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FEMINIST VIOLENCE: RAPE AND MILITANCY IN THE SECOND WAVE

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Introduction

“It’s not Black women who are shedding Black men’s blood on the street – yet. We’re not cleaving your head open with axes. We’re not shooting you down...I’m not blaming the Black man. I’m saying if my blood is being shed, at some point I’m gonna have a legitimate reason to take up a knife and cut your damn head off.”

- Audre Lorde¹

The Question of Feminist Violence

This dissertation explores the as-of-yet undertheorized feminist turn to violence during the second wave. Audre Lorde’s quote in the epigraph exemplifies the rhetorical use of violence for second-wave feminist theorists. In both her interview with James Baldwin, and her essay “Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface,” Lorde expresses the same sentiment. Black women fear the violence of Black men, she reasons, but they do not respond with violence in kind – yet. Much hangs on Lorde’s “yet.” With that qualification, Lorde conjures a vision of retaliatory feminist violence. The idea of “cleaving your head open with axes” is not pulled out of thin air. There, Lorde references Patricia Cowan, a Black actress who answered an ad to audition for a play called *Hammer*, only to be beaten to death by a Black male playwright.² Lorde’s invocation of feminist violence, then, has a revelatory quality. She uses the threat of feminist violence to expose the patriarchal violence that Black women experience every day. What if women engaged in the same violence that men exercise against them? Blood would run in the streets, Lorde answers. Feminist violence is perhaps unfathomable because patriarchal violence is so ordinary. It is difficult to imagine an adequate recompense for everyday violence

¹ Audre Lorde and James Baldwin, “Revolutionary Hope: A Conversation between Audre Lorde and James Baldwin,” *Essence* (1984): <https://mocada-museum.tumblr.com/post/73421979421/revolutionary-hope-a-conversation-between-james>; Audre Lorde, “Sexism: An American Disease in Blackface” in *Sister Outsider* (New York: Crown Publishing Group, [1984] 2007).

² Lorde, “Sexism,” 61.

that would not result in mass slaughter. Gruesome and explicit, Lorde's threat lays bare the pervasiveness of patriarchal violence.

Lorde is not alone in levying the threat of feminist violence. Throughout this dissertation, I read Andrea Dworkin, Simone de Beauvoir, Valerie Solanas, and Toni Morrison as preoccupied with the idea of feminist violence. I also contextualize each of these thinkers in the anti-rape, self-defense, radical feminist, and pro-abortion movements of the second wave. What becomes apparent, I argue, is that violence was a central concept for second-wave feminists. They brought rape, as well as sex and pornography, into the public consciousness as forms of violence, and they debated whether they should engage in militant organizing against patriarchal violence. Rather than advocate straightforwardly for the feminist use of violence, I interrogate what the rhetorical appeals to, and physical practices of, feminist violence revealed for second-wave feminists.

Animating my discussion of feminist violence is a set of questions that plagues contemporary feminists once again in our post-#MeToo moment: Why don't we see violence against women? And how can feminists make often-invisible patriarchal violence visible? During the second wave, feminists became increasingly aware of the ubiquity of patriarchal violence. This feminist coming to consciousness manifested in organizing to re-define rape, pornography, and even consensual sex as violence, as I discuss in my first chapter. Although they succeeded in transforming common sense, feminists struggled to achieve their goal of ending rape, and other forms of patriarchal violence. They quickly recognized the inefficacy of the state, given its masculinism and racism. Instead of law enforcement, feminists turned to self-defense as a means of prevention, a form of feminist violence to counteract and prevent rape, domestic abuse, and harassment. While some thinkers, including Valerie Solanas, raised the

prospect of revolutionary feminist violence, most feminists rejected that proposal in favor of self-defense. Abortion also functioned as a tactic of feminist violence that resisted forced reproduction.

We fail to see patriarchal violence because it conceals itself. A thread running through second-wave feminist thought is the definition of patriarchal violence as objectification, or the transformation of people (usually, women) into things. In this dissertation, I treat objectification not as ethically wrong, but as anti-democratic, since it removes women from the common world. With consent often serving as an alibi, patriarchal violence conceals itself by disappearing its victims from the public space of politics. Feminist violence allows women to contest the logic of objectification, insist on the value of their own lives, and assert themselves as political actors, bursting onto the scene of public life. On a pragmatic level, feminist violence in the form of self-defense promises to prevent rape and harassment. While contemporary theorists tend to treat violence as destructive of language and subjectivity, for second-wave feminists, violence was a collective sense-making project.³ Through feminist violence, feminist thinkers and activists sought to uncover patriarchal violence that was so ordinary it became invisible. They simultaneously hoped, as I discuss in the first and second chapters and the conclusion, to bring into view the possibility of ending rape—a possibility that has all but vanished from the contemporary imaginative horizon.

When contemporary feminists theorize violence, they tend to take one of two approaches. They either critique patriarchal violence, or advocate for feminist pacifism. These ways of thinking violence converge in the belief that women cannot or should not exercise violence

³ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985); Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

because doing so partakes in masculinist structures of domination. Contemporary scholars, then, overlook calls for feminist violence during the second wave because they tend to assume an irreconcilability between feminism and violence. For example, in their aptly named book, *Can Political Violence Ever Be Justified?*, Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings answer the titular question with a resounding “no.” Deeply influenced by Hannah Arendt, Frazer and Hutchings treat “political violence” as a contradiction in terms, because violence destroys the space of politics. “Violence,” they write, “is more closely associated with a project of domination than with politics as the open-ended creation of a world in common.”⁴ From a feminist perspective, Frazer and Hutchings advocate for non-violent tactics of political action to contest violent domination. Frazer and Hutchings’ allergy to the use of violence, even for feminist purposes, reflects a broader negative disposition towards violence among contemporary feminist theorists.

When feminist theorists speak about violence, they usually do so to critique violence as masculinist. Part of the cultural feminist turn, Sara Ruddick famously advances “maternal thinking” that takes as its point of departure the care work performed by mothers and moves toward an antimilitarist politics of peace.⁵ Writing in the same decade, Jean Beth Elshtain draws attention to the gendered logic of what she names the “beautiful soul / just warrior” dichotomy.⁶ While neither Ruddick nor Elshtain insist on a purist pacifism, and Elshtain even underlines the disruptive quality of women’s violence, both thinkers have come to represent the coincidence between nonviolence and feminism.⁷ This apparent commitment to nonviolence has garnered

⁴ Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings, *Can Political Violence Ever Be Justified?* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 92.

⁵ Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, [1989] 1995).

⁶ Jean Beth Elshtain, *Women and War* (New York City: Basic Books, 1987).

⁷ Frazer and Hutchings, *Can Political Violence Ever Be Justified?*

renewed attention in contemporary feminist theory. Adriana Cavarero's *Inclinations* returns to the importance of maternal care in cultivating a feminist disposition through a phenomenological account of bodily comportment, while Judith Butler's *The Force of Non-Violence* makes an ethical argument for the obligation to refrain from violence because of our shared vulnerability.⁸ Although she does not categorically condemn the use of violence, Françoise Vergès calls on feminists to “imagine a post-violent society.”⁹

That said, some feminist theorists have begun re-examining the relationship between feminism and violence, through attention to first-wave British suffragettes.¹⁰ Juno Richards figures the suffragette destruction of property as an Arendtian form of world-making action, which reclaimed public space for women traditionally excluded from it.¹¹ In her sweeping *A Philosophy of Violence*, Elsa Dorlin focuses on “martial ethics of the self” as a vehicle of subject formation; “the subject being defended,” Dorlin believes, “does not preexist the movement to resist the violence directed at it.”¹² With the example of the British suffragettes, Dorlin shows that “feminist self-defense opened up a new relationship to the world, a different way of being.”¹³ Feminists developed a political consciousness, she contends, through the practice of self-defense, by coming to see themselves as subjects capable of resistance. Richards and Dorlin's insights into the world-making and subjectifying effects of violence shed light on second-wave militancy. Yet the praxis of feminist violence shifts substantially between the first

⁸ Adriana Cavarero, *Inclinations: A critique of rectitude* (Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2016); Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence* (New York: Verso, 2020).

⁹ Françoise Vergès, *A Feminist Theory of Violence* (London: Pluto Press, 2020).

¹⁰ Scholars have also paid some attention to women's roles in 1970s leftist groups: Patricia Melzer, *Death in the Shape of a Young Girl: Women's Political Violence in the Red Army Faction* (New York: NYU Press, 2015); Mona Rocha, *The Weatherwomen: Militant Feminists of the Weather Underground* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co, 2020).

¹¹ Juno Richards, *The Fury Archives: Female Citizenship, Human Rights, and the International Avant-Gardes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 72 & 90.

¹² Elsa Dorlin, *Self-Defense: A Philosophy of Violence* (New York: Verso, [2017] 2022), xvii.

¹³ Dorlin, *Self-Defense*, 45.

and second waves. In the first wave, feminists primarily destroyed public property in an effort to enshrine the legal right to vote. The paradigm that “the personal is political” shifts the focus of second-wave feminists to intimate violence. Feminist violence in the second wave thus becomes directed at people, rather than property, and in particular at men who commit violence against women.

In our moment, it is rare to appeal for feminist violence, but Jacqueline Rose suggests that imagining such violence undercuts the perpetual construction of women as merely victims. Like many contemporary feminists, Rose distances herself from second-wave thinkers like Mackinnon and Dworkin, who she believes see “violence as the unadulterated and never-failing expression of male sexuality and power, a self-defeating argument if ever there was one (if true, then men will rule the world forever).”¹⁴ Rose, though, seems pessimistic about the promise of the #MeToo movement, continually reminding us that making violence visible does not necessarily produce political change. Fiction may provide the best path out of this impasse, allowing us to picture women as victims and agents, “doers and done to.”¹⁵ Rose favorably cites Roxane Gay’s story, which begins, “My husband is a hunter. I am a knife.”¹⁶ Fictional portrayals of women’s capacity to exercise violence have recently seized the imagination of political theorists.¹⁷ Renewed attention to second-wave feminist violence contradicts the common assumption that women are always victims, and men always perpetrators, of violence.

Because violence structures everyday gender relations, feminism offers a lens through which we can deepen our understanding of patriarchal violence. As Robyn Marasco writes,

¹⁴ Jacqueline Rose, *On Violence and Violence Against Women* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2021), 9.

¹⁵ Rose, *On Violence*, 80.

¹⁶ Rose, *On Violence*, 80.

¹⁷ Menaka Philips, “Violence in the American Imaginary: Gender, Race, and the Politics of Superheroes” *American Political Science Review* 112, n. 2 (2022): 470-483.

“Feminism is uniquely equipped to listen for the silences in what is said about violence and discern a complex whole stitched together by gendered and gendering violence. It is impossible to think violence at its extremes without thinking gender in its most ordinary and everyday expressions.”¹⁸ A fundamental task of this dissertation is to mine the texts of second-wave thought for interventions into contemporary feminist theory and theories of violence. Feminist violence became a tool that allowed feminists to “listen for the silences” during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. Patriarchal violence was so hard to see because of its ordinariness. The imagination and practice of feminist violence offered a lens through which feminists could reveal rape, pornography, and sex as a form of violence, and envision a world without sexual violence.

Re-Imagining the Second Wave

When it is even retold, the traditional story of second-wave feminism is marred by a sense of “embarrassment [for] the time when feminists essentialized the category of woman, neglected race, constructed maniacally totalizing theories, and exposed themselves in public with their intemperate speech, overwrought emotions, and utopian dreams.”¹⁹ Perhaps the most “embarrassing” second-wave thinker, Betty Friedan represents now-maligned liberal feminism, as the founder of the National Organization of Women (NOW) and the author of best-selling *The Feminine Mystique*. Nearly single-minded in their focus on the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), NOW conjured a vision of legal equality between men and women.²⁰ Radical feminists, who split from NOW in the late-1960s, hailed women as a political class, and demanded more fundamental change to patriarchal institutions, like marriage, the family, and the

¹⁸ Robyn Marasco, “Thinking at Extremes” *Critical Times* 4, n.1 (April 2021): 112.

¹⁹ Kathi Weeks, “The Vanishing *Dialectic*: Shulamith Firestone and the Future of the Feminist 1970s” *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 114, n. 4 (October 2015): 735.

²⁰ Jane Mansbridge, *Why We Lost the ERA* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Mary Berry, *Why ERA Failed: Politics, Women’s Rights, and the Amending Process of the Constitution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988).

economic system.²¹ Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics* and Shulamith Firestone's *The Dialectic of Sex* exemplify the thoroughgoing critiques leveled by radical feminists. Groups like New York Radical Feminists, The Feminists, and Cell 16 brought rape and abortion into public conversation, eventually forcing NOW to adopt pro-choice legal reform as a central issue. On most historical accounts, the so-called sex wars of the 1980s mark the end of the second wave with contentious debates between anti-pornography and sex radical feminists.²²

We tend to remember the second wave as marked by a divide between radical and liberal feminism. What we forget, as I discuss in the third chapter, is that a debate about the feminist use of violence contributed to the fracturing between radical and liberal camps. As Alice Echols details in her landmark historical study, *Daring to be Bad*, radical feminists like Ti-Grace Atkinson and members of Cell 16 grew increasingly militant in the late-1960s and early-1970s. Breanne Fahs underlines the role of Valerie Solanas, as author of the *SCUM Manifesto* and attempted assassin of Andy Warhol, in inspiring radical feminists to take more militant action.²³ This dissertation builds on Echols and Fahs' observations with a close examination of Solanas' influence on the feminist movement. I also broaden our understanding of debates around violence as central to the politics of second wave feminism, with readings of Andrea Dworkin and Simone de Beauvoir on self-defense as a response to rape.

Although the "second wave" in many ways demarcates the historical boundaries of this project, I am not attached to a strict periodization. As Sarah Evans argues, there is no clear end

²¹ Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1989] 2019).

²² Lorna Bracewell, *Why We Lost the Sex Wars: Sexual Freedom in the #MeToo Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021).

²³ Breanne Fahs, *Valerie Solanas: The Defiant Life of the Woman who Wrote SCUM (and Shot Andy Warhol)* (New York: CUNY Feminist Press, 2014); Echols, *Daring to be Bad*.

of the second wave, nor beginning of the third.²⁴ Many of the political issues that defined the second wave persist today, including anti-rape and pro-abortion activism. The separation between the second and third waves often serves to distance contemporary feminism from its supposedly problematic past—the embarrassments that Weeks lists. Rather than seeing contemporary feminist as investigating past mistakes, I am inclined to think of us as living in the shadow of the second wave, plagued by similar problems and by the pursuant conservative backlash. Susan Faludi famously documents the 1990s as a period of backlash against second-wave feminism.²⁵ Anti-feminist thinkers like Phyllis Schlafly fueled the rise of Reaganite conservatism, both through rhetoric about the preservation of the family and through the dispersion of grassroots organizing tactics. Between the first and second wave, Shulamith Firestone identifies a similar backlash, which she labels the “fifty years of ridicule.”²⁶ Then, women were told that they had achieved equality with men, because they had the right to vote, and therefore no longer needed to strive for liberation. That claim of women’s equality perversely came to disguise and justify the domination of women outside the purview of the law, which the second wave subsequently illuminated. I believe we inhabit a similar problem space, wherein, even as conservatives successfully roll them back, the advances of the second wave become a reason to dismiss feminist demands.

The conservative backlash against second-wave feminists propagated the stereotype of feminists as militant lesbians. Victoria Hesford argues that the figure of “feminist-as-lesbian” haunts our memory of the second wave, explaining our simultaneous attachment to and

²⁴ Sara Evans, “Generations Later, Retelling the Story” in ed. Angie Maxwell and Todd Shields *The Legacy of Second-Wave Feminism in American Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

²⁵ Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against American Women* (New York: Crown, 2009); Marjorie J. Spruill, “Feminism, Anti-Feminism, and The Rise of a New Southern Strategy in the 1970s” in ed. Angie Maxwell and Todd Shields, *The Legacy of Second-Wave Feminism* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

²⁶ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, [1970] 2003).

disavowal of the women's liberation movement. Surveying media coverage from that time, Hesford shows that "the lesbian becomes the figure through which the emotive force of the attack on women's liberation is generated."²⁷ Maireed Sullivan believes the lesbian-as-feminist induced such great anxiety because she represents a violent threat to futurity. Conflated with the radical separatist feminist, the lesbian "continues to figure as a destructive, terrifying, even murderous threat to the cohesion of the social, to the family, to men, and, most importantly, to male children."²⁸ The conservative, anti-feminist concern is twofold. First, feminists-as-lesbians might violently reject men, refusing to participate in the heterosexual family. Second, the feminist-as-lesbian may go so far as to threaten the murder of children, a fear that appears in the fourth chapters of this project.

Sullivan purposely stops short of naming the lesbian a killjoy figure, but I believe the second-wave militant feminist occupies the position of the killjoy in both contemporary feminist and conservative imaginations.²⁹ Sara Ahmed famously describes the killjoy as "the one who gets in the way of other people's happiness."³⁰ As she calls into question the pleasure of sex, as well as the joy of heterosexual partnership and the reproductive nuclear family, the feminist of the second wave militates against precisely that which is supposed to be the source of most women's happiness. Kathi Weeks partially blames the feminist disavowal of heterosexual coupling for the organized forgetting of the second wave. Second-wave feminists' "removal from the present is too dramatic, too affectively fraught, to be an accident of history."³¹ Weeks identifies several reasons for this removal, but one among them is second-wave feminists'

²⁷ Victoria Hesford, *Feeling Women's Liberation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 27.

²⁸ Maireed Sullivan, *Lesbian Death: Desire and Danger between Feminist and Queer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2022), 81.

²⁹ Sara Ahmed, "Feminist Killjoys (And Other Willful Subjects)" *S&F Online* 8, n. 3 (Summer 2010).

³⁰ Sara Ahmed, "Feminist Killjoys"

³¹ Weeks, "The Vanishing *Dialectic*," 740.

willingness to interrogate the political dimensions of personal life. Weeks worries that the paradigmatic idea that “the personal is political,” which in many ways defined the second wave, has now fallen out of favor.³²

The point of revisiting the debate around feminist violence in the second wave is not to raise once again the possibility of feminists exercising violence. I do not see feminist violence as the answer to the complicated problems feminists face today. Nor am I interested in analyzing the second wave through a lens of loss, against which Clare Hemmings rightly cautions.³³ Instead, I return to the possibility of feminist violence to raise anew the questions of the second wave, with the hope that they might help us face the impasse of heteropessimism in which many feminists currently find themselves. My intuition is that the refusal of heterosexual partnership and reproduction, emblemized in its most radical form by the willingness to engage in violence against men, was another way of asking: Can women live freely on the earth with men? Given the willingness of men to violently objectify women, how might women assert themselves as political actors?

While Weeks refers to contemporary feminist disposition towards the second wave as embarrassment, perhaps it is more accurately described as shame. Today, many of us are acutely aware of the failures of the second wave: the failure to pass the ERA, to address sexual violence, to dismantle marriage and the family, to secure economic equality, and most recently to protect the right to abortion. Moreover, while these failures might ripple out from the second wave, they implicate contemporary feminists. It seems that the #MeToo movement did not meaningfully transform gendered sexual relations, or lead to greater accountability for sexual assailants, with

³² Carol Hanisch, “The Personal is Political” *Notes from the Second Year: Women’s Liberation* (New York, 1970).

³³ Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

the exception of a few celebrities guilty of serial rape. The overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, one of the definitive second-wave victories, also happened on our watch. The conclusion of this dissertation briefly explores the affective and critical feminist disposition of heteropessimism, induced by the ongoing failures of the feminist movement. During the second wave, I argue, feminist violence brought into view the possibility of ending patriarchal violence. As the prospect of feminists exercising violence disappeared, this imagination seemed impossibly utopian, producing a sense of heteropessimism. Returning to the second wave, then, allows us to diagnose the contemporary impasse in which feminists find themselves.

Chapter Summaries

That brings me to the titular focus of the dissertation, *feminist violence*. This term does not appear in the texts that I read. It is a term of my own invention that aims to capture a strain of second-wave feminist thought which advocated for women to engage in violence for the sake of their collective liberation. The implication in each chapter is not that women feel their freedom in the exercise of violence. Instead, violence serves as a tactic to train, and clear space for, women to assert themselves in public, and change the political world. Of course, any instance of a woman acting violently does not count as feminist violence, and men might sometimes be violent for feminist purposes. Nor does feminist violence avoid the anti-political effects of violence. Instead, like all instances of political violence, feminist violence sheds light on the vexed relationship between violence and democratic politics.

Recently, political theorists have revisited a variety of historical social movements to re-examine the problem of political violence.³⁴ The perennial question emerges in political theory

³⁴ See, for example: On the French Revolution, Kevin Duong, *The Virtues of Violence: Democracy Against Disintegration in Modern France* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020); on civil rights, Erin Pineda, *Seeing Like an Activist: Civil Disobedience and the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021); on Indian political thought, Shruti Kapila, *Violent Fraternity: Indian Political Thought in the Global Age* (Princeton: Princeton

across a number of contexts: Is violence ever justified? And if so, when? Second-wave feminism provides an overlooked site to rethink political violence, especially given the ambivalence of feminist theorists. The routine victimization of women makes feminist theorists particularly aware of the anti-political effects of violence.³⁵ In theorizing feminist violence, then, the contradictions inherent in any exercise of political violence come into stark relief. On the one hand, violence destroys the shared, public space of politics by removing people from the common world. On the other, violence may be the only tactic available in some cases for those excluded from the public realm to reclaim their place in it.³⁶ For the feminists I read in this dissertation, patriarchal violence represented a major obstacle to women's freedom—an obstacle that might necessitate that women exercise violence in response.

A central question recurs throughout the dissertation: What does violence do? As I discuss in this introduction, feminist violence reveals both the ubiquity of, and the possibility of a world without, patriarchal violence. While the revelatory quality of violence runs as a theme throughout the project, the four chapters theorize other political effects of violence. First, violence transforms its victims into objects, unable to take political action. Second-wave feminists brought to the fore the objectifying effects of violence in their analysis of rape, sex, and pornography. Second, while not synonymous with political agency, the exercise of violence trains those who wield it to assert themselves in the world. During the second wave, women collectively learned self-defense so they could freely participate in public life, without fear of

University Press, 2021); on environmental justice, Andreas Malm, *How to Blow Up a Pipeline* (New York: Verso, 2021).

³⁵ Feminist theorists routinely attend to the ways in which intimate and feminicidal violence removes women from public, political life: Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (New York: Autonomedia, [2004] 2014); Verónica Gago, *Feminist International: How to Change Everything* (New York: Verso, 2020); Shatema Threadcraft, *Intimate Justice: The Black Female Body and the Body Politic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

³⁶ This paradox emerges in the tension between Hannah Arendt's and Frantz Fanon's thought. Richard Bernstein, *Violence: Thinking Without Bannisters* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013).

patriarchal violence. Third, revolutionary violence can remake the world anew. Militant second-wave thinkers rejected separatism as a turning away from the world, and insisted on the need for violence to reclaim and remake the world for women. Forth, and finally, violence can destroy the political world. In debates over reproductive freedom at the tail end of the second wave, feminist violence in the form of abortion and infanticide threatened to deny the futurity necessary for politics.

The four chapters of the dissertation each delve into a political effect of violence: objectifying, agentifying, world-making, and world-destroying. In the first chapter, “‘A new kind of death’: Rape, Sex, and Pornography as Violence in Andrea Dworkin’s Thought,” I document the feminist naming of rape as violence by second-wave activists. While contemporary readers puzzle over Dworkin’s assertion that rape, sex, and pornography are all forms of violence against women, I show that each practice transforms women into objects through force, and therefore counts as violence for Dworkin. Towards the end of her career, Dworkin advocates for the feminist use of violence to reveal rape, sex, and pornography as violence. Rather than invoking carceral punishment as a solution to the problem of rape, second-wave feminists like Dworkin contend that feminist violence in the form of self-defense could prevent rape. This reading poses an alternative to the conventional historical understanding of the second wave as laying the foundations for burgeoning carceral feminism. Feminist violence, I conclude in this chapter, brought into view the possibility of ending patriarchal violence, through self-defense.

The second chapter, “Fighting Back: Simone de Beauvoir, Self-Defense, and Second Wave Tactics of Rape Prevention,” picks up on the thread of argument about self-defense that starts in the first. According to Beauvoir, women cannot act in the world because they lack the training in violence that men received at an early age. Learning to commit violence, then, would

enable women to take political action. Second-wave feminists in the U.S. likewise believed that women could not safely navigate public spaces without lessons in self-defense. During the 1970s, I conclude, women learned and practiced self-defense so that they could enjoy the freedom of public action without fear of male violence. This education in self-defense constituted a collective movement with origins in leftist militancy that belies the eventual transformation of self-defense into an individualized, neoliberal, and often conservative tactic.

While the second chapter outlines the politically agentic effects of violence, the third chapter, “A World Without Men: Valerie Solanas and the Feminist Uses of Violence,” attends to its world-making potential. Best known for her attempted assassination of Andy Warhol, Solanas rejected separatism as a turning away from the world. Instead, she argued, women must engage in violence to reclaim the world from men, and destroy oppressive institutions, like the government and the capitalist money-work system. In the *SCUM Manifesto*, Solanas calls for women to commit gendercide against men to build a feminist utopia. Solanas thus sees violence as a world-making project. During the second wave, Solanas’ shooting of Warhol fractured feminism into liberal and radical camps: liberals rejected Solanas, and radicals embraced her. Both sides of the feminist divide, however, disavowed violence as a political tactic. Even sympathetic radicals adopted separatist agendas that sanctioned violence only for the purpose of self-defense. I contend that the reaction to Solanas by her contemporaries, and the erasure of her from history, is symptomatic of a feminist anxiety about violence.

The final chapter, “Infanticide and the Feminist Political Imaginary,” reads Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* in the context of debates around access to abortion. During the second wave, I show, feminists theorized infanticide and abortion together as forms of violence, even as they defended women’s reproductive freedom. According to Adrienne Rich, compulsory reproduction

reduces women to their wombs, objectifying and instrumentalizing their bodies. Second-wave Black feminists like Angela Davis drew parallels between the debates over Black women's reproductive freedom in the 1970s and 80s, and the reproductive exploitation of Black women during slavery. Because Black women were forced to reproduce to sustain the slave system, slavery exemplifies the logic of forced birth. In my reading of *Beloved*, I contend that infanticide and abortion function as resistance against a regime of forced birth. The conclusion gestures towards a theorization of infanticide as world-destroying violence which denies the futurity necessary for politics—not to condemn infanticide, but instead to consider the implications of treating infanticide as violent political resistance.

In the conclusion of the dissertation, I explore the stakes of returning to feminist advocacy for violence. Why re-read texts from the second wave? What can they tell us about our contemporary moment? Through the promise of preventing rape, feminist violence brought into view the possibility of a world without patriarchal violence, a utopian imaginary that no longer appears on our horizon. Today, we find ourselves in a moment of heteropessimism, produced in part by a simultaneous cooptation of and backlash against the second wave. While we cannot recuperate the promise of feminist violence, re-examining its importance in the second wave offers a new imaginative horizon that could help us move past the contemporary heteropessimist impasse.

Chapter One | “A new kind of death”: Rape, Sex, and Pornography as Violence in Andrea Dworkin’s Thought

“Man fucks woman; subject verb object.”
- Catharine MacKinnon¹

“Ms. Dworkin advocates nothing short of killing men.”
- Wendy Steiner²

Introduction

Today, Andrea Dworkin is most often remembered as “the censorial demagogue to shoot down” for drafting the Antipornography Civil Rights Ordinance with Catharine MacKinnon.³ Writing during the sex wars of the 1980s, Dworkin faced harsh criticism from sex-radical feminist interlocutors.⁴ Ellen Willis’ accusation, in her review of Dworkin’s book *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, that Dworkin’s writing is “less a call to arms than a counsel of despair” continues to haunt even Dworkin’s more charitable readers.⁵ Under the conditions of violent domination that Dworkin describes, contemporary feminists reason, it is difficult to imagine feminist resistance. When we focus on the despairing Dworkin, we tend to forget the second side of Dworkin’s Janus-faced reception, captured in Steiner’s review of her semi-autobiographical novel, *Mercy*. I read Dworkin’s novel *Mercy*, in which Dworkin’s protagonist begins exacting violent retribution against men, as a narrativization of the transformation in her own beliefs. Although she started out as a pacifist, Dworkin eventually became an advocate for feminist

¹ Catharine MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 124.

² Wendy Steiner, “Declaring War on Men” *The New York Times*, September 15, 1991.

³ Johanna Fateman, “Introduction” in *Last Days at Hot Slit: The Radical Feminism of Andrea Dworkin* (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2019), 12.

⁴ I borrow the term “sex radical feminists” to describe a faction scholars often call “pro-sex” feminists from: Lorna Bracewell, *Why We Lost the Sex Wars: Sexual Freedom in the #MeToo Era* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021).

⁵ Ellen Willis, “Nature’s Revenge” *The New York Times*, July 12, 1981. For example, Judith Grant worries that “Dworkin’s argument then is that at some point female subordination erases human agency.” Judith Grant, “Andrea Dworkin and the Social Construction of Gender: A Retrospective” *Signs* 31, n. 4 (2006): 983. See also: Laura Tanenbaum, “The Appeal and Limits of Andrea Dworkin” *Jacobin*, August 5th, 2019; Jacqueline Rose, *On Violence and Violence Against Women* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2021).

violence. To justify her calls for feminist violence, Dworkin had to recognize rape as a form of violence.⁶

In this article, I ask: Politically and rhetorically, why did Dworkin, alongside other anti-rape and anti-pornography activists, take up the language of violence to describe rape, sex, and pornography? How does the claim that rape is violence change our understanding of violence? And what is violence, in the first place? Through a close reading of Dworkin's oeuvre, I show that Dworkin defines violence as objectification, or *the process of transforming a person (usually, a woman) into a thing, through the use of force.*⁷ Dworkin extends the definition of rape as violence to sex and pornography by placing them all on a continuum of objectification. Once we understand Dworkin's critique of rape and sex as violence, I argue, we come to see that the logic of her objection to pornography is deeply rooted in a theory of violence as objectification. Her definition of violence as objectification also suggests the anti-political nature of violence, since, by transforming people into things, violence erases them from politics and destroys plurality.⁸ Dworkin makes this point by labeling violence against women "gynocide" and stressing that pornography silences women.

⁶ Before the second wave, rape was treated as an ordinary sexual practice. Following Ruth Herschberger, who first named rape as violence in 1948, second-wave feminists like Dworkin popularized the idea. Ruth Herschberger, *Adam's Rib* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970); Maria Bevacqua, *Rape on the Public Agenda: Feminism and the Politics of Sexual Assault* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000).

⁷ While Dworkin's definition of violence as objectification echoes accounts of violence in earlier political theorists, including Simone Weil and Frantz Fanon, she extends the concept to rape, sex, and pornography to reveal the violence of normalized sexual practices. For contemporary theorists, Dworkin provides a definition for an ill-defined concept. In the ever-growing literature on violence, types of violence tend to proliferate—subjective, objective, symbolic, epistemic, economic, performative, physical, sexual, etc.—while the family resemblance between these types remains unclear. Kevin Duong, "Violence: Introduction to the Special Issue," *New Political Science* (2022); for examples of this tendency, see: Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings, *Violence and Political Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020); Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (New York: Verso, 2020); Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (New York: Picador, 2008); Etienne Balibar, *Violence and Civility: On the Limits of Political Philosophy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

⁸ In this way, Dworkin's analysis of violence resonates with Hannah Arendt's in *On Violence*. Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, 1969, 1970).

In the first section of the chapter, I briefly trace the history of anti-rape activists of the early-1970s naming rape as violence. By referring to rape as violence, these feminist activists hoped to separate rape from consensual sex in the public consciousness. Dworkin, though, complicates this picture with her insistence that both rape and sex violently objectify women. The second section outlines Dworkin's argument that sex is violence, as well as its uptake in contemporary feminist theory. The third section turns to Dworkin's most famous political project, the Antipornography Civil Rights Ordinance. The final section follows the intellectual evolution of Dworkin's thought on the feminist use of violence, beginning with her early participation in pacifist anti-war protests and ending with her declaration that women should use violence in the early aughts.

Despite, or perhaps because of, her controversial reception, Dworkin remains an important figure for feminist political theory. By returning to Dworkin, I make the case for re-centering violence, rather than consent, in post-#MeToo academic literature. Carole Pateman argues in "Women and Consent" that women cannot meaningfully consent under current conditions of domination.⁹ Like Pateman, Dworkin contends that consent papers over the violence involved in even consensual sex. After #MeToo, critiques of consent gained traction once again. The legalistic framework of consent supposedly threatens to obscure the larger problem of bad sex, and the messiness and vulnerability inherent in our sexual lives.¹⁰ It also invites punitive, carceral solutions to address widespread sexual violence.¹¹ Instead of maintaining the contemporary focus on consent, I return to the second-wave theorization of rape

⁹ Carole Pateman, "Women and Consent" *Political Theory* 8, n. 2: 149-168.

¹⁰ Joseph Fischel, *Screw Consent: A Better Politics of Sexual Justice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019); Katherine Angel, *Tomorrow Sex Will Be Good Again* (New York: Verso, 2021).

¹¹ Janet Halley, "The Move to Affirmative Consent" *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 42, n. 1 (2016): 257-279.

as a problem of violence.¹² Rather than investigating the muddy waters of consent, Dworkin spends much of her time making visible the violence that consent disguises.

Dworkin's project of making sexual violence visible leads her to advocate for feminist violence at the end of her career. Confronted by the failure of her own appeals to the legal system, Dworkin called for the exercise of extralegal violence as an alternative to carceral punishment. My re-reading of Dworkin challenges contemporary feminists' narration of Dworkin and MacKinnon as the origin point for our slow slippage into carceral feminism.¹³ Feminist violence, according to Dworkin, promises to expose and counteract the logic of objectification underlying masculine patriarchal violence. By prioritizing prevention over punishment, feminist violence also brings into view the possibility of ending rape. In the wake of the failures of the #MeToo movement, second-wave feminists' vision of a world without rape promises to reinvigorate contemporary feminism with a new, anti-carceral imaginative horizon.

Rape as Violence

While the idea that rape is a form of violence seems like common sense today, it is actually the product of decades of feminist political struggle.¹⁴ In this section, I trace the naming of rape as violence from its origin in Ruth Herschberger's collection of essays in 1948 to the popularization of the idea in the 1970s through second wave feminist activism, particularly the work of the New York Radical Feminists and Susan Brownmiller. Politically and rhetorically, I

¹² Emily Owens, "Keyword 7: Consent" *differences* 30, n. 1: 148-156.

¹³ Originally coined by Elizabeth Bernstein (2010), carceral feminism refers to "an overreliance on carceral approaches to solve the problem of gender violence," without regard for the racism of the carceral regime. Elizabeth Bernstein, "Militarized Humanitarianism Meets Carceral Feminism: The Politics of Sex, Rights, and Freedom in Contemporary Antitrafficking Campaigns" *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 36, n. 1 (2010): 45-71. See also: Bracewell, *Why We Lost the Sex Wars*; Anne Gray Fischer, *The Streets Belong to Us: Sex, Race, and Police Power from Segregation to Gentrification* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022); Mimi Kim, "The Carceral Creep: Gender-based violence, race, and the expansion of the punitive state, 1973-1983" *Social Problems* 67, (2020): 251-269.

¹⁴ Deva Woodly, *The Politics of Common Sense: How Social Movements Use Public Discourse to Change Politics and Win Acceptance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

argue, the language of violence served to prize apart sex and rape, and make rape appear as objectionable to a public who otherwise treated it as an ordinary sexual practice. As an activist and interlocutor in the anti-rape movement of the 1970s, Dworkin appropriates the notion of rape as violence, and extends it to heterosexual intercourse. Dworkin also sees rape as continuous with ordinary sex, but uses that continuity as evidence for the violence of sex, rather than the acceptability of rape. For Dworkin, both rape and sex transform women into objects through the use of force, and therefore both deserve the label of violence.

In her 1948 collection of essays, *Adam's Rib*, Ruth Herschberger is the first thinker to use the term violence to describe rape. Before her, feminists referred to rape with language cloaked in morality. According to Herschberger, the widespread phenomenon of rape is supported by “the legend of man’s natural sexual aggression towards women,” and, conversely, of women’s supposedly natural passivity.¹⁵ Through his aggression, so the fantasy goes, a man transforms the unwilling, passive woman into a willing subject. Rather than drawing a sharp distinction between sex and rape, Herschberger calls rape “a mirror-image of our ordinary sex folkways,” because rape merely exemplifies conventional narratives around romance taken to the extreme.¹⁶ Still, Herschberger writes, “rape is a form of violence involving the personal humiliation of the victim,” a perversion, not a simple expression, of sexual instincts.¹⁷ Published during the period of conservative backlash after the first wave—which Shulamith Firestone labels the “fifty years of ridicule”—Herschberger’s definition of rape as violence sent ripple effects into second-wave feminist thinking and activism decades later.¹⁸

¹⁵ Herschberger, *Adam's Rib*, 15.

¹⁶ Herschberger, *Adam's Rib*, 15.

¹⁷ Herschberger, *Adam's Rib*, 26.

¹⁸ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

Radical feminists of the early-1970s brought rape onto the public agenda, as Maria Bevacqua documents in her landmark study. Prompted by the recognition, through consciousness-raising (CR) groups, that rape was a shared political problem, the New York Radical Feminists (NYRF) organized a speak-out where forty women discussed their experiences of rape and a follow-up conference in 1971. The NYRF aimed “to counter the myths that (1) women cannot be raped against their will, (2) women really want to be raped, and (3) women make false accusations.”¹⁹ Citing Herschberger, the NYRF gives voice to second-wave feminists’ newfound, widespread understanding of rape as violence. Unlike Herschberger, however, CR session contributors draw a starker distinction between rape and sex. For example, one woman says, “I don’t think you can talk about sex and rape together, for some reason. I identify rape in my own head with an act of violence; I can’t relate it to sex because that would be too painful for me.”²⁰ Her statement produces some debate over the exact relationship between the two in pursuant conversation, but the conversation signals the erosion of Herschberger’s initial insight about the continuity between ordinary sexual practices and rape.

The contributors to the NYRF sourcebook also introduce the notion of women’s objectification. An article presented at the conference emphasizes the fact that present culture “deprives [women] of sexual autonomy and exploits them as inferior sexual objects.”²¹ While the NYRF sourcebook portrays women’s objectification as a *cause* of rape, Dworkin will tell us that it is actually an *effect* of the violence of both sex and rape. Given that rape is a symptom of the sex-class system that structures society, the elimination of rape, which the NYRF declares as their political goal, would require “a revolutionary transformation...of the family, of the

¹⁹ Bevacqua, *Rape on the Public Agenda*, 55.

²⁰ New York Radical Feminists, *Rape: The First Sourcebook for Women* (New York: PLUME, 1974), 17, 20 & 88.

²¹ NYRF, *Rape*, 82.

economic system and the psychology of men and women.”²² One method of revolutionary transformation the NYRF proposes is violence, in the form of self-defense. Women must resort to self-defense, the NYRF claims, due to both the inefficacy and racism of law enforcement.

Popularized by and usually attributed to Susan Brownmiller, author of *Against Our Will*, the conceptualization of rape as “violence, not sex” gave feminists a framework to undermine myths that blamed women for their own victimization.²³ After reading Herschberger and the NYRF, however, Brownmiller’s description of rape should sound quite familiar—the latter in particular substantially influenced her thought, since she attended the NYRF conference. Many of the same themes appear in Brownmiller’s book: descriptions of rape as claiming possession over women’s bodies; the construction of men as aggressors, and women as passive victims, sexual objects, and property; and the desire to end rape entirely. Brownmiller theorizes rape as a form of terrorism that keeps women subordinate to men through a regime of fear. “In a sexual assault physical harm is much more than a threat,” Brownmiller writes, “it is a reality because violence is an integral part of the act.”²⁴ Like the NYRF and Herschberger, Brownmiller characterizes rape as a distortion of sex, which requires mutual consent. Brownmiller’s definition of rape, in fact, revolves around consent, rather than violence: “If a woman chooses not to have intercourse with a specific man and the man chooses to proceed against her will, that is a criminal act of rape.”²⁵ With her emphasis on consent, Brownmiller begins to draw a stark distinction between rape and sex.

The progression from Herschberger, who calls rape a mirror of ordinary sexual practices, to the women of the NYRF, who differentiate between sex and rape, and Brownmiller, who

²² NYRF, *Rape*, 250.

²³ Bevacqua, *Rape on the Public Agenda*, 58.

²⁴ Susan Brownmiller, *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* (New York: Fawcett Books, 1975), 384.

²⁵ Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 18.

defines rape as “violence, not sex,” reveals the desire to demarcate rape as nonconsensual and violent from sex, implicitly imagined as consensual and nonviolent. This desire for a clear distinction persists today in the post-#MeToo scholarly literature on consent, as I will discuss in the next section. Even as she takes on board the anti-rape argument that rape is violence, Dworkin calls into question the separation of rape from sex, because she sees both sex and rape as forms of violence. Consent alone cannot serve as evidence of the nonviolence of sexual intercourse, Dworkin contends, since women frequently consent to their own violent objectification. A focus on using consent to distinguish between instances of rape and sex thus obscures the problem of violence. Dworkin’s debts to, and intervention in, the anti-rape movement become clear through a close reading of her oeuvre.

Constructing a brief genealogy of rape, Dworkin shows that the word rape comes from the Latin *rapere*, “which means ‘to steal, seize, or carry away.’”²⁶ Since women were viewed as property, first of their father and then their husband, rape was historically a crime against the male owner. Men would rape (and implicitly abduct) women who they intended to marry. To this day, rape remains, in Dworkin’s eyes, “our primary model for heterosexual relating.”²⁷ At the time of Dworkin’s writing, no laws existed to prevent men from raping their wives. Modern novels, from authors like D.H. Lawrence and Norman Mailer, presented rape as an emblem of romantic love, telling stories where women’s first forced sexual experiences blossom into mutually desired relationships. Though no longer explicitly written into law, except in instances of marital rape, the idea that men retain the right to sexual access over the women continues to

²⁶ Andrea Dworkin, “The Rape Atrocity and the Boy Next Door,” in *Our Blood* (New York: Perigree Books, 1981), 25.

²⁷ Dworkin, “The Rape Atrocity,” 29.

circulate. Echoing the NYRF, Dworkin details the “fundamental cultural, legal, and social assumptions about rape”:

(1) women want to be raped, in fact, women need to be raped; (2) women provoke rape; (3) no women can be sexually forced against her will; (4) women love their rapists; (5) in the act of rape men affirm their own manhood and they also *affirm* the identity and function of women—that is, women exist to be fucked by men and so, in the act of rape, men actually affirm the very womanhood of the woman.²⁸

The construction of rape as always-already consensual rests on the definition of women as masochists, and men as sadists. Women want to be raped, and in fact provoke rape by saying “no,” according to patriarchal logic, because they enjoy sexual suffering. Through rape, men become men and women become women, according to Dworkin.

Ironically, the essence of rape lies in the conviction that no woman is a victim, Dworkin writes in her book on pornography. There, Dworkin cautions against the clear-cut question, “what is force and what is freedom?”²⁹ She invites her readers instead to ask: “why is force never acknowledged as such when used against the racially or sexually despised?”³⁰ The answer to the latter provocation is consent, or more specifically, the assumption that a woman consented to forced sex in all but the worst of circumstances. With the example of the sexual exploitation of Jewish women in Nazi concentration camps, Dworkin reasons that the “sexual nature of the metaphysical victim—passive, submissive—erases force as the authentic reason for compliance or submission.³¹ Given women’s supposed masochism, it is assumed that she consented. If she resists, Dworkin reminds her reader again, it is because she wants to be conquered. The “fate of the metaphysical victim,” Dworkin writes, is “to be seen as responsible for the violence used

²⁸ Dworkin, “The Rape Atrocity,” 31.

²⁹ Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (New York: PLUME, 1989), 146.

³⁰ Dworkin, *Pornography*, 146.

³¹ Dworkin, *Pornography*, 147.

against her.”³² Only excessive violence, such as bruises and maiming, serves as evidence of force, and sometimes that does not even suffice.

Dworkin praises the work of the feminist movement in addressing rape after the fact, for instance with the establishment of rape crisis centers. Stopping rape, however, becomes complicated in light of the blurry line Dworkin draws between sex and rape. Critics frequently misquote Dworkin as saying that “sex is rape.” Although Dworkin never equates sex and rape, she does label conventional forms of heterosexual sex, namely intercourse, as violent. In a reading of pornography, Dworkin observes, “Force is sex. The woman who wants sex wants force.”³³ Men’s use of force during sexual encounters extends beyond instances of rape. That is why rape so often appears consensual. Given women’s apparent desire for force, “rape or battery cannot exist as violations of female will because they are viewed as expressions of female will. It is through the celebration of force—supposedly her celebration of it—that rape becomes just a better-quality fuck.”³⁴ The presence of force in both rape and sex renders the two indistinguishable from a patriarchal perspective. Dworkin sums up the situation: “The norm of femininity as it manifests in normal women is masochism. Force actualizes femininity. *Violence is sex*. Pain is pleasure for the woman. The pornographic conceit is that the normal female demands the force, the violence, the pain.”³⁵ For Dworkin, violence does not occur only during rape. Rape is nonconsensual sex, and therefore nonconsensual violence, but women also consent to violence in the form of sexual intercourse.

Sex as Violence

³² Dworkin, *Pornography*, 148.

³³ Dworkin, *Pornography*, 164.

³⁴ Dworkin, *Pornography*, 164.

³⁵ Dworkin, *Pornography*, 165.

After the start of the #MeToo movement, critiques of consent became increasingly popular in academia. In the exemplary *Screw Consent*, Joseph Fischel argues that a focus on consent risks construing all consensual sex as pleasurable and desired, and conversely obscures the problem of bad sex. When Fischel says “bad sex,” he means sex that is not pleasurable but that also does not qualify as rape, because it is consensual. Fischel expresses agreement with MacKinnon’s critiques of consent, yet I argue that the grammar of pleasure which animates Fischel’s text misses the point that MacKinnon, and other second-wave feminists like her, made. For MacKinnon and Dworkin, consensual sex might be pleasurable for women and still function as a form of violence. Instead of bad (read: not pleasurable) sex, the problem lies in consensual, pleasurable sex that reinforces women’s domination.

To understand the logic behind Dworkin’s claims, let us return to Carole Pateman’s analysis of consent. Pateman famously contends that the liberal demand for consent papers over social and political domination. “At present,” Pateman writes, “women are regarded as men’s ‘natural’ subordinates, and hence as incapable of consent.”³⁶ Society requires radical transformation to actualize women’s equality before they could truly consent to sex. As Lorna Bracewell has shown, Pateman acknowledges her own indebtedness to radical feminist thought, including MacKinnon and Dworkin.³⁷ In addition to condemning the patriarchal domination enacted in pornography and prostitution, Pateman sees rape as “the extreme expression, or an extension of, the accepted and ‘natural’ relation between men and women.”³⁸ Like Dworkin, Pateman undermines the idea that consent creates a clear dividing line between rape and sex. Rape merely intensifies the violent dynamics already at play in consensual heterosexual sex.

³⁶ Pateman, “Women and Consent,” 162.

³⁷ Bracewell, *Why We Lost the Sex Wars*.

³⁸ Pateman, “Women and Consent,” 161.

What prevents us from seeing the violence of ordinary heterosexual sex? In a word, consent. Dworkin does not just worry that consent makes sex seem like an agreement between equal parties, belying the domination that pervades the relationship between women and men. Rather Dworkin acknowledges that women can consent to sex, and therefore to violence, such that consent still demarcates the division between sex and rape. For Dworkin, the deeper concern is that women consent to and even enjoy their own violent objectification. Whereas Fischel assumes that pleasurable sex is liberatory, Dworkin emphasizes that women's masochism, their social conditioning to desire pain, may prove the greatest obstacle to women's liberation. Although it seems contradictory for women to consent to their own objectification, Dworkin describes a sort of "slow death," a gradual erosion of a woman's subjectivity and self-possession that culminates in a complete transformation of her desires.³⁹ The rest of this section investigates Dworkin's argument that consensual sex is violent, with a particular emphasis on Dworkin's definition of violence as objectification.

Dworkin expands on her claim that consensual sex constitutes violence in *Intercourse*. Analyzing Leo Tolstoy's *The Kreutzer Sonata*, Dworkin interprets the protagonist's murder of his own wife as the story's sexual climax. For Dworkin's Tolstoy, intercourse distorts equality and, to end the mass killing of women, or what Dworkin terms gynocide, we must cease all intercourse. In Tolstoy's story, death puts the wife "back in her place, not wanting, incontestably an object."⁴⁰ Death turns his wife into an object, but so does sex, as Dworkin shows throughout *Intercourse*. "All this sexual use of her," Dworkin writes, "was the killing. The physical act of killing—stabbing her with a dagger—is sexual too."⁴¹ Tolstoy's protagonist killed his wife

³⁹ Lauren Berlant, "Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency)" *Critical Inquiry* v. 33, n. 4 (2007): 754-780.

⁴⁰ Andrea Dworkin, *Intercourse* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 23.

⁴¹ Dworkin, *Intercourse*, 23.

slowly, turning his wife into an object over years of marriage with (often, forced) intercourse. The eventual murder was merely the culmination of these sexual acts. Like many other works of fiction that Dworkin takes up, *The Kreutzer Sonata* shows “how intercourse [is] implicitly violent, predicated as it was on exploitation and objectification.”⁴² *Dracula* provides another example of sex as slow murder, with vampirism metaphorically representing intercourse.

Dworkin lays out a vision of intercourse as a form of possession that objectifies women. Put simply, “getting fucked and being owned are inseparably the same.”⁴³ Women eroticize possession, Dworkin believes, learning to interpret it as intense romantic love. Sex becomes an “experience of diminishing self-possession, an erosion of the self.”⁴⁴ By conceding possession of their own bodies to men, women lose control over themselves. Dworkin returns to the relationship between sex and death here: “This sexual possession is a sensual state of being that borders on antibeing until it ends in death.”⁴⁵ The gradual loss of the self that Dworkin describes turns women into living corpses long before their actual demise. Interpreting the story of literal demonic possession, *Satan in Goray*, Dworkin concludes that “*being possessed* tends towards death—an end of self altogether, a sexuality in which the woman is in a state of exile from the human condition as such.”⁴⁶ There, the protagonist, Rechele’s, possession by the devil mirrors her possession by the men in her community, particularly her first husband.

The objectification of women during intercourse explains the proximity of sex and death. Dworkin defines objectification as the process by which “one conforms in body type and behavior and values to become an object of male sexual desire” and calls it “the most singly

⁴² Dworkin, *Intercourse*, 24.

⁴³ Dworkin, *Intercourse*, 83.

⁴⁴ Dworkin, *Intercourse*, 84.

⁴⁵ Dworkin, *Intercourse*, 84.

⁴⁶ Dworkin, *Intercourse*, 96.

destructive aspect of the gender hierarchy, especially as it relates to intercourse.”⁴⁷ According to Dworkin, women collaborate with male objectification, turning themselves into things even before the sexual act: “she physically becomes the thing he wants to fuck.”⁴⁸ In doing so, they sacrifice their own freedom, bodily integrity, and humanity. Dworkin emphasizes the pleasure women take in sexual submission, which “destroys in women the will to political freedom; it destroys the love of freedom itself.”⁴⁹ Dworkin paints a complicated picture wherein men do not just possess women without their consent. Instead, women frequently participate in their own objectification and give themselves to men willingly for possession.

Despite all this, Dworkin notes, women are invested in making intercourse work. Dworkin asks: “Can intercourse exist without objectification?”⁵⁰ If intercourse requires objectification, Dworkin reasons, it can never coexist with women’s freedom and equality. Dworkin hints at a more equitable sexual arrangement when she turns to Victoria Woodhull’s claim that women have the right to sexual determination. Following Woodhull’s lead, Dworkin criticizes the consent standard as “pallid, weak, stupid, second-class, by contrast with Woodhull’s standard: that the woman should have authority and control over the act.”⁵¹ It remains to be seen whether intercourse could survive the destruction of patriarchal power, Dworkin concludes. She does not seem particularly hopeful. Readers should remember, though, that intercourse does not exhaust the possibilities for sexual encounters. In the preface, Dworkin cautions that intercourse “is taken to be a synonym for sex, *echt sex*,” a conflation she carefully

⁴⁷ Dworkin, *Intercourse*, 177.

⁴⁸ Dworkin, *Intercourse*, 178.

⁴⁹ Dworkin, *Intercourse*, 182.

⁵⁰ Dworkin, *Intercourse*, 177.

⁵¹ Dworkin, *Intercourse*, 172.

avoids.⁵² Dworkin implicitly encourages women to pursue other avenues for romantic and sexual connection, imagining sex outside of intercourse.

Martha Nussbaum famously argues that sexual objectification need not carry negative connotations. Drawing on Dworkin, Nussbaum defines objectification as “treating *as an object* what is really not an object, what is, in fact, a human being.”⁵³ Nussbaum lists seven dimensions of objectification: instrumentality, denial of autonomy, inertness, fungibility, violability, ownership, and denial of subjectivity.⁵⁴ According to Nussbaum, MacKinnon and Dworkin are not sufficiently sensitive to the complexities of human sexuality, because they describe objectification as necessarily asymmetrical and hierarchical. Nussbaum denies the claim that objectification is inherently a moral wrong, because mutual objectification between men and women may bring both parties sexual pleasure free from domination. Nussbaum’s desire to redeem sexual objectification, though, means that “Nussbaum empties the concept of political oomph.”⁵⁵ Nancy Bauer worries that sexual objectification loses its feminist content under Nussbaum’s analysis, as she shifts from a concern with the sexual objectification of women to the objectification of human beings. The term sexual objectification, Bauer contends, only makes sense if we understand that, “*in a context in which women experience widespread, systematic, diachronic, structural disadvantages*, certain ways of perceiving and representing women tend to cause women direct or indirect material and psychological harm.”⁵⁶ We come to see sexual objectification as a problem, in other words, upon adopting a feminist worldview.

⁵² Dworkin, *Intercourse*, xxxiii.

⁵³ Martha Nussbaum, “Objectification” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 24, n. 4 (1995): 257.

⁵⁴ For Kantian Evangelina Papadaki, the moral problem with objectification is instrumentality, or the use of people as means to an end, rather than ends in themselves. Evangelina Papadaki, “Sexual Objectification: From Kant to Contemporary Feminism” *Contemporary Political Theory* 6 (2007): 330-348.

⁵⁵ Nancy Bauer, *How to Do Things with Pornography* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), 36

⁵⁶ Bauer, *How to Do Things with Pornography*, 28.

Nussbaum’s criteria may helpfully schematize some dimensions of sexual objectification, but her attempt to recuperate objectification as mutually pleasurable obscures the connection between objectification and violence. Nussbaum acknowledges that perceiving women as objects leads to violence, since it “leaves the human being so denuded of humanity, in the eyes of the objectifier, that he or she seems ripe for other abuses as well.”⁵⁷ Unlike Dworkin, however, Nussbaum does not treat objectification itself as violence. What I want to emphasize, with Dworkin, is that objectification does not just produce violence—it is violence. Rape, sex, and pornography as forms of violence transform women into objects through the use of force. Women under the threat of patriarchal violence thus exist as “living corpses” solely for the satisfaction of men’s sexual pleasure. Once we understand violence as objectification, we see the political harms of violence: namely, that it erases people—in the case of sexual violence, largely women—from shared political life. In *Intercourse*, Dworkin emphasizes that women lose their love for political freedom. In her activism against pornography, Dworkin characterizes pornography as yet another form of violence, alongside rape and sex, and, importantly, argues against defenders of free speech that pornography silences women.

Pornography as Violence

In the first section of this chapter, I traced the emergence of the idea that rape constitutes a form of violence. It is perhaps unsurprising, then, that the anti-rape movement of the early 1970s gave rise to the anti-pornography movement of the early 1980s. As rape consciousness increased, so did the number of reported sexual assaults. Feminists blamed violence in media, and later pornography, for the prevalence of rape and sexual harassment.⁵⁸ In 1976, the organization Women Against Violence Against Women (WAVAW) formed in response to the

⁵⁷ Nussbaum, “Objectification,” 265.

⁵⁸ Martin Duberman, *Andrea Dworkin: The Feminist as Revolutionary* (New York: The New Press, 2020), 129.

premiere of *Snuff*, a film that ended with the graphic, hyper-realistic seduction and murder of an actress.⁵⁹ An active participant in the organizing effort, Dworkin gathered signatures to petition the District Attorney to shut down showings of the film, attended demonstrations, and wrote to Congresswoman Bella Abzug to solicit her support.⁶⁰ Prefiguring arguments made by anti-pornography activists, WAVAW flyers stated that *Snuff* “encourages violent action in a world which already condones and dismisses many terrorist acts against women such as rape and ‘wife-beating.’”⁶¹ WAVAW did halt the run of *Snuff*, and carried out a number of other successful campaigns, with tactics like protesting, boycotting, and letter-writing.

While WAVAW openly disavowed legal avenues of censure, their subsequent sister organization, Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media (WAVPM) began to investigate legal measures. As their name indicates, WAVPM also took pornography as a central concern, shifting the focus away from violence against women in the media more broadly. Unlike WAVAW, who contended that “images of violence trivialized and condoned violent behavior against women,” WAVPM drew a causal link between pornography and violence against women.⁶² WAVPM thus paved the way for Dworkin and MacKinnon’s anti-pornography ordinance in the 1980s. Dworkin herself participated in WAVPM’s 1978 conference, “Feminist Perspectives on Pornography.”⁶³

Preceded by WAVAW and WAVPM, Women Against Pornography (WAP) eventually emerged as the most influential organization at this time. Though Dworkin herself was not a founding member of the organization, she drafted a letter to the *New York Times* advocating for

⁵⁹ Carolyn Bronstein, *Battling Pornography: The American Feminist Anti-Pornography Movement 1976-1986* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 86-7.

⁶⁰ Duberman, *Andrea Dworkin*, 90-1.

⁶¹ Bronstein, *Battling Pornography*, 90.

⁶² Bronstein, *Battling Pornography*, 130.

⁶³ Bronstein, *Battling Pornography*, 158.

the abolition of pornography with WAP's progenitor, the Women's Anti-Defamation League, in 1977 and she attended WAP's inaugural conference and spoke at the March on Times Square in 1979.⁶⁴ Her book, *Pornography*, published in 1981, also bolstered the cause of the organization. WAP's claim that "Pornography Is Violence Against Women" finds its roots, at least in part, in Dworkin's thought.⁶⁵ Like MacKinnon and Dworkin, members of WAP argued that pornography victimized both the women in the films and the women who experience violence at the hands of men emulating the films. MacKinnon, Dworkin, and WAP saw pornography as an act of violence in and of itself.

Dworkin is best known for her work to pass an anti-pornography ordinance with MacKinnon in 1983. Approached by a citizen's group from Minneapolis worried about the rezoning of their neighborhood to allow for the sale of pornography, Dworkin and MacKinnon drafted an ordinance that rendered pornography legally actionable. Rather than banning pornography outright, the ordinance allowed women who were victimized in the production or distribution of pornography to bring civil suit.⁶⁶ Too often, contemporary critics treat Dworkin as seeking to criminalize pornography. While they did pursue civil legislation, Dworkin and MacKinnon were not interested in granting the state more power through the criminalization of pornography.⁶⁷ Dworkin and MacKinnon held hearings to support the passage of the ordinance with testimony from psychologists and women who experienced harm linked to pornography.⁶⁸ Although the ordinance passed in the city council twice, the mayor of Minneapolis vetoed it both times. A part of the broader anti-pornography movement, MacKinnon and Dworkin's efforts

⁶⁴ Bronstein, *Battling Pornography*, 178.

⁶⁵ Bronstein, *Battling Pornography*, 243.

⁶⁶ Duberman, *Andrea Dworkin*, 171-4.

⁶⁷ Bracewell, *Why We Lost the Sex Wars*, 100.

⁶⁸ Duberman, *Andrea Dworkin*, 175.

quickly attracted the ire of liberals who saw the ordinance as an attack on First Amendment rights.

Engaging with Dworkin's work beyond her antipornography activism provides a fuller picture of her political theoretical agenda. Scholars who center Dworkin's antipornography activism risk obscuring the depth of her critique. As Dworkin specifies in the preface of *Pornography*, "this is not a book about what should or should not be shown; it is a book about the meaning of what is being shown."⁶⁹ With a fuller picture of Dworkin's earlier writings, we can now read the Dworkin-MacKinnon ordinance's famous definition of pornography with fresh eyes:

the graphic, sexually explicit subordination of women in pictures and/or words that also includes *women presented dehumanized as sexual objects, things, or commodities*; or women presented as *sexual objects* who enjoy pain or humiliation; or women presented as *sexual objects* who experience sexual pleasure in being raped; or women presented as *sexual objects* tied up or cut up or mutilated or bruised or physically hurt.⁷⁰

Here, Dworkin and MacKinnon list sexual acts that we would now easily name as violence. Later on, liberal legal theorists would narrow their understanding of the harms of pornography to only the most "violent" materials, such as those that depicted rape or sadomasochism.⁷¹ Yet Dworkin and MacKinnon's initial definition extended well beyond that, to any pornography that depicted women as sexual objects. This is because Dworkin saw the objectification of women, even in ordinary sexual acts, as violence.

After reading Dworkin's other writing, her reasons for opposing pornography come into sharp relief. Dworkin explicitly calls pornography a form of violence against women in two ways. First, the women in pornography experience violence during production. Second,

⁶⁹ Dworkin, *Pornography*, preface.

⁷⁰ Dworkin, *Pornography*, xxxiii (emphasis added).

⁷¹ Bracewell, *Why We Lost the Sex Wars*.

pornography “encourages and promotes violence against women as a class.”⁷² For Dworkin, the question is not whether women in pornography consent, although she does believe that women are coerced into creating pornography both by precarious economic circumstances and exploitative male directors and actors. Instead, Dworkin focuses on the political conditions of pornography’s production—the same conditions that she believes makes heterosexual consensual intercourse violent. Pornography, and intercourse more broadly, she tells us, entail the transformation of women into objects for male possession, through the use of physical force. Women might consent to this objectification, they may even enjoy it, but that does not absolve sexual intercourse of its inherent violence.

The perniciousness of pornography lies precisely in the normalization of this sexual violence. “The problem for women is that being hurt is ordinary,” Dworkin writes, “It happens every day, all the time, somewhere to someone, in every neighborhood, on every street, in intimacy, in crowds; women are being hurt.”⁷³ We struggle to see violence against women, including the violence of intercourse, because of its ordinariness. In another essay, Dworkin puts it more bluntly: “Actually, being force-fucked is pretty banal. Didn’t Hannah Arendt write a book about that?”⁷⁴ Pornography plays an important role in normalizing and eroticizing sexual violence, according to Dworkin. By watching pornography, men and women develop the desire to participate in the type of sex that it portrays. Viewers internalize the notion that sex requires the objectification of women and reproduce the same sexual practices in their everyday lives.

⁷² Dworkin, “Why Pornography Matters to Feminists” in *Letters from a War Zone* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 1993), 204.

⁷³ Andrea Dworkin, “Pornography Happens,” in *Life and Death: Unapologetic Writings on the Continuing War Against Women* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997), 132.

⁷⁴ Dworkin, “Women in the Public Domain,” in *Life and Death*, 213.

Dworkin's resonance with Arendt extends beyond her reference to *Eichmann in Jerusalem*. Just as Arendt describes violence as the ultimate anti-political act, because it erases men—or, in this case, women—from the common world, Dworkin shows that violence against women prevents them from participating in shared, political life. Dworkin labels the violence against women that she documents “gynocide,” which she defines as “the systematic crippling, raping, and/or killing of women by men.”⁷⁵ Of course, violence literally removes women from the earth, through gynecidal death, but the objectification of women goes far beyond murder. With the love, or even knowledge, of political freedom eradicated, women lose the ability to speak and act in public. Dworkin made this argument plainly when confronted with liberal proponents of free speech who criticized the pornography ordinance:

Women are denied freedom of expression by rape, by battering,...by violence on every level, by sexual harassment..., by being unable to make the decent living that gives one the freedom to speak one's mind. When I tell you pornography silences me...and the women all over the country [have testified to it], and we are told we haven't said anything about the effects of pornography..., then we understand that we are operating in a moral vacuum (Bracewell 2021, 45).⁷⁶

The dynamics of the pornography debate underline Dworkin's point. Even as women attested to the harms of the violence against them, including but not limited to pornography, the response that they had not “said anything” exemplifies the silencing she describes.

Influenced by Dworkin and MacKinnon, Rae Langton contends that we should add “silencing” as another dimension of sexual objectification to Nussbaum's list. Langton cites MacKinnon's claim, “Pornography makes women into objects. Objects do not speak.”⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Dworkin, “Remember the Witches” in *Our Blood*, 16. Decades before Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch*, Dworkin turns to witch-burnings in Europe as her primary example. Gynocide continues today, Dworkin believes, not only in the mass rape and murder of women by men, but also in the structural poverty that women disproportionately experience.

⁷⁶ Bracewell, *Why We Lost the Sex Wars*, 45.

⁷⁷ Rae Langton, *Sexual Solipsism: Philosophical Essays on Pornography and Objectification* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 229.

Adopting the language of J.L. Austin, Langton argues that speech is action, and that silencing prevents women from acting, in what she labels “illocutionary disablement.”⁷⁸ She offers two examples. First, in some instances, men interpret a woman’s “no” as a “yes.” Pornography shapes the felicitous conditions of women’s speech such that their denial of consent goes not just unheeded but unheard. Second, when women speak out publicly against rape and pornography, then, their protests become mere reproductions of pornographic material. For example, Linda Marchiano’s book *Ordeal*, which details the abuse and rape she endured during the production of the movie *Deep Throat*, was sold in adult mail-order catalogues. Langton gives an illuminating analytic philosophical account of the silencing effects of pornography that Dworkin describes. If women cannot speak and be heard, Dworkin suggests, they should turn to other means to effect change.

Feminist Violence

While contemporary critics have spilled much ink over Dworkin’s involvement in the attempted passage of the anti-pornography ordinance, they have paid far less attention to another of her political proposals: extralegal feminist violence. Early in her writing career, Dworkin raises and rejects the possibility of feminist violence as intractable, but she comes to defend feminist violence later, upon seeing the limits of legal intervention. Influenced by the feminist self-defense movement and the Black Panther Party, Dworkin understood the use of revolutionary violence for leftist movements. It should not surprise us, then, that Dworkin at times advocates for feminist violence in response to widespread patriarchal violence. A close reading of Dworkin’s oeuvre reveals that her conceptualization of rape, sex, and pornography as violence paved the way for a turn to feminist violence. If patriarchal violence often goes unseen,

⁷⁸ Langton, *Sexual Solipsism*, 48.

then, how do feminists expose rape, sex, and pornography as violence? As Dworkin hints in her novel, *Mercy*, feminist violence would retroactively reveal the patriarchal violence that is so ordinary it often eludes our view.

Although Dworkin raises the possibility of women using violence to defend themselves in her early work, she seems at best ambivalent, and at worst pessimistic, about feminist violence. One problem, Dworkin reasons, is that women must reject their femininity, and act like men, to exercise violence. When women defend themselves, Dworkin writes in the preface of *Woman-Hating*, they “are violating every notion of womanhood [they] have ever been taught.”⁷⁹ Women wielding violence undercuts the patriarchal definition of women as victims. Considering the case of Joan of Arc, Dworkin elaborates in *Intercourse*, “to want freedom is to want not only what men have but also what men are. This is male identification as militance.”⁸⁰ Becoming a soldier, Joan must dress and act like a man to approximate male freedom. Ultimately, she receives a grievous punishment, imprisoned, raped, and burned at the stake. Gender transgression in the form of militance thus invites further violence to squash this “crime against male supremacy.”⁸¹

Another problem with the feminist use of violence for self-defense is the personal connection that usually exists between female victims and male perpetrators. In the same chapter on Joan of Arc, Dworkin acknowledges “the timorous ambition of today: a woman fights her rapist,” referencing the second wave turn to self-defense as a means of rape prevention.⁸² Elsewhere, in response to the mass shooting of fourteen women engineering students in Montreal, Dworkin even threatens, “If we have to fight back with arms, then we have to fight

⁷⁹ Dworkin, *Woman Hating* (New York: PLUME, 1974), 23.

⁸⁰ Dworkin, *Intercourse*, 124-5.

⁸¹ Dworkin, *Intercourse*, 125.

⁸² Dworkin, *Intercourse*, 117.

back with arms.”⁸³ She does not morally condemn the use of violence for self-defense or liberation. Yet, Dworkin believes, “No violent reform will work for us, no bloody coup followed by another regime of illegitimate power; because our enemy is family; and we cannot simply wipe him out and kill him dead.”⁸⁴ Beyond the difficulty of transgressing gender definitions, Dworkin cautions that feminists cannot engage in revolutionary violence in the same way as other political movements because of women’s intimate connection with their oppressors. Women will hesitate to kill their family members, their fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons.

Still, Dworkin does not call for women to only use nonviolent tactics. In an early speech, “Redefining Nonviolence,” she declares that “any commitment to nonviolence which is real, which is authentic, must begin in the recognition of the forms and degrees of violence perpetrated against women by the gender class men.”⁸⁵ Dworkin criticizes male proponents of nonviolence who fail to see how nonviolence could further conscript women into victimhood. “As women,” Dworkin continues, “nonviolence must begin for us in the refusal to be violated, in the refusal to be victimized.”⁸⁶ Dworkin qualifies that this refusal does not demand “any act of resistance as male-derived as killing.”⁸⁷ However, Dworkin does not entirely preclude the use of violence for self-defense. That “male aggression can find no dead flesh on which to feast” suggests a live feminine flesh that at the very least may run from, if not retaliate against, male violence.⁸⁸

Dworkin narrates how her beliefs about violence transform in her semi-autobiographical novel, *Mercy*, in which, after years of rape and abuse, her protagonist of the same name begins to

⁸³ Dworkin, “Mass Murder in Montreal” in *Life and Death*, 113.

⁸⁴ Dworkin, “Violence Against Women: It Breaks Hearts, Also the Bones,” in *Letters from a War Zone*, 184.

⁸⁵ Dworkin, “Redefining Nonviolence” in *Our Blood*, 72.

⁸⁶ Dworkin, “Redefining Nonviolence” in *Our Blood*, 72.

⁸⁷ Dworkin, “Redefining Nonviolence” in *Our Blood*, 72.

⁸⁸ Dworkin, “Redefining Nonviolence” in *Our Blood*, 72.

exercise violence against men. Like Dworkin, Andrea experiences rape first at the age of ten, by a stranger in a movie theater, and again in jail during a gynecological exam, after being arrested for protesting the Vietnam war. Like Dworkin, Andrea then moves overseas, first to Greece and then to Amsterdam, where she meets her first (and, in the novel, only) husband, who eventually becomes abusive and subjects Andrea to extreme sexual violence. Like Dworkin, Andrea ultimately escapes this marriage and moves back to the United States, where she lives in poverty, alternately couch surfing and sleeping on the streets, and turning tricks to survive. Unlike Dworkin, Andrea does not meet John Stoltenberg, her second husband and a gay man with whom she enjoyed a healthy romantic relationship. Nor does Andrea become involved in the feminist movement of the time, earning a small salary through her speaking tours and writing. Instead, Andrea falls further into poverty and eventually becomes radicalized by a final experience of rape. She spends the last chapter roaming the streets of New York, looking for men to attack. Layered with many instances of rape and abuse, the novel makes sexual violence appear so pervasive that readers feel an oppressive claustrophobia and near-inescapability. *Mercy* carries through many of the same themes of Dworkin's more theoretical texts, particularly the analogization of sex and rape to death. Given the inarticulability of rape, Andrea and Dworkin must invent a new language to describe it. Once she sees rape as a "new kind of death," Andrea realizes that she must turn to violence at the end of the text.

At the beginning of the novel, Andrea, like young Dworkin, is a pacifist. Eighteen years old, she organizes against the Vietnam war, and she does not believe in the use of violence for any reason. Andrea finds, though, that her fellow organizers do not see rape as a form of violence. "They didn't really believe in rape, I think," Dworkin writes.⁸⁹ Part of their training in

⁸⁹ Andrea Dworkin, *Mercy* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1991), 47.

nonviolence involved answering questions about how they would respond if their girlfriend or their mother were raped, an exercise that would often end in jokes. For Andrea, rape constitutes a form of violence, such that the political attachment to nonviolence demands an anti-rape stance: “I didn’t see how you could make jokes about rape if you were against violence,” she reflects.⁹⁰ Andrea goes so far as to doubt her own experiences, wondering whether rape even exists, rather than challenge the male anti-war activists.

In Amsterdam, Andrea’s political allegiances shift. She meets her future husband, an anarchist who builds bombs, though, she clarifies, he aims to destroy property, not people. At first, their apartment is a site of political organizing, where they “planned the political acts..., the chaos we delivered to the status quo, the acts of disruption, rebellion.”⁹¹ For a moment, she experiences politics as erotic: “I liked fucking after a strike, a proper climax to the real act.”⁹² Then, she realizes, she is not included in the anarchists’ revolutionary acts at all. Her primary role in the movement is limited to sleeping with her husband, and cleaning up after their meetings. Just like the pacifists of the U.S., the anarchists of the Netherlands do not let her speak, or take political action. Then her husband becomes abusive and she flees.

Thinking back on her time in the Netherlands, Andrea’s perspective on violence begins to shift. “Why didn’t I kill [my ex-husband]? Why didn’t I?” she asks herself. “I’m the most ardent pacifist the world ever saw.”⁹³ She reflects on her father, who served in World War II. He was willing to kill, and supported the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, to save his own life. Unlike her father, she feels she could never justify murder, even to save her own life: “If someone stood between me and existence, how come I didn’t think I mattered more; why didn’t I

⁹⁰ Dworkin, *Mercy*, 49.

⁹¹ Dworkin, *Mercy*, 143.

⁹² Dworkin, *Mercy*, 143.

⁹³ Dworkin, *Mercy*, 171.

kill them; I never would put me above someone else; I never did; I never thought that because they were doing something to annihilate me I could annihilate them.”⁹⁴ Here, we see the effects of objectification on Andrea’s psyche. Part of the violence of objectification is Andrea’s own belief that her life does not matter. Finally, though, Andrea starts to question the conditions that render her life valueless. “If someone tortures you and you will die from it eventually, someday, for sure, one way or another,” Dworkin writes, “then maybe he should die because he pushed himself between you and existence. Maybe you should kill him to push him out of the way.”⁹⁵ In the context of her previous marriage, this torture looks like rape and domestic abuse, and death connotes not just literal death, but also the slow death of objectification.

Perversely, it takes a man stealing her dog, in addition to raping her, for Andrea to turn to violence. In a direct allusion to the feminist self-defense movement of the 1970s, Andrea learns karate, developing strength that she for so long felt denied. Andrea imagines herself as part of “a girls’ army, subversive, on the ground, down and dirty, no uniforms, no rank, no orders from on high, a martial spirit, a cadre of honor, an army of girls spreading out over the terrain, I see them moving through the streets, thick formations of them in anarchy and freedom.”⁹⁶ Reminiscent of Valerie Solanas’ Society for Cutting Up Men (SCUM), Andrea’s girls’ army walks the streets, searching for men to violently confront. Andrea’s alliance with the anarchists returns, but this time violent anarchy serves a feminist purpose. She calls her actions “random self-defense,” though the men she attacks need not have harmed her.⁹⁷ Instead, her army reverses the logic of the rapist: “so if he follows you and you have the urge to smash him to death he’s asked for it,

⁹⁴ Dworkin, *Mercy*, 175.

⁹⁵ Dworkin, *Mercy*, 176.

⁹⁶ Dworkin, *Mercy*, 317.

⁹⁷ Dworkin, *Mercy*, 316.

hasn't he?"⁹⁸ The threat of masculine violence alone, invoked in the girls' army's personal history as "raped girls," justifies their violent retribution.

By committing these acts of violence, Andrea believes she does the work of a political theorist. "A political theorist said," Dworkin writes, "to make the implicit explicit; the blood of women is implicit in the weaponry."⁹⁹ For Andrea, and for Dworkin-*qua*-theorist, these acts of feminist violence make explicit the until now implicit violence of men against women. Andrea establishes the political principle, "it is very important for women to kill men."¹⁰⁰ Feminist violence is important not just as a means of preventing the rape, abuse, and murder of women. It is important because it makes rape and abuse legible as violence in the first place. Women must insist that their lives matter, Dworkin reasons, to undo the logic of objectification and reveal the reality of violence against women. Thus when Andrea resolves, "I will make myself into a weapon; I will turn myself into a new kind of death, for them," the meaning of "a new kind of death" is twofold.¹⁰¹ Throughout her work, Dworkin describes rape, as well as sex and pornography, as a new kind of death and, in turn, Andrea transforms herself into an agent of feminist violence that promises to deliver the same fate to men.

Although Dworkin, unlike her protagonist, never killed anyone (to our knowledge), she took a stronger stance in support of feminist violence later in her life. During a talk at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Dworkin says:

We have to find some way to keep the rapists off the street. Now there are different ways of doing it. Law is only one way of doing it. *I myself favor violence*—deeply, I favor it. . . . As long as the law isn't working, women who have been attacked, or are being attacked, need to be able to understand that they have a right to defend themselves against anyone who is attacking.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Dworkin, *Mercy*, 327.

⁹⁹ Dworkin, *Mercy*, 328.

¹⁰⁰ Dworkin, *Mercy*, 328.

¹⁰¹ Dworkin, *Mercy*, 272.

¹⁰² Andrea Dworkin, "Heartbreak: The Political Memoir of a Feminist Militant" *CSPAN* (March 12, 2002): <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c3344211/user-clip-andrea-dworkin>.

Already cognizant of the failures of the law, both as a victim of rape by agents of the state and in light of the impossibility of passing the pornography ordinance, Dworkin advises women to turn to violence. Instead of the wanton violence of *Mercy's* Andrea, Dworkin favors violence as a form of self-defense—a common view among second-wave feminists involved in the self-defense movement. In the wake of the second wave, though, extralegal violence has disappeared from feminists' repertoires of contention.¹⁰³ This loss effects not just the tactics feminists employ, but also their capacity to imagine a future without rape.

Conclusion

Contemporary readers often dismiss Dworkin as a carceral feminist.¹⁰⁴ Because she depicts women as primarily victims, critics reason, Dworkin needs to appeal to the state for benevolent patriarchal protection.¹⁰⁵ In this chapter, I offer an alternate reading of Dworkin as invested in extralegal feminist violence, rather than carceral punishment, to prevent sexual violence against women. Given her own experience of rape at the hands of state officials, Dworkin put little trust in law enforcement to stop sexual violence. Dworkin's advocacy for feminist violence aligns with the broader militancy of the second-wave movement. Radical feminist groups like the NYRF and Cell 16 believed that women must learn self-defense to prevent sexual harassment and rape.¹⁰⁶ The NYRF sourcebook, for example, includes a chapter outlining the tactics taught at a self-defense workshop. Cell 16 founder Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz details her experience defending herself against street harassment as impetus for the group's

¹⁰³ Charles Tilly, *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

¹⁰⁴ Bracewell, *Why We Lost the Sex Wars*; Anne Gray Fischer, *The Streets Belong to Us: Sex, Race, and Police Power from Segregation to Gentrification* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2022).

¹⁰⁵ Amy Allen, "Pornography and Power" *Journal of Social Philosophy* v. 31, n. 4 (2001): 512-541; Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

¹⁰⁶ Echols, *Daring to be Bad*.

signature self-defense classes.¹⁰⁷ Outside of militant groups, self-defense quickly became a collective feminist project.

Dworkin's disavowal of carceral solutions, and advocacy for feminist violence, elides the easy distinction between carceral and abolitionist feminism.¹⁰⁸ Indeed, Davis et al. trace the beginnings of Black abolitionist feminism to second-wave campaigns in support of women who killed rapists and abusers in self-defense.¹⁰⁹ At the time of Dworkin's writing, Black feminists rallied around the 1974 case of Joan Little, an imprisoned woman who killed a guard after he attempted to rape her. In 1977, the Santa Cruz Women Against Rape released a public letter decrying the white feminist turn to the criminal legal system to solve the problem of rape, suggesting instead community-based solutions that involved confronting rapists.¹¹⁰ The Combahee River Collective penned a 1979 pamphlet in response to Black women going missing in Boston: "As women in this society we are definitely at risk as far as violence is concerned but WE HAVE TO LEARN TO PROTECT OURSELVES."¹¹¹ Dworkin wrote in the same tradition, calling for feminist violence in the form of self-defense.

Since the second wave, the feminist use of violence has fallen out of favor, partly due to increased criminalization of victims of sexual and domestic violence. With the passage of dual arrest laws, which mandate the arrest of both parties in domestic disputes, the number of women to kill their partners in self-defense decreased, while the number of women killed by their

¹⁰⁷ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *Outlaw Woman: A Memoir of the War Years, 1960-1975* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014).

¹⁰⁸ Anna Terwiel, "What is Carceral Feminism?" *Political Theory* 48, n. 4 (2020).

¹⁰⁹ Angela Davis, Gina Dent, Erica Meiners, and Beth Richie, *Abolition. Feminism. Now* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2022).

¹¹⁰ robin mcduff, deanne purnell and karen saunders, "letter to the anti-rape movement" *Off Our Backs* 7, n. 5 (1977): 9-10.

¹¹¹ Combahee River Collective, "Why Did They Die?", 46.

abusers stayed the same.¹¹² By criminalizing women's self-defense, the legal system reinscribes the objectifying effects of patriarchal violence, and reifies the construction of women as passive victims. Returning to Dworkin, alongside other second-wave thinkers and activists, reminds us that carceral punishment is not the only avenue to address sexual violence. Second-wave feminists proposed alternatives to policing and imprisonment, including feminist violence.

Rather than merely punishing rapists, the feminist exercise of violence would bring into view the possibility of a world without rape, and other forms of patriarchal violence. Feminist violence promised to reveal patriarchal violence as violence, and to insist on the value of women's lives, contesting the logic of objectification. Put in the simplest terms, feminists argued that self-defense would prevent sexual violence before it happened, rather than entrusting punishment to the carceral state after the fact. "It is astonishing," Dworkin says in a speech to male allies, "that in all our worlds of feminism and antisexism we never talk seriously about ending rape. Ending it. Stopping it. No more. No more rape."¹¹³ Importantly, the utopia Dworkin gestures towards is not one of pleasurable sex for women, but rather, a world without violence against women. While these worlds might coincide, Dworkin is clear-eyed about the fact that pleasure does not necessarily index the absence of violence. If Dworkin is concerned with women experiencing pleasure, then it is the pleasure of freely participating in politics, of speaking and acting in public to create the world anew.

¹¹² Critical Resistance and INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, "Gender Violence and the Prison Industrial Complex" in ed. INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, *Color of Violence: The INCITE! Anthology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016)

¹¹³ Andrea Dworkin, "I Want a Twenty-Four Hour Truce During Which There is No Rape," in *Letters from a War Zone*, 169.

Chapter Two | Fighting Back: Simone de Beauvoir, Self-Defense, and Second-Wave Tactics of Rape Prevention

Introduction

The popular influence of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* at the time of her writing cannot be overstated. In the first week after publication, *The Second Sex* sold twenty-two thousand copies.¹ Toril Moi refers to Beauvoir as a public intellectual because her works reached a mass audience.² Beauvoir received countless letters from readers, not only expressing their enthusiasm about her work, but also soliciting her opinion on their personal affairs.³ Given Beauvoir's outspoken support for women's right to abortion, and her declaration that she herself had received one in the Manifesto of 343, women often wrote to her for advice about securing abortions for themselves.⁴ Readers also asked for advice on familial relationships, and detailed their experiences "coming out" as lesbians, and Beauvoir frequently wrote back.

Her epistolary correspondence demonstrates the wide-ranging nature of her reception and the way her writing deeply affected her readers. While *The Second Sex* generated much controversy in France, it had a more muted effect in the United States.⁵ Still, published over a decade before the crest of the second wave, *The Second Sex* left its mark on U.S. feminism of the 1960s and 70s.⁶ Although they frequently cite her to dismiss her, second-wave feminists from liberals like Betty Friedan to radicals like Shulamith Firestone invoke Beauvoir's name in their own influential texts.⁷ This chapter discusses the uptake of Beauvoir's thought in a strain of

¹ Kate Kirkpatrick, *Becoming Beauvoir: A Life* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019).

² Toril Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir: The Making of an Intellectual Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1993] 2008), 94.

³ Judith Coffin, *Sex, Love, and Letters: Writing Simone de Beauvoir* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020). Coffin estimates Beauvoir received 1000 letters the year after *Force of Circumstance* was published.

⁴ Beauvoir later testified that she had helped women procure abortions. Coffin, *Sex, Love, and Letters*, 231.

⁵ Mary Dietz, *Turning Operations: Feminism, Arendt, Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

⁶ Penelope Deutscher, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Ambiguity, Conversion, Resistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008)

⁷ Dietz, *Turning Operations*, 92.

second-wave feminist texts on self-defense. My intention is not to show that Beauvoir's professed belief in self-defense directly influenced the self-defense movement in the U.S. Instead, I am interested in tracing the logic of her theorization of violence in both *The Ethics of Ambiguity* and *The Second Sex*, and their resonances with the writings that emerge from the feminist self-defense movement in the U.S.

In *Ethics*, Beauvoir argues that violence denies the ambiguity of the human condition, because those who experience violence become mere objects. She extends this insight to women's situation in *The Second Sex*, with special attention to the objectifying effects of sexual violence. Contemporary feminist theorists rightly read Beauvoir as ambivalent about the use of violence. Despite her ambivalence, though, I uncover a line of thinking in Beauvoir's writing and interviews that opens up the possibility of the feminist use of violence under certain circumstances. Although Beauvoir worries about the unending violence of revolution in *Ethics*, she cannot deny the liberatory potential of violence for oppressed groups. Reading *The Second Sex* closely and creatively I show the importance of boys' early training in violence, which prepares them to take worldly action. Beauvoir suggests, then, that women must learn violence to act in public. Taken together, *Ethics* and *The Second Sex* reveal the potential for violence to restore the human condition of ambiguity for women, making them both subjects and objects. Where the previous chapter asks, What does patriarchal violence do?, this chapter follows up with the question, What does feminist violence do? If patriarchal violence objectifies women, then might feminist violence transform them into political actors?

A similar set of questions animates the writings of feminist activists who advocated for self-defense during the 1970s and 80s. Although only a few cite Beauvoir explicitly, Beauvoir's focus on women's objectification, and their capacity to act politically, provides a theoretical

purchase for understanding the concerns of second-wave activists. From handbooks on tactics to empirical studies of its efficacy, self-defense became a collective feminist project during the second wave. These texts evince a shared belief that patriarchal violence objectifies women, and that women must fight back to reclaim public space, and prevent rape. Self-defense remains a relatively under-explored topic in feminist theory, but more recent ethnographic work reveals that that women report a shift in their relationship to their bodies, mapping the shift from object to agent.⁸ “When we change our bodily habits and capacities,” Ann Cahill and Greyson Hunt explain in a short essay on self-defense, “we change our way of being in the world (and maybe even the world itself.)”⁹ The danger of this feminist analysis lies in assuming a move from object to unproblematic, individual subject. For example, Elsa Dorlin writes that “self-defense paradoxically has no subject—by which I mean the subject being defended does not preexist the movement to resist the violence directed at it. In this sense, self-defense is part of what I propose to call the ‘martial ethics of the self.’”¹⁰ Rather than analyzing the formation of woman as subject, this chapter explores the political effects of women collectively practicing violence in the form of self-defense.

Through the promise of collective public action, feminists also brought into view the possibility of eradicating rape. Empirical investigations, then and now, have found that self-defense effectively prevents sexual violence.¹¹ Yet once feminists re-defined rape as a form of violence, Nancy Matthews argues, it quickly fell under the provenance of the state.¹² Meanwhile,

⁸ Jocelyn Hollander, “The Importance of Self-Defense Training for Sexual Violence Prevention” *Feminism & Psychology* v. 26, n. 2 (2016): 207-226; Martha McCaughey, “The Fighting Spirit: Women’s Self-Defense Training and the Discourse of Sexed Embodiment” *Gender & Society* v. 12, n. 3: 283.

⁹ Ann Cahill and Grayson Hunt, “Should Feminists Defend Self-Defense?” *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics* v. 9, n. 2 (2016): 177.

¹⁰ Dorlin, *Self-Defense*, xvii.

¹¹ Hollander, “The Importance of Self-Defense.”

¹² Nancy Matthews, *Confronting Rape: The Feminist Anti-Rape Movement and the State* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 152.

feminists re-directed their efforts towards the provision of social services for victims of rape and abuse.¹³ The problem with carceral punishment and the provision of social services is that both measures address sexual violence after the fact, as I discuss in the previous chapter. Over the past four decades, feminist and state attention turned toward managing, rather than stopping, violence against women. Returning to second-wave thought restores a vision for eradicating rape that emerged from self-defense as a practice of feminist violence.

Re-Reading Beauvoir

In the past two decades, feminist theorists took a renewed interest in Simone de Beauvoir's writing. Upon returning to Beauvoir, contemporary feminists found evidence of the influence of her thought on the second wave.¹⁴ In particular, feminist theories of objectification that gained traction in the 1970s and 80s can be read as a reception of Beauvoir's notion of ambiguity, applied to the situation of women. *The Ethics of Ambiguity* theorizes the human condition as ontologically and socially ambiguous, with each person occupying the position of both subject and object. Extending this insight, *The Second Sex* investigates how men, in an effort to deny their own ambiguity and impose sovereignty, assert themselves as subjects and reduce women to object status. Nancy Bauer, Toril Moi, Sonia Kruks, and more recently Manon Garcia expose the ways in which Beauvoir drew on, and yet importantly diverged from, her partner, Jean-Paul Sartre's, existentialist philosophy. To do so, they locate connections between Beauvoir's early responses to existentialism, especially *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, and her later magnum opus, *The Second Sex*. Only by reading the two texts in tandem, Bauer and Moi claim, can we grasp Beauvoir's larger project.

¹³ Matthews, *Confronting Rape*, 157.

¹⁴ Deutscher, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir*; Dietz, *Turning Operations*.

Bauer resuscitates Beauvoir's thought as exemplary of the method of feminist philosophy. Although Beauvoir's early work, including *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, is highly abstract, *The Second Sex* turns to the ordinary, everyday experience of women to guide Beauvoir's philosophical inquiry.¹⁵ According to Bauer, Beauvoir does not hit her philosophical stride until she writes *The Second Sex*, because, in her earlier essays, Beauvoir remains in the shadow of Sartre. Beauvoir herself diminishes the importance of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, renouncing the essay's "idealism." "I was in error," Beauvoir reflects in *The Force of Circumstance*, "when I thought I could define a morality independent of a social context."¹⁶ While Bauer agrees with Beauvoir's assessment of her early essays as too abstract, she sees the seeds of *The Second Sex* in *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. It is in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* that Beauvoir first refers to being a woman as a "situation," for which she is responsible because "she chooses it or at least consents to it."¹⁷ Indeed, Beauvoir would go on to write *The Second Sex* only months after she finished *Ethics*.

Following Bauer, Moi argues that *The Ethics of Ambiguity* is critical to understanding *The Second Sex*. In an unconventional biography, or what Moi terms a "personal genealogy," Moi reconstructs Beauvoir's life as an intellectual woman, intervening in public life.¹⁸ "Under patriarchy," for Moi, "women incarnate the human condition more fully than men."¹⁹ Although men too occupy the position of both subject and object, the patriarchal efforts to objectify women redoubles the ontological ambiguity of the human at the social level. As "subjects painfully torn between freedom and alienation, transcendence and immanence, subject being and

¹⁵ "What is a woman?" Beauvoir asks, and answers, "I am, if anything is." Nancy Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy, and Feminism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

¹⁶ Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir*, 158. Citing Beauvoir.

¹⁷ Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir*, 170.

¹⁸ Toril Moi, *The Making of an Intellectual Woman*, 29.

¹⁹ Moi, *The Making of an Intellectual Woman*, 195.

object being,” women experience ambiguity more acutely than men.²⁰ Moi centers heterosexual sex as one reason for women’s alienation from their bodies. In arguments that should now be familiar to the reader, after our earlier encounter with Dworkin, Beauvoir describes penetration as objectifying, and accuses women of making themselves passive objects, in part by consenting to sexual intercourse.²¹ The suggestion that violence dovetails with objectification underlies Beauvoir’s work and becomes clear in the contemporary uptake of *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

In *Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of Ambiguity*, Kruks reads *The Ethics of Ambiguity* as a text about objectification that prefigures *The Second Sex*. Beauvoir describes a world where “ambiguity is foreclosed through the treatment of persons as if they were merely physical resources, treatment that does not acknowledge that they are embodied subjectivities.”²² Men refuse to recognize that women are subjects, and therefore deny the possibility of women exercising freedom through action. Kruks clarifies, however, that men treating women as if they are things does not literally transform them into things. Instead, women become object-like, their subjectivity circumvented, and their ambiguity intensified. We must acknowledge women’s subjectivity to see that they play a role in their own objectification. As active subjects, Kruks argues, women make themselves into passive objects to conform to normative gender roles.²³

Garcia uses the term submission to refer to women’s renunciation of their own freedom. For Garcia, objectification does not heighten women’s ontological and social ambiguity: women “are not at once subjects and objects; they are first and foremost being-for-others, for men.

²⁰ Moi, *The Making of an Intellectual Woman*, 175.

²¹ Beauvoir even suggests that “the moment of orgasm represents total obliteration.” Beauvoir’s concern with objectification comes to the fore in second-wave thought, including Dworkin’s work. As I argue earlier, Dworkin and other feminist theorists makes the connection between objectification and violence explicit.

²² Sonia Kruks, *Simone de Beauvoir and the Politics of Ambiguity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 15.

²³ Sadists take pleasure in recognizing women as dehumanized subjects, according to Manon Garcia, as opposed to treating women as objects without acknowledging their subjectivity. Manon Garcia, *We are Not Born Submissive: How Patriarchy Shapes Women’s Lives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

Patriarchy structures the difference between men and women in such a way that men are subjects (they do things) while women are objects (to be possessed and used by men).²⁴ Men see their bodies as tools to interact with the world, while women's alienation from their body-object means they lose touch with the world. Being an object becomes women's destiny, such that they cannot freely take action into an open future. Most disturbing, perhaps, is that women often consent to objectification because of political, social, and economic pressures, and because of the pleasures of submission. This pleasure includes eluding the cost of freedom, the metaphysical risk of an open future without goals determined in advance.

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, then, Beauvoir begins grappling with a problem that comes to fruition in *The Second Sex*. The former argues that the human condition is defined by ambiguity: we are all subjects, who act for ourselves, and objects, who exist for others. The latter explores how men attempt to shed the human condition of ambiguity by asserting themselves as subjects and relegating women to object status. This patriarchal project necessarily invites failure. As close as women become to objects, they are still subjects. Yet women often actively choose to reject their subjectivity for the privileges and pleasures afforded if they conform to patriarchal norms. A close reading of both texts reveals the connection between objectification and violence, which I explore in my previous engagement with Dworkin. Specifically, Beauvoir describes ordinary forms of sexual violence that objectify women, prefiguring the interventions of second-wave feminists.

While Bauer, Moi, Kruks, and Garcia focus on ambiguity, and to some extent objectification, their references to violence are telling. "Since rational argument will rarely convert oppressors into advocates of others' freedom," Kruks writes, "Beauvoir concludes that

²⁴ Garcia, *We are Not Born Submissive*, 149.

coercion will sometimes be the most appropriate course of action.”²⁵ Resistance against oppression—particularly oppression that designates a group of people as things—may entail violence. When a confrontation occurs, those who commit violence objectify themselves, as well as their victims.²⁶ Moi, however, believes that women as a class are unlikely to engage in revolutionary violence against men. According to Moi, “women’s struggle for liberation emerges as a slow and contradictory process, the one truly non-violent revolution in history.”²⁷ Because of women’s heightened ambiguity, they must undermine male domination by struggling to expose the contradictions underlying patriarchal ideology. What determines the perceived necessity for violence in the feminist movement is the degree to which we believe women are objectified. If women are rendered objects, completely and inescapably, then they lack the capacity for persuasion, and must resort to violence.

Ann Murphy, Kimberly Hutchings, and Lori Marso each explore Beauvoir’s theory of violence in more depth. All three agree that, while Beauvoir worries about violence foreclosing freedom, she does not adopt a pacifist stance. Rather than arguing unequivocally against the use of violence, Beauvoir invites her readers to judge each instance of violence contextually. Intervening in two separate cases, Beauvoir herself defends the execution of Robert Brasillach and the revolutionary violence of Djamila Boupacha. When oppression systematically denies the ambiguity of the oppressed, Beauvoir suggests, the oppressed may need to engage in violence to shed objecthood and recuperate the ambiguity of their condition. Although Beauvoir rarely discusses feminist violence explicitly, her reasoning opens up the possibility for the feminist use of violence as a means of women’s liberation.

²⁵ Kruks, *The Politics of Ambiguity*, 54.

²⁶ Beauvoir seems to draw from Simone Weil’s essay on *The Iliad* here. Simone Weil, “The Iliad, or the Poem of Force” *Chicago Review* 18, n. 2 (1965).

²⁷ Moi, *The Making of an Intellectual Woman*, 227.

On Ann Murphy's reading of Beauvoir, claims to ethical or moral certainty, including pacifist adherence to nonviolence, threaten to conceal the ambiguity of the human condition. The world will never be free from violence; we can minimize violence and oppression, but we can never completely escape them. Because of this inevitability, Beauvoir does not "shy away from the consideration of violence as a legitimate option" for resistance and retribution.²⁸ In *An Eye for an Eye*, for example, Beauvoir defends sentencing Robert Brasillach to death for cooperating with the Nazis. The Nazis represent absolute evil, for Beauvoir, "accomplished via a denial of ambiguity, that is via a denial of the fact that to be human is to evince an ambiguous existence between freedom and constraint."²⁹ In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir implies a similarity between the absolute evil of Nazism and patriarchy, as men consistently deny the ambiguity of women's existence.

Kimberly Hutchings explicitly raises the question of political violence for feminism. Current feminist approaches to theorizing violence, according to Hutchings, either emphasize counter-violence as a distinct and implicitly justifiable form of violence or adopt a strong pacifist stance. The result is an "ongoing tension between feminist distrust of political violence and the conviction that in circumstances of oppression, the use of political violence may be a necessary evil."³⁰ Hutchings takes up *The Ethics of Ambiguity* as a feminist text to think through the ethics of political violence by re-centering ambiguity. Initially, Beauvoir claims that the use of violence to counteract oppression is both necessary and legitimate, but she quickly qualifies her statement. While political violence should aim at the exercise of freedom, violence demands a trade-off of freedom for some and unfreedom for others. Hutchings stresses that the wrong of oppression lies

²⁸ Ann Murphy, *Violence and the Philosophical Imaginary* (Albany: SUNY University Press, 2012), 111.

²⁹ Murphy, *Violence*, 110.

³⁰ Kimberly Hutchings, "Simone de Beauvoir and the Ambiguous Ethics of Political Violence" *Hypatia* 2, n. 3 (2007): 114.

“not in the reduction of the other to ‘thing’ as such, but in the denial of the ‘ambiguity’ of both subject and other.”³¹ Instead of endorsing pacifism, Beauvoir stresses the need to exercise judgment before engaging in violence. There is no set recipe for determining when to use violence. Ultimately, violence is a “practice, a mode of being in the world that rests, as does subjectivity, on complex conditions of possibility,” and produces uncertain effects.³²

Lori Marso identifies most clearly the paradox of exercising violence for the sake of freedom. Beauvoirian freedom, for Marso, “is always situated and can be experienced only by acknowledging ambiguity with others in encounters.”³³ Because violence denies the ambiguity of both its perpetrators and victims, it forecloses the conditions that make freedom possible. Like many feminist Beauvoir scholars, Marso believes that “men violate ambiguity [by] trying to always be transcendent, consequently pinning immanence solely on women’s bodies and not their own.”³⁴ This transformation of women into things destroys the potential for women and men to experience freedom in the encounter. Yet women tend to respond with individual, rather than collective, violent resistance to patriarchal oppression. In writing a defense of Djamilia Boupacha, Beauvoir takes the agency of revolutionary women seriously, even if she leaves women’s willingness to engage in violence underexamined.

From these illuminating engagements with Beauvoir, her ambivalence about the use of violence comes into stark relief. Beauvoir worries deeply about violence denying the ambiguity of the human condition. This is especially true in circumstances of oppression, wherein oppressors systematically objectify the oppressed, and therefore foreclose the possibility of both

³¹ Hutchings, “The Ambiguous Ethics of Political Violence,” 124.

³² Hutchings, “The Ambiguous Ethics of Political Violence,” 127; With the notion of violence as a practice, Hutchings shifts our attention to the conditions under which certain gendered subjects might exercise violence.

³³ Lori Marso, *Politics with Beauvoir: Freedom in the Encounter* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 61.

³⁴ Marso, *Politics with Beauvoir*, 113.

parties exercising freedom. To combat oppression, Beauvoir reasons, the oppressed might need to engage in violence, yet she wavers on the potential justifications for doing so. In the following section, I conduct a close reading of *The Ethics of Ambiguity* to reconstruct Beauvoir's theorization of violence. Paired with *The Second Sex*, I argue, *Ethics* gestures towards an argument for the feminist use of violence. Beauvoir's reservations about revolutionary violence, though, imply a more restricted vision for the place of violence in the feminist movement, as a tool of self-defense, rather than revolutionary world-making.

Ambiguity and Violence in Beauvoir's Writings

In *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, Beauvoir paints a complicated picture of the relationship between violence and freedom. She opens the sections of *Ethics* on violence with the claim that the oppressed must use violence to overthrow the oppressor. Violence turns men into things, Beauvoir writes, and "one finds himself forced to treat certain men as things in order to win the freedom of all."³⁵ Through this violent resistance, Beauvoir notes, quick to point out the ambiguity in any situation, that the oppressed then become the oppressors: "here is the oppressor oppressed in turn; and the men who do violence to him in their turn become masters, tyrants, and executioners."³⁶ For Beauvoir, freedom is the only justification for necessary instances of violence. "A freedom which is occupied in denying freedom," Beauvoir continues, "is itself so outrageous that the outrageousness of the violence which one practices against it is almost cancelled out."³⁷ Sometimes, Beauvoir contends, violence provides an avenue for the oppressed attaining freedom from the oppressor. The oppressed, though, pay a high price for their newfound freedom. Violence "not only forces us to sacrifice the men who are in our way, but

³⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media Inc, [1947] 2018), 105.

³⁶ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 104.

³⁷ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 105.

also those who are fighting on our side, and even ourselves. Since we can conquer our enemies only by acting upon their facticity, by reducing them to things, we have to make ourselves things.”³⁸ Subjecting themselves to the violence of war and conflict, the oppressed turn their bodies, as much as the bodies of their opponents, into objects. The perpetual paradox of violence is that it treats man as both means and ends, an instrument for achieving freedom and a subject who exercises the freedom at which it aims.

To make men engage in violence, authoritarian regimes must teach them to consent to sacrifice their own lives. Such tyrannical governments “enclose a man in the immanence of his facticity,” denying him transcendence towards an open future.³⁹ Since it retains a sense of futurity, the collectivity becomes more important than the individual. Under this logic, “the value of the individual is asserted only in his surpassing,” and “the death of an individual is not a failure if it is integrated into a project which surpasses the limit of life.”⁴⁰ Without a future of his own, man finds a purpose in the future of the collectivity, sacrificing his life for the common good. Beauvoir, though, insists on the importance of the individual. “If the individual is nothing,” she writes, “society can not be something.”⁴¹ Sacrifice derives its meaning from the unique, irreducible value of the individual. To truly appreciate a sacrifice, then, we must rediscover the sacred character of human life after periods of violence. In democracies that resort to violence, individual rights must be re-established, and “the soldier must become a citizen again so that the city may continue to subsist as such, may continue to deserve one’s dedicating

³⁸ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 106.

³⁹ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 110.

⁴⁰ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 111.

⁴¹ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 114.

oneself to it.”⁴² The democratic polity deserves sacrifice, Beauvoir reasons somewhat circularly, only if it recognizes the value of the lives of individuals who sacrifice themselves.

Still, convincing men to sacrifice themselves is a difficult task. Undergone in “refusal and revolt,” violence forces the question: why pay for victory “with *my* blood rather than with another’s?”⁴³ Even those committed to the cause will question the necessity of sacrificing their own life. Inevitably, violence will also lead to collateral damage, and people uninvolved with the conflict will lose their lives as well. Given these realities, “violence appears as a crime to the one who practices it.”⁴⁴ Advocates of violence, particularly those who govern, must articulate a justification not merely of the ends, but also of the means. “Why this bloody revolution,” Beauvoir asks, “instead of slow reforms?”⁴⁵

In response to this question, the justification of violence becomes a matter of utility. The calculation of utility happens first by “raising the Thing or the Cause to the dignity of an unconditioned end.”⁴⁶ With the end established, decisions about the means of achieving the ends come down to effectiveness. The problem arises upon recognizing that there is no end that universally benefits “Man,” according to Beauvoir.⁴⁷ Humanity is made up of men, not Man, who strive towards the accomplishment of separate, contradictory projects. As Beauvoir writes, “the terms ‘useful to Man,’ ‘useful to this man,’ do not overlap. Universal, absolute man exists nowhere.”⁴⁸ From here, Beauvoir believes, the antinomy of action arises: “the only justification of sacrifice is its utility; but the useful is what serves Man. Thus, in order to serve some men we

⁴² Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 115.

⁴³ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 116.

⁴⁴ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 117.

⁴⁵ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 117.

⁴⁶ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 120.

⁴⁷ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 121.

⁴⁸ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 121.

must do disservice to others. By what principle are we to choose between them?”⁴⁹ Since no single end benefits all men, Beauvoir concludes, men must continually calculate the trade-offs between different ends. Of course, for Beauvoir, “the supreme end at which man must aim is his freedom,” but “what makes the problem so difficult is that it is a matter of choosing between the negation of one freedom or another.”⁵⁰ The difficulty of action is that, in every case, some men will lose their freedom so that others might win their freedom. Action implies enslavement, because it requires treating men as means, even if they are also ends in themselves. Beauvoir speaks of action and violence as nearly synonymous, so that the loss of freedom might mean either death or the objectification of perpetrator and victim that results from violence.

Central to Beauvoir’s tentative justification of violence is that an act of violence aims at freedom. “Violence is justified,” Beauvoir writes, “only if it opens concrete possibilities to the freedom which I am trying to save.”⁵¹ Freedom requires sacrifices “but when it is a question of choosing among freedoms, how shall we decide?”⁵² While the good of an individual or group may be the end of violent action, that so-called good must be collectively produced, not decided upon *a priori*. For each action, men must determine “what genuine human interest fills the abstract form which one proposes as the action’s end.”⁵³ No end can unconditionally justify the sacrifices it demands, Beauvoir cautions. Otherwise, lofty ideals, such as communism, would justify any and all violence by putting revolution on one side of the scale. The end of a violent action must be finite, and short-term, so that the actor can realistically weigh the means against the ends. Under these criteria, violence functions as a sort of wager. In utopian circumstances, an

⁴⁹ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 121.

⁵⁰ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 121.

⁵¹ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 148.

⁵² Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 156.

⁵³ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 157.

actor would “set up on the one hand the chances of success multiplied by the stake one is after, and on the other hand the weight of the immediate sacrifice.”⁵⁴ Yet no human ever knows the chances of success, or the full extent of the necessary sacrifice, so that judgment always remains doubtful and fallible. Beauvoir calls into question both outright condemnations and *a priori* justifications of violence, instead encouraging her readers to exercise their judgment in each specific instance. She provides a few examples to demonstrate how such calculated gambles may proceed in real life.

Beauvoir agrees that, in cases when the outcome is clear, we should sacrifice a small number of people to save a greater number of people. If killing one man allows ten to live, Beauvoir reasons, kill the man. Violence that is not immediately efficacious may be necessary, Beauvoir continues, to keep the spirit of a revolutionary movement alive. She points to the violence of the French Resistance against German occupation during World War II as one example. Beauvoir then considers the more complicated, fictional situation of two American miners condemned to death for participating in a strike. In response, the Communist Party could either defend the men, or allow them to be killed for publicity. Beauvoir argues that a revolutionary movement should not sacrifice men for the sake of the movement, especially with such an uncertain chance of the sacrifice contributing to the movement’s success. “If it is really *men* which the movement claims to be serving,” Beauvoir writes, “in this case it must prefer saving the lives of three concrete individuals to a very uncertain and weak chance of serving a little more effectively by their sacrifice the mankind to come.”⁵⁵ In other words, “an action which wants to serve man ought to be careful not to forget him on the way.”⁵⁶ A revolutionary

⁵⁴ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 160.

⁵⁵ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 164.

⁵⁶ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 165.

movement that promises the liberation of Man might easily justify atrocity, but Beauvoir cautions that the uncertain and long-term nature of the movement's promise should outweigh the impulse to make any and all sacrifices the movement demands. Such a movement, like the Communist Party, must remember their commitment to the lives of actual men, and not lose sight of the freedom of men in favor of the liberation of Man. At the same time, Beauvoir recognizes that "without crime and tyranny there could be no liberation of man."⁵⁷ While Beauvoir encourages the reader to exercise judgment, and does not endorse the use of violence in all instances, she also believes that violence is sometimes necessary for freedom.

For Beauvoir, violence is an inescapable fact of the human condition. "If division and violence define war," Beauvoir writes, "the world has always been at war and always will be."⁵⁸ The inevitability of violence, though, does not justify its use in every instance. Beauvoir urges her readers to minimize the use of violence, so that men and women might assume their own ambiguity and enjoy freedom in the encounter. She cautions against committing violence to serve the lofty ideals of revolutionary movements, like communism, or perhaps feminism, because such movements easily slide into justifying any and all violence for the sake of universal liberation. When the oppressed exercise violence, they risk becoming the oppressor. Rather than assuming their own ambiguity, the oppressed are tempted to strive for the transcendence they were denied, and relegate their oppressors to facticity, immanence, and objecthood. To avoid this fate, Beauvoir advocates for a limited appropriation of violence; the more short-term and self-contained the goals of any given violent act, she reasons, the better.

While Beauvoir does not argue for feminists to engage in revolutionary world-making violence—a proposition I discuss in the next chapter—she does open up the possibility that

⁵⁷ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 168.

⁵⁸ Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity*, 129.

violence will play a role in the liberation of women. Liberatory violence would subvert violent patriarchal objectification, and allow women to assume their ambiguity, as both objects and subjects in the world. By turning to *The Second Sex*, I show that Beauvoir offers an account of violence as important training to take action in the world. While boys learn violence at an early age, girls become passive, and unable to act. This education influences men and women later in life, even in circumstances that do not call for the direct use of violence.

In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir famously defines woman as Other. “She is determined and differentiated in relation to man,” Beauvoir writes, “while he is not in relation to her; she is the inessential in front of the essential. He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other.”⁵⁹ Women are not defined by biology, but instead by men, who construct femininity to satisfy their needs and desires. The myth of the “Eternal Feminine” opposes the “dispersed, contingent, and multiple existence of *women*” with a stable, fixed ideal.⁶⁰ When women cannot live up to often contradictory expectations of femininity, they are deemed failures. Unlike men, who may seek transcendence through open-ended action, women remain trapped in immanence, constrained to care for the home and the body.

Central to Beauvoir’s critique of patriarchy is the notion that women are deprived of the ability to act. Speaking in a distinctly Nietzschean register, Beauvoir states, “An existent *is* nothing other than what he does; the possible does not exceed the real, essence does not precede existence: in his pure subjectivity, the human being *is nothing*. He is measured by his acts.”⁶¹ Just as Friedrich Nietzsche argues in *The Genealogy of Morals* that “‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed—the deed is everything,” Beauvoir claims that the subject does not exist

⁵⁹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Vintage Books, 2011), 6.

⁶⁰ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 266.

⁶¹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 270.

before he acts.⁶² It is action that brings the subject into existence, and that gives him an identity. Because women cannot act, Beauvoir adds, she has no place in the world. “For many women,” Beauvoir continues, “the roads to transcendence are blocked: because they *do* nothing, they do not make themselves *be* anything; they wonder indefinitely what they *could have* become, which leads them to wonder what they *are*: it is a useless questioning; if man fails to find that secret essence, it is simply because it does not exist.”⁶³ Kept in the home, tending to bodily necessity through what Hannah Arendt calls labor, women cannot enter public life to take action.⁶⁴ The myth of the Eternal Feminine papers over the reality that women lack an identity because they are deprived of the capacity to act.

Women become passive, Beauvoir argues in the second volume, through a long process of socialization during childhood. Training in violence, or the lack thereof, plays a large part in pacifying girls and women. Boys begin “a veritable apprenticeship in violence” at thirteen, “developing their aggressiveness, their will for power, and their taste for competition.”⁶⁵ Girls, on the other hand, renounce “rough games” at this age.⁶⁶ Although girls may still participate in some sports, they do not enjoy the “spontaneous and habitual recourse to force” that boys do.⁶⁷ The prohibition of girls from engaging in violence reflects a much broader trend of which violence is merely the most extreme expression. Girls “must forgo *emerging* beyond the given world, affirming themselves *above* the rest of humanity: they are banned from exploring, daring, pushing back the limits of the possible.”⁶⁸ Unlike boys, girls cannot engage in conquering actions

⁶² Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals* trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Vintage Books, [1887] 1989), 45.

⁶³ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 271.

⁶⁴ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1958] 1998).

⁶⁵ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 343.

⁶⁶ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 343.

⁶⁷ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 343.

⁶⁸ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 343.

like climbing a tree or beating a friend at an arm wrestle. In these moments, boys learn that they can push the boundaries of the possible, affirm their own sovereignty, and transform the world for their own benefit. Without these lessons, girls see the world as a given, unchangeable constraint. Even when violence does not appear explicitly, it “haunts the world; much of masculine behavior arises in a setting of potential violence: on every street corner skirmishes are waiting to happen; in most cases they are aborted; but it is enough for the man to feel in his fists his will for self-affirmation for him to feel confirmed in his sovereignty.”⁶⁹ The potential for violence hangs over many interactions, according to Beauvoir. Since man can exercise force at a moment’s notice, given his childhood training, he feels himself a sovereign subject. Violence, Beauvoir concludes, “is the authentic test of every person’s attachment to himself, his passions, and his own will; to radically reject it is to reject all objective truth, it is to isolate one’s self in abstract subjectivity; an anger or a revolt that does not exert itself in muscles remains imaginary.”⁷⁰ By rejecting violence, women lose their attachment to the world, their ability to act, and their subjectivity.

If women act violently, Beauvoir notes later on, it stems from resignation rather than actual rebellion. Boys engage in effective violence, fighting with fathers and friends to assert themselves. “But affirming herself, imposing herself, are forbidden to the adolescent girl,” Beauvoir writes, “and that is what fills her heart with revolt: she hopes neither to change the world nor to emerge from it; she knows or at least believes, and perhaps even wishes, herself tied up: she can only destroy.”⁷¹ Resigned to their fate, girls engage in symbolic protest that negatively impacts themselves, further restricting their freedom. Despite its spectacular

⁶⁹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 343.

⁷⁰ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 343.

⁷¹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 367.

character, girls' violence often remains ineffective. Biology also prevents women from learning the "lessons of violence," Beauvoir remarks, since they are physically weaker than men.⁷²

Beauvoir lays part of the blame for women's inability to act violently at their own feet. Early on, Beauvoir observes, "Lord-man will materially protect liege-woman and will be in charge of justifying her existence: along with the economic risk, she eludes the metaphysical risk of a freedom that must invent its goals without help."⁷³ Women become complicit in their own oppression not only because of the material benefits they stand to gain from submitting to men, but also due to the fear of freedom. In exercising freedom, women would have to embrace a completely open, uncharted future that they must navigate themselves. They would also have to take responsibility for their own fate. Instead, Beauvoir worries, women prefer to give up the possibilities of transcendence for the guarantees of immanence, the closed future planned by men.

To perform femininity, girls learn passivity at an early age. At first, "the girl seeks activity, autonomy, like her brothers."⁷⁴ For children, freedom does not require responsibility, so no burden accompanies its exercise. Over time, the mother imposes gender norms on her daughter, who in turn desperately tries to escape the mother's fate of the housewife. "Oppressed by rules of decency, bothered by her clothes, enslaved to cleaning tasks, held back in all her enthusiasms," according to Beauvoir, the girl slowly begins "to have a taste for facile escapes and lose the sense of reality."⁷⁵ Upon learning her role as woman, the girl comes to see herself as inferior. In her adolescence, the girl must renounce her sovereignty, assuming herself as the

⁷² Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 345.

⁷³ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 10.

⁷⁴ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 308.

⁷⁵ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 310.

passive object. She “consents to her femininity,” in Beauvoir’s terms.⁷⁶ Perversely, she begins to take pleasure in playing the victim, doing so both to draw attention to the injustice of her situation and endear herself to others. She enjoys the “delights of passivity,” the lack of metaphysical risk and responsibility.⁷⁷ Some girls, Beauvoir concludes, “want to give up their freedom,” so they are no longer “encumbered by an autonomy that they are not used to.”⁷⁸

One important site where women learn passivity is sex and sexuality. For Beauvoir, the loss of a woman’s virginity “always constitutes a kind of rape,” an “act of violence that changed the girl into a woman.”⁷⁹ Beauvoir writes:

Woman does not usually have access to the universe of violence; she has never gone through the ordeal the young man overcame in childhood and adolescent fights: to be a thing of flesh on which others have a hold; and now that she is grasped she is swept away in a body-to-body clasp where man is the stronger; she is no longer free to dream, to withdraw, to maneuver: she is given over to the male; he disposes of her.⁸⁰

Describing sex, and especially the initial sexual act, as a form of violence, Beauvoir goes back once again to the fact that girls lack training in violence. Without such training, women enter into the violent “wrestling” of sex woefully unprepared, and facing a stronger adversary. Sex transforms woman into a passive object through force. “If [a man’s] desire is violent and brutal,” Beauvoir states, “his partner feels changed into a mere thing in his arms.”⁸¹ For men, sex seems analogous to war, promising rewards of conquest and victory, and spoken of in the language of attack and assault. While woman gives herself over, man “claims the violence of his desires as a sign of his sovereignty.”⁸² Men realize their transcendence by instrumentalizing women as objects. In women’s passive role, pleasure and pain are linked, with pain considered a normal

⁷⁶ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 348.

⁷⁷ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 312.

⁷⁸ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 362.

⁷⁹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 384.

⁸⁰ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 394.

⁸¹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 406.

⁸² Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 387.

part of sex. Although women find rape abhorrent, Beauvoir notes, they paradoxically aspire to passivity.

Published only two years after *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, *The Second Sex* attests to Beauvoir's continued interest in the problem of violence. In *The Second Sex*, men play the role of oppressors who transform women into objects, and deprive them of freedom. By detailing the socialization that makes women accept their own passivity, Beauvoir exposes the violence that underwrites this socialization. For Beauvoir, sex and violence are inseparably connected, with sex emulating the violence of wrestling and war, and the potential for rape ever-present even during consensual sexual encounters. Violence against women is not the only way violence serves to reinforce the patriarchal status quo, though. Beauvoir also draws her readers' attention to the gendered division of who can practice violence in the first place. From an early age, boys learn how to engage in violence, which trains them to act in the world. Her point is not that all action entails violence. Instead, Beauvoir shows that learning violence gives men a sense of sovereignty that allows them to participate in even nonviolent forms of action. Of course, the threat of violence always persists, and in cases where violence erupts, men are equipped with the skills to defend themselves. Denied this training, girls become passive and unable to act, because they lack the conviction that they can change the world.

Women begin to enjoy their own passivity, according to Beauvoir, afraid of carrying the weight of responsibility for their own future. To accept this responsibility, Beauvoir's analysis implies, women would need to learn to commit violent acts. The ways this training in violence would allow women to seize their freedom is twofold. First, in instances where they are violently victimized, women would be able to defend themselves. We could also imagine women using violence to overthrow patriarchal institutions, as I will discuss in the next chapter. Second, an

education in violence would give women the capacity to take nonviolent forms of action with the self-assurance of a man. Essentially, women must learn violence to defend themselves, and to become political actors, rather than passive objects. In Beauvoir's language, women could then assume their own ambiguity, enjoying the openness of transcendence alongside the necessity of immanence.

This subtext becomes text in Beauvoir's later writings. Beauvoir opens "The Urgency of Anti-Sexist Law" with the example of a man acquitted for killing his wife, since he supposedly did not demonstrate the intent to murder her. Violence against women, Beauvoir notes, is widespread, as evidenced by the number of calls to domestic violence hotlines and the women seeking refuge in shelters. Feminists need to attack the roots of this violence, which "is mainly perpetrated by men...But that is not an unchangeable given of nature. One is not born, but rather becomes, a man."⁸³ Once again, Beauvoir emphasizes that men learn the practice of violence, in this case from a cultural milieu of advertisements, pornography, and literature that depict and sanction violence against women. An anti-sexist law, Beauvoir hopes, would create an "anti-sexist reflex" that would allow both men and women to unlearn the normalcy of violence against women. Although "we, feminists, do not wish to take our revenge on men," Beauvoir writes, "we do not have the choice; in order to protect women, certain men must be put away."⁸⁴ Here, Beauvoir turns to the state to rectify violence against women, with the hopes that a law threatening imprisonment will change men and women's behavior.

⁸³ Simone de Beauvoir, "The Urgency of an Anti-Sexist Law" in ed. Margaret Simons and Marybeth Timbermann, *Simone de Beauvoir: Feminist Writings* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 266.

⁸⁴ Beauvoir, "Anti-Sexist Law," 266.

In an interview with Alice Schwartz, however, Beauvoir provides an alternative solution. When asked by Schwartz whether she supports violence in the women's struggle, Beauvoir responds:

Such as the situation is today, yes, up to a certain point, because men use violence against women, in their language as well as in their gestures. They assault women: they rape them, insult them, and certain looks are aggressions. Women must equally defend themselves with violence. Some women learn karate or other forms of combat. I am in complete agreement. This way they will be much more comfortable with their bodies and in the world than if they feel unarmed when faced with male aggressions.⁸⁵

The ubiquity of violence against women, Beauvoir claims, justifies women's use of violence in self-defense. Beauvoir references the trend of second wave feminists encouraging women to learn self-defense during the 1960s and 70s. Reiterating her argument from *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir states that an education in violence will embolden women to feel confident in the world, an effect that extends beyond the experience of violent encounters.

Self-Defense as Feminist Violence in the Second Wave

The resonance of Simone de Beauvoir's theorization of violence echoes throughout second-wave feminist discussions of self-defense. In one of the most direct references to Beauvoir, Susan Pascalé, Rachel Moon, and Leslie Tanner quote *The Second Sex* at length at the end of their essay, "Self-Defense for Women." "Not to have confidence in one's body is to lose confidence in oneself," they write, citing Beauvoir.⁸⁶ By increasing their confidence in themselves, self-defense training enables Pascale, Moon, and Tanner to walk through the streets unafraid, and to confront the men in their intimate lives. They draw once again on Beauvoir's insight, "It is a profound frustration not to be able to register one's feelings upon the fact of the

⁸⁵ Beauvoir, "The Rebellious Woman: An Interview by Alice Schwartz," in ed. Margaret Simons and Marybeth Timbermann, *Simone de Beauvoir: Feminist Writings* (University of Illinois Press, 2015), 204.

⁸⁶ Susan Pascalé, Rachel Moon, and Leslie B. Tanner, "Self-Defense for Women" in ed. Robin Morgan, *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women's Liberation Movement* (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 476.

world.”⁸⁷ Without the ability to commit violence, Pascale, Moon, and Tanner agree, women find their faculties of worldly action stymied. They only disagree with Beauvoir about women’s capacity to fight. Women are not biologically weaker than men, they insist. Women’s relative weakness is due entirely to socialization. “We, once as physically weak as any average female, *are* learning the lessons of violence, and learning them well,” they declare in a call to action at the end of the essay.⁸⁸ Like Beauvoir, Pascalé, Moon, and Tanner lament the fact that women are taught to be passive, and treated as sex objects. Self-defense promises a path not just to individual self-assertion but to collective liberation. They describe women’s liberation as a “fight,” calling for feminist violence to overcome the violence of patriarchal oppression.⁸⁹

While second-wave feminists did not always name Beauvoir explicitly, her belief that violence would help women overcome objectification, and take worldly action, appears over and over again in their texts. As I discuss in the previous chapter, the NYRF held a speak-out and conference to make rape a matter of public concern in the early-1970s. The conference included a self-defense workshop for attendees, and their pursuant write-up incorporates much of Beauvoir’s language. They describe self-defense as “one of the means by which all women can combat the myth of their defenselessness and essential passivity.”⁹⁰ “We must change the image that men have of women,” one contributor writes, “as passive, delicate sex-objects.”⁹¹ For the NYRF, learning self-defense counteracts the patriarchal construction of women as objects. This not only effects men’s perception of women, but also women’s understanding of themselves. Self-defense is “both a *psychological* and *physical* practice” that prepares women to “fight back”

⁸⁷ Pascalé et al., “Self-Defense for Women,” 477.

⁸⁸ Pascalé et al., “Self-Defense for Women,” 477.

⁸⁹ Pascalé et al., “Self-Defense for Women,” 477.

⁹⁰ NYRF, *Rape*, 213.

⁹¹ NYRF, *Rape*, 216.

against rape.⁹² The NYRF views self-defense as internally transformative, enabling women to see themselves as agents. More practically, self-defense promises to free women from the everyday violence of rape and assault. Alongside many other second-wave feminists, the NYRF are especially concerned with women's ability to move through public space: "if we all start staying inside off the streets, we make it more dangerous for other women and cut down on our own freedom."⁹³ Given the prevalence of street harassment, and the potential for assault, self-defense equips women with the tools to exercise their freedom by appearing in public.

Second-wave feminists repeatedly return to self-defense as a pathway for women to claim public space. In *Against Rape*, Andra Medea and Kathleen Thompson end their chapter on self-defense with a vignette, written by a woman who experiences rape as she hitchhikes across country. Although she considers returning home, she ultimately decides, "I can't let him do that to me, 'cuz I like the part of me that wants adventure and excitement and is undaunted to go exploring the world alone."⁹⁴ Through this story, Medea and Thompson expose how the fear of patriarchal violence threatens to remove women from the common world. This conclusion stands in sharp contrast to the opening of their chapter with a series of vignettes that depict women successfully "standing up and fighting back" against street harassment.⁹⁵ These stories include a woman talking back firmly to a man who catcalls her; a woman smashing the hand of a man who attempts to grope her on the train with a book; and one woman rushing to defend another from a public beating. Hearing about women's successful self-defense dispels the myth that "a woman is incapable of effective violence," which emboldens assailants and prevents women from

⁹² NYRF, *Rape*, 213.

⁹³ NYRF, *Rape*, 222.

⁹⁴ Andra Medea and Kathleen Thompson, *Against Rape: A Survival Manual for Women* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1974), 98.

⁹⁵ Medea and Thompson, *Against Rape*, 75.

defending themselves.⁹⁶ Like Dworkin, Medea and Thompson also contend that “you must have the basic belief that you’re worth fighting for.”⁹⁷ As I argue in the previous chapter, feminist violence undoes the logic of objectification by insisting on the value of women’s lives. Medea and Thompson’s use of the second-person pronoun “you” calls their reader to action. They enjoin the reader to participate in a class, ideally in street-fighting, to systematically train in the self-defense tactics they outline.

Members of the radical feminist group Cell 16 explicitly describe patriarchal violence as aiming to exclude women from public life. In an interview, Dana Densmore states that their program of self-defense equips women to “defend ourselves from the violence used, then and now, to keep women in their place and punish women who stepped out of their place—such as walking down a public street, for instance.”⁹⁸ “If she’s not private property, then she’s public property,” two members write in a contribution to the Cell 16 journal, *No More Fun and Games*.⁹⁹ Relegated to the private sphere, women need protection from a benevolent male family figure—likely their father or husband—to escape the violence of strangers. If they enter public spaces without such protection, women become subject to patriarchal violence that polices the boundaries between public and private, and returns women to their supposedly rightful place in the home. Densmore emphasizes the psychological effects of patriarchal violence: “It wasn’t just the reality of the need to fight for one’s life against actual attack. It was the feeling that one was vulnerable, the sense as one moved through the world that any pathetic creep could jump out and assault.”¹⁰⁰ Self-defense restores to women a sense of self-confidence. Women cannot eradicate

⁹⁶ Medea and Thompson, *Against Rape*, 75.

⁹⁷ Medea and Thompson, *Against Rape*, 75.

⁹⁸ Breanne Fahs, *Firebrand Feminism: The Radical Lives of Ti-Grace Atkinson, Kathie Sarachild, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, and Dana Densmore* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2018), 104-5.

⁹⁹ Pat Galligan and Delfine Welch, “Females and Self-Defense” *No More Fun and Games* 3 (1969): 111.

¹⁰⁰ Fahs, *Firebrand Feminism*, 105.

fear entirely, but they can learn to act in spite of fear. As Ti-Grace Atkinson expresses, “I think people think sometimes that you should only do things if you’re not afraid—or if you’re afraid, then you should quit. You can be terrified, but if you made a commitment about something, you do it.”¹⁰¹ The militance of radical feminist groups required women to put their bodies on the line in public, rather than retreat to the perceived safety of the home.¹⁰² Although self-defense can seem like an individualistic project, radical feminists imagined self-defense as a collective struggle. Cell 16 demanded that institutions like schools, businesses, and the welfare departments provide women with free self-defense classes: “Individual women should not have to pay to learn how to defend themselves, [because] it is not an individual problem.”¹⁰³ Radical feminists thus hail their readers into self-defense as a collective, rather than individualistic, project for women to take up public space.

Second-wave feminists envision self-defense as a collective project of claiming public space that promises to eradicate rape. Susan Brownmiller ends *Against Our Will* with an injunction for women to fight back. Like Beauvoir, Brownmiller laments the fact that, in childhood, boys learn to fight, while girls do not practice physical combat. This gendered socialization produces a passivity in women that prevents them from defending themselves against sexual violence. “What women need,” Brownmiller declares, “is systematic training in self-defense that begins in childhood,” so they overcome their inhibition against committing violence and inspire fear in men.¹⁰⁴ For Brownmiller, self-defense brings into view a vision of a world without rape: “Fighting back. On a multiplicity of levels, that is the activity we must engage in, together, if we—women—are to redress the imbalance and rid ourselves and men of

¹⁰¹ Fahs, *Firebrand Feminism*, 110.

¹⁰² Of course, we know the home is also not a space of safety. Threadcraft, *Intimate Justice*.

¹⁰³ Galligan and Welch, “Females and Self-Defense,” 112.

¹⁰⁴ Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 403.

the ideology of rape.”¹⁰⁵ Although stopping rape requires radical social and political transformation, self-defense functions as an immediate tactic of prevention, and begins to reverse the early socialization that shapes women’s and men’s gendered relationship to violence. If men came to fear women, many second-wave feminists believed, rape would not be nearly so prevalent.

The rise of self-defense as an organizing tactic inspired empirical research to investigate its efficacy. In *Stopping Rape: Successful Survival Strategies*, Pauline Bart and Patricia O’Brien interviewed nearly one-hundred women who experienced rape or attempted rape. They find that self-defense helps women avoid rape in many cases, especially alongside other prevention strategies like yelling and inviting bystander intervention. Women are often told not to resist rape, Bart and O’Brien observe, because resistance will supposedly further incite the rapist, leading to more severe injuries. They find no evidence for this myth, which they worry disciplines women into passivity and leads to higher rates of guilt and self-blame among victims after the fact. Bart and O’Brien encourage their readers to imagine a “rape-free society,” but admit that they “do not know how to bring such a revolution about.”¹⁰⁶ While they do not see a path to stopping rape, self-defense training could at least reduce rape, by giving women the skills for prevention in individual cases.

For Nadia Telsey, contributor to the anthology *Fight Back!: Feminist Resistance to Male Violence*, women first must overcome denial about the prevalence of patriarchal violence. Until the second-wave feminist movement, “we were told that rape, battering, incest and sexual

¹⁰⁵ Brownmiller, *Against Our Will*, 404.

¹⁰⁶ Pauline Bart and Patricia O’Brien, *Stopping Rape: Successful Survival Strategies* (New York: Pergamon Press, 1985), 120.

harassment hardly existed.”¹⁰⁷ A patriarchal smokescreen of “isolation, self blame, denial, powerlessness, and passivity” kept women from recognizing and fighting back against patriarchal violence.¹⁰⁸ The misuse of words confuses women, Telsey claims. Feminists must redefine words like violence and rape. By the 1980s, feminists did just that and “named the unnameable,” by identifying rape and domestic abuse as forms of violence.¹⁰⁹ Telsey calls for self-defense as a collective feminist project that breaks the silence surrounding sexual violence and keeps alive the vision of “a world without limits” on the spaces women inhabit.¹¹⁰ “There is a collective aspect to training with other women that carries over into collective responsibility for self-defense,” Telsey writes. She quotes a woman expressing the sense that self-defense classes allow her to see that she can change the world. Telsey concludes that “the ‘solution’ to the problem of violence against women is to take away the will to that violence—to make it unthinkable.”¹¹¹ Her essay suggests that self-defense training provides a window into a world without rape, even if the practice of self-defense alone does not render violence against women unthinkable.

Responding to the second-wave self-defense movement a decade later, Sharon Marcus argues that women fighting back prevents rape by subjectivizing women. Marcus describes rape as a process of gendering that “imposes sexual difference along the lines of violence.”¹¹² The gendered grammar of violence defines men as the legitimate subjects of violence, and women as objects of violence. In sexually violent encounters, men and women follow a rape script that

¹⁰⁷ Nadia Telsey, “Karate and the Feminist Resistance Movement” in ed. Frederique Delacoste and Felice Newman, *Fight Back!: Feminist Resistance to Male Violence* (Minneapolis: Cleis Press, 1981), 185.

¹⁰⁸ Telsey, “Karate,” 185.

¹⁰⁹ Telsey, “Karate,” 186.

¹¹⁰ Telsey, “Karate,” 191.

¹¹¹ Telsey, “Karate,” 195.

¹¹² Sharon Marcus, “Fighting Bodies, Fighting Words: A Theory and Politics of Rape Prevention” in ed. Judith Butler and Joan Scott, *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 397.

“strives to put women in the place of objects,” treating “female bodies as vulnerable, violable, penetrable, and wounded.”¹¹³ While men exist in a community of violence, reciprocally committing acts of violence against each other, women are typically excluded from this community. “Simply by fighting back,” Marcus contends, “we cease to be grammatically correct feminine subjects and thus become much less legible as rape targets.”¹¹⁴ If rape establishes sexual difference, women’s performance of violence subverts traditional gendered expectations that shape the rape script. Marcus proposes that feminists stop rape by re-writing the social script that constructs men as agents, and women as objects, of violence. The first step in the process of re-writing the rape script was feminists “*naming* rape as violence.”¹¹⁵ Marcus worries, though, that feminists take rape for granted as an unchangeable fact of life. By appealing for legal intervention, they assume that the only opportunity for intervention occurs in the aftermath of rape. Instead, Marcus urges feminists to shift their focus to rape prevention, primarily through the tactic of self-defense.

Conclusion

Beauvoir, like Dworkin, describes women’s situation as one of violent objectification. Denying women their ambiguity, men turn them into objects, often through sexual acts. In *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir describes gendered socialization in phenomenological and psychoanalytic terms. For her, violence plays a central role in shaping women and men’s subjectivities. While boys learn violence, and with it the ability to assert themselves, girls do not, and this deprivation produces women’s political passivity. The question then becomes: How do women transform

¹¹³ Marcus, “Fighting Bodies,” 398; Marcus echoes Dworkin and Beauvoir when she observes, “The horror of rape is...that it makes us into things to be taken,” 399.

¹¹⁴ Marcus, “Fighting Bodies,” 396; Marcus calls on her readers to transform “the female body” into an “agent of violence,” 400.

¹¹⁵ Marcus, “Fighting Bodies,” 387.

from passive objects into political actors capable of worldly action? Beauvoir implies that women must learn to engage in violence so that they might take action in the world. The same logic animates second-wave feminist theorists and activists' writings on self-defense. Attentive to the problem of objectification, these feminists believe that patriarchal violence removes women from public, political life. Through training in self-defense, they argue, women would collectively take back the streets, and gain the capacity to prevent sexual violence. Beauvoir and later second-wave feminists, then, treat self-defense as a means of combatting women's objectification.

The Ethics of Ambiguity, however, complicates any reading of Beauvoir as a straightforward advocate for the use of violence. Beauvoir worried about revolutionary violence justified by vague ideals, like women's liberation. While Beauvoir condones the use of violence against men in her interview with Schwartzter, she also says that she disagrees with Valerie Solanas. According to Beauvoir, the feminist movement includes "a whole spectrum of tendencies, from Betty Friedan who is rather conservative to what is called SCUM, which is a movement for the emasculation of all men."¹¹⁶ Author of the *SCUM Manifesto*, Solanas represents the "total repudiation of all men."¹¹⁷ Beauvoir rejects Solanas' position because she believes that men and women must join together in class struggle, which will further women's emancipation, though she remains critical of the inequality in leftist movements. Upon further consideration, Beauvoir remarks, "It actually might not be a bad thing that there are women who are totally radical and who completely reject men. They lead the way for those of us who would otherwise be willing to make certain compromises."¹¹⁸ Beauvoir may disagree with Solanas'

¹¹⁶ Beauvoir, "Interview with Alice Schwartzter," 195

¹¹⁷ Beauvoir, "Interview with Alice Schwartzter," 195

¹¹⁸ Beauvoir, "Interview with Alice Schwartzter," 196

program, but she sees that Solanas opens up imaginative possibilities. In the next chapter, I read Solanas' manifesto to theorize the feminist use of violence beyond self-defense, for revolutionary, world-making purposes.

Chapter Three | A World without Men: Valerie Solanas and the Feminist Uses of Violence

Ginger: What would the world be without them [men]?

Bongi: I'd like to find out.

- Valerie Solanas, *Up Your Ass*¹

Introduction

On June 3rd, 1968, Valerie Solanas shot and nearly killed Andy Warhol.² Solanas met Warhol a year earlier and began spending time with his artistic community at the Factory, in an attempt to convince Warhol to turn her play into a movie. At the time, Solanas lived in a state of extreme economic precarity, turning tricks and living alternately in hotels and on the street. Warhol claimed he lost her play, and seedy publisher Maurice Girodias convinced her to sign an exploitative contract. As Avital Ronell writes, in her introduction to the *SCUM Manifesto*, “something was *stolen* from Valerie Solanas,” either “a manuscript, a life, a chance, a place, her say, her bodily integrity...[or] her dignity.”³ Solanas’ complaints about Warhol were valid. Another member of Warhol’s crowd, Ultra, compared the Factory to “multi-level marketing without pay.”⁴ Solanas was never paid for starring in one of Warhol’s movies and Warhol wrote several scripts with lines ripped directly from Solanas’ thought.⁵ Even as he profited from their work, Warhol refused to share his fame and wealth with the people who surrounded him. Ronell claims that, for Solanas, Warhol came to represent “the generality of man.”⁶ As the man who parasitically exploited her, Warhol stood in for the gender that Solanas calls to eliminate through gendercide in the *SCUM Manifesto*.

¹ Valerie Solanas, *Up Your Ass* (Milan: VandA.epublishing, 2014), 28.

² For biographical information on Solanas, see: Breanne Fahs, *Valerie Solanas: The Defiant Life of the Woman who Wrote SCUM (and Shot Andy Warhol)* (New York: CUNY Feminist Press, 2014); Bonnie Wertheim, “Overlooked No More: Valerie Solanas, Radical Feminist Who Shot Andy Warhol” *The New York Times*, June 26, 2020.

³ Avital Ronell, “Deviant Payback: The Aims of Valerie Solanas,” in *SCUM Manifesto* (London: Verso, 2004), 26.

⁴ Fahs, *Valerie Solanas*, 96.

⁵ Fahs, *Valerie Solanas*, 107.

⁶ Ronell, “Deviant Payback,” 28.

Solanas successfully used the Warhol shooting to garner popular attention for her work. On the day of the shooting, Solanas visited the house of playwright Margo Feiden. There, she told Feiden, “You will produce the play [*Up Your Ass*] because I’ll shoot Andy Warhol and that will make me famous and the play famous, and then you’ll produce it.”⁷ Later, she gave Ti-Grace Atkinson the same explanation. “Valerie was a good PR person,” according to Atkinson, “She knew she had to shoot Warhol.”⁸ Solanas was right. Shooting Warhol turned her into a media sensation and led to the publication of the *SCUM Manifesto*. Thrilled by this opportunity for publication, Girodias finally released the *SCUM Manifesto* through Olympia Press. His foreword read, “This little book is my contribution to the study of violence.”⁹ Convinced of her own brilliance, Solanas gave herself a name, and a place in American history with a widely publicized act of violence.

As a figure, Solanas raises the question that haunts the feminist imaginary: Is violence a justifiable means to a feminist end? In the *SCUM Manifesto*, Solanas argues that women must commit gendercide to reclaim the world for women and transform it, liberating themselves and instituting a feminist utopia. Solanas thus makes a public appeal for the feminist use of violence as a world-making project. By world-making, I refer to what Hannah Arendt calls “action”; for Arendt, political action has a circular relationship to the world, creating the public space on which it depends.¹⁰ Separatism is not enough, according to Solanas, because it merely removes women from this shared world, completing the patriarchal project of women’s exclusion. Solanas shares with the separatists a deep ambivalence about women’s ability to exercise freedom while

⁷ Fahs, *Valerie Solanas*, 136.

⁸ Fahs, *Valerie Solanas*, 168.

⁹ Mary Harron, “Introduction” in *I Shot Andy Warhol* (New York: Grove Press, 1996), xxvii.

¹⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

sharing the earth with men, but this doubt inspires her advocacy for the feminist use of violence to change the common world, rather than retreat from it.

Solanas' quick rise to fame caused fractures in the women's liberation movement. Liberal feminists, like Betty Friedan, renounced Solanas' violent tactics, and the rejection of men that such violence symbolized, while radical feminists, like Ti-Grace Atkinson and Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, vaunted Solanas as a feminist icon. Atkinson soon split off from the National Organization for Women (NOW) and founded her own group, The Feminists; Dunbar-Ortiz likewise started Cell 16. These radical feminist groups borrowed heavily from Solanas' thought. In the late 1960s, then, Solanas became a "Rorschach test" that fractured feminism into liberal and radical camps. Yet even the radical feminists most charitable to Solanas shied away from exercising violence for feminist politics. Ultimately, I show that Solanas functions as simultaneously a point of rupture, splitting second wave feminism into liberal and radical camps, and a point of continuity, since both liberals and feminists reject Solanas' use of violence.

This chapter begins with a consideration of how to read the *SCUM Manifesto*. Borrowing Lauren Berlant's term "humorless comedy," in the first section I contend that Solanas' failed attempts to assert herself as a sovereign subject through a redefinition of maleness and femaleness render her a joke to much of her audience. When we take Solanas seriously, I argue in the second section, we find advocacy for the feminist use of violence as a world-making activity, contrasted against the separatist impulse to "drop out" from the shared world. I show in the third and final section that second wave radical separatism emerged through a disavowal of Solanas' world-making violence. In the conclusion, I raise a new set of questions prompted by reading Solanas' thought about the limitations of nonviolent feminist political tactics.

An emphasis on nonviolence characterizes the two well-tread paths in contemporary feminist theories of violence. On the one hand, feminism remains associated with pacifist critiques of militarist violence, especially from a maternalistic perspective.¹¹ This pacifist orientation, typified in the work of Sara Ruddick and Jean Beth Elshtain, persists today in recent feminist works on nonviolence.¹² On the other hand, feminists write against gender-based forms of intimate violence, including domestic violence and sexual assault.¹³ Despite their professed intentions to avoid reifying men as perpetrators and women as victims of violence, these texts often do just that, failing to recognize the possibility for women to become agents of violence.¹⁴ Both strands of literature condemn violence from a feminist perspective. In their otherwise illuminating book, *Violence and Political Theory*, Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings capture this tendency with their conclusion that “we must reject the idea that violence is a justifiable resource for politics.”¹⁵

What is missing from contemporary feminist theory is a serious consideration of the feminist use of violence in history. During the twentieth century alone, anarchists like Emma Goldman and Lucy Parsons, English and American suffragettes like Emmeline Pankhurst, and women involved in black nationalist and leftist militant groups like Assata Shakur, exercised, and wrote theoretical texts on, feminist violence.¹⁶ These historical examples of women taking

¹¹ Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995); Jean Beth Elshtain, *Women and War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995)

¹² Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind* (New York: Verso, 2020); Timothy Huzar and Clare Woodford, *Toward a Feminist Ethics of Nonviolence: Adriana Cavarero, with Judith Butler, Bonnie Honig, and Other Voices* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021)

¹³ Jacqueline Rose, *On Violence and Violence Against Women* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021); Verónica Gago, *Feminist International: How to Change Everything* (New York: Verso, 2020)

¹⁴ For example, Robyn Marasco offers a compelling critique of Carole Pateman’s *The Sexual Contract* on these grounds: Robyn Marasco, “Terms and Conditions” *History of the Present* 3, n. 2 (2013): 205-211.

¹⁵ Elizabeth Frazer and Kimberly Hutchings, *Violence and Political Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), 190.

¹⁶ Emma Goldman, *The Psychology of Political Violence* (New York: Mother Earth Publishing, 1917); Emmeline Pankhurst, *Freedom or Death* (Good Press, 2020); Assata Shakur, *Assata: An Autobiography* (New York: Lawrence Hill Books, 2001).

violent action for feminist purposes disappear in contemporary feminist theory. I diagnose their disappearance as symptomatic of a feminist allergy to violence, a disavowal of violence that becomes evident in second wave responses to Solanas. Returning to Solanas, then, exposes a third, often unacknowledged path for feminist theories of violence, wherein women exercise violence against men for their own liberation. Despite the presence of thinkers like Solanas in the past, contemporary feminist theorists rarely entertain the possibility of using violence for feminism. Reading her work, and uncovering her impact on second wave feminism, reveals the need for further historical investigation into the feminist use of violence—in thought and in practice.

Taking Solanas Seriously

The tone and form of the *SCUM Manifesto* elude easy characterization. Andrea Long Chu notes that readers do not know whether to take the manifesto seriously or treat it as a joke. Leaning into the humorous quality of the manifesto, Chu characterizes Solanas' method as "commitment to a bit," a phrase that exposes the seriousness inherent in any joke.¹⁷ Similarly, Mavis Haut argues that critics for too long overlooked the satiric or comedic quality of the *SCUM Manifesto*. For Haut, Solanas' "wild, freakish humor, her wayward and irrepressibly mischievous ferocity [and] biting satire...lies at the heart of her legacy."¹⁸ Despite Solanas' propensity for humor, Haut stresses that Solanas levies real critiques of patriarchal institutions.¹⁹

Janet Lyon credits Solanas as the writer of one of the earliest and most militant feminist manifestoes in the U.S. Indeed, given Solanas' importance for the fracturing of the women's liberation movement, it is not surprising that many radical feminist groups published manifestoes

¹⁷ Andrea Long Chu, *Females* (London: Verso, 2019), 18.

¹⁸ Mavis Haut, "A Salty Tongue: At the Margins of Satire, Comedy and Polemic in the Writing of Valerie Solanas," *Feminist Theory* 8, n. 1 (2007): 39.

¹⁹ Fahs and Chu also note Solanas' love of humor: Fahs, *Valerie Solanas*, 34-5; Chu, *Females*, 19.

in the following years.²⁰ According to Lyon, the *SCUM Manifesto* “advertises at every moment its subversive negotiations of a rhetorical form of revolutionary authority by parodying, in outrageous caricature, the formal aspects of the political manifesto.”²¹ Lyon worries, however, that Solanas’ radicalism threatens to alienate most readers.

As a manifesto and an apparent satire, the *SCUM Manifesto* occupies a different genre than most canonical political theoretical texts. While acknowledging the comedic quality of the *SCUM Manifesto*, I provide a straight reading of the text, in search of the commitment behind the bit. The real question, I ask, is: Why do readers assume Solanas is joking? This inquiry starts with Solanas’ dismissal in her time as a “homicidal loon” and extends to her relative absence from contemporary feminist theory.²² Readers find Solanas’ work absurd, I believe, because she inverts misogynistic tropes and levies them against men in a misandrist mirror. Her shift from “penis envy” to “pussy envy” signals Solanas’ intentional manipulation of psychoanalysis to paint men as deficient, lacking.²³ Rather than taking her critique seriously, Solanas’ audience resists her inversion of femaleness and maleness as an impotent imposition of sovereignty, defusing her call to violence with laughter.

Throughout the manifesto, Solanas inverts traditional beliefs about gender. Like patriarchal constructions of women that reduce them to their bodies, and their use for sex, Solanas calls men “walking dildo[s],” who are “unfit even for stud service.”²⁴ As opposed to the sex-obsessed male, the female “can easily condition away her sex drive” and, in doing so, she

²⁰ Janet Lyon, *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 172.

²¹ Lyon, *Manifestoes*, 173.

²² Desiree Rowe and Karma Chavez, “Valerie Solanas and the Queer Performativity of Madness,” *Cultural Studies? Cultural Methodologies* 11, n. 3 (2011): 274.

²³ Solanas’ references to psychoanalysis are not surprising given her background in psychology. She earned a bachelors degree in psychology from the University of Maryland, College Park, and pursued a master’s at the University of Minnesota, before leaving the program, in part due to gender-based discrimination.

²⁴ Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 24-5.

“transcends her body,” avoiding the animalism of the male.²⁵ Invoking a misandrist reversal of patriarchal logic, Solanas shows that her reader could as easily sexualize and objectify men as women. In the same way that men justify violence against women—through objectification—Solanas justifies her gendercide. Solanas’ inversion of femaleness and maleness thus upends our beliefs about women, and reveals how those beliefs help perpetuate male violence. To see women as sexual objects, a lacking version of their male counterparts, contributes to their exploitation and eventual death at the hands of men. At the same time, Solanas weaponizes this dehumanizing logic against men, labeling them deficient females. In leveraging familiar notions of gender in an unfamiliar way, Solanas risks her text appearing absurd to readers. Solanas cannot possibly be serious, a reader might think, because her hatred of men appears extreme. The irony lies in the fact that, though perhaps hyperbolic, Solanas speaks of men with the same tropes that circulate about women.

Readers find the *SCUM Manifesto* funny, I contend, because they perceive it as a work of “humorless comedy,” a term coined by Lauren Berlant.²⁶ In humorless comedy, the subject asserts her sovereignty in the face of obvious non-sovereignty. “What constitutes humorlessness,” Berlant writes, “is someone’s insistence that their version of a situation should rule the relational dynamic; but no particular way of being and sounding confirms its social presence.”²⁷ The comedy emerges in the gap between that someone’s version of a situation and reality, and their insistence that the gap does not exist. Berlant holds up the film *American Hustle* as her primary illustrative example, reading the opening scene where Christian Bale—himself, completely serious—attempts to hide his baldness with a combover. The “combover subject” is

²⁵ Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 52.

²⁶ Lauren Berlant, “Humorlessness (Three Monologues and a Hairpiece),” *Critical Inquiry* 43, n. 2 (2017): 305-340.

²⁷ Berlant, “Humorlessness,” 308.

the embodiment of humorless comedy *par excellence*. The *SCUM Manifesto* is funny, at least in part, because readers see Solanas as a comover subject. By imposing her own definitions of each gender, Solanas asserts her sovereignty. Most readers, though, cannot help but see the gap between her definitions of femaleness and maleness, and the way that women and men actually perform their gender identities. Attempting to cover up, or “comover,” this gap, Solanas argues that men convince women that men are “female” and women are “male.” Frustratingly, the gap persists, and with it, a sense of humorless comedy.

Solanas tries to shore up her sovereignty and close the gap between reality and her manifesto in another way: her shooting of Warhol. Her exercise of violence inverts the gendered expectation that men tend to commit violence, with women as their victims. As an agent of violence, with a man as her victim, Solanas becomes the SCUM female that she describes in the manifesto, and the shooting functions as propaganda of the deed, inviting other women to follow in her footsteps by themselves committing acts of violence. Many of her contemporaries responded to the shooting in the same way that readers write off her manifesto. Women do not engage in violence for political reasons, so to the media Solanas’ violence became evidence of her madness.²⁸ In that instance, Solanas’ audience used madness, rather than comedy, to obscure the political critique immanent in the shooting, and political agenda explicitly stated in her manifesto.

What do we miss if we read the manifesto as satire? By treating Solanas’ work as primarily comedic, readers fail to see her argument for violence as a world-making project, and her critique of alternate feminist tactics, like separatism, as a turning away from the world. I reconstruct these important contributions to feminist thought on violence in the next section.

²⁸ For discussion of the media’s coverage of Solanas, see Fahs’ *Valerie Solanas* and Chavez and Rowe’s “Valerie Solanas and the Queer Performativity of Madness.”

Second wave and contemporary feminists' insistence on interpreting Solanas' manifesto as humorless comedy does reveal, however, a deep reluctance to consider violence as a tactic for feminist politics. A supposedly subversive way to read the text as satire smooths over the discomfort of engaging with a text that calls for violence, and an author who makes good on that promise.

The Feminist Uses of Violence in the SCUM Manifesto

The *SCUM Manifesto* begins with a declaration of the need to eliminate men. At the opening of the text, Valerie Solanas argues that “civic-minded, responsible, thrill-seeking females” must overthrow the government and “destroy the male sex.”²⁹ Males, Solanas claims, are a biological accident, an incomplete version of females: “the Y (male) gene is an incomplete X (female) gene.”³⁰ Egocentric, overly physical, and passive, the male projects his traits onto women, and adopts the characteristics of the female. The male “hates his passivity, so he projects it onto women, defines the male as active, then sets out to prove that he is (‘prove that he is a Man’).”³¹ Traits that we typically associate with men—strength, independence, assertiveness—are actually female, according to Solanas, while traits we ascribe to women—vanity, frivolity, weakness—are male. Men have merely convinced women, and themselves, that they are females, and that women are males. “Women, in other words, don’t have penis envy,” Solanas writes, “men have pussy envy.”³²

In reality, Solanas believes, females are individuals, unlike men who, so afraid of being discovered as women, must conform and act like all other men. Females “explore, discover, invent, solve problems, crack jokes, make music—all with love. In other words, create a magic

²⁹ Valerie Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto* (Chico: AK Press, 2013), 23.

³⁰ Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 23.

³¹ Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 25.

³² Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 26.

world.”³³ Only females can create the new, and engage in world-making. Females craft real art, and experience true love, with other females. Men must isolate women, and convince them of their maleness, to prevent them from realizing this potential. Made up of family units, society robs women of privacy, and deprives them of contact with anyone outside the household. Men thus transform women first into “Daddy’s Girls,” who accept “the male definition of himself as superior, as a female, and of herself, as inferior, as a male, which, thanks to Daddy, she really is.”³⁴ Eventually, the Daddy’s Girl becomes Mama, “mindless ministrator to physical needs.”³⁵

According to Solanas, violence helps males prove their manhood. War allows males to get their “Big Gun off...on a really massive scale, and proves to the entire world that he’s a ‘Man.’”³⁶ To divert attention from the male’s massive cover-up, his attempt to convince everyone that he is female, the male must constantly perform an exaggerated masculinity—what Solanas would actually call femaleness. In the hands of males, though, war becomes infinitely more destructive than it would in the hands of females: “Since he has no compassion or ability to empathize or identify, proving his manhood is worth an endless amount of mutilation and suffering and an endless number of lives, including his own—his own life being worthless, he would rather go out in a blaze of glory than to plod grimly on for fifty more years.”³⁷ Lacking the compassion and empathy of females, males are willing to engage in much worse atrocities. Males also desire death themselves, given the emptiness of their lives, and therefore do not fear sacrificing themselves in war.

³³ Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 37.

³⁴ Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 34.

³⁵ Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 35.

³⁶ Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 27.

³⁷ Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 27.

Aside from evidencing males' manhood, violence gives them an outlet for their frustration about their gender identity. Males are "eaten up with tension, with frustration at not being female, at not being capable of ever achieving satisfaction or pleasure of any kind."³⁸ Constantly aware of their inability to access the joys of femaleness, hard as they try, males begin to hate themselves, and then vent this hatred into violence. "Gratuitous violence," Solanas writes, "besides 'proving' he's a 'Man,' serves as an outlet for his hate and, in addition...provides him with a little sexual thrill."³⁹ Males must look for pleasure only in sexual responses because "screwing" protects them from their desire to be females.

It stands to reason that Solanas sees violence as a female, rather than a male, proclivity, one that we have been tricked into treating as male. Those "females least embedded in male 'Culture,'" the Society for Cutting Up Men (SCUM) make the connection between femaleness and violence explicit.⁴⁰ Solanas describes SCUM as "hateful, violent bitches given to slamming those who unduly irritate them in the teeth, who'd sink a shiv into a man's chest or ram an icepick up his asshole as soon as look at him, if they knew they could get away with it."⁴¹ Women in SCUM detach themselves from dominant patriarchal institutions. They are not married, they do not have children, and they certainly do not live in the suburbs. They do not respect Daddy, the Greats (all men), or the Ancients (all men as well). They "get around," and Solanas seems to describe SCUM as made up of sex workers like herself, but they are alienated from sex, "cerebral and skirting asexuality."⁴² An expression of the most essentially female

³⁸ Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 57.

³⁹ Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 57.

⁴⁰ Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 53.

⁴¹ Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 54.

⁴² Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 54.

characteristics, unencumbered by the influence of males, SCUM turns to violence to accomplish their goals.

SCUM, Solanas continues, will not use nonviolent tactics like pickets, demonstrations, marches, or strikes. “If SCUM ever strikes,” Solanas writes, “it will be in the dark with a six-inch blade.”⁴³ Nonviolent tactics erase the individuality of SCUM’s members, since they become an undifferentiated mass, and acknowledge the legitimacy of the system, which SCUM aims to destroy. In a near genocidal attempt to rid the earth of males, SCUM “will kill all men who are not in the Men’s Auxiliary of SCUM.”⁴⁴ Solanas reassures the reader that SCUM will kill men selectively and discriminately. Men in the Men’s Auxiliary—men who assist SCUM in their takeover—can survive, though they must undergo brainwashing to accept their status as “turds.”⁴⁵ Eventually, “the natural course of events...will lead to total female control of the world and, subsequently, to the cessation of the production of males and, ultimately, to the cessation of the production of females.”⁴⁶ Solanas advocates not just for the murder of males, but also for their eradication through scientific interventions in reproduction. In the end, she sees no need for reproduction at all, as she believes science will develop the means for humans to live forever. Meanwhile, the remaining men will survive as drug addicts, drag queens, or spectators to females’ lives. Or they might choose to kill themselves in “the nearest friendly suicide center where they will be quietly, quickly, and painlessly gassed to death.”⁴⁷ These suicide centers will appeal to males, Solanas believes, because they are self-eliminating. As Solanas mentions in her discussion of war and violence, “the male likes death—it excites him sexually and, already dead

⁴³ Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 70.

⁴⁴ Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 66.

⁴⁵ Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 67.

⁴⁶ Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 62.

⁴⁷ Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 74.

inside, he wants to die.”⁴⁸ Solanas reasons that males kill themselves with war and drug use, and eradicate their maleness by becoming gay.

Solanas justifies her gendercide with the insufficiency of males and with their treatment of females. Incapable of happiness, the male can only achieve “fleeting stretches of restfulness” that punctuate his suffering “at the expense of some female.”⁴⁹ By his nature, the male “is an emotional parasite and, therefore, not ethically entitled to live, as no one has the right to life at someone else’s expense.”⁵⁰ Males must resort to elaborate schemes to trick females into thinking they are males, and therefore inferior. Males isolate females in households, exploit them sexually, and deprive them of their individuality, privacy, and friendship. Solanas thus sees the elimination of men as “a righteous and good act, an act highly beneficial to women as well as an act of mercy.”⁵¹ Counterintuitively, Solanas argues that killing men represents a moral good, both because it puts men out of their suffering and liberates women.

Because women fight for the world, not just for themselves, Solanas believes, they cannot abandon this political fight through separatism. The male, Solanas writes, “has made of the world a shitpile.”⁵² Solanas spends a substantial portion of the manifesto listing the ways that “the male has a negative Midas Touch—everything he touches turns to shit”; he wages unnecessary wars, maintains the money-work system, and props up authoritarian governments.⁵³ These practices stem from his desire to hide his femaleness, and to continue exploiting women. For example, according to Solanas, males must keep the money-work system intact so that they

⁴⁸ Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 59.

⁴⁹ Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 59.

⁵⁰ Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 60.

⁵¹ This resonates with Solanas’ later statement about shooting Warhol: “I consider that a moral act. And I consider it immoral that I missed. I should have done target practice.” Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 60 & Fahs, *Valerie Solanas*, 155.

⁵² Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 27.

⁵³ Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 34.

can pay for sex, directly through prostitution and indirectly by ensuring the economic dependence of women on men within marriage. Males cannot accomplish genuine social revolution “as the male on top wants the status quo, and all the male on the bottom wants is to be the male on top.”⁵⁴ Women, then, must transform the world. “If women don’t get their asses in gear fast,” Solanas concludes, “we may very well all die.”⁵⁵

SCUM’s violence brings about political transformation that saves the world. By removing men from the earth, SCUM stops economic exploitation, the rise of authoritarian regimes, and, perhaps ironically, global conflict. The world Solanas depicts as the result of the SCUM revolution is classically utopic.⁵⁶ After the violence, “women will be busy solving the few remaining unsolved problems before planning their agenda for eternity and Utopia.”⁵⁷ There will be no government. Machines will perform hard labor so that women can spend their time on intellectual pursuits. Through scientific advancements, they will rid themselves of disease and live forever, rendering reproduction unnecessary. Of course, Solanas’ feminist utopia requires disappearing men, except the few in the Auxiliary. Only once women remove the gender that parasitically exploits them can they build a better world.

For their own sake, and the sake of the world, women must not “drop out,” in Solanas’ words. “Dropping out is not the answer,” Solanas writes:

Most women are already dropped out; they were never in. Dropping out gives control to those few who don’t drop out; dropping out is exactly what the establishment leaders want; it plays into the hands of the enemy; it strengthens the system instead of undermining it, since it is based entirely on the non-participation, passivity, apathy, and non-involvement of the mass of women. Dropping out, however, is an excellent policy for men and SCUM will enthusiastically encourage it.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 46.

⁵⁵ Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 46.

⁵⁶ Solanas’ utopian imaginary resonates with the final chapter of Shulamith Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, [1970] 2003), where Firestone calls for the end of biological reproduction.

⁵⁷ Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 73.

⁵⁸ Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 69-70.

For Solanas, dropping out refers to a departure from the world. Dropping out may take an individualized form of “passivity” and “apathy,” a refusal to engage in politics, but it also takes a collective form in separatist “non-participation” and “non-involvement,” the removal of a group of women from the shared world. That women “are already dropped out” signals the historical roots of the practice in women’s exclusion from politics. The result of women leaning into this exclusion, Solanas warns, is the further intensification of male power.

Solanas does see separatism, though, as an important step in the path to liberation. “If all women simply left men, refused to have anything to do with them—ever,” Solanas predicts, “all men, the government, and the national economy would collapse completely.”⁵⁹ Like parasites, men depend on women for emotional and material sustenance; without women, they could not function. The male actually desires a “Mama in charge,” who cares for him and tells him what to do.⁶⁰ Aside from murder, SCUM will also “couple bust—barge into mixed (male-female) couples, wherever they are, and bust them up.”⁶¹ Once separated from men, Solanas believes, women will change for the better, and cease acting like Daddy’s Girls. “Eliminate men and women will shape up,” Solanas promises, “women are improvable; men are not, although their behavior is.”⁶² Separatism, then, weakens male control over women, and allows for women to transform their characters. The problem emerges when separatism is figured as the only tool available, instead of one tactic among a repertoire that, importantly, includes violence.

Solanas makes the case for the feminist use of violence as a world-making project. For her, women must use violence not only for their own liberation, but also to save the world from

⁵⁹ Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 63.

⁶⁰ Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 63.

⁶¹ Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 66.

⁶² Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 69.

male degradation and reclaim it for themselves. It is not enough for women to retreat into separatism, according to Solanas. A continuation of women's exclusion from politics, separatism removes women from the shared political world and sacrifices the world to men. Separatism may serve as a useful tool in SCUM's revolution, but "dropping out" cannot take the place of violence. Instead of retreating from the world, Solanas urges, women must reclaim and change it, taking action to stop the violence and exploitation that males perpetrate. From an Arendtian perspective, of course, world-making would never require the use of violence. In fact, Hannah Arendt denounces violence as antithetical to politics, since it removes men (in this case, literally) from the common world.⁶³ Paradoxically, Solanas suggests, women need to use violence to become political actors in the world, precisely because of the pervasive violence that men use to exclude them.

Solanas' Violence Disavowed

Historians of the second wave have shown that Solanas' call for violence divided feminism into liberal and radical camps. Alice Echols observes that Valerie Solanas became a "*cause célèbre*" for radical feminists, with her manifesto serving as "obligatory reading."⁶⁴ Going even farther, biographer Fahs writes that "disagreements about how to proceed with Valerie's case led to major fractures within NOW."⁶⁵ These fractures gave rise to The Feminists, one of the first radical feminist groups, founded by Ti-Grace Atkinson after she left NOW in October of 1968. Originally the president of NOW, Atkinson held Solanas up as a feminist icon,

⁶³ Although the vindication Arendt finds in the execution of Adolph Eichmann because he "supported and carried out a policy of not wanting to share the earth with the Jewish people" resonates with Solanas' concern that men refuse to share the world with women. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 279; Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing, 1969, 1970)

⁶⁴ Alice Echols, *Daring to be Bad: Radical Feminism in America 1967-1975* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 105.

⁶⁵ Fahs, *Valerie Solanas*, 176.

much to the chagrin of NOW's founder, Betty Friedan. Other leading radical feminists, like Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, cited Solanas as an inspiration for the movement as well. Solanas' shooting of Warhol, and her writings, thus provoked the rise of the short-lived radical feminist movement. Made up of a network of groups, including Atkinson's The Feminists and Dunbar-Ortiz's Cell 16, radical feminists saw sex as a class system that constituted the primary contradiction in society.⁶⁶ They called for the abolition of heterosexual marriage, love, and sex, among other institutions. Taking a closer look at the manifesto of The Feminists, and Dunbar-Ortiz' writing alongside the Cell 16 newsletter, I trace parallels between their thinking and the *SCUM Manifesto* that betray Solanas' influence.

Even as Solanas precipitated the split between liberal and radical feminism, though, radical feminists who inherited her thought disavowed her call to violence. Scholars who track the historical impact of Solanas tend to draw a direct connection between her praxis and that of radical feminists. According to Amanda Third, Solanas' shooting of Warhol constitutes a "propaganda stunt" to garner publicity for her political agenda, which inspired the guerilla theater tactics of radical feminists; for example, the freedom trashcans at the Miss America Protest and WITCH's hexings of government buildings.⁶⁷ Based on Solanas' response to reporters, Laura Winkiel argues that the *SCUM Manifesto* "performs a political identity," by constituting "a new political community through its enunciation of an imaginary group of women, SCUM."⁶⁸ In addressing her text to SCUM females, Winkiel reasons, Solanas brings into being a radical group ready to exercise violence in pursuit of a better world. And yet, such a

⁶⁶ Echols, *Daring to be Bad*, 139.

⁶⁷ Solanas reportedly told several people, including Ti-Grace Atkinson, that she shot Warhol to make herself famous; Fahs, *Valerie Solanas*, 136 & 168; Amanda Third, "'Shooting from the Hip': Valerie Solanas, SCUM and the Apocalyptic Politics of Radical Feminism," *Hecate* 32, n. 2 (2006): 107.

⁶⁸ Laura Winkiel, "The 'Sweet Assassin' and the Performative Politics of the SCUM Manifesto," in *The Queer Sixties*, ed. Patricia Juliana Smith (New York: Routledge, 1999), 63.

group of SCUM females fails to appear. The radical feminist tactics of guerilla theater that Third mentions do not involve violence. When radical feminists do turn to violence as a tactic, it is as a means of self-defense, rather than worldly transformation. This double movement defines Solanas' relationship to radical feminist, at once a founding and disavowed figure, her manifesto hailed as inspirational and her violence rejected.

In an article on the Warhol shooting, the *New York Times* presented Solanas as connected to the feminist movement, but NOW was quick to distance themselves from her. Later, when Solanas appealed to NOW for help with her legal defense, they rejected her outright. "The press would skewer us," Jaqueline Ceballos, a member of NOW, told Fahs in an interview.⁶⁹ Solanas embodied the conservative strawman of the women's liberation movement. As Fahs observes, she "posed a triple threat: she looked like a dyke *and* she was crazy *and* she was violent. She was NOW's worst nightmare."⁷⁰ NOW worried that supporting Solanas would confirm the worst stereotypes about feminists—that they were crazy militant lesbians. By distancing themselves from Solanas, they hoped to maintain a respectable image that would appeal to the mainstream. It was the same logic that Friedan used in her homophobic condemnation of the "lavender menace."

Not all the members of NOW dismissed Solanas, though. After Solanas' arrest, Ti-Grace Atkinson, then president of NOW, and prominent civil rights attorney Florynce Kennedy rushed to the courthouse. A lawyer for several Black Panthers, Kennedy defended Solanas early on, calling her "one of the most important spokeswomen of the feminist movement."⁷¹ Atkinson told reporters, "She has dragged feminism kicking and screaming into the 20th Century in a very

⁶⁹ Fahs, *Valerie Solanas*, 183.

⁷⁰ Fahs, *Valerie Solanas*, 184.

⁷¹ Third, "Shooting from the Hip," 109.

dramatic way.”⁷² Framing Solanas’ shooting of Warhol as economically motivated, Atkinson cited the fact that “men killed each other all the time for economic reasons” as evidence of the sexist double-standard in the treatment of Solanas’ case.⁷³ Atkinson’s support of Solanas began to drive a wedge between her and other members of NOW, however, including Friedan. “It’s sort of like a Rorschach test, Valerie was,” Atkinson says.⁷⁴ In the late 1960s, one’s views on Solanas became a way of determining what type of feminism one practiced: liberal or radical.

Atkinson criticized Friedan for her hypocritical treatment of Solanas, recounting a story of Friedan chasing her husband “down the beach with a carving knife screaming she was going to cut it off.”⁷⁵ Friedan certainly objected to Atkinson drawing a connection between violence and feminism, but Friedan’s problems with Solanas ran deeper than merely a pacifist aversion to violence, or even concerns about NOW’s image in the press. Years later, Friedan railed, “No action of the board of New York NOW, of National NOW, no policy ever voted by members advocated shooting men in the balls, the elimination of men as proposed by that SCUM Manifesto.”⁷⁶ Friedan took issue with Solanas’ wholesale rejection of men. In spite of her own marital problems, Friedan saw a place in the feminist movement for men, and not just as part of a Men’s Auxiliary. Narrating the events of the 1960s in the epilogue of *The Feminine Mystique*, Friedan remarks that she “couldn’t define ‘liberation’ for women in terms that denied the sexual and human reality of our need to love, and even sometimes to depend upon, a man.”⁷⁷ Friedan contends that men, like women, suffer in the fulfillment of “obsolete feminine and masculine sex roles” that lead them to feel isolated, alienated, and inadequate.⁷⁸ The Vietnam war, Friedan

⁷² Fahs, *Valerie Solanas*, 173-4.

⁷³ Fahs, *Valerie Solanas*, 175.

⁷⁴ Fahs, *Valerie Solanas*, 181.

⁷⁵ Fahs, *Valerie Solanas*, 181.

⁷⁶ Echols, *Daring to be Bad*, 168.

⁷⁷ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 2001), 465.

⁷⁸ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 465.

contends, eerily echoing Solanas, stemmed from the “masculine mystique,” the need for men to prove their masculinity.⁷⁹ Friedan condemns radical feminists for their “down-with-men” rhetoric, labeling them the “man-hating” faction of the movement.⁸⁰

The source of the friction between Solanas and liberal feminists like Friedan, then, is easy to locate. Friedan rejected Solanas’ misandry, as well as her use of violence. While Solanas saw the potential for some men to assist SCUM, as part of the Men’s Auxiliary, she did not think that men could be improved. Hence, the need to resort to violence for feminist purposes. Unlike Solanas, Friedan, and other members of NOW, believed in the possibility of male allyship. For Friedan, any feminist activism must recognize the reality that many women love men and not only need, but *want*, to share the world with them.

Several months after the Warhol shooting, Atkinson finally left NOW. She cited Solanas as one of the reasons for her departure in her press release, writing, “there have been bitter schisms over taking unequivocal positions on certain issues: abortion, marriage, the family, and support of persons in the cause who have crossed the law (e.g. Bill Baird, Valerie Solanas.)”⁸¹ In 1969, Atkinson founded The Feminists, a group whose principles replicate, in a more subdued form, Solanas’ teachings. Solanas thus drove the final wedge between liberals and the burgeoning category of radical feminists. The split occurred along several, related lines of political disagreement. Friedan and other NOW members criticized Solanas’ violence, while radical feminists embraced her militant image. Complicating matters further, radical feminists endorsed violence only as a form of self-defense, not as a strategic political tool. Radical feminists eliminated men from their movement but did not wish to remove not from society

⁷⁹ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 472.

⁸⁰ Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, 468-9.

⁸¹ Fahs, *Valerie Solanas*, 186.

through gendercide. Still, Solanas' thought exerted considerable influence on radical feminists' political beliefs, just as her actions sparked the formation of radical feminist groups.

The Feminists' manifesto, "The Feminists: A Political Organization to Annihilate Sex Roles," highlights this inheritance. Dubbing themselves "the first radical feminist group" and the militant vanguard of the movement, The Feminists were a small group of women, including other feminist leaders like Anna Koedt.⁸² They organized several direct actions, one protesting the Marriage License Bureau and another supporting abortionist Dr. Nathan Rappaport.⁸³ Like most other radical feminist groups, they only lasted four short years, from October 17th, 1968 until 1973. One contributing factor to their dissolution was a marriage quota, which stated that only one-third of members may be married women. Their separatism extended so far as to limit even women's extracurricular relations with men. In her reading of their manifesto, Echols indicates that The Feminists developed a "highly psychological analysis of male supremacy," with several parallels to Solanas' thought.⁸⁴ Echols finds the most obvious resonance in The Feminists' rejection of heterosexual sex, which they believed reinforces male domination and female subordination.⁸⁵

There is another more explicit response to Solanas in The Feminists' manifesto. Rather than blame men for women's oppression, The Feminists critiqued the "sex role system." The Feminists write, "it is the male role or the role of the Oppressor that must be annihilated—not necessarily those individuals who presently claim the role."⁸⁶ Implicitly denying the need for gendercide, The Feminists claimed that we need not kill men, as Solanas urges, but instead

⁸² Echols, *Daring to be Bad*, 179.

⁸³ Echols, *Daring to be Bad*, 169-70.

⁸⁴ Echols, *Daring to be Bad*, 171.

⁸⁵ Echols, *Daring to be Bad*, 173.

⁸⁶ The Feminists, "The Feminists: A Political Organization to Annihilate Sex Roles," in *Notes from the Second Year*, (New York, 1970), 114.

destroy the current roles men construct and occupy. In 1971, upon leaving The Feminists, Atkinson became even more committed to using violence for the feminist cause. On a panel about violence in the women's movement, Atkinson "was excoriating women's liberationists for failing to 'pick up the gun.'"⁸⁷ Without Atkinson, The Feminists displayed cultural feminist tendencies, formulating a female religion and defending matriarchy. Their later ritual dismemberment of "an enormous and anatomically correct, papier-mâché man," though, hints at their militant origins.⁸⁸

Solanas also played an important role in the founding of the radical feminist group, Cell 16. The founder of Cell 16, Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, read the headline "Super-Woman Power Advocate Shoots Andy Warhol" while in Mexico City and promptly flew back to the United States.⁸⁹ Dunbar-Ortiz saw Solanas as a "symbol of women's rage," and envisioned herself emulating the "Free Huey" movement with a "Free Valerie" one.⁹⁰ When she visited Solanas in the psychiatric hospital, however, Dunbar-Ortiz found a woman who could not become a revolutionary. Dunbar-Ortiz "realized that Valerie's violent act had marked her and that she probably wouldn't be able to become a whole person, much less a leader in the Women's Liberation Movement as [Dunbar-Ortiz] had hoped."⁹¹

Founded in 1968, Cell 16 read the *SCUM Manifesto* as their first order of business, and Dunbar-Ortiz frequently quoted Solanas. They wrote a newsletter, *No More Fun and Games*, and emulated Solanas by selling copies in the street, even charging men more than women.⁹² Dunbar-

⁸⁷ Echols, *Daring to be Bad*, 185.

⁸⁸ Echols, *Daring to be Bad*, 183.

⁸⁹ Fahs, *Valerie Solanas*, 163.

⁹⁰ Fahs, *Valerie Solanas*, 163.

⁹¹ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *Outlaw Woman: A Memoir of the War Years, 1960-1975* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2014), 135.

⁹² Dunbar-Ortiz, *Outlaw Woman*, 131.

Ortiz believed that women would need to wage “warfare (guerilla style)” at some point.⁹³ The women of Cell 16 learned martial arts, and wore a uniform with a militant aesthetic—khaki pants, work shirts, combat boots, and short hair.⁹⁴ Like The Feminists, Cell 16 swore off sex and relationships with men, practicing radical feminist separatism through communal living with women. Dunbar-Ortiz emphasizes, though, that Cell 16 learned violence only for self-defense.⁹⁵ Confronted with a follower of Solanas who was developing a virus to kill all men, Dunbar-Ortiz balked. Cell 16 hoped to combat street harassment, not eliminate men. In her autobiography, Dunbar-Ortiz describes the episode that precipitated the organization’s commitment to Tae Kwon Do. Harassed by a car full of men, Dunbar-Ortiz attempted to punch the driver, who then swung at her with a tire iron. Her friend used a Tae Kwon Do defense to save her. Afterward, Cell 16 formed a class at a Tae Kwon Do studio for women to learn self-defense. “This was the beginning of a commitment to martial arts and self-defense for women,” Dunbar-Ortiz writes, “which ultimately became the signature identity of Cell 16.”⁹⁶

Dunbar-Ortiz’ article in the first issue of *No More Fun and Games* gives voice to Solanas’ influence. She declares, “we want to destroy the three pillars of class (caste) society—the family, private property, and the state—and their attendant evils—corporate capitalism, imperialism, war, racism, misogyny, annihilation of the balance of nature.”⁹⁷ Dunbar-Ortiz’ call to destroy the family, private property, and the state imitates the first lines of Solanas’ manifesto, which states females must “overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation, and destroy the male sex.”⁹⁸ Once again, though, Dunbar-Ortiz stops short

⁹³ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, “Female Liberation as the Basis for Social Revolution,” *No More Fun and Games* 1 (1969): 112.

⁹⁴ Echols, *Daring to be Bad*, 162.

⁹⁵ Dunbar-Ortiz, *Outlaw Woman*, 132.

⁹⁶ Dunbar-Ortiz, *Outlaw Woman*, 148.

⁹⁷ Dunbar-Ortiz, “Female Liberation,” 111.

⁹⁸ Solanas, *SCUM Manifesto*, 23.

of Solanas' gendercide, replacing the destruction of the male sex with the destruction of the family.

The relationship between radical feminists and Solanas is complicated. Radical feminists like Atkinson and Dunbar-Ortiz, as well as the groups they founded, The Feminists and Cell 16, adopted many of Solanas' ideas, albeit in a muted fashion. Atkinson and Dunbar-Ortiz also practiced Solanas' method of organizing. The Feminists wrote a manifesto that, like the *SCUM Manifesto*, functions as a call to action. Following Solanas' lead, Cell 16 distributed their journal on the street. Friedan accused radical feminists of violence and hatred towards men, yet their actions and works do not validate her views. Atkinson and Dunbar-Ortiz were hesitant to commit violence themselves, though they at times endorsed militant action in the form of self-defense. Both founded separatist groups but neither directed much anger towards men. Instead, sex roles and institutions like the family, marriage, love, and heterosexual sex attracted their ire. Neither Atkinson nor Dunbar-Ortiz went to the lengths of preaching, let alone pursuing, gendercide.

In adopting a position of separatism, the radical feminist groups most sympathetic to Solanas avoided the problem of violence. Although separatism may constitute one step in the revolution, for Solanas, feminists must employ other tactics, including work stoppages and violence. Radical feminists like The Feminists and Cell 16 need not eliminate men from the world, their tactics implied, just from the movement. Radical feminists even acknowledged that separatism is a form of dropping out; Vivian Gornick, author of the introduction to the 1971 version of the *SCUM Manifesto*, says women should "walk away from the world."⁹⁹ Removing feminists from public life, separatism ceded the world to men and women who did not support the cause. Because their goal was to create a sense of safety for their separatist group of women,

⁹⁹ Vivian Gornick, "Introduction" in *SCUM Manifesto* (Paris: Olympia Press, 1971), xxxiv.

Cell 16 demarcated violence as only useful for self-defense, which differs markedly from Solanas' use of violence as a world-making activity. In the service of separatism, violence as self-defense creates the space for women to retreat from the world, rather than fulfilling the purpose for violence that Solanas imagined of worldly transformation and reclamation. In Solanas' utopian vision, violence is instrumental precisely because separatism is not enough. If SCUM does not eliminate men from the earth, Solanas reasons, they will continue to violently exploit women and destroy the world.

Solanas, then, marks a rupture and a continuity between liberal and radical feminists. As a point of rupture, Solanas' shooting of Warhol played a major role in fracturing second wave feminists, leading women like Atkinson and Dunbar-Ortiz to split from liberal feminists and form more radical groups. Continuity between the two feminist camps persists in the fact that liberal and radical feminists were not receptive to Solanas' call for revolutionary violence. For a brief moment, Solanas forced feminists to entertain the possibility of using violence to change the world—a possibility that quickly disappeared from feminist memory after disavowal by both second wave factions.

Conclusion

Solanas is a figure forgotten and then resurrected. After shooting Warhol, Solanas was diagnosed with schizophrenia and sentenced to three years in a psychiatric institution. For the rest of her life, she lived intermittently in mental hospitals and on the street. She died in a motel in San Francisco from pneumonia in 1988. The manuscript she was writing at the time has been lost. Cultural productions, including *I Shot Andy Warhol* and Sara Stridsberg's novel, *Valerie*, as well as Breanne Fahs' excellent biography, brought renewed interest to Solanas' life and

work.¹⁰⁰ Mary Harron was inspired to make her movie about Solanas, *I Shot Andy Warhol*, upon discovering the *SCUM Manifesto* in an independent bookstore.¹⁰¹ When she dug into Solanas' history, Harron notes, she found very little record of Solanas' existence. Solanas' play, *Up Your Ass*, nearly disappeared, until Harron located a pornography collector in New York who owned a copy.¹⁰²

My interest in recuperating Solanas as a figure for feminist inquiry extends beyond the valuable contributions of her work. In her biography of Emma Goldman, Clare Hemmings notes that her project “frames the ambivalent histories we inherit as ones that were *always likely to have been lost*.”¹⁰³ Why was Solanas' role in feminist history always likely to have been lost, to borrow Hemmings provocation? Our collective amnesia around Solanas today, I believe, is symptomatic of a feminist allergy to violence, already evident in second wave feminists' treatment of Solanas. Solanas raises perhaps unanswerable and largely unexplored questions about the use of violence for feminist politics. With her advocacy for violence, Solanas exposes the depth, the near inescapability of women's exploitation and acknowledges the impossibility of women experiencing freedom if they continue to share the world with men. Instead of ceding the world to men, as separatism might, Solanas' violence is a world-making project, wherein women reclaim and transform the world into a feminist utopia. The fact of Solanas' marginalization in history indicates the need for feminists to lean into their discomfort, to look at those figures, like Solanas, who disrupt the assumed opposition between violence and feminist politics.

Early on, I said that returning to Solanas raises the question of whether violence is a justifiable means for feminist ends. By offering an affirmative answer, Solanas leads us to a new

¹⁰⁰ Sara Stridsberg, *Valerie* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006).

¹⁰¹ Harron recognized the title from her work on a documentary about Andy Warhol.

¹⁰² Harron, “Introduction,” vii & xviii.

¹⁰³ Clare Hemmings, *Considering Emma Goldman* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 33.

set of questions for feminist thought: In the turn away from violence, what have feminists turned towards? What political tactics have feminists adopted in lieu of violence, and how does a reconsideration of the feminist use of violence expose the limitations of these tactics? Solanas' historical impact on second wave feminism shows that their political tactics, from liberal attempts to build allyship with men to radical separatism, emerged as a rejection of violence. For Solanas, women cannot live freely in the world with men as allies, nor can they cede the world to men through separatism; hence, the need to engage in violence. Violence, then, provides a lens to examine and critique alternate feminist political tactics, even as it opens up another possible path for feminist scholarship and activism.

Chapter Four | Infanticide and the Feminist Political Imaginary

Introduction

In 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court issued the decision for *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*. By returning the issue of abortion to the states, the decision effectively overturned *Roe v. Wade*, allowing conservative local legislatures to further impede or outright ban abortion access. Although the Supreme Court focuses on state's rights in *Dobbs*, they open the door for future legal decisions that establish fetal personhood. Currently, at least thirty-eight states have fetal homicide laws that equate abortion with murder.¹ The criminalization of abortion, which disproportionately affects poor women and women of color, raises the specter of infanticide in the national imaginary. As Beth Richie documents in her discussion of Tanya, a young Black woman who killed her newborn infant by discarding the baby in a dumpster, anxieties around infanticide have long animated the national discussion around motherhood and race.² The pursuant media circus depicted Tanya as “ruthless, irresponsible, and brutally uncaring,” at the same time eliding the structural forces that led to her actions.³ As Republicans attempt to enshrine fetal personhood in the law, this fear-mongering about infanticide to justify the criminalization of women who seek abortions will become increasingly familiar across the U.S.

In this chapter, I return to second-wave feminist organizing around abortion to shed new light on recent juridical and legislative backlash. After *Dobbs*, contemporary feminists are turning their attention to the Jane Collective, an underground group that provided illegal

¹ National Conference of State Legislatures, State Laws on Fetal Homicide and Penalty-enhancement for Crimes Against Pregnant Women: <https://www.ncsl.org/research/health/fetal-homicide-state-laws.aspx>

² Beth Richie, *Arrested Justice: Black Women, Violence, and America's Prison Nation* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 5.

³ Richie, *Arrested Justice*, 7.

abortions to women in Chicago.⁴ While Jane worked in secret, 1970s feminists also struggled to bring abortion onto the public agenda, pushing for liberal reform and radical repeal of laws that restricted abortion access.⁵ Re-reading second-wave texts is complicated, however, by their treatment of abortion as violence against both the mother and the child. Radical feminists, like Adrienne Rich, characterized forced birth as patriarchal violence that reduced women to instruments of reproduction. Abortion and infanticide—often thematized together in these texts—function as a form of feminist violence that refuses to comply with compulsory reproduction, and therefore denies the objectification and instrumentalization of women’s bodies. Second-wave feminists, I contend, offer a now-forgotten grammar to defend abortion rights, which emerged prior to the formation of the contemporary juridical landscape. Unlike feminists today, who must continue to deny fetal personhood, second-wave feminists theorized abortion as justifiable violence, insisting on the need for women to maintain control of their bodies even if it required a loss of life.

Second-wave Black feminists also developed the concept of reproductive justice to respond to dual attempts by the state and Black nationalists to control their reproductive choices. Perpetuated by the Moynihan Report, worries about the pathologized Black family, and especially the Black matriarch, produced a state investment in the forced sterilization of Black women. The Black Panther Party, conversely, urged Black women to abandon the use of contraceptives, so that they could reproduce (implicitly, male) warriors for the militant Black nationalist movement. Black feminist theorists, including Angela Davis, observe that the ghosts of slavery haunt the abortion debates of the second wave, since the slave system required the

⁴ Laura Kaplan, *The Story of Jane: The Legendary Feminist Underground Abortion Service* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1995] 2019).

⁵ Echols, *Daring to be Bad*.

reproductive exploitation of Black women. I read Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as an intervention in the debates about abortion at the time of its publication. In contexts where women are forced to reproduce, Morrison reveals, infanticide resists this violent patriarchal exploitation. Placing *Beloved* alongside excerpts from *The Black Book*, I uncover Morrison's interest in abortion as akin to infanticide, and situate these acts on a continuum with other instances of Black feminist violence.

The first two sections of this chapter lay out the contentious politics around reproductive freedom during the second wave, with special attention to radical and Black feminist critiques of compulsory reproduction. In the final section, I read *Beloved*, and Morrison's other writing, to theorize infanticide as feminist violence against the reproductive exploitation of enslaved Black women. While the feminists I read compare abortion to infanticide, their point is not to equate the two. Instead, their texts show that infanticide and abortion occupy the same space in the national imaginary. The question, then, is: Why does abortion produce such deep anxiety for pro-life conservatives that it comes to appear as infanticidal violence? The conflation of abortion and infanticide, I argue, is symptomatic of a political attachment to the reproductive futurity of the heterosexual family, which depends on compulsory motherhood for its perpetuation.

This chapter thus begins to draw the connection between abortion and family abolition. Insofar as the family is a place "where people are made," as Sophie Lewis puts it, and the site of "a privatized system of social reproduction...and bio-genetic-centred kinship," in Kathie Weeks words, women's refusal to reproduce threatens to destabilize and even destroy the heteronormative family.⁶ During the 1970s, radical feminists called for the abolition of the

⁶ Sophie Lewis, *Abolish the Family: A Manifesto for Care and Liberation* (New York: Verso, 2022), 4; Kathie Weeks, "Abolition of the Family: The Most Infamous Feminist Proposal" *Feminist Theory* (2021): 6.

family, a project spearheaded by “utopian killjoy” Shulamith Firestone.⁷ Firestone urged women to redirect their psychic investments in the family by overthrowing the institution.⁸ Family abolition, though, was not just a white feminist project. Hortense Spillers, for example, believed that the violently produced kinlessness of slavery, and the symbolic power of the Black matriarch, could usher in a new way of relating that exceeded the confines of the nuclear family. Reading Spillers, Tiffany Lethabo King has recently called into question the assumption that the Black family is a safe space that fosters resistance, instead contending that the family functions as a site of ongoing racist, patriarchal, and state violence.⁹ Abortion and infanticide, I argue, inspire anxiety because they conjure alternative kinship imaginaries that do not rely on reproduction.

Because our understanding of futurity hinges on the figure of the child, abortion and infanticide also constitute a world-destroying form of violence—a violence that undermines the very futurity of politics. For Hannah Arendt, natality is fundamental to politics because it produces the plurality necessary for the creation of public space, and inaugurates the new.¹⁰ Following Arendt, Rosalyn Diprose argues that we should think of laboring bodies as politically agentic, “beginners who give birth to other beginners of the new.”¹¹ Forced birth perverts natality, while access to contraceptives confirms women’s status as agents who can freely choose what to do with their bodies. Jill Richards refers to the collective choice to refrain from reproducing as “the birth strike,” actualized in first-wave activism for birth control and narratives

⁷ Lewis, *Abolish the Family*, 61.

⁸ Weeks, “Abolishing the Family,” 17.

⁹ Tiffany Lethabo King, “Black ‘Feminisms’ and Pessimism: Abolishing Moynihan’s Negro Family” *Theory & Event* 21, n. 1 (January 2018): 68-87.

¹⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

¹¹ Rosalyn Diprose, *Arendt, Natality, and Biopolitics: Toward Democratic Plurality and Reproductive Justice* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 207.

of infanticide.¹² Through a birth strike, women would undo the very possibility of reproductive futurity. The threat of the woman who obtains an abortion, Penelope Deutscher writes, lies in her identification as a figure that impedes future continuity.¹³ Jacqueline Rose puts a finer point on it: “By refusing to be mothers, women have the power to bring the world to its end.”¹⁴ Infanticide and abortion capture the “thanatopolitical” moment where natality and death meet.¹⁵ They therefore represent the ultimate world-destroying form of violence, a negation of the plurality of the common world and the open-ended futurity of political action.

Forced Birth as Violence

Through consciousness-raising, radical feminists came to recognize access to abortion as a shared, political issue. In particular, Redstocking, a radical feminist group founded by Shulamith Firestone took action to place abortion on the public agenda. In 1969, they disrupted legislative hearings on abortion law reform in New York that included fourteen men and one nun. Only those with the capacity to reproduce, the Redstockings insisted, should have input on legislation governing reproductive rights. Unlike the National Organization for Women, who advocated for reform, the Redstockings and other radical feminists militantly supported repeal of abortion laws. After they disrupted official hearings, they proceeded to hold their own, where women testified about their experiences obtaining illegal abortions. Their belief that women,

¹² Juno Jill Richards, *The Fury Archives: Female Citizenship, Human Rights, and the International Avant-Gardes* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 106.

¹³ Penelope Deutscher, *Foucault's Futures: A Critique of Reproductive Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017), 43 & 59.

¹⁴ Jacqueline Rose, *Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2018), 48.

¹⁵ Deutscher defines the “thanatopolitical hypothesis” as “the multiplicity of the lives women are considered to enfold may be matched by the multiplicity of the declines and deaths for which they can be deemed responsible.” Deutscher, *Foucault's Futures*, 5.

rather than doctors, could provide the most authoritative accounts of abortion laid the groundwork for legal cases like *Roe v. Wade*, which utilized the testimony of pregnant women.¹⁶

Central to radical feminists' arguments for legalizing abortion was the contention that women should not be forced to reproduce. In *The Dialectic of Sex*, Shulamith Firestone declares that "*pregnancy is barbaric*," because it "is the temporary deformation of the body of the individual for the sake of the species."¹⁷ Firestone proposes the alternative of artificial reproduction, an answer to the demand that women reproduce to ensure humanity's future. Another member of the Redstockings, abortion rights activist Lucinda Cisler claimed that a woman should be able to obtain an abortion at any time because "*she belongs to herself and not to the state*."¹⁸ Much of Cisler's advocacy focuses on the idea that doctors and hospitals need not be the only purveyors of abortion. The provision of illegal abortions by uncertified women in organizations like the Jane Collective proved that it was a relatively safe and easy procedure that did not require a medical license. Firestone and Cisler share the belief that women's bodies should not be used by humanity, or by the state, for reproduction against their will. Both seek to reinstate women's control over their own bodies—Firestone, through artificial pregnancy that frees women from the necessity of biological birth, and Cisler, through the democratization of abortion such that any woman could obtain one without the approval of a doctor. Together, they plant the seeds for Rich's later argument that forced labor is a form of patriarchal violence which instrumentalizes women's bodies for the purpose of reproduction.

Before the New Right consolidated around a pro-life position, second-wave feminists tended to argue against the paternalism of abortion laws. Conservative defenders at the time

¹⁶ Jennifer Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement* (New York: NYU Press, 2003); Echols, *Daring to be Bad*. The irony, of course, is that Roe enshrines the authority of the doctor, not the woman.

¹⁷ Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003 [1970]), 180-1.

¹⁸ Lucinda Cisler, "On Abortion and Abortion Law," *Notes from the Second Year* (New York, 1970), 94.

claimed that abortions were dangerous, and women therefore needed the supervision of doctors and husbands to assist them in making decisions. Radical feminists' class-action suit to contest the New York abortion law, *Abromowicz v. Lefkowitz*, however, invited objections from a group of Catholic physicians who called themselves "friends of the fetus." They saw the fetus as a human life and abortion as murder.¹⁹ These early defenses of keeping abortion illegal and inaccessible grew into the conservative movement to overturn *Roe v. Wade*.²⁰ As feminists pushed to legalize abortion, the backlash against them led to the circulation of a burgeoning ideology that treated abortion as murder. When Rich discusses abortion in tandem with infanticide as violence, then, she is explicitly responding to these conservative beliefs.

In *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich theorizes motherhood as a patriarchal institution. The book famously opens with the titular line, "All human life on the planet is born of woman."²¹ While today we might update this statement to be more trans-inclusive, birth remains a fact of human life. Rich differentiates between "the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control."²² By historicizing and contextualizing the institution of motherhood, Rich reveals how the supposedly natural experience of mothering is shaped by patriarchal political and social systems that seek to control women's reproduction. In light of this revelation, Rich finds herself "alienated from [her] real body and [her] real spirit by the institution—not the fact—of motherhood."²³ Rich is clear that she desires the abolition of the institution, not the reality, of motherhood, so that mothering becomes a form of freely chosen

¹⁹ Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement*, 41.

²⁰ Linda Greenhouse and Reva Siegel, "Before (and After) *Roe v. Wade*: New Questions about Backlash" *The Yale Law Journal* 120, n. 8 (2011): 2028-2087.

²¹ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W. W. Norton Company, [1976] 2021), lix.

²² Rich, *Of Woman Born*, lxi.

²³ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 21.

work. While her division between real and institutional motherhood may give contemporary readers pause, implying a biological truth that Rich hopes to discover, Rich rejects a cultural feminist sentimentality that vaunts women's moral superiority in her introduction, written a decade later. Rather than disentangling the real from the institutional, Rich's text prompts a political and social reckoning with the patriarchal order that structures motherhood, and a reimagining of what mothering could entail.

Key to Rich's account is "the institutional violence of patriarchal motherhood."²⁴ This institutional violence manifests in the objectification of women's bodies as purely instruments for reproduction, often through rape. In a telling passage, Rich cites Simone Weil's notion of "affliction—the condition of the oppressed, the slave, the concentration-camp victim forced to haul heavy stones back and forth across a yard, endlessly and to no purpose."²⁵ For Weil, affliction gets to the heart of defining violence, because it describes the transformation of the oppressed into a thing, through the exercise of force by the oppressor.²⁶ Rich extends affliction to apply to "the labor of childbirth [which] has been a form of forced labor."²⁷ In doing so, she reveals how the institutional violence of motherhood transforms women into objects for the sake of reproduction. Reflecting on her own experience of motherhood, Rich writes that she "could not afford to become an object."²⁸ Her 1986 introduction makes women's claim to personhood more explicit: "the claim to share justly in the products of our labor, not to be used merely as an instrument, a role, a womb."²⁹ When Rich speaks of institutional violence, however, she is not merely referring to violence in a figurative register. In addition to women's lack of access to

²⁴ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 272.

²⁵ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 154.

²⁶ Simone Weil, "The Iliad, or the Poem of Force" *Chicago Review* 18, n. 2 (1965); Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt Publishing Co., 1970, 1969).

²⁷ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 155.

²⁸ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 122.

²⁹ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, xxxvii.

contraceptives for centuries, Rich emphasizes that forced labor is often the product of rape. Citing her contemporaries Susan Griffin and Susan Brownmiller, she reasons, “if rape has been a form of terrorism, motherhood has been penal servitude. *It need not be.*”³⁰ Rich pairs rape and reproduction, then, as twin pillars of patriarchal domination, with the former—the rape that enforces women’s submission—begetting the latter—the fulfillment of women’s reproductive duties.

Controversially, Rich concludes *Of Woman Born* with a final chapter on the maternal violence of infanticide and abortion. Throughout the text, Rich alludes to the relationship between maternal love and violence. She identifies herself with Medea, and recounts another mother informing her that, “If anyone laid a hand on *my* child, I’d murder him.”³¹ For Rich, infanticide makes legible the violence of institutional motherhood. Infanticidal mothers like Joanne Michulski, whose case Rich discusses at length, respond to this institutional violence in kind but, instead of recognizing their implicit critique, “society labels those women who finally erupt in violence as psychopathological.”³² Rich calls Michulski a scapegoat, because the “scapegoat is different from the martyr; she cannot teach resistance or revolt.”³³ By examining society’s treatment of women like Michulski, Rich reveals that their pathologization re-privatizes motherhood, turning it into an individual, rather than a political, problem. Scapegoating individual women thus prevents the recognition of their infanticidal violence as political resistance, and stops the possibility of their story inspiring collective feminist action.

Rich compares infanticide to abortion in this chapter. “Abortion is violence,” she writes, “a deep, desperate violence inflicted by a woman upon, first of all, herself. It is the offspring, and

³⁰ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, lxii.

³¹ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 19.

³² Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 272.

³³ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 288.

will continue to be the accuser, of a more pervasive and prevalent violence, the violence of rapism.”³⁴ The same passage begins with an acknowledgement of the traditional Catholic belief that abortion is murder. Instead of denying that religious claim, Rich expands the conceptualization of abortion as violence to describe it as self-harm. Her 1986 introduction takes on the question of abortion even more directly, with Rich characterizing the debate between the New Right and the Women’s Liberation Movement as a contest over the personhood of the fetus, on the one hand, and women, on the other. In Rich’s thought, abortion occupies the paradoxical conceptual space of violence against the self that simultaneously asserts the personhood of the woman who undergoes it. Like infanticide, abortion makes legible and critiques the violence of “rapism,” and the forced labor involved in institutional motherhood. Abortion denies that a woman’s sole role is to reproduce, and therefore rejects her objectification, even as Rich believes abortion is not a choice most women would make if they were freed from the constraints of patriarchy. Although she undermines the conservative belief in fetal personhood, Rich explores the possible connections between infanticide and abortion, which both function as forms of political resistance against forced reproduction.

The Ghosts of Slavery Haunting the Second Wave

Second-wave white feminists tended to focus on abortion, but Black feminists also organized around forced sterilization and birth control access. In 1973, the case of Minnie Lee Relf, a disabled Black girl who was sterilized by in a federally funded clinic, brought greater attention to forced sterilization as a eugenicist practice.³⁵ Relf’s case, among others, led Angela Davis to write that the “abortion rights activists of the early 1970s” should have issued “a

³⁴ Rich, *Of Woman Born*, 279.

³⁵ Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement*, 66.

vigorous condemnation of sterilization abuse, which had become more widespread than ever.”³⁶

White feminists failed to attend to sterilization because they did not experience it at the same rates. Approximately 65% of the 7,686 women sterilized in North Carolina, Davis notes, were Black. By shifting attention to sterilization, Black feminists, including second-wave activist and founder of SisterSong, Loretta Ross, generated the framework of reproductive justice, which describes the right to have and parent children, as well as the right not to have children.³⁷

At the same time, Black feminists fought for greater access to birth control, rejecting the Black Panther Party’s conspiratorial belief that the availability of birth control to Black women would facilitate racial genocide. In “The Pill: Genocide or Liberation?” Toni Cade Bambara rejects the idea that the Black woman’s role in anti-racist militancy is to “breed revolutionaries and mess up the man’s genocidal program.”³⁸ Bambara continues, “the Brother does us all a disservice by telling her to fight the man with the womb. Better to fight with the gun and the mind.”³⁹ Revolution, Bambara argues, requires women’s liberation, and the birth control pill returns to women control over their own bodies, so that they can participate in militant violence.

The Mount Vernon Black Women’s Liberation Group expresses a similar sentiment:

Black women are being asked by militant black brothers not to practice birth control because it’s a form of Whitey’s committing genocide on black people. Well, true enough, but it takes two to practice genocide and black women are able to decide for themselves, like poor people all over the world, whether they will submit to genocide. For us, birth control is the freedom to fight genocide of black women and children.⁴⁰

³⁶ Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981), 215; 65% of sterilizations were performed on Black women in North Carolina.

³⁷ Loretta Ross and Rickie Solinger, *Reproductive Justice: An Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017).

³⁸ Toni Cade Bambara, “The Pill: Genocide or Liberation?” in *The Black Woman: An Anthology* (New York: Washington Square Press, [1970] 2005), 205.

³⁹ Bambara, “The Pill,” 210.

⁴⁰ Black Women’s Liberation Group, “Statement on Birth Control” in ed. Robin Morgan, *Sisterhood is Powerful: An Anthology of Writings from the Women’s Liberation Movement* (New York: Random House, 1970), 360-1.

The Black Women's Liberation Group shifts the terms of the debate, by referring to the murder of Black women and children, rather than the use of birth control, as genocide. Indeed, Black women were far more likely to die during an illegal abortion than white women.⁴¹ Like Bambara, they claim that Black women can fight better if they control their reproductive fates, comparing themselves to the armed Vietnamese women who defended their country's independence.

Black Panther anxieties about genocide, like the conservative anxiety about abortion as murder, reveal a deep-seated set of fears about women's access to reproductive health care. Certainly, both the men of the Black Panther Party and the New Right sought to control women's bodies for their own political ends. I argue, though, that their fears stem from a worry about women's ability to end the world if they choose not to reproduce. Analogized with infanticide, abortion and birth control come to emblemize the ultimate world-ending violence that denies natality and destroys futurity. Martin Luther King Jr. compared the Black Panther Party's position on birth control to the forced reproduction of slavery.⁴² Given this history, Black feminist scholars have theorized infanticide and abortion as a form of resistance against the racist and patriarchal exploitation of Black women's reproductive capacities.

The Black Panther Party's objections to birth control were in part a reaction to the emasculation encoded in the Moynihan Report through the depiction of a strong Black woman head of household. The notion of the Black matriarch emerges from the tragedy of the Black maternal condition under slavery. As Jennifer Morgan writes, Black enslaved women were forced to "reproduce kinlessness" by giving birth to slavery.⁴³ Morgan explains: "To be or to

⁴¹ 80% of women who died in NYC from illegal abortions were Black or Puerto Rican. Davis, *Women, Race and Class*, 204.

⁴² Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement*, 92.

⁴³ Jennifer Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery: Gender, Kinship, and Capitalism in the Early Black Atlantic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2021), 10 & 207.

become a mother while enslaved was always to face the evidence of slavery’s core contradictory violence—that the child you understood as family was instantly embedded in the property accumulation of the person who owned you.”⁴⁴ Refusal to bear children, then, constituted a form of resistance against slavery. Morgan documents the use of the peacock flower, *Caesalpinia pulcherima*, by enslaved women to induce abortions, although she notes that it is difficult to track its prevalence, because such self-induced abortions are indistinguishable from miscarriages. Conceptually, infanticide and abortion belong on a continuum of resistance. “In the eyes of the slave owner,” Morgan reasons, “the women who removed her reproductive potential from his accounting had essentially committed infanticide.”⁴⁵ Abortion and infanticide functioned as theft of property from Black women’s enslavers, or what Morgan calls “economic sabotage.”

Dorothy Roberts reaches a similar conclusion in *Killing the Black Body*. The control of Black women’s reproduction under slavery, Roberts contends, “marked Black women from the beginning as objects whose decisions about reproduction should be subject to social regulation rather than their own will.”⁴⁶ Roberts, like Rich, emphasizes the objectification of Black women as a central feature of the violence of slavery, denouncing the reduction of women to their wombs. Roberts also tracks the enslaved “women’s rebellion against their role of reproducer” via abortion and infanticide.⁴⁷ She takes up the case of an enslaved woman in Missouri named Jane, who was prosecuted for poisoning her child. In her case, the judge questioned whether infanticide was an act of mercy, saving Jane’s child from “the living hell of slavery.”⁴⁸ Roberts further questions: “What if Jane sacrificed her child as an act of defiance, one small step in

⁴⁴ Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*, 220.

⁴⁵ Morgan, *Reckoning with Slavery*, 225.

⁴⁶ Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Random House, [1997] 2017), 31.

⁴⁷ Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 56.

⁴⁸ Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 58.

bringing about slavery's demise?"⁴⁹ Roberts goes on to wonder about the ethical justifications for infanticidal violence. Her exploration of Jane's case brings to the fore the warring motivations for the violence of infanticide: to save the child from slavery, and to resist the violence of the slave system.

Angela Davis likens the conditions that led to abortion for poor women of color in the 1970s and 80s to those under slavery. Black women resorted to abortion and infanticide because of desperation, and would have resented feminists hailing "their abortions as a stepping stone toward freedom."⁵⁰ The mainstream abortion rights campaign of the 1970s, Davis contends, "often failed to provide a voice for women who wanted the *right* to legal abortions while deploring the social conditions that prohibited them from bearing more children."⁵¹ That is why reproductive justice requires the transformation of social circumstances so that poor and Black women receive the material support necessary to have and mother their children.

At the same time, second-wave Black feminists like Kay Lindsey worried that welfare systems that provided for Black mothers only replaced the male patriarch of the family with the state. In her contribution to *The Black Woman* anthology, Kay Lindsey critiques the Black family as an oppressive institution. After the abolition of slavery, Lindsey contends, Black people became gender differentiated as Black men and Black women. The Black family came to reproduce the dynamics of the white family: "the family and the land on which it lived and cultivated its crops became the man's property."⁵² Black women, Lindsey reasons, transitioned from being the property of white people to the property of Black men; and therein lies the danger of holding up the reconstruction of the family as a desirable goal for Black liberation. Attending

⁴⁹ Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 58.

⁵⁰ Davis, *Women, Race, and Class*, 205.

⁵¹ Davis, *Women, Race, and Class*, 205.

⁵² Kay Lindsey, "The Black Woman as Woman" in ed. Toni Cade Bambara, *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, 104.

to the conception of the Black family in the Moynihan Report, Lindsey describes the Black woman as “the mother on welfare and the bearer of future workers for the state.”⁵³ To destroy the family, Lindsey contends, would be to destroy the state, since the state depends on the reproductive labor that takes place within the family for the creation of laborers and citizens.⁵⁴

Morrison wrote *Beloved* at precisely this point of intersection between the history of slavery and the second-wave movement for reproductive justice. For many readers of *Beloved*, the novel thematizes the way the past haunts the present.⁵⁵ *Beloved* grapples with the history of Black women’s reproductive exploitation in a moment where women’s reproductive freedom was once again a political question. The Moynihan Report indicted Black women for taking too strong a role in the Black family as matriarchs, and the Black Panther Party reacted by insisting on the need for Black women to reproduce. Abortion became legally accessible, but Black women continued to experience forced sterilization at the hands of state-funded doctors. With the concept of reproductive freedom, Black feminists articulated the need for women to control their own bodies, particularly their reproductive capacities—to choose to give birth, or refrain from having children. What happens, though, when women cannot exercise reproductive freedom? How can women resist forced, or what Rich calls compulsory, reproduction?

Infanticide as Feminist Violence in Morrison’s *Beloved*

⁵³ Lindsey, “The Black Woman as Woman,” 108.

⁵⁴ Jacqueline Stevens makes a similar point. Jacqueline Stevens, *Reproducing the State* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁵⁵ George Shulman argues that *Beloved* is a tale of redemption, not in the sense of fixing what went wrong in the past, but instead as “a coming-to-terms with this legacy.”⁵⁵ To some extent, for Shulman, we must lay past stories to rest in order to invent new ones. The forgetting of the past is a necessity, even as it is always partial and problematic. George Shulman, *American Prophecy: Race and Redemption in American Political Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 210-211. See also: Kimberly Chabot Davis, “‘Postmodern Blackness’: Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and the End of History” in ed. John Duvall, *Productive Postmodernism: Consuming Histories and Cultural Studies* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2002); Nancy Jesser, “Violence, Home, and Community in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*” *African American Review* 33, n. 2 (1999): 325-345; Caroline Rody, “Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*: History, ‘Rememory,’ and a ‘Clamor for a Kiss’” *American Literary History* 7, n. 1 (Spring 1995): 92-119; Linda Krumholz, “The Ghosts of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*” *African American Review* 26, n. 3 (1992): 395-408.

Infanticide

Morrison published *Beloved* in 1987, the same year as Hortense Spillers' influential essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," which draws an explicit connection between the reproductive politics of her moment and of slavery. Spillers opens with a discussion of the Moynihan Report's pathologization of the supposedly emasculating "matriarchal structure" of the Black family.⁵⁶ According to Spillers, the 1965 Moynihan Report "borrows its narrative energies from the grid of associations, from the semantic and iconic folds buried deep in the collective past."⁵⁷ The contemporary matriarchal structure of the Black family, Spillers deduces, emanates from the matrilineality of slavery. Under the slave system, the condition of the child followed the condition of the mother. While slavery disrupts kinship, "ungenders" Black women, and turns slaves into objects, Spillers contends, matrilineality opens up an insurgent space for Black women to claim and disrupt the meaning of the "female social subject" and kinship itself.⁵⁸

Writing in the problem space, Morrison responds to Moynihan's depiction of the Black family, particularly the pathologization of the Black matriarch.⁵⁹ Denied formal kinship networks under slavery, Black women were forced to reproduce to ensure the continuation of the slave system. Morrison's characters are clear-eyed about this literal reproduction of property relations. In fact, the protagonist, Sethe's, refusal to allow her children to become property lies at the heart of the text. Morrison figures Sethe's infanticide not only as an act of maternal love and economic sabotage, but also as a form of feminist violence. Enacting the matrilineality of slavery, Sethe

⁵⁶ Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" *Diacritics* 17, n. 2 (Summer 1987): 69.

⁵⁷ Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 65.

⁵⁸ Spillers, "Mama's Baby," 80.

⁵⁹ James Berger, "Ghosts of Liberalism: Morrison's *Beloved* and the Moynihan Report" *PMLA* 111, n. 3 (May 1996): 408-420.

insists on determining the fate of her child. Anxieties around Sethe's infanticide emerge in part because it threatens to end the reproductive futurity on which the slave system depends. Yet Sethe's actions also open up space for imagining alternative kinship structures that do not characterize people as property.

Beloved follows the story of Sethe, who escapes from slavery at Sweet Home with three children, and pregnant with a fourth. Sethe flees to live with her husband, Halle's, mother, Baby Suggs. When four white men from Sweet Home come to return her and her family to Sweet Home, she murders her oldest daughter. The narrative of *Beloved* begins years later, with Sethe and her youngest daughter, Denver, living in the same home at 124. The return of Paul D, another fugitive slave from Sweet Home, reopens the old wounds of Sethe's past, and soon another visitor arrives. Named Beloved, the stranger is treated as Sethe's resurrected daughter, the embodiment of the baby ghost that haunted 124.⁶⁰ Her presence, however, almost kills Sethe, and eventually forces Denver out of the home to seek help. In the end, the townswomen arrive to save Sethe from Beloved through song, and Sethe redirects her violence away from her daughters, towards another white male intruder. The novel concludes with the collective forgetting of Beloved, though Morrison implies that she continues to haunt the place of her death.

Morrison spends much of the novel unpacking the complicated relationship between enslaved women and their children. Over and over again, the reader is told that it is dangerous for an enslaved woman to love her children. "For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled to love." Paul D reflects, the best thing "was to love just a little bit; everything, just a little bit, so when they broke its

⁶⁰ The novel calls this characterization of Beloved into question, however. Elizabeth B. House, "Toni Morrison's Ghost: The Beloved is Not Beloved" *Studies in American Fiction* 18, n. 1 (Spring 1990): 17-26.

back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you'd have a little love left for the next one.”⁶¹ Given the precarious nature of Black kinship relations under slavery, loving a child who white enslavers might sell, or gravely injure, proved risky. A mother's inability to possess her children defines the unfreedom of slavery. Hence, the refrain that Beloved becomes Sethe's, upon her return: “Beloved, she my daughter. She mine.”⁶² This ownership over her children underlies Sethe's love for them. “I was big,” Sethe describes the feeling of loving her children to Paul D, “and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was *that* wide.”⁶³ Sethe's children come to seem like an extension of her body, a part of her. Sethe flees slavery and Sweet Home both because she loves her children, and because she wants to experience the freedom of being able to love them beyond the unfreedom of slavery. “To get to a place where you could love anything you chose—not to need permission for desire—well now, *that* was freedom,” Sethe and Paul D agree.⁶⁴

Subject to the unfreedom of the slave system, there is a danger in a mother loving her children, of desiring ownership over them. The danger, though, is not just heartbreak for the mother: “Unless carefree, motherlove was a killer.”⁶⁵ Once Sethe comes to view her children as hers, she will do anything to protect them, including, as the reader discovers midway through the text, kill them. When Sethe learns that schoolteacher is coming to return her and her children to Sweet Home, she flees to the shed behind 124, and takes a saw to the neck of her older daughter, the “crawling-already?” girl. “If I hadn't killed her,” Sethe thinks, “she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen to her.”⁶⁶ By killing her child, Sethe hopes to protect her

⁶¹ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume Printing, 1988), 45; Ella expresses the same sentiment on pg. 92.

⁶² Morrison, *Beloved*, 172, 200, 204, & 209.

⁶³ Morrison, *Beloved*, 162.

⁶⁴ Morrison, *Beloved*, 162.

⁶⁵ Morrison, *Beloved*, 132.

⁶⁶ Morrison, *Beloved*, 200.

from an inevitable death as a slave. To draw attention to the irony of Sethe's actions, Paul D harshly refers to the infanticide as "safety with a handsaw."⁶⁷

Enacting a writing practice Saidiya Hartman later termed "critical fabulation," Morrison's *Beloved* famously reconstructs the story of Margaret Garner, who killed her child under similar circumstances. An article about Garner appears in *The Black Book*, entitled "A Visit to the Slave Mother who Killed her Child." In an interview, Garner claims that "she was unwilling to have her children suffer as she had done...[She] would much rather kill them at once, and thus end their sufferings, then have them taken back to slavery, and be murdered piece-meal."⁶⁸ Sethe's language, then, explicitly echoes Garner's. In *Beloved*, Morrison depicts Sethe as motivated by a newfound sense of ownership that emerges when she can love her children freely. What Morrison reveals is that Sethe and Garner do not commit infanticide out of madness. Instead, these women kill their children because they would rather see them die free than die enslaved.

Morrison thus figures Sethe's infanticide as a form of resistance against the slave system. Paul D identifies Sethe's value as "greater than his," because she is "property that reproduce[s] itself without cost."⁶⁹ Earlier, Paul D remembers the moment when he learned "his price. The dollar value of his weight, his strength, his heart, his brain, his penis, and his future."⁷⁰ Enslavement puts a price on human life, and Paul D recognizes his own ability to reproduce as part of that price, represented by his penis. Sethe's price far outstrips his, though, because she is capable of giving birth to more Black children, who will be treated as property. Under the logic of the slave system, Sethe's infanticide is a form of theft. In a revealing passage, schoolteacher

⁶⁷ Morrison, *Beloved*, 164.

⁶⁸ Toni Morrison, *The Black Book* (New York: Random House, 1974), 10.

⁶⁹ Morrison, *Beloved*, 228.

⁷⁰ Morrison, *Beloved*, 226.

accuses another enslaved man, Sixo, of theft, after he kills and eats a shoat, or a baby pig (the pig's age is certainly not an accidental choice). "Did you kill it?" schoolteacher asks. "Did you eat it?" he continues. To Sixo's affirmative reply, he concludes, "And you telling me that's not stealing?"⁷¹ Baby animals reoccur as a theme throughout the pages of *Beloved*; at one point, a pig eats her young, in a direct nod to Sethe's infanticide; at another, a woman mistakes baby ducks for her own children, a metaphor for Sethe's mistaking Beloved for her own child. Like Sixo killing and eating the shoat, Sethe's murder of her child removes Beloved from the possibility of being transformed back into property through re-enslavement.

Sethe is not the only woman in *Beloved* who practices infanticide as a form of resistance. At first judgmental of Sethe, a townswoman, Ella, eventually reveals that she starved her own child, the product of rape by a white man and his son, to death: "She had delivered but would not nurse, a hairy white thing, fathered by 'the lowest yet.' It lived five days never making a sound."⁷² Rather than Sethe's protective urge, Ella's infanticide stems from her disgust with the child's conception. Morrison briefly mentions Ella's infanticide to explain her change of heart towards Sethe; Ella wants the past to remain in the past because she fears being haunted by her own child's ghost. By invoking Ella's infanticide, however, Morrison de-sensationalizes and contextualizes Sethe's actions, implying a community of enslaved and formerly enslaved women have engaged in similar violence. Though she does not go to the lengths of Sethe, Garner, and Ella, Harriet Jacobs expresses resonant sentiments in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. When her baby falls ill, Jacobs feels conflicted about whether to hope for its recovery. "I had often prayed for death," she thinks, "but now I did not want to die, unless my child could die

⁷¹ Morrison, *Beloved*, 190.

⁷² Morrison, *Beloved*, 259.

too...Death is better than slavery.”⁷³ Jacobs’ child eventually recovers, but her words echo the beliefs of Garner and Sethe. All three formerly enslaved women see slavery as a fate worse than death, and the latter two take matters into their own hands to free their children from that fate.

In the final scene of the novel, Sethe must make a different choice to exorcise the ghosts from 124, and rebuild trust with her daughter, and the town. At one point, Denver confesses her fear that her mother will one day try to kill her: “I love my mother but I know she killed one of her own daughters, and tender as she is with me, I’m scared of her because of it...All the time, I’m afraid the thing that happened that made it all right for my mother to kill my sister could happen again.”⁷⁴ And sure enough, the scenario does play itself out again, this time with the white male owner of 124 approaching on a horse. Sethe, though, does not attack her daughters this time. Instead, she runs towards him and “if she thinks anything, it is no. No no. Nonono. She flies. The ice pick is not in her hand; it is her hand.”⁷⁵ The town, the white man, Sethe, and her daughters rehearse and rewrite the scene of the original infanticide. Now, the town warns Sethe of the white man’s presence, and Sethe directs her violence towards him, not Beloved or Denver. Alys Weinbaum points out that the weapon of the icepick, which appears in Sethe’s hand, alludes to Joan Little.⁷⁶ Before escaping prison, Little used an icepick to murder a guard who attempted to rape her in 1974. Her trial became a site of contestation over Black women’s right to self-defense in the face of patriarchal state and intimate violence. What I want to emphasize here is not a narrative of redemption—that Sethe redeemed herself from the sin of infanticide by directing her violence towards the “right” target—but instead the analogy between her

⁷³ Harriet Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (New York: Dover Publications, [1861] 2001), 53-4.

⁷⁴ Morrison, *Beloved*, 205.

⁷⁵ Morrison, *Beloved*, 262.

⁷⁶ Alys Weinbaum, *The Afterlife of Reproductive Slavery: Biocapitalism and Black Feminism’s Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).

infanticide and her violence towards the white man. Morrison depicts both forms of violence as striking against the patriarchal violence of slavery, resisting the reproductive exploitation of enslaved women through the murder of the child, on the one hand, and the white rapist, on the other.

I am not the first to read Sethe and Garner's infanticides as resistance against the reproductive exploitation of enslaved women. "By dealing death to her daughter," Mark Reinhardt writes, "Margaret Garner refused the social death imposed on her family. Whatever her motivations or self-understanding, in asserting a mother's right to control the destiny of her children, she struck a blow at the material and cultural foundations of American chattel slavery."⁷⁷ Garner, and Sethe, according to Reinhardt's analysis, seize ownership of their children in the only way they can, with violence. The murder of their children throws a wrench into the functioning of the slave system, I argue, not just through an assertion of maternal right, but also through a refusal to reproduce children as property. Under a regime of compulsory reproduction, infanticide operates as a violent feminist destruction of political futurity.

Abortion

When Morrison wrote *Beloved*, the national conversation around reproductive rights did not focus on a spectacular instance of infanticide. Ten years before *Roe*, and five years before *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*, reproductive politics were a hot button issue, with abortion rights in particular attracting conservative ire. While Morrison rarely writes explicitly about abortion, her work in *The Black Book* reveals an interest in the topic.⁷⁸ A scrapbook-like assemblage, *The Black Book* brings together texts and images from Black history, politics, and culture in the

⁷⁷ Mark Reinhardt, "Who Speaks for Margaret Garner? Slavery, Silence, and the Politics of Ventriloquism" *Critical Inquiry* 29 (Autumn 2002): 99.

⁷⁸ Abortion also becomes a plot point in her novel, *Paradise*. Toni Morrison, *Paradise* (New York: Vintage Books, [1997] 2014).

United States. There, Morrison includes a quote from Gwendolyn Brooks' poem, "the mother," which recounts the abortion experience of the narrator. Brooks' description of the narrator's mourning, and her haunting by lost children, foreshadows the way Morrison will write about infanticide in *Beloved*. Reading the two texts together draws a parallel between infanticide and abortion.

In *The Black Book*, Morrison quotes Brooks: "Believe me, I loved you all. / Believe me, I knew you, though faintly, and I loved, I loved you / All."⁷⁹ The verse appears alongside a picture of two Black men standing in water, reminiscent of baptismal iconography. From Morrison's citation alone, the reader would not know that Brooks' poem describes the experience of abortion. Yet the poem, titled "the mother," begins quite explicitly, "Abortions will not let you forget. / You remember the children you got that you did not get."⁸⁰ We should not ignore the resonance between *Beloved* and "the mother," especially since Morrison includes an article about Margaret Garner, "A Visit to the Slave Mother who Killed her Child," in *The Black Book* as well, more than a decade before she writes *Beloved*.⁸¹ What is so fascinating about Brooks' poem is her ascription of the mothering role to women who obtain abortions. In the context of *The Black Book*, Brooks' quote hails a broad audience with the second person; her "you" comes to refer to Black people, for whom Morrison compiles *The Black Book*. Within the poem, though, Brooks' "you" speaks to a more circumscribed group: the children lost to abortion.

Brooks imagines abortion as a murder that produces a ghostly presence, not unlike the infanticide depicted in *Beloved*. The second verse begins, "I have heard in the voices of the wind

⁷⁹ Toni Morrison, *The Black Book*, 193.

⁸⁰ Gwendolyn Brooks, "the mother" in *Selected Poems* (Harper & Row, 1963).
<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43309/the-mother-56d2220767a02>

⁸¹ There are newspaper clippings that reference historical moments which sparked *The Bluest Eye* and *Paradise*. Morrison, *The Black Book*, 10.

the voices of my dim killed children.” These same voices haunt Sethe’s home in *Beloved*. “124 was loud,” Morrison writes, not just with the voice of the Sethe’s child, but also with the voices of many Black folks who have suffered under slavery.⁸² Brooks refers to “killed children,” rather than the more familiar contemporary phrase “fetuses.” Later, she struggles to articulate the exact state of the “killed children”: “Since anyhow you are dead / Or rather, instead, / You were never made. / But that too, I am afraid, / Is faulty: oh what shall I say, how is the truth to be said? / You were born, you had body, you died. / It is just that you never giggled or planned or cried.” Brooks’ killed children never lived—never giggled, planned, or cried—but they died. She even uses the term “birth” to describe an abortion. As a procedure, for Brooks, abortion collapses birth into death, erasing the life that usually occurs in-between.

One parallel between Sethe’s infanticide and abortion is the fact that her child lacks a name. After her death, Sethe pays for the headstone engraving to read “Beloved,” because she cannot afford to pay for “Dearly Beloved.” The ghost of her child reappears embodied in Beloved, although that is not actually her given name. In flashbacks to the past, she calls her child “crawling-already” girl. This lack of a name gives the child an almost unborn quality, like the “killed children” of Brooks’ poem. Another parallel between abortion and Sethe’s infanticide is the “revulsion” the town feels at Sethe’s actions.⁸³ Even before Sethe kills her child, the town of mostly Black residents turns on her and Baby Suggs for their pride, embodied in a lavish party they throw for their neighbors. Because of this repulsion, others in the town do not warn Sethe and Baby Suggs about the white men who come to re-capture Sethe and her children. Morrison thus implicates the town as complicit in Sethe’s infanticide. Much like the U.S. creates the

⁸² Morrison, *Beloved*, 169.

⁸³ Morrison, *Beloved*, 12.

material conditions that compel reluctant women to obtain abortions, as Davis argues, the town contributes to the infanticide that they proceed to condemn.

My point is not to equate abortion with infanticide. Instead, my interest lies in how, before *Roe*, feminists thought abortion and infanticide together as related forms of violence. Today, it is the New Right that collapses abortion into infanticide, through claims of fetal personhood. In response, contemporary feminists deny fetal personhood, and refuse the characterization of abortion as murder. The feminist retort to the New Right is understandable given their political agenda, and the current juridical-legal landscape in the U.S. Returning to second wave thought, though, reminds us that feminists did not always theorize abortion in this way. Decades ago, feminists embraced a more complex understanding of abortion as violence, and nevertheless defended women's reproductive rights. Second-wave feminist thought allows us to see abortion, like infanticide, as a potentially collective response to the patriarchal violence of forced birth. Through engagement with Rich and Morrison, readers come to see the institution of motherhood, and conversely its deprivation, as "violently oppressive, and as giving rise to violent behavior on the part of mothers."⁸⁴ Without this theorization of abortion and infanticide in our contemporary moment, the violence of compulsory birth itself disappears from view.

Remembering Feminist Violence

Infanticide, and abortion, create a new relationship to historical memory in Morrison's work. The placement of Brooks' quote in *The Black Book* evokes problems of memory, or what Morrison calls, in *Beloved*, "re-memory." Morrison cites Brooks in the final pages of *The Black Book*, before a collage of pictures of ordinary Black people—children, families, a band, and

⁸⁴ Emily Jeremiah, "Murderous Mothers: Adrienne Rich's *Of Woman Born* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" in ed. Andrea O'Reilly, *From Motherhood to Mothering: The Legacy of Adrienne Rich's Of Woman Born* (New York: SUNY University Press, 2004), 60.

many portraits. The same affective relationship between the mother and her killed children, Morrison suggests, structures the relation between Morrison and her subjects. In “the mother,” Brooks describes the lost children as “ghosts,” perpetually haunting the mother, and loved by her. For a reader of *Beloved*, such a connection sounds familiar, nearly identical to the haunting of Sethe’s home by her “crawling-already girl,” and the love for Beloved that nearly kills Sethe. Morrison’s relationship to her subjects follows the same pattern. She is haunted by Margaret Garner and the other historical figures that grace the pages of *The Black Book*, and she loves them.

By likening Brooks’ “killed children” to her historical subjects, Morrison also emphasizes the unspeakability of certain historical phenomenon. While much of the secondary literature on *Beloved* focuses on the problem of memory, there is little attention devoted to the fact that Morrison specifically labels infanticide unspeakable. In my reading, I ask: Why does infanticide come to represent the unspeakable act *par excellence*? Centering infanticide and abortion draws our attention to the importance of futurity for memory. Put simply, the lack of a new generation would render us unable to pass on the stories of the past. Politics depends on reproductive futurity not only for the creation of the new, but also for historical storytelling.⁸⁵ And yet, Morrison and her characters speak the unspeakable in *Beloved*. When we uncover histories of infanticide and abortion, Morrison reveals, we come to see the reproductive exploitation of enslaved Black women as central to the project of enslavement. Infanticide destroys the slave-system from the inside, with Black women refusing to produce children who will become property. Paradoxically, Morrison invites her readers to remember precisely this refusal of futurity.

⁸⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*.

In *Beloved*, Morrison coins the term “unspeakable thoughts unspoken,” which becomes the title of her Tanner Lectures at the University of Michigan. In her lectures, Morrison explains the project of deconstructing and reconstructing the canon as one of breaking silences, and finding lost things.⁸⁶ Critiquing the canon need not mean that we abandon canonical works entirely. Instead, Morrison argues, we should search for the “‘unspeakable things, unspoken’: for the ways in which the presence of Afro-Americans has shaped the choices, the language, the structure – the meaning of so much American literature. A search, in other words, for the ghost in the machine.”⁸⁷ Of course, in *Beloved*, the ghost in the machine is a literal ghost haunting 124, and the “thoughts of the women of 124, unspeakable thoughts, unspoken” are spoken in the following pages—first, Sethe’s thoughts, then Denver’s, then Beloved’s.⁸⁸ Morrison uses the term once early on, to refer to Sethe’s past: “every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable.”⁸⁹ Here, Sethe’s experience of slavery and her act of infanticide coalesce as at once unspeakable. That combination occurs again in the final pages, where the stream-of-consciousness thoughts of the three women of 124 move from infanticide to the Middle Passage. Recovering the unspeakable requires a dual attention to the history of slavery in the United States, and to the history of resistance. Sethe’s infanticide seems like an unspeakable act, unless we understand it as a response to slavery, in particular the reproductive exploitation of enslaved women.

Beloved ends with the same collective forgetting that Morrison describes in her lectures. “It was not a story to pass on,” the narrator repeats three times.⁹⁰ “They forget [Beloved] like a

⁸⁶ Toni Morrison, “Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature” (University of Michigan: The Tanner Lectures on Human Values), 132.

⁸⁷ Morrison, “Unspeakable Things,” 136.

⁸⁸ Morrison, *Beloved*, 199.

⁸⁹ Morrison, *Beloved*, 58.

⁹⁰ Morrison, *Beloved*, 274-5.

bad dream...By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what it is down there.”⁹¹ The unspeakable, the ghost in the machine, Beloved disappears from memory, and with her the water that evokes, not just her rebirth, but the history of the Middle Passage. She never fully disappears, however. Places hold memories, Sethe tells Denver: “Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it’s not. Places, places are still there.”⁹² Sethe’s use of the term pass on in this passage exposes a second meaning of the ending. Passing on a story may mean re-telling it, but it may also mean letting it go, as Sethe says. Even as people do not retell Beloved’s story, it lingers. ““This the place I am,”” Beloved tells Denver.⁹³ The memory of Beloved’s murder, and of Sethe’s enslavement, will stay at 124.

I propose a third interpretation of the concluding passage, “It was not a story to pass on.” As several scholars note, *Beloved* rehearses an apocalyptic scene, with the arrival of the four horsemen who propel Sethe to commit infanticide.⁹⁴ This imagery in *Beloved* depicts Sethe’s infanticide as a harbinger of the apocalypse. Morrison’s novel provokes the question: After the end of the world, who will tell our story? Certainly not Beloved, who Sethe and the townswomen exorcise from 124. Recall Rose’s incitement that women could choose to end the world if they refused to reproduce. In the same vein, Morrison figures Sethe’s refusal to reproduce as apocalyptic, and queries the possibility of storytelling without reproduction.

The problem of memory emerges as a common thread in the dissertation, given the obstacles to recovering the imagination and practice of feminist violence from the past. Naming the “woman-as-life principle,” Deutscher claims that women become associated with life-making

⁹¹ Morrison, *Beloved*, 274.

⁹² Morrison, *Beloved*, 36.

⁹³ Morrison, *Beloved*, 123.

⁹⁴ Jesser, “Violence, Home, and Community”; Berger, “Ghosts of Liberalism”; Krumholz, “The Ghosts of Slavery.”

because of their reproductive capacities.⁹⁵ And yet in their ability to make live, women also can let die. Anxiety about the biopolitics of women's reproductive capacities comes into stark relief in debates over abortion. Deutscher's reasoning suggests one explanation for the organized forgetting of figurations of feminist violence. Feminist violence perverts the woman-as-life principle, disrupting the patriarchal mythologization of woman that reduces her to an instrument for reproduction. Noting that women's violent resistance to slavery often goes overlooked, Rebecca Hall suggests another explanation for this historical oversight: women's violence is often read as individual, and therefore not political. Hall's recent book, *Wake: The Hidden History of Slave Revolts*, details the involvement of women in slave revolts, and the difficulty of uncovering that involvement in the archives. "Historians would have seen 'woman' and 'murdered her master' and immediately dismissed it as some kind of individual household violence," Hall believes. "Coordinated acts of violent resistance were exclusively planned by men, conventional wisdom held."⁹⁶ Hall spends her time in the archive reconstructing women's participation in concerted, collective acts of violent resistance. Her statement implies the need to re-politicize women's acts of violence that are de-politicized because they happen between individuals, and particularly within the family.

Before Hall, Morrison exhibited a fascination with violent resistance against slavery, especially when exercised by Black women. *The Black Book* includes newspaper clippings from stories of such violence. "She Rode Off on a Cow" describes an enslaved woman beating the son of her enslaver, and riding to freedom on a cow.⁹⁷ Another story, "She Chopped this Man to a

⁹⁵ Deutscher, *Foucault's Futures*, 6.

⁹⁶ Rebecca Hall, *Wake: The Hidden History of Women-Led Slave Revolts* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021), Chapter 5.

⁹⁷ Morrison, *The Black Book*, 18.

Bloody Death,” reports on a woman killing her overseer with a hoe, after he whips her.⁹⁸ A third, “No Overseer Ever Downed Her,” recounts, from the perspective of her son, a mother who beat an overseer so badly that others came to fear her.⁹⁹ These clippings precede an article about the more well-known militant John Brown on the next page. By presenting them together, Morrison begins to construct an account of collective resistance that moves beyond individual acts of violence. The story of Margaret Garner, and *Beloved*, adds to Morrison’s archive of Black women’s violent resistance. Though *Beloved* comes to represent the ghost of Sethe’s daughter, a man in the town, Stamp Paid, proposes an alternate origin. “Was a girl locked up in the house with a whiteman over by Deer Creek,” Stamp speculates. “Found him dead last summer and the girl gone. Maybe that’s her. Folks say he had her in there since she was a pup.”¹⁰⁰ *Beloved*, then is another figure of violent resistance in the face of sexual violence, mirroring Morrison’s newspaper clippings in *The Black Book*. Morrison depicts these separate instances of feminist violence as a sort of collective resistance against slavery, like W.E.B. DuBois’ general strike.¹⁰¹ In doing so, she exemplifies how contemporary scholars might reconstruct enslaved women’s violence as politically agentic.

Conclusion

Second-wave feminists conceptualized infanticide and abortion as feminist violence that would counteract the patriarchal violence of compulsory reproduction. The conflation of infanticide and abortion in the national imaginary, I contend, signals a deep anxiety about women refusing to give birth. Through this reproductive refusal, women could destroy the heterosexual family and political futurity. According to Rose, they could even destroy the world.

⁹⁸ Morrison, *The Black Book*, 18.

⁹⁹ Morrison, *The Black Book*, 19.

¹⁰⁰ Morrison, *Beloved*, 235.

¹⁰¹ W.E.B. DuBois, *Black Reconstruction in America* (Free Press, 1998).

Since the 1970s, family abolitionists have called for feminists to either do away with or to entirely reimagine kinship relations. Parallel to the question of how we imagine new forms of kinship, the feminist theorization of infanticide and abortion as feminist violence poses another problem: Can we imagine politics without reproductive futurity?

World-destroying feminist violence forecloses the possibility of a future, embodied in the figure of the child. It indicates a pessimism about what would come to pass, if the future were to unfold. In the case of *Beloved*, Sethe can only see her daughter as doomed to enslavement; she cannot comprehend an alternative path of fugitivity and freedom in life. This pessimism critically diagnoses the near totalizing racist and patriarchal violence of the slave system. It is tempting to say that violence enacts and ensures an outcome aligned with such pessimism, but that conclusion is not exactly right, precisely because Sethe believes her daughter will be more free in death than enslaved. A certain kind of limited freedom then sits compatibly, if uncomfortably, with death, worldlessness, and a lack of futurity. The conclusion to the dissertation turns to the prevalence of pessimism in contemporary feminist politics. Today, the forgetting of the second-wave imagination of feminist violence produces heteropessimism, since we struggle to envision an end to patriarchal violence.

Conclusion

This dissertation explores the imagination and practice of feminist violence in second-wave thought and activism. The project raises questions like: What is violence? What does violence do? When, if ever, is the use of violence justified? And how do we come to see hidden forms of violence? Currently, I argue that the exercise of violence objectifies and subjectifies, makes worlds and destroys them, with each function mapping roughly onto a chapter. Future versions will delve further into the definitional debates around the meaning of violence, for example the differences between physical and structural violence. I am particularly interested in the power feminist violence has to disclose, or demystify, patriarchal violence. The recognition of this capacity for disclosure stands in contrast to much of the historical and contemporary literature on violence, which emphasizes its annihilation of language and worldliness.

By re-centering the question of violence in second-wave thought, the dissertation also participates in the recent contemporary feminist endeavor of canonizing the second wave. Initially dismissed as embarrassing and problematic, second-wave feminists are coming back into style. Upon returning to the 1970s and 80s, contemporary feminists find thinkers grappling with many of the political problems that continue to plague us today, including sexual violence and reproductive justice. Through the imagination of feminist violence, I contend, second-wave feminists offer a vision of a world without patriarchal violence in all its forms. Their vision provides a necessary remedy to the resigned pessimism of feminists today, who, after the failures of the #MeToo movement and the repeal of *Dobbs*, often struggle to see a cessation of sexual violence on the horizon. As I develop the dissertation into a book manuscript, I will ask: Why are contemporary feminists returning to second-wave texts to think through perennial political

problems anew? My intuition is that the overlooked centrality of violence as a concept in much of second-wave feminist thought helps explain their renewed usefulness.

Chapters one and three are closer to completion, and help to anchor the project. In the first chapter, I read Andrea Dworkin's oeuvre, alongside other anti-rape and anti-pornography activists, to show how second-wave feminists reconceptualized the violence of rape, sex, and pornography as objectification. I then turn to Dworkin's semi-autobiographical novel *Mercy* to theorize feminist violence as a way of revealing ordinary patriarchal violence as violence. This chapter re-thinks rape as a problem of violence, rather than consent, and poses Dworkin's advocacy for vigilantism as an alternative to prisons and police that undercuts the reception of her as an early carceral feminist. In the third chapter, I conduct a close reading of Valerie Solanas' *SCUM Manifesto*. By taking Solanas seriously, I construct an account of feminist violence as a utopian, world-making project. The polarizing response to Solanas among liberal and radical feminists underscores the importance of violence to the formation of second-wave feminist politics. Both chapters require further engagement with the Dworkin's and Solanas' interlocutors, specifically a deeper dive into Catharine MacKinnon's work and Solanas' critics. Through an appreciation of the real risks associated with the practice of feminist violence, engagement with Dworkin and Solanas' interlocutors would create a stronger sense of ambivalence.

Moving forward, chapters two and four will require more extensive revisions. In the second chapter, I read *The Ethics of Ambiguity* with *The Second Sex*; these texts, alongside Beauvoir's interviews, demonstrate that Beauvoir entertains the possibility of feminist violence. In order to act freely in public without fear, Beauvoir reasons, women may need to learn to exercise violence. This same logic animates the reflections of U.S. feminists writing twenty years

later about the practice of self-defense. Rather than starting with Dworkin, I will begin the next version of the project with Beauvoir. Beauvoir's discussion of violence in *The Ethics of Ambiguity* gives me a path to elucidating the relationship between second-wave feminist theorizations of violence and previous political theoretical debates. I also plan to foreground the concept of reciprocity in my reading of *The Second Sex*. What characterizes the situation of women's oppression by men is the one-sided exercise of objectifying violence by men against women. To remedy this situation would require women gain the ability to reciprocally engage in violence against men. Reciprocity is crucial to Beauvoir's understanding of freedom. Given the focus of the overall project on the second wave, the chapter on Beauvoir requires greater historical contextualization of her own moment, and the reluctant uptake of her work by second-wave feminists.

For the fourth chapter, I intend to de-center Toni Morrison, so that I can populate the chapter with the broader feminist discourse around the issue of abortion. In the fourth chapter as it stands, I take up Morrison's *Beloved* to reflect on the parallels between compulsory birth under enslavement and the criminalization of abortion. Infanticide and abortion resist patriarchal regimes of compulsory birth, I conclude, through a refusal to reproduce. However, the section on Morrison's *Beloved* implies too direct a connection between compulsory birth under enslavement and later reproductive restrictions, as well as between infanticide and abortion. To rectify this, I will bring in stories like Audre Lorde's and Alice Walker's, both titled "The Abortion," as well as Walker's novel *Meridian*, which all follow protagonists who obtain abortions during the 1960s and 70s. Their contemporaneousness will allow me to delve into the meanings of abortion during the second wave. While I remain attached to investigating the complicated relationship

between abortion and violence, I believe texts from the second wave will provide more apt grounds for doing so.

Finally, as I write the book manuscript, I hope to include another chapter about women's participation in militant leftist groups like the Black Panther Party (BPP) and the Weather Underground (WU). Texts like Assata Shakur's autobiography, articles in BPP newsletters, and the WU manifesto articulate agendas that unite anti-racism, anti-imperialism, Marxism, and feminism. They also expose the gendered frictions within leftist groups. Most relevantly, these groups highly valued militant activity, but the BPP especially, and to some extent the WU, limited women's ability to participate in militant training. This new chapter will put second-wave feminism in conversation with adjacent left movements of its time. Just like anti-racist, Marxist, and anti-imperialist activists, second-wave feminists debated the use of violence. While we remember the violent factions of most movements, even if only to demonize them, the feminist advocacy for violence often gets ignored, overlooked, or erased.

By unearthing feminist violence, my project thus makes a historical intervention. This dissertation examines much of the published material from the second wave that discuss self-defense and militant organizing, as well as rape and abortion, in terms of violence. For the book manuscript, then, I will need to turn to the archives. I will start by visiting the Sophia Smith Collection of Women's History at Smith College several times over the next year. Other relevant records may be housed at Duke University and University of Michigan. The point of this archival work is not just to introduce new facts to the record. Instead, putting major thinkers in dialogue with other women who were part of the second wave will deepen my theorization of feminist violence. Archival work will also underline the importance of debates over violence to the movement.

As feminists debated the use of violence, they transformed the meaning of the concept, and invented new justifications for the political exercise of violence. By re-defining violence as objectification, second-wave feminists underscored its anti-democratic character. Given that women are subject to widespread violence at the hands of men, they are not able to freely participate in public life. The answer, though, is not necessarily pacifism. Instead, feminists cultivated an understanding of the need for reciprocity, for women to sometimes engage in violence to defend themselves. Others put forward an even more thoroughgoing vision of revolutionary violence, which would usher in a utopia without men or patriarchal violence. If women so chose, they could end the world—and maybe that wouldn't be the worst thing.

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