

Passing as Fuckable: Objectification, Sexualisation and the Conditions of Autonomy

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, I attempt to pull apart the conceived dichotomy between sexual objectification and autonomy. In much of the literature, sexual objectification is often conceived as in a purely antagonistic relationship with autonomy. I argue that, though sexual objectification does restrict women's autonomy, but in a particular way that to be sexually objectifiable becomes the conditions under which any autonomy is possible for women. Sexual objectification is the relation on which gender is predicated, and thus autonomy within gender is only provided when these relations are adhered to. As an exemplary case of this, I look at 'passing' for trans women, to see how becoming sexually objectifiable is once a restriction of autonomous self-expression, while also being a condition for the access to material resources necessary for autonomy. I therefore conclude that it is not enough to demand that women individually refuse participation in sexual objectification. For the relations of sexual objectification to be properly dismantled, there must be a recognition of these other structures of oppression that make refusal impossible, and active resistance against these structures.

KEYWORDS

Feminism, Transgender, Sex, Objectification, Autonomy

Sexual objectification does not merely restrict the autonomy of women; rather it is the horizon on which women's autonomy is conceived. In this essay, I argue that Catherine McKinnon and Andrea Dworkin were right to say that hierarchy is inherent to gender as a social structure. In this way, women's autonomy becomes restricted to the realm of sexual objectification in her self-conception. However, I propose that McKinnon and Dworkin are wrong to pose sexual objectification and autonomy as in tension with one-another. Instead, sexual objectification is taken as the conditions for autonomy at all. In my view, "passing" (as it is used in trans spaces to mean being perceived as a non-trans) for trans women is an exemplary case of this, wherein sexual objectification serves as the conditions under which autonomy can be achieved. Hence, I argue that recognition of a "conditioned autonomy" under hierarchical gender is vital for resisting the unfreedom of sexual objectification that pervades gender.

A standard definition of sexual objectification is that it is an imposition of (patriarchal) social meanings that constrict my own capacity for self-presentation. Sexual objectification limits women's capacity for self-expression by delimiting what is sexually objectifiable as the only possibility (Jütten 2016, 35). The options available to women are only those that are valued to the extents to which men might be willing to have sex with them. Hence, this desire for self-worth is not, as Timo Jütten writes, an "autonomously chosen conception of the good" (Jütten, 25), but a reproduction of an imposed inequality that makes real autonomy (a "conception of the good") impossible.

In this way, sexual objectification becomes the way in which women are expected to relate to themselves and, in particular, their bodies. Simone de Beauvoir writes that this leads to a "doubling" of the self; in accordance with the demands to be an attractive object for others, she must take herself as an object too and become Other to herself; she thereby exists "*outside herself*." (Beauvoir 2009, 349). Imposed sexual objectification centres the existence of women on men, and as such are forced to take up this stance of the objectifying gaze. As John Berger writes, "The surveyor of women in herself is male: the surveyed female." (Berger 1972, 47). The language of policing and "surveying" evokes a sense of authority for this masculine surveyor. If self-worth is determined by the extent to which one is sexually attractive to men, this masculine gaze becomes the way of measuring this self-worth internally - through the eyes of the objectifier. Dworkin writes that these standards prescribe a woman's "mobility, spontaneity, posture, gait, and the

uses to which she can put her body" (Dworkin 1974, 201). For Dworkin, the result of this imposition is the limitation of, not just the capacity to visually represent myself to the world, but to fully realise what I might be capable of. Since self-worth for women is often predicated on objectification, the numerous ways of flourishing and developing myself (for myself) become concealed. Thus, sexual objectification restricts autonomy from the inside; it becomes an ideological mechanism by which women are limited to their relationship to men.

For McKinnon and Dworkin, the relations of sexual objectification run deeper; gender itself is the social structure organised by relations of sexual objectification. Sexual objectification is the reduction of a person to the status of a mere thing; but sexual objectification is more than an act inflicted on women - it is the *situation* of women.¹ Hence McKinnon's metaphor: "Women live in sexual objectification the way fish live in water." (McKinnon 1991, 149). For McKinnon, the very meaning of "woman" is necessarily determined by the relations of sexual objectification. Just as a fish cannot live without water, the meaning of "woman" would not exist without these relations. Correspondingly, Dworkin's account of "man" represents the inverse: objectification makes a man "feel *his* own power and presence." (Dworkin 1989, 104). She writes that objectification is a necessary condition if "he is to be a person." - though perhaps it would have been more accurate to write "If a person is to be *he*". (Dworkin 1989, 106). Therefore, the meaning of "Man" is oriented around the objectification of women, just as being objectifiable is the meaning of "Woman". Gender thus is, at its core, the hierarchical relations of sexual objectification; individual instances reproduce this hierarchy that is already imposed on them.

There is something akin to Heideggerian phenomenology here. For Heidegger, meaning of a thing is primarily understood in terms of its practical relationship with myself, and the contexts of this engagement. In his standard example, a hammer is a hammer by virtue of the ways that I use it (i.e., through hammering) and through the contexts in which it is used (i.e., a workshop). Further, it is always interpreted as *for-the-sake-of* some possibility (i.e., making a chair). This set of practical relations constitutes its ontological makeup. Conversely, this relation to "ready-to-hand" things is constitutive for who *I* am too, insofar as its use discloses

1. It is important to note that this is a *pejorative* definition of Gender; McKinnon and Dworkin are, of course, not arguing that women are reducible to men's objectification of them. It is, in their view, the ideological assumption that underlies gender norms as a whole, though.

to me the possibilities for my future (Heidegger 2010, 55-88). There is, then, this reciprocity (not to be confused with equality) wherein the use of a thing constitutes its meaning, whilst simultaneously disclosing the meaning of who I am (and might be). Gender has a similar structure for Dworkin and McKinnon.² The meaning of “woman” is generated in its ‘use’ – in the practice of sexual objectification. This, in turn, gives meaning to the idea of “man”. It might be said that, just as the totality of these relations constitutes the World for Heidegger, this relation between man and woman as giving one-another meaning constitutes the World of gender. This conception of gender as inherently hierarchical is important because it demonstrates that the lack of autonomy in objectification is not a contingent component of the meaning of womanhood, that can be easily discarded. Rather, it seems difficult to see that autonomy and womanhood be reconciled at all.

The practice of passing, in the context of being a trans woman, exemplifies a complexity in this view. On the one hand, passing seems to limit autonomy; in becoming perceived as a woman, thus as available for objectification. On the other hand, it seemingly grants autonomy, since, through being recognised as a cis woman, there is some freedom from transmisogyny. Talia Mae Bettcher, like McKinnon and Dworkin, argues that gender (in patriarchal settings) is organised along the lines of relations of sexual objectification. For Bettcher, gender norms (gendered signifiers such as clothes, body language, etc.) function to communicate a naive notion of “biological sex” that is understood as synonymous with genital status.³ She writes that genitals constitute the “deep, concealed reality of sex” in the ideological consciousness of hierarchical gender (Bettcher 2007, 55). This structure is therefore set up to serve a “sexually manipulative heterosexuality” because it specifically exists to communicate to men who is available to be

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2. It is worth noting that Heidegger strongly opposed the strict opposition of “subject” and “object.” I use “object” here only to be consistent with the language of McKinnon and Dworkin. Indeed, the relation between the objectifier and the objectified is not a neat opposition either. If what it means to be a woman is to be objectified by men, then conversely, what it means to be a man is to objectify women. Thus, it is not only that there is an “I” that imposes itself on some Other, but that this very act of objectification seems to, in return, produce a broader meaning and structure - a gendered World. There is certainly more to be said about the phenomenological implications of this reading, but this task is far outside of my scope.
 3. This conception of biological sex, Bettcher notes, is not based on any coherent - let alone scientific - notion of biology, but rather on a naturalised notion of the sex, whereby the genitals one is born with is the sex that one “ought” to have. Bettcher elaborates on this idea in her article *Trapped in the Wrong Theory* (2014).

sexualised. And, again echoing Dworkin and McKinnon, she argues that this communicative relation between gender and “real” sex exists specifically because “... a man needs to know a person has a vagina for the same reason a man needs to know about sexual willingness without actually having to ask.” (Bettcher 2007, 57). Bettcher’s development of McKinnon and Dworkin is significant because we see that what it means to “pass” as a woman is to become someone who can communicate to others that they are “biologically female.” Indeed, this is consistent with the common-sense use of the term in trans spaces; to pass is to be taken as cisgender. If McKinnon and Dworkin are right, then to be taken as a woman is to be taken as someone whose existence is centred on men’s sexual satisfaction. And this is visible in the fact that it is common for cis men to believe that they play a vital role in constructing a trans woman’s womanhood; one writer explicitly states this, saying that he realises the “important role [he] can play in reinforcing their sense of femininity.” (Nicholson 2020, 269). Above, it was noted that women often adopt this masculine, Othering gaze toward themselves to judge their own self-worth. In his own words, we see the origins of this gaze laid bare; a man believes that the identity of a trans woman is constituted, at least in part (which is enough) through his own attraction to her. Thus, her capacity for self-determination is overwritten, instead taken as predicated on the sexual enjoyment of men.

Parallel to this, there is also a clear sense in which passing not only provides autonomy but acts as a necessary condition for autonomy. Bettcher argues that trans women, under hierarchical gender, are always understood as either “evil deceivers” or “make-believers”. The (perceived) deception of trans women lies in the fact that she has falsely communicated to others that she is someone (in the eyes of a patriarchal society) for whom sexual objectification is acceptable (a woman). Thus, trans women are taken as “deceivers” in this way, as never quite achieving this ethereal, innate status of the Woman. Consequently, recognition of trans women as women is often attainable only through passing. As Bettcher writes, “either pass as the opposite sex or be read as openly fraudulent” (Bettcher 2014, 403). For many trans women, particularly for trans women of colour or poor trans women, the latter is not an option, and certainly not a route to autonomy. For example, a recent report showed that 1 in 3 employers would not hire a trans person. (Crossland Employment Solicitors, 2022). Another study indicated that 87% of people would not consider dating a trans person. (Blair and Hoskin 2019,

2074-95) Of course these studies (or those participating) assume that they always know who is cis or trans. But many trans people live full-time being perceived as cis *because* passing can be the difference between getting a job and not. Trans people may not even reveal that they are trans to romantic partners, out of fear that they would be taken to be “deceivers” or even rapists. These cases make it clear that passing (and hence becoming objectifiable) is a condition for basic survival, let alone the autonomy of self-expression. Hence, passing reveals how being sexually objectifiable can simultaneously suppress one’s autonomy (by restricting the possibilities for self-presentation) whilst also being a necessary condition for the material resources which make any autonomy possible. There is something of the Kantian double-bind here: “Argue as much as you will... but obey!” (Kant 1992, 8:35). For Kant, it is necessary for the flourishing of free enlightenment and progress that one can criticise and deliberate, but ultimately must obey the state (as to not disrupt the status quo too much!). Similarly, a woman is “free” to participate in the labour market, to have many romantic partners; but, only so long as her expression as a woman does not *truly* disrupt the relations of sexual objectification that “moral sex” is predicated on.

It might be objected that trans women can be sexually objectified whilst (and as a result of) not being perceived as cis women. If sexual objectification forms the meaning of womanhood, then the sexual objectification of trans women by men would surely be the same. However, the sexual objectification of (non-passing) trans women is quite different to the sexual objectification of cis women. Bettcher says that non-passing trans women are often interpreted as “make-believers”, and that they are “represented as whores - sexually available and disposable” (Bettcher 2007, 52). Julia Serano argues that it is the (seemingly) voluntary occupation of femininity that men interpret as hyper-sexual. Femininity is already taken as sexual (made clear in the way that women wearing feminine clothing is often used as a way to suggest that she is “asking” for sex). Given this sexualisation of femininity, there is a common corresponding belief that someone becoming a woman must only be doing so for the sexual satisfaction of men (Serano 2014, 254). Therefore, we might say that disposability then comes as a result of the “make-believer” trans woman signifying the sexuality inherent to femininity whilst transgressing the ideological ontology of the “natural” woman. For Bettcher, Sex is a *normative* construct; it makes certain demands on us, first and foremost that the genitals we are born with are the ones we *ought* to have

had, and that we have a duty to communicate these moral genitals to others through gendered presentation (Bettcher 2014, 397). Thus, a man who is castrated is still a man because he "ought" to have been. The naturalisation of gender into this "moral sex" ideologically functions to further obscure the possibility for emancipation from gender. The fact that trans women can be the object of sexual attraction for straight men (evidenced by the popularity of trans women in porn) then calls this normative construct into question. Either a man has to believe that he might have sexually objectified someone who isn't a woman (which, as noted previously, is the foundation of Man as a gender), or agree that gender is a social construct, thereby de-naturalising and casting doubt upon his right to sexually objectify women. Thus, trans women are constructed as make-believers, and usually, simultaneously, as deceivers who trick men into sex. To these men, they are women insofar as they are sexually objectifiable, and men insofar as they reveal this tension in gender. One can clearly see why passing grants some autonomy in this context. While passing certainly cannot help one escape sexual objectification, it certainly makes trans women appear less "disposable". Thus, the sexual objectification of trans women (due to their being trans) does not grant them the status of (cis) womanhood, but rather only serves to put them at further risk of violence.

In my view, many feminist writers do not take seriously enough the fact that sexual objectification, and the gendered beauty standards that are generated through it, is often the *only* way that any autonomy can be achieved. Dworkin writes that, if we are to be liberated from patriarchal standards, we must reject them. She calls on women to stop "mutilating our bodies" (Dworkin 1974, 107). Additionally, it has been argued that "association with imposed social meanings may undermine their status" as people with "equal social standing to men... regardless of the voluntariness of their own choices" (Jütten 2016, 22). In other words, while a woman might voluntarily engage with gender norms that men interpret as "asking" for objectification, this choice ultimately leads to being taken as lesser than, thereby reducing their ability to be seen as full individuals. The takeaway here must be that women should be cautious about the stereotypes they voluntarily engage with. Dworkin, again, writes that "the object is allowed to desire if she desires to be an object" (Dworkin 1989, 109). A woman might choose to become objectified, as in Nussbaum's account of objectification wherein two people consensually objectify one-another for a greater physical

intimacy (Nussbaum 1995, 249-91). But this "choice" is really only a concession to the patriarchal structure - or an inevitable result. The conclusion that follows is that, since sexual objectification restricts autonomy, sexual objectification must be rejected in order to be autonomous. Certainly, sexual objectification (and gender with it) must be resisted and the caution against a "free choice" approach to objectification is not necessarily unwarranted; but, as a result of taking autonomy and sexual objectification as a strict dichotomy, these accounts fail to see that *individual* rejection itself presupposes a kind of autonomy. Resistance to sexual objectification cannot merely be a matter of refusing to engage with men and femininity. Sexual objectification is embedded society, caught up with capitalist and racist oppression for all women. This is made clear when black women's natural hair is regarded as "unprofessional" because it does not conform to white beauty standards. As a result, black women often have to spend more time and money making their hair conventionally "professional" in this way or they risk not being hired for jobs. Individual rejection of this beauty standard is therefore a luxury that not many can afford. Hence, the relationship between sexual objectification is far more complex; sexual objectification, for many, is the *condition* for autonomy. The autonomy it provides, of course, is always conditioned by this relationship of sexual domination which conceals the broader unfreedom at work. However, one must recognise the autonomy all the same as autonomy, since to do otherwise is to conceal the ways that sexual objectification is mandated in a much more thorough way. It is not enough to suggest that women simply stop engaging with behaviour that men take to be objectifiable; instead, we must pay greater attention to the ways that gendered violence, capitalism and racism make this rejection almost impossible. Then, we can find ways to make this rejection possible more wholly and abolish the limits of our freedom.

To conclude, sexual objectification certainly does limit the autonomy of women, insofar as it constructs women as possible objects from the start; it attempts to form their very existence around the sexual satisfaction of men. However, the relationship between sexual objectification and autonomy is not dichotomous. For many trans women, passing provides autonomy (by making the satisfaction of material needs possible) only on the condition that she become someone for whom sexual objectification is possible for her. Examining the ways that sexual objectification can be a *condition* for autonomy is necessary for recognising the ways in which sexual objectification is a pervasive structure. Perhaps it is accurate

to say that sexual objectification limits autonomy primarily through making it impossible to live autonomously otherwise. Recognising sexual objectification as pervasive is necessary to see what is required to make the 'otherwise' possible. It is only through resisting these other kinds of oppression concurrently that people can be emancipated a gender system that provides autonomy to women only insofar as its practice does nothing to reveal what they are fundamentally denied: the freedom for something else.

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