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Dymock, Alex. 2018. Anti-communal, Anti-egalitarian, Anti-nurturing, Anti-loving: Sex and the 'Irredeemable' in Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon. Paragraph, 41(3), pp. 349-363. ISSN 0264-8334 [Article]

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Anticommunal, antiegalitarian, antinurturing, antiloving: sex and the ‘irredeemable’  
in Dworkin and MacKinnon

ALEX DYMOCK

**Abstract:**

The work of Andrea Dworkin and Catharine A. MacKinnon on sex and sexuality has often been posed as adversary to the development of queer theory. Leo Bersani, in particular, is critical of the normative ambitions of their work, which he sees firstly as trying to ‘redeem’ sex acts themselves, and secondly as advocating for sexuality as a site of potential for social transformation. In this article, I argue that this is a misreading of their work. Drawing on Dworkin’s wide body of writing, and the early Signs essays of MacKinnon, I suggest that their work makes no such case for sex or sexuality. Rather, by bringing their analysis into conversation with Halberstam’s recent work on ‘shadow feminism’, I contend that Dworkin and MacKinnon’s anti-social, anti-pastoral and distinctly anti-normative vision of sex and sexuality shares many of the same features of queer theory, ultimately advocating for sex as ‘irredeemable’.

**Key words:** Andrea Dworkin, Catharine A. MacKinnon, second-wave feminism, anti-social queer theory, sex, sexuality

**Introduction**

In Leo Bersani’s early text, Is The Rectum a Grave?, he argues that gay male sexuality takes pleasure in precisely the demeaning sexual subjugation of women that radical feminists argued lies at the root of women’s inequality. Bersani specifically

addresses Catharine A. MacKinnon's argument in her early essay in Signs, and by proxy the work of Andrea Dworkin, and embraces their equation between being penetrated and powerlessness as a means of understanding gay men's erotic pleasures. Although published in the same year as IRG, Bersani might as well have drawn on this particular moment in Dworkin's Intercourse:

Women feel the fuck – when it works, when it overwhelms – as possession; and feel possession as deeply erotic; and value annihilation of the self in sex as proof of the man's desire or love, its awesome intensity (...) sex itself is an experience of diminishing self-possession, an erosion of self.<sup>1</sup>

Counterintuitively, Bersani celebrates the demeaning powerlessness in 'sex itself' and the annihilation of self that is its result. He also recognises the queer potential that underpins Dworkin and MacKinnon's thesis:

Their indictment of sex - their refusal to prettify it, to romanticize it, to maintain that fucking has anything to do with community or love - has had the immensely desirable effect of publicizing, of lucidly laying out for us, the inestimable value of sex as - at least in certain of its ineradicable aspects – anticomunal, antiegalitarian, antinurturing, antiloving.<sup>2</sup>

While admiring the descriptive content of Dworkin and MacKinnon's work on sex, however, Bersani repudiates both feminist theory and LGBT studies for reifying the idea that sexuality has a role to play in transforming the social, or is always theorized 'in terms of its relations to other systems of stratification'.<sup>3</sup> He erases the possibility that there is anything redeemable in (homo)sexuality which speaks to reconfiguring or challenging the indexes of social power.<sup>4</sup> The value of sex, its threat to psychic wholeness, and its rejection of any ties to utopian socialities, is to undermine any

attempts to redeem it. The suggestion that we can fuck our way to queer utopia is, he suggests, precisely what sexuality itself destabilises. This desire to ‘redeem’ sexuality through profoundly altering its system of value is Bersani’s postured point of departure from Dworkin and MacKinnon. He writes: ‘what bothers me about MacKinnon and Dworkin is not their analysis of sexuality, but rather the pastoralizing, redemptive intentions that support the analysis (215).’

While Bersani is careful to distinguish between the analysis of sexuality that we now recognise as radical feminist description of intercourse, and the normative ambitions of their analysis of sex, he is quite clear that he positions their ambitions within a general trajectory in sexualities studies: the redemptive reinvention of sex (215, emphasis his). Repudiating Bersani’s claim, I will argue that there is nothing pastoral about the vision of sexuality that is often attributed to Dworkin or MacKinnon’s work, nor is it their intention to redeem ‘sex itself’. In the midst of the feminist sex wars of the 1980s, in which pleasure and danger were considered the antithetical axes of understanding of sexuality through sex-radical feminism and radical feminism, for Dworkin and MacKinnon victimization stands in for womanhood, and danger is the presumed lens through which sexuality is viewed by women. Thus, the argument goes, to liberate women’s sexuality, male danger must be eradicated.<sup>5</sup> Yet, at the same time, a number of sex-positive feminists suggest that the normative elements of radical feminist work designate sexuality as beyond redemption. As Gatens has written, for Dworkin and MacKinnon, sexual ethics are ‘always already foredoomed’.<sup>6</sup> Charged on the one hand with ill-conceived attempts to redeem sex, and on the other, with an essentialist preoccupation with the mechanics of heterosexual intercourse which ultimately sows the seeds for the impossibility of a

feminist sexual integrity,<sup>7</sup> neither author is permitted the complexity that marks their work, and its proto-queer qualities.

As will become evident, while there is a stronger case to make for Dworkin as an anti-normative queer feminist, I will argue that neither her vision of sexuality nor MacKinnon's promotes its redemption. As we will see, each affirms the idea, later developed by Bersani, that sex is irredeemable on two counts. Firstly, neither advocates that social transformation is achievable through a reconfiguration of the contours of heterosexual intercourse. Secondly, I contend that their work possesses no normative or prescriptive preoccupation with redeeming the content of sex acts themselves, or that it reifies the 'feminine'.

### **Pleasure in Danger: Revisiting Sex in MacKinnon and Dworkin**

For many feminist and queer scholars, Dworkin and MacKinnon's indictment of sexuality, and their claim that gender is produced through the very mechanics of intercourse, is so determinist as to foreclose entirely any erotic imaginary for women that might operate in their interests. This reading has arguably developed from two well-cited instances in their writing, which have been decontextualized to the point that they come to operate as a stand-in for all radical feminist writing on sexuality. In Dworkin's work, this moment arises in Intercourse, when she writes:

A human being has a body that is inviolate; and when it is violated, it is abused. A woman has a body that is penetrated in intercourse: permeable, its corporeal solidness a lie. The discourse of male truth – literature, science, philosophy, pornography – calls that penetration violation. This it does with some consistency and some confidence. Violation is a synonym for intercourse. (143-4)

Unfortunately, this quotation is often reduced to its final sentence, removing the most crucial point. In a quasi-Foucauldian gesture,<sup>8</sup> Dworkin is clear here that it is the hierarchisation of discourse, in which hegemonically masculine iterations of intercourse are most highly valued, that have produced intercourse as violation representationally.

While much more ink has been spilt on MacKinnon's attempts to take the methodological trappings of Marxism and apply them to the dynamics of gender, a similar point might be made about accusations of essentialism attributed to MacKinnon's theory of sexuality. In Feminism Unmodified, she argues that 'the social relation between the sexes is organised so that men may dominate and women must submit and this relation is sexual – in fact, is sex.'<sup>9</sup> Again, the most crucial aspect of this quotation is often ignored: that it is the organisation of the sexes (and MacKinnon lays much of the blame squarely at the feet of liberal legalism for reifying this organisation) which produces a 'thing called sexuality'. More specifically, however, MacKinnon makes clear in her earlier *Signs* essay that it is the (hetero)sexist social order that has generated the 'eroticisation of potency (as male) and victimisation (as female)' (FMMSAT, 526).

This view of heterosexuality's status as a social institution, and the power of discourse to produce sexual categories and norms, would not be considered particularly controversial by most queer theorists. What MacKinnon and Dworkin describe is fairly straightforwardly a critique of the institutionalisation of heteronormativity and its dominion over women's sexuality, specifically through a critique of the history of literary representation (Dworkin) and legal form (MacKinnon). But while MacKinnon and Dworkin's work proffers a totalising view of the coercive properties of sexuality, its distinctively antinormative qualities have

been undermined due to its association with a certain strand of feminist activism at the time in which they published this work, and their later involvement in it. As Janet Halley notes of MacKinnon, there is a distinction between the MacKinnon of these early Signs essays, whose normative intention was to consciousness-raise on the institutionalisation of heterosexuality, particularly within the law of rape, and the MacKinnon who sought legal reform to advocate for a regulation of male dominance, and women's sexual liberation.<sup>10</sup>

I concur with Halley that the reading of MacKinnon as a legal reformist is premised on her association with the anti-pornography and anti-SM lobby operating in the early 1980s, which quite clearly did make a case for sexuality as normatively redeemable. This inevitably makes it difficult to read her earlier work without, as Halley does, retrospectively seeing the spectre of MacKinnon the legal reformist in these texts. However, by reading MacKinnon alongside Dworkin, we can better see the grains of anti-normativity in her writing. West suggests that while the anti-pornography movements became overly concerned with the content of women's sexual desires,<sup>11</sup> this was never at the centre of MacKinnon's writing. West urges that radical feminism should drop the critique of desire, while queer theory should drop the critique of women's 'lack of desire' (385). Thus, Bersani's assumption that Dworkin and MacKinnon ultimately sought out not a way of explaining women's lack of (heterosexist) desire, but a different world of erotic intimacy in which sexuality might be reimagined as egalitarian and pastoral, stems much more obviously from the reception of their work by sex-radical feminists, and the legal campaigns they would go on to head, than the texts themselves. In part, this might be because in the year in which Dworkin published Intercourse, and indeed, Bersani published IRG, cultural feminism was dominant amongst US feminists, which sought to revalue and promote

female sexuality, as it did femininity, as ‘muted, diffuse, interpersonally-oriented, and benign’.<sup>12</sup> As Grant has written, when Intercourse was published its commitments to early radical feminist consciousness critique about sexuality and romance were considered ‘shocking’ in part because cultural feminism was in the process of attempting to revalorise the value of femininity.<sup>13</sup>

Despite this, it is not entirely true that all sex-radical feminists equated the vision of sexuality espoused by Dworkin and MacKinnon with the pastoral vision of communitarian intimacy we might now more readily associate with cultural feminists such as Carol Gilligan. In Pleasure and Danger, Echols recognised that the earlier work of radical feminists was much more concerned with romantic love, marriage and the nuclear family straitjacketing sexuality. Quoting an essay by Karen Lindsey, she makes clear that radical feminists certainly had no interest in sexual conservatism: ‘We are, in fact, in danger of reverting to a rejection of sex without love – with all the self-denial, smugness, guilt and dishonesty that goes with such a rejection’.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, Echols still reverts to locating Dworkin under the rubric of cultural feminism. This is a mistake, since there is little indication in Dworkin’s writing that she maintained anything other than political disdain for romantic love, or its pastoralizing effects on femininity. In both Our Blood, and later, Right-Wing Women, Dworkin renounces the suggestion that femininity is simply in need of revaluation. In the former, she argues that femininity, in enculturated, male-imagined terms, is ‘roughly synonymous with stupidity’.<sup>15</sup> In the latter, this rejection of femininity is made even more explicit: ‘women have stupid ideas that do not deserve to be called ideas’.<sup>16</sup> Dworkin decries women’s ‘ideas’ here as synonymous with the association of women’s intelligence as ‘small and timid’ (RWW, 41), and argues for a specifically ‘unladylike’ ‘sexual intelligence’ (53-6). While Dworkin’s condemnation



of feminine intelligence in these texts is a precursor to the claim we see above from Intercourse – about the discourses of ‘male truth’ and the ways in which it is a function of masculinity – as Palmer-Mehta has argued, Dworkin’s confrontational rhetorical style, as well as her approach to relationships, reveal an explicit rejection of the feminine and ideological trappings of heteronormativity.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, Drucilla Cornell has vigorously critiqued MacKinnon’s refusal to revalue the feminine as a normative project. In her writing on pornography, MacKinnon suggests that the equation of the feminine with sexual object is impossible to reject: ‘Men’s power over women means that the way men see women defines who women can be (FU, 148).’ As Cornell notes, this requires women to either negate who they are, or affirm men’s perspectives (and it is this affirmation that I suspect leads Dworkin to equate femininity and stupidity). As she puts it, ‘for MacKinnon, it is profoundly mistaken to emphasise feminine difference as having value’,<sup>18</sup> because it has the effect of privileging a masculine system of value that reduces the feminine to male definition. While, of course, the paradox of MacKinnon’s perspective is clear – if it is impossible to define women beyond male valuation, then how is it possible that she and Dworkin are themselves able to reappraise sexuality in the way they do? -- it is important to flag the distinction between the cultural feminist perspectives so often associated with their work, and the radical feminist perspective that in fact underpins it.

More recently, a small number of articles have surfaced that both anoint Dworkin’s work with more serious consideration than she has historically been permitted, and work to recover the radicalism of her writing. Serisier argues that the representation of Dworkin in feminist and sexualities studies texts seems almost inevitably to cast her as an ‘archetypal character in a social morality play’.<sup>19</sup> That

Dworkin herself fashioned this character – feminist as antagonist – as a fundamental property of her writing is echoed by Palmer-Mehta, who suggests that the ‘rhetorical strategy of confrontation’ (ADRE, 53) is used by Dworkin to reject the politics of respectability. It is this quality of her work that has perhaps led to its denunciation. Taking a different tack, Allen has proposed that Dworkin’s work should be seen in tandem with Millett’s literary criticism, observing that we might re-read the feminist sex wars themselves as principally a debate about ‘the relation between representation and real life’.<sup>20</sup> Cameron has also argued that Intercourse is quite explicitly a survey of the troubling representational strategy that accompanies intercourse, and the blueprint for sexuality that is produced as a consequence, rather than a descriptor of the material realities of sex.

The rehabilitation of Dworkin as an underrated feminist literary critic and radical political provocateur goes some way to releasing her from the shackles of ‘paranoid reading’<sup>21</sup> that have befallen her writing. Equally, while her Signs essay on the law remains a mainstay of many undergraduate courses in Jurisprudence, MacKinnon’s early work on heterosexuality has received little of the same rereading. I suggest that in much of their writing, both MacKinnon and Dworkin were far more interested in revising the institutions, and the hegemony, of heterosexual intimacy than redeeming ‘sex itself’ (by profoundly altering its system of value), or in viewing sexuality as a locus for social transformation (the suggestion, repudiated by Bersani, that sexuality has the power to fundamentally shift the terms of the social). For Dworkin this rested principally on undoing and deconstructing the representational discourses of intercourse-as-violation and the deficit in ‘sexual intelligence’ permitted women, while MacKinnon’s interest lay primarily in legal discourse, and liberal

legalism's 'objective' coercive and controlling treatment of women as men treat women.<sup>22</sup>

### **Anti-Loving: Sex and Negativity**

So far, I have illustrated that the charge often laid at MacKinnon and Dworkin's doors, that their vision of sexuality-as-violation is an essentialist descriptor of materialist reality, is at least partially false. Both authors grounded their social-constructionist (Dworkin) and structuralist (MacKinnon) theories of sexuality in a critique of heteronormativity, and particularly of marriage and reproduction associated with earlier radical feminism. But this does not account for their anti-normative approach to sex. Eliza Glick has argued that the failure of both radical and pro-sex feminism lies in their opposing but similarly liberatory perspectives on female sexuality. In radical feminists, she assumes a desire for 'a sexuality purified of male sexual aggression and violence' (SP, 21), while in pro-sex feminism, a desire for an eradication of the system of value that leaves no room for 'benign sexual variation'.<sup>23</sup> In each of these designations of the 'sides' of the sex wars we see some normative suggestion that sexuality is a site of social transformation. While pro-sex feminism's vision of sexual liberation undoubtedly nails its rainbow colours to the mast of sexual liberation via transgressive, non-reproductive and undoubtedly anti-pastoral sexual content, both camps, Glick argues, ultimately accept that sex is nice and pleasure is good for you. She is right to note that this normative ambition of some radical feminism makes it difficult to truly call the latter camp, as it often gets labelled, 'sex-negative'.

Yet, it is the sex-negativity of MacKinnon and Dworkin that Bersani was to suggest formed the basis, indeed the conditions, for his own work. As Millbank points

out, MacKinnon and Dworkin's writing does advocate for a certain 'sex-negativity' that flouted both compulsory sexuality and sexual morality for women. Millbank argues that sex-radical feminism tended only to critique the first of these, and conflates claims on the part of second-wave writers about compulsory sexuality with sexual morality.<sup>24</sup> Halley also mistakes this tendency in MacKinnon's early scholarship. She recognises that Bersani fails to see the 'horizonlessness' (*SD*, 159) of MacKinnon's writing on sex – that there are no exit signs, no pleasures, and no compromises – but also takes him to task for his suggestion that the erotic underpinnings of MacKinnon's account present us with the very qualities of sexuality that should be celebrated, because they tell us that sex is bad for you. Rather, argues Halley, there is an unmistakably normative preoccupation underpinning his essay that has more in common with cultural feminism than the MacKinnon of the early *Signs* essays. As she points out, what cultural feminism and Bersani share is an attentiveness to the question of the sex act itself as politically and even morally valuable; that there is 'something good in sex, something that has been devalued, and the reform project is to revalue it' (*SD*, 155). In particular, Bersani may stake out sex's masochistic, negative qualities as the root of its experiential jouissance, but he nonetheless reaffirms the moral value of pleasure itself, and thus his thesis might be described as one that avows compulsory sexuality. What Halley's thesis misses in MacKinnon, though, is that it is at least in part a critique of (hetero)sexual compulsory sexuality; the idea that sex itself does not have moral or political value for women, either in present reality or any post-patriarchal imaginary.

More recently, Halberstam has advocated for what s/he terms 'shadow feminisms', in which negativity, rejection and failure mark a feminist resistance to patriarchal modes of becoming woman, and instead encourages modes of

‘unbecoming’. While some of the epistemological apparatus of ‘shadow feminisms’ re-engage core premises of what has come to be called the anti-social thesis in queer theory, Halberstam explicitly rejects the apolitical negativity associated with Bersani, but also by inference some of the commitments of sex-radical feminism. S/he suggests that a shadow feminism might constitute a means of rejecting normative models of ‘success’ that are, of course, measured by white male standards. Some of these ‘successes’, we might infer, are connected to demonstrating the possibility of women’s sexual pleasure through alternative sexual practices and representations. Halberstam does re-engage other feminist renegades of the past, particularly Wittig, Spivak and Solanas, and as s/he notes, ‘the feminist archive of the anti-social, needless to say, looks far different than the gay male archive deployed by Bersani, Edelman and countless others’.<sup>25</sup> However, Dworkin and MacKinnon are left conspicuously absent from the frame.

Arguably, Dworkin and Mackinnon take sex as not just the locus of women’s unbecoming, but their annihilation.<sup>26</sup> It is subordination rather than discrimination that is at the heart of the injuries done to women through patriarchy, and the task of feminism, to quote Halberstam, might be to ‘unthink sex as that alluring narrative of connection and liberation and think of it anew as a site of failure and unbecoming conduct’.<sup>27</sup> Drawing on postcolonial and black feminist theory, which refuse the equation in white Western feminism of sovereignty and freedom, and instances of feminist art that take self-destruction as their key motif, Halberstam charts a genealogy of feminisms in which the choice offered to women, ‘freedom in liberal terms’ (QAF, 129),<sup>28</sup> is refused; in which feminism becomes primarily a site of ‘negation and negativity’ (129). S/he argues for a ‘feminism that fails to save others (...) a feminism that finds purpose in its own failure’ (128).

Where Halberstam does not venture, however, is a suggestion that sex itself might be a site of feminist negation, and it is here that we might join up the queer anti-social feminism of The Queer Art of Failure with MacKinnon and Dworkin's thought. As Dworkin notes, sex and, by extension, sexual pleasure is consistently promised to women as meaningful and affirmative on two grounds, outlined most clearly in Right Wing Women, via the brothel model and farming model. On the one hand, because women's sexuality is shaped by the sensual pleasure of being possessed ('there is no separate being (...) only the flesh-and-blood reality of being a sensate being whose body experiences sexual intensity, sexual pleasure and sexual identity in being possessed: in being owned and fucked' (IC, 77)), it becomes a necessity for the maintenance of patriarchy. On the other, because of its proximity to motherhood ('women as a class planted with the male seed and harvested' (RWW, 174)), sexuality is hamstrung by its utility for men. Therefore, in Dworkin's terms, negation of sexuality altogether is the only means of resistance woman has (in MacKinnon's thought, even this negation is conceived as impossible). Even lesbianism, as Grant notes, cannot change the 'structure of women's exploitation' (981) for Dworkin. This becomes particularly clear in Intercourse in her reading of Joan of Arc, which Dworkin reads as a tale of resistance to compulsory sexuality. Joan's 'rebel virginity' (IC, 111), she writes, 'was a renunciation of civil worthlessness rooted in sexual practice' (100). In this feminist retelling, Dworkin notes that Joan was 'shown the instruments of torture' that would kill her for her hereticism, yet chose to disobey and was burnt at the stake. As Dworkin notes, Joan 's decision to self-annihilate, rather than be coerced into intercourse, designates her heroicised virginity as a site of refusal.

Two observations might be made here that connect Dworkin's reading with queer theory. The first is that Dworkin's reading of Joan of Arc has much in common with Halberstam's genealogy of anti-social queer shadow feminists. If the only agentic 'way out' of exploitation for women, from the burden of either being 'brotheled' or 'farmed' through sex, is to negate it entirely, no matter the costs, then we might suggest that Joan's 'rebel virginity' made her a shadow feminist. As Halberstam notes of Spivak's critique of Western feminism, perhaps it is the case that we have become wilfully blind to forms of resistance that do not conform to Western standards of active subversion or resistance. Arguably, sex-radical feminism has had a role to play in instituting this blindness, by positioning sexual subversion as a representational and practical strategy of queer-feminist resistance.

A second point of connection might be to look to the burgeoning queer literature on asexuality. Cerankowski and Milks argue that Dworkin's reading of Joan, despite her problematic use of 'virginity' as synonymous with resistance to phallogentric sex, might be seen as an early attempt to theorise asexuality as feminist.<sup>29</sup> Furthermore, they articulate that Dworkin's reading demands that asexuality cannot be dismissed as conservative, repressive or anti-sexual, but rather that it might, by Bersani's definition, act as one of many myriad ways of being queer:

By its very definition, asexuality brings a focus to the presence or absence of sexual desire as a way to queer the normative conceptions around how sex is practiced and how relationships are (or are not) formed around that practice (660).

While the queer conceptualisation of asexuality, as we see above, rests not on a refusal of sexuality, it is the negation of sex itself in Dworkin, and the horizonlessness of MacKinnon's writing on sexuality as always already the product of

male desire, which demonstrates the misreading of their work by Bersani. Dworkin did imagine a 'sexual intelligence' for women premised on sexual integrity, and the 'honest possession of one's body' (RWW, 54), but her post-patriarchal vision of sexuality was certainly not pastoral. In Woman Hating, she suggests that there might exist a much more expansive sexual universe, in which, for example, the incest taboo would in future be undermined by the destruction of the nuclear family and (in a Foucauldian twist) the depedagogisation of children's sexuality. Bestiality, too, would flourish.<sup>30</sup> Although Dworkin was later to become an ardent critic of de Sade, her sexual imaginary in this work sounds oddly Sadean.<sup>31</sup>

## **Conclusion**

This article has sought not to 'redeem' Dworkin and MacKinnon's work on sexuality entirely, but first to demonstrate its rejection of the equation between sexuality and social transformation, so often laid at radical feminists' feet, and second to contest Bersani's charge that the normative intent of their work is that intercourse itself might be redeemed. Even where Dworkin does, albeit briefly, pause on the possibility of sexual pleasure post-patriarchy, she is more interested in evacuating sexuality of its penetrative and phallogocentric properties. Where MacKinnon is concerned, her work is much less ambiguous. The gender division for MacKinnon is premised on 'those who fuck' and 'those who get fucked', but there is no attempt to redeem sexuality from this paradigm. As Cornell attests, the irony of MacKinnon's work lies in the association she makes between knowledge, its power to define what woman is, and sexuality:

By definition, the one who knows, for MacKinnon, can only be the fuckor. Knowledge as conquest. And yet she announces what woman *is*:



fuckee. But how can MacKinnon, a fuckee, know at all? She is the object.

Feminist knowledge is, by her definition, impossible. (BA, 141)

Thus, if women's sexuality is merely the product of male knowledge, not only is there no redemptive or normative intention in MacKinnon's writing, but her own voice is stymied by the same problem. A similar accusation might be levelled at Dworkin's analogy between penetration, pleasure and annihilation. The suggestion that women's experience of sexual pleasure is determined by male possession is ultimately guilty of 'subscribing to the heroics of phallic mystique'.<sup>32</sup> Even if both Dworkin and MacKinnon ground their critique not in the material act of sex and its immutable properties but rather in its cultural (Dworkin) and legal (MacKinnon) significations, this relies on a masculinist construction of knowledge and subjectivity.

If we accept these critiques, we can begin to comprehend the inheritance of Dworkin and MacKinnon's work in Bersani's queer theory. Nonetheless, to return to Halley, though her reading of Bersani is fully cognisant of his debt to MacKinnon, she suggests that what is 'not feminist' in his text is the way it speaks quite specifically to gay men (SD, 156). However, if MacKinnon's theory of sexuality does indeed rely on phallogentric configurations, we might read ISG? not as a queer reversal of her thesis, but instead as an extension of it. If MacKinnon's reading of sexuality presumes the feminine as 'doomed' to be constrained to masculine definition, and Dworkin's reading presumes feminine sexual pleasure as annihilation of self, then Bersani's argument articulates the normative value of sex for women just as for men. While Bersani authors his text specifically to advocate against feminist and queer attempts to 'redeem' the sexuality of gay men, MacKinnon and Dworkin's work makes a more compelling case for an anti-social irredeemable sexuality than does Bersani's, and much of the queer theory written in its wake.

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<sup>1</sup> Andrea Dworkin, Intercourse (London: Arrow Books, 1988), 78; hereafter IC.

<sup>2</sup> Leo Bersani, 'Is The Rectum A Grave?' October 43 (1987), 197-222 (215); hereafter IRG.

<sup>3</sup> Rostom Mesli, 'Gayle Rubin's Concept of "Benign Sexual Variation": A Critical Concept for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality', South Atlantic Quarterly 114:4 (2015), 803-26 (804).

<sup>4</sup> As Bersani remarks, 'gay men are no less socially ambitious and, more often than we like to think, no less reactionary and racist than heterosexuals. To want sex with another man is not exactly a credential for political radicalism' (IRG, 205).

<sup>5</sup> Eliza Glick, 'Sex Positive: Feminism, Queer Theory and the Politics of Transgression', Feminist Review 64 (2000), 19-45; hereafter SP.

<sup>6</sup> Moira Gatens, Imaginary Bodies: Ethics, Power and Corporeality (London: Routledge, 1996), 78. A number of other prominent feminist scholars have written similarly about Dworkin and Mackinnon's conceptualisation of sex as violation. For example, Donna Haraway writes in the Cyborg Manifesto that: 'Ironically, MacKinnon's 'ontology' constructs a non-subject, a non-being ... she owes her existence as a woman to sexual appropriation' (298-9), thus precluding either the existence or even possibility of a feminist (sexual) selfhood. (See 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century' in The Cybercultures Reader, edited by David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy

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(London: Routledge, 2000)). In Straight Sex: The Politics of Pleasure (London: Virago Press, 1994), Segal reads Dworkin and MacKinnon's vision of sexuality as a failure to recognise the achievements of feminism: 'Now that feminism has recognised that sexuality is seen as the single source of women's oppression, we know just what feminism has achieved: nothing at all!' (61).

<sup>7</sup> The root of this criticism tends to stem from a particular phrase in Catharine A. MacKinnon, 'Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: An Agenda For Theory', Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society 7:3 (1982), 515-44 (541); hereafter FMMSAT, where she argues that 'sexual objectification is the primary process of the subjection of women ... Man fucks woman; subject verb object.'

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Michel Foucault, 'Truth and Power,' in Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977, edited by Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980).

<sup>9</sup> Catharine A. MacKinnon, Feminism Unmodified (London: Harvard University Press, 1987) 3; hereafter FU.

<sup>10</sup> Janet Halley, Split Decisions: How and Why To Take A Break From Feminism (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), hereafter SD. I will not follow Halley's way of distinguishing between the phases of MacKinnon's thought as 'early' and 'late' MacKinnon, as the latter has always seemed to me rather carelessly unkind, given that MacKinnon is still very much alive.

<sup>11</sup> West argues that feminism should be much more agnostic about the 'desired sex in which women engage', no matter its content. See Robin L. West, 'Law's Nobility', Yale Journal of Law and Feminism 17:2 (2005), 385-458 (388).

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- <sup>12</sup> Alice Echols, 'The Taming of the Id: Feminist Sexual Politics 1968-83' in Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality, edited by Carole S. Vance (London: Routledge, 1984) 59.
- <sup>13</sup> Judith Grant, 'Andrea Dworkin and the Social Construction of Gender: A Retrospective', Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 31:4 (2006), 967-93 (975).
- <sup>14</sup> Karen Lindsey, 'Thoughts on Promiscuity' (1971), The Second Wave 1:3, 3, as cited in Alice Echols (see note 12).
- <sup>15</sup> Andrea Dworkin, Our Blood: Prophecies and Discourses on Sexual Politics (New York: Perigee Books, 1976) 101.
- <sup>16</sup> Andrea Dworkin, Right-Wing Women (New York: Perigee Books, 1978) 40.
- <sup>17</sup> Valerie Palmer-Mehta, 'Andrea Dworkin's Radical Ethos' in Rethinking Ethos: A Feminist Ecological Approach to Rhetoric, edited by Kathleen J. Ryan, Nancy Myers, and Rebecca Jones (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2016), 50-70 (57), hereafter, ADRE.
- <sup>18</sup> Drucilla Cornell, Beyond Accommodation: Ethical Feminism, Deconstruction and the Law (New Edition) (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999) 125; hereafter BA.
- <sup>19</sup> Tanya Serisier, 'Who Was Andrea? Writing Oneself as a Feminist Icon', Women: A Cultural Review 24:1 (2013), 26-44 (27).
- <sup>20</sup> Leah Claire Allen, 'The Pleasures of Dangerous Criticism: Interpreting Andrea Dworkin as a Literary Critic', Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 42:1 (2016), 49-70 (50); hereafter DLC.
- <sup>21</sup> Jessica Joy Cameron, 'Dworkin's Subjects: Interpellation and the Politics of Heterosexuality', Feminist Theory 18:1 (2017), 3-16 (10).

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<sup>22</sup> Catharine A. MacKinnon, 'Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: Towards Feminist Jurisprudence', Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 8:4 (1983), 635-58; hereafter FMMSFJ.

<sup>23</sup> Gayle Rubin, 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality' in The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader, edited by Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale and David M. Halperin (London: Routledge, 1993) 11.

<sup>24</sup> See Lisa Millbank, 'The Ethical Prude: Imagining an Authentic Sex-Negative Feminism', A Radical TransFeminist, <https://radtransfem.wordpress.com/2012/02/29/the-ethical-prude-imagining-an-authentic-sex-negative-feminism/>, consulted 5 December 2017, 8.50p.m.

<sup>25</sup> Judith Halberstam, The Anti-Social Turn in Queer Theory, Graduate Journal of Social Science 5:2 (2008), 140-156 (151).

<sup>26</sup> Annihilation is a constant theme in Dworkin's work. As Grant notes, the continuum between sexual desire and annihilation is linked by objectification. As she puts it, in Dworkin's work 'woman-as-feminised-subject is a being who experiences pleasure in the moment of her annihilation, since her participation in patriarchal sexuality is simultaneously the abdication of her authentic human agency'. See Grant (note 12) 977.

<sup>27</sup> Judith Halberstam, The Queer Art of Failure (London: Duke University Press, 2011) 144; hereafter QAF.

<sup>28</sup> In QAF (note 29), Halberstam follows Spivak in her critique of liberal feminism's comprehension of freedom, as it relies on constructing the 'otherness' of non-Western women to 'fortify a sovereign notion of self' (128).

<sup>29</sup> Karli June Cerankowski and Megan Milks, 'New Orientations: Asexuality and its Implications for Theory and Practice', Feminist Studies 36:3 (2010), 650-64 (658).

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<sup>30</sup> Andrea Dworkin, Woman Hating (London: Plume Books, 1974) 187-9.

<sup>31</sup> Susie Bright has accounted for the fact that Dworkin was ‘mesmerized’ by de Sade and the ‘most expert historian of his work’, even as she ‘rips’ him, as constituent of her reverence for French intellectualism. See Susie Bright, ‘The Baffling Case of Andrea Dworkin’, in Inspired by Andrea: Essays on Lust, Aggression, Porn and the Female Gaze That I Might Not Have Written If Not for Her (New York: Self-published, 2000) 4-13 (11).

<sup>32</sup> Amelia Ziv, Explicit Utopias: Rewriting the Sexual in Women’s Pornography (New York: SUNY Press, 2015) 105.