narcissus
Sex, Desire, and Violence
April 4, 2023

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Contents

large-scale aggregation of which amounts *rape culture* or *patriarchy*. Patriarchy in turn constitutes the structure of power, from the priest to the police to the courtroom principle of "innocent until proven guilty," that facilitates each individual rapist's free exercise of power upon the victim's body. This facilitation of the rapist's free exercise of power upon the victim is pervasive at every level of the state; the monopoly on legitimate violence is deployed not to "catch rapists" or to "protect children," but to obstruct and truncate the victim's access to *any* form of power, including the power of the justice system to redress grievances. In this sense, all cops are the allies and facilitators of rapists, if not rapists themselves (which they are, at startlingly high rates).

And every rapist, regardless of either their own gender or the gender of their victim, is always acting as *a front line enforcer,* in the most absolute sense, of a structural hierarchy of bodies, genders, sexualities, desires, and power. Every rapist is acting in the capacity of an "armed soldier of the 'sovereign,'" an executor of violence, who acts with virtual impunity and is always impossible to hold accountable, as patriarchal discourses of "desirability as power," "false accusations," "witch hunts" "moralistic panic," "punitive vengeance/mandatory forgiveness," and endless other discourses constantly and deftly extricate the rapist from any and all attempts to seek aid or justice on the part of those over whom the rapist exercises embodied sexual power. As such, *every rapist is acting in the capacity of a cop.*

To fight a rapist, in any form, is an act of insurrection against the entire fucking state, capitalist oligarchy, and patriarchy.

This is what it means for "*rape*" to be "*about power.*"

Part I: What Do We Mean by "Rape is About Power"?

On Strange Bedfellows

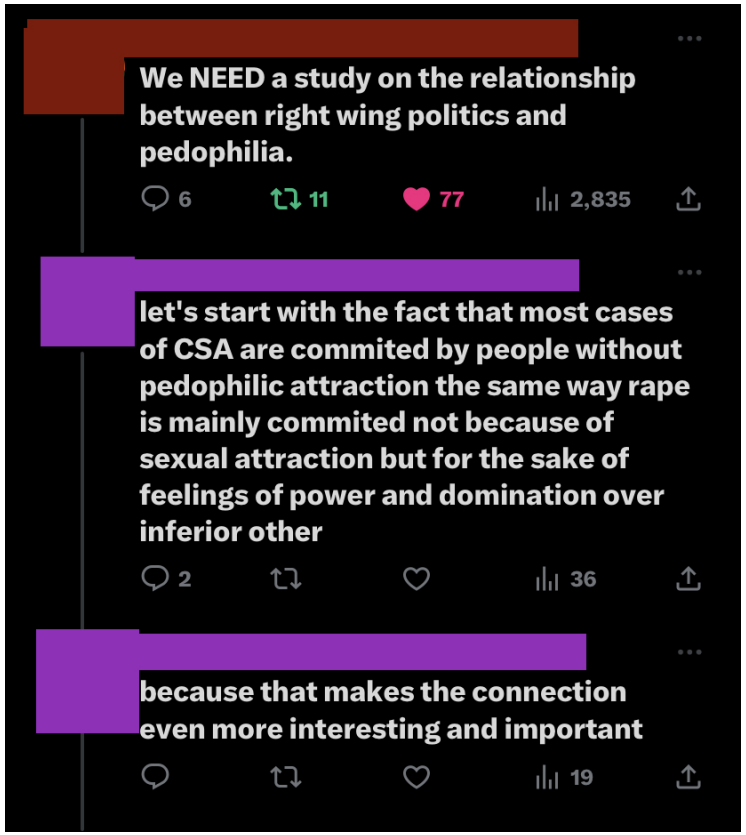
You have most likely heard someone assert that, *"rape is not sex, rape is violence."* Or the somewhat less reductive: *"rape is not about sex, rape is about power,"* or *"rape is not about **desire**, it is about power,"* or any other variation on the classic anti-rape slogan.

I have to admit these slogans have always rubbed me the wrong way, for reasons I hope will become clear soon. However, more recently, I have repeatedly seen them deployed in a number of troubling ways, most especially in combination with another, seemingly similar assertion: *"most people who commit sexual abuse of a child are not '(true) pedophiles,' — not people who have 'pedophilic attraction' — rather, sexual abuse of children is 'about power.'"* For example, take the following interaction:

> Twitter User 1: "We NEED a study on the relationship between right wing politics and pedophilia."
>
> Twitter User 2: let's start with the fact that most cases of CSA are commited by people without pedophilic attraction the same way rape is mainly commited not because of sexual attraction but for the sake of feelings of power and domination over inferior other
>
> Twitter User 2: because that makes the connection even more interesting and important[1]

Although at first this may seem like a perfectly reasonable parallel, these two propositions have strikingly different points

[1] The identities of both twitter users have been redacted, to avoid the possibility of directing harassment toward them.



All power relations between large classes or groups of people—e.g. the relationship between the state and the subject, or between the owning class and the working class, adults and children, cis men and women, etc.—must be constituted and sustained through the aggregation of many routine daily practices of the techniques of rule. All exercise of these techniques of rule are always functioning to reify the oppression of all who are subject to them. It is for this reason that *all cops are bastards*. Every cop is acting as an agent and enforcer of the state's monopoly on political violence, as long as they are acting as a cop, even if they save a kitten from a tree, and even if they supposedly "fear for their lives," i.e., (claim to) feel powerless to sustain their own survival in the face of a "threat."

Every rape reifies and enforces a hierarchy of violence that flows—through the mechanisms of (necro)patriarchy, capitalism, and the state, and through the blunt material exercise of power—downhill from those who have access to the exercise of power onto the bodies of the marginalized, otherized, and oppressed. Every rape constitutes a practice of oppression, the

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men, and he is careful to state that he obtained the interviews *with the permission of the adult "partners."* In fact, it was the adult men who *asked* the boys to participate in Sandfort's study. Some of those men also had the permission of the boys' parents. In this case, the parents grant the adult "partners" sexual access to their children, and then the adult "partners" in turn grant Sandfort epistemic access to the boys, neatly setting up a scenario where the boys are not really free to speak openly because they know that their words will be reported to the men, whom they know are already aware that the interviews are taking place. From a pure "research ethics" point of view, the study is bafflingly poorly designed, and from the point of view of anarchist love for the oppressed, the study is agonizing to read. The boys are trapped between three sets of adults with power over them, all of whom are engaged in a practice of mutually reifying each other's relation to the boys as a property relation. Not surprisingly, Sandfort repeatedly frames the children as the ones who "hold the real power in the relationship," including by means of the exact narratives of imagined legal power and "power of desirability" discussed in this essay and its predecessor.

further removed from power than adult women, even when the victim is a boy. In fact, the gender of a child victim going up against an adult rapist does not seem to have much effect on their access to means of any escape from the physical and epistemic violence of the state and legal system's collaboration with their rapist.[32] Or when a cis woman rapes a trans woman, the gendered power the rapist wields over her victim is very materially real, but is obscured by discourses that frame the cis female body as incapable of becoming the weapon of a rapist *and* discourses that frame trans women as intruding upon or threatening to cis womanhood, and so on.

So here is where I am going with all this:

Every rape (including every act of sexual interaction with a child) reifies a relation of domination and subjugation between, at minimum, the rapist and the victim. But *every* rape *also* functions to produce and reproduce a *societal* relation of domination and subordination (prototypically, in the coercive gendering of subjects and the *sexing of bodies*), between those who wield implicit or explicit social legitimacy in exercising the techniques of (necropatriarchal, state, etc.) rule, and those upon whom those techniques of rule are exercised. Rape is a technology of oppression. Rape is an assertion of *entitlement,* in the sense of "being the title-holder to a piece of property," of holding the *title* to someone else's body. Rape is a *property relation.* As such, it has special significance in the adult-child hierarchy, which is characteristically defined as a property relation, in which children are configured as parental property and/or as objects of exchange between adults, as in child marriage, pederasty, and other practices through which an adult "owner" may license other adult's sexual or physical access to the body of the child in their care.[33]

[32] Zeedyk & Raitt (2000), *passim*

[33] I am reminded of Theo Sandfort's *Boys On Their Contacts With Men*, (1987), in which the boy-love advocate and sexologist Sandfort interviews a number of young boys who are in so-called "sexual relationships" with adult

of origin and frameworks behind them. Slogans like *"rape is not about sex, rape is about power,"* come from anti-rape activism, most of the time at least downstream from radical anti-rape feminism, but the claim that *"most perpetrators of child sexual abuse are not (so-called) true pedophiles/most perpetrators of sexual violence against children are not sexually attracted to children,"* comes directly from the often deeply trans-antagonistic field academic *sexology*, a field profoundly hostile to feminism *per se*, especially *transfeminism*, and in many ways constructed as a systematic, academically legitimized "rebuttal" to feminist political knowledge of sexual violence.

In fact, this claim in particular, about the distinction between "true pedophiles" and "sexual abusers" acting opportunistically, comes directly[2] from highly idiosyncratic, widely discredited[3] psychosexual "typologies" of Michael Seto[4] James Cantor,[5] Ray Blanchard,[6] and other sexologists associated with the International Academy of Sex Researchers[7] and the

[2] EDIT: a minor correction is in order. It has since come to my attention that this claim originates further back in the history of sexology, at least to the time of John Money and Richard Green in the 1960s, but probably earlier, stemming from the development of the psychosexual/pathological category of "pedophile" to begin with. Sexologists working in the areas of "sexual typologies" and the paraphilia model, such as Seto, Cantor, Blanchard, J. Michael Bailey, Kenneth Zucker, and others, are drawing heavily on that same earlier work, and are indeed colleagues and collaborators with sexologists like Richard Green, who founded the journal *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, of which Kenneth Zucker is now editor-in-chief. Much of the usually-cited contemporary "evidence" for this claim is, however, directly derived from the works of Seto, Cantor, Blanchard, and their associates. See, e.g., Blanchard citing Michael Seto as an authoritative source on this claim.

[3] See Julia Serano's work at https://tinyurl.com/28mvxexh and https://tinyurl.com/4mzbn9dd

[4] See Anarchasteminist's discussion of James Cantor at https://tinyurl.com/bdzk32tr

[5] Blanchard's transgender map profile: https://tinyurl.com/5xbu6bsz

[6] Transgender Map profile: https://tinyurl.com/2zfwmyvy

[7] Transgender Map profile: https://tinyurl.com/s3awmvme

Clarke Institute of Mental Health.[8] Although it should be noted that in the original context, the claim was not usually that sexual abuse of children is about *power*, but rather that it is a "crime of opportunity."[9] Somehow, this seems to have been hybridized with the feminist slogan.

The whole story of academic sexology and its long history of association with the anti-feminist movement, transphobia,[10] rape and sexual abuse[11] apologia,[12] links to the Father's Rights and Men's Rights movements, associations with organizations and individuals that provide legal aid to adults (mostly cis men) accused of sexual abuse,[13] and its many curious links to the so-

[8] For example, see Seto, Michael (2018) *Pedophilia and Sexual Offending Against Children: Theory, Assessment, and Intervention*, 2nd Ed., *passim*

[9] For an overview of oppression and exploitation of trans people in sexology, see: https://tinyurl.com/2p8zrtwa

[10] Some of sexology's relevant history is reviewed reasonably well in Goode, Sarah D. (2011). *Paedophiles in Society: Reflecting on Sexuality, Abuse and Hope*, but some scrutiny and cautiousness should be exercised in reading this source, which has some weaknesses in its approach.

[11] Wakefield, Hollida. (2006). The Effects of Child Sexual Abuse: Truth Versus Political Correctness. *Issues in Child Abuse Accusations* 16. Retrieved from `http://www.ipt-forensics.com/journal/volume16/j16_2.htm`. Note that this text provides a brief overview of some sexologists who have argued that sex with children does them minimal or no harm, but Wakefield herself is writing in praise of these sexologists, among others.

[12] For example, sexologist and founder of the Archives of Sexual Behavior Richard Green's association with the False Memory Syndrome Foundation. For more information on the FMSF, see Heaney, Katie. (2020), *The Memory War* at https://tinyurl.com/2jf25tfz

[13] As just one example, sexologists like Theo Sandfort, (who is associated with the editorial board of *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, the journal controlled by the International Academy of Sex Researchers,) have repeatedly co-authored academic works on "Man-Boy Love" with "Pedophile Emancipationist" political activists like Edward Brongersma, and even sat on the editorial board of pro-"pedophilia" pseudoacademic journals like *Paidika: the Journal of Pedophilia*. Brongersma and other "Man-Boy Love" activists continue to be cited as a credible source by contemporary sexologists like Michael Seto, e.g. in Martijn, Frederica M. et al.

Sexual Economies of Death," translated by Olga Arnaiz Zhuravleva[31]

The mechanisms of legal, social, and gendered power are often (although not as consistently) slanted toward the rapist even when the rapist is not a cis white man. Access to the power of the law or the power of patriarchal storytelling is considerably less reliable as a fall-back for people of marginalized genders, and when it is available it often takes different forms than those at the disposal of cis men. However, the discourses of rape culture are powerful and hegemonic, and still consistently conspire to excuse and permit rape in a variety of ways. For example, in the case of a cis female teacher who rapes one of her underage male students, the victim is vastly disadvantaged when it comes to even articulating (or understanding) himself *as a victim at all*. He may be "officially" recognized as a victim in terms of pure legal doctrine (if the abuse is discovered in the first place) but the designation of victimhood can only extend beyond the bureaucracy of law in certain limited circumstances. When a Men's Rights Activist wants to accuse feminists of lying about the gendered distribution of power-to-rape, he may bring up the male student as a victim, but outside that context the victim is mercilessly entrapped in gendered discourses that construe the cis female body as incapable of rape and "males," as always sexually desiring, always sexually consenting, initiating, eager – the woman who is his rapist is put into discourse as a coveted reward he is "lucky" to have "got." Here we can also see the great significance with which sexual desire, and especially the position of the (aspiring) masculine subject as *desiring subject,* is invested in the discourses of sexual power. We can also see how child victims may be even

[31] Sayak Valencia (2019). Necropolitics, Postmortem/Transmortem Politics, and Transfeminisms in the Sexual Economies of Death, translated by Olga Arnaiz Zhuravleva, in *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly 6*(2). 180-193. Duke University Press.

although that may be a factor (but, because rape is so often not accompanied by physical force, strength may not even enter the picture); I mean that the rapist *always implicitly knows*, even if they may consciously hold the anti-feminist beliefs described above, that the mechanisms of legal, social, and gendered power are all really at *their* disposal, not the victim's. The capacity to rape is a social capacity, a structural capacity, not a capacity inherent to a type of body or a type of person. The power to rape is distributed unevenly by patriarchal social organization: cis men are afforded the prerogative of sexual violence as a component of the techniques of rule to which they have access within what Sayek Valencia calls "necropatriarchy":

> "*I understand necropatriarchy as the privilege of exercising the techniques of necropolitical violence proffered by the patriarchy to the figure-body of the individual man (as microsovereign of the populations in his charge). So men have among their gender privileges the knowledge and cultural socialization in the use of the techniques of necropolitics, and legitimacy in the handling and use of violence as a key technique of rule. That is [...] the executors of violence, usually heterosexual cis men, act as armed soldiers of the 'sovereign.' Their crimes occur with impunity, and there is a persistent lack of justice for trans and cis women, as well as minority populations. Due to their race/ethnicity, sexuality, and class, they possess a monopoly over the techniques of death, ruling over gender, class, race, sexual dissent, and functional diversity.*"
>
> Sayek Valencia, "Necropolitics, Postmortem/ Transmortem Politics, and Transfeminisms in the

called "Man-Boy Love Movement,"[14] is far beyond the scope of this essay. As is any detailed analysis of the problems with the "paraphilia" framework produced within this psychosexual approach, which would require an entire other essay. Even the specific claim itself that caught my attention: *"most perpetrators of sexual violence against children are not sexually attracted to children"* deserves its own full length analysis. Hopefully I will be able to write further analyses on these subjects in the near future. For now, suffice to say that (1) there are many compelling reasons to be extremely suspicious, especially as anarchists, of anything this particular academic milieu says about sexual violence, power, and so-called "pedophilia," and (2) sexology, because it attempts to divorce sexual violence from *structural power and oppression* and attribute sexual violence, coercion, and abuse to pathologies of individual psychology, is *inherently* antagonistic to *any* feminist critique of rape culture.

Just keep these things in the back of your mind next time you see this claim floating around.

And yet, I keep seeing these two assertions from categorically antagonistic points of view expressed side by side: one expressing the knowledge-claims of scientifically dubious, trans-antagonistic, generally feminism-hostile sexology and the other expressing the knowledge-claims of sex-positive feminism and anti-rape activism. How could *"rape is about power,"* a classic feminist critique of rape culture come to be routinely deployed in such a strange, contradictory context? Even more striking, I have repeatedly witnessed self-identified "Minor Attracted Persons," — people who self-identify as pedophiles — use this very claim in attempts to *supplant*

(2020). Sexual Attraction and Falling in Love in Persons with Pedohebephilia. *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 49:4, pp. 1305–1318. Retrieved from `https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32086644/`

[14] For more information on disease models of sexuality and gender, see the Transgender Map: https://tinyurl.com/bdtaezx7

feminist critiques of rape culture entirely, by replacing them with the point of view of clinical, pathological sexology.

The scope of this essay is limited to examining and articulating the feminist critique itself, and the ways I think it has been reduced over time into something that can be interpreted as compatible with ideological frameworks fundamentally antagonistic to feminism. Specifically, addressing the way it seems to be expressed in assertions like the above.

"Rape is Not About Sex, Rape is About Power"

First, the slogan "rape is about power" is derived from a specific rebuttal to the myth that people (namely, cis men) commit rape because they are overwhelmed by sexual desire, by "temptation," or even by the beauty of the victim themself, which I will discuss below.

Therefore, the feminist critique could be more accurately phrased:

"rape is not about being overwhelmed by desire, it is about the exercise of power."

Before continuing, I should explain that there is no singular monolithic "feminism," but many feminisms, and they don't always agree. While it's true that some feminists, (e.g., Susan Brownmiller and noted TERF and self-described pederast Germaine Greer,) especially (but not exclusively) liberal sex-positive feminists and libertarian choice feminists beginning in the '80s, have taken the more literal route of asserting that rape is solely an act of violence and not sexual, it's also true that they have been heavily criticized by other feminists, including but not limited to Marxist feminists, socialist feminists, Black and Third World feminists, transfeminists, and yes, anarchist feminists like ourselves.[15]) Besides failing to

[15] For some examples of such critiques, see Monique Plaza's excellent and scathing rebuttal to Foucault in Plaza, M. (1980). Our damages and their compensation. *Feminist Perspectives on The Past and Present Advisory Edito-*

It should go without saying that this is all the exact inverse of reality. The realities of the legal system's treatment of rape victims and marginalized people is so well-documented and beyond all doubt that it is pointless to recapitulate the many, many analyses that have been made of it here. But since of late many leftists, progressives, and anarchists alike seem to have slid quite far to the right on the question of the supposed overwhelming power of a rape accusation, it bears stating explicitly: *rape victims, **especially children**, are silenced and disbelieved at every single turn, from their own families to the fucking supreme court*, and they have been for hundreds and hundreds of years, for as long as court records and judicial norms have been documented.[30]

In all of these frames, the actual distribution of power is discursively reversed – the victim of rape wields both sexual and punitive power over the helpless rapist, who is weak in the face of the victim's overwhelming desirability and powerless against the censure of the law; the "rapability" of subaltern genders and children (i.e. their sexual desirability and their vulnerability to sexual assault) allows them to wield a pervasive, ever-present social and legal power to "ruin a man's life" by, essentially, ruining his reputation. (There is an internal contradiction, however: in those contexts where a rapist is understood as taking power *back* from someone who has abused their putative power over him, the transfer of power from the victim to the rapist is implicitly admitted to.)

Rape, said feminists in response, is not caused by the the rapist's *weakness and powerlessness* before overwhelming sexual desire, as previous masculinist and patriarchal discourses had insisted, but the opposite: rape is an expression of not only a *will* to control and dominate but also a *capacity* to do so. And I don't mean capacity in terms of physical strength,

[30] See Suzanne Zeedyk & Fiona Raitt, (2000) "*The Implicit Relation of Psychology and Law: Women and Syndrome Evidence.*

descend upon him. (Again, although a rapist can be of any gender, and a person of any gender can be raped, in the patriarchal ways of thinking that produce these narratives, it is cis men who are virtually always imagined as the prototypical "victims" of the out-of-control "moral panics" and "witch hunt mentality" that supposedly invest subaltern genders and children with this overwhelming epistemic authority.)

This is often claimed to be *especially* true of "sexual relationships" that (ostensibly) fall under the scrutiny of the law: a child or adolescent who "consents" to a "relationship" with a man becomes enframed as having privileged access to tremendous power over their "lover," because, if they should have a vindictive streak or want to "punish" their "lover," they can simply "blame the adult" or "reveal the relationship" in order to expose the helpless man to the persecution of the law. These discourses mirror similar storytelling techniques found in white supremacist, transphobic, and homophobic narratives. For example, the way a wealthy and powerful white male university professor might imagine himself as a martyr risking arrest and persecution for refusing to use a student's pronouns, or for disseminating "suppressed" "race realist" "science" and so on: the idea is that the marginalized, otherized, and oppressed (i.e., the young, Black, trans, and queer students who are both officially under his authority and structurally marginalized relative to his *de facto* dominance as a cis white male at the top of the food chain) possess the power to "ruin his life," over imagined slights or false accusations. So also might an abuse apologist imagine himself as a "revolutionary" risking arrest and persecution for seeking sex with children.[29]

[29] See the interview given by Ralph Underwager and Hollida Wakefield to *Paidika: The Journal of Paedophilia,* in which Underwager implies that men who seek sex with children are akin to "revolutionaries." Accessed April 7, 2023. Retrieved from: `http://www.nostatusquo.com/ACLU/NudistHallofShame/Underwager3.html`

answer the obvious question, "if it is solely about violence or power and has nothing to do with sex, why didn't he just hit her?" (non-sexual physical violence is, after all, the predominant means by which adult cis men assert power over other adult cis men), it disavows the unavoidable reality that rape victims—of whom the gender-marginalized and children make up the vast majority—overwhelmingly (if not necessarily always) experience rape as sexual. And rapists, likewise, often (if not necessarily always) experience rape as sexual–as the pursuit of sexual gratification–as much as they experience it as power (and they may not experience it as power at all, as we shall see.) For example, Susan Brownmiller falls into the camp that argues "rape is not about sex" and comes from a strictly bioessentialist point of view, according to which the so-called "biological sexes" of human anatomy and the corresponding (hetero)sexual act are ontologically pre-social or "primal." Sex and sexuality therefore exist outside the social world in which power relations come to exist; power is social, sex is anatomical, therefore rape (being about power) is social, but sex(uality) is biological and pre-social. (She contradicts herself somewhat, however, by locating the "structural capacity to rape" and "structural vulnerability to rape" in the "primal" reality of human anatomy, a view now popular among TERFs.)[16] Certainly not all of the feminists who took this view were bioessentialists—many were not, and most would have regarded themselves as welcoming to "transsexuals" as was the terminology of the time—but you may be reminded of the popular liberal claim that "gender is social but sex is biological," and with good reason. In fact it

rial Board, 183., and Lauretis, T. D. (1989). The violence of rhetoric: Considerations on gender and Representation. *The Violence of Representation: Literature and the violence of Literature,* Routledge, London.

[16] For a critique of Brownmiller, see Woodhull, W. (1988). Sexuality, power, and the question of rape. *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on resistance,* 167-76.

is something like this view, I suspect, that underlies popular progressive adoption of "rape is not about sex"; it is a wish to locate "sex" and "sexuality" or "sexual desire" outside the world of the social and hence outside power, outside gender, and indeed outside critique.

On the other side, many critics of what they called the "desexualization of rape," such as Monique Plaza, Winifred Woodhull, and Teresa de Lauretis, took a strongly social constructionist point of view, understanding not merely gender and power but even so-called "biological sex" and "sexuality" to be social, and therefore implicated in the institution and ideology of patriarchal power. They argued that taking rape out of the realm of "the sexual" and placing it exclusively in the realm of "the violent," allows one to be against it without having to interrogate the social institution of (hetero)sexuality and its normative codes. To claim that rape is "not sex" defangs the critique of cisheteronormativity. On this, at least, although certainly not everything,[17] I agree with the critics. I would argue that this split, which played out especially through the era of the feminist sex wars of the '80s and '90s,[18] is the point at which the critique expressed in "rape is about power" already begins to lose its force, and the seeds of its eventual co-opting by proponents of explicitly anti-feminist frames like sexology were planted.[19]

[17] Among the most outspoken critics is Catherine MacKinnon. Her social constructionist criticism of "rape is not sex" in *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* is cogent and insightful, but the flaws in her broader analysis become painfully clear in her now infamous carceral and statist activism against pornography.

[18] For a succinct overview of the early "sex wars" written from the then-contemporary perspective, see Ferguson, A. (1984). Sex war: The debate between radical and libertarian feminists. *Signs: journal of women in culture and society, 10*(1), 106-112.

[19] In fact, Gayle Rubin's "charmed circle" theory, which came to be very influential in the following years, was strongly influenced by academic liberal sexology. Rubin, drawing from sexology on the one hand and Foucault

ther "punish" or forgive. The rapist is imagined as being perpetually at the victim's mercy, and the victim is often framed as "punitive, carceral, vengeful, vindictive," etc. if they don't forgive and extend the mercy to which the rapist is implicitly entitled. This experience of being trapped between discourses of "false accusations" that position them as unreliable narrators and "punitive vengefulness/mandatory forgiveness" that position them as the one exercising coercive power over their rapist will be familiar to any victim who has been abused in the context of Evangelical Christianity. For example, consider the Indiana pastor[27] who raped a sixteen-year-old girl. When confronted by his victim, he confessed, and his congregation rose to embrace *him* with love and support, in a big group hug, eschewing the vengeful, harsh punitiveness Evangelical ideology asserts that "the (secular) world" practices toward rapists. The church further expressed its support for him in a statement affirming its commitment to "demonstrating the same support, encouragement, counsel and forgiveness that has come to define the collective heart and ministry of this body." This is quite typical of Evangelical culture's handling of abuse. (Of course, it will also be familiar to many survivors in "radical" and "anarchist" scenes[28] who have been subjected to "restorative justice" processes that "radically" produce the same result as Evangelical churches.)

Women and children *in general* (and feminists in particular) are thus imagined as wielding unaccountable power over cis men *in general*—all a woman (or a child) must do to permanently destroy an innocent man is accuse him of rape, and immediately a whole machinery of legal and social power will

[27] Steinbuch, Yaron. (May 24, 2022). Indiana pastor John Lowe II admits affair—but woman says she was his 16-year-old victim. New York Post. Accessed April 7, 2023. Retrieved from: `https://nypost.com/2022/05/24/indiana-pastor-john-lowe-ii-admits-affair-`

[28] See Words to Fire Press, "Betrayal: A Critical Analysis of Rape Culture in Anarchist Scenes."

of and assign gendered meaning to the body itself and its physiological features. Allonormativity, *compulsory sexuality*, is among the sociocultural normative forces that invest sexual desire itself with certain forms of *power*: especially the power to assign one's own sexual, erotic, and gendered meanings to the bodies of others.

Although the supposed power to incite and entice is attributed to the object of desire, it is in reality the social and sexual scripts of patriarchy that are implicated in the production and social construction of the (patterns of incitement to) desire, which come to (or are said to) *instigate* or *justify* the exercise of sexual power. This includes patterns of incitement to desire that fetishize those bodies that are inscribed with the social signifiers of vulnerability and powerlessness, signifiers of *the availability to be subjugated*, i.e., the child's body. The reduction of the Other to a body, and then the body to a violable object of desire is a two-fold process of objectification. Intrinsic to objectification is the epistemic erasure of the desire-objects subjectivity, which renders the exercise of sexual coercion upon their body morally excusable.

Closely related, then, is the delegitimization of the victim's claim to epistemic personhood, the denial of their capacity to know and to speak and to act as a reliable witness to their own lives and bodies. If a victim—or a woman, or a child, or a trans person—cannot act as a reliable witness to the "truth" of their own body, yet the desiring-subject, by virtue of their desire, possesses a form of epistemic authority, then the victim can become an object three times: an object of desire, an object of violence, and an object of knowledge. In this context, one way in which a rape victim is often construed as "the one with the real power," is through the discourse of "false accusations." A (counterfactual) narrative is produced in which the victim is imagined as having the unique ability to unleash the whole power of the state upon the abuser, to "ruin his life" over a mere "lapse," or "miscommunication." The power to ei-

Nevertheless, what both the "rape is not sex" feminists and their critics agreed on was that the slogan and associated arguments originate as a counter to the patriarchal myth I described above: that rape is caused by the rapist being overwhelmed by desire. And they all certainly agreed on the specific critique of the myth itself: "rape is not about being overwhelmed by desire; rape is about [the exercise of] power." While some came to the conclusion that rape was "not sex" by artificially separating sex from power, others maintained that, "[i]nstead of sidestepping the problem of sex's relation to power by divorcing one from the other in our minds, we need to analyze the social mechanisms, including language and conceptual structures, that bind the two together in our culture."[20]

This general agreement points to the fact that this critique stems at least originally from the robust network of feminisms that treats *sexuality, desire, and power* as inseparably intertwined in the operation and production of patriarchy. Importantly, the *exercise* of power is not always about "feeling" powerful and dominating. very often the exercise of power is subjectively felt by the person enacting it as being functionally "power-neutral." Practices of power is very often taken for granted as naturally occurring or just the way things are, not as an actively felt experience if power. A person *feeling* powerful, feeling an active sense of personal power, is not

on the other, (extremely strange bedfellows to anyone familiar with Foucault's acidic views on the "sexual sciences,") argued that "sexuality" and "gender" had to be separated into different realms of analysis, and therefore "gender oppression" separated from "sexual oppression." This is inevitably a move toward the "gender is social, but sex is biological," liberal frame of today that is heavily critiqued by transfeminists—arguably the foundational move in that direction. There is certainly much to be said about Rubin's influence on popular feminism and the influence she drew from sexology, but it is beyond the scope of this essay. For a critique of both Rubin and MacKinnon, see Valverde, M. (1989). Beyond gender dangers and private pleasures: Theory and ethics in the sex debates. *Feminist Studies, 15*(2), 237-254.

[20] Woodhull, (1988). *Sexuality, power, and the question of rape*, 171.

synonymous with a person actually *exercising* power upon the body of others. Both in the sense that a person can feel powerful while they have no access to material power and in the sense that a person can feel powerless while actively exercising power.

Consider BDSM: ideally, BDSM involves the dominant party *feeling* a sense of power while not actually exercising any material coercive control over the submissive party. Feeling power and enacting power are not the same thing.[21]

Because, straightforwardly, power is not a feeling.

Power is the capacity to enact or impose your will. Especially the capacity to impose your will upon others.

The original feminist critique emerged in the context of a specific ideological struggle about the nature of sexuality, desire, and sexual violence. It is a counterargument to a claim about the nature of rape that goes something like this: sexual desire can be so overwhelming that a person (usually a cis man, implicitly or explicitly, in the mindset of the rape apologist) can be overcome by desire and lose control of themselves. Rape, in this view, is not an assertion of power but the result of a loss of power on the part of the rapist, a loss of control over their own body. This claim inverts the reality of rape in order to frame the aggressor as not an aggressor at all but, at worst, a man who succumbed to his weakness.

The point was to reject the notion that rapists are powerless against their own desires, to insist that rapists hold full agency in their actions and that sexual violence is not merely an individual "mistake" or "loss of control," but a manifestation and practice of *structural and systemic power*. Importantly, the crucial role of rape as an operative mechanism of *systemic and structural oppression* means that rape cannot be solely about an

[21] BDSM was a point of contention in the feminist sex wars precisely because of feminists' contending theories of power; on this topic, I take the side of the sex-positive feminists, but again, a full critique of the sex wars' battles lines on BDSM is beyond the scope of this essay.

ing is nonetheless *sexual coercion*—the application of coercive power—regardless of how they subjectively feel about their motivations. They are choosing to act in a way that expresses their sense of entitlement to *de facto* ownership over the body of the other. They are not choosing to engage in this coercive practice because they are just so overwhelmed by the power of their desire and can't help themselves, nor is sexual desire entirely unrelated to the particular sense of corporeal sexual ownership they are expressing. What they are doing is attempting to exercise power over their partner's body, attempting to overrule their partner's consent, attempting to assert their right to have their sexual desires met through the subordination of the other's autonomy to their own desires. They are exercising the capacity to impose their will.

And *that* is the point of the feminist critique.

Part II: Every Rapist is a Cop Without a Badge

A feature of the rape apologist ideology to which feminist analysis of rape-as-power responds is the reversal of the power relations between the victim and the rapist.

In the previous article, we discussed how this reversal is constructed by framing the victim as wielding the "power of their sexual desirability." Sexual desire, far from being entirely divorced from power, is invested with *supreme importance* in the patriarchal economies of power—especially the sexual desires of adult cis men. Sexual desire may even be invested with a form of epistemic authority, by which knowledge-claims (about, for example, the woman-ness of trans women,) can be made according to a metric of fuckability afforded to them by a (cis) desiring-subject. "She is (not) a real woman because I (do not) want to fuck her." In other words, sexual desire is even sometimes afforded the power to define the reality

even if he is powerful enough to "resist" the urge to "offend." This set of ideas, if it not clear, seems to unavoidably implicate the view that sexual desires are overwhelming, natural, pre-social or non-social forces that exist outside of power, and that a desiring-subject is either strong enough to resist or becomes overwhelmed by—the same view discussed above as part of the network of patriarchal ways of thinking that conspire to excuse and justify rape culture. Someday soon I hope I will be able to write out a more thorough critique.

For now: it is true that any individual rapist (whether their victim is an adult or a child) may or may not be motivated by a personal pursuit of subjective feelings of power over the inferior victim, but this is not what is meant by the feminist analysis that *rape is about power*.

What is meant is that rape is the material, embodied, *exercise* of power. Rape is an operative mechanism of oppression, at the interpersonal *and* the structural level. That power is not purely individualistic or personally felt, although it (obviously) functions at the level of interpersonal power too: instead, *rape is a **function** of structural and systemic power*. Child sexual abuse is no different: it is a function of structural and systemic power. *And so is sexual desire toward children.*[26] These things cannot be meaningfully disentangled in the way sexologists attempt to do.

Pestering your partner over and over again for sex, even after they have said no? That is *an embodied, gendered and sexual exercise of power*, even though it is unlikely that many people who do this think about it as personally empowering. Many who do this very likely think their partner is "the one with the real power," since their partner is "gatekeeping" the sex they so badly desire.

The person doing such a thing is likely to be personally motivated primarily by sexual desire, but what they are do-

[26] Liddle, Mark A. (1993)

individual rapist's *personal experience of power*, even though for some individual rapists, a personal experience of feeling dominant and powerful may be a component of their motivations. This means that regardless of whether the individual rapist *feels* a sense of power domination, (which they may or may not) the *act* of committing sexual assault is (1) an exercise of *sexual, gendered and embodied* power, (2) made possible through systemic forms of power that encourage and permit sexual violence along gendered and sexualized lines, and (3) a social operative mechanism of oppression.

Closely related to the idea that a rapist is simply "overcome by desire" is the particular style of thinking according to which being sexually attracted to someone or sexually desiring *them* gives them power over the *you*. Tropes like the *femme fatale*, the notion of "feminine wiles," and broadly, the idea that subaltern genders (including children!) can wield their "desirability" to control and have power over the helpless targets who desire them (again, implicitly cis men). In this context, sexual assault has often been framed as a means of taking that power "back" from the desirable person, or at minimum as a consequence of the desirable person's "power of desirability."

We find this rationale deployed as abuse apologia in the context of sexualities and sexual acts which are at least ostensibly socially proscribed: a man who is in a "relationship" with an adolescent or child is sometimes framed by apologists as being essentially at the child's mercy, the child is "the one who holds the real power in this relationship," because they, as an object of desire, can easily wield their desirability to control their "lover." This line of thinking obviously turns up in consciously apologist texts about such "relationships,"[22] but also turns up in the ostensibly objective and analytic worldviews of liberal

[22] For example, again see quotes like the following from Theo Sandfort's (1985) *Boys On Their Contacts with Men: A Study of Sexually Expressed Friendships*: "…it can be seen that the boy realized he could **withhold sex from his partner** and so use it **as a power tool**." (p. 95, emphasis mine)

academic historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and so on, who would likely otherwise consider themselves fervently opposed to "sexual abuse" and would even very likely be offended by the comparison.[23] The point is that it is a normative style of thinking, not confined to people who consciously advocate for inegalitarian "relationships" of this kind, but widespread and often unconscious. The putative power wielded by the object of desire is derived from their status as the "gatekeeper" of the sex the desiring-subject wants so badly. They can refuse or reward, they can tempt and tease, and so on, but ultimately the "power" to decide if sex is going to happen, if they are going to "give" the desiring-subject sex, if they are going to save him from his suffering, is allegedly entirely in their hands.

In this worldview, it is the desiring-subject's personal strength to resist overwhelming desire that prevents them from committing sexual assault. A desiring-subject is either strong enough to resist overwhelming desires, or they are overcome by them. With this in mind, let us reconsider the standard sexologist claim that *"…sexual offending [against children]* ***is expected*** *when a motivation to seek sexual gratification is combined with* ***low self-control*** *and* ***opportunity***"[24] [Emphasis mine], with a view of the context we have just discussed. Since sexologists argue that most sexual abusers are not so-called "true pedophiles," (not fixedly attracted to children)[25] we can infer that the "opportunity" somehow

[23] For example, see quotes like the following from classical archeologist Judith Barringer's *The Hunt in Ancient Greece* (2001), describing the Ancient Athenian practice of pederasty as "…a vacillating exchange of power between the older *erastês*, who holds social status, and the *erômenos*, who, **by virtue of the desire that he inspires in the *erastês*, possesses power**." (p. 70, emphasis mine)

[24] Seto, Michael. (2018). *Pedophilia and Sexual Offending Against Children: Theory, Assessment, and Intervention.* 2nd Ed. p. 86

[25] We technically agree, although for very different reasons—we reject the paraphilia model entirely and along with it the notion that there is a set of "chronophilias," including pedophilia, ephebophilia, and so on, that are

as, for example, an unhealthy, disordered, repressed sexuality!) In particular, there is a strong historical precedent for framing *sexual violence against children* as a product of arrested psychosexual development in which an adult is stuck at the "infantile," undeveloped stage of sexuality, including the purported stages of "childhood asexuality" and "adolescent homosexuality." For more on this fascinating history, I recommend reading *Crimes Against Children: sexual violence and legal culture in New York City, 1880–1960* by Stephen Robertson and *Refusing Compulsory Sexuality* by Sherronda J. Brown, but I won't go further into the whole history right now. I mention this mainly to gesture at some possible clues about the kind of biases and presuppositions about sex and (a)sexuality that have played a role in the sexology framework coming to be seen as compatible with (a somewhat reductive, oversimplified understanding of) the feminist critique of rape-as-power.

It should be noted, finally, that to insist that "rape is about *'feeling'* powerful and dominating" is once again to actually reinforce the notion that rape is a product of individual psychology (the view preferred by pathologizing the framework of sexology) rather than systemic structural power.

I want to make it clear that when I allude to finding the claims of sexology problematic or suspicious, I am not at all rejecting the notion that practices of power lie at the heart of sexual violence against children. Instead, I am rejecting the notion that sexual abuse of children is always about *feeling* powerful, about having a subjective experience of power, or that sexual abuse of children is chiefly opportunistic and unrelated to having sexual desires directed at children. I am rejecting the false dichotomy between those who supposedly have an intrinsic or pathological "attraction to children" that is beyond their control, and those who sexually abuse children purely out of opportunism but supposedly have no "attraction to children," the notion that "pedophilia" constitutes an overwhelming urge or desire which the desiring-subject is powerless to overcome,

triarchal thinking being refuted imagines that the presence of sexual desire voids the exercise of power: the rapist is rendered powerless by sexuality and desire. *Ipso facto*, a desiring-subject can only exercise power over the bodies of others if he does *not* sexually desire them. But what I have seen time and time again, is this one-time feminist critique being turned on its head and used to return to that exact false dichotomy from the other side, just approaching from the other side: to deny the sexualization of the exercise of power within patriarchy.

Final Thoughts: Rape as the Sexualization of Power, or Power as the Asexualization of Rape?

There is a curious discursive tendency forming here too, in my opinion, although this is rarely ever stated as a consciously held belief: rape comes to be framed (usually unintentionally) as an inherently *asexual* practice of power. Power itself is framed as the inverse and mutually exclusive opposite of *"sexual,"* which is, by definition, in the domain of the *asexual*. Power becomes discursively situated safely *outside* allonormative practices of compulsory sexuality, as the "Other" to allosexuality and to allosexual ways of desiring, ways of relating to desire: power, in other words, is being discursively *asexualized*, and by extension, then rape, too, as power but not sex, is asexualized.

This is, in fact, not actually new. There is a long tradition in, you guessed it, academic sexology and psychiatry, (among other disciplines), of (1) constructing asexuality as pathological "repression" or arrested development, as inherently unhealthy, abnormal, and disordered, and thus as tending to produce unhealthy, abnormal, and disordered sexual behaviors, including sexual violence, and (2) distancing sexual violence as far as possible from sexual desire (especially the desires of cis adult men), with sexual violence framed instead as a product of a diseased mind, alien to and outside normative modes of desiring. (Such

directs sexual desire (the "motivation to seek sexual gratification") toward the victim. In other words, "opportunity" here implicitly means *"temptation,"* not merely random circumstances: it is the opportunity itself that actually *produces* desire toward a specific object. This framework, that sexual abuse "is expected" when a desiring-subject (a subject with "motivation to seek sexual gratification") is overwhelmed (because of low self-control) by temptation (opportunity), is the *exact inverse* of the feminist critique in *all* its forms, even the slogan "rape is not about sex, rape is about power," which I have criticized for opening the door to co-optation. It exactly reproduces the very myth the slogan came to exist as a rebuttal against.

But there is a quiet part to this myth, too: if the object of desire promises sex and then withholds, wields their "desirability" to control the desiring-subject but never intends to reward his "obedience" by granting sexual access to their bodies, then if the desiring-subject should be *be overcome with desire, lose control,* and *take* what is being withheld, then it is the rapist who is framed as taking power *back* from the object of their desire. The desirer's actions are framed as essentially understandable (because they have been a "victim" of "cruel" and "withholding" control) and the rape is even implicitly seen as perhaps *deserved* (after all, the manipulative desire-object must have known they were playing with fire, right?) Moreover, I draw your attention to the words "overcome" and "overwhelmed." These words, when used to frame sexual assault as a product of being "overwhelmed by desire" position the rapist as the one

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allegedly biologically innate to those assigned male at birth, benign sexual variations, or deviancies produced by psychosexual abnormality (all three claims have been made by sexologists). "True pedophiles" do not exist in the commonly understood sense, but are socially constructed, because sexuality and desire are both social, not biological or pre-social. For a better analysis of how sexual desires become directed toward children, see Liddle, A. M. (1993). Gender, desire and child sexual abuse: Accounting for the male majority. *Theory, Culture & Society, 10*(4), 103-126.

who is actually *losing* power through the very act of sexual assault, while framing rape as the expression of the *victim's* power to entice and incite. Paradoxically, rape becomes the means by which a helpless desirer takes power back from the desire-object who controls them by inciting desire *and* a moment of individual weakness during which the rapist loses all power over their own body and is helplessly controlled by the desire inspired by the victim.

The feminist critique rejects this whole worldview by stating that sexual assault is a *sexual practice* of exercising power. The feminist framework sees sexual practices as a key site for the production of gender roles, "sexed bodies" (the notion that bodies become "sexed" or imbued with "sexual difference" through discourse and through embodied, gender-reifying sexual practices), and power itself.

The critique was about rejecting the false dichotomy between sexual practice and exercise of patriarchal power. It was *never* supposed to be about positing a mutually exclusive boundary between sexuality/desire, and the exercises of power. It was quite literally the *opposite*. It was about recognizing that rape is the both the ultimate expression of the patriarchal sexualization of power AND the ultimate means of imbuing bodies, sexuality, and desires with hierarchical, power-stratified meanings.

Rape, in the feminist analysis, ***is the invention of patriarchal gender***.

It is the archetype and paradigm of heterosexuality as a hegemonic *ideology* (which, it must be made very clear, does NOT mean "all hetero sex is rape." That is a strawman, which I don't have space to explore here, but it needs to be preempted anyway. Hegemonic sexual *ideologies* are not the same as sexual identities, and although sexuality is socially constructed, individuals have agency to operate both within and against the constraints of socially constructed institutions in complex ways.)

Phenomena like prison rape (which is, in my experience, typically brought up as an example of cishetero men sexually assaulting other men as a means of asserting power over them, although prison rape is certainly not limited to the practices of incarcerated cis men) are not proof of the absence of sexuality in rape, nor that sexual violence is "not about sex," they are instead very blunt practices of the sexualization of power, and the practice of sex as a key site for the production of power. The victim of a prison rape is understood as "dominated" not just because his rapist has asserted power over him—which he could just as easily have done by physically assaulting or injuring him—but because he has been *subjugated into the sexual position of a woman or a child* within a patriarchal sexual economy of power, gender, desire, domination, and subordination. It is not just an abstract form of gender-neutral, sexuality-neutral "power," sexual practice of power that coercively genders subject and sexes the body, through the imposition of sex *on* the body. Prison rape doesn't prove that sexuality and power are categorically separate, but literally the opposite: it shows that (quite specifically *gendered*) power is exercised and constructed through sexual practices.

The feminist critique was a rebuttal to the ways power was framed as playing a role in sexual violence. It was a rebuttal *both* to the false dichotomy that presents sex and desire as inherently outside power *and* to the notion that power is generated by desirability.

To take that feminist analysis, which so crucially depends on an understanding of sexuality, desire, and power as intertwined and co-constitutive, and warp it into "rape is *not sex*, rape is *sexless*, separate from sexuality *per se*, and *only* about 'feeling powerful'" actually *undermines* the original point!

Treating sexuality, desire, and power as mutually exclusive, the presence of power as implying the absence of sexuality or desire, is quite literally reverting right back to the exact false dichotomy the critique exists to refute in the first place. The pa-