocentric sexuality and subjectivity more generally. In this way, we cannot only remove pornography’s impediments to the development of fecundity and human freedom, but—with care—use pornography to aid in this project.

So, we see that sexuality and language hold important positions in men’s task. One reason dialogue figures in Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference in this way is because men’s task remains indeterminate. Men’s debt defies quantification, and therefore men’s reparations must remain indeterminate. Because we cannot specify the parameters of men’s task, we need to understand men’s task as an open-ended process of reparation. Dialogue between women and men will be indispensible to working through this process.
Sexual relationships are important to men’s task because men are always already in relationships with women—and, in general, sex is the most prominent feature of these relationships. Therefore, the process of determining men’s task must involve some suggestions for improving upon women and men’s romantic and sexual relationships. As we have seen, this also includes men making changes to their sexuality. In the conclusion, I make some further suggestions for changes men need to undertake as part of their task in an ethics of sexual difference.
Conclusion

I. Renouncing Privilege

In discussions of the privilege of oppressor groups, we commonly find suggestions that men and other oppressors “renounce” their privilege (Cudd 2006, 196) or become “traitors” to their privileged group (Bailey 1998). Naomi Zack (1999) draws critical attention to the notion of being a “traitor” to one’s race or gender, as well as the notion of “privilege” more generally. In the context of the present project, these kinds of suggestions raise important questions: What does this kind of suggestion mean in a context where many of men’s privileges coincide with the features of subjectivity often taken to be necessary for agency and responsibility in the social, political, and ethical spheres? Should men give up being subjects? How might men accomplish this project? And would this abdication guarantee or even contribute to the creation of a feminine subjectivity or non-hierarchal relationships between women and men?

From an Irigarayan perspective, “renouncing” privilege would seem to entail giving up on the subject privileges that come from being (and being seen as) “the subject” in western culture. But what would this mean? We cannot simply replace rational thought with irrationality, reason giving with unjustified belief, and activity with passivity. “Renouncing” privilege must mean something else for men.

In “renouncing” their privilege, men must turn first and foremost to their relationships with women. Currently, women and men’s relationships are unethical, because the subjectivities that women and men embody, and live out, are limited. Men must work with women to create subjectivities amenable to non-hierarchal relationships. This will include making changes to masculine subjectivity: the ways men speak to
women, the ways men’s bodies take up space, the ways men think about women’s capacities for rational thought and emotion, the ways men see women’s bodies, and the ways men have sex with themselves and with women. This list is not exhaustive. But it gives us a place to start.

Before men can “renounce” their privilege, they need to know that they benefit from women’s oppression, the ways in which they benefit, and that they should work against their privilege. Most men do not know, or do not want to believe, that they contribute to women’s oppression. Most men reject the fact that they benefit from women’s oppression. Most men even deny the fact that contemporary Western culture systematically subordinates women. So men need to begin the painful process of accepting these facts and thinking about and acting on their implications.

Men seem to have very little motivation for working to undermine their own position of privilege or to end women’s oppression. I hope that men will learn about the ways in which their privilege harms women and perhaps more importantly how women’s oppression limits men’s ability to develop fecund relationships with women. And I hope that as men learn these things they will come to see that they have much to gain from joining in the labor of ending women’s oppression.

Our discussions of responsibility and the justification for responding to men’s responsibility are very important in this context. If we are going to teach men about their task, then we need to be able to articulate reasons why men ought to partake in this task and to provide the kinds of reasons men will understand. Giving these reasons to men, justifying our claims of responsibility and our demands for participation in feminist social change, will be a first step. Doing so requires justifying our response to men in terms of
their past connection to women’s oppression. Men need to understand that they are both responsible for women’s oppression and responsible to women. Because the model of responsibility I elaborated in Chapter four contains both backward-looking and forward-looking components, it allows us to cast men’s task as both an act of reparation for men’s participation in and benefit from women’s oppression, and a project of social change.

Further, the immeasurable quality of men’s debt shapes men’s task. Because we can never know precisely what any particular man owes, men’s debt remains indeterminate. Thus, we saw that the reparative aspect of men’s task takes the form of an open-ended process. And the key component of this process is the dialogue between women and men that helps to determine the parameters of men’s reparations and begins to define men’s task in further detail.

Dialogue will be integral to realizing men’s task. The first role of dialogue will be one of education; we need to begin by talking to men and boys. We need to let men know that that they contribute to subordination, that they receive privileges form this subordination, and that these privileges are undermining men’s ability to relate to women. Men need to come to see the ways in which women and men suffer from the structures of phallocentric subjectivity and culture.

Only once men begin to understand the parameters of their privilege, can they begin to “renounce” it. Here dialogue will take on another meaning: searching for a way of speaking with women and a way of creating a reciprocal dialogue between subjectivities. This discussion will be the beginning of men taking on their task. Through this discussion further aspects of men’s task will begin to take shape.
Once men begin to learn about their connection to women’s subordination, they can begin to take a more active role in creating social change specific to their connection to women’s subordination. Part of this task will be to help educate other men. This man-on-man education will be important for three reasons. First, men cannot expect women to educate them about women’s subordination and men’s oppression. Many women have been kind enough to do so in the past. But men need to take the initiative. Second, men will take this kind of news better from other men. When members of oppressed groups speak about their oppression, members of oppressor groups often see them as “whining” or laying blame inappropriately, which amounts to an excuse not to listen. Finally, this man-on-man education will also to build better relationships among men as part of creating new masculine subjectivities. Projects such as the Good Men Project, XYOnline, and the White Ribbon Campaign carry out this kind of work. But this kind of education has not yet reached the mainstream.

Although we cannot say with certainty what men’s task in its entirety will look like, we can begin to sketch out some suggestions for men. I close by drawing on the structures of women’s task to say something about some directions for thinking about what else men’s task might entail.

II. Further Directions for Men’s Reparative Task

Social change requires creating feminine and masculine subjectivities, as well as women and men working together to create a culture of sexual difference. Men’s task parallels women’s task. Men must create new masculine subjectivities both at the individual level and through relationships between men. Most importantly, these new modes of subjectivity must be able to relate to women as sites of subjectivity. As we saw
above, women’s task breaks down into three components: love of other, love of self, and love of same. Irigaray (1993a) suggests that men’s task would consist of three parallel components.

Moving beyond Irigaray’s limited comments on the topic, I develop this three-part notion of men’s task further. We have already discussed men’s task regarding love of other, i.e. men’s relationships with women. Below, I make a sketch of men’s love of self, and in the final section, I focus on love of same, or the changes men could make to their relationships with other men as a means of furthering men’s task. Specifically, I point out some of the implications of an Irigarayan framework in thinking about men’s friendship and fatherhood.

**a. Love of Self**

‘Love of self’ can refer to both autoeroticism and self-respect. Both of these aspects are important for men’s task. On a phallocentric model of sexuality, male orgasm takes the form of an energy that is built up and then released. This ‘teleological’ mode of sexuality leaves little place for another subject. In autoeroticism, men can learn to develop a non-teleological desire and practice. Men need to learn to maintain desire and to break with the cyclical loss of energy. For example, Jamie Bevson (1977) offers a first-hand account of his attempt to move away from pornography, objectifying fantasies, and a teleological sexuality (“Orgasm-As-the-Goal”) through masturbation techniques that he describes as “a meditation of self-love” and how this has improved his relationship with his own body and his sexual relationships with others. Further, men’s autoeroticism should incorporate a broader notion of erogeneity. The teleological mode of sexuality focuses on the penis, just as the penis the central value in the phallocentric sexual
economy more generally (see Irigaray 1985a, 58). However, the expansion, circulation, and maintenance of desire require an eroticization of the entire body. Men need to develop bodies that welcome touch, both their own, and that of others.

Men also need an awareness of their limits: ontological (i.e. the subject), physical (i.e. how they take up space), and emotional (i.e. their underdeveloped intimacy). Ultimately, this will require recognizing the other as a limit to the self in what Irigaray calls a relationship of “recognition.” As we saw in the introductory chapter, Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference requires a give and take between masculine and feminine subjectivities. This reciprocity requires that neither exist as a totality and that neither assimilate the other (Irigaray 1996, 10-105).

Establishing recognition of this kind first requires the development of a balanced awareness of oneself. This awareness is both a self-reflective position and an attention to one’s body and language, as well as how one’s body and language affect others. Men need to pay more attention to their bodies, where they are and what they are doing, and men need to pay more attention to their language and voice. Men need to attend to the way in which they occupy space. Consider for example the ways in which many men take up space in a hallway, classroom, or on a bus. They are much less aware of the extent to which their bodies infringe upon the space of others. (See, for example, Hai, Khairullah, and Coulmas 1982) Cultivating an awareness of this use of their bodies and space will aid in creating a limit to the solipsistic, obsessive subject.

Beyond an attention to their body and an awareness of their limits, men need to develop generosity. Synnott (2009) suggests that men today are much less likely to identify as ‘masculine’ than previous generations. However, this creates an insecurity that
often expresses itself through violence and anger, i.e. typical masculine traits, and hence reinforces hegemonic masculinity. Further, male-male friendships tend to be characterized by a lack of intimacy or ‘covert intimacy’ (Migliaccio 2009, Bedford and Avioli 2006, Strikwerda and May 1996, Swain 1989). However, the problem is not that men do not experience complex emotions, but that they lack the means of expressing them. Rather than building a shell of masculine strength and aggression, men need to develop a porous and vulnerable identity. This means forgiving and accepting one’s “short-comings” in relation to dominant modes of masculinity, as well as honing these dispositions more generally. For example, men need to allow themselves to cry before they can be comfortable crying in front of others (men or women).

b. Love of Same

‘Love of same’ can refer to both interpersonal relationships between men, as well as the broad cultural representations of ‘male culture’. Again, men’s task can be broken down into two parts. First, men are in need of vulnerability and dependence in relation to one another. Strength and independence—and loneliness—dominate masculine culture. Men’s relationships are a testing ground for these traits, a place where men’s façade of strength is tempered through ridicule and physical tests (sports, fights). Men need new ways of relating among themselves and in particular new forms of male friendship. For example, men could learn to better share their emotions with other men, and work towards a notion of friendship that explicitly values emotional connection. In this way, the definition of acceptable masculine behavior can change through relationships between men. An important part of cultivating a love between men will be putting an end to
homophobia. This is particularly important because homophobia is often integral to the establishment of dominant masculinities (Kimmel 2001).

An Irigarayan ethic will also require the creation of a culture of men among themselves. Aboim (2010) argues that despite the plurality of masculinities, a hegemonic masculinity that underlies relations of domination between women and men persists. In contrast to the current nature of homosocial relations among men, a culture among men in line with an ethics of sexual difference requires a new mode of masculinity that emphasizes vulnerability and dependence, the expression of emotion, and touching. This needs to be an inclusive definition of masculinity. Therefore, there will need to be an open invitation and receptivity to alternate masculinities. That is, male culture itself will need to become more hospitable. In the past, the man/not-man distinction has worked along lines of exclusion. Men need to find ways to increase inclusivity and remain open to other possible masculinities. Anderson (2009) shows how masculinities are becoming more inclusive, but does not develop normative prescriptions that would encourage this. Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference offer the means of doing so.

Although Irigaray does not mention fathering, both father-son and father-daughter relationships, in addition to male friendship, will have to play an important role in establishing a new culture of masculine subjectivity. Friendship and fathering are two aspects of men’s lives where an application of Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference stands to make interesting new contribution to existing ethical discussions.

i. Friendship

An ethics of sexual difference requires developing a love among men. This kind of shift must begin from the realities of men’s lives and holds the most possibility for
boys and men to ‘do’ masculinity and friendship otherwise. This will be an important step in creating a new culture among men. Through new models of friendship men will be able to change the social meaning of ‘man’ and how men should relate to women. An Irigarayan approach could add valuably to the philosophical conversation of friendship.

Friendship does not hold important place in ethical discourse that it did during the Classical period. Michael Pakaluk (1991) suggests that part of the reason for a decline in ethical discussion of friendship in the modern period comes from an inability for modern moral theories to accommodate friendship. Friendship seems to require partiality, and moral systems based on universality and impartiality have less room for friendship. Care ethics in contrast is an ethics of partiality, and Marilyn Friedman (1993) treats friendship from this perspective. Friedman (1993) argues that friendship’s voluntary nature gives friendship a “latitude for experimentation” not found in the rigidity of kinship ties (219). This experimentation represents a disruptive possibility inherent in friendship (Friedman 1993, 219). That is, friendship is more likely than other kinds relationships to allow us to relate to one another otherwise than the dictates of status-quo social structures. Therefore, we can see that a voluntarist account of friendship might be necessary for maintaining the transformative potential of friendship, and perhaps the possibility of transforming friendship.

Friedman (1993) develops her ‘quasi-voluntarist’ notion of friendship in contrast to Alasdair MacIntyre’s (1981) Aristotelian approach, and defends it against feminist criticism by separating her voluntarism from contract theory. Here, she argues that voluntarism need not take on the disinterestedness of contract theory, that friendship is truly voluntary, whereas contract theory is only hypothetically so, and that voluntarism
does not necessarily depend upon “the conception of an atomistic or presocial self.”

(Friedman 1993, 223-229)

Friedman (1993) grounds this moral argument for voluntarism in friendship in an account of friendship as a product of voluntary choice (248). However, it is not the case that friendships are necessarily the result of voluntary choice. Many friendships, particularly for adolescents, are equally the result circumstance: propinquity and a desire for social acceptance both play major roles. Factors such as class, race, and gender also play significant roles in determining who our friends are. There is need for a distinction between the reality of what we call friendships and an ethically sound friendship that offers either, on the social level, a disruptive potential, or, on the interpersonal level, the possibility for love, generosity, and human happiness. For this reason, we ought to pay close attention to the kinds of friendships that men and women are a part of and focus our efforts on transforming those relationships.

From a feminist perspective the reasons to focus on men’s friendships with other men is that they have an important impact on men’s relationships with women, both erotic and ‘platonic’ (Flood 2008, see also Lorentzen 2007). From the perspective of the men’s movement, a community of men is important for repairing or rebuilding masculinity in crisis (Synnott 2009). Both approaches identify a lack of intimacy and emotional literacy as the problem with men. Male-male friendships tend to be characterized by a lack of intimacy or ‘covert intimacy’ (Migliaccio 2009, Bedford and Avioli 2006, Strikwerda and May 1996, Swain 1989).

Brotherhood might offer an alternative for developing men’s intimacy. A set of studies conducted by Victoria Hilkevitch Bedford and Paula Smith Avioli suggest that
some of these features do not hold for fraternal relationships. Bedford and Avioli (2006) conclude that, “Until men can free themselves of traditional masculinity ideologies, their brothers may be their best male friends.” (98) This also suggests that there is a possibility to learn from fraternal relationships in our attempt to develop ways in which men might build better relationships with other men.

A common objection to this critique is that it judges men’s intimacy in feminine or female-centric terms (Bedford and Avioli 2006, 99). This is an important point. In critiquing male friendship, we need to be careful not to simply abandon all traditionally ‘masculine’ characteristics. In part, men ought to develop more ‘feminine’ characteristics, such as intimacy. But this should not mean negating, for example, men’s self-confidence. We need to distinguish between ‘feminine’ characteristics that are positive (caring, warmth, etc.) and those that are negative (subservience, lack of confidence, etc.). On the other hand, men need to develop specifically masculine modes of these traditionally ‘feminine’ characteristics. In the end, we need a masculine subjectivity capable of entering into mutual relationships with a feminine subjectivity.

For example, there might be something important that men gain from ‘covert’ forms of intimacy. Simply abandoning these because they are masculine or have been used to support distanced and aggressive behavior might not be reason enough. We need, rather, to look carefully at the connection between specific modes of relating between men and their impact on men’s attitudes towards, and relationships with, women’s subjectivity, as well as their impact on men themselves.

Another example comes from Strikwerda and May (1996), who recommend drawing on existing emotional resources in developing specifically masculine intimacy:
“Among these are the ability to find common ground with those one meets for the first time, the ability to be constructively critical without adversely affecting the future of a relationship, and the ability to form long-lasting bonds of loyalty with other males.” (91)

These aspects that have allowed men to succeed in the public sphere and have helped men in wartime and team sports might be re-purposed to help build more intimate relationships between men. Beyond the suggestion to draw on men’s existing strengths, the authors note the importance of understanding intimacy as a process, and that this will require men learning how to express the caring feelings they already experience (Strikwerda and May 1996, 92). These are two points that remind us of both the difficulties that men face in developing intimate relationships, and possibility of men achieving this end.

Despite the strengths of Strikwerda and May’s account, there is a lack of careful attention to men’s bodies and the roles men’s bodies play in men’s friendships. Activities such as sports play an important role in the development of masculinity (Maass 2006, 52). Competitive and aggressive sports are often associated with desirable forms of masculinity. For example, the little league football coaches in my neighborhood park sound more like military drill sergeants than childcare professionals. My own experience playing hockey or baseball with the neighborhood boys was filled with ridicule and feelings of inadequacy, rather than anything resembling a healthy camaraderie.

However, we cannot ignore the importance of physical groups activities, such as sports. Physical closeness, “mutual comfort with close physical proximity,” is important for friendship (Bedford and Avioli 2006, 96). Sports allow for closeness between boys and men that would be unacceptable in other aspects of their lives. Rather than simply
rejecting sports because of their role in reinforcing ideals of masculinity, we can work to adjust the meaning sports have in boys’ lives. For example, rather than focusing solely on competition (both against and among teams), coaches and parents should draw children’s attention towards the importance of trust (both physical and emotional) necessary for good teamwork. Further, Eric Anderson (2009) draws on his research with college sports and fraternities to argue that an increased cultural acceptance of homosexuality has begun to produce more ‘feminine’ masculinities and more emotional bonds between men. This suggests that these changes are beginning to take place and that we might be able influence the kinds of relationships that develop between boys and men.

Sandra Lynch’s (2005) approach to friendship resonates with important elements of Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference. Lynch (2005) argues that friendship involves two competing motivations, which she describes as “self-love and love of humanity.” (129) Lynch suggests that friendship is a matter of balancing these competing motivations, and discusses some of the emotions and judgments necessary for striking this balance (Lynch 2005, 137-144). She also suggests that friendship contributes to our self-constitution (Lynch 2005, 130-133). Lynch’s primary interlocutors are Spinoza and Hume. However, we could cast this problematic in the terms of Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference. Here, friendship would appear as a negotiation between a love of self and a love of other, and one way in which each subject might contribute to the becoming of the other. An articulation of Irigarayan theory of male friendship could add to this line of thinking and make an important contribution to the overall discussion of friendship.
ii. Fatherhood

The philosophical literature on fatherhood tends to fall within the domain of applied ethics. There are two issues at play within this literature. On the one hand, authors debate the criteria for fatherhood, whether biological or social (Cannold 2002, Kaebnick 2004, Laqueur 1996). On the other hand, there is a question as to what obligations and rights apply to fathers (Austin 2007, Brake 2005, Callahan 1996, Harris 1986, Richards 2010). These are two sides of the same coin. There are also two kinds of concerns that I characterize through a distinction between ‘paternity’ and ‘fatherhood’. I understand ‘paternity’ to be a legal definition. The question here is whether the man is the father and what rights (i.e. access) does this entitle him to, and what obligations (i.e. child support) does he have. ‘Fatherhood’ is first and foremost a moral definition. Given that one has assumed the role of the father, what moral obligations follow from this? In either case, any ontological question of fatherhood is subordinated to practical concerns. Norvin Richards (2010) typifies the erasure of sexual difference by framing his project in terms of a generic ‘parenthood’. Andrea Doucet’s (2006) *Do Men Mother?* is an exception to this trend. Doucet conducts a sociological investigation of new forms of fathering in contemporary Canadian society. Doucet sets her work apart by asking what it is about fathers *qua men* that makes them fathers: What is particular about fathering, as opposed to mothering?

Feminist theorists have done this on the feminine side, beginning from an investigation of pregnancy and motherhood and drawing conclusions ranging from ontological to ethical to social care ethics is one example of this. For example, Noddings (2003) gives a philosophical of care as the basis of novel approach to ethics. In *Starting*
at Home (2002), she applies this to a variety of social issues. Other related approaches that draw ethical and political implications from women’s experience are also found in the work of Held (1993), Kittay (1999), Mullin (2005), Ruddick (1989), Walker (2007), and Willet (1995). Another example comes from Lisa Baraitser (2009), who argues that maternity has an impact on women such that we can distinguish between a feminine subjectivity and a maternal subjectivity. This consideration of maternal experience has important implications for her ‘ethics of relationality’ (Baraitser 2009).

Very few men make the parallel move from the perspective of fathering. One exception is Larry May and Robert Strikwerda’s essay, “Fatherhood and Nurturance,” (1996) in which they argue that fatherhood is best understood in terms of nurturance and make suggestions for developing a masculine form of nurturance. This is a place where an Irigarayan ethic can make important contributions. Men need to further develop their notion of the “new father” by living out different relationships with their children and partners. However, contemporary research suggests that the image of the “new father” pushes men to be more caring and nurturing fathers, despite the fact that many of these men also embody aspects of hegemonic masculinity (Finn and Henwood 2009, and Henwood and Procter 2003). It would seem that among white, middle-class men, “fatherhood” is in a real state of transition, and a variety of factors (the notion of the “new father”, intergenerational influences, personal biography, and traditional masculine ideals) are shaping the ways in which men father (Finn and Henwood 2009, Henwood and Procter 2003, and Williams 2008).

Finally, we ought to consider the way in which the sexual difference of children demands different responses from fathers. Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference provides
a perspective from which to respond to questions of ethics in relation to fatherhood. For example, beyond asking whether we are obligated to love, I ask, “What kind of love is appropriate to this relationship and how might men cultivate this kind of love?” In short, I seek means for reforming masculine subjectivity in such a way as to build more fecund (creative and receptive) relationships between fathers and their children, both male and female. This will also contribute to the development of a love of other, because it will allow us raise both young women and men who will be able to relate in new ways. Of course, acknowledging the sexual difference between sons and daughters requires men to cultivate a different kind of love in each of these relationships. Daughters will require a mode of love of other specific to the father-daughter relationship.

The father-daughter relationship has garnered some attention. For example, Sue Sharpe (1994) gives a book length treatment of the complexities and nuances of the father-daughter relationship, from a social scientific perspective. More recently, Adrienne Harris’ (2008) has taken a psychoanalytic approach and asks about the relationship between gender and the identities of ‘father’ and ‘daughter’. In the context of feminist philosophy, Mary Beth Mader (2003) argues for the need to symbolize father-daughter genealogies.

Fatherhood has the possibility to radically alter men’s subjectivity, the way in which they experience the world and others, because fathers have such a profound influence on sons and daughters. If we can effect change in fatherhood, we have a good chance of raising a different kind of boy and producing a different kind of man.
II. Conclusion

Given Irigaray’s analysis of women’s subordination as taking place in relations of discourse and desire, Irigaray’s transformative project must affect change within the structures of interpersonal relationships. Because of this focus on interpersonal relationships, the Irigarayan ethic I have outlined looks a lot like something we might find in a self-help book. However, self-help books that tend to have a limited scope: “Increase your earning potential,” “Build self-confidence,” “Have better sex.” That is, self-help as a genre does not tend to offer a systematic approach to broad-reaching social change. In contrast, Irigaray’s project demands the kinds of intervention it does for the simple fact that her ethical project has something to say about how we ought to live our lives. Specifically, Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference makes suggestions about how men (and women) should act, speak, and think—a faux pas in an age of philosophical liberalism.

Irigaray’s ethics is a radical feminist project. In the suggestions for men’s task, we can clearly see the radical nature of Irigaray’s ethics of sexual difference. Men’s task within this project demands that he work to challenge the system that privileges traditionally masculine subject capacities to the exclusion of all others, and work with other men and with women to create a culture in which non-hierarchal relationships between masculine and feminine subjectivities become the norm.

If we agree that women’s subordination is wrong and that processes of subordination work through individuals day-to-day comportment and interpersonal relationships, then Irigaray offer the kind of positive project that we need. Men need to commit themselves to feminism, and this will mean not only critically reflecting on their
subject privilege, but also on their relationships with women, and engaging with women in a dialogue about how to move forward together.
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